

Resonant Bell World

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Resonant Bell World

by [2point5](#)

Summary

For a city run by heroes, there was an awful lot of crime in Hermit City.

It made sense, of course, when a city full of people is granted super powers, the chances that some people will choose to use them for evil are rather high. While not all people- or even many- would actually consider committing atrocities, some would.

Some people would use their powers to rob banks, or control gangs, or kill people. Some people would grow disillusioned to what it means to have power, and crave more. Some people would lose touch with humanity.

Some people would suck the soul out of innocent civilians on the street, apparently.

Notes

hey guys it's me, 2.5 tangodyke, back with another multichapter fic to eventually abandon. the title is a mountain goats song lol.

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

Chapter 1

For a city run by heroes, there was an awful lot of crime in Hermit City.

It made sense, of course, when a city full of people is granted super powers, the chances that some people will choose to use them for evil are rather high. While not all people- or even many- would actually consider committing atrocities, some would.

Some people would use their powers to rob banks, or control gangs, or kill people. Some people would grow disillusioned to what it means to have power, and crave more. Some people would lose touch with humanity.

Some people would suck the soul out of innocent civilians on the street, apparently.

Lovesick didn't like this.

It was strange to see someone like this, not asleep, not dead, comatose, unconscious, their head lolling to the side, their eyes almost open, but not quite. It made him sick to think about being like that, your soul torn from your body like that, like someone squeezing all the toothpaste out of a tube.

Maybe.

That metaphor didn't make much sense, in retrospect.

"So?" The woman beside him asked, crossing her arms. "What do you think?"

"We'll find whoever did this," Lovesick assured her, trying to enunciate like how his roommate would always remind him to do. "Don't worry."

The woman hummed, her eyes narrowing. She wasn't a cop, which made him even more nervous, because that meant she was an agent. This was a high level crime, then, if the agencies were getting involved.

"If you don't mind me asking," A sudden voice from behind him rang out, as if reading his mind. "Why did you call us here, instead of BTM or The Octagon?"

The woman's expression twisted bitterly. "BTM are busy with other things, and The Octagon are freelance, Scarlet Fever. You three were our only option."

Scarlet Fever nodded, running a hand over the shaved side of his head. "Well, don't worry Agent...?"

"Cleo."

"Agent Cleo. We'll find and stop whoever did this," The blond said. "Don't worry."

Agent Cleo didn't look particularly *worried* as much as she looked annoyed and maybe a little disbelieving, but she didn't get a chance to argue because at that moment, the third member of their crew decided to slap her back as hard as he possibly could.

"Yeah!" Morpheus said, and Lovesick could almost imagine those bared teeth in what the smaller man mistakenly believed to be an encouraging smile. "We got this."

Agent Cleo hacked out a cough, giving the smaller man a distrusting frown. “Right... well, if you need anything... my partner and I can be reached at the number on this card. Please...”

She trailed off there, letting them guess what the rest of the sentence was. Please don't hesitate to call. Please don't call. Please solve this. Please don't make a fool of me. Please get your hand off my shoulder.

She left before any of the men could get in a word, and they were left in the alley with the paramedics and the body.

Scarlet frowned slightly as they loaded the comatose body in the ambulance. “So... their soul was just removed, huh?”

“That's what the doctors said,” Morpheus said, his wide eyes flickering to the incendiary hero. “Just *slurp* . Sucked out.”

“Ugh,” Lovesick shivered. “Creepy.”

“Yeah,” Scarlet murmured, watching the paramedics slam the doors and climb in. “...Does this remind you of the Hels Duo at all?”

“That old case?” Morpheus asked. “Weren't they apprehended years ago?”

Scarlet tilted his head, but didn't respond. Lovesick could practically see the gears turning behind those red sunglasses.

“Hey hey,” Lovesick said, nudging him. “If you really think it's a lead, I can pull a few strings, ask the Mayor if he knows anything.”

Scarlet nodded, his shoulders relaxing. “Yeah. Yeah, okay, fine. Uh, Morpheus, you interviewed the witnesses, right? What did they say?”

Morpheus held up a notepad, clearing his throat importantly. Lovesick knew he liked this part, and there was a reason Scarlet had suggested he do it.

“According to the old man who owns the store across the street,” Morpheus started. “He saw a dark figure pull this young lady into the alley. He hesitated- wasn't sure what to do- but he ended up going to see if he could help, and that's when he saw... okay, this part is weird, but he claims to have seen two dolls, clad in black, standing over her. When they saw him, they spooked, and ran off.”

“Two dolls?” Lovesick asked, frowning. “What does that mean?”

“Dunno,” Morpheus shrugged, glancing up from his notes. “When I asked, he just repeated that they were dolls.”

“Huh...” Scarlet said. “Anything else?”

“Yeah,” Morpheus grinned, his eyes wrinkling. “I found this.”

He held up a piece of paper.

The other two immediately leaned in to get a better look. It had clearly been neatly folded, sharp creases running across it. The words in the center were a bold font, clean and neat letters typed and printed.

“Thank you for your business,” Scarlet read out loud. “Signed... Horse Head Farms?’ What does that mean?”

“Dunno,” Morpheus said, cheerfully, turning the page back towards himself to read it. “But it’s a clue.”

Lovesick sighed. It was a clue, yes, but not a particularly helpful one.

“It’s okay,” Scarlet said, gently nudging him. “We’ll figure this out.”

“Mhm. Let’s, uh, let’s go back to base, yeah? I want to grab some food,” Lovesick said, smiling thinly. “If that’s okay with you guys?”

“Yeah,” Scarlet said, at a nod from Morpheus. “Let’s go home.”

Their base happened to be Lovesick’s apartment, in all its messy, low cost, slightly moldy glory.

“Okay,” Scarlet said as soon as they were all settled, peeling off his goggles and mask and tossing them onto the coffee table. “Okay, so, we have a good start here, right?”

“Mm,” Morpheus pulled off his gas mask to take a bite of the cereal he’d poured. “We have a note-slash-calling card, and an eye witness account, and a possible connection to another case.”

“Yessiree,” Lovesick said cheerfully, smiling at his friends. “I think we can get this solved in a week!”

Scarlet- no, wait, his mask was off, he was just Tango now. *Tango* chuckled, one long leg stretching leisurely over the other. “I wouldn’t say that, but... yeah, we have a pretty good head start.”

Morphe- Bdubs slurped the milk a little bit as he squinted at the notes. “We should make a red string board.”

Tango kicked his shoe gently. “Last time we did that, I was the only one who contributed at all.”

“You’re always the only one to contribute at all, don’t blame Bubbles and me,” Keralis pointed out, smiling. “Come on, let us have our red string board.”

Tango rolled his eyes, smirking despite himself. “Yeah okay, whatever. Do you still have that cork board?”

“Mhm,” Keralis stood, wiping his hands off on his pants. “I should, yes.”

They’d only pinned up three things- a photo of the crime scene, the calling card, and Bdub’s notes from his interview with the witness- when the sound of a key in the lock rang out through the apartment.

“Ah, the princess is home,” Keralis beamed. “That’s good, he can help.”

By the time that the bearded man had gotten to the living room, Keralis was practically beside himself. His roommate was smart- really smart, probably one of the smartest guys he knew, and he was the only person who knew the three men’s secret identities. If anyone knew anything, it would be xB.

“Hello, princess,” Keralis beamed as the man rounded the corner. “We have a case!”

xB laughed at that, pulling off his hoodie and nodding at the other two, not even sparing the board a glance on his path to the mini fridge. “Yeah? What exactly is happening? Another issue with the mercenaries?”

“No, actually, they’ve been pretty quiet. This one’s new.”

xB glanced up at that, his eyes landing on the board, and the smile immediately fell from his face, the twinkle in his eyes fading. He didn’t look scared, or angry, or sad, or anything, his face was just dead.

“xB?” Bdubs asked. “You okay?”

“Uh,” The man cleared his throat, grinning weakly. “Yeah. Horse Head Farms, huh?”

“Mhm,” Tango said. “They sucked a poor girl’s soul right out of her, apparently.”

“...Huh,” xB said, standing up. “They sound dangerous.”

He looked scared now. He looked honest to God scared, and that made Keralis feel incredibly anxious.

“Hey, princess,” The hero said, reaching out a hand reassuringly. “It’s okay, we’re going to stop them before they hurt anyone else.”

xB smiled, thinly, but it looked fake. “Yeah, yeah, I know. You three are the best heroes in the city, if anyone can do it, it’s you guys.”

“Not without your help,” Bdubs grunted, his lips peeling back in annoyance. “I have no idea what I’m looking at. None of the clues lead anywhere.”

“Hm,” Tango said, leaning in again to look at the note. “We’re kinda at a stand still. Do you have any thoughts?”

xB hesitated, his eyebrows drawing close. “I... I can ask my pal Jevin if he knows anything- he gets around, has a foot in every door, he may have heard something, and he almost definitely will be able to at least track down if this was from a print shop or not.”

“Ohh, thank you princess!” Keralis sang, flinging his arms around the smaller man’s shoulders. “Thank you!”

xB patted his arm weakly. “No problem, dude. It’s what I’m here for.”

Things were off to a good start, Keralis decided.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Investigation.

Chapter Notes

uhhhhhhh hi

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

The first step in the investigation was, naturally, to talk to the mayor.

For most small heroes, this would be a difficult endeavor: the mayor was a notoriously private man, and rarely got involved with that scene. The only hero organizations who could speak with him were Boatem, and even they had to sit on the waiting list for days.

However, the Big Eye Crew was not just any small hero organization. They had an in.

Keralis smiled sweetly at the secretary as she pressed the buzzer to page the Mayor.

"Hello?" The tinny voice of the mysterious man came through the small speaker. "Yes?"

"You have a visitor," She smiled, winking at Keralis, who beamed back. "Should I let him in?"

"Uh, no? Wait, is it- oh is it Wels? Gosh, I told him to tell me when he dropped by-"

"It's not Wels," Keralis sang, leaning closer to the microphone. "Hi Shashwammy!"

It was quiet for a moment, then a tired laugh. "Keralis, hello. Uh, come on in, please."

Keralis waved a goodbye to the secretary, and slipped through the door leading to the Mayor's office.

"Hello Shashwammy," He smiled, putting a paper bag of donut holes in front of the older man, who smiled up at him. "How are you, sweet face?"

"A bit exhausted, a bit overwhelmed," Xisuma chuckled, popping a pastry in his mouth. "Gosh, it's really been quite a long week, you know."

Keralis hummed in acknowledgement, sitting on his hands to keep from fidgeting too much- something that Xisuma very much noticed and found amusing. "Yes, yes, same here. There's a new case: some people called Horse Head Farms have been sucking souls out of people!"

"I heard about that," Xisuma frowned. "Do you and your crew have any leads?"

Keralis sucked in a deep breath. "That's what I'm here to talk to you about... Ta- I mean, Scarlet

Fever has noticed some similarities between this and an old case."

Xisuma stilled, his frown deepening. "...Which case?"

"The Hells duo case."

Xisuma's expression soured, one hand coming up to his mouth as if he were going to be sick. "It's not them."

"I know, Shashwammy, but-"

"Eric Xisuma and Helen Knight are both in prison, accounted for and secure," He said, his voice cold. "That case is closed, and has been for years."

"I know, Shashwammy," Keralis said, gently, reaching over the desk. "I'm just saying, soul sucking? That's almost exactly what your brother did."

Xisuma sighed, running a hand down his face. "Oh, I am ruefully aware."

"...So you don't think they're related?"

"A copycat, maybe, or a coincidence. It's not Eric. I can swear to that."

Keralis smiled gently, nodding. "Okay, I'm sorry for bringing it up."

Xisuma's expression was still bitter, but he relaxed a bit. "It's alright, I understand. Explore every angle. Gosh, I just wish I could help in more ways than this."

"And yet you refuse to get involved with heroes," Keralis laughed, pulling his feet up on his chair. "You know BTM and those guys would love your help, sweet face."

"Ugh," Xisuma shivered. "Not a fan of BTM, my friend. Other than you and Worm Man, most heroes just seem... corrupt."

"Worm Man?" Keralis asked, surprised. "You have contact with him?"

"He and Eric were close," Xisuma smiled ruefully. "So I try to help him out when I can."

"Ah," Keralis nodded. "Yes, he seems like a good man, if a bit eccentric."

"He's more than eccentric, that man is bloody insane!" Xisuma laughed. "But, so are you."

Keralis chuckled, nodding an acknowledgement.

Xisuma let down his ponytail, running his fingers through his greying hair. He had aged well, but his two consecutive terms were starting to wear on him physically, something that made Keralis sad. They'd been friends since middle school, and to see a man he'd grown up with so weary...

"Well, I have a meeting in about 30 minutes that I really should be panicking over," The mayor quipped, winking at Keralis. "So, if you'd excuse me-?"

"Of course," Keralis pushed his chair. "It was nice seeing you again, sweet thing. We should chat more about nicer things than this."

"We should," Xisuma smiled. "Goodbye Keralis."

"Goodbye Shashwammy."

xB promised to meet up with him at a cafe nearby, and was already sitting inside with an iced coffee and a lemonade. He pushed the coffee across the table to Keralis with a grin, nodding a greeting at him.

"Hello princess," Keralis smiled. "Did you talk to Jevin?"

"I did," xB said, looking much more put together now. "He didn't have much, unfortunately, nothing you don't already know."

"Oh," Keralis pouted. "Do you think there's any chance this was a one time thing?"

xB shrugged, taking a sip of his drink and frowning thoughtfully. "I hope so, but there's really no way to guess."

"Ah," Keralis sighed, resting his chin on his palm, stirring his drink idly. "Unfortunately, you are right."

xB made a face, knocking his foot against his friend's leg. "Hey, come on dude. It's going to be okay."

Keralis looked at him. He looked... weirdly cheerful, his eyes a little brighter than usual, his fingers tapping on his cup cheerfully. Keralis found himself smiling too, although he wasn't sure why.

"Okay, so that's two leads down. What else?"

"Well," xB's gaze shifted past him. "Here comes Bdubs, perhaps he has something?"

Keralis twisted around just in time to watch his smaller friend come bounding in, shoving something in the pocket of his fleece coat and baring his teeth at the barista as he slid up to the table.

"You look happy," xB chuckled. "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing," Bdubs shrugged in the least nonchalant way Keralis had ever seen. "Just nice weather."

"Bubbles," Keralis laughed, kicking his shin gently. "Come on, we don't have all day!"

Bdubs reached into his pocket, dramatically yanking out a thumb drive and gesturing to xB's computer. "May I?"

xB nodded, lips twisted in amusement. "Go ahead."

Bdubs stepped forward, plugging in the thumb drive and opening the file.

It was a video, roughly 5 minutes long.

Street surveillance of the alley they'd investigated the day before, in late afternoon.

The video quality was awful, naturally, but it was good enough to see two figures dressed completely in black.

One looked to be wearing a hoodie and jeans, while the other wore a longer coat and beanie. They

both wore white full face masks, and they both stood at the mouth of the alley, leaning casually on the walls.

Suddenly the taller one in the coat shoved off of the wall, moving beside their partner. They both pressed against the wall as someone walked past, then resumed their usual positions.

After another half minute of waiting, they both stand upright. The hoodie lunges out of the alley, dragging in another figure- the victim- and tossing her to the ground.

The coat man crouched over her, pinning her down with one hand and raising the other above her head. After a while, the squirms quieted, and she went limp. Another figure appeared in the mouth of the alley- the shopkeeper- and both figures froze, before suddenly springing into action, clambering up the fire escape nearby and vanishing while the old man checked on the woman.

And then the video ended.

"Weird," Keralis whispered under his breath. "That... really didn't explain much."

Bdubs frowned, shrugging. "Well, we have more information now, and approximate heights."

"Approximate heights?" xB frowned. "How so?"

"Look," Bdubs pulled the video back. "Keralis is 6'3", yeah? And that dumpster came up to his chest," He gestured with his hand, making an approximate motion around his chest. "And it only goes up to hoodie man's chin, and coat man's shoulders-"

"So, hoodie man is probably 5'6" or 5'7", and coat man is roughly 5'10" or so," Keralis beamed. "Yes, yes, yes, oh Bubbles you're a genius!"

He pressed a kiss to Bdubs' forehead, absolutely giddy at the new lead, but xB looked thoroughly unconvinced.

"I mean, camera angles might affect this, though, right?" He leaned forward, squinting at it. "We don't know-"

"Mad because you're 5'6", huh?" Bdubs quipped. "You afraid you'll be a suspect?"

xB's eyes darted up to him, narrowing nearly imperceptibly, before a sheepish grin split his face. "The thought hadn't even occurred to me."

He was lying.

Keralis knew he was lying, and xB knew he knew he was lying, but they were at an impasse because neither wanted to address it with Bdubs there, because this was the kind of thing that stayed behind the closed doors of the apartment.

So Keralis just smiled at him.

"Well, don't worry, I won't let you get in trouble, princess."

Bdubs called Tango with the new information, giving them all time to sit back and finish their drinks while they waited for the blond to arrive.

One of the baristas- the same one who Bdubs had 'smiled' at- stopped by to offer them some discounted muffins, and the smaller man grabbed his sleeve, stopping him in his tracks.

“Etho, my friend,” He said, lips peeling back in what he surely thought was a charming grin. “I have another fun hypothetical for you.”

The barista, Etho, rolled his eyes, brushing his long white hair out of his eyes and adjusting his headband as he gazed down at the group. “Yeah, go for it, little guy.”

“First of all, I’m not ‘little’,” Bdubs said, holding up a finger. “Second of all, what would you do if you had to find someone in the city when all you know is their height?”

“Uh, Bdubs, let the guy get back to his work,” xB said, frowning. “He’s probably busy-”

“Never too busy for my little buddy,” Etho shrugged, before tilting his head slightly, his creepy pale grey eyes settling on Bdubs. “Hmm... I guess the first thing to do is get a list of possible people, then eliminate some of them. If you know his body type, that could help. Mostly, though, I’d suggest waiting for more information.”

“Hmmm... like a lineup?”

Etho nodded, slowly, his head bouncing back and forth. His eyes were nearly white, slowly settling on each member of the crew, peeling them each apart and considering the pieces.

He was eerily familiar, although Keralis had no idea where the feeling could have come from.

“So,” Etho said slowly. “What exactly is the goal here?”

“Oh, just,” Bdubs flapped his hand vaguely. “A story I’m writing.”

The tall man’s eyes flickered to the computer screen, where the video footage was frozen on the girl’s comatose body, but smiled anyways. “Well, good luck. I’d love to read it when you’re done.”

“You’ll be first,” Bdubs promised with a terrible wink. “I’ll even give you an autographed hardcover.”

“An honor,” Etho nodded, his eyes trailing over everyone else for a moment, before snapping back to Bdubs. “See you around, short stack.”

Leaving Bdubs to splutter in indignation, he ghosted back to the counter.

Tango arrived a bit later, bursting with ideas, and he and Bdubs started trading theories and cracking jokes while Keralis watched xB. His face was grim, his eyes fixed on the woman on the computer screen. While Keralis watched, he reached up, running one hand along his jawline, and then suddenly he glanced up, his eyes met Keralis, and he smiled shakily.

Keralis smiled back.

Things were going to be okay, even if he had to fight for it. His friends would be safe.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

short chapter, sorry, but ill hopefully post the second part this week

Things were quiet for a while.

Oh- not quite *silent*, this was Hermit City, after all. There was still crime and chaos and drama, but there was no one sucking souls out.

And then, late one evening, someone called the police station to report an all too familiar scene.

A young man, this time, laying in an alleyway, his eyes not quite shut, his body limp.

The thing that caused issues, this time, was the location of the alleyway. It happened to be directly across the street from BTM headquarters, meaning that by the time Scarlet Fever, Morpheus and Lovesick arrived, the other heroes were already there.

Lovesick didn't like BTM.

They were good people, of course, they were heroes after all. There's nothing more inherently beautiful than the five heroes and their honor and loyalty that was proudly displayed on every ConCorp billboard across the city.

They were good people, but that wasn't the issue.

The issue was that they were industry plants, loud and proud.

One of the CEOs of ConCorp, Scar Goodtimes, had always dreamed of being a hero, apparently, but his power wasn't strong enough, so he made technology, hired a team, and called them superheroes.

As a result, ConCorp funded BTM, and in return, BTM functioned as a sort of walking advertisement.

It was odd, though, how threatening they managed to be.

Scar wasn't particularly scary, he was a pale man with greasy hair and shifty eyes, with a wheelchair and silk robes that reminded Lovesick of a rich widow. He was handsome, perhaps, and very charismatic, but he was very much a businessman before he was a hero.

His goons, on the other hand, were something out of a nightmare.

Lunar Lights was the shortest, a small, compact woman, who wore a dark blue bodysuit. Her face was hidden by a dark blue motorcycle helmet with glowing stripes on the side, her long brown hair peeking out of the bottom. She had the power of light manipulation and flight, and- although she had no wings- crystal crescents hung in the air around her.

Nuke, on the other hand, was a tank. He had to be around six and a half feet tall, and was made all

out of muscle. His suit was black, with yellow highlights, his mask a simple yellow one with a black symbol on the forehead. His power was explosions, and being nearly immune to damage. Bullets bounced off of him like they were nothing, and even most psychic attacks reportedly failed.

Archangel, also known as Grian Xelque, was another plant, Scar's best friend from childhood. Unlike Scar, though, his power was substantial enough that he probably could have been a hero on his own: the ability to fly, and wings that stretched at least 20 feet. His suit was simple: a tight black top and baggy black pants, a red plague doctor mask and cloak thrown over it to cover his massive wings.

The last member of Boatem was the most infamous. Cannibal, a 6'9" string of a man, with the ability to steal other people's powers. Unlike the others, he wasn't loud, or violent, or particularly charismatic. In fact, he was dead silent. His suit was just that: a tuxedo suit, with a red tie, and his mask was a plain black ceramic mask, with no features, no nothing. His black hair was slicked back, his skin inhumanly pale. He was like a shadow.

A shadow that stared down the Big Eye Crew as they approached the alley.

"Who are you three?" Scar asked, frowning at them as they approached. "Is this your case?"

Lovesick gulped, standing up a little straighter, putting a bit of Charm into his voice. "Yes, hello. My name is Lovesick, this is Scarlet Fever and Morpheus. We are the Big Eye Crew."

"So, this *is* your case," Archangel drawled, his head tilted slightly. "Do you know what exactly this is?"

"Soul sucking," Scarlet Fever said, and Lovesick thought he saw Nuke jolt at the sound of his voice, although that didn't really make sense. "Someone is removing peoples souls."

"Why?" Scar barked, sort of laughing, sort of scandalized. "Who would do that?"

"Dunno," Morpheus said. "It's scary, though, huh?"

The BTM members shared a look, before Nuke shrugged, stepping back. "Alright, do what you have to do."

They didn't leave, just watched as the crew poked around the scene, helped the paramedics load the body, and compared notes.

Finally, Scarlet Fever huffed, whirling around, narrowing his eyes at them behind his welding goggles. "You guys don't have to stick around, you know."

Nuke shrugged. "Dont worry about it."

Scarlet Fever grunted, throwing his hands up in the air and spinning to face his crewmates.

"Gentlemen, shall we go to discuss this in *private*?"

"Yes." Morpheus announced, brushing his pants off and marching off. Scarlet Fever followed him, leaving Lovesick to trail behind. As he walked past, Cannibals hand shot out, grabbing him by the coat sleeve.

Lovesicks heart immediately surged in panic, and he had to resist the urge to punch him in the nose. The man was so much taller than him, he hardly came up to his chest.

"Uh," He stammered, glancing at the other BTM members. Judging from Scars expression, they

found this as strange as he did. "Yes?"

"If you get the souls back, will the people be okay?"

Cannibal's voice was soft, almost nervous, and polite. He sounded like a butler from some old timey movie, not like a monstrous creature to fear.

He sounded weak almost, like a lost little kid, and Lovesick had to wonder if he really was as young as the rumors said.

"We'll catch them," Lovesick said, softly. "I promise."

"But will you save *them*," Cannibal gestured to the city, his black gloved hand encompassing the city in a sweep. "Will the people in the hospital be okay?"

"...I don't know," Keralis admitted. "I'm sorry."

Cannibal hesitated, releasing his arm and stepping back. Almost immediately, Grian was at his side, a hand on his shoulder.

Keralis could feel their eyes on his back as he marched into the street.

He piled into Bdubs' van and tugged off his mask with a smile, forced though it was.

"This song sucks," Tango whined. "Can't you turn it off?"

"No," Bdubs snapped back. "I like this song."

"You're the only one," The blond huffed. "Keralis, this song sucks, right?"

He and Bdubs both turned to stare at him. He was mouthing along and nodding happily to the music, but at the sound of his voice, he looked up.

"Mhm, this music is bad bad bad. Sounds like garbage," He sang. "Turn it off, Bubbles."

Bdubs' face twisted in betrayal, but he turned off the song with a huff.

By the time the crew got home, it was getting dark, and Bdubs was yawning.

"I think xB has a pal over," Keralis said softly. "So everyone be quiet."

The other two nodded, Tango tossing him a thumbs up, and he opened the door.

Quiet whispers issued from the kitchen, but as the three walked through the entry hall, they stopped.

It was silent for a moment, before xB stuck his head out of the kitchen, sending an uneasy smile to the trio.

"Hey guys," He said. "How was, uh. How was work?"

"It was good," Keralis smiled, raising an eyebrow at the door behind him. "How's your friend?"

"Ah, yeah," xB waved them closer. "Come meet him."

The man perched on the counter was almost cosmetically intimidating. He was uncomfortably lean, with shaggy blond hair that was pulled back with a black cloth headband, clad entirely in

black leather and a tight yellow turtleneck. One platform boot was slung up on the counter beside him, the other perched on the wheelchair in front of him.

He smiled at them as they walked in, a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Hello," He said, calmly. "I'm Hypno."

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hypno was a strange guy.

Not in a bad way- he seemed pretty friendly, despite his physical appearance, but something about him seemed... wrong.

He kept tapping his fingers against the counter, his thigh, his chest, a gesture that xB seemed to echo nervously.

"So, how do you guys know each other?" Keralis asked, politely, leaning against the counter. Tango and Bdubs were still standing in the doorway, awkwardly.

"Work," xB said quietly, running a thumb across his jaw. "He moved from the customer service department to the tech department recently, I've been showing him the ropes."

"Mhm," Hypno grinned. "It's actually pretty nice, y'know? Easy work for good pay."

"Yeah, I heard ConCorp pays well," Keralis smiled slightly. "Nice to hear you're enjoying it!"

Tango cleared his throat, nodding towards the front door. "Ah, I'm cooking dinner for my roommates tonight, Impulse'll kill me if I don't get started soon."

"Ah, okay! Bye bye Twinkles," Keralis smiled, glancing at where Bdubs sat slumped against the table, his eyes on Hypno, his eyebrows pressed together slightly. "Bubbles, do you need to go home too?"

Bdubs jolted, blinking owlishly. "Oh... oh, yeah, I'm... I'm tired, sorry. Uh, Tango, can you give me a ride?"

"Yeah, come on," Tango smiled one last time at Hypno. "Nice meeting you!"

"You too," The blond said, his fingers tap tap tapping on the counter. (Across the room, xB's fingers tap tap tapped against his beard.) "Have a nice evening!"

Once the two were out of the room, Keralis felt suddenly suffocated. He could understand now why xB looked so nervous, Hypno had a strange intimidating aura. "So, er, are you interested in staying for dinner? We usually have burritos on Wednesdays...?"

"No, thanks," Hypno smiled, making no move to leave. "I have plans. Where did you two meet, by the way?"

"High school," Keralis said, politely. "I'd just moved from Sweden, and xB showed me around the school, and helped tutor me in English."

"xB's nice like that," Hypno grinned at the man in question, who looked positively queasy now. "Always showing the newbies around."

xB smiled back, his fingers tap tap tapping on his jaw so much that Keralis almost wanted to grab his hand to make him stop. "Yeah... uh..."

“What’s your power?” Hypno asked suddenly, turning to Keralis. “I’m not sure xB told me?”

“Ah,” Keralis shrugged. “Just charmspeak.”

Hypno blinked, eyes sliding between the roommates. “You guys... have the same power?”

“Keralis is a lot more powerful than I am, man,” xB muttered. “I just do suggestions, he can actually... yeah.”

“Oh, princess, don’t be humble,” Keralis smiled, but he was a little worried about his roommate now. “xB does more logic stuff, I do more emotion stuff. If that makes sense.”

“I guess it does,” Hypno nodded. “How about your friends?”

“-Hey, Hypno, how about you leave, like, now?”

Keralis and Hypno both turned to look at xB in surprise. His jaw was clenched tight, his fingers drumming a beat into his flannel so desperately that Keralis actually reached out to stop him, before thinking better of it and letting his hand fall to his side.

“xB?” Hypno asked, worried, his lips pressed together. “Uh... sorry dude, I’ll... yeah, my bad.”

He slid off the counter, hesitating for a moment before sighing, sitting down in the wheelchair and reaching out to shake Keralis’ hand.

“It was nice meeting you,” Keralis said politely. “Thanks for dropping by.”

“Yeah, of course,” Hypno smiled, glancing at xB and leaning in to whisper. “Keep an eye on him, please?”

“I will,” Keralis smiled. “Goodbye.”

xB didn’t relax until the door shut, when he sagged back against the counter with an exhausted sigh. “Sorry, man.”

“You’ve nothing you apologize for, princess,” Keralis smiled. “It’s okay.”

“I don’t really feel like burritos,” The shorter man admitted. “You cool with me ordering some burgers or something?”

“Absolutely,” Keralis said. “I’ll grab some beers?”

xB smiled. “Sounds good.”

Neither spoke until they were curled up on the couch together, each with a beer and a sandwich, each thinking their own thoughts.

“Do you ever wonder how people can... get away with the things that they do?” xB asked, suddenly, quietly. “Like, people who have so much money, and just... throw it away for nothing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, think about it,” He paused, wiping some mustard out of his beard. “No one needs five cars, man. No one needs a four story mansion in the nicest part of town, and a garage of sports cars and a private basketball team. No one... there’s people starving, people who work their whole lives to get a two bedroom apartment with a roommate who’s ‘job’ involves possibly dying-” He took a

deep breath. “You know that every time you put yourself in danger, I could lose more than just my best friend? Without you, I can’t pay the bills, can’t afford dinner. And some of the guys you work with- BTM and the Octagon and the Swamp Women- they have enough money to buy the whole block, and they don’t even have to worry about losing it.”

Keralis stared at him.

His fingers still beat out that beat on his thigh, but it was gentler, softer, sadder.

“Oh, princess...” He shifted, moving to sit beside him, laying his head on his roommate’s shoulder. “I’m not going to die, though.”

“I know,” xB murmured, tiredly. “That’s not the point, though.”

It was quiet for a moment, before Keralis sighed. “Did Hypno say something? Is this because of him?”

“No,” xB said, before hesitating. “Well... yeah, I guess. He’s been talking about it for a few weeks now, but I’ve been thinking about it for longer.”

“Is he a good friend?” Keralis asked, lifting his head to watch xB’s face. “You seemed... afraid of him.”

“I’m...” xB laughed, shakily. “I am, I guess. But he’s a good guy. Just intense. A good guy...”

Keralis hummed. “Okay. If you’re sure.”

“I am.”

It was quiet for a moment, before Keralis cleared his throat. “Oh, there was another victim today, near BTM headqua-”

“No, no, don’t... don’t tell me,” xB shivered. “I don’t... I don’t want to hear it. Can we talk about, like, something nice?”

“Oh,” Keralis blinked, before smiling brightly. “Okay! Okay, sure! Do you remember the first time we met? In the cafeteria at school?”

“You didn’t know how to ask if you could sit with me,” xB recalled, smiling gently. “So you said... what did you say, again?”

“Hello. Welcome. Thank you.” Keralis chuckled. “And then I sat down.”

“And then you sat down,” xB murmured. His arm tightened around Keralis’ shoulder, his cheek pressing into the top of his best friend’s head. “I’m really glad you did.”

“Me too,” Keralis said. “Me too.”

Outside, the city whirred by, and somewhere on the street below, a wheelchair sat abandoned by an alleyway.

sorry that the last two have been so short, they absolutely could have been made into individual chapters, but next chapter is when things really start to get more exciting. that should be both longer and sooner.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

sorry it's not longer, it was supposed to be updated tuesday but i forgot to edit it. the second chapter has already been started, don't worry

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

“We have a lead!”

Keralis jolted upright from the couch, his eyes wide and searching. The black hoodie that had been draped over him fell onto the floor with a quiet *flump* and he shivered in the sudden chill of the living room air. He frowned in confusion, looking at Bdubs who was trembling excitedly in the doorway like a small dog who had been promised a treat.

“What?” He rasped, confused, clearing his throat. “What’s going on?”

The side of his head ached a bit from where it had been leaned up against the understuffed arm of the couch, and his hand was cramped around the empty beer bottle he’d been cradling to his chest all night.

He must have dozed off after his conversation with xB, he decided, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

“We have a *lead*,” Bdubs repeated, happily. “Are you hung over?”

“No, just didn’t sleep well,” Keralis put the bottle down, stretching his arms over his head. “Princess and I were up late talking.”

“Ah,” Bdubs was bouncing on his toes, rubbing his hands up and down the sides of his jeans, his lips pulled tight over his teeth in what was either a grin or a snarl. “So, uh, you ready to go?”

“Yeah, hang on. Is xB in his room?”

Bdubs vanished down the hallway, before coming back moments later. “No. And his shoes are missing.”

“Must’ve gone to work,” Keralis decided, standing up, slipping on the hoodie on the floor. It was one of xB’s, a soft black one with a white rose on the back. “Alright, tell me about the lead.”

“So, the second victim had his phone on him, right? Tango decided to go through his contacts to see if there was anything weird,” He waited for Keralis to exit the apartment, bounding after him gleefully. “And he found a voice message that was... kind of whack. So, we found the first victim’s phone- she’d left it at home- and there was the exact same message on her phone.”

“Oh?” Keralis asked, hitting the elevator button. “What do you mean by weird?”

“Like, weird! You’ll see. Agent Cleo and her partner are waiting for us in the park.”

“Do- oh, shoot, do I need my mask?”

“No, no, you’re okay. Tango already messed it up for us, they know who we are, it’s fine.”

“Ah, okay,” Keralis fought down a wave of anxiety. “Let’s go then.”

The park was pleasant, people running around and enjoying the breeze. Kids played on the playground, couples had picnics on the grass and an old man flew his kite. Keralis smiled slightly, rolling up the sleeves of the hoodie.

Tango, Cleo and another person were sitting around a picnic table, around a handful of phones and a laptop. It was funny, almost, how out of place they looked.

Tango’s hair was pulled up in a bun, exposing the tattoos on the side of his head, and he wore a leather vest coated with pins and patches and spikes, and his piercings flashed in the sunlight.

Agent Cleo was dressed more casually now, in a baggy blue shirt and a pair of short jean shorts. One of her legs was a prosthetic, he realized, surprised. She looked almost bizarrely normal, not like government agent and more like a normal woman.

Her partner, on the other hand, looked almost comically bizarre. He wore a pair of blue cowboy boots and board shorts, paired with a bright green shirt and a white formal vest. He had dangly fuzzy dice earrings hanging from his ears and a pair of cat eye sunglasses. His long brown hair was pulled up in a bun, held in place with a yellow scrunchie.

“You guys stick out like sore thumbs,” Keralis said, cheerfully. “Like delinquent teens.”

The other agent looked up, smiling brilliantly. “It’s on purpose. T’ distract from the fact that we’re looping creepy audio messages. I’m Joe Hills.”

“Nice to meet you, I’m Keralis- er- Lovesick?”

“Pleasure,” Joe smiled. “Did Bdubs tell ya what was goin’ on?”

“Sort of,” Keralis glanced curiously at the phones. “Although he wouldn’t tell me what the messages were.”

“Here,” Cleo reached over, picking up a phone, pressing a button. “Have a listen.”

The message started with about five seconds of silence, before there was a sudden beep, and a mechanical voice started to speak.

“Thank you for your patience. Horse Head Farms is excited to be working with you, your IOU has been deposited in our data base. Please remember that if your side of the bargain isn’t upheld, we will have to cash in your debt. You have five weeks. Thanks again for working with us, it’s an honor doing business with you.”

Keralis glanced up at them, frowning in confusion. “Your side of the bargain?”

“We think,” Joe drawled, leaning over the table to turn the laptop towards him. “That the victims may have been doing some shady business with these Horse Head boys.”

“Which leads to some questions about what exactly that business was, and whether the victims were aware of what they were getting themselves into,” Cleo said, scowling. “Because if there was a legal, binding contract, then we wouldn’t be able to do anything about it.”

“It’s weird, though,” Tango said, sitting down, slowly. “Like, who would exchange their soul for

anything?"

"Unless it's for other souls?" Bdubs asked. "Because, like, consuming souls can make you, uh- it can give you powers, yeah? So, maybe if they completed a task or something in five weeks, they got a soul, but if they didn't they lost theirs."

"Mm," Tango worried his lip piercing between his teeth. "Yeah, I guess. That's kinda... do you really think someone would do that?"

"That *has* to be it, though," Keralis said, enthusiastically. "That's the only logical explanation!"

"Ugh," Cleo scowled. "Still doesn't help with the legal side of things. I can ask Kai- our head of legal affairs- but I don't know if we can actually say anything for sure until we figure out what's happening."

"Okay, so, I guess we'll have to wait for something else to happen, as morbid as that may be," Joe dug his fingernail into the table. "Some sort of further evidence."

Suddenly, Tango's phone rang, and he jolted, tugging it out of his pocket. He peered at the screen, and jabbed at the decline button. "Uh, it's my roommate, sorry."

Right as Joe opened his mouth to respond, his own phone rang. He chuckled, shaking his head in amusement. Everyone returned to meaningless chatter as he answered, but after a moment, he cut them off, raising a hand. His expression was grim as he turned to Tango. "I think you better answer that call."

Tango stared at him, pale and nervous, before he slowly tugged his phone out of his pocket again. He hit the call button, but before he pressed it to his ear, he hesitated, putting it on speaker mode.

There was a pause, before he spoke. "Zed?"

"Tango, Impulse is dead," A man's voice came through, rushed and breathless and shaky. "Or, I mean, maybe not *dead* but... the paramedics- I don't know, I walked into the kitchen and found him on the floor-"

"Wait, wait, wait, what?" Tango asked, his shaky hands clenched in his lap. "What's going on?"

"The paramedics said his soul has been sucked, but that's not- he's too pale- God this is just like last time- fuck, Tango just get home, fast. They're calling some heroes, this is apparently a serial thing, but I-"

"I'm on my way, Zed," Tango said, grabbing his phone off the table. "I'm on my way. Bye, love you, be careful."

"Bye, love you, hurry."

He jabbed the hang up button with a finger and immediately launched himself to his feet, jabbing a finger in Joe's face. "How the fuck did you know what that was about?"

"I got a call from Big B, informing me that one Seth 'Impulse' Varnus had been found in his apartment by his roommate, Aaron Zedaph. They have a third roommate, who wasn't there, a Tekla 'Tango' Turner. That's you."

"That's me," Tango muttered. He looked mad, still, but he mostly just looked sick. "Fuck, I wasn't there."

No one tried to stop him as he stumbled away from the group, towards the car. No one tried to follow him as he collapsed to his knees. They all just watched in stunned silence.

“I’m... I’m going with him,” Bdubs announced. “Want to make sure he’s alright.”

“Okay,” Cleo said. “Joe and I will go back to the office, do some paperwork. You guys... might get taken off the case. You’re too close, now.”

“That’s fine,” Keralis said, dully, watching Bdubs jog up to Tango, who was sobbing now, curled up in the grass. “I think... I think that’s okay. Do you think this was targeted?”

“I don’t know,” She said. “I don’t... I don’t know.”

He waited until he was in his car to pull out his phone. His fingers tingled as he typed in a message.

Are you okay?

Every second that passed without a response made him feel sicker and sicker, until, finally, that blessed blue bubble popped up in the bottom of the screen.

i’m ok. why?

Keralis could have sobbed in relief, messaging back a quick. *Tell you later. ILY*

xB was fine.

xB was fine, that’s all that mattered.

His forehead bounced off the steering wheel with a weary sigh.

He had no idea what to do now.

Chapter End Notes

binged petscop while editing this and i think it's taking a toll on me.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

happy 420. told you the next update was in the works.

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

Keralis wouldn't remember much from the next hour of his life.

One moment, he was getting into Tango's car, behind the steering wheel, while Bdubs cradled the sobbing blond in the back seat.

Then, he was sitting on Tango's couch, while paramedics talked to the roommates of the victim.

Then, he was holding a glass of water, crouching next to where Tango was kneeling on the floor of the bathroom, keeping his friend's hair out of his face while he wretched into the toilet.

He wasn't sure why he was so shaken. He'd hardly known Impulse very well, they'd only met a few times. Maybe it was seeing Tango like this, so grief stricken and confused and lost. Maybe it was the guilt of knowing he had been cuddling with his pal instead of helping people. Maybe it was just knowing that this might have been targeted.

Impulse had been a big guy, six and a half feet tall, with biceps the size of Bdubs' whole body and the added bonus of super strength. Whoever had taken him down had been skilled.

He was on the couch again, with Bdubs and Tango and Zedaph. They were all silent, waiting for someone else to speak.

Zedaph was a small man, shorter than even Bdubs, with a messy blond mullet and soft blue eyes. He looked gentle, like a lamb, and Keralis felt awful for him.

"It's okay," Zedaph said, choking on his words a bit. "There's a hero team for this. They're going to help."

"Yeah," Tango croaked, his forehead on his knees. His hair had come down from the loose ponytail and was covering his face. "I know."

"...I'm..." Zedaph sighed, rubbing his eyes. He'd been crying for a while now, but he was clearly on the denial stage. "I'm going to the lab, to just... do something. Will you be alright here?"

"Yeah."

Zedaph gave Keralis and Bdubs a look.

Keep an eye on him.

Keralis nodded and smiled shakily. He would. He wasn't losing anyone else.

Zedaph left, leaving them all in the same choking, suffocating silence.

"Concorp called," Tango rasped. "Said they were sorry to lose a valued employee."

Keralis frowned. "Wasn't... wasn't he a construction contractor?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Tango let out a little high pitched giggle that sounded like a sob. "Turns out he was lying."

He lifted his head to look at them, his eyes shining red in the light.

"Oh..." Bdubs said, uncomfortably. "That's... strange."

"It makes you wonder," Tango said, his voice stronger now. "What else was he lying about?"

"Uh," Keralis frowned hesitantly at Bdubs, who shrugged. "I mean, maybe nothing?"

"Oh," Tango gasped, chuckling a little bit. "Oh, no, he was lying about a lot, I think. Why would he sell his soul, Keralis. Why the fuck-" He cut himself off, his eyes drifting shut. "What the fuck was he *thinking*?"

Bdubs set a hand on his arm, and Tango crumpled. He had to have been out of tears to cry, but he let himself fold into his friends, dry sobs wracking his body.

"He was smarter than that," He choked out. "He was smarter than that."

Keralis pressed a kiss to his shoulder, grabbing his hand as gently as he could. "He's not dead, sweet face. Once we get his soul back, he'll be fine. And you can ask him all the questions you like."

Tango let out a little gagging sound, and Keralis immediately moved, ready to get him to the bathroom again, but when he looked at the other man's face, he didn't look sick.

He looked furious.

"Whoever did this," He snarled, his eyes meeting Keralis' with a burning intensity. "Is going to *burn*."

His body temperature was rising, Keralis noticed, and Bdubs was starting to glance anxiously at the fire extinguisher on the wall.

Tango was a quick tempered man, but he never really got *too* angry. It was short, hot bursts of emotion that fizzled out fast. This was different. This was rage.

Keralis gulped, nervously. "Yeah, of course, we'll catch them-"

"No," Tango stood up, pacing away from the couch. "No, we're going to fucking kill them."

"Tango, come on man," Bdubs said, grimacing nervously. "That's... don't you think that's a bit much-?"

"They hurt Impulse," Tango hissed, smoke billowing from his mouth. Flames were starting to flicker on his shoulders, and Keralis could feel the heat from ten feet away. He and Bdubs stood too, nervous, ready to move if something went wrong. "They hurt Impulse, they don't get to fucking walk away."

Keralis was genuinely concerned for his safety now. Tango was out of control, cruising on nothing but anger and rage, moments from snapping. And if he did, there's no telling if there'd be any survivors.

"Tango," He blurted. "Calm down."

Tango's expression went slack, the flames on his arms flickering out as a peach light seemed to wash over his eyes, turning them a pale pink. For a moment, he relaxed, his face going into a gentle neutral expression.

And then all the tension and anger returned in a wave, and he surged forward, grabbing the collar of Keralis' hoodie, shoving him backwards onto the couch. Keralis let out a panicked scream.

"You used your fucking powers on me?!" Tango howled, and Keralis could smell the bile in his breath. His hand shifted, grabbing onto Keralis' neck and squeezing. "Am I the villain now?! Am I the bad guy?!"

Keralis tried to speak, tried to choke out an apology, or beg for his life, but he couldn't get the air.

Tango's hand felt like it was burning through his throat, and he could already feel his pulse in his face. His head throbbed, his lips tingled, his eyes burned. His lungs were filled with fire, fire that seemed almost to melt through his ribcage, feeding the rage in Tango's chest.

One of his hands reached up to scratch at Tango's wrist, while the other grabbed onto his collar. The other man didn't react- Keralis' grip was loose, his fingers were hardly hooked on Tango's sweater.

His vision was starting to go dark.

Tango's face leered down at him, grinning wickedly.

Was this the last thing he'd ever see? His best friend with his hands around his neck?

Suddenly, Tango was yanked back, stumbling to the ground, his elbow slamming into the glass coffee table. Bdubs had tackled him, wrapping his arms and legs around him.

Tango screamed in rage, but a thick mist had begun to issue from the shorter man. As he struggled, the fog only grew thicker.

Keralis, coughing and choking, crawled over the back of the couch and cowered in the corner, watching the white fog fill the room. It moved in waves and swirls, reaching toward him and blanketing the other two.

He curled up, watching the fog and trying hard to catch his breath. The sounds of the struggle had stopped, replaced by heavy breathing.

The fog began to recede, and he braced himself for what he was about to see.

Tango lay on the couch, his chest rising and falling in an easy sleep. The fog still lingered around his nose and mouth, a sort of anesthesia to help him rest.

Bdubs was kneeling beside him, his whole body shaking in exhaustion. His forehead rested on his shoulder, his eyes squeezed shut.

"Bubbles?" Keralis rasped. "Are you okay?"

"Don't know how long the sleep will last," Bdubs responded, his voice cracking. "We should... we should leave."

"...We used our powers on him..." Keralis said, weakly. "We swore we'd never do that."

Bdubs hesitated, before shoving himself to his feet and limping over to Keralis. He had a swollen lip and a bruise was already forming under his eye, but he looked resolute.

"Come on," He said, extending a hand. "Let's get out of here."

Keralis drove him home in dead silence, waiting until he saw the front door shut before driving away, his knuckles white around the steering wheel.

He only really had one place left to go.

His apartment was cold when he walked in, and he shivered, suddenly thankful for the hoodie he'd borrowed from xB.

He wandered into the bathroom, still dazed from the evening, and stared at himself in the mirror.

He looked like a ghost, his eyes swollen and watery, his lips chapped and cut. His hair had fallen limply over his forehead and his neck was ringed with red bruises and minor burns.

He no longer looked like Lovesick, the smooth talking superhero.

He no longer looked like Keralis, the sweet friend with a heart of gold.

He looked like Erik Fox, the lost little boy from Sweden, standing in the cafeteria of an American middle school, alone.

He went into xB's room. He wasn't really sure what he was looking for, he knew he wasn't home, but he needed to be somewhere familiar, somewhere safe.

His friend's room was always a mess, clothes strung out over the bed and wardrobe, shoes and old dishes scattered around. Keralis found himself smiling ruefully despite himself, nudging an empty soda bottle to the side with his foot.

He needed something to do, so he started gathering dishes. It was like a fun little scavenger hunt, moving around the clothes looking for empty cups and bowls.

He was only looking for a few minutes before his game came abruptly to an end.

He was crouching, looking under the bed for more dishes, when his fingers brushed ceramic and he grinned.

Happily, he pulled it out, expecting a mug or something.

Instead, cradled in his hands, was a plain white ceramic mask. It was perfectly smooth and featureless, other than the two eyeholes. A soft leather strap was made to stretch around the back of the head, and another was made to go over it, securing the mask in place. Etched in the leather were three letters.

HHF.

Horse Head Farms.

Keralis' head buzzed. How was this happening? Why would xB have one of the soul stealer's masks in his room? Why would he associate with them?

Explanations whirred in Keralis' head, voices and names blurring into each other.

He couldn't be a villain. Not his princess. Not his xB.

The door to the apartment opened, and heavy footsteps wandered in.

"Keralis?" xB's familiar voice rang out, raspy and melodic with just a hint of sadness tucked in the seams. "Keralis, are you in here?"

Keralis stood, aimlessly, stumbling to the bedroom door, the mask still in his hand.

xB was on his phone, texting someone with a concerned expression on his face. For a moment, Keralis just stared at him, took in the way his hair slid over his forehead, the way his eyelashes flicked across his cheeks when he blinked.

This was his friend.

This was his princess.

This was the man who stole Impulse's soul.

xB looked up suddenly, his bright blue eyes landing on Keralis. For a moment, his face warmed, the ice in his eyes melting, and he nearly smiled, but then his eyes flicked downward, to the mask, and he refroze.

They stood there, like gunslingers in a cowboy movie, gazing at each other, tense and afraid and angry and confused.

And then xB ran. He spun around, slamming the door open and fleeing.

Keralis didn't follow him.

Chapter End Notes

sorry.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

hey besties. uh, tw for vomit and somewhat detailed descriptions of burns. he's okay, but he's not... doing great

ALSO yesterday was my birthday, everyone say happy birthday or i will cry

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

Keralis didn't remember the rest of that day.

It had been noon when xB left the apartment, and for the next few hours, Keralis didn't move from his spot, standing in the doorway of the room, staring at the carpet, the mask gripped in his numb fingers.

He had to have been thinking something. There had to be thoughts in his head. None of them stuck, however.

After a while, he turned, going back into the room, laying down on the soft blue comforter, setting the mask down on the poorly made nightstand and staring at the ceiling.

He wasn't sure when he dozed off. One minute the room was lit by the mid afternoon sun, and the next, it was dark, only the ever present lights of Hermit City to fill the corners of the small bedroom.

He felt sick.

Not in a metaphorical way, not in an emotional way. He felt really truly sick, his stomach heaving, his hands shaking.

He made it to the toilet before he puked, at least, clutching the ceramic and choking out the burger he'd eaten nearly 24 hours previously.

That may be why he felt so sick: he hadn't eaten for a day. He probably hadn't gotten any water either, although he couldn't remember if the cops had given them any or not.

He struggled to his feet, leaning on the sink and turning on the faucet, lapping up the bitter water eagerly like a drowning man searching for air. At some point, he must have hit his limit, because he almost puked again and had to stop, heaving for breath. His whole body still felt weak and his stomach still seemed almost to be digesting itself, but his headache had lessened at least.

His eyes caught on his reflection and he winced. The burns on his neck had over taken the bruises, forming a ring of blisters like a noose. The whole area was inflamed and swollen, bright red and puss yellow. He, again, fought back vomit and reached for his phone, which still sat in hoodie pocket.

It took a few tries to get his password, and then he was left, trembling, staring at the screen. He didn't know who to call.

xB was a traitor, and a killer, but he couldn't call anyone else. He couldn't turn him in. They had been friends through so much, brought each other out of misery and debt and loneliness. They'd created a home, a family, and Keralis... as betrayed as he was, he needed to know xB would be safe.

His traitorous fingers drummed in a familiar beat, finding their way to the contacts app and scrolling all the way to the end and pressing the little green telephone symbol and-

It rang. Once, twice, three times, and then there was that familiar click and the sound of the microphone scratching against facial hair as the other person waited for him to speak.

"Hey princess," He nearly whispered, slouching to the floor. "Sorry for disturbing you."

"It's alright," Xisuma said, and the way that his voice curled into a smile screamed that he meant it. "You alright? Your voice seems a bit hoarse."

"Ah, I'm fine, don't worry about me," Keralis said, digging fingernails into the tile grout. "You in the office still?"

"I'm getting ready to leave," The mayor hummed, and Keralis heard him stretch. "How about you, still off being a hero?"

"No, I'm home," He said. "My uh... my roommate isn't home and I wanted to talk to someone."

"Oh," Xisuma sounded surprised, and as Keralis squeezed his eyes shut, he could almost imagine the look on his face, the curious tilt of his head. "Are you... sure you feel alright?"

"How did it feel when you found out your brother was evil?" Keralis blurted, pressing his forehead to the wooden cabinet of the sink. "Did you... what did you do?"

The other side of the line was silent for a long time, long enough that Keralis could feel regret come pinching at his lips like a centipede, but finally, Xisuma sighed.

"Eric was always... we weren't very close, even as children. I loved him, and I'm sure he loved me, but we didn't..." Xisuma sighed, a heavy sound like the rattle of a dying man. "We didn't say it."

"And you regret that?"

"More than anything," Xisuma murmured. "He won't accept my visits anymore, won't see me, and I don't even know why."

The line was quiet for a bit, and Keralis found himself dozing off. He still felt sick, still felt light headed, and the tile under him was nice and cold.

If xB had walked in, he would have been upset. He would have sat next to Keralis, pressing their legs together and touching his forehead with his icy fingers.

He would sigh, shaking his head and trying to coax Keralis into standing up, murmuring to him and lead him to the couch, only letting go of him to bring him a glass of water.

"Shashwammy?" Keralis croaked, realizing with horror that his eyes were filling with tears. "I don't feel very good."

"What happened?" Xisuma responded, unsurprised. "Are you hurt?"

"No," He whimpered, his eyes slipping shut, one hand coming up to dig into his sockets. "No, I'm

just... I think I'm sick."

"Ah, okay," Xisuma hummed, his voice gentle, chiding. "Do you need me to come over?"

"No. No, don't worry about it, I'm just... it's probably just that I'm..." Keralis sniffed. "Tango and I had a fight."

"Ah," Xisuma hummed thoughtfully. "... Who is Tango?"

"Ah, crap," Keralis hissed. "No, forget I said that."

"He's one of your crewmates?" Xisuma asked. "Morpheus?"

"Scarlet Fever," His back was beginning to hurt, but he didn't move to sit up. "Please don't tell anyone."

"I won't. What was the fight about?"

"He was getting mad, I was scared, I used my powers on him, he got madder."

"Oh gosh. Are you hurt?" Xisuma asked again. "He didn't hit you, did he?"

Keralis was silent for a beat too long. "No."

"...I'm coming over," Xisuma said, and Keralis heard a car door thud. "Give me fifteen minutes."

"A special visit from the mayor," Keralis giggled, somewhat hysterically. "I'm fine, Shashwammy, I mean it."

"You're sick, alone, and you're hurt," Xisuma muttered, audibly upset. "Let me do this, goddamnit."

"...Sweet Face?"

"Yes, Keralis?"

"I love you," Keralis muttered. "Thank you."

He hummed, listening to Xisuma keep talking, his friend's voice shifting into a pleasant hum. He shifted until he was laying on his side, his legs sticking out into the hallway, his feverish face next to the floor vent.

He squeezed his eyes shut, digging his fingernails into his cheeks.

His head hurt so bad, and his neck felt aflame still, and his whole body was freezing, but it felt like he was in an oven. He managed to take off the hoodie, writhing on the floor, his eyes still shut. He felt like he was going to throw up again, but he couldn't find the toilet.

Someone gently nudged his knee and he cracked open one eye.

Black hair, blue eyes, black clothes.

For a moment, he was beside himself with relief- xB was back, he was home! He would have an explanation, he had to! He would tell him the mask was just a fake, for the investigation, or he had somehow taken it from the Horse Head Farmers.

But then he blinked, and it was Xisuma, still in his suit. His hair was in a bun, his single diamond earring glittering in the harsh bathroom lights. His expression was contorted in what was either fear or sadness, one hand resting on Keralis' thigh.

"Hi," Keralis murmured, reaching down to gently pat the other man on the head. "How are you?"

"Gosh," Xisuma murmured sadly. "I thought you said you were fine?"

"I *am* fine," Keralis' eyes slipped shut. "Just... sleepy."

Xisuma didn't speak, just sighed, shifting until he could lift Keralis. He was much taller than Keralis, but he wasn't as strong, and he stumbled a bit, struggling to get a good hold on him. Keralis didn't help much, just going limp, one hand hanging onto his collar loosely.

Next thing he knew, he was laying on the couch. Xisuma crouched beside him, looking at his neck in concern.

"What happened?" He asked, horrified. "Did... did Tango do this?"

"It was an accident," Keralis whispered. "He didn't mean to."

Xisuma didn't argue, just reached over to grab his hand.

He dreamt of a dark alleyway, and a pair of men with masks. He stared at them, and they stared back, and then the shorter one moved forward, one hand reaching out.

Keralis flinched back, his eyes wide. "Princess?"

The man's mask vanished, revealing those long eyelashes and crooked nose and the little scar on his upper lip that his shaggy beard didn't quite cover.

His expression was cold, his stance firm, his gaze unwavering.

"It's been a pleasure doing business with you," He spat, as his fingertips closed over Keralis' throat. "Goodbye."

Immediately, he stood in a sharp, modern apartment with white furniture and walls. He winced, recognizing it immediately as Tango's.

He spun in a slow circle, expecting something to jump out at any moment, but instead, when he turned back around, Impulse was standing there, staring at him.

It'd been a while since Keralis had seen him, but he didn't look any different. His brown hair was short and well combed, his stocky figure clad in a yellow hoodie and cargo pants.

However, his eyes were blank, his mouth open a bit. He was soulless and dull, his body nothing but a shell.

"I'm sorry," Keralis said, and he meant it. "I'm so sorry I didn't do anything."

"It's not me you should apologize to," Impulse rumbled, gesturing behind Keralis. "Talk to them about it."

He turned, his body reacting slowly like he was drowning in molasses.

He stood in a ruined warehouse now, shelves and ceiling beams caved in. He gagged at the smell

of charred skin, before suddenly recognizing the scene before him.

Bdubs lay on the ground, smoking and charred, his eyes dull and staring at Keralis. Over him, fully aflame, teeth bared in a snarl, was Tango.

"You lied," He spat, stalking forward. "You said you'd never use your powers on me. And now you're protecting the monster who *killed* Impulse."

Keralis stepped back, glancing around for help, but no one came. It was just him and his demons. Tango advanced, slowly, the flames swirling around him burned hotter and hotter. He was nothing but a pillar of fire and claws and fangs, reaching towards Keralis, stretching, biting, howling.

The next time Keralis awoke, he was in his bed, tucked in, his phone on the nightstand.

It was midmorning, judging from the light in the room, and someone in the kitchen was cooking something that smelled an awful lot like stir fry.

He fought his way out of bed, stumbling to the door. He still felt lightheaded and queasy, but his need for company far outshined his need for rest at this point.

He twisted the knob, practically falling into the hallway, stumbling into the kitchen with no small amount of difficulty and-

A familiar figure stood over the stove, spatula in one hand, a bottle of soy sauce in the other. He was wearing his glasses, and a lemon yellow knit sweater with what looked like a severed hand on the front. None of his piercings were in and his hair covered the tattoos on the side of his head, and as he turned to stare at Keralis, for a moment, he was unrecognizable.

Tango's eyes flickered to Keralis' neck for just a moment, before he quickly turned back to the wok on the stove. "Hey."

"Hello," Keralis rasped. "What are you doing here?"

Tango shrugged his shoulders. "The mayor called me. Said he had to go home, but didn't want you here alone."

"Oh."

"Said you'd mentioned me."

"...Oh."

"I'm sorry," Tango muttered. "I didn't... I don't know what came over me."

"I'm sorry too," Keralis said, his voice wavering. "I know you hate being controlled."

Tango glanced at him again. Without his signature red contacts, his eyes were a soft grey, like ash or marble. He looked so domestic and gentle here that Keralis almost burst into tears again.

He didn't say anything further, just turned back to the stove, dishing the stir fry into two chipped bowls and handing one to Keralis.

"Is Bubbles coming?"

"No," Tango muttered, shoving his food around with his chopsticks. "He doesn't want to talk to me. Where's xB?"

For a moment, Keralis considered telling the truth, considered coming clean, but some part of his mind snarled Tango's threats at him, and he hunched over on himself. "Um... staying with a friend. I didn't want to risk him getting tied up in all of this."

Tango nodded, regret and sympathy smoldering in his eyes, and Keralis felt bile in his throat.

Chapter End Notes

haha... :-/

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

this is. 5 days ahead of schedule because i'm in a terrible mood and i'm having an absolutely brutal mental health day so i spent 6 hours writing this instead of doing classwork

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

Eric Xisuma looked nothing like his twin brother.

It was odd, sitting in front of him, knowing that this- the man with a broken nose and chipped tooth and long grey hair, wearing a stained and fraying prison uniform- was the identical twin of the mayor.

He was sitting in a chair, his wrists shackled, his pale blue eyes trained on Keralis with a sort of bitter knowing. He knew why he was here, Keralis thought. Even the inmates had seen the news.

Lovesick waved off the guard, who nodded and left, and waited until the red light clicked off on the camera in the corner.

Heroes were allowed unsupervised time with inmates. That was usually for corrupt interrogation techniques, which is likely what the guard (and Eric) expected to happen here.

Lovesick sat down across the table from Eric, smiling thinly.

He had barely been feeling well enough to leave the house this morning, but after two days of bedrest, he had to continue the investigation. And what better place to start than the man who stole 21 souls, only a little over a decade ago.

"Hello. Do you know why I'm here?"

"The soul suckers," Eric rasped. His voice was deeper than his brother's, harsher, but every bit as wary and tentative. "Those villains. You think I'm involved."

"No, I don't."

"No?" Eric leaned back. "No. You're just here for fun."

"No," Lovesick responded, again, keeping his tone even, not rising to the bait. He'd been through too much in the last few days to be rising to any bait. "No, I just have a few questions about your powers."

Eric fell silent for a beat, before nodding. "What do you want to know?"

"Once you took someone's soul, could it be returned?"

"No. My power is a permanent one, it kills the victim's body, along with stealing their soul," Eric said, levelly. His eyes were so much lighter than his brothers, a sort of pale turquoise blue, like a robin egg. "There's no bringing someone back from that."

"Wait, but..." Lovesick paused, frowning. "These people aren't dead. They're in a coma."

Eric nodded.

"...This isn't like your power."

"If I had to guess," The criminal stretched out his legs under the table, cracking his ankles loudly. "I'd say this isn't a real, direct power. Someone found a loophole in their power, and it's given them the ability to remove souls."

Lovesick sighed, slouching back. "I was afraid of that."

"Why are you really here?" Eric asked, suddenly, leaning forward. "If you don't suspect me, and you already have your suspicions about the case, why bother asking me?"

Lovesick stared him in the eyes, trying to decide on a response. "Because I wanted to know... what made you do it?"

"What?"

"Why did you kill all those people? Why did you... what drove you to that?"

Eric shook his head, bemused. "What are you, a psychologist?"

Lovesick didn't speak, just stared at him. Waited.

The clock in the room was deafening, every tick driving into his soul, and the high pitched whine from the lights made his teeth ache.

He suddenly realized there was a bloodstain in the carpet. How many people had been tortured in this room for justice's sake? The prisoners here were the worst of the worst, but it was grim to imagine them being tied down in here and beat until the so-called heroes got what they wanted to hear.

"Why aren't you using your power on me?" Eric asked, suddenly, as if reading his mind. "It's persuasion, isn't it?"

"It is, yes," Lovesick said, tiredly. "But I don't like using it outside of conflict."

"Ah."

"Do you want me to? Because if you'd rather, I can-"

"No," Eric said, hastily. "I don't need you making me rip out my nails or something, please and thanks."

Abruptly, it occurred to Lovesick that the bandages wrapped messily around the other man's fingertips may have been more than for the aesthetic.

They sat there for a few more minutes in silence, Lovesick staring through Eric, who gazed stubbornly at the floor.

"My friend is one of those soul suckers," He found himself saying. "And I don't know why."

Eric didn't reply.

"I mean, I know he was unhappy with his life and- and- but he didn't ever- I didn't think he would-" He shut his mouth. "I just want to know why."

"Money," Eric murmured. "That's why we did it, at least."

"Why you... that's it? Money?"

Eric was quiet for another minute or two, before he finally lifted his head. "It was Helen's idea. Helen Knight. He was my... friend, I guess. I didn't really... I didn't want to do it, not really, but he said..."

Lovesick stared at him, baffled. Obviously, he'd known about Helen, the other mastermind of the operation, but he had been almost completely erased from the stories. It was always about Eric Xisuma, Mayor Xisuma's identical (!) twin (!) brother (!), who killed so many people and left his poor brother to clean up the pieces. Helen was an afterthought.

"Did you ever hear the full story?"

"No," Lovesick said, dazed. "No, I didn't think that Helen was a big deal-"

"He was the one who came up with the idea. He made me kill them, said it was for the greater good. And-" He held up a hand, ducking his head. "I know I can't claim it was all his fault, I *did* kill them in the end, I am in no way innocent, but... I never would have done any of it without him."

"You were peer pressured into becoming a serial killer?"

"Yes, I was," He smiled, wryly. "But! I finally grew a spine. I told the lead hero on the case that I knew who the soul sucker was. I tried to pin it all on him, tried to get away with it-"

"But the hero- Worm Man, right? He caught you, he arrested you," Lovesick said, leaning forward. "Or was that another fabricated tale?"

"You're catching on," Eric shook his head. "That's what I told him to say, I'm glad he went with it. He had no idea I was the killer. Or maybe he did, maybe he was just pretending he didn't- he did that a lot, played dumb... I turned myself in, actually. I let myself be arrested, because I couldn't lie to him."

"You... you cared about him."

"More than I cared about Helen, certainly," He laughed, and that laugh sounded so much like Xisuma- like Vance- that Lovesick actually jolted. "You know, I remember you. Remember your voice."

"You... what?"

"You and my brother went to college together, right? Keralis, right? Or... yeah, you're Keralis, Biffa was someone else."

Keralis paused, before sighing, taking off his mask. "Yes, I'm Keralis. I never got to meet you, I'm afraid, but Shashwammy talked about you."

"Shashwammy," Eric chuckled, shaking his head. "That's a new one."

"He says you won't talk to him," He said, curiously. "Why not?"

"I decline to answer," He responded, the grin fading from his face. "Next question."

"He misses you," Keralis pressed. "So much."

"I don't want to hear it-"

"Why don't you see him?"

"Because! Because..." Eric whined, a weak, pitiful sound. "Because how can I? I am a monster, Keralis. You know that, don't you? I killed so many people, and he had to watch me get hauled away, he had to go to my trial and try so hard to tell the jury that I was innocent when he knew I wasn't. He had to sign the paperwork that condemned me to life in here, knowing- *knowing!*- that he would never get to see me outside of these cramped little halls, and I know that..." His voice broke, and he took a moment to suck in a breathe. "I know he probably feels like shit about it too. I know he probably regrets this whole affair more than I do. But I also know that the second I see his face, see his stupid fucking face, I will never be able to think of him in a positive light ever again. I don't want to see him thriving and happy without me, I want to remember him as a kid."

"He deserves closure," Keralis said. "He deserves to say goodbye."

"He deserves to forget me."

They were silent, again, before Keralis spoke, a murmur more than anything. "He loves you, you know. You were his brother."

"Yeah. I *was* ," Eric spat. "Now... God, I don't know who I hate worse. Him or me."

"... I'm sorry."

"What about your friend? The one taking people's souls. What's his power?"

"Charmspeak, like me," Keralis said, ruefully. "I don't think he's the one pulling their souls out though, it's got to be his partner-"

"So he's the Helen Knight of the situation?"

"No. He's not. He's... he's innocent, he has to be."

"Can I tell you something? Something I've learned in the last 12 years of being in here?" Eric leaned in, close enough that Keralis could smell his bitter breath. "Not a single person on Earth is as innocent as their lover believes."

"I'm not his lover," Keralis blinked. "What?"

Eric shook his head, sitting back, tiredly. "Is that all you needed?"

"...Yes. Yes, thank you for speaking with me, Mister Xisuma."

"Any day, Mister Keralis."

"...Fox," Keralis said, suddenly. "My name is Erik Fox. Keralis is just a nickname."

Eric smiled. "Erik."

Keralis smiled back. "Eric."

He'd probably never see him again, he realized, walking out of the prison gates. He'd probably never get the chance. That was it, that was the end of the line. Eric may never see the light of day again. He may never have a pleasant conversation with someone. But at least he had this.

Tango sat in the driver seat, staring down at his phone. As Keralis climbed into shotgun, he hummed, putting it away.

"Any word from GHAST?"

"Nothing. We're not officially off the case yet. I think it's taking them a little longer to process this because of Zed, but that's good."

"Zed? What does Zedaph have to do with this?"

"Uh, apparently," Tango snorted. "Apparently, he has some big, high level, top secret job, and they're having a hard time figuring out how legal it is."

"Like... he's a vigilante?"

"That's what he claims," Tango shrugged. "But I don't believe it. You've seen the guy, he's like... he's not a hero. He eats crayons, for God's sake."

Keralis chuckled, gazing out the window. "You seem to be in a better mood."

"Yeah, I am," Tango said, then, quieter, "I just wish Bdubs would answer my calls."

"... Angel..."

"He's not picking up, Keralis," Tango fretted. "I don't know if he's okay, or where he is, he just... I don't know what happened!"

"If it was bad, GHAST would have told us. He's fine, Tango. He has to be."

"Mhm..." Tango sighed, running his fingers through his hair. He had it unstyled today, and it hung in his eyes slightly. He looked so tired, so hurt. "Sure."

"...Eric Xisuma had a theory."

"Yeah?"

"He said..." Keralis hesitated. "He said it looked like this was someone's power. If we can limit it down to who has soul sucking powers, we can figure it out from there."

"Good," Tango smiled, a cold, cruel thing that did not look like it belonged on his face. "That's very good. It gives us a starting point."

"Right," Keralis said. "Yeah, this is... good."

He felt awful.

Chapter End Notes

did you know. i hate writing dialougue??

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

this took. so so long to update and i'm so so sorry about that. but tada, it's up!! i'll try to update paltergeists soon, but i make no promises

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

In all the years Keralis had known Tango, he'd learned that the man hated three things more than anything else: he hated the cold, he hated being alone, and he hated liars.

Keralis had lied to him, and that was making him sick.

He kept trying to justify it, kept trying to convince himself it was necessary, but it ate at him, gnawed at his stomach and made him sick. He wasn't a liar. He *hated* lying. He hated lying to his friends even more.

But he could fix this. He could solve all of their problems, just as soon as he found xB.

When he found xB, he thought he would ask him to stop. And he would. He would, because he was a good man. He was kind, and he was good, and he wasn't a murderer, and when Keralis begged him to stop, to come to his senses, he would. He would have to.

He had to because plan B was so much worse.

Until then, Keralis was stuck.

He was alone.

Not really, of course, Tango had moved in while xB was "out of town," and Zedaph was under investigation. Bdubs had even called once, to let them know he was safe, just staying with a friend, taking care of himself.

Keralis wasn't really alone, but it felt like it.

But he had one lead, at the very least, a lead who had reached out to him late late one night with a promising message.

"I had an idea," Joe said, tiredly, when they met up the next morning at the park. He looked exhausted, his glasses crooked on his face, his hair in a low bun. He wore a plain gray sweatshirt over a pair of tattered jeans. He hardly looked like the eccentric man he'd been before. "And, before you tell me it's a bad idea, it's too late, I've already gone and done it."

"Joe?" Keralis asked, nervous now. "What did you do?"

"I... alright, you have to swear not to tell Cleo I did this. I already reached out to Bdubs, but he said he was off the case, and I don't know if Tango seems the most... stable..."

"He's... struggling a bit," Keralis confirmed, weakly. "Grieving."

“I understand,” Joe nodded. “But it didn’t seem like he was the right decision for this.”

“...What do you need?” Keralis asked.

“I signed the contract,” Joe said, and he looked so old at that moment, like a man who had seen it all. “And I arranged a meeting.”

“What?!” Keralis jolted. “With... with the farmers?!”

“With the farmers. I figured you could show up to the meeting instead, get some answers. If not, then I’ll go, and do my best, and hope-”

“I’ll go,” Keralis said, a bit too quickly. “I’ll be there, don’t worry. when and where?”

“Tonight, at 10:30pm. Behind the Juicy Burger. Please, please, be safe.”

Keralis went home, shaky and uncomfortable, to find that Tango had made them both salad. The whole meal, the blond jabbered away about his visit with Impulse in the hospital, and the car crash he’d passed on the way, casual conversation that only served to rot Keralis and make him feel weak and tired.

He excused himself, sulking off into his room and sitting on his bed, staring at the wall.

It had to be fine, he chided himself, as he gathered the pieces of his costume from the floor and pulled them on. It was going to be fine.

He wrote four letters. One for Bdubs, one for Tango, one for Xisuma and one for xB, just as a failsafe, just in case. In case he didn’t get back, he wanted to have goodbyes for them.

He snuck out the fire escape as soon as he heard the TV turn on, running out of the apartment building and into the dark night.

The Juicy Burger alley was empty, when he arrived, which wasn’t much of a surprise when he was nearly half an hour early, and he sat in a dark corner and waited in silence.

The city was alive, even at this hour, buzzing and bright and loud, a million people doing whatever they could to prove they had a pulse still, to prove they were still alive. It reminded Keralis of what xB had said only a few days prior, during their last conversation: there were so many people struggling and starving and afraid, and somehow people had the nerve to waste their lives.

Someone stepped into the alley.

It was one of the farmers, obviously, the one with the trenchcoat, not xB. He hadn’t noticed Keralis yet, his eyes on a cop car that was slowly crawling by.

Up close, Keralis could make out more. A small chunk of blond hair that stuck out from under his beanie. A leg and hip brace that creaked gently when he shifted. His hand tap tap tapping on his thigh.

It was Hypno. It had to be. And of course that made sense, of course that was the obvious option, but still. It was a terrible thought that Keralis wished he had never had.

Keralis stood, slowly, and the movement was enough for Hypno’s head to snap around, his eyes landing on the taller man immediately, and he tensed, stepping back, looking around again.

“I’m alone,” Keralis said. “Don’t worry.”

“So, this was a trap,” Hypno hissed, a knife suddenly flashing into his hand. “A trap you and your buddy set up?”

“Yes. Yes, but I just want to talk-”

Hypno surged forward, one hand grabbing Keralis’ collar, the other pressing a knife against his still burnt neck. “Sure you do. There’s nothing stopping me from sucking *your* soul, too, loverboy.”

“Hypno,” Keralis choked out. “Hypno, please.”

Hypno’s grip loosened, just for a moment, before he suddenly jabbed the knife into the underside of Keralis’ jaw, right at the bottom of the mask. “Who gave you that name?”

Slowly, one of Keralis’ hands rose, slowly, slowly creeping up to his ear, where he unhooked his mask. It fell to the ground, and Hypno’s eyes- hardly visible behind his mask- followed it before snapping back up to Keralis’ face. His body tensed even more where it was pressed against Keralis as he recognized him, as he *understood*.

“I want to know that he’s okay.”

Hypno didn’t move, only exhaled, slowly. “Who?”

“You know who,” Keralis said, quietly. “I don’t care about being a hero anymore, I just need to know that xB is safe. He hasn’t answered my calls, he hasn’t-”

“You figured him out,” Hypno said, and it wasn’t a question. “That’s why he’s been so nervous and snappy.”

“So you *have* been in contact with him?” Keralis asked, and suddenly the last few days came crashing down on him all over. “So he’s okay?”

“I should kill you,” Hypno said instead. “I should slit your throat.”

“Okay,” Keralis responded, simply. “Alright, fine. Just tell xB I love him, okay?”

Hypno hesitated at that, stepping back slightly. His hand fell down to his side, and he just gazed at Keralis for a bit.

“Please, tell him I’m sorry,” Keralis said, almost reverently. “Tell him I love him and tell him I’m sorry.”

“He loved you too,” Hypno said, quietly. “A lot.”

“Okay,” Keralis said, weakly. “Okay, good. That’s it, then, I guess. I’m... I’m backing down from the investigation, I have no part in any of this anymore.”

“You’re... you’re serious?”

“I’m serious. I don’t want... I can’t be pitted against xB, I can’t fight him.”

“God,” Hypno chuckled, shaking his head. Keralis couldn’t see his face, but he could hear the incredulous grin in his voice. “You’re insane.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Keralis leaned back against the wall, tiredly. “Take care of him for me, yeah?”

“...Yeah.”

Hypno left, after that, and Keralis stayed a bit longer, just to breathe.

xB was alright. xB was safe. xB loved him.

He would probably never see him again. He would probably never ever get to see him and say hello and say he loved him and call him princess and give him a kiss on the forehead.

What was the last thing they said to each other? Was it the text conversation, when Keralis said he'd explain everything later? Was it the couch, when xB said he was glad they'd become friends? Was it every single night, when Keralis dreamed of his best friend killing him, over and over and over?

He went home, tired to the bone and just a little sick too. He felt like shit- he'd felt like shit for the past week, but this was different. He hadn't won anything. He hadn't beat his demons or saved his princess. He'd effectively cut himself off and called it a compromise.

It was a compromise, though. Whoever won this- the farmers or the hero (hero, singular, he'd left Tango to deal with the case all alone) he would lose someone he loved. So, either he loses xB, his best friend and the man he loved more than anything else, or Tango, the man he'd fought and bled beside, who had become his closest confidant. He didn't want to pick.

They'd been in the news recently. A short segment on the soul sucking, and an even shorter one on the heroes helping to stop them. The photo they used was an old one, with all three Big Eye Boys, posed heroically in front of a collapsed school. They'd just gotten everyone out, and there was a streak of ash on Bdubs' forehead, but they looked happy. They looked strong. They looked unified.

Tango jumped up from the couch as soon as the door opened, his glasses crooked and a red mark on his forehead from where he'd fallen asleep on his laptop. He blinked at Keralis in confusion as he trudged past him into his room, mouth moving silently. “Ralis? You okay man?”

“I'm okay, Angel. Go back to sleep.”

“Why're you in your uniform?”

“...I'm leaving the case, Tango.”

“Oh. Oh.”

“I'm sorry.”

Tango didn't look mad, or even all that surprised. He just sat back down on the couch, staring at the muted television.

“Tango? Tango, say something, please.”

“No, no, I get it...” Tango said, his eyes not meeting Keralis'. His voice was hard, but it had a tremor to it. “Get some rest, alright?”

“I'm sorry.”

“I- me too. I'm sorry too.”

The last thing Keralis saw before he shut his bedroom door was Tango lean forward, burying his face in his hands as a single tear slipped out.

Chapter End Notes

yeah.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

well, here it is. the penultimate chapter. we're almost at the end. i have updated the tags, please be wary of them.

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

The end began a few days later.

Keralis wasn't sure how he knew, but something in the air, something in the taste of his scrambled eggs that morning *reeked* of a finale, a last stand.

Him and Tango hadn't really talked since he left the case. Tango still cooked him meals and they both passed in the hallway and they both watched TV on the same couch, but now they were silent, just... avoiding it.

Today though, Tango started talking.

"Got a call," He said, hoarsely. "They think they located the Farmers' next victim."

"Yeah?" Keralis asked. "That's good."

"I'm going in. To stop them."

"Okay," Keralis said. "Good luck."

And that was it.

Keralis didn't leave his room, even when Tango knocked on the door gently to let him know he was leaving.

He wanted to.

He wanted to rip the door open and cling to Tango and beg him to stay, beg him to just drop the case, beg him to never leave him. He wanted to keep what little comfort he had left in the man, wanted to keep at least one friend safe.

He knew that he was going to lose someone tonight. As soon as Tango left the apartment, either he or xB was dead meat. If Keralis could stop him, could prevent the fight, they'd both live. They'd survive this.

"I'll see you when I get home tonight," Tango said, his raspy voice nearly a whisper. "And I'll make lasagna."

Keralis didn't speak.

He went to the window, at least, to watch Tango walk away, watch him disappear down the street. The sun wasn't quite set yet, and he found himself scanning the roofs of the short buildings, as if expecting to see a figure in a black hoodie and a white mask looking back.

There was nothing.

Keralis sighed, digging his thumbs into his eyes and breathing deeply.

Finally, he stepped away from the window, picking up his phone and staring dully at the screen. He could see his reflection, see the deep bags under his eyes and the beard that was growing in. He looked older than he should, looked like he was falling apart. Maybe he was.

He opened messages.

The last message he'd sent to xB was a simple "<3" and a promise to explain more. A promise he never fulfilled.

You: Princess

You: I'm sorry. About everything.

You: I love you.

He stared at the screen until his vision started to blur. In shock, he realized he was crying and he gasped for breath, scrubbing at his eyes.

"Ah, fuck," He muttered. "Get a hold of yourself, Erik."

A notification pinged on his phone and he jumped, scrambling to grab it.

Bubbles!/: whta did u do

Bubbles!/: impils just woke upl

*Bubbles!/: *implse*

Bubbles!/: ,impulse

Bubbles!/: wheres tamgo hes not ansering his phone

You: He's fighting the Farmers

There was a pause, before he started typing again, a question or an apology or a thank you, but suddenly Bdubs was typing again.

Bubbles!/: why arent u there

You: I left the case

Bubbles!/: SO HED ALONE???

Bubbles!/: im gong to hlepl

You: Don't. It's too dangerous

Bubbles!/: idc. im sikc of not doing anythign

Bubbles!/: im going to help.

Keralis sucked in a breath, pressing his forehead to his knees, squeezing his eyes shut. He ran the risk of losing three friends now, just like that.

And, if Impulse had woken up, it probably meant that he'd already lost one.

He stood in the living room.

He wasn't *really* sure how he got there, why he was holding his jacket, but he didn't really hesitate to pull it on and grab his shoes from the bench in the hallway.

The jacket wasn't his. It was one of xB's, a soft grey one with a fleece lining that Keralis had stolen from him a year or so back. There was a hole in the sleeve, near his thumb, and faintly, he thought that if he survived, he'd get it patched.

He could see the smoke from the fight from the street. It seemed to be coming from one of the old warehouses down by the dock, the ones used for storing the boat equipment that no one needed.

He didn't move at first, joining the crowds of people in the street watching the explosions and fires. Some part of him wanted to turn and walk away, leave town, never come back. He didn't want to hear who won, who got out of this alive. He didn't want to know who he lost.

But still, he advanced, setting off on a slow jog, eyes on the smoke.

He got there at the same time as Bdubs, and for a moment, they stood there together, staring at each other.

Bdubs looked *older*, his hair greyer, his wrinkles deeper, the green windbreaker he wore almost engulfing his frame.

Behind him stood the barista from the cafe, who was staring silently at the fire. Keralis realized that this must have been Bdubs' friend who he was staying with.

"Hi Bubbles," He said gently. "Are you okay?"

Bdubs opened his mouth, closing it a moment later. "Yeah. Yeah I'm fine. Are you?"

Keralis paused, before shaking his head.

Bdubs' lips pressed together and he nodded, before he turned to his friend. "Etho, keep the press away."

"I'm helping," Etho said, immediately. "Let me help."

"This isn't your fight," Bdubs said sternly, and he sounded more serious than Keralis had ever heard him. "Go. Please."

Etho hesitated, before stepping back, nodding stiffly. "Be careful."

"Love you," Bdubs said. "See you soon."

Etho vanished down an alley and Bdubs turned back to Keralis, extending a hand to him. "Shall we?"

Keralis nearly dissolved at that, but he grinned thinly and nodded. "We shall."

The warehouse was full of dust and smoke, sounds of conflict coming from the back. Bdubs didn't hesitate, plunging forward, but Keralis was frozen in place.

Faintly, he heard someone scream and his stomach lurched.

Who did he want to win this? Who's side was he on? When he joined the battle, who's back would he have? Would he become a villain for the man he loved, or a hero for the rest of the world? Why was it so hard to breathe?

He found himself moving forward, between the shelves and shelves of boxes and crates, slowly, as if in a trance.

Finally, he could see the fight.

Tango stood on top of a forklift, his whole body aflame, just like in Keralis' nightmares. He gazed down at someone else, smaller, wearing all black, who seemed to be holding up a gun with shaking hands.

Nearby, Bdubs and another figure traded blows, Bdubs trying hard to put him to sleep while the other man shoved him away over and over.

Keralis gulped, trying to calm down, but before he could bring himself to move, Tango saw him, and froze.

"Lovesick!" He called, eyes wide. "You're here?"

The figure at the base of the forklift turned, gun dropping for a moment. It was xB- it had to be, he had to be, and for a moment, they made eye contact, before Tango moved on top of the forklift, shifting to jump down and xB spun back around to raise his gun and *fired*.

The bullet caught Tango right in the arm and he screamed, toppling to the side. Keralis lunged forward, wrapping his arms around xB to try to grab the gun. xB wrenched away, spinning to point the gun at Keralis, his hand shaking badly.

"Princess," Keralis breathed. He wasn't wearing his mask, and he knew the burn scars around his throat were out in the open, but he couldn't worry about that now. What mattered was that he was so close to his princess, so close, and he hadn't seen him in *weeks*. "I'm sorry-"

Tango roared from behind xB, and it took the man a moment too long to react, whipping around right as a wave of fire slammed him into a set of shelves hard enough to send them toppling to the ground. Keralis choked out a scream, flinching back from the fire, eyes on the prone figure of his best friend.

Tango noticed, immediately raising his hands in surrender. "Shit, Keralis, sorry- I'm not going to hurt you, okay? I swear."

The fire that danced across his shoulders fizzled out as he stepped back, and Keralis suddenly realized what was going on.

Tango thought he was scared of him.

Maybe he was.

It was really hard to breathe with all the smoke in the air (Keralis wasn't sure if that was the only reason he felt like choking) and he was really starting to wish he'd brought his mask.

"You're bleeding," He gagged, pointing to Tango's arm. "You need to- we should-"

"We'll worry about that later," Tango said, tensing as he glanced over Keralis' shoulder at Bdubs and Hypno. "Are you... up for a fight?"

“I think so,” Keralis said, trying hard to breathe. “Yeah, I am.”

Hypno was good- his power seemed to be creating things from nothing- taking the air and turning it into swords and clubs and spears, but Bdubs was doing a good job blocking and dodging, dancing away and the closer, gas leaking out of his skin. Tango managed to get behind Hypno, swinging one flaming fist at him, but Hypno twisted into a duck and Tango went sprawling.

Hypno raised one hand, placing it on Tango’s head, and *pulled* , yanking his hand away as if he were a controlling a marionette, and Tango folded, landing on his knees, arms going limp at his sides. Out of the top of his head floated a small orb, blinding bright.

His soul.

Keralis understood now. Hypno could make tangible things out of intangible things- and that included souls. That was the loophole, that was the twist Eric Xisuma had told him about.

Bdubs tackled Hypno and he went down *hard* , landing with a scream as his arm slammed against the ground. Tango’s soul snapped down into his body, and he collapsed forward with a gag, clawing at his chest.

Keralis stood there, paralyzed, watching everything happen, watching Bdubs and Hypno on the ground, watching Tango’s body light up again as he struggled to breathe, watched xB claw his way out of the wreckage.

He couldn’t breathe.

It was insane, how much had happened in the last few weeks, how much had changed, how much he’d lost.

xB wasn’t moving. He’d managed to shift, managed to get over the shelves, but now he lay limply on the floor. One of his legs was held in place by a beam of metal that ran through his thigh, and his chest looked *caved in*, almost. Keralis took a step closer, and then another, and then, somehow, he was kneeling beside him, dragging his head into his lap. He hesitated for a moment, before pulling his mask off.

His eyes were closed, his face tight with pain, but when Keralis’ fingers brushed his cheek, one eye cracked open, his teeth appearing and then disappearing in a flash of white.

“Hey princess,” Keralis whispered. He could hear the fight continue on without him, and he knew that if any of them looked over at him, he would never be able to come up with an excuse, but it didn’t matter to him, not now. “Hey, it’s okay, just look at me-”

“I’m sorry,” xB said, his voice weak, coming out as a rattle, and Keralis almost sobbed. “I’m sorry, I- we were just going to target rich people, dangerous people, people who des-” He coughed, hard, whimpering in pain. “Deserved it-”

“It’s okay, you don’t... don’t have to speak,” Keralis said, softly. “I know, I understand.”

“I was going to... I was going to buy you a car,” xB said, one bloody hand resting on Keralis’ cheek. “And a ring.”

“A wh-” Keralis huffed a weak laugh, wiping away a tear. “A ring?”

“A diamond ring,” xB said, smiling at him. “And you’d have enough money to gamble it all away and still... still come back to me.”

“xB,” Keralis found himself crying for real now, and he took a moment to scrub away the dampness from his cheeks, still doing everything in his power to smile comfortingly at his princess. “I don’t need a ring, you silly silly man. I just need you, and your beautiful face in the mornings.”

“I don’t,” xB coughed again, and this time, he spat out some blood, wincing as he dragged in another shaky breath. “I don’t know if my face is going to be there for you anymore.”

“Don’t say that-”

“KERALIS-” Bdubs screamed, and Keralis looked up. Tango and Hypno were fighting now, trading blow after blow, and Bdubs was stumbling closer, cradling his arm to his chest. “Keralis we have to get out, the roof-”

His eyes landed on xB, and he paled, stumbling and dropping to his knees for a moment at his side.

“Hey,” xB croaked. “Hey, sorry.”

“You’re... you’re one of the farmers?” Bdubs said, weakly, looking at Keralis with wide eyes. “You-”

The column near them creaked, and they all tensed, Keralis drawing xB closer to his chest. The bearded man chuckled, one hand coming up to his shoulder.

“I’m not leaving without princess,” Keralis told Bdubs grimly. “You go.”

“I’m not-” Bdubs said, and then his mouth snapped shut. “I- I promised Etho I’d survive this-”

“Go,” Keralis said, softer. “And take Tango with you, he doesn’t even... he has to get back to Impulse and Zedaph.”

Bdubs’ eyes were watery, but his expression was firm. “Okay. Okay, I’m sorry, I-”

“Bubbles, go,” Keralis whispered. “Get out.”

Tango had managed to get Hypno on the ground and was slamming his fists into him over and over, beating the life out of him, but Bdubs managed to wrench him away, dragging him to the door, shouting something that Keralis couldn’t hear over the rush of blood in his ears.

Tango’s eyes landed on him, and he froze in place, and Keralis smiled, nodding at him to leave.

A section of the ceiling peeled down, and the two heroes turned to leave.

xB whimpered again and Keralis immediately turned to him, pressing his forehead against his. “It’s okay, princess. It’s almost over.”

“Keralis?”

“Yes? What is it, what do you need?”

“Keralis, I’m sorry I never got you that ring.”

“I don’t need a ring,” He said, again, laughing weakly. “I didn’t need a ring, I just needed you.”

“It’s hard... it’s hard to get married without a ring,” xB said, gripping Keralis’ shirt tightly as another section of the ceiling fell. “I don’t think I know anyone who’s done that.”

“We’re getting married?” Keralis said, wiping a tear from xB’s cheek. It was probably his, he thought, distantly. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Yeah,” xB said. “Yeah, it’ll be a spring wedding, and Hypno... Hypno’s going to be my maid of honor-”

His eyes drifted over to the limp body laying not a hundred feet away, cracked white mask turned toward them.

“Okay,” Keralis said, quickly. “I don’t know who to pick for my best man, though. Tango or Bdubs?”

“How about Mayor Xisuma,” xB said, and his voice sounded even weaker than before. “I think... I think you should pick him.”

“You’re right, you’re right,” The ceiling above them creaked, and Keralis felt a pebble fall, landing on the back of his head. “Oh, what color scheme are we doing?”

xB didn’t respond. His eyes were still on Hypno, his hand still gripping Keralis’ shirt, but after a moment, it fell, landing on his own chest.

“xB, *listen to me*,” Keralis commanded, desperately. “*You can’t die. You cannot die, not here not now.*”

xB’s eyes flashed orange, and for a moment, nothing changed, but then, abruptly, he dragged in a breath, and Keralis sobbed.

“Keralis-” xB choked, his voice full of fear and confusion. “Keralis, I-”

And the roof buckled.

Chapter End Notes

yeah. yeah, that's... we're almost done guys, i swear. we just have the epilogue of sorts left.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

this is it. the final chapter.

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

The funeral lasted a lot longer than Keralis would have liked. It was difficult not to stare at the closed casket in the front of the room, at the large photo of his best friend sitting beside it, wreathed in flowers.

It'd been nearly a month since the collapse of the warehouse before they declared xB dead, and then another two weeks before the funeral.

They had never found his body.

There had been a body recovered, yes, one identified as a Zachary "Hypno" Thypnot, but xB had never been found.

Keralis himself didn't remember much from the collapse.

He knew that after he'd brought xB back, a section of the roof had collapsed on them, sending a metal bar into xB's chest.

He knew he'd managed to tear it out, but xB had stopped breathing again. His power wore off fast.

He knew he had kept chanting under his breath, kept begging the other man to survive. "Wake up," He'd command, and watch the life flood through xB. "Open your eyes."

He'd known it wouldn't last forever- his power lessened each time he used it, but the adrenaline rushing through him made it easier.

He struggled to dig them out, cradling xB to his chest, trying not to jostle him. He managed to shift a concrete slab, managed to get a glimpse of the sky, before another immediately took its place.

He couldn't feel his legs, he had realized.

Something had fallen on his back, when he'd hunched over xB, and while it hadn't been enough to kill him, it'd absolutely hurt like hell.

"Wake up," He'd hissed, desperately, and xB sucked in a breath. "Stay with me, Princess."

Outside, he heard someone scream, and he did his best to call back, but he choked on his words.

"Ralis..." xB whispered, brushing a hand against his cheek. "I'm sorry-"

"I told you, it's okay, it doesn't matter-"

"Let me die," The quiet rasp seemed to take up all the air in the room. "Please, go, live-"

"Help!" Keralis screamed, unable to hear any more. "Help, someone!"

Outside, he heard someone shout, and there was a quiet scuffling.

"We're almost out, Princess," Keralis sobbed, watching as a speck of light grew on the other side of xB. "We're going to make it."

"Get out," xB croaked. "Get out. Leave me."

Keralis froze. He knew xB had charmspeak too- it was one of the things that had made them so close in the beginning- but he had never been at the receiving end of it. It felt strange, nothing like what he'd expected, warm and soft, like he was sinking into a bath.

He was climbing over xB before he knew it and froze, staring down at him.

xB smiled faintly, as life left his eyes one last time.

"Princess?" Keralis asked, then again, louder. "Princess?! Wake up!"

Nothing. No orange glow flickered over his eyes, no shaking, shuddering breaths filled his lungs. xB remained still, and cold.

"Keralis!" Someone called- Bdubs, he thought, faintly- and the spot of light widened.

Keralis was still crouched over xB, back pressed against the concrete block above them, fists clutching his blood soaked hoodie, ugly sobbing in pain and exhaustion and confusion.

Bdubs' voice got louder, clearer, two hands grabbing at his jacket and tugging, and Keralis screamed, slamming his body away, his shoulder slamming into some loose rubble, making the whole crater shift.

Bdubs shouted something, and Tango's hands joined him in trying to fish him out, clutching at his jacket and arms and legs and he started sobbing again, trying to beat them away, trying to tell them to leave him, to let him die here with his princess, let them be together one last time.

Suddenly, the hands vanished, and he relaxed a bit, letting his head rest on xB's crushed chest, letting himself breathe for a moment.

And then white fog began to flood the little hole.

He gagged, pulling the collar of his shirt over his mouth and nose, but it didn't help, didn't block it out.

His head buzzed sleepily, his eyes getting heavy. Every blink felt heavy, like it was dragging him down to sleep.

"No..." He sobbed, as xB's face became blurry. "God, please, no-"

And he was out.

The funeral ended after long last, and he collapsed wearily in the passenger seat of Tango's car.

"You doing okay?" Tango asked, rubbing his fingers over the stitching of the wheel. "You don't... I know this is a lot for you-"

"I'm fine," Keralis insisted, watching Zedaph and Impulse approach the car. "You worry too much."

Impulse had gotten a lot better over the last few weeks. He had finally regained the ability to walk again, although he'd been temporarily suspended from BTM, leaving him restless at home. Fortunately, since the Big Eye Crew had disbanded and Worm Man was on his own hours, he had both of his roommates there to keep him company.

Zed tugged open the back door, climbing in, leaning forward between the seats. "Hey, do you guys know a guy named Beef?"

"No, I don't think so," Tango said, curiously. "Why?"

"I don't know, there was a guy named Beef there. And we started talking- you okay Impy?" Zed paused when Impulse climbed in, grumbling slightly as he tried to fit into the cramped back seat. "You wanna kick Keralis out of the passenger seat?"

"Aw," Keralis frowned, twisting around to pout at him. "Oh, come on, I got here first-"

"No, no, it's okay," Impulse waved a hand, chuckling. "I can fit fine."

Zed went back to rambling about his new friend as Tango pulled out of the church parking lot and Keralis found himself staring out the window, catching a glimpse of Bdubs and Etho climbing into Etho's banged up old Subaru.

A lot of people had showed up to the funeral. Some had known xB, either from work or from day to day life, but most had heard of the Farmers, heard of the battle, and had come to see what a monster looked like. Keralis hoped no one remembered him like that, hoped no one walked away thinking he'd been a villain.

He had been, of course, but none of that mattered anymore.

Tango stopped in front of the prison, letting Zedaph clammer out.

"Say hello to Eric for me," Keralis called. "And give him a hug!"

Zed waved happily.

Ever since he'd met the former villain, Keralis had been bugging the prison to loosen visitation rules to let non-relatives visit. After the collapse, they'd finally consented, and had lowered the tight restrictions, meaning Zed would finally get to see Eric Xisuma for the first time since he arrested him ten years ago.

It was incredible, how much things had changed. How the city had healed in the last three weeks, and how everyone seemed so much happier.

xB would have been proud.

The next stop was Keralis' apartment, and he gave Tango a hug and a kiss on the cheek before climbing out. "Goodbye sweet face. And goodbye Impulse, I hope your physical therapy appointment goes well!"

"See you later, Keralis," Tango smiled. "Say hi to the wife for me."

Keralis huffed, rolling his eyes and shaking his head as the car shuddered off.

Once in the elevator, he took a shaky breath, leaning against the wall, closing his eyes. It had been a long day, and no matter how good he was at lying to Tango, he was goddamn exhausted.

He'd been the first to suggest that xB was dead, hardly a day after the collapse. He'd already grieved in that godforsaken hole, he'd already seen the life leave his Princess' eyes. The first few days had been the hardest, but after a while, when he was going through xB's room, he'd found something.

A letter.

It was long, and sad, written the night the investigation started, the night xB had realized they'd be on opposite sides.

'The good guys always win,' He'd written. 'And you three are the best guys I've ever met.'

There was something else in the envelope, though, coordinates to a secret base, a base for the Farmers.

It wasn't much, a shack on the riverside, but there was so much in there, so many things that made Keralis want to cry.

And one of those things was a enderporter.

They'd never found the body, because five days after the collapse, the body had vanished from the wreckage.

At first, Keralis hadn't known what to do. He wanted to bury him, somewhere nice, some flower field, maybe, or a forest. He didn't want him to go through a soulless funeral attended by strangers who never cared about him. He had to think of something, had to do something nice, one last apology to the man he failed.

Not all of the souls stored in the building had been released.

Even after breaking the bottles they were stored in, letting them go flooding back to their original owners, some had stayed, floating in the air. Later, Keralis would learn that these were the souls of people who had died afterwards, either because their comatose body had never been found, or because their bodies were too frail to survive long without a soul.

It was morbid, yes, but Keralis didn't care about why they were still there: what he cared about was what came next.

A soul wouldn't last long without a body. A body wouldn't last long without a soul.

He had a body.

He had a soul.

He didn't really expect it to work.

He heaved xB up on the table, grabbing a soul (they felt a bit like silicone balls to his surprise, but he didn't dwell on it), and pressed it into his chest.

It took an hour for xB to start breathing again, but he did, in fact, start breathing again.

Keralis had called Tango, immediately, in tears, choking and sobbing as he tried to explain what he'd done. He and Bdubs had come as fast as they could, crowding into the little shack and gazing at the body in wonder.

They'd ended up bringing the body home, and putting him on xB's bed.

No one was sure what would happen when- if- he woke up. Would he still be xB? Would he be someone else? Or something else?

It took two whole weeks for xB to open his eyes. When he did, it was night, and Keralis was asleep in a chair beside him, a chair he hadn't left for more than ten minutes in days.

Keralis had awoken to find his hand in xB's, those shining blue eyes gazing at him with all the love in the world.

xB wasn't fully healed yet- he had a couple broken ribs that hadn't been healed with the soul's magic, and he had some pretty severe burns on his legs, but they couldn't take him to the hospital. Zed- who had failed out of medical school- was their best bet, and he did his absolute best to help out.

Impulse took to hanging out around the apartment, trying to help out with xB's healing as best as he could. When the former villain saw him, he'd started choking on apologies, but Impulse had waved him off with a grin. "My fault for signing it away like that."

That was something they finally got an answer to, as well. Apparently, the Farmers ran a technically legal operation- the paperwork was binding, and the services were legit. If you fulfilled your side of the bargain (usually a task, like taking out a thousand dollars from the bank and leaving it at a specific location, or driving someone somewhere, but it could also be something so big as murder or robbery) then you in exchange got a favor. It was a surprisingly legit operation, if not a little bit suspicious. The souls were another possible favor you could ask for- if you didn't have anything you needed, you could instead get a soul, which granted you extra power or more vitality.

Impulse had been hoping for a favor- someone who would go undercover to investigate a case for him. His task, in exchange, had been to break into someone's house and take their vault- something he'd refused to do.

xB had explained to them how it had started, him and Hypno trading IOUs in their office, turning them into a sort of currency. He'd explained how Hypno had learned he could take souls, how he had learned he could up the stakes.

It wasn't like Helen Knight and Eric Xisuma, because there hadn't been a mastermind. They'd worked together, all the way. They'd been co conspirators until the end.

xB was torn up about Hypno's death, of course. He hadn't cried- Keralis wasn't sure he ever cried- but there were several days where they had found him sitting by the window, staring outside with an exhausted expression. At first Keralis had thought that was him still recovering from his death, but in time, he realized it was more. He'd lost a friend too, he realized, even though none of the others had particularly known the man.

Bdubs' new friends came over pretty often too.

Etho, a strange, tall man with white hair and a quick mind, was around the most, chatting with xB and eating their leftovers, while Iskall, a Swedish person with a prosthetic eye and a soft beard, came over less.

Keralis quite liked Iskall, liked having a conversation in Swedish for the first time since he was a kid.

Things got easier.

Keralis unlocked the apartment door, letting himself in.

"Funeral's done," He called. "I'm back."

"Hey man," xB called back, from his bedroom. "Which photo did they use of me?"

"The one where you've got the tie," Keralis smiled, sitting at the foot of his bed. "The one we took at... I think it was Applebee's?"

"Oh, like, four years ago? I don't like that one," xB huffed, sitting back. "It doesn't show my dimples."

Keralis laughed, moving to kiss him on the cheek. "Well, there's not a lot of pictures of you smiling. Also your beard hides your darling dimples anyways."

xB chuckled, turning his head to give him a quick peck on the forehead. "Ah well. Did you get any food?"

"No, but I'll cook you something if you want."

"Mm, that sounds good. How about a chicken sandwich."

"I can do that," Keralis stood, smiling softly at him. "I'll be right back."

"Oh," xB called after him. "I think there's a box on the table, by the way."

"Princess, did you get the mail," Keralis frowned. "You shouldn't be up and moving like that-"

"It was just to the door and back," xB laughed. "And I've been waiting for this package for a while."

Keralis paused, looking down at the box. It was addressed to him, and was small, only about the size of his head.

"Is this for me?"

"Mhm."

He hesitated, before opening it carefully. Inside was a bunch of packing paper, and, deeper down, a little box.

"Princess..." Keralis gasped.

"Yeah," He turned to find xB in the doorway, smiling shyly. "I'd get down on one knee if I thought I'd be able to get back up afterwards."

Keralis, still in shock, slowly opened the box. "Princess... it's beautiful..."

"So, will you marry me?" xB asked, nervously smiling at him. "I guess it's a weird question, considering it's, you know, the day of my funeral-"

"Oh princess," Keralis chuckled. "You know we can't have a wedding- you're dead-"

"No, but we can call each other husbands," xB pointed out. "And you can say you're a widower."

Keralis chuckled, again, shaking his head. "Alright. Alright, princess, yes, I'll marry you."

Things were getting better.

Chapter End Notes

ANNND THAT'S A WRAP!!! thank you all so much for reading, here's to hoping you all enjoyed!! leave a comment or send me an ask @tangodyke on tumblr!! love you all so much!!

End Notes

thanks for reading, check me out on tumblr @tangodyke and twitter @_2point5_

EDIT: we have fanart!! please check it out [here](#) and listen to [the official playlist](#).

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