

# Chapter 23

Chapter 23 delves into the tense mission of Mickey and Berto, navigating through a desolate and treacherous environment. The two face not only the harsh conditions of their surroundings but also the emotional weight of past actions and unresolved guilt. While hovering above a vast crevasse, Mickey confronts Berto about the fate of Six, a group member who was taken by the creepers. Initially, Berto had lied, but now he reveals the truth: rather than being eaten, Six was dissected by the creepers, leaving Mickey with a sense of betrayal and heartbreak. Berto also admits his deep fear of the creepers, explaining that this fear led to his hesitation in acting to save Mickey during earlier dangerous moments. This revelation sheds light on Berto's internal struggle and helps Mickey understand the deeper complexities of their relationship, fraught with both fear and trust.

As the two continue descending into the crevasse, the stakes of their mission grow even more significant. Mickey, equipped with bubble bombs containing antimatter, feels a deep unease about using such destructive weapons against sentient creatures. The thought of deploying such an overwhelming force to eliminate the creepers does not sit well with him, especially considering the empathy he has developed for them. Despite the urgent demand from Eight to proceed with their mission, Mickey finds himself conflicted, recalling a prior encounter where a creeper actually saved his life. This emotional dilemma intensifies his internal battle, as Mickey is torn between following orders and his growing moral reluctance. His hesitation demonstrates the complexity of the mission and the deeper layers of conflict he must face within himself as they venture deeper into dangerous territory.

The situation escalates when Mickey and Berto are separated, each navigating different sections of the dark and winding tunnels. Mickey, now alone, is keenly aware of the creepers' presence, sensing that they are aware of the intruders. The

atmosphere in the tunnels becomes suffocating as Mickey explores further, eventually stumbling upon a massive cavern filled with an overwhelming number of creepers. The realization of the sheer scale of the threat hits him hard, amplifying the danger they face. The tension reaches a boiling point when communication with Eight suddenly goes dark, leaving Mickey in total isolation. The silence that follows only adds to the sense of impending doom, as he realizes that Eight may be gone, heightening the gravity of their already perilous situation. This loss of communication signifies a turning point, with Mickey now isolated in both body and mind, left to navigate the uncertainties ahead with no clear guidance.

In the midst of this escalating chaos, Mickey is faced with an urgent decision: whether to use the destructive weapons at his disposal or explore other options. Just as the pressure peaks, a giant creeper confronts him and demands to know if he is "Prime." This moment shifts the narrative from a confrontation based on violence to one that opens up the possibility for dialogue. Instead of reacting out of fear and aggression, Mickey surprises himself by responding that he is "Prime." This declaration is not just a statement of identity, but a symbol of his willingness to shift from destruction to understanding. Mickey's decision to engage with the creeper in this way signifies a crucial turning point, as he begins to look for common ground with the beings he has been taught to view as enemies. This leap of faith offers a glimmer of hope that the cycle of violence might be broken, and a new possibility for peaceful coexistence could emerge. The chapter ends with this transformative moment, leaving the outcome uncertain but filled with new potential for the future. The complex layers of morality, survival, and hope continue to unfold, propelling the story toward new and unexpected directions.