

## Asking for Nothing

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## Asking for Nothing

by [mayflowers07](#)

### Summary

Evil X was not a Hermit.

He was a stain on their lives, a problem for them to solve, a nuisance to everyone who knew him.

Honestly, the world would be better off if he just stayed in the Void forever,

So why, he asked himself, had he broken back into Hermitcraft again?

(Part of a series but can be read as a standalone fic)

### Notes

This fic is not canon to anything that happened in Season Eight. It takes place in Season

Seven and is totally separate from any Season Eight versions of Ex's character.

Also you definitely can read this fic with no knowledge of the others in this series, but it sort of connects into a lot of other storylines that would be helpful to know. If you don't want to read anything else, here's the very quick summary for you:

In part six we meet Ex when Evil Xisuma kidnaps and tortures Keralis in an attempt to get back in the server. He is caught and banned by Xisuma.

In part nine, Zedaph experiences some really bad intrusive thoughts and gets saved by Evil X, who regrets his past actions. Zed then begins sneaking Ex into the server and talking with him.

In part fourteen, we learn that a glitch is the reason Wels got left behind in Season Six. He has a breakdown about this, and Ex comes to help him work through it.

In part seventeen, Hypno has some suicidal thoughts and texts Zed for help, who then lets everyone know that something is wrong. It then later turns out that it had been Ex texting Hypno, not Zed.

In part nineteen, Impulse gets badly hurt and the only one around to help him is Ex. This reveals Ex's presence. We learn from Xisuma that Ex causes glitches around him, including the one that trapped Wels in Season Six. We also learn that Ex used to abuse Xisuma when they were children, causing glitches that eventually lead to Ex killing their parents. Xisuma bans Ex from the server.

And in part twenty, Bdubs is kidnapped by people trafficking and selling Hybrids. He learns that he is a hybrid who had the coding for it hidden. Upon being rescued, it's revealed that Xisuma is the one who hid Bdubs' hybrid nature in an effort to help Bdubs fit in better. Bdubs and the other hybrid players are furious.

\*phew\* All caught up? Good.

And in case you haven't read any other fics in this series, let me explain the concept this series is based off of: in Hermitcraft there is a code phrase Xisuma introduced years ago- blue creeper. If anyone says the phrase, it means something is seriously wrong and that everything has to be stopped to deal with whoever said it. It's a way to ensure that even though the Hermits all prank each other, fight in wars, and have conflicts, it stays friendly and nothing gets taken too far. It also acts as an emergency SOS when someone is in immediate danger.

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

For the record, this was self-destructive behaviour.

For the record, Ex was *well* aware of that.

As always the first thing he did upon shoving through the barriers of firewall blacklisting him from

Hermitcraft and spawning back into the server was collapse onto the floor, gasping and panting for air like a dying man.

The heavy Overworld atmosphere settling into his lungs, thick and suffocating like smoke, the overwhelming sensation of grass scraping against his hands and knees like ants and needles writhing beneath his skin, and the cascade of thousands of background noises barrelling down on him all made him shake and whine-

a fucking worm crawling to the surface to escape a storm.

Pathetic.

The difference between the Overworld and its loudness- its chaos and dissonance screaming together with a thousand sensations buzzing around- and the Void where he had spent the last few months/majority of his life always sent Ex reeling, made him dizzy and overwhelmed upon spawn.

Because in the Void, there was nothing. There was no black, no coldness, no emptiness, because those were *things*, and the Void was an expanse that never ended and never began, made of nothing. Your body felt both infinite and inconsequential. There was only yourself, and the voices in your head for company.

Considering the voices in Ex's had never been traditionally kind to him, this was usually a problem.

Once his body reached the lowest level of agony it was going to get, he groaned and leant heavily against a nearby oak tree while trying to stand on shaky, unpracticed legs. The sensation of rough bark on his hands, even through gloves, made him want to scream.

Made him **angry**.

~~Made him want to rip this stupid server apart block by block-~~

Gritting his teeth, Ex shoved both himself into an upright position and those thoughts down to the back of his head. There was no freeing himself from the ever present feeling of wrongness that always followed him whenever he hacked into the server he wasn't whitelisted in. He always felt a low level of fatigue and muscle pain and throbbing headaches while on Hermitcraft. But after years

of experience, Ex could no longer tell what illness was caused by the server rejecting his code on a base level and what was his famished body collapsing under its own weight.

From the burning, acrid scent of saltwater in the air, Ex guessed he was probably near the ocean. Indeed, looking at the horizon with eyes still rapidly adjusting to actual sunlight, there was the faintest corner of a bright orange, cartoon-style building to be seen amidst the oak and hills he had spawned on.

Luckily for him, he wasn't too far from his goal of the Cowmercial District. That was probably the best place to start.

Just one thing needed to be fixed before he could go.

*Damnit, Ex thought to himself with furrowed eyebrows and down turned lips, I'm not built to fix things. And yet, here I am, trying to do just that.*

Closing his eyes, Ex reached out to that metaphorically small place all Void-Walkers were taught about, where blocks were broken down into pixels and pixels were broken down even further into data. Without really seeing, Ex *saw* the world around him shift and ripple into lines of binary, one and zeros, billions of sequences firing simultaneously to create what was processed as 'reality.'

The Void had none of that, so something relaxed in Ex's chest at the physical, tangible reminder he was not alone anymore.

But then came the hard part.

Clenching his fists and feeling sticky sweat bead up on his brow, Ex concentrated on the data consisting of his armour, above the whining, staticky mess that was his own glitched-out data. He danced his consciousness along it and began the daunting task of changing it, of feeling for just the right lines to manipulate and switch around to create what he wanted to create.

Creation- such a horrific thing. As a child, before the rift between them grew like an infection, with cherub-like cheeks and wide eyes Xisuma would bounce in excitement as he described what creating code felt like to him.

*"Oh, but it's so wonderful, Exy! It's sort of like painting a picture. You create something from*

*nothing, and then suddenly you get to hold this thing and know that it's yours, truly yours, and you did something good!"*

Even back then Xisuma was always trying so desperately to be good and perfect.

Unfortunately Ex never really had the same gifts for building code as his brother. He wasn't called 'Good Xisuma' for a reason. Instead, he would reach for those same lines of data and get overwhelmed by a feeling of **wrongness**, a need to **destroy**, to ~~tear apart and shatter and fracture and glitch and~~

Shuddering under the weight of his anger, Ex quickly tried to finish his task before the intrusive thoughts overcame him: red armour plates became obnoxiously bright and bulky yellows that hid his pale, malnourished form well enough, antennae grew from his helmet piece, and black glass plates over the eyes thankfully covered his distinct facial features.

Until finally Ex was done and allowed himself to drift back to the physical world, where he stood in front of the same trees panting heavily and looking like a shocking replica of his brother.

Internally praying that Xisuma would not be in the shopping district to expose his ruse, Ex crafted a quick boat to head out towards the island, hoping to finally soothe the part of his conscience that had not shut up ever since the day he had been banned again and demanded he make sure the Hermits he had hurt were okay.

He was also silently ignoring the other part of his psyche that scolded him for caring so much for these players that owed him nothing but fear and disgust for what he had done.

Ex *did* care for the Hermits, and he wished more than anything he could undo such a grievous mistake.

After all, everything and everyone Ex loved always tended to die by his own hands.

...

Naturally the first Hermit Ex managed to meet was unexpected and unprepared for.

After touching down behind a big blue and yellow factory-like shop and grumbling curses as he tried to wipe off the slick ocean spray that accumulated on the armour plates, Ex was soon greeted with the sound of rockets firing off and an approaching figure flying in.

Huddling in on himself, Ex growled under his breath, “Fuck, now I’ve got to talk to people, Void I hate people, why am I here, why have I done this, fuck, shit, bitch-” up until the person landed a few blocks away onto the rocky coast and turned to face him.

Oh. Hypnotizd was right there in front of him, eyes narrowed in concern and blonde hair a tousled mess from the flight.

A *player* was right there in front of him.

Ex hadn’t seen another living person in months.

Part of him yearned and cried out to reach for Hypno, to feel some sort of skin-on-skin contact and know that everything was real and not just another sick, twisted delusion in Ex’s head.

That part of Ex could shut the everloving fuck up.

“Hypno!” Ex called out, pitching up his voice to sound as close to Xisuma’s as he could and wincing internally under the stare of the Hermit. “My friend, long time no see. How are you today?”

The last time Ex had seen Hypno, it was the day on the Nether roof. He had looked so concerned when Zedaph had told everyone that it was Ex that had texted him during his lowest lows. Probably because he was angry that Ex had blatantly lied to him-

Just as Ex was doing now all over again.

Fuck, Ex was such a piece of shit.

After a moment of scrutiny, Hypno shook his head and grinned, wide and relieved, and breathed out, “Xisuma, it’s so good to see you.”

Ex exhaled heavily from his nostrils. Thank fuck he bought.

The Hermit continued, “You’ve been cooped up in that tower for two weeks now. You haven’t let anyone see you except Keralis. I’m so glad you’re okay.”

That was news to Ex. His brother was locking himself away? Why? Was the poor bastard sick or something? Had he gotten into a fight?

And why was part of Ex... worried for Xisuma? Someone who couldn’t care less for his well being if he tried?

... oh well. It at least made Ex’s life easier, knowing that Xisuma wasn’t going to show up and expose the truth.

“Sorry if I worried you then,” Ex chuckled, feigning a light and easy tone. “I just needed some time to myself to work through things, but I figured I was long overdue for some fresh air.”

“No, don’t worry about it dude. I hope you know that I understand why you did what you did. Generik was a kind man, but he had some backwards views of the world. You’ve grown up into your own person since then, but he practically raised you since you were a teenager. It makes sense that you looked up to him so much, and I think I can speak for many of the older players when I say it’s difficult to look back at your oldest friends and re-evaluate whether they’re as good as you first thought.”

What the fuck? What the actual fuck had Xisuma done? That absolute derp fucked up this bad?

Nodding along, Ex quickly added, “And I appreciate that. It’s... hard to reconcile with who you were and who you want to be. I think I’m still picking up the pieces of what once was and trying to figure out where they fit into who I am now.”

Something acidic burnt in Ex's chest at that confession, too teasingly close to the truth, *his* truth, for comfort.

For a second something changed in Hypno's eyes, widening minutely before being schooled back to normal. Ex tensed, waiting to see if the jig was up, and Hypno would expose him.

Instead, all Hypno curiously said was, "Oh, so you regret the things you've done that hurt people?"

"Yeah... I do," Ex confessed with a waver in his voice, letting his true self confess under the guise of being his brother. "I think I was drowning for a very long time. It took some friends helping me to realize that there was a better way. Now I want to make sure I didn't pull anybody under the waves with me."

Ex was sweating hard under the mid-afternoon sun beneath all that armour.

He let himself pretend that's where the moisture gathering in his eyes was from.

Hypno smiled, warm in a way that screamed safety and security, reminding Ex that this was one of Xisuma's oldest friends, yet another person in Xisuma's life Ex was messing with-

Another reason proving why he really was *Evil X*.

"That makes sense," Hypno nodded. "Good luck with everything then. Know that I'm on your side, man."

Void, did Ex wish he could pretend that that statement was true, even for just one second. But the last people who had been on Ex's side were Zedaph and... Wels.

And that hadn't gone too well for anyone involved.

Waving in an awkward, jerking motion, desperate to escape before Hypno realized the truth, Ex agreed, "Thank you. That means a lot more than you know. I'm going to head out now, but please, if you ever feel like you're feeling shitty with those suicidal thoughts again, reach out to someone."



Hypno chuckled but also seemed genuinely fond and proud when he replied, “Don’t worry. You exposing me that day in the chat was actually one of the best things to happen to me. Jevin and xB can be quite insistent on proper mental health when they want to be. I’m not as lonely anymore, so the thoughts don’t have as much time to get to me. Turns out telling your truth can be really freeing... turns out that people tend to see the best in you, even when you can’t see it yourself.

“That’s great then... well, bye now,” Ex suddenly exclaimed, feeling strangely claustrophobic under Hypno’s strangely all-seeing gaze and oddly targeted word choices.

Spinning on his heels, Ex prepared to walk deeper into the island and try to find the Hermits he wished to check up on.

“Oh, and X?” Hypno chimed in just as Ex turned away, a glint of something mischievous in his eyes and an emphasis on the name.

Groaning in over-exaggerated annoyance, Ex put his hands on his hips and tapped his foot impatiently. “Yes?”

“Fool me once, that’s my bad. But I’ve known Xisuma for years. I know him like the back of my hand. And also, you’re way less convincing in person than you were over text. Don’t go around thinking that you’ve managed to fool me twice now.”

“Um...” Ex laughed nervously. “What do you mean? When did I fool you?”

Hypno just smirked knowingly, like Ex had managed to confirm whatever he had been thinking. “Take care of yourself, Evil X. You helped me once before. I’ve never forgotten that. I *genuinely* hope that whatever you’re looking for here on the server, you manage to find it.”

With that Hypno fired up some rockets and took to the skies until he was just a black dot in a mass of bright blue, leaving Ex standing absolutely still in the same spot with his jaw hanging open, wondering in complete bewilderment when Hypno had exactly pieced everything together.

...

What was Ex looking for?

That last comment from Hypno was stuck on loop as Ex stalked through the shopping district, so distracted he almost tripped over the llama on a minecart zooming through the area (seriously, what the fuck was wrong with these people? Who sets up a llama in a minecart?).

Grumbling to himself while he dusted the armour off after almost eating shit on the pavement, Ex continued on searching for the Hermits he wanted to check up on.

But why? Forgiveness? Something that Ex didn't deserve after spending years of his life rotting away everything he touched like a sick version of the Midas Curse?

Damn these stupid complex emotions. Why couldn't Ex's trauma be more cute and relatable?

“Well, well, well. Look what the Jellie dragged in.”

Gasping sharply at the sudden voice, Ex's eyes darted around until they landed on the two figures of Docm77- who had called out- and BdoubleO100 leant against a nearby building filled with intricately crafted musical instruments lining the windows.

Or at least, Ex was fairly sure that it was Bdubs. Last time he had seen them both, they had been calling for his banishment and threatening him (~~yell louder, scream louder, hurt them louder, break them louder~~) and Ex could almost guarantee that BdoubleO did not have phantom wings and green eyes back then.

He didn't seem like he was hiding the extra appendages from 'Xisuma' though, so Ex tried to play it cool as he waved back at them.

“Hello, friends. Beautiful weather we're having today.”

Both of them shared a quick look out of the corner of their eyes, and instantly Ex tensed his jaw and clenched his teeth.

Strangely, Bdubs simply responded, “Wow. *That’s* the first thing you say to me after everything?” A strange fiery anger burnt in his eyes that made Ex wince. So they had figured him out.

Ex kicked up some dirt on the ground and sighed, “That’s fair... I’m really quite sorry for all of that. I was honestly just trying to help and-”

“We know Xisuma,” Bdubs interrupted, giving Ex time to process what the other man had just said.

Bdubs still thought he was Xisuma, which meant that he was angry and irritable... at Xisuma? Maybe because of whatever Hypno had been referencing earlier that made Xisuma self-isolate.

Smiling sharply, all pointed phantom fangs, Bdubs added, “You don't have to be so nervous. I mean, you already apologized for the Hybrid thing- though I'd be lying if I said it didn't hurt that you only said it over message. I'm still working on processing my feelings over it all, especially in regards to Generik. I think... I do forgive you. But part of me still hurts over the fact that I was even put in *that* situation where I'd have to deliberate our friendship. It hurts that you're still a guest spot in my nightmares.”

While explaining, Bdubs' pupils constricted in panic and he began digging his sharpened claws into his upper right arm, not stopping until Doc gently pulled the hand away and held it close to his own chest, reminding Bdubs to take in a shaky breathe and not lose himself in fear.

There was the name Generik again. Hypno had brought him up too. Apparently he was an important piece of this never ending puzzle.

Taking a shot in the dark based on what he had been told and put together, Ex mumbled, “Yeah, realizing your oldest friend might not have the best views on life really shakes a person.”

That seemed the right thing to say considering that Bdubs didn't get any angrier at 'Xisuma,' instead just nodding and rubbing his free hand over his eyes,

“We've all kind of learnt from the situation that just because someone's in a position of authority, doesn't mean they're always right,” Doc threw in, keeping a careful eye on Bdubs. “You're a person with your own opinions, and sometimes that means you're going to be wrong about things. Like how to handle having Hybrid players on your server.”

A tiny part of Ex wanted to laugh at just how much shit Xisuma had managed to get himself into. “Right, that makes sense...” he began, before being cut off by Doc again.

“But on that note- let’s talk about Evil X.”

... what the actual fuck nuggets?

“What about him?” Ex asked, partly nervous as he fiddled with his gloves but also curious as to what these two men who seemingly hated him would have to say.

This time, Bdubs answered, not overly harsh but also not sugarcoating, “As we’ve established, sometimes the admin of a server can make mistakes. And maybe banning Evil X was one of them. Just as you accidentally hurt people you didn’t mean to, so did he with Beef and everyone. A few of us have been talking, and we think it would be worth it to at least give him a fair trial to explain himself.”

By the end of the speech, Ex could barely hear Bdubs talking through the pounding of his heartbeat in his ears. It seemed so impossible that the Hermits would actually be *taking his side* that Ex had to blink harshly a few times to remind himself he wasn’t dreaming.

“What about K-” Ex began asking dazedly, before his own throat closed up at even the mention of ~~Keralis screaming under his hands, writhing with the electricity pulsing through his veins,~~

~~Keralis’ blood splattered around him as Ex hit him again and again and again,~~

~~Keralis crying and whining and the joy those pathetic sounds brought him.~~

“What about ~~Keralis~~ though?” Ex managed to choke out, shame crawling up his throat like insects burrowing through. “What Ex did to him was despicable and awful and irredeemable. Are you going to tell me I was wrong for punishing my brother for that?”

Both men’s faces became hard and closed up, Doc’s brow creased harshly and Bdubs jaw clenched and unclenched.

“That situation does make things a little trickier,” Doc confessed, rubbing the back of his neck with his mechanical hand. “We’re not saying we *have* to whitelist Evil X, but if we do decide to blacklist him, it should be a fair decision made after hearing both sides that we do together as a server.”

Ex silently prayed the two wouldn’t see the way his hands shook and the way his eyes couldn’t seem to focus clearly on one or the other.

Not for a moment had Ex expected a warm welcome back to the server. He hadn’t dared let himself hope, that fragile thing abandoned in Pandora’s Box, in fear that it would hurt him worse when it was all ripped away.

“Just... think about it?” Bdubs added in, before him and Doc began strolling away to continue their afternoon, leaving Ex shivering in the warm afternoon’s heat, wondering for just a tantalizing moment if there was a chance left for him.

...

Of course, Ex could barely have more than a minute to recover from that shock before he was bombarded yet again by more people. If Zedaph was there, he’d tease Ex about being such an uncoordinated introvert, which was true but still.

“Xisuma!” Ex looked up down the path he had half heartedly strolled down, where Zombie Cleo was waving him down from her spot beside Joe Hills. They were chatting on a bench beside a very large wood and glass building that was probably the Barge based on what Zed and Wels had described to him.

Walking the few more meters up to them, Ex tried to relax his ragged breathing and steady his trembling hands, putting on the persona of falsified calm and all-knowing his brother usually had.

“Joe and Cleo, it’s nice to see you two again,” he called out, haphazardly assuming that neither of them had seen Xisuma during his isolation situation as well.

Cleo heaved a sigh of relief. Her words were chastising but laced with underlying fondness. “Xisuma, you absolute fool. Disappearing into your tower for almost two weeks? You had us worried sick.”

A small, bitter grin graced Ex’s face beneath the mask at the ridiculousness of him now needing to pick up the pieces of Xisuma’s mistakes, not the other way around.

It was Joe who explained, “If it was because of what was said that day Bdubs came back home, know that no one meant it in a mean way. Emotions were running high, but hopefully things will slowly go back to normal soon.”

That made Ex almost burst out laughing, just barely biting his tongue to keep it contained. Oh, poor Joe. If only he knew who he was talking to. Quite far from normal itself.

“It’s okay. I understand why everyone was mad, and I don’t expect to be forgiven too soon,” Ex said, then paused. Some clarification would be nice, something more solid to dig into and know that it wasn’t just a fluke decision:

“I’ve been thinking about something though. How do you two feel about Evil X?”

The silence itself was deafening. Both Hermits seemed lost in thought as Cleo ran her fingers through her long curls of hair and Joe worried his lip.

Seconds felt like hours until Joe finally answered, “Once I heard the story of what happened between you two from the other Hermits, I definitely sympathized with you. No disrespect, but it explains a lot of your behaviours: your overprotectiveness, your need for control, your fear of losing someone.”

Guilt clenched Ex’s heart in a mighty fist. Horrid whispers reminded him that all of that trauma his brother had suffered came from him.

“However,” Joe continued, gazing at the ground and lost in deep thought, “my daughter would just about be the age Ex was when he was first banned for what he did to your parents. She’s still my baby girl. She’s so young, Xisuma. She watches She-Ra, she loves Rice Crispy squares, she’s been trying to learn to skateboard, she’s always complaining that she hates her math homework, and she’s doing all the other things kids do at that age. I can’t imagine punishing her, or any twelve

year old, with banishment to the Void. Evil X was a child, probably lonely and scared. I can't help but feel my heart ache for that twelve year old boy."

It would've hurt less if Joe had yelled at Ex. Or beat him. Or even killed him.

But kindness? Sympathy? Those ached in Ex's very soul, brought forth his inner child, who used to wonder every single night what he had done to deserve such cursed powers,

who used to beg his parents to see him for more than just a mistake to fix,

who used to hurt his brother, because it was all he knew how to do, and then screamed in his pillow to muffle the regret.

That poor stupid child, so innocent and young.

Sometimes Ex wonders if he had killed that kid.

"Xisuma, you're crying. I've never seen you cry before," Cleo said, voice gentle and the corner of her lips turned down. Ex sniffled and licked his lips, tasting the salt of tears that let him know he was indeed quietly weeping.

She began to stand and step towards him in concern when Ex put his hands up and stumbled back, feeling as though any further affection would send him spiraling too far down a hole to claw back out of.

"No, it's okay. I'm fine Cleo. And thank you, Joe. I hadn't thought of m- *our* childhood in a long time."

Neither looked very convinced in 'Xisuma's' mental state, but Cleo did eventually, hesitantly, back down.

Before Ex continued on his way, he had one last thing to ask. He asked, "Have either of you seen Impulse around?"

...

According to Joe, he had last seen Impulse hanging around with Tango by some new shops in what was apparently a recently-developed area of the shopping district called Aqua Town. Well, technically Joe had said Aque Town, but Ex assumed he must have misheard.

Walking through the colourful builds and retro style city grid, his mouth hanging open catching flies, Ex was in awe at how wonderful the server was. Even before Xisuma had banished him for the final time, Ex had spent all his time in Hermitcraft hidden either in Wels' chateau or Zedaph's cave. Getting to the cumulative work- or maybe better said as art- of the Hermits laid out in the whimsical shopping district reminded him of how shameful it really was that he once aimed to destroy it all.

Finally arriving at a grey concrete and stone building near the ocean, Ex peered in through the front window and couldn't keep the smirk off his face at the sight of ImpulseSV and Tango Tek inside, bickering together over a blueprint design of some redstone contraption.

Ex found himself strangely attached to the two, otherwise dubbed 'Zedaph's Dumb and Dumber.' With the amount Zed would ramble about the adventures of his two best friends, smiling wistfully at any mention of Tango's cleverness and Impulse's intuition, Ex felt like he knew the two men quite well, even if they themselves did not know him.

Entering the shop, a bell on top of the door ringing as it swung open, Impulse and Tango both looked up from their spots sitting on a revolving chair and on top of the wooden desk respectively to see Ex approaching.

"Well, well, well. Don't you look pretty good for a dead bitch," Tango smirked, the flames dancing along his hair casting his face in mischievous shadows.

Feeling more comfortable with these two Hermits he at least knew by association, 'Xisuma' allowed himself to exhale and relax his tense shoulders when he shot back, "Even in death, I'm better looking than you two senior citizens."



It made Ex smile, alighting something bright and alive in his chest and on his cheeks, when Tango sputtered incoherent protests and Impulse wheezed out giggles at his joke. For a moment Ex could forget the circumstances and pretend he was teasing amidst friends like any other player would.

Once Impulse calmed down, he leant back in the chair with a creak and said, “What brings you down to the Vertical Enforcement head office? Someone I need to knock down a peg- literally?”

“Oh, that was an awful joke. Well done, I hate it,” Ex groaned as Tango simultaneously buried his head in his hands in shame. “Actually I’m here to check on you.”

The smile fell off of Impulse’s face and Tango sat up straighter at the more serious topic of discussion. Ex continued, “I know it’s been a while, but I just wanted to make sure you’re feeling okay since the explosion on the Nether roof- no lingering pain or infection or anything.”

From a physical standpoint Impulse looked fine, no sign that anything around where the main wound on his stomach had been was hurting him as he lounged comfortably in his chair. Though when Ex did look closer, he could see the faintest hint of discoloured, pale burn scars along Impulse’s neck and arms. He felt a bit guilty about that. Maybe if he had been faster spawning in and applying the potions there would have been less scarring.

Impulse blew air through his nose and answered, “No, I’m good to go. No real residual pain, and my two idiots made sure nothing got infected. The only remaining issue is that the area around the cut where it scarred is sort of numb, like the skin has no feeling in that area when I run my fingers over it. But honestly after a scare like that and thinking about how bad it could have been, I’ll take what I can get.”

Ex nodded, genuinely grateful that Impulse was okay. Another piece of business left unfinished on the server he could wipe off his ledger.

“Thanks to Evil X, that is,” Tango muttered to himself, making Ex’s eyes go wide.

Geez, if he had known he was such a popular topic of conversation on the server, he would’ve started selling autographs.

Trying to capture the bone-deep, worn down way Xisuma always seemed to sound around him, Ex rolled his eyes and responded, “And I appreciate my brother for doing that. But we can’t ignore that he causes problems wherever he goes. Even if what Zedaph said was true, that he was working

on controlling himself and his emotions so there weren't any more outbursts, we can't ignore that he *had* those outbursts in the first place. And a lot of people were hurt by them. He deserves what he got."

Tango seemed to be getting emotional- maybe even angry- over something 'Xisuma' had said, considering how his fire flared up and burnt a scorching white for a few seconds. Ex flinched away from the heat but also found himself getting angry at the danger, because ~~if Tango wanted to fight, Ex could fight back. Could glitch him out of existence. Could tear him to shred. Could have the Void swallow him whole. Could-~~

In utter tranquility and calm, Impulse cut through the mounting rage in Ex when he noted, "Maybe. We can't ignore them, because you're right: Ex's personal issues don't excuse him from taking accountability for the problems he's caused. But in my opinion, I think what *does* redeem poor behaviour is actions, specifically actions showing that someone is actively trying to be a better person. Talk is cheap, but if someone has put actual, tangible effort into fixing the problems they caused and stopping those problems from occurring in the first place, then I don't know about you both, but I'm willing to forgive. And Evil X risked his position on the server to save me. I was in a very vulnerable state, unconscious on the ground and bleeding out, yet Exy saved me. The same way he saved Zedaph and Wels and Hypno. If those don't show he really does mean no harm, that he doesn't want to behave like he did in the past, then I don't know what does."

Impulse was staring at Ex while he spoke, but it also felt like the man was staring *through* him. Nausea rolled in Ex's gut, hot and burning, while his heart wailed in his chest. Never had Ex felt so naked and vulnerable. Every single twitching nerve and flexing muscle and firing neuron was seen and understood.

Someone *understood* Ex.

He understood that Ex wanted to be better, that Ex regretted so much he had done it felt too impossibly huge to fix, that Ex still tried regardless because not trying felt like dying.

Even as a child, Ex had never felt understood.

"That's-" Ex began, choking on his words, thick as they clawed though his closed throat. "That's... a good point..."

Tango nodded furiously and continued, "Okay... so... you'll whitelist Ex?"

Darting his eyes between the two of them, both so hopeful that he would be let back in again, Ex felt sick. His head pounded like a wild animal was inside, rattling the bars of its cage.

How could he be lying to these two men, who were fighting for his freedom, fighting for *him*?

Lying, because if Impulse and Tango and Hypno and every other Hermits he had talked to today knew the truth about Ex, about the angry voices that cried and screamed for ~~bloodshed~~ and ~~fractures~~ and ~~p-a-i-n~~, they would never support this fruitless endeavour.

Again, Ex was exploiting those who he cared for.

So he did what a coward, a shadow, a worm like him was born to do.

He ran.

Trying and failing to tune out the way Impulse called out after him and the way Tango leapt from his chair to try and stop him, Ex's legs pounded on the concrete pavement. His arms pumped beside him while he bolted through alleys and around street lamps, looking behind him only once to ensure that no one was following him.

Collapsing against a nearby enderchest to wheeze and catch his breath, Ex couldn't tell if he was happy or sad that no one was.

...

Once Ex could inhale without it sounding like a whistle was in his lungs, he pushed himself up to stand and shook his head to clear the fog. Staggering forward and around to the front of the building he had chosen as refuge, Ex found the sign nailed above the front entrance and immediately tensed up and cursed.

Because of all the places to end up, of course Lady Luck had led him to WelsMart.

“Wow, you kiss your mother with that mouth?” The man himself quipped, poking his head out of his store to chastise Ex.

Well, Ex had wanted to check on Wels anyways. Just preferably not when he was feeling so emotionally vulnerable.

“My mother’s dead, and you know it,” Ex retorted, feeling particularly raw and smouldering.

Expecting Wels to go wide-eyed at that harsh remark, Ex scowled when the knight instead snorted in laughter. “Oh man, you’re spending too much time in that tower of yours. You’re starting to sound like Exy.”

Wels referenced him so casually, so freely, like he talked of Ex a lot, like they were still friends. It sent Ex reeling for a moment. Wasn’t Wels still furious at Ex for causing that glitch in Season Six?

A moment after, Wels pushed the glass door of his shop wide open, held it up with his arm, and gestured with his shoulder for Ex to enter. Taking a moment to consider the anxiety eating away in his veins at the thought of being enclosed and alone with the friend he had most wronged, Ex figured that he had nothing to lose since he could always just log out of the server back to the Void.

So he shuffled past Wels and into the bare, cleaned out interior of Wels’ store. His footsteps echoed on the wooden flooring into the imposing, shadowy abandoned building. The smell of dusty and stale air made Ex’s nose tickle.

Right after he entered, Wels hustled past him into the far back dark corner and dragged out two pieces of scaffolding, setting them up as makeshift chairs in the middle of the room.

“Sorry for the lack of accommodations,” he called back to Ex as he worked, “I’m working on cleaning out all of the old merchandise that piled up while I was ignoring everyone. Kind of a useless store now that no one ever visits. Might end up selling it.”

Soon both seats were placed properly, so Ex wandered over and sat on the right most one across from Wels.

“It’s a lovely build Wels, don’t worry about it.”

The look Wels shot Ex saw straight through him. “Cut the crap, Xisuma. You’ve been hiding out in your tower long enough that you’d probably only leave at this point for an emergency. What’s up?”

The déjà vu Ex felt at the situation, sitting beside Wels after a long day to chat, rocked through him like an earthquake. Memories of after Wels had learned of his presence and the two would hang out, kicking a football between two end rods to act as goalposts or baking medieval style bread to eat fresh with tart berry jam, flooded to Ex, each as bitterly heartwarming as the last.

“I just wanted to check up on you,” Ex breathed, unable for even a second to keep the yearning out of his voice. He hoped more than anything that Wels, so brave and kind, was okay again after the betrayal of learning what Ex had done to him.

Because that last scene of Wels, tears streaming down his face as he cried out in anguish at the damage Ex’s glitch had caused, haunted Ex more than any other moment of his time on the server.

Wels sighed, running his fingers through his long golden strands of hair. “I’m doing good actually. The grind never stops until it bleeds you dry, as we both know. I want to be more active next season, so I’m trying to get a head start on packing up this one for the move. The new meds I’m taking get my BPD under control, but the appetite suppressant combined with the fatigue really saps my energy. I don’t know, I’m going to bring it up with my psychiatrist, maybe lower the dosage. But overall, I’m doing okay, and I think after the past two years I’ve had, that’s worth being proud of.”

“That’s fantastic,” Ex genuinely congratulated, pride at Wels for managing to keep floating seeping into his words. “Really, you’ve made great strides since you rejoined this season, and it’s definitely an accomplishment worth celebrating... speaking of which, what about the whole situation with Evil X? How are you feeling now that it’s been two months since you learned the truth?”

Ex subtly tried to inch back, expecting Wels to blow up in either tears or rage at even bringing up Ex’s name. If Wels were to take a swing at him, Ex was ready for the blow and pretty convinced it was well-deserved.

No hit ever came. Instead the corner of Wels’ lips turned up in a crooked, tired smile and shrugged, “I actually quite miss Exy. We had some good times together. I accept his apology about what happened, though in retrospect it’s a bit too late for that on my end... I hope wherever he is,

he's doing okay. He's a good guy. He deserves it."

No.

No, he didn't.

Ex was a bad person, Ex was sick, Ex was a glitch, Ex ~~hurt~~ and ~~murdered~~ and ~~tore apart~~.

Ex was *not* a good person.

He almost wanted to shake Wels until he understood that truth. With comically large eyes and a tongue numb and swollen in pure shock, Ex barely managed to respond, "But-But, it, I mean he, I mean- he, he hurt you! You just- forgive him for that?!"

"X, I hurt Exy too," Wels insisted, leaning back heavily in his seat. "The first time we met, I was going through what my therapist would probably call a manic episode and beat him up so bad I broke his helmet. If you wouldn't kick me out for that, something arguably more in my control, why would you kick out Ex?"

Ex remembered that day. Afterwards in the Void, when he pressed his thumb deep into the bruises to feel *something*, Ex felt proud of himself for helping Wels overcome his demons. The pain radiated for days after, but Ex merely considered it a drop in the bucket towards his attempts to be a better friend.

"And I understand that," Ex cried out incredulously, gesturing with his hand towards the Hermit he sat beside, "but it's different. You hated Ex for what he did to you! For causing that glitch and then lying about it and manipulating you! You blamed him for what happened!"

"Xisuma," Wels started to respond, patient and unwavering as he chewed through his thoughts. "I've been blaming *everyone* for what happened- I blamed the Hermits for leaving me behind in Season Six, I blamed you for not being more diligent, I blamed Evil X for causing that initial glitch, and most of all I blamed *myself*. That hatred became my best friend, my one consistent companion, a source of comfort for me, because at least it was familiar to be angry all the time. But because of that, I've essentially been living in the past, forcing myself to relive my trauma over and over again in a desperate attempt to decide whose fault it is, who deserves to suffer for it. That's not healing. And I want to heal. I *want* to get better."

During his speech, Wels stood up and began pacing, shifting weight on his feet as confessions split from his lips like a river, a rushing torrent of pure honesty.

He continued, “It wasn’t Evil X’s fault, because he didn’t mean to do it. It wasn’t anyone’s fault... It was no one’s fault. My abandonment truly was an accident. And I’ve been scared to admit that truth for so long, because I thought that if I was hurt, then whoever did that to me needed to hurt back, needed to suffer the way I suffered and feel justice, for me to start getting better. And yet there Ex was, getting abandoned the exact way I was, and I felt... nothing. No sense of justice or peace or reconciliation or whatever I was supposed to be feeling. That’s why I was feeling like such shit afterwards. I didn’t know what else I was supposed to do next.”

Turning around in the spot he had ended up to face Ex, back to the glass windows and doors in the front, allowing the mid-afternoon’s nearly setting sun to illuminate him from behind like an ethereal being swallowed in a halo of light, Wels *glowed*. The sparkling hint of tears pooling in his eyes did nothing to diminish this as he stated, simply and powerfully, “I’m not angry anymore... finally, I’m not angry. And it’s scary, because these new feelings that filled in the void the anger left are alien. But at the same time, I don’t feel like I’m burning alive every waking moment. At last, I get to live. And you and Evil X and every Hermit deserve to experience the same level of peace.”

...

Leaving WelsMart afterwards was like going straight from the Nether into an icy biome.

The sickness and aches that built up around him from the server pushing back at his presence was getting worse, as it always did. There was a tight iron band around his lungs and pressure in his sinuses building up until they could explode. It was the reason why Ex historically never stuck around Hermitcraft for more than a few hours at a time.

A full day was pushing it,

Which was why Ex had left in a hurry to go visit the one last Hermit he needed to, to make sure everything he cared about was okay.

There was only one question left: what was next for Ex?

As he paddled his stupid little oak boat through relatively calm seas towards the achingly familiar hills where the Cave sat, he knew it wasn't the slowly chilling evening air or gentle ocean mist causing goosebumps along his arms that made him shudder while he contemplated his inevitable return to the Void.

Hermitcraft was so full of *some things* . A plus B equaled C, which added together with infinite more variables to create infinite more equations, spiraling and collapsing in on itself until there was a cascade of chaos, all together creating the server. Could Ex find a place among that mess? Somewhere his glitches and madness were a part of his character and not a flaw to fix?

He didn't know.

It seemed too unlikely, a sick game played on him by Fate, a cruel mistress who had never bothered to show him such kindness.

But what Ex did know was that he had arrived at his designation. The golden sunset with purple clouds dyed the glass-covered hill that was the entrance to the Cave a brilliant water-coloured array of hues. Ex felt his bottom lip quiver at the thought of Zedaph being in there, of finally getting to see his friend again.

Ex bit down hard on his lip until the skin was left smarting. He couldn't afford to show that level of emotions, because if anyone was going to notice his ruse, it was going to be Zedaph.

Dismounting the boat carefully while waves rocked him against the shore, Ex descended on the Cave of Contraptions, wincing whenever the pain would throb behind his eyes or the ringing in his ears would pick up.

Finally Ex came to the front entrance, a new addition considering he distinctly didn't remember a horrific giant stone visage of Zed's own face that opened its monstrous mouth upon Ex approaching.

Ex honestly didn't know why he was surprised. It was quite par for the course for Zedaph.

Once the stone had finished groaning under its own weight and fully opened up to reveal the so familiar yet heartbreakingly foreign Cave interior, Ex took one more moment to close his eyes, inhale deeply through his nose to try and settle his racing mind, then stepped through the door.



The Cave looked as gorgeous as ever. The detailing added by Grian during the base swap, lush vines and moss along corners and the minecart track looping between crevices and stalactites near the roof, added perfectly to the atmosphere that this was the home of a crazy, shut-in scientist.

Which unfortunately fit the inhabitants of the room quite well. Knelt in front of the Void hole, crouched in a tight ball that looked quite uncomfortable and gazing wistfully into its open depths was Zedaph. His thick curls of blonde hair sat in a tangled disarray of knots, various redstone stains blotted his cardigan, and purple, bruise-like rings sat under his half-lidded eyes.

Zedaph looked wrecked.

And it made Ex's heart burn. He longed to rush forward and hug Zed, scolding him for allowing himself to go through such neglect while also wiping away the grime and the sadness that seemed to have taken hold of him. Then the jig would be up, and something was oddly appealing about that notion- giving up and seeing whatever happened.

He would not though. Zed deserved better than to be stuck dealing with the mess Ex had made.

Instead Ex cleared his throat and tentatively called out, "Zedaph?"

The muscles in Zed's back stiffened at his name. Without even turning around to look at him, Zed quietly, exhaustedly sighed, "Go away, Xisuma."

Again, Ex's chest clenched at the worn, bitter tiredness radiating off of Zed. "I just wanted to check on-"

Only then did Zed turn to look at him. There was a low sort of anger pinching Zed's eyebrows, but in general Zed's expression screamed of tired numbness when he snapped back, "If you're here to apologize for Exy, I don't want to hear it. If you're here to try and convince me you made the right choice, I don't want to hear it. If you're here for *anything* other than telling me you whitelisted Ex again so I can see the friend you took from me, I don't want to hear it."

When the thick silence, the impossibly large distance between them, became too much, any words Ex wanted to say caught on his tongue, Zed chuckled under his breath and lamented bitterly, "Yeah. That's what I thought. Get out Xisuma. Just go and break my heart all over again."

And Void, did Ex not want to leave.

He could taste how close he was to regaining the old dynamic with Zed he once had. All he had to do was take off his helmet and hide out in the Cave.

But after everything, Ex knew he couldn't keep hiding from his problems anymore. Zed would eventually heal. With Tango and Impulse at his side, Zedaph would soon move on and the memories the two of them shared would be a fleeting memory in Zedaph's long life.

Maybe for a more stable person, that thought would be depressing.

It made Ex smile instead.

"Okay, I'll head out then," he whispered, so quietly and softly his voice almost broke. "Take care of yourself. Please. For me... Goodbye, old friend."

Just as Ex was about to begin shuffling out of the base into the nearby woods so he could spawn out, he heard Zedaph gasp sharply and look up at Ex so fast it must have hurt.

Zedaph's eyes were wide and brimmed with confused hope when he cried out, "Evil X?!"

Oh *fuck* .

Oh fuck nuggets.

Choosing to freeze in place and lock up, Ex met Zed's eyes in equal horror. This seemed to confirm Zedaph's assumption as the man exclaimed in shock and scrambled to stand up.

At once, the two started talking over each other, louder and louder, with Zed trying to show his joy and Ex waving his hands wildly and vehemently denying the obvious truth.

“Oh my End, I can’t believe you-”

“No, no! You have the wrong-”

“-so long since I last-”

“-maybe you’re tired and should-”

“-did you get here?”

“-get going soon.”

Both protests stopped when Zedaph dashed forward, almost tripping on some loose cobble, and grabbed both of Ex’s hands in his own in a desperate, tight grasp. Even through the leather gloves, the pressure from someone *touching* him instantly sent chills along Ex’s arms and short circuited his brain.

For some reason he wanted to start bawling.

Ex was eerily still while Zedaph smiled up at him, that blinding dimpled thing Ex could never resist with tears pooling in his eyes, and asked in full confidence, “Exy?”

There was no shot in the world Ex was going to be able to walk away from that plea.

Grumbling in fake annoyance, Ex reached up to pull his replica bee helmet off, letting his distinct snow-white hair tumble free and ruby eyes find Zedaph’s searching gaze. With an equally gentle voice, Ex responded in his normal raspy tone, “Hello, Worm Man.”

Zedaph squealed and yanked Ex down into the closest, most rib-breaking hug he could muster. “You came back to me,” the Hermit muttered into Ex’s shoulder, shaking and pulling at Ex like he was scared any minute Ex would make a break for it or disappear in his hands.

The feel of Zedaph around him was suffocating and overwhelming and heart-pounding.

It was absolutely *perfect*.

All Ex could do was fight the urge to collapse, safe and solid, in Zed's arms as he leaned heavily on his friend and wrapped his own spindly arms around Zed's waist. "Told you I'd find my way back in one way or another."

For a few minutes, that's all the men did: breath in each other's warmth. Ex familiarized himself with Zedaph, all of the parts of him that both stayed the same and changed in their time apart. It struck him like an arrow through the chest how badly he wanted to stay there forever, how his previous resolution to leave and free the server from the curse that was his presence seemed small and inconsequential.

Finally Zed pulled away- not far, never far again. Leaving his hands on Ex's arms, he leant back to look Ex over. Grinning ear to ear despite the new tear tracks tracking down his cheeks, Zedaph rambled, "I've dreamt of this moment for so long. I always hoped that you could break your way back in but didn't know if you were strong enough... guess that's on me for doubting you."

Ex snorted, "Yeah, my brother's been quite negligent with up keeping the firewall, so I figured it was my best shot."

"Small mercies," Zed beamed, reaching up to tenderly brush a stray strand of Ex's wispy hair behind his ears.

Then Zedaph's features widened, his mouth dropping and eyes widening in realization. He exclaimed, "Wait! Now that you're here, we should call a meeting and convince Xisuma to whitelist you!"

A grimace pulled at Ex's lips. He lifted back on and reattached the helmet before the Overworld's heavy atmosphere could settle in his lungs.

"I don't know if that's a good idea. I mean, my brother banned me for a good reason..."

"No! No, he didn't!" Zed protested, shaking Ex furiously in punctuation. "I've been talking with a lot of the other guys, and I think at this point we have a majority. We call a meeting, demand that Xisuma let you explain your side, you do and tell everyone how you promise you don't want to cause any more harm to the server, we put it to a vote, majority rule, and bada bing bada boom,

you're back on the server, this time as a proper Hermit!"

That did make a lot of sense, Ex had to concede. He had spent the whole day seeing first hand how many of the Hermits were willing to give him at least a shot. "Spent a lot of time thinking up that plan?"

A healthy blush dusted Zedaph's cheeks. "Maybe a bit. What can I say, my partner in crime has been MIA, and I wanted to do what I could to get him back."

Smirking at first at Zedaph's devotion to saving him, Ex soon went back to frowning and staring at the ground, uncertainty and doubt taking hold in his mind. Was Ex ready to face off against his brother again? To face all of the Hermits, even those who may hate him for what he's done? He already felt so fragile, he feared another conflict would send him scattering in the wind like ash.

Before he could fall too deep in his own head, Zedaph squeezed his arms where he held them, leaned down so he was making eye contact with Ex, and reassured, "Hey. I let you go once before. I'm not letting that happen again. No matter what happens, I will fight for you."

In Zedaph's eyes, Ex saw *hope*. He had glanced at it plenty throughout the day, from the corner of his vision, teasingly just out of reach. But in Zed, it was front and centre.

Unignorable.

Unwavering.

And more powerful than the fears eating at Ex's heart.

After all, even if Ex didn't believe in himself, there was no one he had faith in more than a stubborn Zedaph.

Falling into Zed for one last hug, then stepping away with hopefully more bravery on his face than he felt, Ex replied, "Okay. I trust you. Let's do this."

With that, Zedaph smiled at him so wide it crinkled his eyes and lit up his cheeks, then typed the

code into the chat, calling everyone's attention in one go and asking them to meet at spawn.

This was going to get interesting.

...

All of the Hermits save for Xisuma had shown up.

*All* of them.

Considering Ex was barely used to talking to more than two people at once, the introvert in him was practically hysterical.

At the front of the meeting room table where he stood, Ex fidgeted ferociously with the wrist of his gloves under the eyes of so many people all at once: Grian perched like a parrot on the arm of Iskall85's chair, Hypno chatting with iJevin but still smiling that smug grin that made Ex want to punch his stupid face in, Ethoslab helping brush off some dirt on the outer edges of Bdubs' wings.

Even TinFoilChef, the ol' bastard, had made the trek out, limping in heavily with a keen, quiet eye on the surroundings.

After everyone had fully settled, GoodTimesWithScar cleared his throat, sending the room into silence, before asking, "Zedaph. You have all of us gathered here for something so important you had to use the code. I think we're all dying to know what that reason is."

Zedaph stood in his assigned seat, a perfect show of confidence with his head held high to contrast the butterflies eating away at Ex's stomach. He answered, "Actually, we don't have all of the Hermits here."

More than a few players looked around in confusion, counting to themselves everyone apparently present.

That was, until another player stumbled through the water bubble elevator leading into the room. Xisuma, armour pieces crooked and hastily strapped on, righted himself and chimed in, "Sorry I'm late! I hadn't had to wear my armour in a while so this took a bit longer to assemble. I-"

Xisuma cut himself off at the sight of all of the Hermits staring at him in shock, looking back and forth between the two identical looking Xisumas in front of them. Upon making eye contact with his perfect, pristine brother, Ex instinctually lowered his gaze and hunched over.

"So either I'm hallucinating on poisoned soup again, or there are two Xisumas," xB spoke up first.

This was Ex's queue to release his hold on the code manipulating the armour, sending forth a cascade of data commands that glitched him out of physical reality for a few moments before he snapped back, this time in his original red armour set.

Reactions varied- Grian fell off of his seat into a protesting Iskall's lap, FalseSymmetry showed her scary fast reaction time as she immediately reached for her battle axe, Doc let out a stream of foreign curses in surprise, Impulse and Tango cheered his name upon seeing him, and Keralis went pale as a sheet and covered his mouth with his hand.

Not the worst but the most interesting was Xisuma, staring at Ex standing in front of him in a way that almost seemed... wistful. A shaking hand stretched out towards Ex that could easily have been to strike him, but if Ex squinted it also appeared like Xisuma was reaching out to him.

Then Xisuma shook his head and the usual anger and sorrow was back, leaving a hole rattling around in Ex's chest.

"What is this?" Xisuma demanded, cold as ice, choosing to ask this in Zedaph's direction instead. "What have you done?"

"I-" Ex began explaining, his sentence withering under the glare of his brother and the various range of looks from the server. A single breath caught his attention, and looking up to see Zedaph grinning reassurance at him and gesturing with his hands for Ex to take a breath in and out, Ex found his hope again, his willingness to at least try.

"If any of you have seen Xisuma walking around the Cowmercial district this whole day, that has been me pretending to be him," Ex explained, pausing as the various Hermits he had seen gasped

and murmured before continuing. “After hearing what all of you had to say about me, I figured it was worth a try to try and plead my case for being whitelisted.”

Various people seemed to want to respond, but Stressmonster101 got to it first. “But what were you in the shopping district for?”

For second, Ex didn't know if he knew that answer himself. It was what Hypno had presented to him hours ago. Thinking through the number of perspectives and interactions he had today- the protective shadow of Doc over Bdubs, the thoughtful care Joe and Cleo both showed, the passion for that which they loved from Tango and Impulse, the growth and contentment for life radiating off of Wels, and the unfiltered love Zedaph had for him- Ex realized what was right in front of his nose.

“If you had asked me that when I had made the decision, I wouldn't know what to say. The instinctive answer is a second chance, but that wouldn't really be right. You all taught me that in your own ways. I know what I'm doing here now- I'm not asking for forgiveness. I came here today, because I *genuinely* just wanted to know how you guys are doing. Simple curiosity. I genuinely hope this server thrives, and I genuinely want you all to live happy and fulfilling lives. Because... Zedaph was my first real friend in a long time. And then I had Wels as well. And they talked so fondly of you all and your friendship. Zedaph would get so animated rambling about how much he loves Tango and Impulse, and Wels' eyes would just light up whenever he talked about Jevin or Beef. Even walking through your island today and talking with each of you guys has shown me how well you all know each other and how much you care. It made me realize everyone deserves to feel that level of love and know they deserve it. I may be broken, and I may be beyond saving, but if I can make sure that Hermitcraft- the one last good thing in my life- sticks around, I can at least say I did something good.”

A fragile silence filled the room to the brim. Just as Zedaph said, most of the Hermits nodded along to his speech and smiled by the end, seeming to agree with Ex's words. The looks of affection Tango and Impulse shot Zedaph was so sweet, Ex wanted to check for a cavity.

“Stop playing your games,” Xisuma interrupted the moment, unsure and untamed rage leaking through. “Stop pretending you care about things. You're a monster and a psychopath who only hurts and kills.”

Blinking heavily at those thoughts, Ex raised a hand to stop Wels and Hypno, who had both opened their mouths to intercept. Instead Ex responded, refusing to match his brother's anger:

“Of course I care about things . In fact, would you like to know the thing I cared the most about for a long time? You, dickhead. Xisuma, I once thought the whole world of you. You were so smart and polite and perfect in every way I wasn't. I envied you and got mad at you and felt



overshadowed by you, but I could never hate you, brother.

“Don’t call me that,” Xisuma instantly snapped back.

“No, I think I will,” Ex retorted, a childish glee at flustering his brother giggling in him, “because even if you don’t think of me as your brother, you will always be mine.”

“Then why have you tried to destroy my servers for so long?! Why have you tormented me for years and years, acting as my own personal Boogeyman?”

Memories- long repressed and long left to rot seeing as only he held them- that came to mind. Ex knew that to reveal them would hurt Xisuma. But as Hypno had said, the truth could set you free.

“Your parents didn’t love me the way they loved you,” Ex revealed in one breathe.

This multiplied Xisuma’s rage tenfold. His brother staggered before striding forward and hissing, “How dare you?! How dare you talk bad of the people who raised you that you paid back by *murdering*?! They gave you everything-”

Ex interrupted quickly, stepping aside as Xisuma took his place at the head of the table, “They gave me the bare minimum. They gave me a roof over my head, food to eat, clothes to wear. That’s not love. You wouldn’t have noticed it, but they never really liked me. Everything I did was too loud and annoying and destructive. For basically our entire childhood, I don’t think I got any praise or affection from any adult, especially after my powers came in. I was always an embarrassment, always some child living with you guys, but I don’t think they ever considered me *their* child. Maybe I deserved that, but seven year old me didn’t understand the why. He just wanted to be *loved* the way you were. And that’s why I started lashing out at you as a kid. It’s not an excuse, and I am sorry for the way I hurt you, but I saw the way they looked at you with so much joy and pride, and the way they looked at me like... well, like a virus. Like a glitch. Like evil Xisuma. And I got angry and blamed you for that. So I hurt you, which was never fair to you, because you were the only one who loved me unconditionally, but then I drove you away by causing those glitches, and... it became a mess.”

Xisuma was shell-shocked. His eyes narrowed on Ex, desperately trying to find some inkling of a lie in his words. Opening and closing his mouth, Ex could see the way Xisuma was trying to rectify this new view of his previously idyllic childhood with the nightmare that had been Ex’s.

“They abused you,” Joe stated simply. When Ex looked up at Joe’s haunted expression, he remembered that Joe had a young daughter who he was probably picturing.

Majority of the Hermits were in between anger and sadness as they contemplated Ex’s reveal. If he had not been worried his newfound strength would fail, Ex would run forward to comfort a silently devastated Zedaph.

“No... that can’t be true?” Xisuma denied, glancing around wherever his eyes would meet.  
“Mother and Father... they were so kind. They-”

Knowing that some kind of proof was needed, Ex took a hesitant step toward his brother and asked, “What did they get me for Christmas? On the last one before they died?”

The memory of that day was painfully raw, even years later, for Ex. Disappointment tasted bitter on an adult’s tongue, but on that twelve year old’s, it had been poisonous and acidic.

It had felt like agony.

It was the first night Ex dreamt of dying in his sleep to free himself.

“Um...” Xisuma tried to recall, tapping his foot as he did. “I think I got a puzzle and some books and a poster for Hypixel, but I... for the love of the Void, I can’t remember your gifts.”

Sadly smiling, Ex turned to the many frowning faces of the meeting room, then back to his brother, and corrected, “Because I never got any. I had accidentally shocked the neighbour’s daughter earlier that week because she had called me a freak, so as a punishment I got nothing. Your father privately told me I had to watch you open your gifts instead, to see what ‘good little boys’ got.”

Someone whimpered sympathetically under their breath. Someone else muttered, “what the actual fuck,” to their neighbour. But all Ex had eyes for was Xisuma, who first looked more and more like a deer in headlights as each sentence was said, then seemed to deflate on the spot, losing the previous anger and replacing it with something buried deep within that Ex couldn’t name.

“Is that why you killed them?” Mumbo Jumbo softly spoke up, his arms wrapped around his waist in a self-hug.

Ex grimaced and struggled to force the next words out, feeling as the glitches in him roared to life at his emotional turmoil within. “The night I... killed them, I had snuck downstairs for a glass of water, and I overheard them talking about how to handle my glitches. And Xisuma’s father... he said...he...I heard him say, **‘we should have let that child die as a baby.’** That was the straw that broke the camel’s back. I was devastated. After twelve years of trying so hard to control the uncontrollable and be good, they still didn’t consider me their child and accept me. All I could think to myself was ‘I want them to stop: stop ignoring me, stop hating me, stop hurting me, just **stop**.’ And then their voices went quiet. I went into the living room, and they had disappeared... And I realized what I had done; I made them **stop**.”

Xisuma seemed haunted at that moment, pale and harrowed, both twelve years old again and thirty years older when he whispered, “You... made them stop existing.”

“I did,” Ex lamented, “I did, and it cost me everything. For the next decades of my life, I spent them trapped in the Void, self isolation to the extreme. Every destructive, chaotic thought that came to my head multiplied and spiralled until I was delirious, convinced that you had planned the whole thing as a way to torture me and you had stolen everything from me. So the second I was near the Void in a server that contained you, I used my rage to shatter through the firewall and aimed to destroy the whole thing. That manic fury didn’t really properly die down until the day over the Void when I met back up with Zed. He helped ground me, and it was like a light came on, making me realize what I had been doing all of these years.”

Glancing between the Hermits, Ex couldn’t gauge what most of them were feeling. The nerves in his gut fluttered, not helped by the now pounding headache under his temples. For so long Ex had thought his past made him unlovable. Finally it was all laid bare for the world to see, and he could only hope that it was received well.

“I think we can all agree that this reveals a new side to the story,” Cubfan135 said, glancing between nearby Hermits for support and continuing when he saw them all nodding along. “Evil X, I speak for all of us when I say that we’re sorry for the way you were treated in the past. No child deserves to suffer like that.”

Ex’s heart clenched. Pressure, unrelated to the pain, built behind his eyes, but he sniffled and tried to hold back the rising flood of emotions.

Soon after Cub, Ren took over talking. “After everything you’ve done for this server and the way you’ve helped it, especially hearing how you were here all day and caused no damage, I’m fully willing to trust you on Hermitcraft as a permanent member.” The wolf hybrid smiled encouragingly at Ex, fangs glistening.

One after the other, Hermits spoke out in favour of this notion- Bdubs, Grian, Cleo, Joe, Impulse, Tango, Wels, Hypno, and so on until almost everyone had agreed they wanted to whitelist him.

Pure joy at such praise, unlike anything Ex could ever remember feeling, lit up the darkness within. Stubborn tears finally began falling and his shoulders shook with happy cries. Realization that he had done it, he had found a family again, rocked his very core in the best way possible.

“But what about my glitches?” he sobbed, grateful for his helmet covering the worst of his outward emotions. “I don’t know what causes them, or if they’ll ever stop. I could accidentally do some serious damage to the server without meaning to, and you all could pay the price.”

VintageBeef waved his hand at Ex’s worries and explained, “I can’t speak for everyone. But even if you do cause more glitches, that’s okay. Because we’ll all be here. At the end of the day, I survived my emergency. Wels survived, Stress survived, Joe survived, we *all* survived. And that’s because we helped each other out. So long as we have each other, I think we can manage any more glitches thrown our way.”

Oh my Void, this was happening. They were going to let him in. Regardless of his flaws, of his damage, of his broken history and unknown future, Ex was going to get a home again. It was better than a dream, because even in his wildest dreams Ex had never thought such a thing was possible.

The chair screeched against the floor as Zedaph pushed it back to stand up. Motioning to Ex, he decreed with much proud, dramatic flourish, “On that note, I say we put to a vote, *as a server-*” those last words were aimed directly at a notably silent Xisuma, “-on whether or not we whitelist Evil X.”

It was perfect.

It was a dream.

It was everything Ex had ever wanted.

But it could not be.

“*No*,” Ex revealed, a steady voice echoing through the meeting room, stopping Zedaph’s idea where it stood.

For a moment, no one spoke, almost unsure as to what Ex had said and waiting for the opportunity to take it back. Eventually Wels asked, “Ex, what do you mean? This is it. You’re finally getting whitelisted.”

“*No*,” Ex shook his head, more sure than ever by his choice, despite the pain he knew it would cause him. “I don’t want to be added to this server. Not so long as it will cause someone else pain. I’m done hurting people to make myself feel better. As a wise man once said, my personal issues don’t excuse me from taking accountability for my actions.”

A few handfuls of Hermits tried to call him back to reason and argue against his logic. All the while Ex reached under his helmet to dry his eyes, then sought out the Hermit who had tried to remain unseen through the whole process.

“Keralis?” Ex gently called for the older man, making everyone else quiet.

With a flinch at his name, Keralis murmured something panicked under his breath. He couldn’t manage to look up from the spot in his lap he had been staring at, not meeting Ex’s eye at all.

Keralis was truly paralyzed with fear, scared stiff and shaking hysterically at the thought of Ex hurting him the way he had over a year ago, adding more scars to the nasty collection already across his face and all over his body.

And Ex was going to make damn fucking sure he didn’t cause Keralis anymore unwarranted pain. No one deserved to hurt like that.

“Thank you.”

After a moment, Keralis peaked up at Ex, finally making eye contact. The Hermit seemed properly confused, as was everyone else in the room, as to why Ex would be thanking Keralis.

“Excuse me?” Keralis barely managed to audibly say.

Again, Ex reiterated, trying to stay calm and show no sudden movements. “Thank you. For stopping me from going through with that, frankly ridiculous, plan and destroying the server. You’re a hero and a wonderful, kind man with a strong heart of gold. And I am so very sorry for putting you in that position where you had to use that strength. You don’t need to forgive me, but it is the truth. I’ve felt so guilty about what I did, I haven’t used my lightning since and swore I never would again. I mean it when I say I’m done causing others pain to cope with my own, and that includes you. Don’t worry, I won’t be added to the server. I’ll log out after this meeting. You’re safe, Keralis, and that’s all that matters. I hope you get to feel that way again.”

There was nothing. For a minute, Keralis stared at Ex, reading him and all of the troubles he had revealed like a book. Ex stood there and took it, letting Keralis have all the time in the world he needed to process.

“You would do that... for me? Give up Zedaph and Wels and all of your other new friends and your chance to be on a server again?”

With no hesitation, Ex answered, “In a heartbeat. Say the word, and I’m gone.”

Keralis sat up straighter than he had all meeting, allowing his eyes to break from Ex’s when he turned to the other Void brother in the room. “Sishwammy?”

Snapping out of whatever daze he had been in, Xisuma instantly responded, voice heavy but also desperate to help out anyway he could, “Yes?”

“... Please whitelist Evil Shishwammy.”

That-

That was-

Unexpected-

What the f-

Like a broken record, Ex's mind spun and whirled, unable to comprehend in any meaningful way what had just happened. He barely picked up on the high-pitched cry Zed gave or the proud smile Bdubs shot Keralis or really anything.

It seemed as though Xisuma was in the same boat. He gaped at Keralis, "K, are you sure?"

Keralis nodded and stood up, carefully making his way to where Ex swayed in shock the side of the front end of the table. The Hermit kept his distance, his boundaries of a few metres laid clear, but he was still miraculously close when he looked over Ex with crystal-blue eyes and decided, "You thanked me. And you were willing to lose it all for me. I don't trust you right now, but I think I might one day. So you get to be a Hermit."

After that, Xisuma reluctantly typed something on his communicator.

After that, Bdubs and Cleo ran forward to tackle Keralis in the largest bear hug.

After that, Stress yelled out her congratulations and Jevin cheered towards him with a bottle of water and Tango clapped and hollered, and everyone looked at Ex and strangely it didn't hurt anymore.

But the thing that snapped Ex out of his shock fully was the sensation of something rattling loose in his body, a broken piece he didn't know was digging into him, sewing itself back together. The various aches lifted away one by one until Ex felt like he could be floating, so free from the usual daily pain he lived with. With the headache now gone, colours around Ex seemed brighter and sound was sharper.

And for once, even the voices in his head were quiet.

Gasping so intensely he made himself cough, Ex scrambled to check his communicator and see a message he had never gotten to see before:

### *Evil Xisuma joined the game*

Upon looking up and seeing a very giggly Zedaph staring at him with numerous others crowded around, Ex gave a cry of glee and threw himself at his oldest friend in an embrace. The two almost fell to the floor as Zed staggered to catch his weight, but then Grian and Impulse were behind Zed

to steady them.

Tango threw an arm around the two of them, and Doc patted his back, and a dozen or so other hands all reached out for Ex. Everyone was laughing and smiling and celebrating.

They were *celebrating* Ex.

“Welcome to Hermitcraft, Exy,” Hypno announced through the noise, making Ex think about that name and in a moment of adrenaline and pure happiness coursing through his usually cold heart, Ex made another impromptu decision.

“Actually... it’s Exiona,” he replied, the name no one had called him since the day he was banned at age twelve rolling stiff off his tongue, making those nearest to him reel back in shock.

“I’m not just Evil Xisuma. I’m my own person with my own life to live, and I’m done living in the past. I get to dictate my future and who I want to be.” At that, *Exiona* smiled bashfully and felt his pale cheeks redden under the many awestruck, proud, and even teary-eyed in the case of Zedaph, gazes of the Hermits on him.

“So hello,” he waved awkwardly, hunching his shoulders. “My name is Exiona... you can still call me Ex or Exy though.”

And maybe, just maybe, when he laughed uncontrollably- so aggressively tears came to his eyes- at Mumbo immediately pronouncing his name wrong and Grian and Iskall making fun of him by pronouncing it in every odd way they possibly could,

Exiona’s inner child got to laugh too.

*We made it kid, we made it out of there.*

...



“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather be my roommate in the Cave? It would be like old times, just with significantly less hiding for dear life.”

Exiona snorted at Zedaph’s protests, glancing over to where his friend lounged on the yellowish grass of the scorching dry plains biome they found themselves in.

Continuing on as he ripped handfuls of grass up and scattered them in the wind, Zed rambled, “I mean, you picked an area so far from spawn it makes xB look social by comparison. Is this how you break up with me?”

“You wish,” Exiona joked back, setting down the shulker of building supplies Scar had loaned him. “It’s nothing personal Zeddy, but I meant it when I said I get to dictate who I want to be, and I think the first step to that is taking some time to myself and figuring out who I am. I’m going to build a little starter home, make some farms, maybe go to the Nether, and finally do all of the things normal players get to do.”

With doe eyes, Zed rolled over onto his stomach and put his hands under his chin, staring like a hurt toddler. “But you’ll come visit me?”

“Like I said,” Exiona reiterated, kicking up some dirt and grass blades in Ex direction, “you couldn’t keep me away if you wanted to.”

An easy silence drifted between them as Exiona organized his new supplies, only punctuated by the occasional bleating of sheep in the distance and wind murmuring through the flat plains in a wave.

“Before I forget,” Exiona turned back to Zedaph once he had finished unloading the redstone gifted to him by Etho, “can you please explain to me what Xisuma did that made him shut himself away like that? Because that situation seems pretty intense.”

Grimacing a bit, Zed pushed himself to sit up and patted the soft earth beside him. “Oh boy. You better get comfortable if you want to hear the whole story.”

“Your brother’s found himself in some deep waters recently; Here's hoping he knows how to swim.”

## End Notes

I told myself I wasn't going to write another long fic again and then this monster came out of me. \*sigh\* I need a nap.

So Ex (or should I say Exiona) got a fic! And whitelisted! If you're wondering about the name, it's pronounced ex-oh-nah. I made it the same way Xisuma made his name: X flipped the word 'music' backwards, replaced the c with an x, and added an a at the end. Exiona is the word 'noise' flipped backwards, s replaced with x, and an a added at the end. Interpret that choice of word as you will.

I contemplated having Exiona getting whitelisted 'fix' his glitching, because now he's a proper player. I decided against this. That's not how real mental health issues work. Acceptance by your friends and family is great, but it can't solve your internal conflicts and thinking like that can be dangerous. Instead I decided on a different ending- Ex's glitches are tied to his emotional wellbeing. When he's angry or scared they get worse and worse until he can't control them. Now that he's no longer in the Void, a very triggering environment, and has the safe space and support to work through his issues, he'll get better and better at controlling them.

Hypno fully tricking Exiona into revealing himself by saying "you exposing me" and Exiona agreeing without realizing and Zedaph realizing it's Exiona because Exiona says "old friend" which is the last thing he had said before being banned are my fav parts.

Obviously there are still loose ends to deal with: Keralis is willing to have Exiona on the server but he's still a long way from being comfortable around him, Xisuma has now realized his entire view of their childhood is a lie, and Xisuma never heard all of the kind words from the various Hermits saying they hope he's okay and miss him.

But for now let's enjoy this happy ending.

Thank you to everyone who has ever commented on, kudos, and bookmarked my fics. You all mean the world to me. If you have any thoughts and ideas about this AU or just want to chat, please leave a comment or send an ask on my Tumblr @mayflowers07. Take care if yourselves, drink water, unclench your jaw, and goodbye!

Works inspired by this [one](#), [Between the Lines](#) by [Sharo](#), [Spirits of my Discontent](#) by [Sharo](#)

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