



TRAFFIC
ZINE



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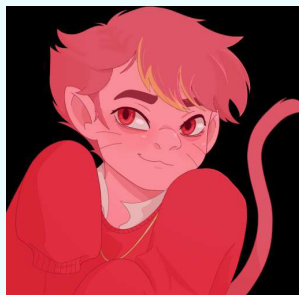


Organizer Credits



Vio

vyeoh 
vyeoh_  



Conk

Conk   



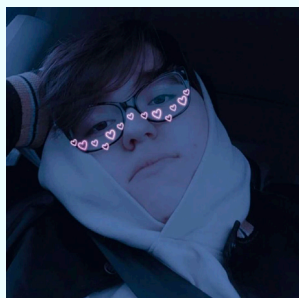
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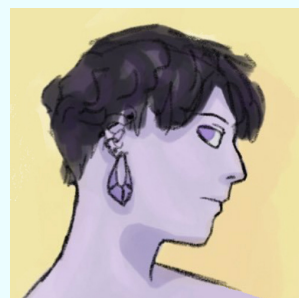
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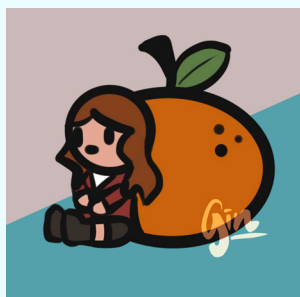
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Marzo

Martuzzio  



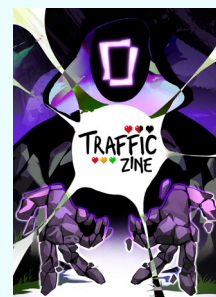
Gin

ginngerine  



McDuck

McDuck08_ 
McDuck08 



**Cover Art by:
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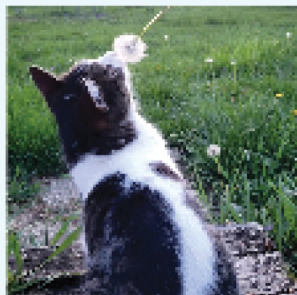


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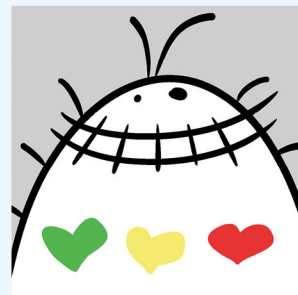
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Mochily

_mochi.ly 
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zhuk

zhukzucraft 



Lyne

iamjustbread  



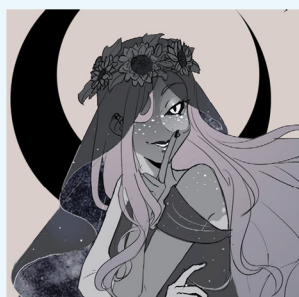
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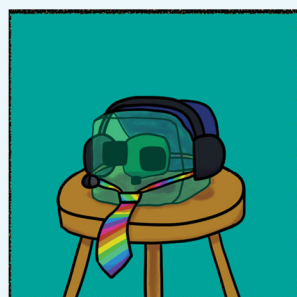
Cappy

CaptanObviois  
the-universe-is-kind 



Lemon

strobbylemonade
  



Kait

Uy8hg  
Uy8hg-art 



Kit

kitdreamzing  





Contributor Credits



Carrot

carrotchipper 



Shim

cerealdog 



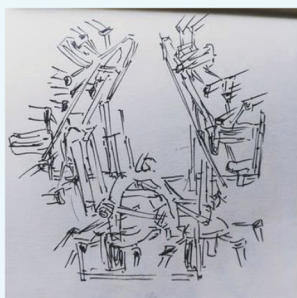
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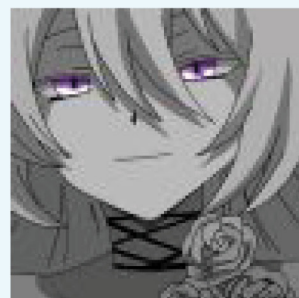

Aquinnix

Aquinnix  



spiderziege

spiderziege  



DeathShadowRules

DeathShadowRules  



Spine

Spine_0 
spine0 



Song

songobom 



Josie

Josie.illustrates 
josieillustrate 
misswitchjosie 





Contributor Credits



Roman

alienssstufff  



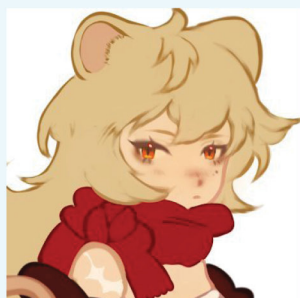
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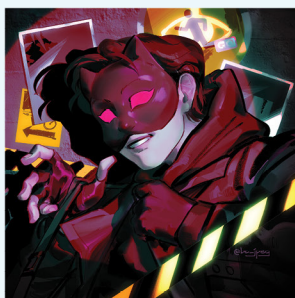
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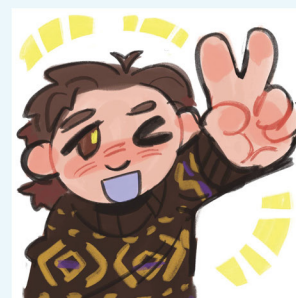
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black cat

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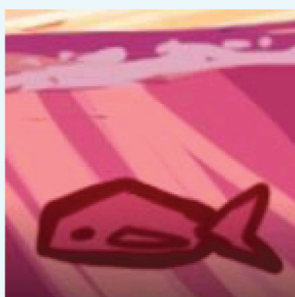
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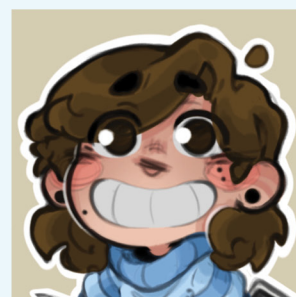
Kihori

Kihorri   



Tilapsci

tilapsci 



IngaPotejto

IngaPotejto  
ingapotejto 





Contributor Credits



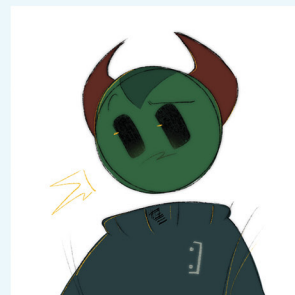
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FindingSchmomo

FindingSchmomo  



Cactuu

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cactupng 
cactuu.png 



Yodel

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ScoringFour 
Paperturtledove 



Kip

unkipt 



lumi

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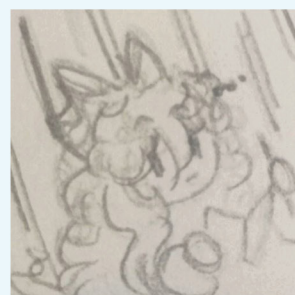
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Ro

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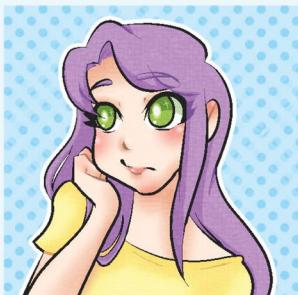
Sofi

sofi1z 
S0fiiz_ 





Contributor Credits



SquareHart

squarehart 
HartOSquare 
JubileeMelody 



Astronomodome

astronomodome 



Jas

isjaszzz  
isjasz 



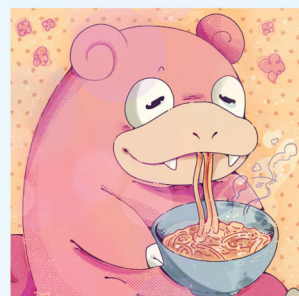
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Joi

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Audi

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Anddy

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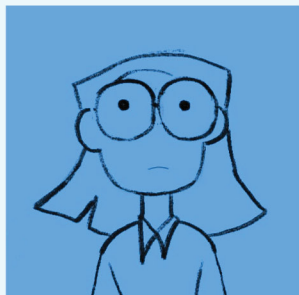
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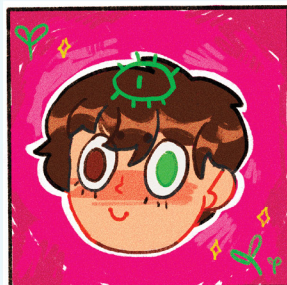


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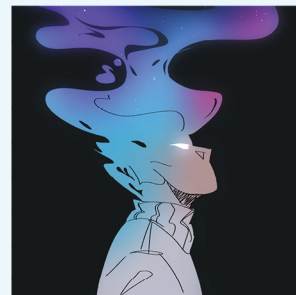
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WeishinLuk 



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plantswrites 
plantstwt 



Messier

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Bax

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vexdraticc 



Brook

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Genrih

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GenrihG 



Ane

anneliis18  



Siff/Raine

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rainymars 



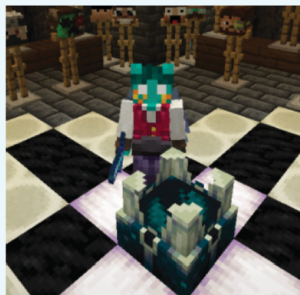
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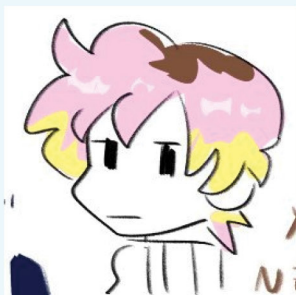


Contributor Credits



Artie

eternalduos  



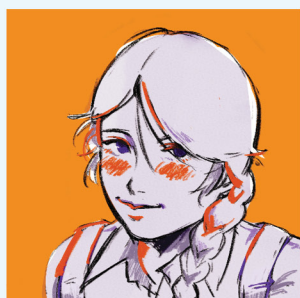
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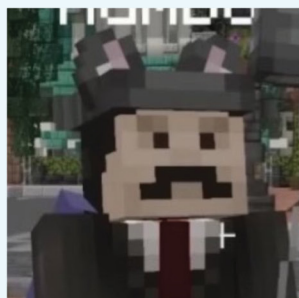
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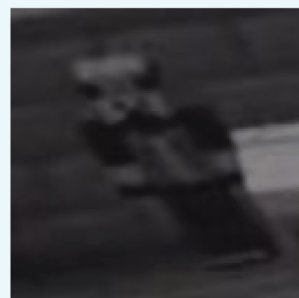
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Soup!!

Captainsoop  



Astro

AstronautBeans   



Archie McKenzie

archillustrates 
traffrogers 



Omegathekid

Omegathekid 



Snow

snowhearer 
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Contributor Credits



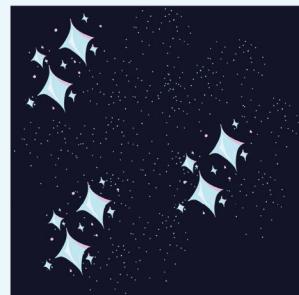
Kaya

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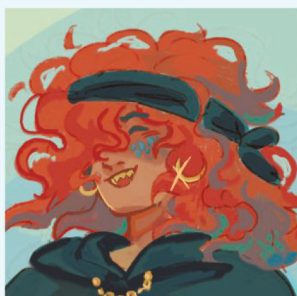
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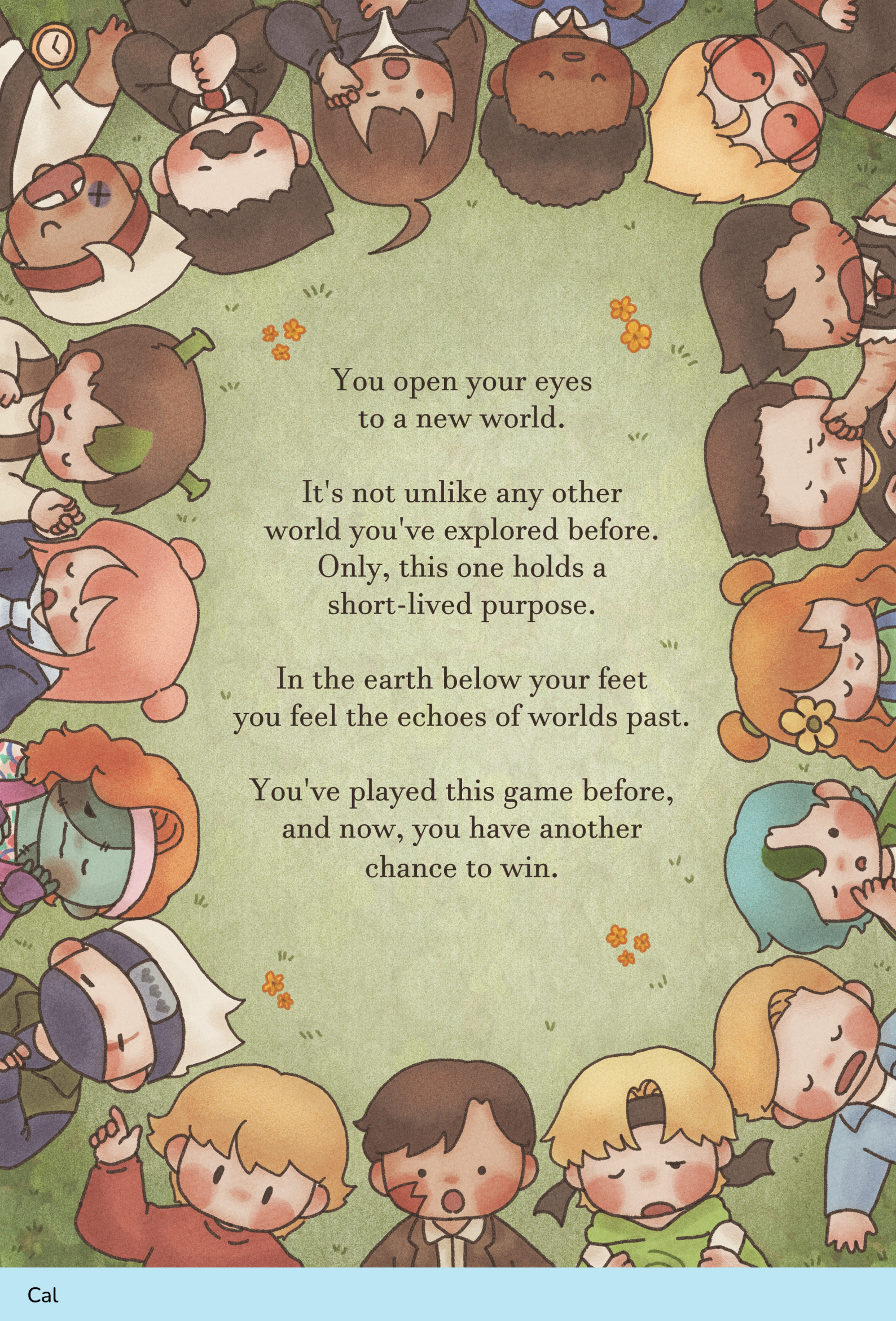
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Bucket

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You open your eyes
to a new world.

It's not unlike any other
world you've explored before.
Only, this one holds a
short-lived purpose.

In the earth below your feet
you feel the echoes of worlds past.

You've played this game before,
and now, you have another
chance to win.



My Beautiful Castillo

By Mochily

You open your eyes to a new world. It's not unlike any other world you've explored before. Only, this one holds a short-lived purpose. In the earth below your feet you feel the echoes of worlds past. You've played this game before, and now, you have another chance to win.

It starts as it has three lifetimes before: in a ring around the heart of your first spawn. Now, sixteen people stand before you, a blur of smiles and vigor. You know these people. You stood beside these people before, a partner in any way that mattered. Across from you stand your closest friends. Allies that took you arm-in-arm while you rushed headfirst into danger. A soulmate whose life is held in your hands. An enemy whose home burns to cinder underboot. A friend whose blood has dried under your fingernails. You remember the bloodbaths and lives taken several times over. You remember gambling lives away like coins in your back pocket. Most importantly though, you remember love. The love you hold for your closest friends, the love between a haphazard family, the love cast by heartbreak as you carry on alone.

But this isn't those now distant times. This is here and now. Before the first bonds of alliances doomed to shatter. Before the promises and betrayals. Before the blood that stains your skin and dries beneath your nails. Before the glory and devastation of a lonely win. This is a new time, and this new time, like all the many times before, promises to be no different. There are differences, though. A missing friend you haven't played beside in months. A towering statue that casts a deep shadow on the earth. More health than you've ever had before. A portal to a dimension you've never seen in these games before. You try not to humor the idea too much. Not yet.

It is, however, a familiar voice that rises above the clamor of the crowd. The same voice that welcomes you every time.

"Hello, friends! Welcome to Secret Life. In this series we have thirty hearts per life, but no regeneration. The only way to regain hearts is from the Secret Keeper. At the start of each session, we'll be given a secret task. When you've completed your task, you can visit the Secret Keeper who will reward you with ten new hearts. If you fail your task, you get nothing. Remember, the whole time, you must keep it a secret!"





The sun is high and bright in the sky, a spotlight on the group around you. The shadow cast from the Secret Keeper is deep and long, but it leaves your small campfire alone to warm you. Anticipation of the unknown sends thrills down your spine, and you see mirrors of the same feeling on the rest of the group, too. You join in with the soft, excited cheers that ring out from the group while others around you call out friendly hellos.

Not yet finished, Grian motions towards a new face in the group, “As you can see, Gem has joined us this series,” you turn your head without a trace of subtlety, “She kinda didn’t leave, and no one wanted to say anything.”

Giggles ripple around the circle and Tango nods, “it was awkward, yeah.”

Impulse shoots Tango a sharp glare, “you mean we love that she’s here,” he defends at the same time Gem says: “you can’t get rid of me!”

Jimmy steps forward, taking all the attention of the crowd, “surely for a newbie, everyone gets one free punch on Gem, right?” Interspersed agreements from the circle drown out anything else he wants to say, leaving Gem to vehemently deny the idea without help.

The friendly banter and sharp quips last only a moment. It quickly changes to shocked ohs as, instead of Gem, Martyn punches Jimmy and first blood is drawn. An uproar of booming accusations and bewildered laughter make the once friendly climate into something chaotic. Jimmy, the first to die every game since the beginning, was already half a heart down.

Martyn, eyes wide, puts his palms up guiltily, “my bad! My bad!” Apologies on his lips, he does the only thing left that makes sense, “let me give you this back!”

It takes only a moment for the heart transfer feature to do its job. In moments, you all bear witness to one of the new gimmicks of the season as it shines on full display, and the once disadvantaged Jimmy is half a heart ahead of the game.

The crowd, still unnerved, backs up, making their circle thinner. Unlike before, the noise does not dissipate, but rather, grows more discordant than ever. “With that,” Grian says, whipping around and breaking free of the meeting, “I’m getting outta here!”

Mumbo follows his lead, Scar casts long glances at the ominous statue, and you notice the players scatter in all directions. You retreat, letting the world take you as it always does.

THE END







TRAFFIC ZINE

[MINECRAFT players survive HARDCORE with a TWIST]

A FANMAGAZINE ORGANIZED BY VYEOH GINNGERINE PINKCONKONUT CONTRIBUTORS AQUINNIX ANELIZ ODDISSEY ASTRONAUTBEANS
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GAMMA600P MESSIERGALAXY31 XXMOLHLYXX OMEGATHEKID RAIYINAUTUMN REVANCYX RUE-00 SSSERIEMA CEREALDOG SNOWHEATER SON6BOM CAPTAIN500P
SPIDERZIEGE ALIENSSSTUFF HEAVYHANOEDHEX UY8H6 WISHINGWELLART WDRMTIME123 STARLIT_VOIDS ZHUKZOCRAFT SPECIALSLEUTH
KALEIDOHYDRA APPLESTRUDA CACTUOPNG CALCIUMYUM CAPTANOBVIOTS FINDING6SHMOMO GENRINGAYNE DEATHSHADOWRULES LINGPOTEJTOW BC.JPEG
STROBBYLEMINADE JAMJUSTBREAD CREATUREESQUE SHADOWSTACHEDDO PLANTSKIDD STORYTELLEROFUNTOLEGENDS SSSERIEMA PINKN-JUICE-ART
SOLAROUKK SPINED TRAFFROGERS PAPERTURTLEDOME WOODHOFFICIAL



InTheLittlewood was slain by Piglin Brute



Golden Eyes

By Cappy

It's so hot here. Not the comforting heat of a sweet, summer night spent around a crackling campfire. No – It's the heat of scorched stone and molten rock. The air is heavy with soot and ash. It clogs the atmosphere like a dense fog, but lacks the cooling moisture. The scents of sulfur and smoke sit heavy in the air, stuffing their way up Martyn's nostrils. Every inhale burns his lungs, making his breaths raspy and short. Wiping his brow brings no relief from the onslaught of sweat and intense heat in this unforgiving hellscape.

Despite everything, Martyn is confident. Down seven hearts, ego and body bruised from the day's challenges, he wasn't the pinnacle of success. Still, someone has to be the first to map out the corners of this nether. It has to be him. He needs the opportunity to plunder the dimension's treasures first. Images of gold and netherite swirl in his mind. He's sturdy, and seven hearts down just means twenty-three up. Surely the risk is worth the reward.

Finally, Martyn spots blackstone bricks. He slowly – *painfully slow* – bridges towards the base of the building. Mining into the bastion, he hears squealing – Piglins. The beasts are territorial, and won't take kindly to their home being raided. As he mines forward, doubt begins to brew. On the blackstone walls, flecks of gold shine glint. They shine in the dim torchlight, reflecting in his eyes, and Martyn's fingers twitch around his pickaxe. He stops himself. If he took any, the Brutes guarding the horde would sense it in a heartbeat, and cut Martyn's short. With every swing of his pickaxe, his heart thumps faster.

Eventually, Martyn emerges into a chamber of the bastion. Light floods into his tunnel along with a blast of searing heat. He checks the tunnel is only large enough for himself to slip through. Then, he creeps along the walls, exploring the room. However, the heat of the blackstone scalds his skin through his clothing. Gritting his teeth, he jumps away and darts through the large cracks in the walls. He runs from room to room, until he spots a chest. Rushing towards the chamber, he barely manages to avoid the cracks in the floor. As he's almost to the room, a loud roaring halts him. Turning towards the sound he sees massive yellow-ish tusks and the snarling snout of a Hoglin.

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" Martyn shrieks as he turns and books it back towards his tunnel. Slipping in, he hears the monster still in pursuit behind him. He





scurries further into the tunnel, finally turning around to get a good look at his assailant. The tusks of the beast ram at the opening, trying in vain to squeeze in. He heaves a sigh of relief. “Ooooh ohohoho-aha!” He laughs, a little light headed at how close he was to losing more hearts.

He moves back towards the beast, ready to clear the way. “Easy, now easy now... careful. Easy does it...” He tries to keep his distance, swinging his sword to swipe at the snout of the creature. It’s slow going, and doesn’t seem to be deterring the Hoglin. Martyn breathes in, and moves closer, taking another swing. He manages to pierce it between the eyes, just as the creature gores one of its tusks into his arm.

“Oh, oh my god!” he yells out, prying his arm away from the beast. It’s dead, but takes three and a half of Martyn’s hearts with it.

Martyn sighs, crouching down against the tunnel wall. His arms shake, as he tightens the grip on his sword. His heart beats fast, and he struggles to regain his breath in the thick atmosphere. *The risk is worth the reward*, he reminds himself.

After a few moments, he rises and moves to exit his tunnel. Once again, he inches through the broken rooms, this time slower despite how much it pains him. He sweats more with every second. His mouth grows parched and his heart rate spikes as he retraces his steps.

As he approaches the chest room, he peeks his head around a broken wall and meets angry eyes. Large, scared, and terrifyingly *enraged* as it screeches. The Piglin Brute raises a golden ax and begins charging. Martyn races towards his tunnel, “Ooooh boy! Oh boy, oh boy!” He shouts as he slips in just in time. When he turns around, the Brute is gone.

“Where is he? Oh, I don’t know where he is. Where’d he go?” he worries. The fact that Martyn couldn’t see it wasn’t fantastic news. It must have realized the hole was too small. This was bad. No sane person would continue on after being spotted by one of the Brutes. At least, not under his circumstances. But...

The risk will be worth the reward.

Martyn’s isn’t going to leave. He already lost hearts in this endeavor. Someone else would take the loot from the bastion if he didn’t make his move now. But, he could be smart about this. So far, his tunnel was working. Maybe he could extend it? He sets his brow and grabs his pickaxe.

As he mines forward, his thoughts wander to the chest. His fantasies are cut short as he hears screeching. Regaining focus, he gazes to the broken





rocks resting at his feet. There, among the blackstone, are flecks of gold.

“Oh yeah. That’ll do it,” he laughs, full of nervous energy. “That will make them *angry!*”

The screeching grows closer as the Brute rounds the corner. It’s below Martyn, but there’s a clear path over the rocks for it to reach him.

Thinking fast, he throws a block down above the top of the rockslide. “If I do this, I might be able to stun lock him into place—?” Martyn braces as the brute approaches.

As the Brute reaches the top, he remembers –

Martyn couldn’t see it from his tunnel entrance... It must have realized the hole was too small to fit through.

The Brute wasn’t stopping its charge this time.

Just as Martyn realizes his error, it climbs the final distance. “No no no! He’s through! He’s through!”

Martyn raised his sword, slashing at the creature, but the brute hacks into his side, tearing through cloth and skin. Frantically, Martyn moves backwards, raising his shield to cover his flank. The brute lifts its arms, and brings down the ax against his shield, knocking it from his grip. It clatters uselessly to the side, leaving him fully exposed. Martyn slices again, hitting the pig across the stomach. It lets out a horrifying roar, and aims its ax for Martyn’s head.

Golden metal cuts through like butter, and the world goes dark.

Falling through the void, Martyn feels his flesh knit together and his health regenerate. Then, he’s crashing back into reality, landing on his hands and knees. The atmosphere is clear, and Martyn takes greedy gulps of fresh air into his lungs.

“RAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! NO!” he shouts. An unfathomable, cursed rage boiling just below the surface.

Sitting back on his knees, he raises golden eyes and meets the blank, unsettling face of the secret keeper.

“First yellow.”







TrapDome

By Kait

Pearl had no idea how she'd gotten here. She knew she'd agreed to be in Secret Life, that was a good place to start. She also knew that, for whatever reason, she'd agreed to join Mumbo and Bdubs in building a mound-based base, even though there wasn't another natural mound for her. Thus, her upside-down bowl of dirt had formed.

And then, in week two, Jimmy had decided he was ready to move in. Had she spoken much to Jimmy prior to this decision? No. Had she had a say in it? Also no.

Was he sectioning off his corner of the dome and building a house-within-a-house? Now that one was a yes.

"Uhm, Jimmy?" she broached, not quite sure how to interrupt his organizing. "You know this is my base, right?"

"Our base," Jimmy corrected. "See, you've got your area, and I've got mine." As if to prove this point, he cut out a window and a door in his cobblestone facade. "Right, I've had to move some of your things to make room." Items appeared in his hands, and on instinct, Pearl held out her hands to take them. He dumped the pile in her arms, and she buckled under the sudden weight. A wooden bowl and three chunks of raw copper clattered to her recently-installed wooden floor. She watched some seeds trickle out of her hands and down between the cracks of the planks.

"You know, maybe I was using that space for storage," Pearl protested, trying to stop some amethyst crystals from joining the pile on the floor with little luck.

"Naaaaahhhh," was Jimmy's eloquent response.

After a few more quips, where Pearl's cheery demeanor took over and led her to not only agree to the bit, but to help by installing a matching cherry door and contrasting roofline, Jimmy suddenly announced "Thanks, Pearl!" with a salute and ran away.

Pearl stared between his retreating shape and the conversation happening between Grian and Cleo, trying to figure out what had just happened. And, more than a little bit, how long she was supposed to leave the bowl-sectioning up before she could safely take it down.





Tentatively, she moseyed away to get on with her own task.

As she collected terracotta, messed with her neighbors, and planned her super devious goose chase, Pearl mused on Jimmy's behavior. Was it his task to move into someone's house? Or was he just being Jimmy? You could never tell in the Life Series, let alone the season with 'Secret' in the name.

Twenty minutes of her own business, and shenanigans, later, Mumbo started a sentence with "Uhm, Pearl?", and she knew that Jimmy was back.

Cue her marching into her own home, where a whole party was gathered around her front door. This wasn't the first time that day that a throng of people had been delivered to her doorstep, and her main hope was that no one else had decided to take up residence.

Stepping inside, Mumbo and who knows who else in tow, Pearl crossed her arms. To her delight but also dismay, it was just Jimmy. "Jimmy, I thought we'd been over this. This is my house."

"Pearl, we have been through this. It's our house now." Jimmy patted his own crafting bench, apparently a symbol of claimed territory. Pearl put her hands on her hips, ready to press him further, but something over her shoulder caught his attention. "Mumbo, I think you should move in, too. We can be buddies!"

With absolutely zero hesitation, Mumbo had cobble in hand and was further subdividing the dome. It no longer looked like an upside-down bowl, but more of a sectioned chip-and-dip or veggie plate, and she was the guacamole getting dunked on.

Jimmy lit up in delight, clapping his hands together. Eyes shining, he turned to Impulse. "Impulseeee, c'mon man!"

Pearl closed the distance between herself and the intruder, leaning against his weirdly diagonal window-hole. "Jimmy, don't make me punch you. I can make you lose a heart."

She was cut off from hearing a response, or enacting any punishment, as Impulse began sectioning directly next to her, not with cobble but with whatever he had on hand.

It was a small miracle that Pearl didn't get dizzy as she spun around in her own base, trying to follow what developments her three new roommates were doing. She thought it was Mumbo who first introduced the trapdoors, but soon they were everywhere, the hottest new thing to add into the mound.





If asked, Pearl couldn't pinpoint the moment that she gave in. At first, she'd tried to be jovial and go along with the joke, if only to help Jimmy with his secret task. But that was before The Escalation. That was before the trapdoors. At some point, it became clear that this wasn't his task, but by that point, things had spiraled so far out of control that something else entirely was happening. Even more people had gotten in on it, with more on the horizon.

Within five minutes, she was scrunched into a newly-created trapdoor-induced cubby, with Mumbo trying to weasel his way in above her without knocking Impulse off of his top-spot. Jimmy wasn't anywhere to be seen, but three new hermits had squeezed their way in, took one look at the pillar in the corner, and got to work.

Pearl was eye to eye with the random debris scattered over her once-pristine new floor. There were more than a few rocks and bits of cobble, a stray ore, and various unstackable items. Each new person seemed to drop something while kicking everything else to the side. That random wooden bowl she'd dropped, in a serendipitous metaphor for this whole scenario, bounced back and forth across the space with each new visitor.

It just kept going, with the introduction of the crescendoing surround-sound "EYYYYYY"s and the need to hastily craft more trapdoors. Pearl got oddly comfortable, snug in her corner of the floor. As nearly everyone on the server - she admitted she lost count - arrived, she pondered how big a base really needed to be. Maybe all a mound needed was some friends to share it with.

And maybe, when it was all over, she'd have enough trapdoors to last her the rest of this secret lifetime.

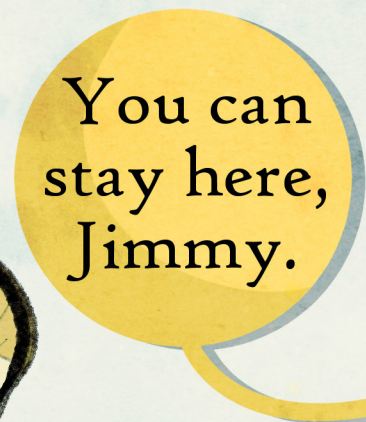
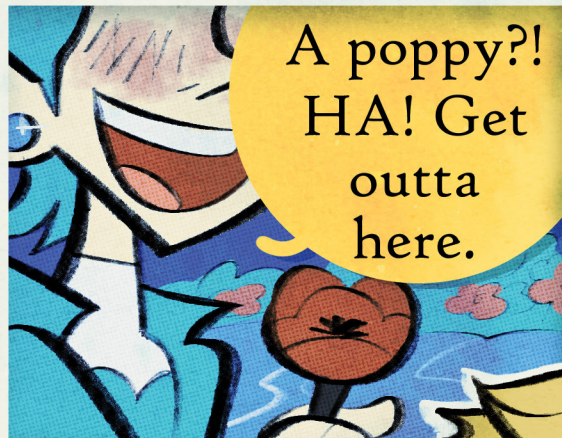






Secret Task #050216

"Get someone
to say 'Get out
of here'."



Results: *Failure*

Presented by *Traffic Zine: Volume Five*
Illustrated by *Carrotchipper*





i love you (say it back)

By Sage

This was either going to be the hardest thing Scott ever did, or the easiest. The task book felt like it was burning a hole in his pocket.

Tell someone you love them and have them say it back unprompted. 1 attempt per player. Total of 3 required to pass.

Scott told people he loved them all the time! It was just who he was! So that part would be fine– but it wasn't always a guarantee that they would say it back. However... there were definitely some safe bets.

“Scott, I gotta visit the secret guy,” Gem announced as Scott was gathering materials for their Nether trip.

“Okay, Impulse–” Scott started, not fully registering what Gem had said.

“Already?” Impulse asked, blinking in surprise at Gem.

Then Scott fully realized what Gem had said. They had *just* gotten their tasks... Scott frowned. “Wait, why?”

“Just– Just for a moment, don't mind me, it's fine,” Gem said, tone mildly frantic and *clearly* not fine.

“What?” Impulse asked, like he was trying to fix a stubborn bit of redstone machinery.

“It's a secret, obviously!” Gem called over her shoulder, already heading towards their staircase. “It's the secret keeper, guys!”

Scott chuckled, shaking his head. “See you soon. Bye Gem! Love you!”

“Yeah, love you too, goodbye!” Gem said, her voice clipped as she was distracted by *whatever* it was she was off to do at the Secret Keeper– but it was a “love you” all the same. Sure, Gem had been an easy target– but it was still one done. Just two more to go.

Scott got more opportunities as Martyn and Cleo decided to drop in. This should be easy, right? Cleo and Martyn were former teammates of his, they wouldn't let him down. Or so Scott thought.

“Before anyone presses the succeed button, they have to come and converse with me,” Martyn said smugly.





Scott rolled his eyes. Safe to say that he was struggling to muster up any love at this moment.

“Is that an actual rule or is that just a Martyn rule?” Scott asked flatly, mostly to Cleo.

Martyn rattled on some nonsense numbers and regulations, while Cleo looked a little like they wished someone would strike them down then and there.

“That’s a Martyn rule,” Cleo deadpanned.

They continued squabbling a bit about terms and services, until Cleo spoke up again.

“I do have a question to ask you, Martyn.”

“Sure,” Martyn said, head tilted to one side in confusion at the sudden topic change.

“Should I make a sword or an ax with diamonds?” Cleo asked.

“Oh sword, hundred percent, all day everyday,” Martyn replied without missing a beat.

Cleo seemed unsatisfied with the answer, frowning a little. “I’m... gonna go and ask questions of other people.”

She started to leave, and Scott saw his chance. “Bye Cleo, love you!”

They grinned, waving as they headed off. “Love you too, bye!”

Martyn jolted a bit, realizing that Cleo was leaving after some very suspicious behavior. He ran after her, attempting to guess her task as she left. Scott couldn’t help but chuckle as he crashed and burned miserably with his guess.

“Right, well it was lovely seeing you, bye Martyn!” Scott called down the staircase.

“Bye!” Martyn replied, already partway down the staircase.

Then, realizing he had another opportunity, Scott called out a hurried “love you” after Martyn... but he was too late.

Ah. Scott hadn’t taken into consideration how much being rejected would sting. He tried his best to push it aside. After all, things had ended uneasily between him and Martyn. Scott was sure to have better luck elsewhere, right?





Wrong. After a harrowing trip in the Nether with Gem, Scott decided to mount his newly hatched zombie horse and travel around to actually complete his task. It should have been easy– he just needed one more! But things went terribly with Jimmy– his “love you” went completely unnoticed! Then things had just been odd with Lizzie– she tried to bait him into revealing his task, and she wasn’t even yellow!

Feeling a little dejected, Scott headed back towards his base to rethink his strategy. However he ended up running into Pearl on the way, who was very taken with his zombie horse. He hopped off, offering her the reins for a ride.

“Can I have your horse?” Pearl asked, mischievous and likely half-joking as she rode around.

“Later– I’ll give it to you later,” Scott said between laughs, taking back the reins as Pearl came to a stop in front of him.

Pearl dismounted, eyes glimmering with excitement. “Ooooh okay! I was expecting like a straight no or something!”

“Well it’s cause I love you!” Scott said automatically, not even thinking about his task at the moment.

“Awww! That’s so sweet!” Pearl said, looking just about teary-eyed.

Then Scott realized what he said, and waited with bated breath...

“Aw, bless you. Quite a big contrast from the past,” Pearl continued with a sheepish smile.

So close. But... this was nice too.

“Oh, well we’re past that,” Scott said casually, but no less assuredly.

“I’m- I’m glad we’re standing there on that, that we can move past things,” Pearl said softly.

And sure, it wasn’t an “I love you–” but it felt pretty nice all the same.

Unfortunately, Scott’s exchange with Pearl wasn’t going to be enough for the Secret Keeper. But luckily, one last chance presented itself as Scott got back to his base. Impulse and Skizz were there, talking about Impulse’s abysmal failure at his task– he’d ended up setting an enderman loose on Skizz, and got called out. But at least since Impulse and Skizz had been best friends for ages, Skizz was able to laugh it off.





“I gotta go, bye!” Skizz said through a laugh after recounting the story.

“Bye Skizz, love you!” Scott called, giving one last try.

“Love you too!” Skizz called back, and Scott resisted the urge to cheer. Success!

However, Scott’s elation must have been pretty clear on his face, as Impulse *immediately* picked up on it.

“You’ve been very uh... loving today,” Impulse pointed out with a raised eyebrow.

“It’s very much my brand Impulse, what do you mean?” Scott asked, with a laugh that he hoped was more fond than nervous.

“Oh. Yeah, okay,” Impulse conceded, looking a little sheepish. He bought it!

“I literally say ‘love you’ to everyone!” Scott teased with a laugh.

“Every single person that’s left you’ve said ‘I love you’ to, and I was like— ‘uh is there something going on here?’” he laughed. “But you’re right, you’re right.”

Just then, Skizz ran by again, apparently having forgotten something. (Scott suspected that he actually wanted to make one last crack about that enderman.)

“Bye Skizz! Love you!” Impulse chuckled as Skizz darted off again.

“Wow, you’re seeming very lovey Impulse!” Scott said with a playful nudge.

Impulse rolled his eyes, nudging Scott back. “Yeah, yeah yeah—” he trailed off into a laugh.

Scott laughed too, both with relief and genuine amusement. All in all— he couldn’t have ended up with a better task. If tasks continued this way, things would be a cinch this go-around.

Right?





And Then it All Burned

By Aquinnix

Tango stared into the flame, maybe this wouldn't be as bad as he thought. He smiled, his curved lips seemingly mirrored in the fire. It was nice being able to talk like this, to let it all out.

"You alright top?" Skizz's voice brought Tango out of his thoughts.

Tango tried to not look as surprised as he was, meeting Skizz with hopefully steady eyes. "I'm fine! Nothing to see here!" He chuckled sheepishly.

Skizz began to turn away. "If you say so."

Torchy's warmth soaked into Tango's hands, offering a small comfort. He could have sworn the flame seemed lower now, flickering. "It's okay Torchy, he doesn't know anything."

Skizz let out a soft laugh in the distance, probably about something completely different.

That was when Tango got an idea. A really stupid idea. An idea that would severely overcomplicate things and make his life much harder than it needed to be. But it could be an opportunity, and a cover. Tango could take note of the other's reactions to his... less than normal behavior, pretend the whole thing was a dumb little research project.

Tango tucked Torchy back into his pocket, ignoring the slight burning sensation at his side, and jumped into the water. He was glad Skizz had walked away, Tango had never been the best swimmer and he was sure he looked ridiculous as he flailed. Still, he made it to the other side. Now the real fun could begin.

It didn't take long to run into someone, or multiple someones. Scar, Bdubs, and Mumbo were running around the perimeter of an arguably well built stone house.

"Scar, the courthouse is gorgeous." Bdubs rounded the corner, smiling wide.

Tango walked closer. "What is this red yellow blue bit? What is... is this a streetlight?" He eyed the construction.

"Yeah, that's blue Tango." Bdubs rolled his eyes.





“Listen!” Tango could feel his cheeks turning red. “There’s blue in your hand, my little brain got confused alright?”

Now everyone was laughing. “Yeah yeah.” Bdubs waved him off.

Tango decided he needed to leave the moment the ‘wack stick’ was mentioned. He snuck off to the side of the building, pulling out his task book.

Tango drew lines across the page, making sections for note taking. He grabbed Torchy and sat them down on the grass next to him. “Sorry, that pocket must’ve been stuffy. Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?”

Torchy fizzed, and Tango could almost hear soft words wrapping around his ears. *It’s alright*, Torchy seemed to say.

“What’cha got there?” Tango jumped, Scar’s voice making him fumble the book, slamming it shut.

He scrambled to his feet. “Oh just re-reading my task is all!” He forced a smile.

Scar stared at the book. “By talking to it?” He pitched his voice high, like that of a curious child.

“Yup!” Tango explained without missing a beat. “It’s all part of the process!” He launched into a monologue about how helpful it was with planning large contraptions. Scar left within the minute.

Subject gained an immediate curiosity, though it did not seem to take interest in a prolonged explanation, losing fascination quickly.

Tango continued to wander, Torchy in hand. It was almost as if the flames had formed a mouth, fiery lips moving up and down. *They know nothing, you are safe with me.* Flaming eyes melted into a reassuring expression.

“Tango my man.”

Tango turned to find Etho standing right behind him. What was it with people sneaking up on him today? “Hi! How’s it going?”

Etho looked around. “Now, I can’t give you details...”

He was cut off by Gem’s frantic yelling as she neared. “Tango! Tango! Tango!”





Tango wasn't able to hide his fear, letting a wild shriek tear up his throat and nearly losing his balance. Soon he was surrounded, Bdubs, Pearl, and Scott coming up behind Gem.

Then the dreaded question came. "Have you handed in your task?"

"I haven't." Tango spoke slowly, trying to think of a way he could get out of this mess. Maybe his ruse worked? Maybe she thought it had something to do with the book?

Gem cocked her head. "I would like to guess at your secret, I don't think you've done a good job at keeping it a secret."

Tango's breath quickened. "I don't have a secret! You can guess, I don't have a secret." He tried to hide the way his voice shook.

"I think your secret is to remove light sources from the server." She placed her hands on her hips, staring daggers into him through pumpkin eyes.

A smile crept across Tango's face. "That would be very incorrect pumpkin person! Be gone with yourself!" He quickly stumbled away, the adrenaline rush starting to fade.

That was a close one.

Subject seemed to take interest in the behaviour, however they vastly misinterpreted the actions. Whether continued interest will be exhibited post rejection is yet to be seen.

The next few hours were spent trying to keep everyone else off his back. Torchy's whispers were the only thing keeping him sane at that point, telling him that he didn't have to worry.

And then Martyn showed up.

Well more accurately, Tango showed up and Martyn was there waiting for him like some rabid dog ready to pounce. Martyn grabbed Tango roughly by the wrist and dragged him to the middle of the island. "Come take a seat." The words were repeated by a concoction of voices. Tango's mind was swimming, his heartbeat leaping to his throat and his limbs growing numb.

"I, InTheLittleWood of the task force..."

Oh no.





“Would like to invite you...”

This was bad.

“To sit there...”

This was really really bad.

“And...”

Tango’s breath got stuck in his lungs, he could feel the blood running through his veins going cold. His grip on Torchy tightened, splintering wood digging into his palm.

“Not just you to sit on that bed...”

Everything was warm and frozen and spotty. Tango couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t...

“But your imaginary friend that you have to pretend you have for the task this week!”

Tango wasn’t thinking, panicked words falling from his lips before he even felt them crawl up his throat.

He got caught.

What could have gone wrong? He had done everything right! He had tried to ignore how much Torchy’s flame was becoming more and more face shaped, how his ears still rang with the words that wormed their way inside no matter how much he knew they weren’t real.

Tango tried to get his racing heart to slow. He threw Torchy down on the ground, watching as the grass started to smolder and blacken.

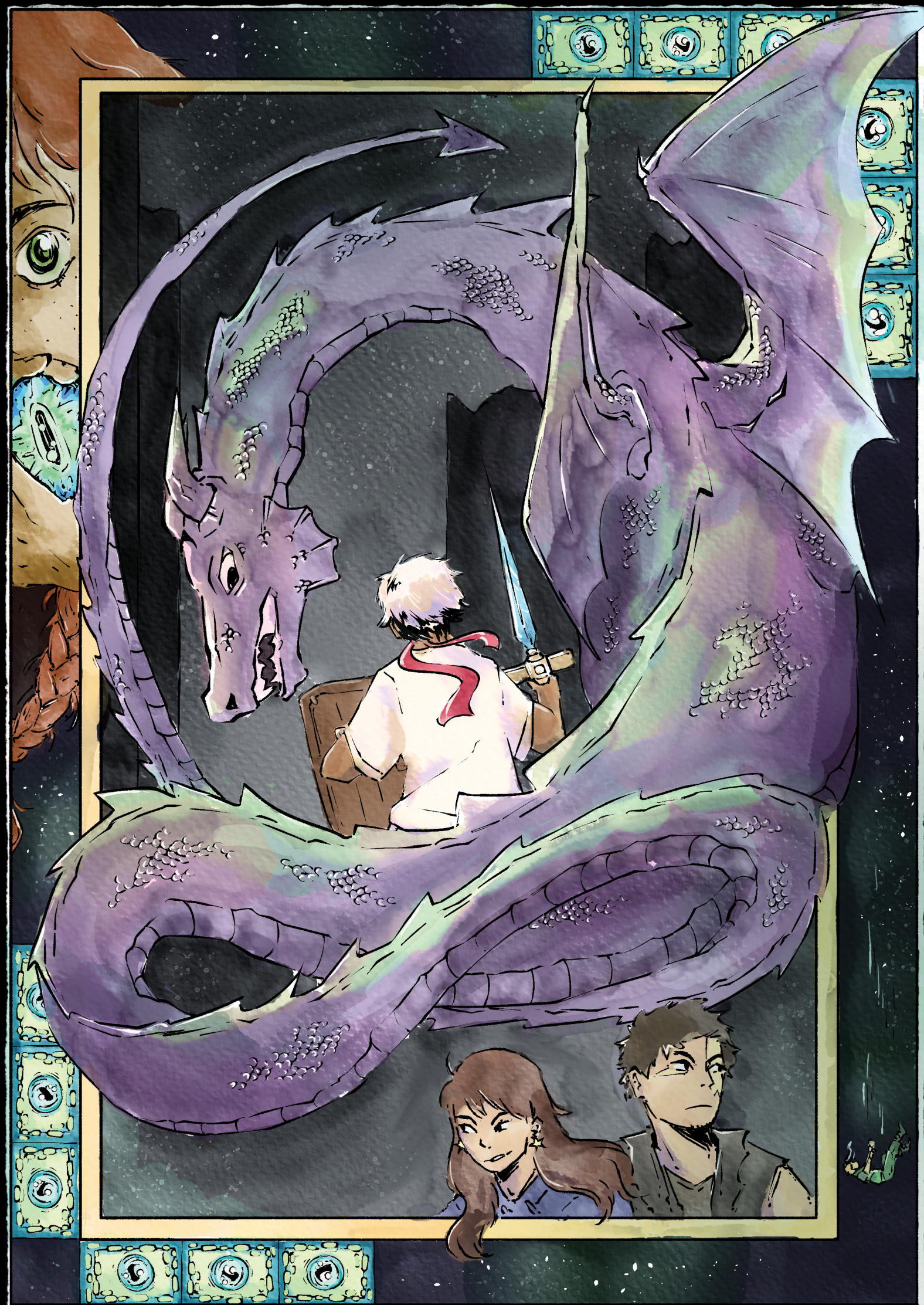
Then it hit him. “You already guessed! Everybody already guessed! Didn’t you?” Tango played the day over again in his mind, bits of yellow swirling and mixing together.

The air around them solidified, everyone freezing for a moment. The next few minutes were a blur. Martyn had to have guessed, if he hadn’t...

Tango didn’t start thinking again until he stood at the foot of the secret keeper, until he felt the cold button underneath his palm.

Until he failed.







Game Files

By DeathShadowRules

Files Archive from XX-XX-XXXX

Accessed by: XXXXXXXXX

Some Server Configuration Viewing Requested.

Status: Approved

~

BdoubleO100 has made the advancement [The End?]

impulseSV has made the advancement [The End?]

PearlescentMoon has made the advancement [The End?]

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Wait a minute, we're missing Gem! She didn't jump! What a stinky!

{Local} <BdoubleO100> To be honest, I thought you guys were baiting me here I was prepared to be here by myself.

{Local} <impulseSV> You did jump first.

~

{Global} <Smajor1995> Oh-

{Global} <ZombieCleo> Ah-

{Global} <SmallishBeans> Oh my gosh, they've actually gone into the end portal they are crazy.

{Global} <SolidarityGaming> People are going to the end?

{Global} <InTheLittleWood> There's no way-

{Global} <Grian> Oh my Goodness-

{Global} <Smallishbeans> GOOD LUCK

{Global} <bigbst4tz2> Oh my goodness.

~

{Local} <GeminiTay> YES! My plan worked! I mean it wasn't much of a





plan, but it did work! Oh, I'm so pleased with myself. You're welcome, end portal. I did it.

{Local} <GeminiTay> Oh I'm sure they're fine they're fineeeeeee. They've got this. Easy for them.

~

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Gem completely baited.

{Local} <BdoubleO100> That's fine.

{Local} <impulseSV> Alright, going up!

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> What a scaredy cat in diamond armor. Oh, we can look at the enderman. We got the things now.

{Local} <BdoubleO100> Oh that's right we can look at them! Here we go, let's get some shots on!

[End crystal has been blown up by an Arrow from BdoubleO100]

{Local} <BdoubleO100> Got it! Okay, got one.

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Oh dear me this is scary- Where is the dragon? Oh, he's over there. Why am I doing this in the life series?

[End crystal has been blown up by an Arrow from PearlescentMoon]

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> This is like the worst thing you can do in the life series is go fight the dragon. I mean I'm green with plenty of hearts so I can afford it but whYYYYyyyyy.

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Okay we need to get up there. All right I'm going to try getting up there.

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Wait is it going for me?

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> No it's fineeeee.

{Local} <impulseSV> You're fineeeee

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Where is it?

[End crystal has been blown up by an Arrow from BdoubleO100]

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Where is it?

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> It's over there. It's going for you guys.

{Local} <BdoubleO100> Okay there's another one down.





{Local} <PearlescentMoon> I'm totally going to die.

{Local} <BdoubleO100> Oh are you going up?

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> I'm going up

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> This is the plan

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> bad I've got Australian ping

{Local} <BdoubleO100> Oh you're going to be fine.

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> No I'm not. I'm totally going to die.

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Totally going to die.

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Totally going to die.

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Totally going to die.

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> I'm so scared.

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> I'm aaaahhhHHHHHHH
hihihihihiohohohihihi

[End crystal has been blown up by an Arrow from PearlescentMoon]

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Oh I shouldn't have done that. I was too close.

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Oh my gosh I did not like that at all I should have gone a bit further away.

~

{Local} <BdoubleO100> You know what?

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Hm?

{Local} <BdoubleO100> I'm putting water down for him in case he gets knocked.

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Oh yeah no good shout good shout. Is there any more crystals left or is that it?

[End crystal has been blown up by an Arrow from impulseSV]

{Local} <BdoubleO100> I think that's the last one-

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Oh there's one more that big, tall one over there.

{Local} <BdoubleO100> Let's try to shoot it.





{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Yeah, I'm not going up there.

[End crystal has been blown up by an Arrow from BdoubleO100]

{End Announcement} All end crystals have been destroyed.

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Nice I think you got that one.

{Local} <BdoubleO100> We got this ooHHH CAREFUL PEARL LAND IN THE WATER!

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Your water is amazing dude! Oh my gosh

{Local} <BdoubleO100> The water oh my gosh

~

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Real, my first shot is on the ender dragon.

{Local} <BdoubleO100> HAHAHAH

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> That's the way you play the life series everybody. ~

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Don't stand in front of it or it's going to boop yah I cannot shoot to save my life apparently.

{Local} <BdoubleO100> Yeah me neither, and I'm trying to conserve arrows.

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Maybe we just get elytra. Could you imagine?

{Local} <BdoubleO100> Oh my goodness. What an idea! That would be amazing.

~

[PearlescentMoon has been launched by Ender Dragon]

{Local} <impulseSV> Uh-oh, uh-oh! Water bucket clutch water bucket clutch!

{Local} <impulseSV> OOOOOHHHH!!!

{Local} <BdoubleO100> What did she do it??

{Local} <impulseSV> That was fantastic! She clutched it.

{Local} <BdoubleO100> No way, wow! Holy cow!

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> :nodders:

{Local} <BdoubleO100> You did it :D





~

{Global} <Grian> Is the dragon dead yet?

{Global} <PearlescentMoon> Almost!

{Global} <GeminiTay> My army is working on it! Trust them

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> I think Grian wants to come in here and steal the kill...

{Local} <BdoubleO100> He better not!

~

{Local} <impulseSV> Holy smokes this gut is tough.

{Local} <BdoubleO100> We can do this together all as one!

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> All as one! Just please don't hit me <3

{Local} <impulseSV> We all go in!

~

{Local} <Smajor1995> It's around here somewhere.

{Local} <LDShadowLady> There it is! Let's go!

{Local} <SolidarityGaming> I'm going, I'm going, I'm going! ~

LDShadowLady has made the advancement [Eye Spy]

Smajor1995 has made the advancement [Eye Spy]

InTheLittleWood has made the advancement [Eye Spy]

SolidarityGaming has made the advancement [Eye Spy]

LDShadowLady has made the advancement [The End?]

Smajor1995 has made the advancement [The End?]

InTheLittleWood has made the advancement [The End?]

SolidarityGaming has made the advancement [The End?]

~

{Local} <impulseSV> How dare they?!

{Local} <PearlescentMoon> Ope- They're coming in! The kill steal guys!
We did all this work! Absolutely not!





{Local} <BdoubleO100> Nooo! No no no no! We gotta do it now! ~

{Local} <InTheLittleWood> OH NO!

{Local} <LDShadowLady> OHMYGOSH Martyn's just fallen off the edge

{Local} <SolidarityGaming> Wait is Martyn died?!

{Local} <Smajor1995> Yes! He's fallen off!

InTheLittleWood fell out of the world

~

{Local} <Smajor1995> We should go and help!

{Local} <LDShadowLady> Yesssss! Let's do it!

{Local} <SolidarityGaming> They've just gone and killed it! Oh, OH! I'm dead I'm dead!

SolidarityGaming was doomed to fall by Ender Dragon

~

BdoubleO100 has made the advancement [Free the End]

~

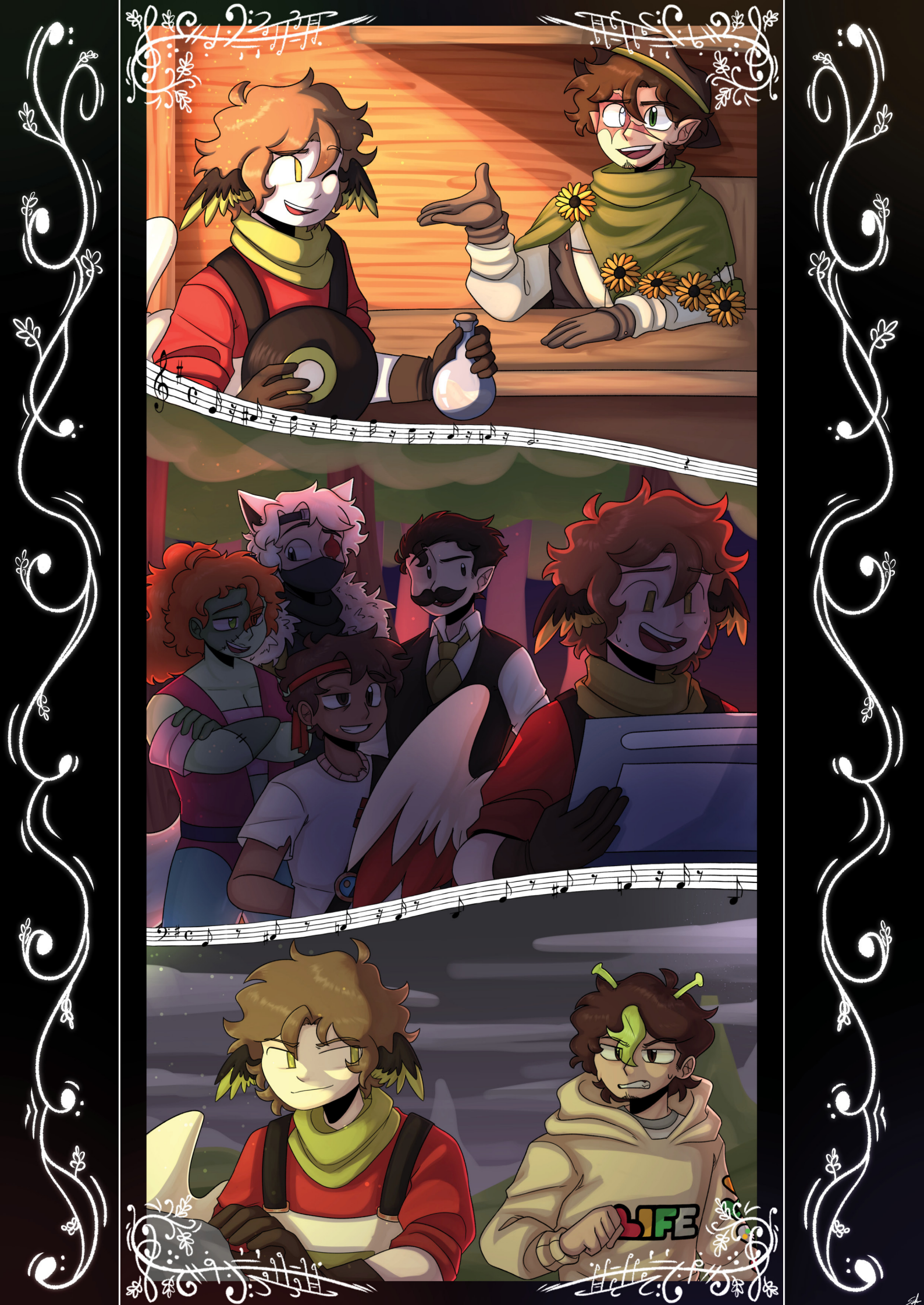
[World Game: Saving]

[World Game: Saved]

[Tasks will be updated to match current rankings]

[Thank you for your collective participation]





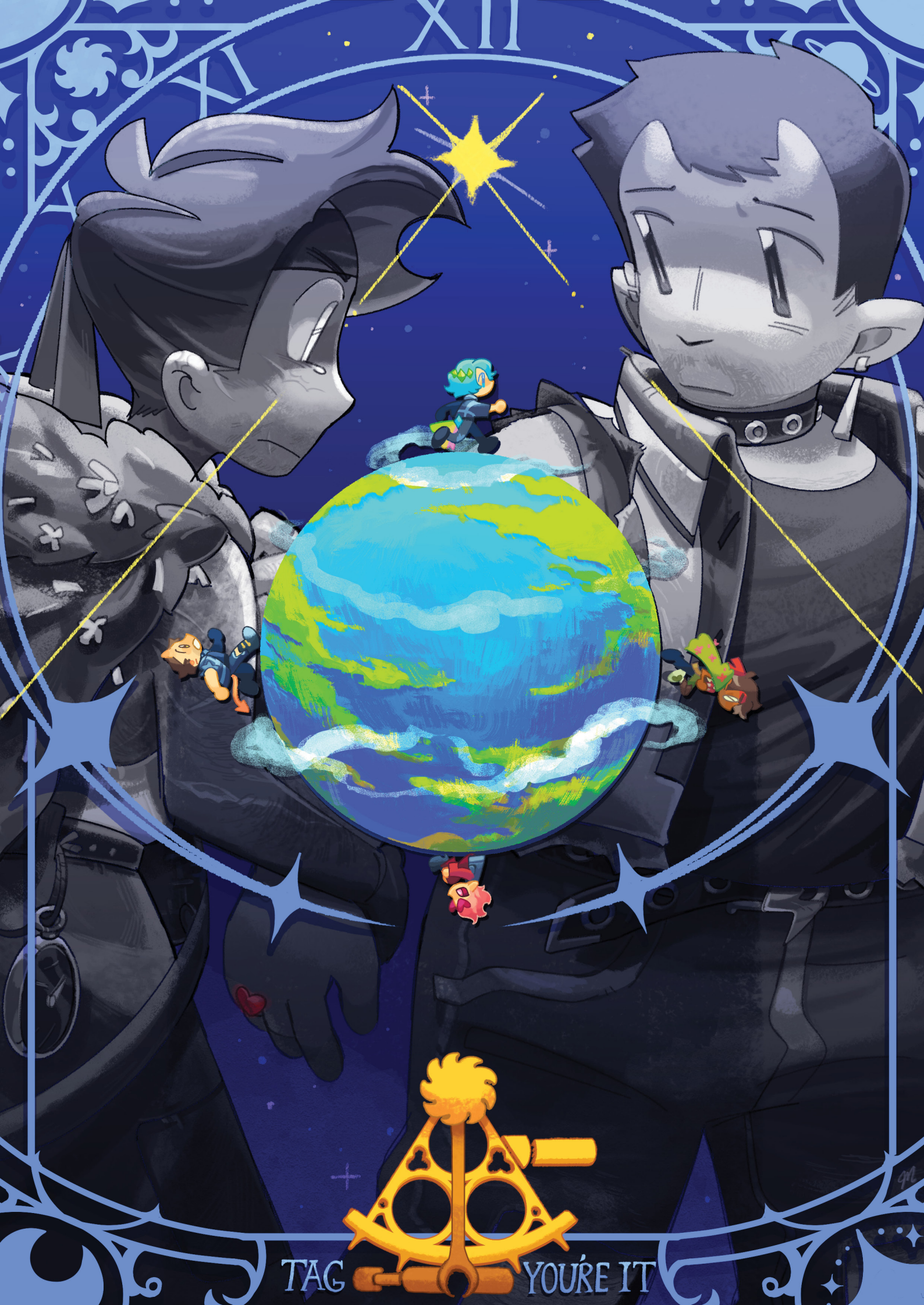


Sakura
Born

secret task

The Red's Name Lackey







Tag, You're It

By Mars

When Impulse opened his scroll, he was hit with an overwhelming feeling of *dread*.

Gathered together with his team like every morning, his eyes darted over the words before him, mind racing as they finally processed.

Tag. With Tango and Bdubs.

His anxious gaze flickered towards his bandmate.

And Scott.

Impulse took a deep breath as he locked focus with the man across from him. Hesitation danced behind his eyes. There was none behind Scott's.

He looked at Impulse with the calm collection of his usual self, piercing, calculating. He must've looked like a predator, a tiger stalking its prey. *Hungry*.

A knowing look was shared between the two. Impulse wasn't "it." Somebody else was.

And that somebody was Scott, who tagged Impulse the moment they were alone.

Impulse took it as well as he could, swallowing the faint, hushed "betrayal" that bubbled in his throat. He forced a smile instead.

Unease blossomed in him like an ugly flower, hunger pangs like thorns pricking his stomach, eating him from the inside out. Scott wished him luck and gave him a very gentle pat on the back. Impulse could feel his mouth watering.

And just like that, as he raced out of the cherry blossom base, the cycle had started. Tag had begun. The chase was on.

—

Running through the parking lot,





He chased me and he wouldn't stop.

Impulse found Tango quicker than he thought he would, distracted, talking with Etho. He gave him a sudden whack before he even saw him coming. Tango spluttered, whipping around, and Impulse felt a hand come down on him in turn.

Something flickered inside of him. Angry, resentful, *raw*.

Impulse *refused* to be “it” again.

“No tag backs!” he exclaimed, suddenly devoid of any sympathy as he watched Tango’s eyes grow shifty from afar. He was lucky Scott came around to back him up, make his little lie seem true. Even luckier his bandmate became a new target for Tango.

Impulse, however, could only be safe from the game for so long.

Even as he watched Tango and Bdubs circle each other like wolves from the safety of his base, and as break time came around and he and Scott celebrated their success, a new tagger had to be chosen.

Tango, the first loser, gathered him, Scott, and Bdubs together, far away from the watchful eyes of yellows. He looked oddly pleased at the prospect of pulling the strings, choosing the new hunter. He truly was a gamemaster, Impulse supposed.

Tango had let fate decide, and fate had never been kind to Impulse. The hard hit that came down on him as the man he tagged before finally tagged him back only solidified it.

“Tag, you’re it,” Tango declared. ***“Tag, tag, you’re it.”***

—

***Grabbed my hand, pushed me down,
Took the words right out my mouth.***

Scott, ever the gracious ally, let Impulse tag him. Strategically, of course.

It gave Impulse a chance to breathe again, that heavy weight being passed along. It gave him time to do other things, too, like tower building and socializing. And the usual past time of being terrorized by red names.

There was some comfort in the cycle that had formed, knowing who to





run from and who to chase. But all that was squashed when Impulse remembered *who* was fated to tag him.

It felt familiar, running from Bdubs. Sickeningly so.

Impulse would survive, though, he told himself. It's just a game, after all. And we would win.

In his moment of reprieve, he stood with Scott at their home. The two of them gazed upon the server, and Impulse racked his mind trying to pinpoint Bdubs.

"I don't see him anywhere..." he muttered. That should've been a good thing, but it seemed that Bdubs's absence was just as uncomfortable as his presence.

Twisted irony, however, tended to follow Impulse everywhere he went.

Moments after the words left his mouth, Bdubs was there, electricity shooting through Impulse as a hand came down on his back. Piercing like an arrow, maybe an axe. He felt so *stupid*, being snuck up on like that.

His desperate, determined eyes met Scott's. His bandmate's held a trusting hesitation.

"We got time for this, don't we?"

A gentle tap.

"Tag, you're it," Impulse said. **"Tag, tag, you're it."**

—

***Can anybody hear me when I'm hidden underground?
Can anybody hear me? Am I talking to myself?***

Impulse was, to put it simply, scared.

He was no stranger to running, to being chased, to being hunted and stalked like prey.

It wasn't helping that Martyn had decided to antagonize him as well, sadistically toying with him. Hadn't he already run from Martyn enough? The cauterizing wound and dwindling timer still felt fresh.





And with Bdubs hot on his trail, things couldn't be worse.

There's something so cruel about running home and knowing you're not safe there, stumbling on cherry wood stairs as someone you can't even see breathes down your neck. Impulse felt *sick*.

He ran. Impulse ran and ran until he nearly choked on the water beneath their diving board, on the air that couldn't seem to find its way into his lungs, on the scream he couldn't let out.

Everything felt heavy. His footsteps sounded so loud on the stone floor of the cave. His frantic breathing echoed off the walls like a ticking clock, maddening. He could sense Bdubs behind him, getting closer and closer and *closer*.

Impulse ducked back, scrambling into a crevice. He slammed a hand over his mouth. He waited.

His body *ached*. All he could do was cower as he heard footsteps running around beyond his hiding spot, jagged breathing just like his own far too close for comfort.

It felt like *hours*. Neither of them spoke a single word.

Impulse eventually dug himself out once any noises were long gone, relief crashing down on him in waves the moment the sun kissed his skin. He drank up the fresh air, heart thumping wildly in his chest. He swore it was the sweetest breath he ever took.

—

Saying, "Tag, you're it, tag, tag, you're it."

Impulse had escaped then, sure, but Bdubs found him again. He always did.

To onlookers, he must've looked like a caged animal, probably sounded the part, too. Screaming and thrashing with tears pricking his eyes, he tried to get away, but it was too late.

Too late to run, too late to find Scott, too late to save himself.

And, consequently, too late to succeed in his task.

Impulse had survived, at least.





The end of the session came far too quickly, the four of them gathering in front of the Secret Keeper as the rest of the server watched. Scott and Bdubs stood with pride. Impulse and Tango... not so much.

With the winners having claimed their victory, there was only one thing for the Impulse and Tango, the *losers*, to do.

Impulse reached out, the restlessness leaving him as his fingers touched the button. Just as soon as the game of tag had entered the world, it left. A sense of ease settled over the four of them at last.

He's saying, "Tag, you're it, tag, tag, you're it."









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Warm or cold, huh?

You're special today, aren't you?



Ughhhhhh



I think that's hot!

That's so hot, Cleo.



I know I'm hot, you don't have to keep saying it!

You did it!

That's it!

Alright, Clebert!

Finally!

That's what's up!

I did it!!

What did I DO??





Before the Screaming Starts

By Woosh

The thing about everything you're doing is that you don't want to do it. You know it's the time of the season, but something in you isn't ready for the carnage ahead, not yet. The air is growing heavy with red mist. There are no boogeymen, but all the same, violence is a mirror that holds your roommate's reflection.

Everything is dark, but you knew that would happen when you went down here. Going down the mountain and into the deep dark is like stepping into another dimension, vast and deprived of all sense of self. If you weren't used to the feeling, you'd be like the man behind you, grasping your hand white-knuckled as you make your way down. You can't see his face, but you bet he's pale, pupils dilated to adjust to the dark. You can't blame him; you're exactly the same. After all, it's hard to be calm before a big storm.

Part of you is excited. This happens every time you're made to be a fighter, rather than a runner- the thrill of the hunt seeps into your blood, brain working a million miles per hour to figure out how exactly you want to go about murder. You cannot deny just how exciting it is to be the puppeteer of a warden; the hand that turns the tide. It's so exciting, in fact, that you almost forget about the consequences until you hear them clacking

The thing about everything you're doing is that you don't want to do it. You know it's the time of the season, but something in you isn't ready for the carnage ahead, not yet. The air is growing heavy with red mist. There are no boogeymen, but all the same, violence is a mirror that holds your roommate's reflection.

The darkness is suffocating. You know that the ceiling sits high above you, but the skulk on the deepslate grips onto your ankles with a force that nearly topples you over. With every step farther in, you kick the spores off, careful not to hit the man guiding you down to the start of the end. You're grasping his hand tighter than the skulk is grabbing onto you, hoping that his steadiness flows into you through touch. You wonder how someone can be so calm before such a massive storm.

Other hand in your pocket, you feel the subtle sting of withering on your fingertips. You frown in response, worried for what's next. Usually, you're all for chaos, but this seems excessive, catastrophic. This will mean an unwanted change of pace, and apologies given that you know won't be accepted. You don't know how many people will survive long enough for you to give apologies to them, especially now that Lizzie is gone. Still, the words





around in your roommate's pockets. Reality settles in: what you're about to do is going to change things for the worse. People will want your head for this, they are bound by the universe to get it, and now that Lizzie is dead, they won't hesitate to hunt you down. You're not sure if you're willing to fight back, when it comes down to it, if it puts others on the line.

Focus on the present: you've made it down to the noteblock machine without setting anything off, the incessant dinging boring into your skull. Behind the two of you, the bubble elevator gurgles gently; the path to the open-air arena spawn will become. Veins of skulk surge from a single shrieker, antennae limp in the silence. The nametag in your right hand suddenly feels much heavier, no matter how lighthearted the words written on it are. *Etho's Dishwasher*, out to shatter the peace. You, creator of chaos. A pit forms in your stomach, but it's too late to turn back now. You're almost there. All you have to do is summon the warden, bring it to spawn, and let it—and your roommate—do the rest.

It's time. Without disturbing the eerie silence, you wriggle your hand out of his grip and take a shaky breath. You find his eyes in the pitch, the shine barely visible. It takes more force than usual to croak out three words: *are you ready?*

He gives a hesitant nod, and you mimic it. You know he's lying, and he knows you are too.

linger on your tongue- *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I had to, I'm sorry*. You said a version of them earlier to Mumbo and he had taken it in stride, but you're not sure when they go from being genuine to just being a mantra to make yourself feel better. After all, there will be too much blood on your hands when you say them. Mumbo's is already caking under your fingernails.

That doesn't matter right now. What matters is what's in front of you: the noteblock machine that will wake the warden and start up this whole mess. It's a little self-sustaining work of genius on your roommate's part, but it doesn't make you feel any better. Frankly, the constant *ding ding ding* of the thing just makes the pit in your stomach worsen—you won't be surprised if you end up vomiting in the next twenty minutes, from either the appearance of the great hulking beast, or being shot up the bubble elevator, or running as fast as you can towards spawn, or the withering effect, or the guilt that's bubbling its way up your throat, even before you set dominoes into motion. There's no time to think about the guilt, though.

You feel the air shift when your roommate lets go of your hand, takes a breath, and turns to look at you. His voice is barely a whisper when he speaks, careful not to set anything off: *are you ready?*

You're not, but you nod your head anyway. He nods back, and you're pretty sure he isn't either.





You remove the wool from the shrieker, tugging at the fibers clenched in your fist with a careful precision. Your roommate's voice, filled with worry, echoes out immediately after- he's concerned about where the warden is going to spawn; if the space set up for it will be enough or if the two of you will have to track it down. Before, when you had been setting up the path of destruction, you had listened, but now, it's just more noise in your ears as you grip the name tag with white knuckles, a snap reply falling off the tongue.

When he pulls the wool off the sculk shrieker, redstone-stained hands tugging like ripping off a bandaid, you can't be silent anymore. Too many worries filter through your brain and out your mouth, echoing off into the space where your roommate stands, wool in one hand, name tag in another. Your questions are bounced off the walls, alongside his snap reply: *I don't know! I've never done this before!* He doesn't entirely seem to be listening, fists clenched around the name tag, staring into the deep yawning of the shrieker's maw.

And then the caverns howl. Once, twice, three times, four. The ground rumbles, and out from the darkness emerges change like no-one has seen...





Nightmare Scenario

By FindingSchmomo

It all started out as a dream, but now it was looking more and more like a nightmare. Joel internally screamed as he nervously paced around his Helter Skelter, watching from afar as Jimmy made yet another attempt. It was painful to see Scott easily dodge and weave the onslaught from his sword. His mocking laugh carried all the way up to his mound and made him want to grind his teeth to dust.

Agony. Pure agony.

“Oh gosh, Jimmy. Why have I chosen the most useless red name?” he whined out, mostly to himself. Down below he saw Jimmy give up the chase and turn back toward him, giving him a big thumbs up. Joel shook his head and sank down to his knees. He dug the task book out of his inventory, re-reading it one more time for good measure

You are Smajor1995's assassin.

Killing Scott was one of his favorite pastimes. How could this session turn into such a stressful experience? Why was Scott so good at the darn game? Joel could scream. He might do just that from the safety of his home.

Why couldn't Scott just go home? And die. In his trap. Two assassins and a bugged home, and still the teal haired rockstar was gallivanting about shamelessly alive. To add salt to the wound, Scott had even come up to him to warn him about Jimmy. Did he know? Did he know it was Joel who sent him and he was just teasing him? Was this another one of his mind games?

Scott was smart, it was a fact Joel could never contest. Most importantly, Scott could do something Joel never seemed able to achieve--he could stay calm during a crisis.

Joel tended to panic. In fact, he was panicking right now. Why else would he be running around in circles around his Helter Skelter like a headless chicken? Oh dear, what if Scott was watching him!? It was an obvious tell. Oh, he was being so stupid!

He froze in place, staring out past his fellow mounders and the rest of the chaotic landscape of spawn. He could see the Task Keeper's merciless





stone facade staring back at him. Were they mocking him? Just like Scott no doubt was?

So perhaps it shouldn't have been much of a surprise when, soon after, stupid Scott on his stupid horse with his stupid smug voice asked if he was his assassin. Hearing the teal haired man laugh in victory burned his cheeks. Scott might as well have branded *Utter Failure* across his forehead. Perhaps he deserved it at that point. He'd been given his dream task on a silver platter and had absolutely squandered it somehow.

"You can shame me, Scott," Joel huffed as they stood in front of the Secret Keeper's altars. The fail button sat ominously in front of him, and his fingers twitched wishing he could just turn around and shoot the victor with his bow right then and there.

"Shame, shame, shame," Scott chanted jovially.

"Hate, hate, hate," Joel seethed in turn.

If it were up to him he would have spent the rest of the session wallowing deep underground, replaying the events of the day and rehashing his terrible decisions. Why Jimmy? Sure, Martyn was friends with Scott, but he knew Martyn to be a man willing to throw hands with most anybody. He loved chaos and he *actually* got kills.

The Secret Keeper, however, may have heard his silent pleas for redemption. He heard a loud crackle take over the skies above, forcing him back out into the open and clearing his self-loathing thoughts.

The Secret Keeper had sent him an angel.

Someone had spawned the Wither.

Joel grinned.

He heard the rest of the server shriek in terror. Most jumped straight into battle to deal with the sudden enemy--not just a Wither, but a Warden, too. Others ran for the hills to keep smartly away. But luckily for Joel, his target was in the midst of the fray.

In fact, the Wither had zeroed in on Scott, who was running as deftly as he could through the carnage of flying dirt blocks. Now, that just wouldn't do. If the Secret Keeper had been kind enough to send him a second chance, the least Joel could do was help.

He sprung into action, running forward and shouting, "Get him, Wither!" in sharp contrast to the rest of his friends. He saw Scott whip his head





around, his usual calm and collected veneer wiped clean to show real disheveled panic. Oh, if only Joel could take a screenshot.

"Joel!" he cried out.

Joel grinned down at him as Scott reached up a hand for help. Instead, he slammed a block down, and then another, spamming a wall to trap Scott behind it. The teal haired rockstar shrieked, still managing to scramble up and free, barely avoiding the Wither's next attack.

Why do you have to be so good at this game? Joel whined internally, for the millionth time this night. It really was not fair.

"Come on, Wither! Get him!" Joel urged on, throwing more blocks down desperately.

"Joel! You can't do this!" Scott called back, slipping slightly in the mud and taking a bolt of damage. He yelped out, a new rush of adrenaline urging him forward, "You already failed your task!"

"I'm not doing anything," Joel replied easily, eyes manic, "I wasn't the one who let a Wither loose on the server."

"Well how about you *help*, instead of blocking me!" Scott huffed, twisting to the left to get some distance from Joel and the Wither.

"I am helping," Joel insisted with a near hysterical laugh. Another bolt of lightning hit the ground, much too close for comfort. He ended up falling, taking a tick of damage and cursing under his breath. Okay, maybe Scott was right. Playtime was over.

After all, it would be absolutely embarrassing if he died now. Scott would never let him live it down. So, Joel squared himself up and started attacking the Wither proper. Eventually, they managed to destroy it, but not without heavy casualties. Jimmy--he regretted cursing his name so often that day--and Mumbo were gone. Not to mention his own wife's death before the battle.

So many deaths, and none of them Scott's!

"You know, Joel," Scott breathed out as the panic subsided. He was a safe distance away as he called out, clearly hurrying back to the safety of his cherry grove. "Your little stunt got me all the way down to half a heart."

Joel blinked, mouth falling open as he stared at the teal haired man. "Are you blumming serious?"





Scott just laughed, the sound piercing through Joel's skull as he let out an aggravated screech. He had him. Just one more push was all he had needed.

One day, Scott, Joel seethed internally, one day your life will be mine.







Three's a Task

By Yodel

Pearl's very important, very secret errand list.

1. *Stab and crit Skizz (Don't apologize!!! Important!!!)*
2. *Set Etho on fire*
3. *Use some good old dripstone*
4. *Profit?*

Leaving the Mounder's base to begin her quest, Pearl couldn't help but feel slightly guilty. Not for any potential violence she may inflict of course, but for having to do it so deceptively. While she didn't want to be out so quickly, part of her thought this would be much easier if she was already red.

A close guess of her task from Gem later, Pearl rested a hand on the diamond sword at her belt. Blood diamonds, given by Jimmy with the intent to harm. Not just harm, but *jump crit*. Ah well, it couldn't be too hard, right? She let her hand leave the hilt and take hold of her near broken ax. Weaker, more unsuspecting and probably just to fend off mobs to an unsuspecting eye.

Yellow dandelions dotted the hill she found Skizz on, who eyed her suspiciously. "Skizzly!" she sang.

Frowning slightly, Skizz's expression told her that she was already failing to be innocuous. "Hello?" He greeted, already beginning to move away as Pearl pranced towards him, giggling at his fear.

"If I was a red name that might be a warranted reaction, but c'mon now Skizzleman I'm just a green name!"

"No, I'm not—ok, well first off please put your ax away." Pearl tossed her ax aside in an instant and pulled out one of her salmon snacks, flopping it around as if to show Skizz it was harmless, before sinking her teeth into the flesh of the belly. Skizz's every muscle remained tensed, his creased brow stressing every line on his face. "You're about to attack me."

"Aw, what makes you think that?" she said through a mouthful of fish.

"Listen, I know people, I know their approach, I know what they do, am I onto something?"

Feeling sheepish, Pearl cast her eyes downward. "Mmgh, I don't know?"





I don't think so, what do you want from me, I'm a green name!" She laughed nervously and kicked away the ax beside her. Skizz broke at that, a nervous chuckle also coming from him.

"...Alright, that's fair. But," he raised his shield up. "I have to ask. How are you feeling about what you're about to do?"

Neither side budged for a moment. "About what I'm doing? Actually, I'm feeling great! I get to see my good friend Skizzleman, who I haven't spoken to like all season!" Skizz looked thoroughly unconvinced.

Truly, it was a shame, because she was glad to see him. Who wouldn't be glad to see Skizz? She was only lying a little bit, really. The hard part of this would be not apologizing, because the man was just too gosh darn amiable. Alas, she had to keep pushing and wait for an opening.

"And don't forget, I helped you get hearts last session. I'm just looking for a bit of food, armor, anything you might have to spare, really." She made her face as innocent as possible, adding an ever so slight hint of puppy dog eyes.

Seemingly, that worked. Skizz lowered his shield, relenting slightly. "I mean...do you like the pants you have right now? Because I could give you something better." Relief flooded Pearl, only to immediately sweat at getting to the next phase of her admittedly on the fly plan. Go through transaction talk like normal, then when he turns around... Could she crit him on the first try? Should she let him start walking away and then take a running swing? Before she knew it, Skizz was waving bye to her, she was praising his name for his generosity and he was setting off at a brisk pace. Pearl immediately strode after him, unsheathing her sword. Skizz only had time to momentarily turn before she struck him on the shoulder.

Yelling, he began to run instead of falling to the ground. "And there it is!"

Feeling bad already, Pearl hit him twice more, trying to land that crit. "That's enough," Skizz pleaded, right as the fourth strike to his side knocked him back and made him crumple to the ground, clutching at his side.

"Oh! I'm sorry!" she said on instinct. "I mean—that was from Jimmy! You're amazing Skizz! Love you!" As she turned to run away, she heard Skizz grumbling loudly, hopefully not too offended. Torrid feelings of shame and guilt pooled in her stomach. She'd gone against the very thing Jimmy had asked her to do, but hey, the task just said she had to harm, and Jimmy wasn't the secret keeper. As far as they were concerned, one third of her task was complete.





—

Upon hearing voices coming from Etho's mountain, Pearl cautiously crept towards the entrance. Even if no Etho was to be found, perhaps she could still pull off a dripstone maneuver. Thankfully, that hassle was postponed as it was indeed Etho who popped into view, looking just oh so chipper.

"Really great to see you come by Pearl! I've been looking all over the place for you actually." He said in that melodious tone of his.

"Terrific. I've been looking for you too." Etho's eyes twinkled with amusement at that.

"Evidently, it seems we keep missing each other." Pearl smiled wearily, already reaching for the flint and steel.

"Eventually it was bound to happen. I've been looking for you for so dang long. I don't care how I do this at this point. Just, please burn sir." The strike sent sparks flying onto Etho's pant leg. For a single glorious moment a plume of flame sprang to life to eat away at fabric and flesh, before a panicked Etho yelped and smothering the flame swiftly.

No matter. She could see the place the flame had grazed his ankle. It was a complete task. "That's it! You were driving me bonkers not being around where I needed to look for you. You're making my day very difficult sir!"

Pearl marched off indignantly while Etho and a very startled Grian stared at her, baffled. "I thought she was happy to see me, but that's not really happy, more like..."

Lurking a few paces behind and feeling thoroughly grateful he hadn't been the target, Grian shook his head. "No, not happy at all."

—

"Ey, you just wanna stand on top of that chest real quick? I wanna try something." Big B squinted at her suspiciously, but reluctantly took a few steps closer to being under her perch before stopping and looking up again. Pearl knew she was incredibly suspicious in her tree dirt tower, but after a long day of imposterizing or whatchamacallit she didn't particularly care how much finesse her schemes had as long as they resulted in one good strike.

"Are you sure? Here?" There was absolutely no way he didn't think she was out to get him, but either because he'd also had a long day or because Big B was a buddy through and through, he shuffled in the near but not quite perfect killing range.





“Sure, but just a block forward please!” He sighed and did as told. She made it quick, lugging the stalactite up and out and dropping it. There was a thud and a cry of annoyance and pain. Peering over the edge, Pearl could see Big B staring up at her, annoyed but unsurprised.

Eventually, after a moment of silence, Big B’s voice spoke up again. “Pearl. You are officially banished from this base forever.”





Choosing Red

By Kip

Impulse let out a long exhausted sigh as he leaned against the cobble walls of the Mounders base, his axe discarded on the ground by his side. He watched people run by, some talking, others just passing by with that determined look in their eye that told him they were probably on their way to work on their task. Speaking of tasks, he dug his book out of his pocket, scowling down at the words.

“Get 3 people to accuse you of being the Boogeyman.”

When he'd first read it, he thought it was going to be simpler than it was turning out to be. The fear of a Boogeyman lingered, even in the seasons without one. That fear of hidden red, unknown until you were already half dead. He'd thought he'd be able to chase around a few people, swinging his axe with narrowly missed hits, or spook them with some fire, and yet that stupid word had yet to leave anyone's lips.

Pearl had felt like an easy first choice, what with Double Life and her almost self-imposed Boogey curse that had ended up winning her the season. And yet, even after chasing her and threatening her, she simply ran, not even a hint that she thought he might be the Boogeyman.

He'd seen Bdubs a few times, thinking maybe he'd try with him later if Pearl never got it. He'd been watching most of what he was doing with Pearl, surely he had some thoughts about what Impulse was up to. He was almost relieved when Bdubs said he was going to guess, because it meant a chance that either he would accuse him of being the Boogey, or he'd guess his task and he'd simply be free from it.

But no, Bdubs got it wrong, so off he went, trying to figure out a new plan, a new target, struggling to figure out how the hell he'd get one person to guess, let alone three.

Scar was his next target, the man's usually jumpy behaviour seemingly a perfect setup for him to guess. Impulse had known Gem had been around Scar earlier, complaining of a few shots he'd gotten on her, but whatever she'd been up to must have set him up, because as Impulse watched his hearts tick dangerously low from arrows he knew this target wouldn't work either.





Which brought him to now, exhausted as he was of faking swings and only losing hearts in his attempts. He knew his current two wouldn't last him long, even if the heart foundation happened to draw his name. It was probably better to give up, to go find Scott or Gem and see if there was anything he could do to help them prepare for the growing number of reds and yellows on the server, for the inevitable battle that the end would spark.

And that was when he heard Gem and Bdubs talking. He knew Bdubs had died earlier, and that Gem had caused it. Maybe, with his two hearts, he could see if she needed the kills. Maybe he could help her out. It would only set him to yellow, and since his task was practically impossible, if he could help his teammate with hers, then he may as well.

"We just need one more person and then we'll be awesome," he heard Gem say as he pushed his way through the gates of the Mounders base. Bdubs said something about a horse, but he didn't pay much attention to it, he had already made up his mind.

"I volunteer as tribute!" He said, coming up behind Gem and surprising them both.

Bdubs gave him an incredulous look, "To be a horse?"

Impulse raised an eyebrow at him, about to correct him but stopping when he saw the questioning look in Gem's eye. She pressed her lips into a thin line, "Trust me, you don't want—I mean, no, he doesn't want this smoke."

"Does he want this smoke?" Bdubs asked her, overlapping her words.

She eyed him, then shook her head, "No he doesn't want this smoke."

He looked between them, summoning all his courage. "Bring it."

They shared a glance, Bdubs turning back to him, "You want this smoke?"

"Bring it," he repeated, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt.

Bdubs glanced at Gem again, who simply shrugged, then the next thing Impulse knew Bdubs' sword was through his chest, his last two hearts slipping away as he yelled a harrowed "Thank you!" Before respawning in his house back on the cherry hill.

Impulse looked down at his hearts, the fresh set of 30 feeling like a weight off his shoulders, even as the uneasiness of yellow began to wash over his skin. He'd dealt with it before, he could do it again.





He made his way back down the stairs, planning to go talk to Gem either way only to find both her and Bdubs rushing to meet him along the path, Gem quickly passing him a book in his confusion. He held it, staring at Gem's name across the cover and raising an eyebrow at them both. Normally, reading someone's book would be bad, so he had no idea why she had tossed it to him, but both of them looked insistent, so hesitantly he opened it, skimming the words as fast as he could.

The second he did though he had to laugh at the irony. At the very least, he was glad he was in fact helping Gem in her task by letting himself be killed, especially since it gave him another chance to complete a task for the day. He quickly dug out his own book, passing it to Gem as he finished reading hers, listening to her laugh.

"Well, that's useless now," she snickered, passing the book over to Bdubs, "Now it's real."

He tossed Gem back her book, already feeling the familiar lust of the Boogeyman curse flooding through his veins now that he knew to look for it. Looking between Gem and Bdubs, he could just catch the tiniest swirl of red in their eyes, though Bdubs was red now so it may have just been that.

Gem moved into talking about plans, about traps and targets as well as filling them both in on what she'd tried so far, and the entire time Impulse couldn't help but think that he'd made the right decision.

He'd failed enough tasks this season, and he could feel the wear it was taking on him. He'd failed when it was his task alone and when the task was designed for at least some of them to fail. This time at least, it felt like he'd had a choice in joining this one, and it was one they could all succeed.

At the very least, it was nice to know that this time, he wouldn't be failing alone.







zombie army

By kris

Adrenaline burns through Joel's veins like a blazing fire, and he can't help but twist his face into a wide, warped grin at the familiar feeling. It's been so *long* since he's had a good fight like this.

Of course, he *is* on the defensive, but he doesn't care. A fight is a fight. Especially when everyone is giving it all they have. No holding back on either side. Gem and the rest of the people on his tail are determined to kill him, and he's determined to evade them. It's like when an unstoppable force meets an immovable object.

Privately, he's aware that he's not as immovable as he thinks he is, but what does that matter? He's still alive for the moment, isn't he? He can feel the wind on his face as he runs and hear the slight wheeze in his breath as he pants. If this isn't the closest he'll get to feeling truly *alive*, then what will be?

Distantly, he's aware of Etho calling after him, pleading for help. Joel just scoffs as he continues running. He's not *daft*. Etho's one of the "zombies", as he's taken to calling them. He can hear the man's voice growing louder and louder as he steadily gains on him. He should probably do something, shouldn't he?

Given his eagerness for a battle, it makes sense that he properly prepared for it. His grin widens when his fingers brush against the stack of zombie eggs in his inventory. He has some idea of how he wants to use them, too.

Joel waits for a moment as Etho and the rest of the horde behind him begin to gain on him. Just as they're in arm's reach, he springs forward. "You guys think *you're* zombies?!" he says with a cackle.

"Joel, help, they're after me! They're after me, Joel, let's group up!" Etho calls, undeterred even as zombies begin to spawn into existence. He's lucky it's night right now.

As he begins to run again, he lets out a scream of alarm as a zombie buries its fist in his back. "Oh, God, *they're* after me!" he yells, turning on his heel and resuming his sprint forward. Hopefully that's a good enough buffer for now.

His breath catches in his throat as an arrow whizzes right past his ear,





growing painfully close to striking him. Joel looks over his shoulder, scowling when he realizes that they're growing closer and closer. He loads three arrows into his crossbow and fires, feeling a thrill of satisfaction when Etho cries out in pain. "No, what are you doing?!" he asks.

From there, the battle can truly begin. He runs, his breathing labored as he follows the light of the torches. He can see his helter skelter standing tall in the distance, and he can't help but unconsciously run toward it, like a lighthouse beckoning him home. All the while, arrows are shot toward him. Occasionally they strike him, but more often they embed themselves in the ground next to him. Joel is all too happy to return fire, of course.

Scar breaks to the front of the group. "Come and get it, Joel," he says, voice low and intimidating as a lazy smirk spreads across his face. Now, a fight was what he was looking for, but he would prefer a one on one battle.

Instead, he vaults over the stone fence walling off his fairground, tightly gripping a few more zombie spawn eggs in his hands. "Would you like some more zombies?!" he yells, placing as many as he can manage before breaking into a run again. A few of them attack him, and as minimal as the pain is, he can't help but let out a hiss from grit teeth.

As he continues running, feeling much more at ease in the familiar area, Scar lets out an nervous laugh. "He's got a lot of eggs, guys!" he calls.

Scar continues to close in on him, and to make matters worse, Impulse appears out of nowhere. Joel lets out an alarmed yell, and Scar cries something about a pincer attack.

More zombies appear from the eggs in his hands, but he doesn't look back to see if they do anything, jumping back over the fence. Scar is right on his tail and takes a few swipes at him.

Once Joel is far enough away, he turns around and gets a few more shots off with his crossbow. Scar curses under his breath, clearly irritated by the triple arrows.

"There's a wall of zombies!" he yells, spawning more in. They're getting closer and closer, and he's growing lower and lower, and the adrenaline is so strong it makes his hands shake. "They're worse than you!"

He uses up the last of his eggs and begins to frantically run, feeling his wounds ache. The zombies chase after him, and he lets out a hysterical laugh as he throws a glance over his shoulder. What has he *done*?

And yet, seeing the zombies doggedly following him like this... It brings





to mind memories of a life long past, of a pack of wolves trailing behind him. Of dying alone in a desert.

Joel felt powerful then, and he feels powerful now. A cackle pries itself from his throat. "Come on, zombie army!" he yells, grin wide and feral. "Let's go, zombie army!"

Gem joins the fight, and the chase lasts for a few more minutes at most. He can't win. He *knows* that.

But still, disappointment bites at his chest.

And then, Gem's sword pierces his chest as he nocks an arrow and prepares to fire it at Etho. The blow isn't a killing one, but rather the culmination of smaller blows causing his body to finally give out.

Gem's triumphant grin is the last thing he sees, taunting him.

Everything is dark after that, he supposes. But he doesn't languish in it for long. He reaches out toward the light as quickly as he can manage, letting it consume him. His vision is pure white, and then-

He sucks in a breath as his knees buckle under him, palms hitting the wooden floor. Breathing is difficult for a moment, but he forces himself to his feet. He refuses to remain dazed for too long.

The moment he can get back to his feet, he's off toward Gem and the rest. The task is pressed into his hands and he briefly skims it, even though he could already guess what it was. They complain about the zombies, of course, and it's a sentiment he echoes.

"Some idiot had sixty-four spawn eggs and spawned them all in," is his offered explanation. Idiot indeed. They did more damage to him than the people after him in the end.

But the feeling of an army behind him... It was nostalgic and powerful. Even as the sun rises and the acidic stench of rotten flesh fills the air as the zombies burst into flames, he can't tear his eyes away from them.

Smoke forms in the clearing, heavy and stifling, and he lets out a breathy laugh as he turns on his heel and begins to hunt.









Flowers adrift in water are given new life

By SquareHart

4 hearts.

Cleo sighed as she stared at their remaining hearts as she and BigB followed Scott down the steps under Gem's house. She didn't have many left, if the zombie hoard finds her, she would be dead in one hit. They were definitely on track to finding them, as the zombies had clearly spotted them up on the cherry tree mountain, and they had a limited amount of time before they would be here. They needed a place to hide, and fast.

"I have a spot down here that not even Gem or Impulse know about," Scott explained as he led the group down the stone staircase, stopping at an inconspicuous spot in the wall to clear away the stone. He cast a glance at the dogs following BigB and grimaced.

"You guys will have to leave your dogs here, they might give us away," Scott advised, his voice tense.

BigB frowned, but commanded his dogs to stay a little further up the stairs. Cleo decided to leave her one remaining dog with them. She knelt down to give it a couple more pets, commanding it to stay.

Scott moved aside to show a hidden enchanting room, and they hunkered down in the room in silence, waiting with baited breath for the sounds of people.

Cleo looked around the room. The walls were lined with bookshelves surrounding the enchanting table in the centre. There was no other exit other than the hole in the wall they came through that Scott had now filled in. If they were found, they would not be alive for long. Cleo began to fidget as she scanned the walls for a possible way out. BigB shifted his weight nervously, his hands wringing together, eyes fixed on the wall between them and the staircase. Cleo's eyes locked with Scott's, who seemed to be looking at her intently. He nodded his head in the direction of a wall opposite the one they came through, pickaxe in hand. He had thought of something similar, and he was about to make a way out.

Cleo nodded, and Scott began to tentatively carve a way out of the room, catching BigB's attention with the sound of the metal hitting the stone. The group moved swiftly and quietly as the sounds of footsteps started to echo down the staircase. Cleo let out a slow breath as she sealed up





the tunnel behind her and BigB, plunging the group into darkness with only the stars swirling around Scott's head for light, casting dim shadows against the stone walls.

Cleo didn't want to think about how much time they had left as muffled voices could be heard just above them. Instead, she forced herself to focus only on the tunnel in front of them. BigB moved aside to let Cleo walk in front of him.

Scott didn't stop mining as the voices gradually got louder. He tore away stone after stone, trying to find a way out of the mountain. Cleo listened to the voices closely, her gaze burning holes in the stone behind them.

Cleo heard water splashing in front of them, they turned just in time to see Scott's figure jump into a hole in the ground, plunging the tunnel into darkness.

"Scott!" Cleo whispered in alarm, trying to keep quiet and ignore the excited shouting that she hoped was far enough away. BigB attempted to close up the way behind him with the few blocks he had. It was suddenly so dark that Cleo could almost swear the warden was here. She could not see Scott. She could not see BigB. She could only hear the voices of the group getting closer.

Go!

Cleo jumped, squeezing her eyes shut as she felt the water swallow her whole. She blinked her eyes open, though it was just as dark as before.

Cleo floated about aimlessly, desperately blinking in an attempt to get her eyes to adjust to the pitch black water.

Where is Scott?

She kicked her feet in a desperate attempt to swim upwards, trying to find the hole she came in from. As they reached out they felt their hand collide with a stone ceiling.

An underwater cave.

They grabbed at their pickaxe and lifted it upwards, if they could mine a hole in the ceiling she could at least take a breath. She could barely hear Joel's voice quickly approaching. Cleo forced their arms up, up until they burned so badly she thought they could boil the water around her. Cleo could hear the muffled footsteps of the zombies that were steadily getting louder, Scott was definitely long gone by now, where he went Cleo had no idea. She didn't have much time left. If they couldn't breathe, they would drown, but if she spent any more time here, the zombies





would kill her.

Cleo took the first tick of damage. They were drowning, and it quickly dawned on her that there was no way out.

Die to the water, or to the zombies?

The question was uncomfortable, but it persisted in Cleo's mind all the same. It took only a second for Cleo to make their choice.

Cleo pushed away from the ceiling, swimming down and away from the zombies as her health quickly and steadily ticked down, her throat burned from the water, her lungs screaming.

The only one who takes me out is me.

Cleo coughed, eyes flying open to see the sky above them, before flying into an uncomfortable coughing fit as they hacked up water, having to turn on their side to eject the water somehow still in their lungs.

They were alive.

Cleo quickly brought up the player list to see that their name was now yellow. One life down.

Choosing to drown instead of letting themselves be assimilated was not at all a comfortable experience. Cleo took a couple full breaths to try to get her heart to stop racing.

Her heart was racing?

Cleo didn't have a heartbeat, being undead. She forced herself to sit up and look down at herself. A beating heart, skin that was no longer green, no longer stitched together. Instead it was a pale ivory, almost pink. She could see the veins in her skin, pumping blood.

They were *alive*.

It didn't make much sense to them, although nothing really made much sense when it came to these games. The only vaguely defined explanation they could think of was that this was some sick reward for being the zombie that survived the zombie apocalypse, considering the irony of it all.

They had no idea how long this would last or if they would return to being undead if a zombie came and killed her right then, but they decided at that moment she wanted to keep this new form that was given to her. It seemed to be a strange prize for "surviving." For now though, Cleo figured it was best to head home to hopefully wait out the rest of the





session. They chuckled at the thought of Etho and Grian's faces at her new look.

This opportunity could not go to waste.









Sated

By Aquaquadrant

Sated

~

It starts before Gem even opens her task book.

Her mouth goes dry; she thinks it's the shock, as she reads. It's the weight of the task she's just been given. She's never been the boogeyman. That was before her time. And now she needs to infect the entire server. It's a daunting task, but she's up for the challenge. As she chats idly with her bandmates, a scratch starts up in her throat. She has to swallow down a cough a few times- though each time, her mouth gets drier.

After they disperse to prepare for their tasks, Gem kneels by the pond outside her cottage and scoops water into her cupped hands. But as soon as she puts it to her lips, it seems to evaporate. She can *feel* the water passing into her mouth, down her throat, into her stomach- but it does nothing to soothe her.

Her mouth is still dry. And worse, now- her stomach feels empty. Nibbling on a piece of steak brings a similar result; it's dry and tough and flavorless, and after eating it, her stomach feels even emptier. There's a powerful craving for... *something* inside her. An aching, yawning chasm in her heart.

It terrifies and confuses her. Is this what it's like to be the boogeyman?

She stares at Scott and Impulse. They're both green. They're strong, healthy. She can see it in their eyes. And somehow, strangely enough, she can almost smell it on them- the extra hearts, the pure life flowing through their veins. It's alluring. She licks her lips.

"Don't come near me, just for a little while," she tells them, turning away.

~





Gem's kill on Bdubs leaves her reeling.

The second he poofs away, torn apart by zombies spawned by her hand, an odd sensation washes over her. It's like the coolest, sweetest water soothing her sore throat. It's a warm meal comfortably filling her stomach. It's energy and strength flooding her veins, electricity out the tips of her fingers. After losing nearly two rows of hearts to Scar, it's sorely needed. She's almost giddy as she climbs back to the surface to find Bdubs.

He's already licking his lips, before she even hands him the book. Killing is enough to spread the infection, then. As she guides him through the new task he's been given, she feels her mouth go dry again, and she realizes that killing is only a temporary fix.

~

"You said you needed one more person," Impulse says. Always eager to please, wanting to be involved in things. He thinks he understands, but he doesn't. Not really.

Gem hesitates. "Trust me, you don't- you don't want..." She swallows, licks her lips. She and Bdubs have already tried and failed to kill Tango, and they're both starting to feel it. Every step, every word, every breath takes more effort to get out. The scent of Impulse's life is incredibly tempting, but she'd wanted to spare her band as long as she could. "I mean... no..."

Impulse insists. Bdubs kills him.

She sees him swallow it down; the relief that floods his wide eyes. The sudden vigor that returns to his body. The way he breathes a little easier. And she realizes that while the curse can only be spread if the newest victim takes part, the killer is the one who gets sated.

Gem gasps. "You did it!" she cheers, even as she bites back her envy. "Did you gain hearts? You gained hearts, right? That felt good?"

"Yes, I did," Bdubs breathes.

She tries not to hate him for it.

~





Gem's sword slashes through the empty air where Scar used to be.

Pearl's arrow got there a millisecond faster. Gem locks her feelings behind a smile of bared teeth. "*Perfect,*" she praises Pearl even though her mouth feels like sand and her limbs feel like lead. She's been cursed longer than Pearl, she needs it more, can't Pearl see how much she needed it?

She licks her lips. It doesn't help.

~

Gem trudges next to Impulse, the cherry tree mountain looming before them. She gives him a sidelong look; Impulse's face paint has dried into powder, dusted in the hollows of his cheeks.

"Is the server weirdly quiet?" she asks. Every breath rasps against her throat, like she's inhaling brambles. Her stomach gnaws at her. It's been ages since her last kill.

"Yeah, I know," Impulse murmurs. His eyes are sunken. He licks his lips.

~

"I would rather not kill Cleo, personally," Etho says, because he's still fresh and he doesn't understand. He didn't see the way she turned on Scott.

Gem nods. "Well, you have to participate in the next kill, for the curse to spread, so it's your call."

"Yeah, let's go for Tango," Etho decides, unsurprisingly.

She doesn't mind. He'll understand soon; he's already clearing his throat.

~





Gem respawns in her cottage after a stray shot from Scar takes her last yellow hearts.

Scott's there. He's yellow, but still uninfected. The scent is maddening.

"How are you feeling?" Gem asks, her grip tightening on her sword.

He runs.

~

Wolves pour down the mountainside and sprint headlong into lava, all snapping jaws and burning fur. Their deaths bring Gem no satisfaction. Instead, she sets her sights on the life blood she can smell, sheltering behind the stone walls of the castle.

Her army has grown significantly. They swarm the castle almost like a single being, unified in mind and body. Not just by their shared task, but by their desperation to kill. To be sated.

"The curse feels so good," Gem lies, as they close in on their next kill, "just let it take over!"

It's Scar's kill, in the end. She licks her lips.

~

Gem stands before the Secret Keeper.

She can feel the others' eyes burning into the back of her skull. The resentment for bringing them to this point. Most have lost a life, and all have lost hearts. All this struggle just to fail at the end, when she could've spared them by failing at the start.

Despite her exhaustion, Gem keeps her shoulders back and chin up. She was given a nearly impossible task, and she nearly succeeded. She assembled an army and led it well. She doesn't regret it. But privately, she's glad it's over.

"I failed!" Gem declares, hitting the button.

This isn't the first time she's failed a task, but it's the first time she's failed as a red, and she isn't prepared for what happens. The weight of the





curse falls off her; body strengthening, mind sharpening. That much is back to normal.

But Gem is seized with horror as she finds that thirst, that hunger, that *craving*, is still there.

Martyn locks eyes with her from the assembled crowd. Martyn, the only person who was red without the curse. There's understanding in his gaze, solemn and empathetic, and suddenly his eyes look more hollow than they used to.

And Gem realizes that while she might no longer be infected with the boogeyman curse, she's still a red name, and there's a reason they've always said the two things aren't so different.

Her mouth is dry. She licks her lips.

~







Errantry

By Audi

Gem had played with being a Queen before. It was astonishingly easy, from server to server to make yourself royalty.

She'd never cared for diamonds, or gold. But crowning herself in flowers and starlight made her feel like she was master of what she created. Someone who could *lead*, and *build*, and raise countries from the ground.

But... She'd never had *knights* before.

Oh they had *played* at it— her, Scott, and Impulse. They called themselves 'Gem and the Scott's' like she was a centerpiece, a lynchpin, the lead singer of a glam rock band which she had thought was a *joke*.

Because Scott was royalty. He had a *literal* crown of starlight glimmering in his hair, and a cold consideration in his gaze that made plans of everything it fell on. He could be warm just like the distant light of a star could be warm, but he was a monarch and a winner first.

Impulse's support was easier to believe in, if only because he made it that way. He settled himself into the sidelines, and came forward only when the bonds and friendships that had been set so far into the Life Series were beginning to shatter. He would pull on whatever threads he had woven between friends and enemies, and only after the weak ones had snapped would he declare his final allegiances.

It was a smart way to play these games, and Gem had felt a flattering warmth in their first session, when he'd come up with an armful of cherry petals, and offered to build a home with her and Scott on top of the mountain. His allegiance had been like hearing birdsong outside, and knowing you had cultivated the garden it flowed from.

A barometer to success, that Scott's matching knowing look had cemented.

It wasn't like they were really *her* followers, they were a *team*. They were *friends*, so full of love that it dragged them towards the end of the game stuck together like the gravity of a collapsing star. Gem wanted them to win more than she wanted herself. She'd always said so, and even the idea of it had her heart soaring.

But with the end of Session Eight the hounds were at the door, and they were the last yellows left on the server. She couldn't keep them safe, not





from every other player.

Thankfully, she didn't have to. They didn't ask that of her.

They just asked her to make it quick.

"I'd rather let Gem kill me," Scott was saying on top of their mountain, looking directly at Pearl. His mismatched eyes met Pearl's red ones over Gem's shoulder without flinching, because there were three of them and one of her and Pearl knew it. Even though she had that funny five a.m. smile playing around her mouth, they all knew she was helpless here.

Still dangerous, but defanged. Docile for now with the Eighth Session winding down, and the three of them armed.

"You'd do that?" Gem asked softly, sliding down off the camel and onto the ground. The cold grip of her sword was already in her hands even as she asked, the red life pulsing through her like a war drum. She knew Pearl felt the same, because Gem could see her foot shifting in the camel's stirrups, as if positioning herself to *jump*. To beat Gem to the punch, to steal their hearts.

It *would* be funny... But, no.

"...You'd let me *kill you*?" And maybe it was funny for her voice to be so warm when she said that, but it was—and Scott returned her smile even as he came close enough for her to make out the leaves caught in his hair, the rip in the knee of his jeans under the glossy diamond greaves.

"Just let me set my spawn."

"Should we both let her do it?" Impulse asked Scott eagerly, calling loudly enough that Scott had to have heard him as he came back through the door, the blankets of his freshly made bed smoothed in preparation and (of course) *pink*. Impulse was just as unafraid, just as excited, his mouth twitching in a constant grin. There was pride there too, that he and Scott were the last yellows. Gem could tell.

They *should* be proud— *she* was.

With a nod and a mischievous grin towards Impulse Scott removed his chestplate and set it gently aside into the soft grass, Gem's sword resting just as softly against his neck.

Gem didn't say anything, just gave Scott a soft nod. Impulse drew close enough that she could feel his touch against her elbow, and for a moment she felt *protective*. She didn't want Pearl here, for all she knew the two of them were *friends*, that they were loyal to each other outside of the





bounds of the Life Games. Because right now it wasn't Pearl and Gem—it was *Gem and the Scotts*.

Pearl was just another red right now. Another red life, just like her, with eyes fixed on Gem's two yellow team mates.

Gem drew her sword back like a bow on the strings of a violin. It was enchanted, and she barely felt the cut as Scott died. There was a thump.

Scott was back a moment later, before the excited energy of a red kill even finished coursing through her—shaking the respawn off as easily as rubbing sleep from his eyes. Gem took a moment longer than him to recover, her pulse beating and hands shaking in love. In excitement.

Her blade hadn't even gotten wet, the kill had been so clean, and Gem could see the gratefulness in Scott's newly red eyes. His attention turned to Impulse, and he must have heard the converging reds a moment before she did. "Armor off Impulse, *quickly*."

Scott was right, of course, because Pearl was moving in the corner of Gem's eye and drawing her bow, and she could hear footsteps and voices coming up the mountain.

Pearl was fast, but Gem was faster. Just this once.

Impulse barely had time to fumble his chestplate to the side, half of the straps still fastened when Gem's sword slid through him. Pearl's arrow sank harmlessly into pink cherry wood as his body disappeared, and Gem could hear him respawn in his bed laughing.

"*Missed*," Pearl said with all the venom of a swear, tilting her head back in defeat.

Skizz and Tango came over the ridge just as Scott was helping Impulse to his feet, a moment too slow to try and steal the kill. Gem felt the hearts flowing through her, like an overfull cup about to spill over, and swung her sword clean of blood in an arc against the scuffed siding of Scott's house, before sliding it into her scabbard.

She could get used to this. To a team. To their *trust*, and to her sword resting on their shoulders like she was *knighting* them, making a promise.

They may not win. They may not all be able to be declared victors. But, Gem and the Scotts were going to be the last ones standing.

Gem would make sure of it.













Howls in a Mesa

By plants plantskid

A house is a home
is a house is a mesa
is a home and two
dogs and a bed
and four dogs and
no dogs is
no home.

- no one

The sky is ever-searching vultures; hungry-eyed and sharp-beaked, they fly their eights over their heads. When they look up, they see them wraithlike and backlit against the bright blue. Harbingers of death, ill omens. And animals.

There have never been clouds. All the brush is dead and dry and crunches under feet and paws alike. The sand in gusts of air clings to skin, lungs, fur, memories. The trek is miserably from here to there, crossing the desert and the terracotta peaks, the sun beating down mercilessly.

It is dreadfully empty so the wind can pick up speed, pick up debris and throw it into the nothing, into the gorges and deep canyons or create ghostly sounds in the boughs of tree-skeletons and within the spider-infested caves.

Yet, amid all this unholiness, this deathly determined nothing always returning to nothing, stands a house.

It is not a shabby lean-to either, not something built out of sheer instinct of survival, pure desperation. It is not necessity turned hideout. It is a home. Stark white walls against the terracotta backdrop, chimney-smoke curls up to a steel-blue beyond. Barking laughter fills the dry air. (It has been long since the echoes in the canyons were something as beautiful and bright as this.)

The meaning of life is this: a home and a bed and two dogs.

The meaning of life is a concert of barks, excited yaps in the morning, rising with the sun. The meaning of life is bedding down as the desert





cools for the night, tails curled around one another, softly slumbering beneath star-littered skies. And should there be a thunderstorm, the house holds steady, and the dogs can hide under the bed. And should there be a day too hot to put paw-pad to sand, the house provides cool shelter, and the dogs can hide under its shade.

There's a home in the mesa, and everything is perfectly fine.

Below the warm summer sun toil two of them – making the thirsty ground fertile for crops, carving out stairs down the treacherous trails, building a life among the red sands. Raising cattle in the harsh conditions is a challenge, but they make do with what they have, never too greedy for mother earth to stop providing. Always replenishing what they take, sowing seeds where they go and making the plateau planes their playground.

Their howls can be heard in the mesa on nights when the moon is full and brightness spills into the crevices, the canyons, the crevasses, filling them with silver light. Their howls echo between the gorge walls and up to the highest, wind-shaped peaks. Silence is a distant memory now that this biome brims with life.

Ancient bones are unburied from their soulless slumber underground and placed preciously on display. A game of sorts is played, a game of wins and losses. There are far greater forces at play than the dogs and their game, but for now there is peace in the simplicity of their rules. They bark at each other over the bones awarded and the vultures fly a little further off.

There is laughter in the mesa. Jokes are thrown like skip-stones on a lake, bouncing off the terracotta walls of cavernous spaces. The golden dogs leap around each other, circling non-vulture-like.

Flowers bloom, where they touch. The desert sparks with colour, light and life, no longer a lonesome place of death and decay, but of bright love and laughter.

There are two dogs in the mesa, and everything is perfectly fine.

Leatherbound tomes begin to bring peril to the lands, many-eyed beings darken the skies and blood wets parched earth. Dried and chipped bone on stone and grass trampled in battle, ground scarred with scorch marks and craters. Playfulness is replaced with sombre seriousness.

Yet, amid all this unholiness, this deathly determined nothing always returning to nothing, remains a house. Touched only by wind and the traipse of dog paws. Seen only by those that look most closely. The





house, the home; a steadfast beacon in the roiling chaos.

Over time, others visit; bright pink like desert rose, like cactus blossom and black as raven's feathers. They howl with the golden ones beneath the twinkle of the milky way, and though their song is short-lived, it's the most beautiful harmony the deadly landscape has ever heard. (Long after their passing, it still reverberates in the memory of the ancient sand dunes, paw prints washed away but scratch marks on the sandstone still.)

There is a home and dogs in the mesa, and it seems like it will always be this way. But the nature of things is to change, and change can mean evolve into love and life or change can mean devolve into chaos and ruin.

Loud, booming noises that shatter the earth, break apart the stony ground, a coal-grey skeletal figure rises to the clouds as it ravishes the ground below, turning everything to ash and anguish.

Death is never loud. It is quiet moments, heartbeats stopping, the air growing ever still.

The mourning howls are heard for miles, they scrape the lands with the grace of a butcher's knife. A solemn song of sorrow. Loss runs deep where nothing can sink into the ground but more dust and despair.

There is a home in the mesa, where one dog hunkers down, determination grim in red-glowing eyes. One golden dog remains with fire rivalling the sun, flames licking up into the night-sky.

The Hound of Hell, three-headed Cerberus, canine of carnage. A shadow in the night, slinking in the moonless hours, snarling and snapping at echoes that haunt the dark. Whispers of revenge for the pack.

Whispers of glory and reunion upon death.

The land reclaims the dogs with grim finality.

Now the home is dreadfully empty, filled with debris, and the windows sand-dirty. There are ghostly bones in chests left rotting, moulding, mildewed.

Once sand turned earth turned mulch turned fields has once again returned to sand and nothingness. Once again, there are no crops that grow in desert heat or change the landscape's shapes to something homely.

The land does not mourn. The land simply is. The mesa returns to its emptiness not with relief or with grief, but with nature's kind and pure



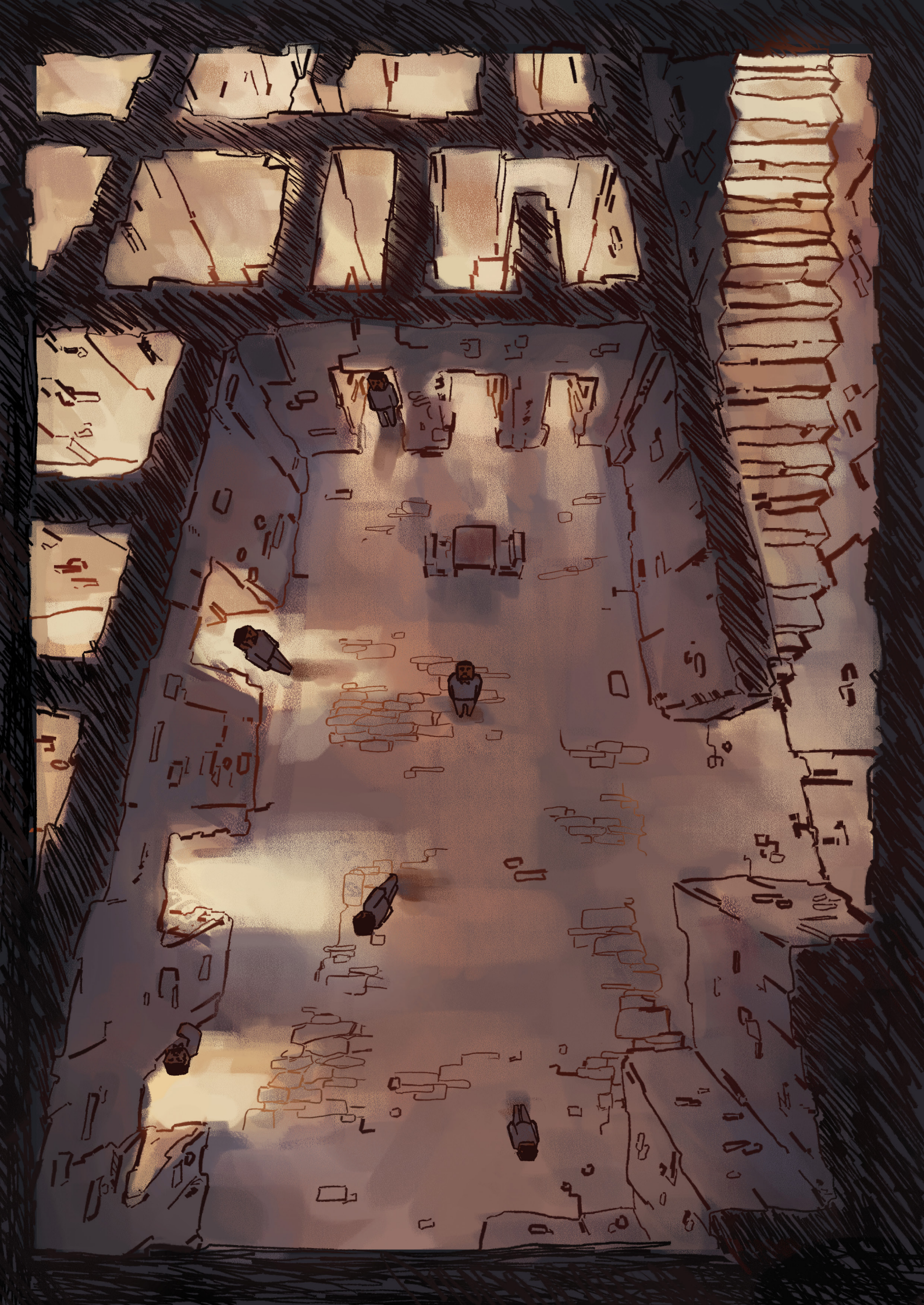


indifference.

The vultures in the sky – their bellies full – caw loudly. Now the only sound that here remains, beneath the sheer blue skies.

There is nothing in the mesa, and everything is perfectly fine.









if I make it through the night

By Brook

There was no clean, succinct way to describe how Jimmy felt in those moments after the first elimination.

He was relieved. He was overjoyed. He was hollow. He was utterly bamboozled. His head and his chest hurt so badly—

And so did his *legs*, dangit.

He lay on blue glass, the sound of water flowing muffled beneath his head. Even as he and Pearl bantered with each other, his eyes were locked on the sky.

Imperfect darkness, deep blue broken up by points of light. So unlike the blinding white of a lightning strike, or the inky black that was the only thing he remembered of What Came Next.

Jimmy was alive, and he wasn't sure how to handle it.

It was all over too fast. Pearl teasing him, telling him to be more careful. Martyn dragging him into a crushing hug, Jimmy trying so, so hard not to cry on Martyn's hoodie. Telling Cleo to **change that tombstone** and them instantly agreeing, grinning that their own prediction was wrong. It was bliss. It was peace.

But the feeling of rough paper on his fingers snapped him back to the present. He was still in a death game, after all.

It wasn't enough to be alive. He had to survive.

Jimmy didn't enjoy this part of the game. At least not the way several of the others did. He could get a kick out of a good-natured scrape or an over-the-top trap, as long as the victim could walk back to yell at him later. But could he actually take another's life?

But it felt so good to be alive. He wouldn't let that get away from him now.

“Punch another player into lava. It can be lava you have placed.”

But who'd be dumb enough to stand between a red name and lava?

It wasn't like Jimmy was in the best fighting shape. The tumble off of the cherry blossom mountain left him limping, his right leg hurting worse but neither being good.





The sun was up now, and as the Big Dogs were standing by Lizzie's empty house, Jimmy realized he might be looking at this from the wrong angle.

Who would be willing to stand between *Jimmy* and a pool of lava?

Even now, even with that bloodthirsty glint in his eye, Martyn was at ease. He never seemed to lose his cool in these games, unlike Jimmy. He didn't think twice of setting up his own grave.

It wasn't payback for some perceived slight; it wasn't even really self-defense. It was just selfishness, a willingness to watch his best friend burn just to save his own skin.

And the worst part? Jimmy couldn't even follow through on it.

Martyn hit the dirt almost a meter from the lava, barely stunned long enough for Jimmy to escape. Footsteps followed close behind while Jimmy fumbled with the ender pearl in his pocket. Martyn's voice prickled with anger, but not shock.

(Martyn knew how the game was played, after all.)

When the pearl landed, when Jimmy appeared right up against the world border, all he wanted was to tear through the barrier and *run*.

He couldn't, and he knew he couldn't, so he limped between the birch trees, wondering where to go now. Not back to Baxter. He wouldn't be welcome and it would be entirely fair.

Martyn could've *died*. What would Jimmy have done then? Would he have been able to go back to their shared home anyway, knowing he was the reason it was quiet? Would he have been able to tell the truth when someone inevitably ran up to him with concern and horror, asking about his fallen teammate?

No, he decided. If I'd have killed Martyn, the only right thing would be for me to go down into that pit BigB dug out, away from the rest of the server, and wait for something to kill me.

The hiss of soul sand sent a chill down Jimmy's spine.

Grian looked over his shoulder, a silent apology in his eyes. Jimmy didn't accept it, didn't really *believe* it. Maybe that made him a hypocrite, but in his defense, he could still see flashes of green against red and brown. It wasn't like Grian needed this, not like some of them.

It wasn't like Grian was already limping as he approached his teammate, anxiously waiting for that inevitable crack of thunder to end the suspense and put him down. It wasn't like his hands trembled as he tried to explain why he





thought his life was worth more than another's; when really it wasn't about worth, it was about *fear*, about finally having a fighting chance and keeping that chance in a desperate vice grip.

But that fear was never stronger than your stupid, stubborn principles.

That was why he hadn't been able to turn his crossbow on the other Bad Boys.

Why he'd ran back to the Southlands over and over until they'd taken him back.

It hit him at last, as he stumbled in blinding darkness, as he called to BigB for more arrows. Jimmy really didn't know how to play the game.

Was he ready for this? How was someone *supposed* to be ready for this?! He'd cried at the thought of taking a life from Skizz. He'd wasted half the day helping other people with their tasks. He'd all but fallen to his knees begging for Martyn's forgiveness. And now he was running alongside the green names, desperately trying to shoot the Wither down.

He should be huddled in a corner of his shack, riding out the storm, waiting to pick through the scraps later. He should leave the others to die. He should *want* the others to die, after how many times he'd been ripped from this game too soon.

(It didn't feel right to call it a game now. Not when he was frantically waving Mumbo along, trying to ensure at least one of them would live to see the dawn. Not now that he was so deep in it.)

He didn't need to win, he didn't *want* to win, he just wanted to **live**.

Maybe next time, he thought as the ground trembled. *Maybe... maybe third to go out*. Maybe by the time he's actually made it very far into the game, he'll have learned to play it the way he's supposed to. For now, he would take what he could get.

He barely pulled himself to his hands and knees. He stumbled to the side, dizzy from the fall. He didn't get very far. It was enough to make it look like he was putting up a fight. Enough to prove a point.

Because he didn't really want to fight, but he wanted to give up even less.

For just a moment, he stopped. He stood and let himself breathe for the first time since he'd gone to The End. The Warden's darkness had waned. The server was illuminated by the moon and stars, by the fires left behind by the Wither, by the glowing blight of the Skulk, by the torches and lanterns of everyone's bases.

He heard the Warden scream.

Everything went white, then everything went black.









hunter turned prey

By Siff/Raine

Your feet pound against the grass, shoes flattening weeds and flowers alike. A limp clings to your stride like a weed of its own, trembling legs barely holding you up. So much damage taken in one moment, like poison rushing through your veins.

One hand remains clasped around a shield, gripping the metal handle as though it were your last hope, a last line of defence. More physical than the mental blocks you've upheld for so long, even more physical than the mask you wear, hiding yourself away in every way you can.

Eyes of deep grey and vibrant red scan the terrain, wary of arrows and swords, watching for the gleam of metal you're sure will shoot past or swing forward, constantly turning your head to glance behind you.

You know you're being trailed.

And still you run, nothing but pure instinct fueling every movement, muscles straining under thick clothes, a bow manifesting in your free hand. Better safe than sorry, better you shoot an ally out of paranoia than you die. With any luck, you know your allies have hearts to spare—and the likelihood that they'd be trailing you now is slim to none.

Your allies should be safe, far above in the sky, where the best weapons are what screams through the air in quick succession, where the only way to win is to fire shot upon shot through the clouds and pray you hit your target.

You? You're prey on the ground, wounded and desperately running for any semblance of fragile safety. You're a target for every conniving predator ready to pick off the scraps of what remains, prepared to look at your fractured legs and laugh.

So all you can do is pick yourself up, piece the fractures back together, and run for your life—because you know it's on a thin line dangled above a pit of hungry hounds.

And oh how you know what it's like to be part of that pack of hounds, a veil of corruption held in a singular book leading you and so many others forth. But no, this is not that, this is the final royale, an ending to a bloody story draped in small fragments of laughter, the days of joy long behind you.





You wish you could go back to those days. To the fleeting moments where laughter fell from your masked mouth, of stealing beds and freezing in place at every glance, even to the moments of dared confessions and sly remarks, to the days of sitting in a boat as the one your soul was once tied to tells you *I still care*.

All these moments you store in your heart, and there's one last thing you wish to immortalise within a soul that could never possibly forget, for the abyss in all its power and glory rests heavy in your beating heart.

"I want to die in my home," you say to the static-charged air, nearly choking it out through your heaving lungs, face turned to the sky and eyes screwed shut for just a moment. You can't shut your eyes for long, you can't dare to.

You know someone is behind you.

"I want to die in my home." You repeat, every syllable shuddering in a near-sob, feet scrabbling for purchase on the ground, hands gripped so tight around the shield handle and bow that your knuckles are white, a rare sight to your pale complexion.

A voice chirps lowly behind you as you run. You can't make out what he says over the blood rushing in your ears, over your void-imbued heartbeat pounding ever louder, a crescendo of fear pouring over your senses with every dull thud your shoes make against the grass.

An arrow flies just to your right, streaking through the sky with a sharp whistle as you turn, jolting as you glance at the arrow, watching it land into the grass with a *thunk*. The sound only further gives away the sharpened arrowhead, poised for the kill, prepared to rip through flesh with no mercy.

You're more than lucky it missed. Four and a half hearts beat leftover in your HUD, trembling as your legs move. Little icons representing leftover life seem to reflect your frazzled mind, like a shaking animal running with its tail between its legs, like an injured fox doing all it can to flee.

A thick vwoop sounds behind you as you run, hot breath reflected back onto your face, desperately sucking in any scraps of oxygen that make it through your mask. For a moment, you consider pulling it down, just to help your aching lungs—but in the end, you don't bother.

You know, deep in your soul, that pulling down your mask won't provide any more safety than keeping it on does. It would only expose you more, reveal your sheltered face when you aren't ready.

Something is tossed as you begin to climb the steps, a sound like glass





hit with a spoon chiming brightly, covered with another vwoop.

There he is, standing in front of you, skidding as purple particles waft off of his poncho, highlighted with poppies and lilacs woven into the hem. Red eyes meet yours, brows furrowed in concentration, scars etched along skin like a rip through fabric, messy brown hair stuck in every way, debris and detritus clinging tightly.

And to think you once called him *son*. Even if for a joke, for a bit, it pierces your heart—to see him so bloodthirsty, diamond sword glinting in the sunlight that only further highlights every crimson stain. His head tilts up in some sort of greeting, a tight smile pulling on scars, all sharp teeth, lips drawn back in a near-snarl.

Before he can swing you knock an arrow into your bow, firing it as quickly as you can—only shreds of strength linger in the shot as it flies limply to his left, missing by the haste with which your attempt was created.

A blade bears down onto your chest, nearly ripping through your chestplate with the swing behind the blow, your hands trembling as you fumble to shoot again—another miss.

The second swing knocks you back with a grunt, trampling over crops as the blade pierces your gut, agony washing through your senses like fire to paper. It's only worsened as he rips his sword out, void-tinted blood left spilling into the ground in crimson viscera, your quickly dulling eyes catching onto *your* blood now joining the stains of the blade, meeting his eyes just moments later.

In the end, you can't blame him. He's like you.

Just trying to survive, desperate in a world that hates him.

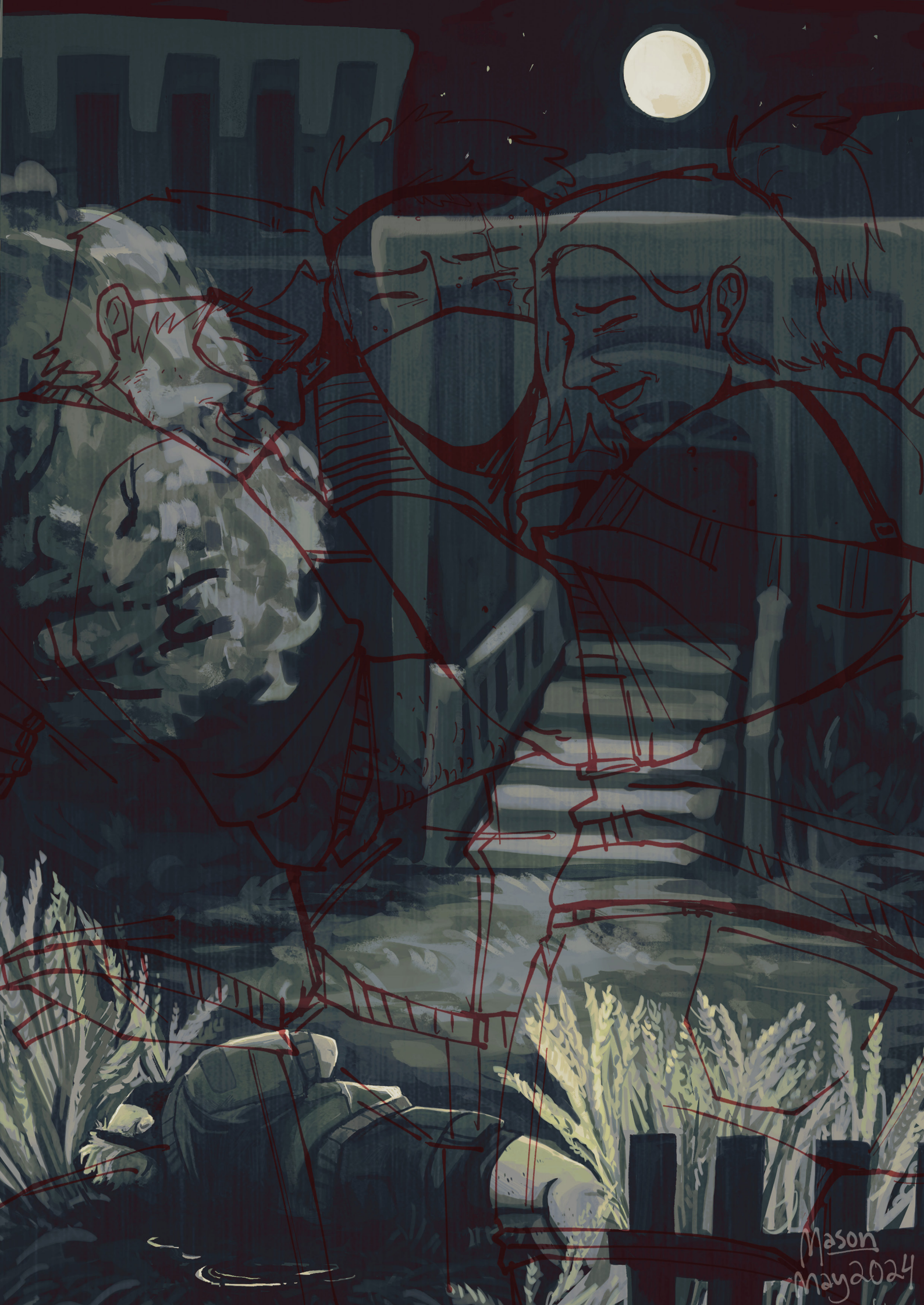
Your body lies close to your home, but never close enough. You watch, lingering for a moment in spectator mode, studying the remains of your faded life. Your eyes are closed to the world, white hair damp with the dew in the grass, blood staining the nature that surrounds your fallen body.

You didn't get your wish. But at least you got as far as you did. At least your allies got as far as they did.

And so the cycle will go on.

You're proud of him.





Mason
May 2024



Mightier Than the Sword

By Artie

Only BigB would be relieved to find himself in the Backrooms. He sighs in relief at the sight of the foreboding caverns. His feet ache from his fall and dangerous trek through the caves, and he despises how his own breath and heartbeat feel so loud. He's alone, he knows. But who might hear him?

Of course it'd be Scar, chasing after him. Of course he would fall into his own trap. BigB creeps through the Backrooms with half-purposeful stealth. Every movement is a frightening risk when he's this close to death. And what good did it do to be stealthy, anyway? What's the point of staying here? He could only hide out for so long before Scar came looking for him and knew exactly *where* to look. His wounds literally can't heal, there's no point in nursing them. He could die in a hole or die on the surface. Alone. All alone.

He approaches the exit of the Backrooms. It's too late before he hears the tenfold skittering of wolf claws on stone. He is already turning the corner, and there stands Scott.

"Oh, my—"

"Hi, BigB," Scott greets, cheerful as ever.

"You scared me so much," BigB admits. He backs into the cavern.

Scott just laughs—not cackles. He never acts red, even with a sword in his hand and a pack of wolves at his feet. His armor is starlight pale and uncannily clean of blood, but not for lack of bloodshed. "You're fine for now. Everyone else is in the sky, just dropping dripstone and stuff, trying to build another tower to get them." He shrugs. As casual as complaining about errands he has to run. "I don't want to kill you, but there's no one else to do things with."

"I'd just like to finish something first." BigB says. "Before I die, at least."

A scrutinous frown forms on Scott's face. BigB plays this card with practiced ease. *Don't kill me now. You can kill me if you come back later. What could I possibly do if you let me live for a few more minutes? I was actually planning to die at 4:30, not 4:00; would it ruin your schedule to postpone my death? Please? Thank you.*

"Yeah, I'll leave you," Scott replies, whistling to his wolves to follow him





back up the stairs. “I’ll come back.” He would return to his allies baffled by his own failure. *It was BigB. I just couldn’t kill him.*

BigB smiles. “Thanks. Thank you.”

He turns and bolts the other way as soon as Scott is gone, quick to block up that exit, and to scramble up the other tight stone staircase in the dark. He can’t stay underground forever. Something has to give. Someone has to go.

Boom. Thunder roars.

< *Etho was slain by GoodTimeWithScar.* >

Not comforting, with Scar’s crooning taunts fresh in his ears. Maybe, at least, that means Scar is distracted. Cleo and Grian were still kicking, surely he’ll be after them next. Or they’ll be after him. Cleo certainly would.

BigB imagines that’s how alliances should be—going down together, or giving yourself up for each other, or running down foes for vengeance. That’s how Skizz and Tango seemed to think, at least, but BigB had been on the dealing end of betrayals and the receiving end of revenge and both ends of dying alone, too early and too late, and staunch loyalty really loses its luster when it’s drenched in enough blood. BigB isn’t in the habit of throwing himself on any swords. The Heart Foundation was more loyal to him than he’d been to them, anyway. They’re dead now. He doesn’t have to think about them. There’s safety, even strength, in solitude. Everyone knows that. He’ll be fine on his own. Yeah. Completely fine. It’s better this way.

After a moment to steel his nerves, he pushes through the door to the surface. Torches light the ground, but the sky is dark, and BigB clings to the trees for cover. He takes his spyglass and scans the horizon. There’s Impulse, alongside Gem and Scott, and further right—

Blazing red eyes. A hood of shadow.

BigB lets out a shaky laugh. “Hey, Scar...”

Boom.

< *InTheLittleWood was shot by Grian.* >

The dark illuminates in a split-second flash. For a moment Scar stands clad in black on the horizon, when the lightning above makes him a silhouette of sallow white light, a colorless spectre of death. His eyes lock on his next target.





Oh, no.

A sound like a pop rings out as an ender pearl shatters, and in BigB's spyglass, Scar is gone. "Hey, *BigB!*"

He yelps and as blades hurdle through his vision, there's a clash of diamond between their swords. Pain rips through every joint in BigB's arm with the strain of holding Scar back. Scar is *grinning* through their crossed blades. "BigB!" he echoes again.

The adrenaline-fueled instinct that guided BigB's sword seems to leave him now. He swings again and misses, swiping at a tree instead.

He's lightheaded. He has to say something. *Can't I live a little longer?* He can't say anything.

"BigB strong, BigB powerful!" Scar continues to taunt, and his sword bludgeons BigB's damaged chestplate like a punch to the gut that doesn't retract. The cracking of ribs is both felt *and* heard under the dent. More reds are approaching, Gem and Scott like vultures waiting on a meal that's yet to die. It hardly even matters, because they all wear matching grins, all teeth, thirsty for blood, and their words are no more than the growling of wolves.

Their swords all pummel him. Dull blows turn sharp and stinging. Armor splinters. There are no more words to speak, much less ears to listen.

Would Skizz and Tango have wanted this? he thinks, and finds himself bemused at how foreign the thought seems. What did he care? What had that alliance meant, after he lied over their corpses and ran and hid? When had he ever considered that before?

It's not just one life that flashes before his eyes, now, but five, as he asked the questions he never chose to ask before. *Would Pearl have wanted to chop up her time for me? Would Ren be content for Grian to kill him, the one I went behind his back for? Was Cleo's revenge enough for her to even the scales? Did the Red Army think me strong to outlive them, or cowardly not to die with honor?*

BigB never tends to die with honor. Words are not his sword, but his shield, and he cannot manage to raise it.

"I'm sorry," he thinks he hears Scott say, impassive and impersonal.

Even his enemies stand at arms-length when they kill him.





THIS IS FOR TELLING BOUBS you're my Favorite.







Green flags waver

By Soup!!

The end is near, though neither says it, they both know it's true. With the rest of the yellows trickling down to red, it's bound to happen soon. All they can do is wait.

Pearl's mound is a place of solace, a quiet respite from the constant clamouring of the other players— One that Bdubs takes every chance to slink off to after clearing his task. More often than not, Joel joins. They sit back to back, in comfortable silence, hands weaving arrows, and again, neither speaks of the reason, quelling their nerves with the guise of normalcy. It's much easier to pretend the mindless fiddling is— well— just that, mindless, that they won't be using these arrows in mere hours against their friends.

The end is always hard.

“Joel?”

“Bdubs.”

“What if we made our arrows unique, like if we coloured the feathers so we could recognize them in battle? Leave markers to know the other has been there.”

He stills and makes a noise of contentment. Bdubs can almost see the way he presses his tongue against his cheek in his very distinct Joel way of thinking.

“Got any dye?”

Bdubs shakes his head, before realizing Joel can't see him. “No— Was thinkin' we could use grass? Just braid it in with the feathers...?”

“Yeah— I like that.”

...

Up and down are mere concepts, at least, to Bdubs they are. Funny, how the world spins when one's life is in danger. How the sky and ground





merge into one, gravity the only thing tethering shaky limbs to the earth.

Nausea— If he can call it that— stirs in his brain, an airiness like the weightlessness of falling probing at the sensitive matter.

The shine of armour flicks through the trees, the blue burning itself in Bdubs' retinas.

Any moment now.

Any moment they'll strike.

Any moment Bdubs will be dead. He always feels it. The red coil snaking up his legs, wrapping around his spine, constricting his chest— pressing to his throat like a dagger, challenging him to try and escape his fate.

He almost believes he can win, even as his lungs suffocate him.

Almost.

The shine of metal against the sun strikes fast, unforgiving, and there's Scott, a blurry blue rush of motion. He can't make out anything about him, what he can make out is the sword coming at his throat.

Stupid! Stupid Bdubs! Not like this. Move you idiot! His muscles scream in protest, but his brain watches in slow motion as death tugs the red strings tighter, like he's already given up.

No!

A blunt blow to his chest sends him stumbling backwards and the dull thunk of diamond meeting wood cracks through the air— Bdubs blinks, before fervently running his hands along his chest plate, looking for any tears, cracks, blood or— Nothing. He's okay.

Joel.

Swords crash like the gears of a grindstone— Bdubs needs to breathe— It's too much. The red is closer than ever, thick in his throat as he desperately tries to gulp down air.

Joel saved me.

Then he remembers there's two— There's supposed to be two! Gem— Gem! Where's Gem!?

The hills cackle around him, mocking, as he spins craning his head through the trees to find her. She's a wolf prowling low between them, rearing on her haunches ready to strike— Bdubs has to be ready.





The twang of an arrow alerts him of her presence before he sees her. It lands somewhere with a stiff fleshy thwack and Bdubs feels the crushing weight of defeat all over again.

Shoot— Joel!

He spins on his heel before white hot pain shoots up his leg—

Nope— Not shoot Joel.

He doesn't have time to feel pain, not with Gem hunting. She reveals herself slowly, bow taught and brows set heavy over dark eyes.

"Bdubs."

His calloused hands shift on the sword's grip— Hands made for building, not destruction. What a shame.

"Gem."

She smiles, lip curling with ravenous hunger. "May the best win."

Gem strikes fast— Letting the arrow go in the blink of an eye. Bdubs barely raises his shield in time, arrow hitting the wood with a hollow thunk.

She brings her sword down, and the shield tears from his grip, falling to the ground.

It's just us now— nothing to fall back on.

He feels the strings closing again but he won't let them tighten anymore. He'll cut them from his throat if he has to.

Anything.

He strikes this time, catching Gem off guard. She fumbles, raising her sword to meet his, but he's faster, meeting her jab with the dull edge of his blade.

It slides down with a terrible screech till it clangs against her hilt, where he thrusts it from her hands, taking a few fingers with it.

She staggers, pupils shaking in shock, and lets out a breathy gasp as she steps back.

May the best win.

...





“Joel! Joel!” Bdubs jumps with each word, “They’re retreating! Hah, we showed ‘em!”

Joel only puffs, letting his sword fall and his hands brace his ribs. Relief washes over his face— (and so does blood) maybe even something like peace settles over his angry gashed brow. Bdubs has half the mind to notice— a similar red rushing through his veins.

He barely registers charging up the hill— and the volley of arrows attacking. Joel screams in protest, but his pleas fall on deaf ears.

Bdubs only has sight for one thing;

Red.

Another scream rips from Joel’s throat— this time painful, animalistic— inhumanly tearing at his vocal cords.

His name, *Bdubs*.

And when he turns, the maws of death close around him, sinking their teeth deeper than the arrow in his chest.

He falls.

There’s shouting— but it reads as ringing to Bdubs ears and quickly blurring vision.

Then there’s Joel—He staggers, torn between grief and anger. His face scrunches, and he presses his tongue to the inside of his cheek. The ultimate judge, weighing Bdubs’ life on a scale. Another arrow whizzes by, and he turns, fighting onward.

‘No!’ Bdubs tries to scream, but a hollow rasp of a wheeze comes out.

‘he can’t leave me— No! Nononono—’

He reaches after nothing, the shadow of his comrade, left behind in the muck.

A sob tears violently from his chest, and the arrow does a little dance with his rise— a mockery. Teasing its victory, but a flash of green in it stops Bdubs’ fight.

No—

No!

It stands tall, an unwavering flag, while Bdubs eyes snap to it.





A carefully braided arrow, with tiny blades of grass, blowing slightly in the afternoon breeze.

...

“Joel?”

“Bdubs?”





Wolves Don't Howl To Stars

By Astro

The stars were staring down at Joel like sightless eyes as he crossed Love Island.

He didn't like them, not their ever-watching presence or the way they judged how he held his rocket-loaded crossbow with a finger hovering over its trigger, ready to shoot. His eyes shot back and forth over the bank, trying so hard to ignore shimmering dots above. He didn't like the stars in these games. He wanted the closest living *star* on the other end of his crossbow.

It was a good thing Bdubs stuck out his foot to make him trip, nearly sending him face-first into the pink petals. It meant that, for a second, he wasn't trying so hard to keep his eyes away from the sky. He scoffed, regaining his balance to glare at him, then shot out a hand to hopefully knock into his face or, if that didn't work, ruffle his hair beyond repair. He laughed as Bdubs nearly slipped over the petals himself, for a last joy before they'd inevitably find trouble.

Then something finally moved in the trees ahead, and he gripped the weapon so tight it turned his knuckles white.

Bdubs seemed to have noticed it as well, and he ran ahead. "We've got them backed into the corner!" he shouted, rushing over the crumbling bridge to reach the trees. Only then did Joel see the dangerous glint of armour between leaves.

Electricity was dancing through the air already, a cloudless sky ready to strike down upon them, making the hairs on his neck stand on end. The stars blinked brighter above him.

He slowed to a stop behind Bdubs, who crouched behind the cover of a tree. Switching to his other bow, he nocked an arrow and let his eyes scan the area. Something moved atop the hill, and he drew, aimed and released in one swift movement.

Bdubs, of course, decided to stand up right then. Instead of hitting his mark, who really should've been coming over the hill at that exact moment, the arrow struck his friend. It ripped through the first layer of his armour, the flaming tip scorching the edges to black, setting him aflame.





“Sorry Bdubs!”

Bdubs stumbled, reaching up for his shoulder with a shriek.

“I’m so sorry!” He wanted to grab him, push a gapple into his hands, but Scott chose that moment to step into view. It forced all his thoughts to a halt, heart sinking. He couldn’t die like this. He needed to get out of there *now*.

With one last regretful look at Bdubs, he scrambled to get away. It hurt to leave him, but he couldn’t save him now. If he was lucky, maybe he had his own pearl or gapple, *anything* at all. Joel wouldn’t have known what happened, because he dove back into the water.

The thunder that struck the dirt where he had just stood reverberated in his chest. It made him stumble, hands caked in sand as he struggled back to his feet. The water that ran down his spine made him shudder.

Scott’s menacing laugh echoed in his ears, condescending as if he’d already won. One kill wasn’t enough. *Bdubs* wasn’t enough — a death that was on Joel’s conscience too — he wanted to take *his* life as well.

And yet, he couldn’t help but turn around. Words sat on his tongue, phrases of faked confidence, of how he was so handsome, so perfect that of *course* Scott wanted to take his life. But he found his bow instead, nocking another arrow. He had to kill him *now* or his ego would shatter, and he couldn’t have that, could he? At the sight of shimmering armour, he let the arrow loose. It hit its target, flames bursting to life. He barked a laugh, a minuscule moment of victory, then turned on his heel and ran, his shoes tearing up the grass.

He had no time to breathe before Scott stepped from the shadows in front of him, a flurry of purple particles surrounding him. A sharklike grin split his lips, eyes bright as the stars. “Hi Joel!”

Joel hissed in surprise. Switching his bow for his sword, he grit his teeth. In a move practised so much it had become flawless, he flipped it over in his hand and slashed it across Scott’s chest.

It didn’t even make him flinch. He gasped, retreating a step. “How much health do you *have*?” he screeched, fingers clenching around the hilt of his sword.

“Enough! I got regen, remember? From killing Bdubs?” And really, there should not have been as much joy in the man’s voice as there was. Scott lashed out with his own weapon, the adrenaline from the kill making





his swings that much more powerful than Joel's. With each swing, Scott forced him further down the hill, towards the water, until his feet sank into sand.

He bared his teeth then. They weren't nearly as sharp and threatening as he'd hoped — more a trembling dog backed into a corner than the wolf he was supposed to be. He was bleeding, wheezing for air, glaring daggers at someone who wasn't the slightest bit impressed by him.

Silent as the void corrupting her skin, a dagger cut across his back. He only realised it was Gem at the sight of her hungry eyes before she kicked him towards Scott without an ounce of mercy.

There were no more words, no pleas, laughs, nothing to fill the tense silence before the sky lit up. Lightning sparked, reaching down to touch this game's joyous star and his sword just as it pierced through Joel's armour and stomach underneath.

Instantly, his body was vaporised from the inside out.

He fell to his knees in another plane of existence. It didn't hurt as they scraped against the rough sand. Nothing could hurt here. An armourless hand reached for his stomach nonetheless and he hissed at the phantom pain. Maybe it would leave a scar — though he really hoped not, Scott wasn't allowed to leave *another*.

With a frustrated yell, he punched the ground. He just lost, *again!* His fist barely tingled, and it just made it more frustrating. Pulling at his hair, he clenched his eyes shut so he wouldn't have to see the victorious grins of a greyscale Scott and Gem.

The silence surrounding him afterwards was deafening. The echoes of his death grated in his ears, and it would haunt him in the nothingness, the space between these games. He would have an eternity and a half to think over his failure. He would have ages to swear to himself over and over again that he wouldn't make the same mistakes, just like he always did, like he always would.

With a heavy sigh that was muffled even to his own ears, he pushed himself back onto his feet. Maybe he could find Pearl, with the hope that she was still alive, to see if at least one of them made it to the end. Her unknowing company would be better than nothing.

Joel did not look up at the stars. They would be overjoyed with his death, and he didn't want to face their satisfaction.





Why do I have to kill you??!



I'm on 2 and a half hearts, if they get me, they get the 10!



I don't think I can do it, Gem.



You're gonna need to do it.



But Scott...



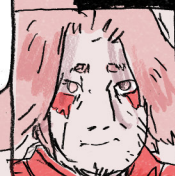
Take this.

and some mutton...

and this...



And here's a POWER 4 BOW.



Go, Gem



Carry it.

TRAFF ROGERS // ARCHIE MCKENZIE



Sacrifice

By Omegathekid

I line up the shot... I can see him in the distance...

"Scar, you chose the wrong team!" I fire, arrow after arrow after arrow. He yells out for Pearl, but I don't care. Impulse is already gone by Scar's hand, and I will avenge his death. I move in closer, aiming for any blows I can get at him. "Why did you team with Pearl?" Betrayal drips from my voice. I haven't been this angry in a long time.

"It's- Well it's just who I was with at that minute!" He sputters, noncommittally, running away like the coward I know he really is.

"Why would you team with them after everything I did for you?"

"I- It was a- You're the one who turned on me! I was just chilling with the boys!" I work my way towards him, but then I see *her* out of the corner of my eye.

"No, I wasn't..." My last words to Scar, before throwing an ender pearl. I can't win a two on one, and at this point... I can't win at all. "Goodbye, Pearl,"

I feel myself shift, the world blinking away before I suddenly appear again. I only have a moment to regain composure before the first arrow flies over my shoulder. Running is my only option. I flee the traitor and the enemy, with only one thing left on my mind.

If I can just find Gem...

I never thought this would be how it ends.

I mean, I've done this before, sacrificed myself for someone else. It's kind of what I do in these games. Cleo, Martyn, Jimmy, even Gem already... and Pearl herself. The one I'm trying to protect Gem from... The one I want to give Gem a chance against. Well, her and...

Scar.

I thought maybe he would be loyal to us, but I guess I should know better than to trust him, the swindler he is. He chose the Mounders over us, but even so, we were doing so well! Joel and Bdubs fell so easily. Even with Impulse dead and gone, we took out two of them with barely any thought. Grian did his damage, but we still took care of him, we struck





him down, and yet his mark is felt.

Two and a half hearts.

It's amazing how quickly things can fall apart.

I sprint until I lose track of time, searching and searching, until finally I find her, where else but the site of the accursed statue that's ruined all our lives. No time to dwell on that, though.

"Gem, you need to kill me!" I shout over and over, desperate for her to see me. She turns, a look of confusion clear on her face.

"Wha- why do I need to kill you?"

"I have two and half hearts, if they kill me, they get the ten." I stumble over to her, out of breath, "I don't think I can do it. I think... I think you're gonna need to do it."

"But Scott..." Her sadness is clear, but I can't let her focus on it. All business, from here to the end.

"Wait, take this," I shove my sword into Gem's arms haphazardly, feeling my low health finally catch up to me. My breaths are heaving, my strength is failing, the panic is overwhelming. "And this, and some mutton, and some zombie eggs, and there's a power four bow." Every weapon I can give her, I will. Every piece of armor I can give her, I will. Every potion, every tool, every single chance I can give her, I will. She's going to win. She has to, I know she will. Because if she doesn't, then what was the point?

"Thank you..." I try to ignore the tears welling up in her eyes. I can't lose my nerve. I need to be strong.

I wonder what will really happen when I'm gone... it's been a while since I missed the ending of these... back in the days of thirds.

Jimmy... My husband... I found you in the end, didn't I?

Cleo... My best friend... Even if we drifted apart this time, I hope you know I always care for you.

Martyn... My partner... Your old betrayal stung, but it's a shame you had to leave so soon.

Impulse... My band mate... We fight on in your name.

Gem... My leader... Win.

Pearl... Do you even remember when we were friends? Maybe you forgot,





but I never did. I never will. And if we can ever be a team again... We'd be unstoppable. Winners to the end. And instead you choose BigB, or Bdubs, or Joel, or even Scar! You don't even like Scar! I thought... Maybe I just don't understand you anymore.

Either way, I hope you're happy. I've lost, and this is the end. All my hopes lie in her now. And what do I hope for? That she takes you both down.

It's time. I see her raise my sword above her head. She turns away, the tears now streaming down her face, but I give her a smile. Sometimes, you just have to take one for the band.'

"Go, Gem. Carry it." With a final resolved look, she swings down the sword. I can feel it, the time has-

...

"Scott..." She lets out a whimper, before turning away. Holding back tears, yet clear and firm in her resolve.



הצליח להשיג את המידע הנדרש, הצליח להשיג את המידע הנדרש



הצליח להשיג את המידע הנדרש, הצליח להשיג את המידע הנדרש



Enter: The End?

By Kaya

FADE IN:

EXT. SECRET KEEPER — MID-DAY

WE OPEN with a greyscale montage of the events leading up to the scene.

SCOTT sacrifices himself to GEM against the SECRET KEEPER's stony shroud. GEM lowers her head, grief briefly savored, before taking position on top of the boulders that make up the SECRET KEEPER's shoulders, shooting at the faraway figures of SCAR and PEARL. GEM's eyes shine, but her mouth is set in a hard, determined line. With one last release of an arrow, GEM steps off the rock, slings her bow across her back, and breaks into a run.

CUT TO:

EXT. OPEN FIELD — AFTERNOON

WE'RE SHOWN an establishing shot of the grassy field behind the SECRET KEEPER. Its surface slopes in gentle hills and the far end borders the lake. Various bases can be seen ringing the edges. The sky overhead is clear, but the early winter air brings a bite.

GEM, a general lacking her army, a red name with mismatched eyes, trudges forward, stopping at the center of the field beside a gnarled oak tree.

GEM

(To herself)

I don't think I can fight Pearl. I think Pearl wins this.

In the distance, PEARL and SCAR are splotches of red and black.





GEM

Pearl has a lot of hearts.

GEM holds her SHIELD closer to her body and tightens her grip on her SWORD as she watches PEARL, a fiercely loyal ally turned teamless, and SCAR, a smooth-tongued salesman with nothing to lose, draw closer. The pair sports matching bloodlust on their faces, eager to end this.

GEM straightens up. She loosens the tension from her shoulders and steadies the tremble in her hands. GEM knows that this may very well be her demise. She doesn't plan on going down without a fight.

PEARL stops at the top of the squat hill GEM is standing beneath, and raises her BOW. Her expression is layered as she aims at her friend-turned-foe, her exhale a puff of steam. PEARL has chosen her victor, and she'll do whatever it takes to make sure he wins.

PEARL

Don't make me do this, Gem!

PEARL shoots, and GEM ducks behind the tree with a grunt.

GEM

Pearl! I'm not making you do anything!

PEARL

You're making me do this right now!

PEARL continues to shoot as GEM sprints away.

GEM

What are you doing? We were friends!

PEARL:

(Overlapping)

I don't know! I don't know, Gem!

GEM twists to the side and throws an ENDER PEARL, and after a moment she disappears in a poof of





purple particles, teleported into the lake. GEM swims up and breaks the surface at shore, SCAR running up to meet her.

SCAR

(Through a sharp grin)

Hi, Gem!

GEM strikes SCAR with her sword, her motions quick and brutal. SCAR stumbles, but is fast to recover. Their swords clash together as they exchange blows, whittling down each other's rows of hearts. PEARL races to join the action.

PEARL

Gem, do you wanna sword this out with me right now?

SCAR and GEM continue their fight. GEM's sword snags against SCAR's poncho and tears the fabric. SCAR grimaces as the blade reaches flesh, and deep red stains the poncho darker.

PEARL

(With a shrug)

Oh, you're gonna sword this out with Scar right now.

GEM's WOLVES charge into battle in defense of their master, biting at SCAR's heels. PEARL leaps into the fray, landing in front of GEM, her sword clanging against GEM's shield. PEARL darts to GEM's side to slice at her unprotected flank, and SCAR draws back in at the front.

GEM

(Scoffing)

2 vs 1? Oh, you guys are gross.

GEM retreats, throwing down LAVA in her wake. The edges of it lick at her cape, and GEM must use her WATER BUCKET to extinguish herself.

SCAR continues his pursuit, getting momentarily





caught in the spilt water, but it doesn't slow him for long. With a long sweep of the arm, SCAR thrusts his sword forward, stealing more of GEM's hearts with a stab.

GEM

You guys are *gross*!

GEM meets SCAR's next move with a parry of her own, PEARL standing off to the side, close enough to provide backup if needed, but letting GEM and SCAR fight. SCAR's next attempt lands, and a sharp gasp is forced from GEM's throat. GEM staggers back a step, and SCAR uses the opportunity to close the distance between them, slashing once, twice, three times. GEM's moves become desperate as she returns the blows but is unable to block, taking as many hits as she lands.

PEARL

C'mon Scar, you've got this. You've got this!

With a final arc of his sword, SCAR defeats GEM, the remainder of her hearts depleted. WE SEE thunder CRACK across the cloudless sky and WE HEAR thunder BOOM as GEM's body vanishes.

CUT TO:

INT. COTTAGE — AFTERNOON

For SCAR and PEARL, the game is not yet over. But for GEM, her time has come; lives bled dry.

WE SEE a brief flash of GEM's cottage interior, empty and eerie, that pulls out through the window into an OVERVIEW of the surrounding area, SWEEPING ACROSS the cherry blossom grove, its cottages and farms marred by destruction, before PANNING OUT to the rest of the server. The camera ZOOMS IN on the SECRET KEEPER, shrouded in shadow despite the sun, and with one final thunderous BOOM, the screen FADES TO BLACK.

FADE OUT:







And Then There Were Two

By Lune

Pearl never wanted to make it to the end. Everything she's done, had been for her Mounders, her loyalty had dictated it so.

Mumbo had died first, to the posts round the bend. Then Bdubs and Joel in the same fell swoop, barely a moment to process it, a tale of woe.

They left Pearl to ally with the *one* person on the server with no real friend. With Gem now gone, she already knew how this would go.

But when she offered Scar her life earlier, he opposed the idea vehemently. "I refuse. We go out together. I genuinely don't want to win that much anyway," he declared. Nobody else would know the pain and exhaustion fighting solo brought, honestly. And she had respected his words, looking ahead.

A duel he had wanted, so a duel he'd get, she thought, raising her sword unwillingly. Here, with just the two of them left, Scar looks at her, bow drawn.

The dogs had to go first, Scar decided. Pearl watches as he sets off the TNT, the shadow of her past win claspings her heart in phantom pain. With nobody left to die but them, Scar lets his arrow loose, resolute and undaunted. It lodges into her side, the sharp fall in her health telling how little time she had before she'd be slain.

She weaves in and out of the swarm of mobs, sword at the ready by her side as she laughs at the poetry. What a fight, between two crazed fools who remember the hollowness of living in total isolation. Neither of them fighting for the win, and their duel being the final one nothing short of irony. She darts away from the crowd of zombies and spiders, avoiding embers from their sunlit flames, but not escaping the fire in Scar's expression.

His eyes are bright, filled with grief she recognises in herself. His shots fly everywhere, frantic just as he is. And there's nothing she can do but mourn. In her emotional haze, her own sword strikes miss.





One of his determined arrows finally lands, square in her shoulder, the burning pain screaming from the force in the shot. She ignores the sting (it's nothing she hasn't felt before), turning to swipe her sword angled with the sunlight to start a fire. Scar makes a shocked sound, indignant as he douses himself with water, her strike all for naught. The numbness in her shoulder spreads; she can't lift her arm high up now, her situation dire.

Pearl never wanted to make it to the end.
Everything she had done, had been for her allies.

She sees the defensive instinct backing every action that only someone with no one has, and chooses to treat him as a friend. She sees the slow, deep breaths Scar takes, the breaks in his voice and forced banter, and identifies the weariness she once held in her own scarlet guise.

There's gold fruit glinting in her inventory, all she needs to rejuvenate herself, with a quick bite and swallow. It's all she needs to last longer than Scar, clearly exhausted from all his fights (victories) on their last day. Instead, she leaves it untouched, looking at the dance he wishes to lead with valour alone, choosing to follow. There is no doubt who remains standing after this, but she's ready to accept her fate as it comes her way.

But then she gets a little too close, and he sets the TNT down in a quick moment that sends her heart into a fright. Swiftly backing away is all she can do, the boom behind her loud and terrifying. It's enough to have her disregard all logic, expression lighting up in a mirror of his desperation, and she turns her sword into him with all her might. But it's enough for Scar to strike another arrow into her heart, brutal and damning.

Arrow after arrow, swipe after swipe, they trade blows, but Pearl knows he has more health than she does. His kill on Gem had ensured it. Her measly two and a half hearts wouldn't last her much longer, and so she raises her shield as she goes. He draws another arrow from his diminishing quiver, lips pulled into a thin line as he sets it loose, only for Pearl to counter the hit.

"Behind you," he says, tone lined with concern that Pearl *knows* to doubt.

A split-second long look back, and then she's turning back with the smallest smile on her face.

"Oh, you really tried it right now," she replies, but she sees something worth calling out.





His call may have been fake, but hers are something he ought to listen to with grace.

“You better look behind you,” she starts carefully, voice lined with concern she knows he’s not going to trust easy. “Uh Scar, look behind you. I’m serious.”

To his credit, he does, however uneasy.

But it’s frenzied in a way that she *knows* means he’s scared of turning his back to her, and she can’t blame him. He misses the zombie, choosing to aim one of his incredible arrows straight at her. She skips across quickly, shield at the ready as the projectile sails past her, but the margin is slim. And yet, after everything, she wants him to be *safe*, for his victory to occur.

“Behind you Scar,” she starts, but it’s too late. He’s nocked another arrow, and this time it lands its mark with ease. It sends her flying back, and she knows it’s time for her to meet her fate.

“Ah, jeez.”

Pearl never wanted to make it to the end.

Everything she had done, had been for the people she loves with loyalty.

It’s inevitable, how she falls into the ravine she missed earlier, truly something to reprehend. (The same, frantic turn Scar had done, and suddenly she realises why it felt so familiar to see.) A chuckle barely leaves her lips, oddly subdued. Things had gone just as she wanted them to, and the fall makes her feel oddly free.

Pearl never wanted to make it to the end.

Everything she did, had been so that *nobody* would ever be as alone as she was, in this terrible game that stole their spark.

Before she hits the ground, she can only hope Scar sees the zombie that’s making its way towards him without prelude.

And then she *does* hit the ground, and all is dark.





Villain

By Star

She's dead, Scar
You won

Scar's entire body was trembling. His sword slipped from his grip, clattering to the ground, but he was far too focused on the sight before him to notice. Pearl almost looked as if she was sleeping, her eyes half closed, the ghost of a smile still lingering on her face as she lay lifeless in the grass. Scar wished he had the courtesy to show her some respect, to close her eyes or to at least remove the arrow piercing her shoulder, but in his shock he could only bring himself to turn away.

How did this happen?

Scar had only turned his back on her for a moment. Pearl had been standing right before him only seconds ago, still alive albeit if barely. And just like that, she was gone. The words echoed in his head like a broken record; *You won. You won. You won.* He'd done it. He'd completed his task. He was the last man standing, the victor of this sadistic bloodbath, but it was still beyond him how someone with no friend or allies had managed to win.

As he pulled himself out of the ravine where Pearl had died, still refusing to look at her lifeless body, Scar began to laugh. Not a joyous, cheerful laugh, but a slow, maniacal one, broken up by occasional sobs as tears began to stream down his cheeks. No, he hadn't won in spite of having no friends, he'd won *because of it*. His fellow competitors had shunned and alienated him from the very beginning, and it was these so-called 'friends' who were responsible for all that had happened. He saw no reason to mourn them, in fact, he should thank them.

Scar stood, eyes affixed on the Secret Keeper as he made his way to them. They were nothing but a faceless statue, yet it felt as if they too were laughing at the miserable excuse for a man before them. It was the Secret Keeper's tasks that had forced him to lie, cheat and steal. It was their bidding that had destroyed what little trust people had in him, and perhaps he also owed them credit for what had become of him.

Scar's hand hovered over the button, and he thought back to the first time he'd pressed it. He'd been beaming with pride, victorious despite all odds, laughing and cheering as he was showered with rewards. That





feeling was still present, but not in the same way it had been the first time. Scar's pride now carried an underlying guilt and shame with it, one he tried his best to ignore but couldn't quite shake.

He pressed the button at last, the red scroll in his hands disappearing into thin air as treasures rained from the sky and he was healed of all wounds and injuries from his final battle. Scar laughed once more, drying his tears and turning back to the all-seeing statue before him.

"I hope you're satisfied " He called, unsure of who he was talking to. Perhaps it was to the Secret Keeper, perhaps it was to his long-gone friends and perhaps it was to nobody at all.

Or perhaps he was talking to himself. Scar certainly didn't feel satisfied, a horrible emptiness still clawing at his insides just as it had been from the very beginning. But he tried his best to ignore it; a villain should know better than to crave the love and attention they would never receive.

Villain. The word itself was bittersweet, a testimony to Scar's victory and a painful reminder of all he'd sacrificed to achieve it. He briefly thought about Pearl, whose body still lay in the ravine behind him, and wondered if it all had truly been worth it, if he was truly thankful for her death. He banished the thought as quickly as it came, instead looking up once more at the Secret Keeper.

Scar forced a smile through his tears of grief and anger, and with a spiteful, mocking bow, bid his final farewell to this wretched place and the sadistic bloodbath of a 'game' he'd been forced to play.

"Thank you for watching, I hope you enjoyed the show."







Secret Tasks

- Cal — Take photos and incorporate them in your drawing (photos in the back)
- Mochily — For your whole piece, no words can share a first letter with the next word (ie. you could say “she flung the item across the room” but not “she slung the item across the room”)
- Zhuk — Ask a writer for a challenge (make a visual pun)
- Lyne — Make a movie poster
- Bel — Take a picture from real life and color-pick from it for your piece (photo in back)
- Cappy — Incorporate at least two hostile or neutral mobs into the background of your piece. They have to be mentioned at least two separate times (you can’t just mention “there are two zombies” in one sentence and call it a day)
- Lemon — If you usually use line art, don’t. If you don’t, use lineart
- Kait — Include the word “bowl” at least 5 times
- Kit — Have a single strong light source
- Carrot — Include as many subtle references to previous seasons in your piece as you can
- Shim — feature typography in your piece





Secret Tasks

- Shim — feature typography in your piece
- Sage — Incorporate at least two hostile or neutral mobs into the background of your piece. They have to be mentioned at least two separate times (you can't just mention "there are two zombies" in one sentence and call it a day)
- Aquinnix — Write in the style of a scientific research paper
- spiderziege — imitate a traditional medium
- DeathShadowRules — Tell the story via chat logs
- Spine — design a cool border for your pieceuse lineart
- Song — do colored line art if you usually do all black, or black if you color usually
- Josie — Draw in the Wes Anderson poster style
- Roman Alienssstufff — Feature a break down of a movement (draw the same pose at multiple points in time, as if it was an animation)
- Mars — Write a songfic with a song from your Spotify top 100 (or equivalent for other apps)
- Reilios — Draw your sketch with your non-dominant hand





Secret Tasks

- Boff — Use only the color palette of the cherry grove biome (shades of pinks, dark purple, and light green; neutrals like stone grey or dirt brown are permitted) for your entire piece
- black cat — You're only allowed to use 90 minutes everyday until the piece is done
- Misha — make your piece into a diptych/triptych
- Kihori — Download and use 3 brushes you've never used before
- Tilapsci — Work with a writer to make a comic. Paired with Star
- IngaPotejto — Draw in 4 point/fisheye perspective
- Woosh — Write in 2nd person perspective (like Homestuck)
- FindingSchmomo — Include a piece of ASCII art as part of your written work
- Cactuu — Copy the style of another artist from history
- Yodel — the first letters to all paragraphs spell out a secret message
- Kip — Take inspiration from a still-living writer
- Lumi — Make a piece that looks like a collage
- Kris — Keep an alliteration streak going for as long as you





Secret Tasks

- Ro — Do a traditional piece and scan it in
- Sofi — One layer challenge!
- SquareHart — Don't use any similes
- Astronomodome — Wait until another artist shares a WIP of their zine piece, then recreate either the composition, colour palette or style within your own artwork
- Jas — Never flip your canvas
- Aqua — N/A
- Joi — Every character has to be entirely painted by shades of the life they're at. If they're on green, they'll be fully green, but with different shades of it. Same for yellow and red with their respective colors
- Audi — N/A
- Anndy — The artist has to hide an image of the autism/tbh creature in their drawing
- Seri — Sneak at least 2 references to other series your character(s) has been part of (e.g. older Hermitcraft seasons, Mindcrack, Empires, etc)





Secret Tasks

- Bee — N/A
- Weishin — N/A
- Plants Plantskid — Write your entire piece in the style of an old Film Noir narration monologue. First person POV optional; you just need the drama, the mystery, and the metaphors
- Messier — Draw in 3 point perspective
- Bax — Incorporate at least two hostile or neutral mobs into the background of your piece
- Brook — Hit the word limit, exactly
- Genrih — Draw a scene from the perspective of a mob
- Ane — Use exclusively cool colors
- Siff/Raine — Ask another writer for a challenge
- Mason — Draw your piece in the style of a risograph
- Artie — N/A
- Sol — Do line art with the shapes tool
- Worm — N/A
- Arofuoo — Incorporate flower language





Secret Tasks

- Soup — Write a scene from the perspective of a mob
- Astro — Ask an artist for a challenge
- Archie McKenzie — Incorporate halftones or screentones
- Omegathekid — Write in first person POV
- Snow — You have to include several hidden objects in your piece, à la a game of I Spy. (key in the back)
- Kaya — Write in the style of a script/screenplay
- pumpkinJuice — Incorporate a QR code to the episode the scene occurred in
- Lune — Every other line must rhyme, like a children's storybook.
- Star — Work with an artist to make a comic. Paired with Tilapsci
- Bucket — Use brush made of one of the Life series members (like if you stamp it it'll be their MC skin)





Secret Tasks

Cal - Photos



Snow - "I Spy" key



Bel - Photo

