

Hello! Welcome to the document where we (darubyprincxx, hi) explain basically everything about and behind Ashes. This was started in late April 2023 because I just realized that this shit has LAYERS to it and we can't just not share it with everybody after everything is posted.

Unfortunately though, we have a habit of going insane about something and then forgetting all of our thoughts about it, so this exists so that we can put all that here and not have it be eaten by the menthol eels. Here, have an essay. It has nutrients!

So: the plot of Ashes. Two guys find a third guy and then they all try to get the hell out of the world. The third guy is more than a little fucked up. We soon discover that the first and second guys are also fucked up but in different ways. The portal they find is broken, they go to another one, and then eventually they get out.

Of course, it's not that simple.

See, when we first drafted this fic, the premise (which was an adaptation of a headcanon by our friend Twine) was pretty simple. Pixlriffs has been missing for months. His old ally Fwhip and Fwhip's sister Gem find him and take him into the crew. They travel together and eventually Pixl gets better, slowly talking again, and some other hurts are healed. That's how it started, and then the original "months" turned into "8 years" and it went from a really angsty one dimensional concept to a complex story about friendship, grief, steak, and the hope of living despite being in a world that is crumbling under your boots.

I'm not even sure how I'm gonna fucking begin explaining all of the symbolism and themes and shit in this fic, since everything fits together and doesn't make sense seperately and also it's 8:30 PM and I'm fucking tired right now. This is going to be incoherent as fuck. Whatever. Let's go.

First off, the Narrator. It's not meant to be a character at all, just serve as a way for the story to be told in-universe while also allowing us, the author, to drop some snide hints or commentary or foreshadowing in parentheses. There is no Narrator without the story, and there is no story without the Narrator.

I've gotten a lot of comments asking who or what they are or what purposes they serve, but the truth of the matter is that the narrator is whatever fits your interpretation of the work best. It's a historian telling the story years later, it's one of the characters, it's the universe itself commenting on one of the clearest truths its seen in millennia documented here in story.

You'll see us refer to the narrator both with name capitalized and not, as an it and a they, and this is because their identity is transitive and changes on a whim. Also we're an indecisive bitch.



natequarter Follow

Nov 19, 2022

unwilling narrator



natequarter Follow

Nov 19, 2022

the weight of a story is hard to bear but someone's gotta be atlas



saintemiliosandoz Follow

Oct 26, 2022

doomed by the narrative and haunted by the narrative and a secret third thing (narrating the narrative)

^ both of these are relevant and fit the vibes btw

Secondly, the story as a whole. Ashes is a Minecraft fanfiction, of course, but it's also us giving the middle finger to despair and safely exploring what would happen if the worst case scenario DID come to pass. The whole point of this work is that the worst happened and everybody fucked up as badly as they possibly could and they still lived. Let me elaborate.

Take the inciting incident, for example, the Rapture. The entire thing was kicked off by Fwhip when in his attempt to fix his grudge with Jimmy he combined the two fish and instead kicked off the literal end of the world.

Fwhip, youngest child of his family and often neglected and abused at home for being an outcast and for not being everyone's vision of what he should have been. Gem, who cracked under the pressure of being the heir to the Grimmish dutchy, ran from home and left Fwhip to manage everything by himself. Since he didn't know about Sausage at the time and was basically forced into the position by the adults, he was pressured to take the mantle and absolutely hated it.

His entire life, he had been blamed for his actions and everything he did was, in the eyes of everything, completely wrong. He saw Pix as a mentor and even as an older brother figure, and he figured that if he just fixed this one thing with Jimmy, he'd be able to heal the rift between one of his closest friends and his brother as well and then he'd finally be doing something right.

In the catastrophe that followed, Fwhip basically cemented this idea that he'd had that he was unable to not fuck everything up. Upon finding Pix, he was excited, even hopeful- Pix knew how to fix things! Pix would solve everything and they'd all be alright! He found out very quickly, though, that Pixl was even worse off than he was, and with Gem assuming the role of leader he was stuck in the middle again with next to no agency in the group.

Fwhip and Pixl are extremely alike in the fact that they both assumed all responsibility and same and guilt for horrible situations that they either a. had no idea what the consequences would be or b. were only partially responsible for. Or both.

Fwhip:

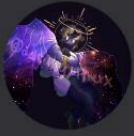
- had no real idea what the reactor explosion would bring and could not have planned for the fallout in any real way, especially considering the speed of the collapse.
- was left with a fair amount of survivor's guilt as a result, especially after experiencing Jimmy dying in his arms.

Pixl:

- Well. Pixl has a lot going on. We'll get back to him later.

As for Gem, she's not without her fair share of flaws as well. I'm going to go ahead and say here that our characterization of her has been incredibly lacking, to our eyes anyways. She is a woman and is treated as such by the story, and with that comes a fair measure of misogynistic biases coming from a myriad of sources, including from within the house. As of writing chapter 14, we are aware of this and trying our best to do her justice.

Gem has very high standards set for herself, due to her upbringing. She still carries a huge amount of guilt from running from the Grimlands at age 15. That internalized guilt and shame combined with the high expectations for herself make her someone desperate to please others while keeping all of her issues inside and safely tucked away. See the messages we sent to the group chat below:



darubyprincxx hoy a las 10:52

ok so. gem.

she still carries a huge amount of guilt for running from the grimlands

she had huge expectations placed upon her but didn't know how to tell everyone that she would rather be a magician than lead a country

even that second bit wasn't really true. both her and fwhip were placed in an environment Not Exactly Designed to nurture unimportant things like independence. and self confidence. really, she was just desperate to get the hell out of there because it was affecting her so bad, but she just thought she really was better at magic

it wasn't her political ability that was the issue, as we see her go off and form an entire other internationally recognized empire, it was her distaste for a system that was traumatizing her

the fuckin ironic bit was that since literally none of the nobility supported her being a trans girl, when she eventually fled and changed her name and even when she signed papers with them they straight up didnt recognize her.

Yeah. Yeah.

Both Gem and Fwhip had put up with years and years of misgendering and constant transphobia from their superiors and adults. Even though the nobility didn't want a woman ruling, they still shunned and ignored Fwhip when he came out. It was complex, as transphobia often is, and Fwhip had to fight tooth and nail to get recognized by the nobility as a man, especially before his coronation. He won in the end though, and was crowned Count Fwhip of the Grimlands, not Countess.

Gem had it decidedly easier after she ran away. She found a small magic school that would take her in and pleaded her case, eventually getting her appearance altered magically after two years in the Academy. Still, the spell didn't fix everything, and she still dealt with rude comments from the occasional people who had known her before her change and spread rumors about her.

As with Grimmish tradition, all of the allies who could make the time showed up to Fwhip's coronation, including the Crystal Cliffs, which at that point Gem had founded and turned into a hub of trading and scholarly prowess. Fwhip recognized her immediately. The conversation went... interestingly.

fwhip: what the actual fuck are you doing here.

gem: attending your coronation, y'know, since we're allies and all that-

fwhip: YOU LEFT ME TO DEAL WITH THIS BULLSHIT ALONE FOR LITERAL YEARS AND NOW YOU SHOW UP AGAIN AND PRETEND THAT WE'RE ALLIED??

gem: well not exactly personally no but in the eyes of the state-

fwhip: i want to punch your nose off your face so bad right now but if i go back in there with blood on my hand and if you go back in there with your nose broken then there will be questions neither of us want to answer. do not talk to me for the rest of this stupid fucking party

gem: well if you want me to, i can do that. i know you're mad

fwhip: mad is an understatement, gem.

gem: yes. i know. anyways i was going to introduce you to sausage

fwhip: who the hell is sausage?

gem: did mom never tell you that she had a third kid??

fwhip:

And that's how Fwhip was introduced to Sausage! At this point, that particular thread of story veers off really hard from the events of Ashes, and I haven't actually watched any of Gem's videos from Empires S1 so I'm just gonna leave that there.

Pixl has a lot going on. Ever since the End Heist disaster (again, only partially his fault, that's a motif we find a lot in his character), he worked tirelessly to atone for what he saw as an unforgivable mistake. Despite being forgiven over and over by his allies, he beat himself up constantly for what he'd done and never looked outwards for help.

After his first exile and the dragon fight, Pixl came home to a populace who distrusted him and he knew it. He had always been reclusive, but now he almost never talked to anyone unless it was out of necessity. Due to this, when he eventually disappeared, it took a few days for people to notice at all.

Because see, the thing about Pixl in this work is that he has an incredibly strong sense of self-loathing. One of his greatest fears is being selfish, and we see this in everything he does. He caters to people and pays no mind to his own mental and physical health. When he left Pixandria the second time, for good now, he assumed that nobody would care to see him go. He thought that he would be forgotten and would be left to die in peace, which in his mind was the fate he deserved. But he was wrong. He was fucking wrong. People DID care.

I need to underscore here that Pixl had fucked up as badly as he could possibly have done. He immediately assumed the worst in every situation and turned his own anger and loathing at himself ever inwards. His luck was atrocious and he couldn't even bring himself to do the one thing he so desperately wanted to do, which was end his own life so that it could finally be over with. In his eyes, that would release him. But he was scared of death and of actually taking a hand against himself, and so he lived in a half-dead state for years upon years.

At the point where Gem and Fwhip found him, he was described as "husk-like". This isn't accurate, as we soon find out, but they had been even two months late to finding him, that would have absolutely been the case.

In this universe, there are two ways that the undead form. One is from restless souls, bodies, etc not being put to rest properly. Due to the undead being seen as inherently violent, the vast majority of the time they are killed on sight. The second way is a very specific form of self-neglect, where a living person through a process of wasting away physically and mentally slowly get to the point where they can no longer be described as living.

I need you to understand how fucking close Pixl was to this state. Like. This man FUCKED UP. Walking towards and recognizing his friends went against all his mind told him, but it was not his mind that forced the body into the action, it was another bit of his brain that simply yearned for comfort and warmth. If he had not been recognized, he would have absolutely been lost.

And despite all I've told you and all you've seen, as you all know, he still fucking lived. He got better. He healed, well, the most someone could heal in that situation.

All three travelers were deeply flawed and had issues that often clashed with each other. And yet, they stubbornly held on. They made it out alive. The odds were piled against them every which way, and they pulled each other out of the holes they were in just enough to keep things going.

And that, folks, is the entire point of Ashes. That nobody is irredeemable and hope always finds a way. The essay doesn't end here, of course. I just wanted to make sure people actually knew this, now that I have it in writing. It's corny as fuck, but I think the world needs a little bit of stupidly corny things. Ashes is by no means a feel-good happy story. In fact, if you take it at face value, it's the exact opposite. But it's still filled with so much fucking hope anyways.

FORGOT THIS EXISTED FOR AN ENTIRE MONTH LETS GO I AM NOW ON HIATUS FIGHTING GOD AND STILL THINKING ABOUT THIS!

There is a specific grief that comes with a story left unfinished, especially when you know there was more planned for it. Whether cut off before its time by some outside force or stuck in indefinite hiatus by its creator or given the axe for some internal reason, there is no denying that there is an exit wound there: a jagged hole to the outside world edged with uncapped wires and shaky infrastructure and a desperate yearning for any sort of ending beyond this. That a story could end not at the beginning nor the end but in the middle is possibly one of the worst fates I could think of for one. It's like watching a video of a surgery where a bomb hits the operating room midway through the operation.

And now you have all of my feelings on Pixl's Empires S1 ending in one paragraph.

As we (and I specifically) have said elsewhere, I don't blame him for this. I'm not mad. All things have their place and their time, and this timing coincided with an unfortunate place. Empires is (unfortunately) not my baby, after all, but guess what! I'm here to fix the holes in with duct tape and sheer will.

Enter the methodically planned insanity of fic writers and my promise to carry the rest of the Copper King's story on my back.

See, in an Empires Season Two stream, one of his last, Pix got asked about his opinions on fanworks and stuff and how it ties in to the end of his Empires Season 1 perspective. Tumblr user valoisfulcanellideux transcribed it [here](#). An excerpt:

"One of the things about the ending of Season One not really being there was that people come up with their own theories about what happens to the Copper King after all of that. And I'm, like, "All of those are correct!" [laughs]. Whatever you think happened, happened. Because that's the fun of using your imagination for stuff like this, right? That's sort of the approach I want to encourage people taking when

we do projects like this, is your interpretation is just as valid as ours. And if you want to imagine that stuff, don't always expect us to act on it."

So yeah. I read that and lost my goddamn mind, for... obvious reasons. Ever since we've started Ashes, from the original message sent to a friend that kicked off a brainstorming session to where we are now, on hiatus on the tail end of Chapter 13, it's always been a sort of homage to the series that got away. Copium, even. I said okay. If I can't have this naturally, I'll make it myself.

Ashes did indeed start as an AU, back when I didn't want to label it as canon compliant because I thought it completely went against everything in canon. (I hadn't actually watched Empires S1 in months at that point. Sue me.) It was very much a thing between me and two other friends. I was going to post it, of course, but I never really expected it to get anywhere.

At some point, we decided that yeah okay this is going to be us stubbornly carrying on the legacy of the Copper King where Pix himself left off over a year ago. Fuck the canon, fuck whatever opinions he might have on the ending, if there does turn out to be an official one in the end then we'll drop the post-canon and canon compliant tags and it'll just have to be canon in our hearts. But it WILL continue. This thing carries too much weight on its own to be stopped by something silly like canon.

And then Pix went and said that all interpretations were valid and we lost our mind and now this is the closest you people are ever going to get to an actual ending for the Copper King bar other people doing the same thing on ao3 probably. You're welcome. This is a labor of love just as much as it is a labor of stubbornness and, more recently, a flying fuck you in the face of despair and fascism. (That's a thought that's been circling through my head the past week. I'll get to that later maybe.)

Ashes, then, is as much of a love letter to the canon of Empires SMP as it is a scream ripping through the fabric of the void, hoarse with anger that it never got to be finished. That doesn't do the emotions justice, but then again, not many words do.

I just realized that this is less of an essay at this point and more so me just rambling into the void to be shared with the readers when we eventually post the link (god i cannot WAIT for them to see it they're going to love this i think), but most of our writing and brainstorming process for this has been "yes, and"ing our way from kernels of concepts into fully fledged plot points in the group chat anyways. This IS the process.

I mean, okay, there was a timeline when we realized everything was fucked over and there were like three million inconsistencies and we fixed that in two days. There's actually a couple of inconsistencies. Hey! I could turn that into a section header!

Inconsistencies, The

1. Gem's name is Genaveve in the first chapter and is later spelled as Gynaeve. I'm keeping this in because I'm tired and also it might be a spelling discrepancy between the Crystal Cliffs and the Grimlands or maybe just a transition name between her deadname and chosen name idk. Maybe both. Thog dont caare right now. (Addendum: Made a post clarifying this. I need to add more links to this document. Will do that later.)
2. The timeline is fucked five ways to hell and back and I am aware of this and I am tired of fixing it. I, the author, am timeblind as fuck. The Narrator is also timeblind as fuck. This will be actually officially canon within the work (dear god are we doing that now? nevermind) or just, posted, when we actually Finish Writing and Publish Chapter 14.
3. i have been mentally restrained from going off of hiatus too early because we needed to study but my dumb ass wanted to write when we were exhausted both mentally and physically which is the reason this document exists at all. (We are fine. A bit stressed, but fine. This is why we are on hiatus!)
 - a. Confession time! I actually deleted and rewrote the entire chapter 14 draft While On Hiatus because I was paranoid and hated it and said oh im just rewriting it it doesnt count and then sent that shit to superhell. Reasonably, everybody clowned on my overworked ass for this.
 - b. At the time of writing, we have exactly one week left on hiatus and I am losing my fucking mind. See point 3, end of line 1.
4. Odysseus the dragon is first referred to with they/them pronouns then he/him later, and also occasionally it/its. I have decided to fix this by officially making the dragon's pronouns he/they/it. Yippee!

The reason for most, if not all, of these is that we're writing this and coming up with things to tack up onto the end as we go. The vast majority of our brainstorming happens in the group chat, just talking things out with the two other people there.

Actually, on that note, I'd just like to give a shoutout to our friends Twine and Anzy (whimsicaltwine and andreaissy on tumblr) for helping us workshop and refine ideas, giving some god-tier feedback, and being awesome friends in general. Twine, in particular, is the person who first came up with the headcanon that we ran with and wrote into an entire ass multichapter fic and I consider her a co-author even though I am the one actually writing the thing due to her incredibly essential role in sketching out the plot and setting the tone for Ashes when it was naught but 6 Discord messages in a private DM.

Regarding Embers the Cardinal

You're Never Gonna Fucking Guess Who Just Found The Perfect Name For This Bird, Y'all

Pre ashes c16 draft Keys here! I just got a shower and figured out something pretty fucking cool. Okay. So Fwhip and Pix didn't stumble upon a cardinal for no reason, right? No. I looked up bird symbolism and EVERYTHING for this. Check this shit out.

i need to stop making headwrs for these heres more unorganized thoughts

I'm racking my brain here trying to think about all of the little things I put into this fic and something that just hit me was how relevant the song Ashes itself actually is to the fic. like yhe lyrics in it and shit. this isnt surprising but heres some bits that i can actually cite here

Capture the wild things and bring them in line
And own what was never your right to confine

the dragons and Ember the bird

The lives and the loves and the songs are what
matters

T'll tend to the flame: you can worship the ashes

this is a core theme of like the entire fic

Do you feel heavy? Your eyes drop with grief
Your spirit is wild and your suffering is brief
So never you buckle and bend to the masses

the first line applies heavily to Gem, the last two are moreso Fwhip

Get round the fire with a glass of strong ale
And tell us a story from beyond the pale
Bury some seeds and expect some strong branches

theres a central fire that features heavily throughout the entire fic. its what they sit around and cook food over its where the arguments and discussions and heavier conversations happen. in chapter 17 when gem and pixl walk off to discuss what's been affecting gem so heavily, that's intentional- walking away from the light of healing into the darkness of fear and grief. sounds really basic and cliché but i know what im doing.

unfortunately the crew never gets to bury the seeds because the world is too far gone for that, but they do get to use it to feed Ember- which counts as discarding their hopes of staying here and returning to normalcy and using them to keep going into the future instead.

Now show me a man that can meet all his needs
For what we need most now is unity's seed:
A common old song for all creeds and all classes
I'll tend to the flame; you can worship the ashes

despite their differences in background and the infighting that sometimes occurs between them, they all stick together. if they didn't, they'd be dead by now! all they have is each other, even if it hurts!

What will we do when the world it is ending
And time it is halted for friend and for foe?
Try to hold on to the time as it passes
I'll tend to the flame; you can worship the ashes

i took this line quite seriously lol but yeah- holding onto the time as it passes? done. both the narrator and the characters themselves lost track of it at least a little bit at a lot of points throughout the fic, and as for time being halted for friend and for foe- well, yeah. Actually, let me elaborate on that.

After chapter 16 (at least it's chapter 16? let me check. yeah chapter 16), Fwhip notes that the cicadas are gone. This both has sentimental meaning to us, the author, as we live in an area with cicadas that can be heard through late June to early August, and also means that Fwhip's interpretation is a little more literal than he might have liked or expected: from this point forth in the fic, the seasons have ceased turning on their axes. This world will never know summer again. It's just an eternal spring, the flowers paused in their blooming.

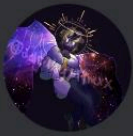
We've know from the start that the world of Ashes (or the world of Empires SMP S1) is deteriorating rapidly. That fact is the first line of the fic, for god's sake. As the three have gone on, the world has started crumbling, the plant life first: it stubbornly tries to hold on, as life always does, but it can't. Things stop here.

This is for one very simple reason: this world only exists in a story. It is dead as soon as the story ends. After we post the last chapter, things will finally have ended, left in stasis for the rest of eternity or until someone flips back to the first chapter and starts reading all over again. As we approach that final line, the decaying of the world increases rapidly. It's a horrible fate for a universe, but it was its fate all along.

The crew of Ashes- Fwhip, Gem, and Pixa- all get out safely. They get the luxury of finally living outside of the pages, of healing where the eyes and voice of the Narrator cannot reach. The animals do not, unfortunately. Pix keeps a feather of Ember's in his pocket, thus taking hope and its memory with him into the beyond, but that's about it.

edit: THIS DIDN'T HAPPEN LOL dw about it. most of the information in this document was written before we worked everything out

Hello! Working on chapter 22 now. It's been pretty difficult to write for a number of reasons, but the core of the matter can be summed up with this image:

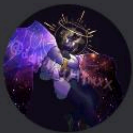


darubyprincxx Today at 8:53 PM

think i figured out why we've been having such a hard time writing this ashes chapter

we've been trying to make this much angstier than it is- well, no, not that, but angsty in the wrong way

because pixl's actions aren't out of anger or revenge or wrath, they're out of (misguided and confused but still) love (edited)



darubyprincxx Today at 9:09 PM

as soon as you change this core motivation, you lose the core of the character

and that's where the tragedy comes from, i think

because really, what is a tragedy but a love misplaced?



whimsicaltwine Today at 9:14 PM

Ok I know we are ashes posting rn

But I cannot focus on that because the bottom of my foot is itchy and I'm wearing boots

help

Fuck



darubyprincxx Today at 9:15 PM

And yes, that last bit goes in here too. Not all of the writing process of this fic has been serious.

hello again we are going on a two day writing hiatus while we are on vacation to the beach so i figured i would add some extra odds and ends to this just so that we dont forget everything because hoooooo boy my mind is full of thoughts and i know ive missed SOMETHing here.

the date is june 30th! happy last day of pride month! To celebrate i will be thinking about the last three chapters of ashes

and then i wrote nothing.