

it takes two to play (the game of mutual secrecy)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/37161811) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/37161811>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Hermitcraft SMP
Relationship:	No Romantic Relationship(s) , Xisumavoid & Evil Xisuma (Hermitcraft) , Evil Xisuma & Worm Man (Hermitcraft) , Welsknight & Xisumavoid (Hermitcraft)
Character:	Characters w/ multiple speaking lines , Xisumavoid (Hermitcraft) , Evil Xisuma (Hermitcraft) , Welsknight (Hermitcraft) , Grian (Hermitcraft) , Cubfan135 (Hermitcraft) , TangoTek (Hermitcraft) , keralis (hermitcraft) , ZedaphPlays (Hermitcraft) , Worm Man (Hermitcraft) , Joe Hills (Hermitcraft) , Mumbo Jumbo (Hermitcraft) , Helsknight (Hermitcraft) , VintageBeef (Hermitcraft) , Jeff the Minion (Hermitcraft)
Additional Tags:	Comedy , Alternate Universe - Superheroes/Superpowers , Alternate Universe - Modern Setting , Swearing , Blood and Violence , Characters have different names , imagine miraculous but actually done well , yes beta we don't die just like wels , Mario Kart As A Plot Point , all this couldve been avoided if evan was on adderall , Angst But It's Like A Breadcrumb Trail , dont worry about it too hard yet :] Happy Ending
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of the hermitcraft hero au (VDHAU)
Stats:	Published: 2022-02-24 Completed: 2022-07-21 Words: 53,645 Chapters: 8/8

it takes two to play (the game of mutual secrecy)

by [kiwinatorwaffles](#)

Summary

Giving Evan's shoulder a friendly yet firm pat, XVoid says, "You should probably run along home, as there might be people worrying about you. Don't get yourself into too much trouble, alright?"

After the hero gently releases his grip and steps away, Evan stares in awe as XVoid zips away into the distance, jumping from portal to portal until he completely disappears within the buildings before him. Even after a full minute, Evan still finds himself staring out to where XVoid left, mind rushing with a thousand thoughts of what just happened to him.

"Wow," Evan whispers, still feeling his heart hammer against his chest from the adrenaline rush upon thinking of the hero. "What a cool guy..."

So, Evan decides that he wants to get to know the hero XVoid a little better using the most rational course of action that enters his mind at the moment: he's going to become a vigilante.

In which two brothers are both living double-lives as a hero and vigilante, yet neither of them catch onto each other's identities. What shenanigans will ensue?

Notes

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

the erratic exposition

Chapter Summary

prologue: in which we are introduced to the setting.

Chapter Notes

cover page! >:D



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

On a late winter evening, after the skies had long darkened, the two brothers sat at the dinner table, watching the news while eating.

“On this day, the beloved hero Welsknight was reported to have passed away in a coma just this morning,” the reporter’s voice announced through the speaker. On the television screen, a profile of Welsknight’s face appeared next to the text, which read ‘RENOWNED HERO, DEAD AFTER BATTLE.’

“NileCorp, which oversees the heroes’ alliance, was quick to declare his death as a result from the recent fight against the notable Syndicate villain group. However, as rumors spread, the location of his body currently stands unknown.”

The screen changed again, this time showing a video of a bearded man in front of the microphone. “We’re currently still on a search for any whereabouts of where he may have gone,” the bearded man explained, shuffling quite uncomfortably in his spot. “We promise to get him back in the end.”

He’d never really paid attention to news about heroes before, especially considering that it was just an everyday thing to hear about anyway... but this time, as the news report on the television continued to blare on, he watched his older brother’s grip tighten around the fork.

“You good?” he asked, glancing up at his brother’s tightly-pressed together lips, the right side of which was still patched up by a bandage.

“Why do you ask?” his brother replied, attempting some sort of a grin to release tension. The grip on the fork only grew tighter, betraying the mask.

He doesn’t remember the last time his brother had looked this upset, but he decided not to ask any further.

Other than the noise from the screen, dinner was especially quiet that night.

Chapter End Notes

the prologue..... lots of strange and weird things already being established, but i promise it'll all come back later! :]]
with that being said, have fun on the next chapter! itll thankfully be a lot more lighthearted than this one.

the opposable opening

Chapter Summary

chapter 1: in which a local teenager finds the worst possible new hyperfixation.

Chapter Notes

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

It's a long and awkward ride home for Evan Voros.

As he sits quietly in the passenger seat of the car, he finds himself constantly glancing over at his brother's face, checking for any changes in expression or mood. Unfortunately for Evan, his brother's face remains in the same stoic state, only hinting at mild irritation. *But that's how he looked for the past five minutes, anyway.*

Evan can only hope that his situation is never brought up again and the car ride can remain silent as it had been since the start, but just when he gets his hopes up, his brother opens his mouth to break the overwhelming tension.

"*Why did you punch your classmate?*" His brother's usually-soft voice now hangs heavily in the air, seemingly chilling with the air conditioning blasting from the small vents. Evan flinches when he notices the slight shift in his brother's face, the faint irritation now morphing into something comparable to a dangerous oil spill—vulnerable to being lit by a single spark of fire. Somehow, the scar on his brother's mouth seems much scarier than normal when it sits on the deep scowl.

"Listen, Shawn—" Evan speaks up in protest, straightening up in his seat. "The principal didn't even tell you the full story! I didn't even throw the first punch!"

"Did you hit someone or not?" Shawn says curtly, and even though his eyes are focused on the road ahead, Evan feels the glare burning into the back of his skull.

As he sinks into his seat, Evan mumbles quietly, "...*Yeah.*" He hears a harsh sigh escape from Shawn's mouth and wishes he could phase out of the car at this very moment.

"Listen, it *doesn't matter* what happened before the whole situation," Shawn begins a typical parent-like lecture, his words droning into Evan's ears like a drill. "You know better than to harm your own classmate. You got *suspended* for acting out."

"Okay but look, that fu— ..*fool* was bullying my friend! I had to fight for him!" Evan blurts out in defense, which he instantly regrets when Shawn shoots him the most *threatening* death glare.

Even though the last three rational brain cells scream at him to just *shut up*, Evan's own impulsivity somehow still manages to squeeze out one more line of stupidity out of him. "I mean... isn't it what those heroes do? They fight for people who can't stand up for themselves?"

Those three brain cells all consecutively perform the biggest facepalms allowed on the earth, and Evan follows with a kick to his own leg, silently cursing his idiocracy. Attempting to escape from any further conflict, Evan completely averts his eyes away from the direction of his brother, who he can feel the fumes of increasing rage heat up like a furnace from the driver side of the car.

Shawn, when angry, is a completely different man— one that Evan has no intentions of dealing with any longer.

Fortunately for Evan, his brother keeps his mouth shut tight, but upon glancing over for a quick checkup, he finds that the murderous aura still lays stagnant in the atmosphere, circling above Shawn's head like a flurry of storm clouds. He decides not to provoke the thunder any longer and burrows into his hoodie, praying for the ride to be over quick.

The day after does not start off particularly well, either.

“I’ll be leaving you with Grian, alright?” Shawn notes, standing before the entrance, hand on doorknob in preparation to leave. “He’ll just be watching over you for the day to make sure you’re safe. *Don’t act out of line.*”

“*I don’t need a fuckin’ babysitter,*” Evan mutters underneath his breath as he watches Shawn enter his car from the window. “*I’m not ten.*”

Shawn drives off as Evan takes a bite out of his dry cereal indignantly.

Though his brother had mentioned Grian a number of times in the past, Evan doesn’t remember actually meeting him before... and he doesn’t look forward to it. Well... *maybe* Grian is a nice man— who knows! But it still doesn’t change the fact that Grian will basically be the warden to his house arrest, and that’s never bound to be a positive first impression.

Evan finishes his last mouthful of cereal and decides that he might as well just play games on his computer for the entire day just to kill the time. Hopefully the babysitter won’t actually ask him to do anything productive. Not like he’d actually follow someone else’s orders, but he’ll probably still find a way to sneak out of it regardless.

As Evan trudges upstairs to his room and opens the door, he thinks about the events that occurred during school the day prior. *I wonder if Norman’s doing alright,* Evan thinks, pushing his door open. *Guy can’t even order a takeout by himself, much less fight back against bullies.*

Evan recalls the fight he took part of, in which he and another classmate duked it out in the middle of the hall. *That whole thing happened because that asshole decided to shove Normie for no reason.* Rolling his eyes at the thought of the bully, Evan flings himself into the desk chair and rolls over to his computer, booting up the monitor. *I’ll shoot him a message around break time, then.*

Pushing thoughts about his friend aside, Evan clicks on a game icon in his apps bar and watches as the loading screen progresses forward... until that is, he hears an ear-splitting screech pierce out from beside him.

“*Who’s there?!*” he demands, swiveling around in the direction of the interruption, fists balled up in preparation to attack. However, out of anything that could have made the noise, Evan hasn’t expected... a red parrot to be sitting at his windowsill, picking at its own feathers.

Apprehensive, Evan slowly lowers his fists and stands up from his chair, taking small steps towards the bird (who seemingly doesn't notice him— either that, or it’s ignoring him on purpose). He manages to close in only two feet away from the bird’s face before it finally looks up to meet his gaze, tilting its head in curiosity at the human in front of it.

“Hey...?” Lowering down to the bird’s eye level, Evan kneels in front of the parrot and gives it a slight wave, unsure of if it would understand any of his gestures. “How’d you get here?”

The bird only squawks in response. What'd he expect, anyway? Without any further speech, the parrot returns to preening its feathers, completely diverting its attention away from Evan. *Rude.*

"...Are you just going to stay there?" he scowls at the creature, now *definitely* aware that it's just deciding to be a little jerk and ignore him. "Come on, man. My dumb babysitter is coming soon and I don't need him seeing I have a new pet in my room. Shawn's gonna freak if he finds out."

Some phrase must have triggered the parrot, because immediately after Evan says "babysitter," it instantly puffs up and begins chirping out the most *surprising* thing that has happened in the early morning hours so far.

"*Grian! Grian!*" the parrot caws, flapping its wings up and down.

Sighing, Evan decides he may as well just humor the bird. "Yeah, Grian is coming soon—" He pauses before finishing the sentence, narrowing his eyes at the parrot, whose beak now seemingly curls into a grin. "Waaaaait a goddamn second. Did you just say his name...? But— you're—"

"*Grian!*" The parrot chirps again, beating its wings in pride as Evan stares at it, dumbfounded.

This absolutely cannot be real.

*Did my brother hire a fucking **bird** to babysit me?*

As *Grian*, the bird, struts on the windowsill, Evan realizes that this is going to be even easier than he thought. He has no idea what Shawn was thinking in hiring an animal to look over him, but why does that matter? He can now goof off all he wants!

Still snickering to himself, Evan returns to start up his game thinking he could just relax for the entire morning, but unexpectedly, *Grian* generates the most air-splitting screech upon seeing the screen. "*HOMEWORK!*" the bird squawks right in Evan's ear, nearly shattering his nerves.

"Shut it, parrot!" Evan hisses, waving off the dumb bird (to which it flaps back in retaliation). "Can't you go find some crackers to eat, or something? Leave me alone!"

Grian does not leave him alone.

Every single time Evan tries to play a round, that goddamn *pesky bird* only screams at him to finish his work, leaving an inescapable ringing in his ears that lasts for many seconds. When it comes to the point where Evan can no longer stand the actual fire alarm that blares out every two minutes, he slams down on his keyboard and snaps towards the bird.

"Fine, *damn!*" he roars at *Grian*, whose smug bird face only contributes to the growing frustration. "I'll do my stupid homework, okay? Stop yelling!"

Triumphantly, *Grian* settles down on the window, sinking into a sitting position knowing he's defeated the kid. Grumbling, Evan closes out his game window and opens the online classroom, scanning for any assignments that might have been posted.

Stupid bird, he thinks angrily, resting his chin on his palm with a deep scowl. *Stupid bird making me actually do my stupid schoolwork.*

As Evan stares at the entire page of calculus problems in front of his face, the growing urge to escape from the never-ending agony of math and the ceaseless winged tyrant grows to an extent where it's impossible to ignore the pull of a chaotic exploit. He can just... well, make a run for it, right? There's not much a tiny bird can do to a human teen, anyway... right?

Without thinking much further, Evan stands up from his chair and makes a bolt towards the door, only to be caught by his collar seconds before reaching the doorknob. He yelps at the sudden force as he gets dragged back to his desk and practically thrown into the seat.

“*HOMEWORK!*” the stupid shit ass bird screeches again, flying out from behind Evan and landing on his desk, tapping the computer with a claw. Evan, once again, is left staring dumbfounded.

What the fuck.

So his brother *did* just hire a bird. But this bird. Somehow has *super strength*? At least enough to *physically drag a grown human*, and anything of that caliber from a creature so small is *concerning*, to say the least. Maybe even terrifying. However, while any normal person would sit down and do their homework like a good student, this only motivates Evan to rebel *further*. There is no way he’s losing to an animal he could easily hold within his hands like a hamburger.

He just needs to find some sort of a distraction– something to throw Grian off for just a moment...

And so Evan decides to do the most reasonable thing he can think of: in one swift motion, he yanks the quilt off his bed and flings it onto the creature, instantly darting off to the door without looking back. As Grian lets out a distressed screech and flapping noises of struggle, a smug grin spreads onto Evan’s face in knowing that his slapdash plan has *somehow* managed to succeed.

With the velocity of an olympic sprinter, Evan clamors down the halls with growing excitement, but that instantly shatters when he hears that Grian’s muffled parrot squawking has suddenly become clear again... which can only mean the bird is free from his cloth prison.

Shit! Evan curses himself, suddenly beginning to regret defying the bird.

God, what was he even thinking? He did lock his door after dashing out, but will a lock even do anything to stop Grian? Besides, his room’s window is still *open!* Grian can just fly out of there without any resistance at all!

There is pecking at the doorknob now. Just as Evan has predicted, Grian is drawing close.

To continue on his streak of absolutely *brilliant* decisions, Evan takes a sharp turn towards the stairway leading to the building roof. For some reason, in that moment, his panicked mind somehow convinces him that the best course of action to take would be going out onto the top. Because why would Grian ever think of looking there, right? Evan hopes that the bird will probably just assume he has escaped downstairs, or something.

Right as he hears the doorknob make an opening *click* sound, Evan busts open the door to the roof and scampers out into the open space, a blast of cold morning air hitting his skin. As Evan scans around himself, he notices there are only roofs of other buildings present in the immediate vicinity, each accompanied with at least a two story drop to the ground beneath.

Every remaining cell in his brain begs for him to call off the plan and admit defeat, as screwing up now would probably result worse in simply Homework Hell, but his own stubborn mind refuses to rescind his terrible choices as if to say, *these are MY horrible life decisions and I will go through with them no matter what.*

Swallowing nervously with a pounding heart, Evan peeks down past the roof to confirm if jumping down would break every bone in his body or not. The city floors look pretty far from up here, he thinks. Better not take that risk.

Is the next roof over close enough to jump onto, though?

Evan thinks to all the videos he's seen on the internet of superheroes making powerful leaps from the top of roofs. If he remembers correctly, not all of them have powers that boost their jumps, either— so... he assumes it won't be too difficult...

As Evan climbs onto the ledge surrounding the roof, he takes a deep breath and eyes the closest surface to him, trying to hyperfocus his mind into staring at the smooth brick rather than thinking about his shaking legs.

Am I really doing this to escape a dumb bird?

Losing to Grian will probably be the most humiliating thing that can happen to him if he decides to run back in cowardice. Apart from that, breaking a couple bones is infinitely better than getting dragged into the chair by a screaming bird, Evan decides (perfectly displaying the sole reason why parents worry for their teens).

Well, here I go! Evan clenches his teeth and readies himself into a jumping position, locking on to his target landing point.

Launching forward, he boosts through the air, legs creating a less-than-graceful arc over the dangerous drop below. While airborne, Evan feels the world slow down around him in an over-the-top, theatrical manner as a rush of adrenaline blooms across his limbs. He can feel the crisp morning air stream across his face and filling his lungs, sending a sharp signal to wake up his brain and just *feel* what's happening. It's a completely new experience. The suspense before landing, the prickly cold against his skin, the rapid pounding coming from his heart—

And just as quickly as the feeling comes, Evan lands on the hard roof surface, completely uninjured. Three thoughts then formulate in his mind, in this exact order:

1. *I did it?*
2. *I did it!*
3. *Hold on. What the hell was that.*

The jump from his building's roof to the other must have barely been a five foot gap or so, but Evan's entire body trembles as the adrenaline courses through his veins, stretching to every nerve. He. Made. The. Jump. He made it— and it wasn't even that bad! If he can make one jump, then the others should also come easily!

In a moment, Evan completely forgets that this whole chase is about escaping his dictatorial babysitter and sprints for the nearest roof, barely hesitating to perform the same stunt as he did previously. *Jump, soar, and land.* Boom, now he's on top of another nearby roof. Within just a minute, Evan zips effortlessly across the tops of buildings with bubbling confidence, laughing to himself in triumphant exploitation.

Will Shawn kill him for this? *Absolutely* . But that's just what makes it all the more exciting.

But of course, nothing nice can ever last. Just like Icarus and his wax wings, Evan flies too close to the sun when he decides that he can probably make that over ten-foot jump (spoilers: he can't). After boosting himself towards his target, Evan comes to the quick realization that there is no way he is going to land properly on the flat surface and he feels his heart practically *skip* a beat.

Is it all going to end like this?

Fortunately for Evan, he manages to snag a pipe on the edge of the building to catch himself before

he can fall to his imminent doom. He stops to breathe a sigh of relief, but a wave of horror crashing over him like a tidal wave quickly interrupts the fleeting moment of respite when that pipe buckles slightly under his weight.

Oh, lord. Oh, *fuck*— he needs to reach the top *immediately* before the whole thing collapses! As panic settles into his chest and internal clock starts to tick, Evan clings onto the rusty pipe for dear life and reaches upward towards the building ledge, trying with all his might to grab his only chance of survival. Yet despite it all, the ledge sits only a few centimeters away from his desperate finger, just out of reach, as if taunting him for thinking that he was ever good enough to perform such an insane stunt.

In the final moment of distress, Evan calls out, “HELP!” in some sort of a futile hope that somebody would actually be around in the back of alleys to save some random teen. The old pipe bends and cracks further outward, unyielding to his pleas, and Evan feels his legs dangling dangerously in the open, no longer able to touch the walls and grab ahold with his shoes.

This is it, isn't it? He's going to seal off his short sixteen years of life because he decided to go for a little run on top of the city. He's going to fall and crack his skull or something equally horrible like that and nobody will know, because he's all alone, screaming for help that will probably never arrive.

Aw, man. And I didn't even get to say goodbye to Norman...

As the pipe makes its final croak of life, snapping in the process, Evan squeezes his eyes shut and braces for the impact, waiting for himself to hit the floor at any second now— but instead of hitting a hard surface, Evan hears a distinct *fwoosh* noise moments before landing into what feels like a pair of arms.

“Huh?” Evan's eyes shoot open in shock, revealing a face wearing a dark helmet staring back at him.

This stranger is clothed in heavy armor that consists of a mix with black, light green, and purple motifs. *Definitely* not something a typical civilian would wear... so, does that mean—?

“Hey, kid!” The man's visor displays a set of electrical eyes that flicker in concern upon seeing Evan's reaction. “Are you alright there?”

Even though Evan's mouth opens to respond, no words fall out of his silenced vocal chords— so he just opts to nod slowly instead.

He hears the man sigh with relief underneath the helmet, then shifting his arms to position Evan back on his own two feet. As the two carefully walk back out onto the sidewalks, the man remarks, “What you were doing up there was dangerous. You could have seriously harmed yourself!”

The words go into one ear and travel out the other, as Evan's entire mind empties out while staring at his rescuer. *Who is this man?* Now he has to know.

“Yeah, got it—” Evan says, trying to ignore his throat that feels like someone poured a bucket of sand into. “Um... Thank you, sir... I don't know your name...”

“It's XVoid,” the man answers, nodding. On the visor display, the eyes of concern don't leave, but they soften out and lighten up responding to Evan's question. “I'm a hero around here— but that doesn't mean you should go around acting reckless, okay? I can't be here all the time.”

Giving Evan's shoulder a friendly yet firm pat, XVoid says, “You should probably run along

home, as there might be people worrying about you. Don't get yourself into too much trouble, alright?"

After the hero gently releases his grip and steps away, Evan stares in awe as XVoid zips away into the distance, jumping from portal to portal until he completely disappears within the buildings before him. Even after a full minute, Evan still finds himself staring out to where XVoid left, mind rushing with a thousand thoughts of what just happened to him.

Escaping from Grian. Running on the roofs. Falling off the roof. Being personally saved by a hero. All within less than an hour.

"Wow," Evan whispers, still feeling his heart hammer against his chest from the adrenaline rush upon thinking of the hero. "What a cool guy..."

Evan has to admit, he's never been all too interested in heroes before. It's just a typical everyday matter for regions to suffer attacks and recover with the help of those with powers— in fact, he's even experienced emergency situations himself before, where he had to hide in a bunker while a dangerous threat remained in his area. Again, he's never thought much about the matters of special people who save civilians from villainous beings, but maybe that was due to him never actually needing to get involved with anything of the sort. However, after this run-in with XVoid...

Which somehow loops him back to what got him here in the first place: his brother forcing him to stay at home with a babysitter.

This isn't fair, Evan thinks as he kicks a rock while sluggishly making his way home. That hero there was *so* cool. XVoid actually looked like he was *genuinely concerned* for his well being, despite him just being a normal civilian. That's got to be the traits of a good person, right? Compared to his brother, who's always nagging him to do this and that, endlessly lecturing, and even having the audacity to assign him a dumb babysitter.

The more Evan thinks, the more frustrated he gets with his current situation.

Shawn is less of a brother than he is like a proxy parental figure, ever since their parents passed away years ago. Always off at work at his accounting job and coming home at irregular times, having to live the responsible adult life. On top of that, Shawn is the one to watch over his academic status as well, which can get *really* annoying when he's getting bothered about grades again.

Though Evan is a little ashamed to admit it, outside of Norman, he doesn't have many friends. And just like the previously stated points, Shawn is far from a viable candidate to be considered a "friend" at all...

So, Evan decides that he wants to get to know the hero XVoid a little better using the most rational course of action that enters his mind at the moment: he's going to become a vigilante.

Unfortunately for Evan, he completely forgets that Grian is something that exists and once he makes it home, a very irritated bird waits for him right by the door. In the end, Grian still drags him all the way up the stairs and back into his room, which kind of rendered the whole chase useless. Thankfully, Grian doesn't seem to mind Evan tabbing in and out of his messaging app while doing his work, which is how he manages to talk to Norman about the insane event that happened to him.

tax evander: hey normie

BanaNorman: What's up?

tax evander: first of all are you alright

tax evander: second of all guess who met a hero in person today

BanaNorman: I think i'm fine for

BanaNorman: Hold on back up WHAT

Evan can practically hear Norman's surprised yell from his message and cackles as his friend sends a series of short, confused questions into their chat. When Norman asks what happened, Evan explains to him the entire story of running away from his babysitter (omitting the part that it's a bird, of course) and how it led to him being rescued by XVoid.

Norman expresses surprise in the form of various gifs upon hearing the ordeal and in return, mentions that XVoid is a member of the notable hero group called "HC," which piques Evan's interest in finding more about other heroes as well.

He peeks over his shoulder at Grian to check if the bird is watching (luckily for Evan, he's playing with a rock on the windowsill) before opening up the search engine and diving into research about heroes in his area.

This brings Evan to the realization he's heard a *lot* about these people while browsing the internet or listening to the radio— like, Philza and Lady Death? He's heard of them a lot on the news! Even for someone who barely pays attention to talk about heroes, it's hard to miss their iconic matching large hats and flowy gowns. He also recognizes the face of Doc Monster as that one guy in a lab coat who once lifted an entire building using psychokinesis just to look for the movie ticket he lost.

And names of hero factions as well! *Boatem Incorporated, Big Eyes Crew, Architechs, ZIT Ghost Hunters, and the Octagon...* The amount of amazing hero groups that are right near his home shocks Evan— How has he not paid attention to them before?

For the remainder of the day, Evan spends his time clicking on link after link, scrolling through countless pages of heroes and villains alike, looking at the arrangement of crazy costumes in awe. Oh, *man*. His younger self always thought heroes were a bit cringeworthy and overhyped, but if he could travel back in time, he'd probably slap himself in the face for that stupid mindset. Evan realizes now that this hero thing is actually *really interesting!*

In his search, Evan also learns that it's not exactly necessary for heroes to have superpowers either. This hero named Big T, for example, works with his partner's mechanical inventions rather than some kind of power, and he's *still* pretty strong.

This means that he definitely has a chance of being just like them.

Well, Evan knows how to fight— at least he *thinks* he knows how to. He's gotten involved in school fights before and came out on top four times out of five! Besides, he's pretty quick when it comes to movement, as shown through the whole roof-jumping stunt, and he'll more than likely be *fine* as long as he doesn't do something *too* reckless, right?

His search finally comes to a close when Grian screeches, "*BROTHER HOME!*" then proceeds to take off from the window. From the street ahead of them, Evan watches the car pull up into the driveway, and his brother approaches the door with the keys.

Shawn, just like yesterday, does not look happy in the slightest.

Feeling his doom approach once the door opens, Evan's fears of his brother having found out about his little adventure are instantly confirmed when Shawn yells for him to come downstairs

immediately.

Oh, boy... here it comes.

Slinking down the stairs like a blob of jello, Evan begrudgingly steps into the living room where his brother stands at the door, arms crossed and lips pulled into a scowl. If the universe can write emotions on top of people's heads, the words above Shawn right now probably consist of *rage*, *fury*, and *fucking pissed off*.

He definitely knows about it, doesn't he?

"I *told* you to not get into any trouble," Shawn says sternly, not even giving Evan the liberty of receiving his usual evening greeting. "And today a street cop told me about how you were running on top of roofs."

Shit. He does.

"You could have gotten hurt like this!" Shawn exclaims, breaking out of his low voice in a sudden spike of volume. "What if you fell off and broke your bones— No, even worse! A fall from that high could *kill* you!"

Evan's logical thought knows better than to talk back against Shawn, but the aggressive side of his brain insists on fighting back, despite the actual fair arguments stacked against him. "But I *didn't* get hurt! I'm completely fine— you need to stop worrying so much!"

Shawn opens his mouth to fire an argument in return, but before he has the chance to do that, Evan turns on his heels and starts climbing back up the stairs.

"I still have calculus homework to finish!" he yells back at Shawn, hurriedly speeding to his room to avoid any further lecturing. "Just call me over when dinner's ready!"

Evan in fact, does not do his calculus homework. Rather than writing down what he actually needs to do for a grade, he fills his notebook with doodles of possible costume designs. If he wants to be a proper public vigilante, then he's going to need a costume to both look the part and hide his identity, right? At first, Evan outlines a few costumes with cool fluttering capes and all sorts of fancy clothing, but quickly comes to the realization that he would need to find something from his closet, because Shawn would probably get suspicious of him ordering flashy costume parts.

Doesn't he have a jacket that he accidentally bleached the back of? He hid it away without ever showing the mess-up to Shawn, so maybe he can use that as a part of the outfit without being accidentally recognized, given that it's probably been at least two years since he's last worn it. Shawn's a bit of a derp, so he won't realize, hopefully.

Oh, right— and his face. He's going to need something to cover that, for sure... Right. Evan thinks to anything he can use as some sort of a mask or helmet that wouldn't be too difficult to obtain with a limited budget. Wait, his brother's old motorcycle helmet! That could definitely be modified into something with a bit of paint and glue.

Evan leans back in his chair, grinning proudly to himself with what he's come up with. He should be all set for his vigilante alter ego, now...

"Oh, I need a name!" he realizes suddenly, remembering all of the creative code names that he's seen throughout the day.

Now, names are the real challenge of creating any sort of character. Racking his brain, Evan thinks about any online usernames he might be able to translate into a hero name, but there's no way he's going to use something stupid like "xXbellpepperslicer."

"You know what? I'll make it simple." Clicking the top of his pen, Evan quickly scribbles down two letters onto his notebook, reading "EX" in plain letters. E for Evan and X for... a certain hero he looks up to.

And he's finally finished. All Evan needs to do now is assemble the costume and make his debut, then he can properly be known as the vigilante EX.

When he thinks of the kind hero's eyes from this morning, Evan then decides to make a resolution. Something that is important to him, or even, an eventual goal that spawns from the driving factor for this whole fiasco.

I will meet XVoid again, he promises to nobody but himself. No matter how long it takes– I'm going to see him.

Chapter End Notes

hey guys! first multichapter mcyt fic huh? and yep. its xisuma and evil xisuma brainrot again... sighs. this is embarrassing

anyway! exciting!! ive published the first chapter (and prologue) yeah!!!

also if you didn't figure it out already, i'm not using anybody's real names in this story! x has been named shawn (based off shashwammy) and ex has been named evan respectfully. a few other characters will also follow this in the future! (also no, norman is not jimmy's cat. though that would have been funny.)

i also post on social media!! i have the main cast's designs right over here! although they're a tad bit outdated, it's still a pretty good start for checking things out.

[instagram](#), [tumblr](#)

FANART TIME!!

check out this pokemon battle-style [fanart](#) lindentree made!

[evan roof jumping](#) by fellfromavent!

got any questions about the au or fic status? shoot me an ask @ kiwinatorwaffles on tumblr!

and fanart,,,,,, id love to be tagged in posts! you can also use the hashtag #voidduoheroau on instagram or #void duo hero au/#vdhau on tumblr respectively!!

thank you again for reading! i will return for the next chapter hehehe

the dubious double-life

Chapter Summary

chapter 2: in which the alternating action begins, and we learn that our protagonists are very, Very stupid.

Chapter Notes

yeah uh. 11k words pog ! honestly im not sure if i had just been staring at the chapter for too long (because ive been working on it for over a month now) but hopefully you wont get bored lmao i promise chapter 3 will be much easier to write

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

Shawn fidgeted nervously with his thumbs as he walked through the doors to the HC Headquarters.

First day on the job. Yep. He totally wasn't freaking out or anything, considering he'd only discovered his powers just a week ago. Was he strong enough to match up to the veterans? Would he be useful? Could he defend the city just as well as the rest of them? Just because he was told that he "passed the entrance test with flying colors," that didn't mean he's good enough per se.

As he approached the front desk, a short figure with light-blue skin and short, dark hair lifted his head upon noticing Shawn, smiling amiably at the newcomer with a set of sharp teeth.

"Hey there!" the receptionist(?) greeted cheerfully, and Shawn noted that he looked to have two little, alien-like antennas poking out of his hair. "How may I help you?"

"Hello- I'm, uh-" Shawn started, but all the words that he previously formulated in his brain seemed to have leaked out at this very moment, leaving him stumbling for anything to respond with. "I'm... I am- I was just accepted into the hero program a day ago, I think. Ah, um. Do you... know where I should go for that?" He paused, then added on quickly, "Sorry if I'm bothering you."

"No, no, don't worry!" the receptionist reassured, waving his hand. "You've come to the right place. You're a new recruit, right? I just need to check the records..." He clicked with the mouse a few times, presumably scrolling to find the said record. "There you are! You're XVoid, right?"

"That would be me, yes."

"Sweet!" The receptionist offered another wide grin, his bug-like eyes glistening brightly. "My name is Cub, and you probably already figured it out by now, but I'm the receptionist. You can come to me if you have any questions in the future, alright?"

Shawn nodded and thanked Cub, feeling the knot in his chest melt away at the friendliness he'd experienced thus far. Hopefully the rest of the league would be similar?

Cub now bounced avidly in his seat, giggling to himself. “This is so exciting! We haven’t had a new recruit since Xelqua, if I remember correctly— Alright! Now, XVoid, it’s your first day here, correct? The way we do things around here is that for the first month or so, we have a veteran hero guide the newbie.”

Veteran hero? The knot that Shawn had thought disappeared now came back with full force, instantly tensing him up. Someone who was actually experienced on the job, coaching his amateur abilities? Oh god, he’d make a fool of himself, wouldn’t he?

Not noticing Shawn’s sudden apprehension, Cub grabbed the communicator at his desk and pressed a few buttons, exclaiming into the speaker end, “Wels! Your trainee is here!”

After barely a second of waiting, the device crackled with noises, and a confident voice boasted through the speaker, though the audio was too far away for Shawn to properly hear what it said. And barely thirty seconds later, he heard the rhythmic thudding of something metallic hitting the floor— hold on, were those footsteps?

From one of the halls behind the reception desk, a tall figure wearing iron-clad armor and what seemed to be a knight helmet bounded over like a golden retriever in a park, his sky-blue cape and helmet plume flapping behind him valiantly.

“There’s the newbie!” Wels (Shawn assumed, at least) boomed loudly, stopping beside Cub’s desk. Shawn felt the sheer energy of this hero travel through the air, and it would have knocked him back physically had he not shifted his weight to keep balance.

Wels held out his gauntleted hand, presumably to shake, which Shawn hesitantly accepted. With a (literal) metal grip that could probably crush bones, Wels vigorously shook Shawn’s poor hand as he introduced himself, “Hey! The name’s Welsknight, but you can just call me Wels!”

“Nice to meet you, Wels,” Shawn tried to return a smile, but found it difficult from cringing under the powerful handshake. “I’m XVoid—”

“Can I call you Void?” Wels interjected suddenly, though he finally dropped the handshake.

Confused at how to respond, Shawn could only offer, “Uhh—”

“Great!” Delighted at the assumed approval, Wels placed his now free hand on Shawn’s shoulder, weighing him down with the metal glove. “Now, Void, how are ya feeling right now? Excited? Scared?”

Ah, that was certainly a question, alright. “A little nervous if anything, I suppose—” Shawn let out a short laugh, attempting to make eye contact with the veteran hero. “I’m not really sure. I don’t think I could ever be half of what my parents were...”

“Don’t worry about that!” Wels reassured with a wink, patting Shawn on the shoulder with the force of a friendly sledgehammer. “Your parents, from what I heard, were amazing... but only you can be the best of yourself. There’s only one XVoid out there!”

He’s right.

“Of course,” Shawn now let a genuine laugh escape from his mouth, finally loosening up. “You’re right. It wouldn’t be fair to myself or them to compare my powers, especially when I haven’t even really even been out in the field yet.”

“That’s the spirit!” He watched as Wels’s eyes lit up with an enthusiastic sparkle. “Now, we can

properly fetch your costume and set you up for crime-busting. It wouldn't be ideal to go out wearing that math teacher-looking fit you have right now, unless you want everyone to know your true identity!"

"Have fun, you two!" Cub snickered, organizing some papers. "But don't take him on too wild of a journey, or else XVoid will end up like Tango did on his first day!"

Shawn blinked. "Excuse me, what?"

"Ah, it's nothing too big," Wels said with a scoff. "Just accidentally burned somebody's tree. But don't worry! We won't commit unintentional arson, I hope!"

Shawn decided to take his word for it. First day on the job with Welsknight— and somehow, Shawn didn't feel as apprehensive going into the job as he did just ten minutes ago. With Wels and Cub joking around so lightheartedly before him, he had a feeling in his gut that just maybe, he would be alright after all.

Ah, those were the good times, weren't they?

Evan doesn't even notice how much he's spaced out today, until Norman points it out.

During Civic Ed, he spends his entire time imagining scenarios of chasing hypothetical villains and epic fight scenes, completely shutting out the droning lecture on the presentation screen before him. In the middle of a daydream fight, Norman shakes Evan's shoulder gently, whispering out a quiet *hey!*

Snapping out of his mind, Evan whirls towards the bespectacled teen, almost accidentally punching his friend. "*Huh?!*"

"Your Civics bingo sheet is empty." Norman says in a hushed voice, pointing to the slip of paper on Evan's desk. "And I would have said that you were awfully nonviolent today," he continues, shifting slightly away from Evan to avoid any future punches. "But it seems like you're back to normal."

"What do you *mean*, 'nonviolent?!'" Evan retaliates loudly, slamming down on his desk and instantly causing the eyes of surrounding classmates to focus on the two. "I've never been violent a day in my *life!* Geez!"

"Quiet *down*, Mr. *Got-Suspended-For-Starting-A-Fight!*" Norman hisses, elbowing Evan. "Do you want to send both of us to the office for interrupting class, *again?*"

Shamefully melting into his jacket hood, Evan shakes his head as Norman slowly marks off "*Evan Voros interrupts the lesson*" on his sheet. "But thanks for that," Norman grins, tapping the four crossed-out boxes in a row. "I've almost got a bingo!"

"Okay, but..." Evan starts, trying not to feel salty that Norman might get a bingo before him. "It's not like the supervising teacher gives even half a shit about what's going on, though," he offers one more point of opposition, pointing to the adult sitting on the desk in the corner of the lecture hall, reading a newspaper while drinking coffee; then, Evan uses Norman's pencil to mark off "*the teacher is also annoyed at the lesson*" on his own bingo sheet.

Norman sighs, clearly unwilling to argue this point any longer. "*Fine*. Well as I was saying, I'm a bit concerned for you today... because by now, you would have done your daily rant on calculus or geography or school lunches— or even punched someone."

Rolling his eyes, Evan playfully hits Norman in the shoulder. “I hate derivatives. *There!* Is that good enough for you?”

Though Norman shakes his head, Evan still sees his friend trying to resist laughing. “*Alright*, sure. Still, you’re not getting away with just that. What’s *really* going on?”

Evan motions for Norman to hand over his pencil again, which his friend complies with, and grabs Norman’s notebook.

“*Hey!*” Norman gasps indignantly, despite not doing anything to stop Evan. “I was taking my notes on that— oh, *whatever!*”

Quickly scribbling on Norman’s ex-notes, Evan quickly writes down, “*so I’m gonna become a vigilante.*” Norman scans the sentence, frowning at the content, and writes in response, “*that’s incredibly out of pocket for you. Why’d you decide that all of a sudden*”

“*I literally told you about XVoid,*” Evan writes back, handwriting barely comprehensible from his sheer speed. “*I wanna be friends with him*”

“*by becoming a vigilante?*”

“*exactly*”

“*are you sure this is a good idea? Do you even have any powers?*”

“*chill I’ve beat up some people before I think I’ll be fine*”

Norman raises an eyebrow.

“*plus I have never made any bad decisions ever*”

“*you almost got us expelled in 8th grade because you decided to TP the principal’s house*”

“*but we weren’t!*”

In the middle of their pen-to-paper conversation, the bell rings loudly, signifying the end of today’s classes. Dropping Norman’s pencil, Evan springs up from his chair and grabs his backpack, instantly jumping over the desk like a hurdle.

“Well, I’ll be out on my first day!” Evan exclaims, glancing back to Norman’s confused face staring back at him. “I’ll tell you all about it later!”

“But what about homework—” Norman shouts back, worry increasing in his voice as he scrambles to clean up his supplies.

“*Just send me the answers!*”

And Evan disappears into the hall, leaving Norman standing with a messy desk and a vandalized notebook.

Sighing, Norman crosses off the final box in a row that reads, “*Evan asks for my homework*” and places the pencil down in defeat.

“*Bingo...*”

Evan practically sprints the entire way home. He’s probably bumped into at least five different people in the halls and streets alike— and he did say sorry! It’s just that he might have rushed off too fast for the poor victims to hear the apology.

Once he reaches his home, Evan fumbles with the keys, excitedly turning the lock and bursting into the house. He scampers up the stairs on all fours, clambering into his room and tossing the backpack to the side of his desk. Finally, Evan skids to a stop in front of his closet, flinging the door open to excitedly pull out his costume box.

And there it is, in its full glory: his bleach-stained jacket, a random turtleneck he's pretty sure he's never worn before, a slightly-modified hiking backpack, and the star of the set— the customized motorcycle helmet.

Picking up the helmet, Evan proudly admires his own craftsmanship. Shawn's old helmet had just been plain black, but he painted a few strips of gray and red on the top and sides just to add some more color. On top of that, he attached a voice modulator he bought from the dollar store on the mouth region of the helmet (wouldn't want people knowing he's a kid, after all!), and even glued on two red ram horns from an old Halloween costume just for the hell of it.

Are the ram horns practical? Of course not. But at least he would look *cool* going into fights— and that's all that matters, in the end.

After hastily changing into his costume, Evan soon realizes that this clothing probably isn't *ideal* for the hot summer weather, but it's a bit late to turn back now. Ignoring the heat, Evan puts the helmet on and rushes over to a mirror to check out his look. Ah— wait, no. There's hair in his eyes. He quickly takes off the helmet to sweep the disrupting strands aside before placing it back on again.

And finally, his reflection stands confidently before him, being practically a different person now. He looks... actually pretty good, for a homemade costume thrown together in such a short time! Leaning in closer to see his helmet more clearly, his face reflected in the mirror suddenly reminds Evan why he always keeps hair over his left eye in the first place.

It bears the scar running from the top of his eyebrow to halfway down his cheek that he got from a biking accident when he was a kid— which honestly, would be *pretty* freaking hilarious in hindsight, if it hadn't fucked up his vision permanently and left his whole eye blurry. He does remember Shawn's distressed screech being extremely funny, though.

But will this hinder his performance?

Eh. Evan shrugs. He's lived with it for almost a decade now, and he's been *fine*. It probably won't be a big deal.

Well, now that he's all dressed up, Evan decides it's finally time to take on the face of EX and jump right into the vigilante world! He'll still do his homework, of course... just... later.

I hope Norman can help out!

To make up for his lack of powers, EX snags a couple switchblades from the drawer before sneaking out the window into the alleys. Although he doesn't doubt in the slightest that he can hold up with his fighting skills, it can never hurt to have a couple precautionary weapons.

Just like the last time he headed out, EX sneaks through the roof exit, because if he's going to go look for any situations to deal with, it will probably be easier to spot from above. Confident in his ability to avoid death like the last time he attempted such an activity, EX now takes off on the roofs, zipping from building to building and searching for any possible trouble down below. Of course he gets a little distracted from the roof-hopping and gets a *little* too into it— maybe running along one roof too many— but this activity comes to an abrupt halt the moment he spots a

suspicious individual (at least it looks like someone who's suspicious) creeping around the corner of a shop.

Without a single active neuron in his brain, Evan thinks—*perfect opportunity*, completely ignoring any possible and highly-likely danger of ambushing a random shady person.

Using his severely underdeveloped frontal lobe controlling his poorly-thought-out actions, EX promptly repeats the same action that nearly got him killed before— taking a jump onto a pipe on the side of a building. Except this time it's on *purpose*, where he confidently leaps forward like a monkey towards the pipe and slides down as if it's a fire pole, landing with a *thud!* behind the stranger and drawing out his blade.

“Hey!” EX demands loudly, causing said person to turn around in an instant at his voice. “What do you think you're doing here?”

And almost as if it were in a ridiculous comical superhero show, the suspicious stranger reaches for the side of their pants, fumbling to pull out a gun in the most convoluted fashion ever seen. They almost drop the gun a few times, and EX watches in amusement, completely forgetting that he'll be faced with a deadly weapon in possibly a few seconds.

“G-Get away from me, you weird demon!” the now armed suspicious person stammers, pointing the gun's barrel at EX's face.

Offended, EX only steps closer, pointing back his knife in retaliation. “Who the hell are you calling a demon?! Where are the accusations even—” He stops to glance at his shadow on the wall, which displays the shape of his helmet. “Oh. Yeah. The horns, huh?”

Well, maybe those horns *are* in fact an excellent design choice, EX thinks.

But before he turns back to face the robber criminal person, EX hears the metallic *click* of a gun loading, only being given a few milliseconds to process what's going on. Travelling through the air with incredible speeds, the bullet barely misses EX's face as he manages to swerve aside just in time to avoid being shot. The lead pellet buries itself into the brick wall behind them, cracking apart some of the stone and sending a few pieces of debris shooting out. EX feels a pebble deflect off his helmet.

Dear lord. Surprisingly, this might be more difficult than he anticipated.

It's been months since XVoid has felt this troubled. He tries to not let his life at home affect the working conditions, but there's no possible way to shake off what happened yesterday.

Every time he thinks about his brother's near-death fall, XVoid's chest tightens at what might have happened had he not arrived in time or if he opened his portal in the wrong place. Oh, what *horrible* events that could have occurred—

And while his brother was supposed to be at home, too! XVoid had listened to Grian's explanation of being trapped by the rebellious teen's blanket, leaving him utterly shocked at the sheer audacity displayed. Then if that wasn't enough, he was even told *not to worry about it!*

How can he *not* worry about Evan's careless stunts? He swears, the image of seven-year-old Evan running up to him with a bleeding eye will never leave his list of reasons to worry.

On top of that, he didn't even have a chance to confront his brother this morning, as Evan promptly rushed off to school without another word— which is strange to say the least, considering how

much Evan typically lags behind in refusal to go to “that bloody place,” like he always says.

XVoid sighs. *Teenagers*. Sure, he’s been one too at some point, but it’s much more different when you’re on the parenting end of the situation. At least he hadn’t been suspended for fights or sent to the office every other week, unlike his brother. Alas, there’s nothing he can do but worry for the kid at this point, especially since Evan refuses to listen to just about anything he says.

Deciding to shake these distracting thoughts off his mind, XVoid sharpens his focus back into hero mode, as it would be less-than-ideal to be distracted while on patrol. That is, until his helmet picks up the sound of a gunshot from a few blocks away.

Arguably, responding to a potential gun threat would be the duty of a hero, but XVoid has not yet switched his brain back into work mode and rather processes it with his “worried brother” brain instead, immediately sending him into panic overdrive. Without a moment of hesitation, he bolts off, hopping from portal to portal in the signaled direction of the gunshot.

As XVoid nears the source of the noise, different scenarios begin to fill his mind the longer the silence extends after the initial gun fire.

What was the gunshot for? Who was it directed to? Does the silence mean that the attacker has been disarmed, or is the victim already immobilized?

Despite all this, no amount of overthinking could have prepared XVoid for the sight that would reveal itself once he turns the corner of a building. In an alley right by a store he sees in full view—a small figure (a teenager, most likely?) with a helmet and a significantly taller person holding a gun just engaging in hand-to-hand combat. Although both of the fighters hold their respective weapons (the short figure having a dagger in hand), they both seem to be completely disregarding this fact, instead choosing to use their free fists and legs to battle.

The teen is winning, *somehow*.

XVoid nearly makes it to the front of the alleyway just as the shorter figure holds out their hands, frantically waving and shouting, “*STOP!* Hold on a second!” To his surprise, the opponent actually pauses, lowering the gun.

“...What are your pronouns?” the teenager asks after a second of catching their breath (the voice sounds distorted? Maybe it’s some sort of a modulator, XVoid assumes. It sounds similar to the type he uses). *Hold on, what does this question have to do with anything?*

The taller figure raises an eyebrow, but answers the question regardless. “Um... he slash him?”

“Ah, thanks.” The teen straightens up again. “Now, I can respectfully kick your ass in my thoughts.”

With this comment, the teenager twists their body, swinging a foot straight into the face of the taller one, completely launching him into the dumpsters at the end of the alley, and as a result, also leaves XVoid completely dumbfounded at the series of events that have just unfolded before him. What in the name of Earth did he just *witness*?

The winner of the fight claps their gloved hands together, patting off the dust in a fashion similar to characters in cartoon battles. “That was much easier than I thought, eh?”

And a moment after, the kid turns to face the alleyway entrance, locking eyes with XVoid in a moment of hushed suspense. He can feel the stare from the teen burn onto him, despite their eyes being mostly obstructed by the helmet. And even after three years of experience on the field, he

can't think of a single response to this completely unique situation.

...Until the teen whispers through the helmet– “No way... *XVoid?*”

XVoid blinks. *Ah*. So that's how it is.

Within a minute, the police arrive on scene after the gunshot, finding only a handcuffed robber lying completely wasted against the alley wall and an apologetic note from XVoid explaining the situation. By now, the two have promptly exited the area, with XVoid now being followed closely by his new “friend.”

His companion has introduced himself by the name “EX,” stating nothing other than that limited amount of information (XVoid didn't expect to ask anything else to begin with, but the kid's ambiguity only raises more questions for him).

At first, XVoid only made a loose assumption that this vigilante he's talking to can't be very old, but after only a few minutes of conversation, he's thoroughly convinced that this EX character is undoubtedly in his teenage years, entirely based on speech mannerisms and slang. He's probably heard at least five different phrases that he doesn't know the meanings of. XVoid is unsure of if he wants to ask what an “L plus ratio” means, but he certainly recalls Evan saying things similar to that quite often.

And the two continue to walk along the path, the awkward mood growing exponentially on XVoid's end. EX, on the other hand, appears to be skipping excitedly behind XVoid, tagging along right at his feet. XVoid doesn't know how to feel about EX following him like this, especially when he knows so little about EX... but it would be rude just telling the kid to leave him alone.

“Well...” XVoid begins, hoping his voice can at least emulate some sort of an urgency for EX to hear. “You seem like a nice young man, and it was nice meeting you, but– I have to head along in my patrol now.” He decides to pat EX's shoulder a few times, just for good measure (and to not end the conversation completely stiffly and awkwardly). “Make sure not to stay out for too long, and keep yourself safe, alright?”

With that, XVoid attempts to portal himself ahead, but EX somehow still manages to catch up with a sprint. He tries another time to teleport himself into an alleyway, but the kid still finds him within mere seconds, time after time in his attempts to escape. No matter where XVoid tries to portal to, EX always catches up, calling out his name while rushing in. Oh god, now XVoid feels an *immense* guilt for probably being a massive jerk in turning somebody away...

“Can I come along with you just for a little?” EX asks when he rushes to XVoid's side, hardly masking his elated tone. “I promise I won't cause any trouble! I'm just interested in seeing what you do!”

So EX is most likely new on the field? But he's already incredibly good at fighting...

Still, after seeing EX pull the insane fight against an armed individual, XVoid considers the horrifying possibility of the kid getting into trouble again, and maybe with even larger threats than just an armed robber. Maybe he *should* monitor EX, just for a little...

With a sigh, XVoid replies, “*Alright*, you can follow for a bit. Just make sure to stay close.”

XVoid turns back to face where he's walking and hears EX hiss out a quiet “*Yessss!*” Upon hearing the enthusiasm, XVoid grins and decides that maybe it would be fine to have someone around for a little while. EX does seem to be immensely interested in what he's doing, after all–

and how can he turn down someone like that?

As the two continue down the patrol path, EX throws forward a flurry of general questions for XVoid (stuff like how long he's been working, what his favorite area is, how often he fights crime–), all of which XVoid answers to the best of his ability (at least in keeping up with the kid's incredible talking speed).

After maybe five minutes of rapidfire questioning, XVoid decides to reverse the roles and in turn asks, "What are you doing out here alone?" He's slightly concerned about the idea of a teenager running around initiating fights with armed robbers– well, the kid at least looks like he knew what he was doing back there, but *still*, it's not something anyone can see without questioning the safety of.

"Exactly what you're doing," EX responds with little new information to provide. "I'm just fighting crime, you know?" *Well, that was certainly a vague answer*, XVoid thinks.

"How long have *you* been in the crime fighting field?" He narrows his eyes from inside the helmet (being quite grateful for the visor that will hide his emotions). If he is going to try and find out anything else about EX, will being a bit more subtle help? XVoid decides to try. "You seem pretty good at combat to me."

"You really think so?" EX's voice raises for a second in receiving the compliment, but he promptly drops it down to normal. "Well– I *have* had some training before."

That still answers very little.

Racking his brain for any more questions he can try to throw at EX to know if it's safe to leave the kid alone or not, XVoid attempts one more time to gain any more info, before–

A jarring beeping noise shouts through his earpiece, sparking the screen of his visor with a tint of red and a loud exclamation symbol.

"Attention to all heroes on duty in area B-5!" an urgent voice crackles through the speaker, causing XVoid to straighten up into position. *"False requested backup from a potential Level 3 threat right in the area! Somebody has gotten ahold of an experimental power enhancer, so be prepared for any hard hits. Please head over to the specified location as soon as possible!"*

Glancing over to the map at the side of his eye, XVoid looks to his map right as a danger symbol blinks into view over a building just a few blocks ahead of him. Right over here– *Goodness, me.*

"What's wrong?" EX scampers up to his side, tilting his head in confusion. XVoid begins to warn EX of the danger ahead of them, but he's interrupted by an explosion blasting from the pinpointed building, which sends a puff of billowing smoke and debris shooting out from the source.

"Get out of here right now," XVoid orders sternly, holding out his arm in a signal to stop EX from potentially following. "You don't want to be caught up in this."

In a moment of shock from the sudden explosion, EX stares forward dazedly for a split second before vigorously shaking his head and backing a couple steps away.

It's been a good couple of months since they've gotten a Level 3 warning, that of which signifies a threat to both property and civilians if not acted upon fast enough. Last time was back when Wels was– XVoid purses his lips, shaking his head. *No use in thinking of that.* Hopefully, he can deal with this quickly along with the other heroes.

XVoid hears EX's light footsteps tap away and fade into the distance and lets out a sigh of relief, knowing that the kid will at least be safe from this danger. And without another word, he then proceeds to hop from one portal to another, heading straight for the danger zone.

Almost uncharacteristically, EX actually follows the orders of an authority figure this time. *For a moment, at least.* Like XVoid told him, EX actually does leave the danger zone, before doing a big 180 upon realizing that this is a perfect time to actually see some superheroes in action. Peeking ahead, EX checks to see if XVoid is gone, just so he can commit his minicrime with the reassuring knowledge that his idol won't see him breaking the rules.

Sure enough, the portal hero is far ahead enough that he *surely* wouldn't notice EX deciding to turn directions and just taking a little look at all the cool heroes, right? With a typical teenage-lack of rational thought, EX makes a sprint down the sidewalk towards the scene of battle.

While nearing the building, EX first recognizes a group of heroes bolt into the area of hostility. He first watches a cloaked form streak down from above—flying straight into the area with glowing eyes and palms. Following behind her, EX watches as another hero arrives on pillars of sweets, accompanied by a figure with a tangle of robot arms closing in. Just when EX thinks that this lineup can't get any cooler, he spots a man wearing a hat slide comically across the ground on two banana peels, springing into the action like a rubber band.

“Now, everyone,” the hat-man turns to face a seemingly empty space with a goofy grin. “This is what we call a Level-3 threat! Our friend XVoid explained it in his little internal monologue earlier; I hope you'll vaguely know what it is. But it won't be an easy battle, so sit tight!”

“Mr. Goodtimes—” the candy hero yells out from the top of what seems to be a giant candy golem. “Stop doing that! This is serious!”

“I know I *know*, Impulse,” Mr. Goodtimes responds with a laugh, pulling out a cane out of thin air. “Just letting the audience know what we're in for.” He winks at the nonexistent camera. “Hopefully, you amazing readers still stay for the rest of this story even after our little cameo passes by.”

EX doesn't understand a single word Mr. Goodtimes is saying, but he doesn't question the hero. At least according to what he read, Mr. Goodtimes's cartoon powers have no reasonable explanation, so it will be best to just accept it.

Still, EX continues to watch from the corner in awe at the group—Boatem Inc, was it? The alien hero Pearl and her iconic two-toned hair, candy hero Impulse with his black and yellow suit, cartoon hero Goodtimes and his giant tophat, plus AI hero Mumbo's lively mustached face—well, maybe there was someone else, but he doesn't remember who— and it's not like it matters right now, anyway.

EX considers moving in closer to get a better look at the battle going on, because all that he can really see from this angle is the top of trees. He can *barely* see Pearl whizzing around over the area, and maybe Impulse's head pops out from the foliage occasionally. He begins to trek forward, but is promptly interrupted by an out-of-pitch car horn to his right.

As he turns to see what exactly it is, EX spots from afar a car so incredibly beat-up it might just fall apart any second throttle forward at top speeds, skidding to a stop right by the sidewalk EX stands on. The driver's window rolls down, revealing the face of a man wearing a pair of round, red glasses and flaming hair.

“Hey!” the man calls out, head leaning out of the window. “Are you affiliated with any of those goons over there?”

That’s a dumb question, EX thinks. If he were a criminal, he’d obviously deny it. Will this fire guy really accept it if he just said a simple “no?”

EX barely begins to shake his head when the flame-haired man instantly reaches to the backseat door and pushes it open invitingly. “Then hop in! We’re gonna get you out of here, alright?”

Hesitant, EX feels the stubborn reluctance creep up his chest, since it’s not like he *wants* to leave in the first place. He’d much rather stay and watch Boatem fight a bit more, but he is pretty sure that the driver was not making an offer, but delivering an order. He relents and steps into the car, hoping the frame won’t collapse under its weight.

Inside the car, EX notices that a Glare already occupies one of the backseats– it wears a red bandana around its... head...? Region? –And has a golden clock hanging from its side. He notes the figure in the passenger spot ahead of him before taking a seat next to the mossy creature awkwardly, and EX subtly shifts his vision around to inspect these interesting characters that he has boarded the car with while the two people at the front seats bicker like there’s no tomorrow.

He tries to fetch into the storage of his mind for any names he can match up with their looks... Fire hair and red glasses– he remembers seeing the face somewhere on an article. And the other figure in the passenger seat with a cap and large, spiral-framed glasses, too... accompanied by the Glare... hold on, he recognizes this combo! It’s the Big Eyes Crew– Tango Tek, Keralis, and B-Dubs!

But before EX can think further about this group, he feels something slam against the back of the car as the hunk of metal lurches, sending all the passengers jerking forward. Somebody’s hand then claws through the opening of the window from the roof of the car, reaching into the car in an attempt to possibly grab something.

“Oh, that goddamn *jerk!*” Tango, the flame-haired driver hisses, mashing his foot onto the gas pedal. “That guy we shook off was still following us!”

The poor car reels forward again, its sheer speed managing to pin EX against the back of his seat like a photo on a corkboard. *Holy shit, is this how it feels like to drive? I thought Mario Kart wasn’t an actual depiction of the road!* Despite the car’s sudden increased speed, however, the hand still refuses to leave, only closing in more on the seat EX sits on.

“Drive *faster!*” Keralis, the man sitting in shotgun orders, pointing forward frantically (well, at least EX knows who the fire man is, now). “We’ve *got* to shake him off!”

“Hey, I’m *trying!*” Tango growls, taking a sharp swerve to the left. The hitchhiker makes a *thump* noise on top of the car, but the hand still stays inside the actual compartment– causing Keralis to make a high-pitched noise of distress. Wow, EX thinks. And these guys are supposed to be heroes?

Tango groans, spinning the driver’s wheel one-eighty again. “*Hey* – calm down– stop making that sound. We still have a line of defense.” EX watches as Tango takes a deep breath, hollering out, “B-DUBS! Bite that guy’s hand right now!”

“I thought you’d never ask!” B-Dubs exclaims in a surprisingly human voice from beside EX, shocking him to no end. *B-Dubs can talk?* Out of everything that’s happened today, this has to be the most mind breaking piece of information EX has gained.

With the energy of a feral rat injected with five shots of coffee, B-Dubs lunges forward to attack the intruder's exposed hand, sinking his teeth into the skin with a comical *crunch* noise. A shrill screech rings out from the top of the car as the hand jerks back, finally disappearing from the window. Barely a second later, EX hears more thumping noises from car top and with one final shake, the weight on the roof completely disappears.

So biting people can lead to victory, EX notes. He should try that more in the future.

"Whew, that was a close one!" Tango sighs in relief, the flame in his hair now lowering to a moderate flicker. He lessens his force on the gas pedal, bringing the car into a normal fast speed. "That guy back there had a power that could shrink any living thing, so we're lucky he didn't touch any of us."

"As if you can get any smaller than you *already* are," Keralis snickers, leaning back into his chair smugly.

Tango spins the car in a circle again. Keralis screams.

"Anyway," Tango says, voice seeping with satisfaction from his little revenge. "Hey, civilian—" EX straightens up, promptly aware that Tango is referring to him. "Where can we drop you off? Any general location out of this area should be fine."

EX just says the location of a park near his house, and Tango punches it into the GPS, starting off in its direction. As the car chugs forward, the three heroes stay unusually silent compared to their interactions before, all staring forward onto the road without a single word. Could this be a time to maybe strike a conversation...? Okay, no— he really isn't the best at conversations, especially not with adults. Every single adult he had to talk to was either a teacher or Shawn, and most of those instances were over his "delinquency" or grades.

But he talked to XVoid just fine, didn't he? XVoid didn't seem to dislike his chitchat— either that or he was just trying to be nice, but XVoid still talked back to him! They somewhat had a functioning conversation! EX is pretty certain that if he can talk to someone like XVoid, then he can definitely speak to these three. Well, now that XVoid is on the topic, maybe it won't be so bad of an idea to ask the Big Eyes Crew if they know anything about his hero.

"So, uh—" EX speaks up, quickly pausing to assess the reaction from the heroes sitting ahead of him. Keralis turns his head back slightly into view, and Tango nods back to signify that he's listening. Confirming that he's gotten their attention, EX continues, "You guys are... er— the Big Eyes Crew, right?"

"Hey, you actually know our group name!" B-Dubs exclaims from beside him, causing EX to nearly jolt at the voice. Sometimes, it's hard to remember that the Glare can actually talk.

"That's correct!" Tango chimes in, grinning back at EX. "What's up?"

"Well..." EX pauses for a second to properly assess what exactly he wants to ask about XVoid. He *has* asked XVoid about his years in service and general questions about his job, but... nothing really further than that. "You guys are a part of HC, right?"

Keralis lets out an enthusiastic "*mmm-hm!*" and a part of EX's heart relaxes in confirmation. They're in the same group as XVoid, knowing that at least.

EX clears his throat. "So uh, I'm not sure if you know the hero named XVoid or not, but—"

"Ahhhh, X!" Tango says before EX can even finish his question. "Real nice guy to be around— I

remember he was the one who registered as a hero after Xelqua and I did!”

“He *is* suuuuper secretive though,” B-Dubs adds on, nearly causing EX to jump again. How does he keep forgetting about the fact that B-Dubs can talk? “I don’t think I’ve ever seen ‘im go *anywhere* without that helmet.”

Secretive, B-Dubs says. Yeah, that lines up with what EX has gathered so far– XVoid is super nice! But even still, EX feels as if he’s barely learned anything at all, and if even XVoid’s comrades don’t know that much about him, then that’s definitely saying *something* for sure.

“Bubbles is right,” Keralis confirms. “*But –*” When hearing that magical word, EX’s entire attention snaps towards the man with spiral glasses, barely noticing Tango already beginning to sigh in exasperation as Keralis continues smugly, “I know what XVoid looks like under the helmet.”

“We *get* it– You’re the *special snowflake* who is X’s bestie,” Tango groans, purposely swerving the car at the next turn, causing Keralis to slam into his side of the seat (and EX has to grab the handle to prevent himself from falling on top of B-Dubs).

Keralis only giggles playfully in response to Tango’s frustrations and the two continue to banter playfully like lab partners in a seventh grade chemistry lab. EX tunes out of their conversation after a few minutes anyway, turning his attention to the fight scene happening far behind them with the Boatem crew. Even though he can hardly see from this far away, admiration swells up in his chest upon seeing the heroes’ colorful forms zip around while containing the danger. *They are SO cool.*

After a couple more minutes, the car screeches to a stop next to a sidewalk. “Your stop is here!” Tango announces cheerfully, unlocking the doors. “It was a pleasure to have you here today!”

Exiting the car, EX thanks the driver and waves goodbye to the Big Eyes Crew, then watches the trio pull away onto the road once more. He now stands before the entrance of the park he requested to stop at, staring ahead until the car completely disappears into a speck of white in the distance.

Now that he’s alone, all the comprehensive thoughts finally return to his brain cavity. Today was certainly a *day*, to say the least. He’s met the heroes he looks up to and even *talked* to them– plus, he was even sitting in a car with some of them... and all of this happened in just a few hours?

Fucking crazy. *Bonkers*, even, as Shawn would say.

On the topic of hours, EX realizes that he hasn’t checked the time since leaving school, so he pulls out his phone and turns it on, only to be shocked by the set of numbers on his screen.

“*Six forty-eight?!*” he yells out in bewilderment, nearly chucking the poor piece of technology. “When did time pass so fast?!”

The homework. Oh god, the *homework*.

In a panic, EX bursts off in the direction of his home upon remembering his scholarly duties like never before, instantly setting aside any further thoughts about this afternoon.

He ends up not doing any of the work, regardless.

“Gosh, Evan, I forgot how *terrible* you are at Bedwars,” Norman comments as Evan’s game character accidentally plummets off the sides of the map for the fifth time. “Didn’t Shawn literally invent this minigame? How are you so *bad*?”

“Shut up,” Evan shoots back curtly, grumbling while he waits to respawn. “I don’t play this game like, ever.”

“You lack sufficient skills in *every* video game, actually.”

“Or *maybe* you’re just too good at everything!”

Evan hears Norman laughing on the other end of the call. He’s quite offended, actually.

“Okay, okay— enough about this,” Norman says, returning to a level voice. Evan watches Norman’s avatar speed off into the middle section, sword in hand. “You specifically wanted to call because you wanted to tell a story. So, go ahead.”

Honestly, Evan doesn’t know why he decided to play Bedwars while chatting instead of just straight up calling. He can’t multitask for shit— but he attempts anyway, trying to upgrade some of their team’s gear while narrating his afternoon experience about the robber fight, meeting XVoid, the danger zone, and the car ride with Big Eyes Crew.

“At some point, I managed to get up *real* close up to see what Boatem was doing!” Evan explains while trying to save himself from falling off his own poorly-built bridge. “And some villain latched onto Big Eyes’s car. I nearly got attacked— it was *insane*, I’m telling you!”

He hears Norman’s end go silent for a few seconds before Norman responds with something he hasn’t expected to hear. “Evan.. This whole vigilante thing. I’m not sure if it’ll be— I don’t know— *good* for you? No offense at all, but your decision-making skills are at *concerningly* low levels.”

“You can’t just say that shit and expect me to not take offense!” Evan rolls his eyes playfully, attempting to slip a bit of a laugh into his voice to let Norman know he’s joking. “Okay, but you’re kind of right. You are actually 85 percent of my impulse control, after all. Hey, wait— I know!” Upon gaining a new idea, Evan’s eyes light up. “You can join me in the hero stuff! It’ll be more fun that way!”

Norman makes some sort of a choking beaver noise. “A-Actually, *about that—*”

“Oh and by the way,” Evan says, readjusting his microphone and instantly setting aside what he suggested just moments ago. “Can you ask your brother to make me some sort of a grappling hook?”

“...Why do you want it from my brother?” Norman’s voice raises inquisitively through his headsets. “You can get your own.”

“First of all, I don’t have the money for that. And second, imagine how cool it would be to own something made personally by *Doctor Zaeden Plays*.”

“Okay, but you can just tell him directly.”

“But! It’s easier to make you do it.”

Norman sighs in exasperation. “*Fine.*”

Evan hears the thump of Norman’s headsets being set down and a quiet “*ZAED!* Can you make a grappling hook?”

There’s silence on Norman’s end for a few seconds, and Evan spends this time placing a few more wood planks around the bed defense.

“He said he’ll get right on it,” Norman’s voice cuts through the call a few moments after. “and for whatever reason, he already knew you were the one asking.”

“Oh, really? Huh,” Evan says, puzzled. Zaeden knew just like that? Well, it would make sense— Why would Norman need a grappling hook, after all?

“Anyway, I’ll probably call you over when it’s ready. In the meantime—” Evan watches Norman’s game avatar rush over and punch out all of the blocks he just placed. “These placements are *awful*. It’s like you’ve never played this before. Are you sure you’re the legendary Xisuma’s brother?”

“*HEY!*”

As Norman cackles in his headsets, Evan sighs and his avatar shuffles back miserably to the iron and gold collecting station. He really *is* terrible at Bedwars... Okay, maybe he’s bad at Digbuild in general. Kind of hard to believe Shawn used to be one of the original innovators of the game, especially considering where he is now. What does someone even *do* in accounting, anyway?

“Evan, *watch out!*” Norman’s voice calls out again, causing Evan to swerve his camera up to eye level. While he was sulking in the gold and iron station, a couple players from an opposing team made their way into the base, instantly breaking through the defenses and destroying their bed. Evan barely walks out of the pit before being attacked by two players at once, getting absolutely crushed within seconds. Damn.

Norman manages to fight off the intruders for a few more seconds until they launch him off the edge of the island, and the elimination message for their team pops up in the chat box.

While sitting at his desk in silence, Norman’s groans of despair traverse through Evan’s headsets and into his ears. “Oh my *gosh*— we were *so* close!”

“Well, uh—” Evan laughs awkwardly, clicking out into the lobby. “Anyway! It’s a good thing I can fight better in real life than on PvP!”

“Evan, *no*.” Norman’s tired vexation practically materializes physically. “Please don’t tell me you’re going to do something insane, like joining the fight club.”

“Oh, Normie, that’s a *great* idea, actually!”

Norman wails in anguish.

A coincidence is when something repeats once, by chance. So what does one call it when that same thing keeps happening over, and over, and over again?

For the remainder of the entire week, XVoid has somehow managed to somehow bump into that kid EX time after time whenever he’s sent on patrol. XVoid also initially thought it was a funny coincidence when he saw EX the first and second time, but every meeting after that, it started feeling more like some god of luck was toying with his hero's life from the heavens. Either that, or EX was incredibly good at sniffing him out all the time.

At first, XVoid has to admit he was quite apprehensive about letting EX follow him around due to the events during their first meeting, as he doesn’t want the kid getting in any more dangerous situations. However, EX’s chipper attitude really boosts his morale on the job, and as EX inquires more about his powers and career, XVoid finds that he actually enjoys talking about being a professional hero quite a lot.

“How did you get your powers?” EX asks in awe one day after watching XVoid displace a stray steel beam with his portals.

Frankly, this question surprises him a bit— nobody has truly asked him about the origin of his powers. Even when applying for HC, one is never required to say the exact reason why they have their power. “Well first of all, are you familiar with how powers manifest?”

EX shakes his head. ...Strange, XVoid thinks. He has assumed that since EX is a vigilante of some sort, he will at least know why his powers formed, but XVoid supposes not everybody is aware of it after all. *Ah*, well— it should be fine. He can still explain a little.

“Okay, so...” XVoid pauses for a moment to put it into the most fluent words. “You probably know this already, but not everybody has powers. The potential to manifest superpowers is only present for some people, but we’re not entirely sure what sets us apart from those who don’t have it yet. However, those who do have the potential still need a certain *situation* or *event* to truly spark the flame— if you know what I’m saying.”

“A situation...?” EX repeats after him, seemingly puzzled. “Wow— I didn’t know that. I always just thought people woke up with powers one day.”

Laughing, XVoid replies, “Oh, not at all! It’s kind of like matchsticks: Those of us with powers are given an unlit matchstick, but we need to find the fire to light it up, which usually comes in the form of an extreme situation.”

“Well... what was your reason?”

XVoid cringes under his helmet upon actually remembering the events that led up to his powers manifesting, in which a *certain* younger brother’s recklessness nearly gave him a heart attack once again. *Evan*. God, what is he going to do with that kid...

“Let’s just say that I had to get someone out of trouble,” he responds simply to EX. “It was a really tight situation where I only had a moment to react.”

Although EX’s eyes are difficult to see behind his helmet, XVoid can see the kid’s eyes light up in a moment of suspenseful excitement as he asks, “And did you save them?”

“*Thankfully*,” XVoid chuckles, thinking about Evan’s confused face after being fished out of immediate danger all those years ago. “It was... close, for sure.”

“Wow—” EX awes. “That’s *amazing!* I want to be as great of a hero as you someday...” The kid then clamps his hand over his mouthpiece in embarrassment and immediately rescinds his statement. “Wait, no. That’s so cringe. Pretend I didn’t just say that.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” XVoid laughs warmly again. He has to admit, EX’s enthusiasm is quite flattering. “If anything, it’s real endearing to hear that. And I think with proper training and time, you can become an amazing hero as well.”

XVoid said proper training and time. He has all the time in the world, so it’s a good time to use it for training.

With that being said, some days were great for Evan.

Every consecutive day Evan heads out as EX, he’s managed to run into XVoid on duty. In this time, he’s learned more about the hero than he could have ever imagined!

And following Norman's advice, Evan actually joins the martial arts club! Of course, he doesn't win all the time. Far from that, actually— Evan has probably lost two times as many matches as he's won so far, which probably makes sense, considering most of his losses were due to fouls and the fact that he keeps accidentally breaking rules.

Disregarding that he isn't very good at fighting while abiding by honorable rules, he still learned a couple useful tips for battle, including pressure points and weak spots (like the crotch, but he knows that already).

And other days... were not so great.

Now, he originally went on vigilante duty every single afternoon, but this quickly changed after he received a *certain* comment from Ms. Gem, his calculus teacher.

"Oh, I know you guys have lots of activities after school and such," Ms. Gem says one day as she's dismissing the class. Evan swears he saw her wink at him. "but make sure to do your homework, alright?"

In all honesty, although Evan has little cause to be afraid of Ms. Gem, a ginger-haired woman who's at least five inches (or 13 cm) shorter than him, the fact that she had friendly relations with Shawn is more than enough of a reason to fear her. So, Evan decides that maybe it's for the best to put a little bit of effort into studies and only go out every other day, just to avert the suspicion.

Unfortunately, Shawn still notices this change in activity.

With his afterschool club and criminal-fighting, Evan starts to come home later than usual— sometimes even up to an hour or so after their usual dinner time.

When Evan enters the house to see Shawn sitting silently at the dining table, he instantly knows he's in trouble.

"You're back," Shawn says in a calm (but still somehow terrifying) voice. Although his face remains stoic, Evan sees his hands folded on the table, clenching together so tight the veins might as well pop out. "Where have you *been* all this time?"

At this moment, Evan realizes he's never told Shawn about the martial arts club.

"*Evan*," Shawn says in a more tense voice, eyebrows furrowing.

Right. "Oh— yeah, uh— I... joined the martial arts club at school. I've been going for a few weeks actually, but I kept forgetting to tell you since you usually come home later—"

"*Just a club*," Evan hears Shawn mutter in relief. "Still! I was worried, alright? I thought that— maybe something happened to you! You should have told me much earlier than this!"

And like usual, Evan gets defensive. They argue. And Shawn yells a lecture as Evan stomps up to his room, slamming the door shut.

It's a typical day in the Voros household.

The next day, EX finds that XVoid seems to be just *slightly* out of it. The hero isn't typically talkative, but he's never fully *quiet* either. But today, XVoid barely speaks at all, leaving an awkward gap of silence between the two.

“Hey, is there anything wrong?” EX finally works up the courage to ask after a while. “Just... making sure you’re okay.”

Almost seeming shocked at this question, XVoid turns and gives EX a blank look before sighing and responding, “I’m sorry... you should probably stay a little further from me today. I got into an argument with my brother yesterday and I wouldn’t want to accidentally reflect my bad mood onto you as well.”

“Argument...? Brother?” *So XVoid has a brother too, huh?* “But you’re such a cool guy! What would there be to get mad at you about?”

XVoid shakes his head. “Thanks, I try to be... but sometimes I worry a bit too much and I don’t think my brother likes that.”

“Well, your brother seems like a real di— uh, jerk. I mean, you’re just looking out for him and he’s —“

Oh, wait. Brothers arguing. A brother that worries too much. This sounds awfully like... the way he and Shawn act at home. Could it be that...?

There’s no way. It has to be.

This means that whatever XVoid’s describing, Shawn must be feeling the same way! At this moment, it dawns on EX that maybe, just maybe— he was kind of a *bitch* to Shawn yesterday when he started the fight over Shawn’s worrying.

I should apologize, shouldn’t I?

Evan decides to go home early that day.

Shawn isn’t in the house when he arrives, so he sits down to do his homework (yes, actually) for a little while waiting for his brother’s return. Surely enough, around thirty minutes later, Evan hears Shawn’s car pulling up into the driveway and the sound of the door unlocking.

“Uh, Shawn?” Evan calls out as soon as the door opens to reveal his brother. “Can we talk for a moment?”

Upon hearing the request, Shawn raises his eyebrows in surprise. Which makes sense... because Evan has never asked to talk about things. Ever.

“Okay, so...” Evan says, trying his best to maintain eye contact with Shawn before quickly giving up and instead staring at the corner. “I’ve come to the realization that I was a real jerk yesterday and...”

For the brief moment that he glances back to Shawn’s face, he thinks he sees his brother smile. “I...” Oh, great, now his cheeks feel hot. “I- I just wanted to say... I’m sorry for acting that way...?”

Oh my god. You idiot. Was that an apology or a question?

Evan wants to curl up in a little ball dear *god* that was *so* embarrassing. This confrontation went *nothing* like he planned he must have stuttered or gotten in incomprehensibly quiet a bunch of times and the fact that he can’t maintain eye contact with even his *brother*—

“I accept your apology,” Shawn replies warmly, grinning broadly. “I am also sorry for being overbearing.”

“Eh— oh?” Well, that was much easier than he expected. He thought Shawn would berate him or ignore him or something, but... none of that happened. So yay?

“But!” Shawn says cheerfully.

Never mind. He knew it wouldn't be so easy.

“You should still be more responsible in the future as well. Do know that I am only worried about you getting hurt if you keep acting like this, and...”

Oh great, now Shawn has gone all Parent Mode™, there's no way to stop him until he's actually done. Though Evan now understands that his brother is only showing concern, it's still incredibly annoying nevertheless. He'd honestly rather be doing calculus right now, and that's saying a lot.

I bet XVoid isn't like this to his brother, Evan thinks. He would understand.

XVoid can't help but to think about his younger brother when EX walks beside him during a day on duty while complaining about his own brother.

“Yeah, I've got a brother too, and he nags me a *lot*,” EX explains, balancing along the curbside as he walks. “Always talking about what I can do and what I can't— it's like he thinks I'm made of ultra-combustible glass, or something! He acts like if I step out onto the streets by myself, I'd explode!”

“I think you are a fully capable person,” XVoid says, frowning. EX *is* sturdy, especially for such a young fighter. It's a bit strange to hear someone think he's a being that needs to be protected. “Your brother should respect your choices.”

Upon saying that, XVoid realizes that it's awfully hypocritical of him to criticize EX's brother when perhaps— he is the same way. He did realize he was being overbearing last night, but he still went on a parental spiel about safety afterward... Evan most definitely has the same feelings of annoyance towards him.

“Ex-aaactly!” EX sighs, breaking XVoid out of his thoughts. “You get it! Wish he'd just listen to me sometimes, you know?”

XVoid nods. “I hope you can confront him about it sometime.”

EX is right, he thinks— he *should* try harder to listen to Evan. XVoid decides tonight, once he gets home, he's going to make a proper apology without any tangents this time.

The bell has just rung for lunch time, and while Norman packs away his stationary, Evan narrates his previous day out to his friend.

“This is the best day of my life!” Evan thinks out loud, leaning back in his chair, nearly knocking over Norman's water bottle. “Well— today *and* yesterday. *Okay*, the rating of today might just change after I get my test grade back, but it's the best day of my life at this moment.”

“What could have happened yesterday to take the ‘best day of your life’ title from that one time you set the basketball court ablaze in middle school?” Norman asks, grabbing his water before

Evan can create another dent in it.

“Now that you mention it, I don’t think yesterday’s event could possibly top the Basketball Arson Case, but it does come pretty close!” Evan says, twisting his body to face Norman and leaning in to increase suspense. “Get this: Shawn *actually* apologized to me for worrying all the time.”

Feigning a gasp and pretending to stumble back, Norman’s hand shoots up to his mouth in a moment of over-dramatic surprise. “*You’re kidding!* That’s something I never expected to hear!”

“*Right?* ” Evan grins, revealing his entire set of teeth. “I had to slap myself once to see if it was actually real!”

Yesterday, seemingly out of nowhere, Shawn called Evan over to apologize for being worrisome and overbearing all the time, even offering a plate of cookies he had baked just earlier. Evan has to admit that it felt *really* nice– it actually motivated him to finish his homework early and study for the calc test, just because his mood improved immensely.

“And well, because I *actually* studied last night, I actually knew how to do the questions,” Evan says, huffing proudly. “God– math is always such a pain. I hope I manage to pass this time. I really worked my ass off for this.”

“You know–” a voice sounds from the front of the room, causing Evan and Norman to turn their heads and see Ms. Gem standing at the door of her classroom, holding a cup of coffee with an amused smile. “I don’t want to give any spoilers in particular, but... I’m very glad to say that you boys *both* did well today.”

“*Ms. Gem!* ” Evan squeaks, straightening up into a proper sitting position. “What are you doing back here?!”

“Oh, I only came back to get my mug, but I overheard you two talking about the test. I’m pleasantly surprised, Evan! It’s nice to see you finally putting some effort into your studies, eh?” Evan feels his face flush up, just like it did when he was apologizing to Shawn a few days earlier.

“Now, I’d love to tell you more, but I’ve got lunch waiting for me.” Ms. Gem takes a sip from her cup, stepping back into the hallway with a wink. “You both should hurry along as well, before everything sells out.”

“Will do, Ms. Gem!” Norman waves goodbye enthusiastically for his teacher. “See you tomorrow!”

As the two follow Ms. Gem’s instructions and begin to leave for the cafeteria themselves, Evan continues liveblogging his stream of consciousness to Norman.

“It kinda feels good to be appreciated by people. ” Evan says while the two pass by rows of cheesy hallway posters. “And not to be cringe on main, but do you think... if XVoid saw me trying hard, would he be proud?”

“Oh, definitely!” Norman reassures. “You said he’s got a brother too... right? He probably would feel the same way if his brother tried really hard in studies as well, I think.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Evan thinks about XVoid’s smiling eyes and a nice pat on his shoulder. *God, I’m so cringe.*

When Shawn checks the test score notification from Evan's calculus class, he's greeted by a positive comment by Ms. Gem detailing Evan's improvement on this test. "A surprising score, but I'm pleased," Ms. Gem wrote. "Mr. Voros seems to be finally using all of his potential, and I cannot wait to see his future in my class."

Eighty-four percent. The largest smile rises from Shawn's chest and onto his face.

"*SHAWN!*" Evan's excited voice booms from behind the door a second before the entrance bursts open and he rushes into the house, waving the test paper over his head. "I got a B! *Look!*"

Turning over to face his excited brother, Shawn nods, grinning so intensely he can feel his cheeks pull. "Yes, I just saw—" He holds out his arm, patting Evan on the shoulder. "Evan— I am *so* proud of you."

And looking at Evan's enthusiastic response combined with this unexpected turnout might have just made today one of the best days he's had in *years*.

Chapter End Notes

how the fuck do you write british slang. dear lord i think i would simply pass away if i gave evan and norman any more british slang so you'll just have to deal with what i could include here

anyway gang how are you feeling about our main duo being dumbasses? yes, they are like this naturally. they both share one derpy, overworked braincell

FANART TIME!!

EVERYBODY STOP AND LOOK watch [this animation](#) by FOURamRadi0 on youtube!!!

and [evan pancake](#) by ilikecheeseitslit, anyone?

the sneaking suspicion

Chapter Summary

chapter 3: in which a few clues get set loose, and a panicked older brother does everything to throw the eyes off his back.

Chapter Notes

"don't make this as long as chapter 2," i said to myself. "keep it under 10k words," i repeated as i wrote.

end result: 11,256 words. my fucking god.

also, sorry i went a bit overboard in the norman and evan brain worms. it's all copium. i miss their canon sources, man. anyway the first portion of this chapter is just two mentally ill teens banter: the episode. anyway i hope by now you realize this isn't actually a real superhero au, but rather copium for my faves interacting /jjjj thanks for understanding

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

Everyone knows to look both ways before crossing the street— at least, most of the time.

Shawn gripped his thirteen-year-old brother's hand as the two walked briskly along the city streets.

"Do you really have to come with me?" Evan whined, dragging his feet along the pavement in a petty, fruitless struggle against Shawn's grasp. "I'm only going to meet Norman!"

"The last time I let you go off on your own, you ended up in the next city," Shawn said sternly, pulling Evan along. "And I'll only be taking you there; then I'll be leaving you alone, okay?"

Evan made a couple more noises of protest as the two then approached a crosswalk, where Shawn reached to push the walk signal button. However, this was quickly interrupted by shouting from a distance and a faint sound of feathers beating.

"HEY— get back here!" a vaguely male-sounding voice yelled, footsteps closing in. "Somebody, stop that bird!"

Whirling around, Shawn turned to see a lanky neon-green haired man dressed in an apron and square glasses rushing towards him, waving his hands frantically. "Oh hey, Joe!" Shawn waved back upon seeing his old friend, all while while some sort of a red creature sailed towards him—

And to no surprise, the bird crashed directly into Shawn's face, sending both barrelling out of the way, ultimately loosening his grip on Evan.

"Oh my gosh— I'm so sorry!" Joe scrambled, grabbing the bird and pulling it back towards

himself, to which it squawked in protest. “I don’t know how he flew away so fast!” Then, holding the bird like a burger, Joe scowled as he scolded the winged creature. “Bad G! You hurt my friend over there!”

“It’s fine—” Shawn sighed, patting his hair to brush off the bird’s stray feathers. “I’m completely fine...”

Still, Joe apologized profusely, even making his bird say sorry as well (though it sounded mildly annoyed, somehow). After Shawn assured them that they were okay and the two promptly left, he turned back to where Evan was previously... Was.

“Evan?”

As Shawn spun around in search for his brother, his heart froze in horror at the sight unfolding before him: Evan skipping onto the red-light streets with an inconveniently placed semi-truck barreling directly towards him.

“EVAN!”

And at that moment, Shawn wasn’t sure exactly what happened. He held out his hands in a panic, then watched something dark **flash** before his eyes, opening up underneath Evan only moments before the truck ran over the spot— Then just like that, as if he blinked— Evan disappeared from sight, dropping down right back next to Shawn in an instant.

“...Huh?” Evan spun around in all directions, confused at the series of events that had just occurred. “Why am I back— eh?”

Unfortunately, Shawn had absolutely no idea either— as he was left just staring at the spot that Evan should have been in...

It was something black. Something dark, like a rip through the space, but he only saw it for a split second to tell exactly what it was. What he did know is whatever happened, it was a clear sign of supernatural interference— whatever that suggested.

Shawn stared down at his palms, a frown staining his face with skepticism.

...Maybe he should talk to Kasper about it later. But for now, Evan was already back to tugging at his sleeve, complaining about the walk ahead. He’d better take the kid over to his friend, and then think over that strange event.

There’s around five minutes until Civics ends, and Evan can barely stand the wait. He’s already filled out his bingo, taken his notes (if one can count scattered words and low-effort doodles as notes at all), and spent all the reserves of his little attention span— so when he sees Norman’s sketchbook lying on the desk right there for the viewing, he quite literally grabs that opportunity.

“I haven’t seen your drawings in a while, Normie,” Evan says, sliding the notebook over to his side of the desk. “Can I take a look?”

“I suppose—” Norman shrugs, not taking his eyes off the projector screen. “Be careful with the pages, alright?”

“Hey, I’m always careful!”

“Can you really say that about how you nearly blew up the entire lab last week?”

“Well, but... I mean—”

“Gosh, Evan— *whatever*. Just don’t rip it into shreds, or something.”

With his friend’s approval, Evan opens the notebook and begins slowly flipping through the pages. Although Evan himself isn’t really an artist, he always finds Norman’s drawings to be fascinating — seeing the various sketches of their city heroes and characters from shows they always watch together. And now, he can even recognize all of the heroes from HC!

As Evan flips to a page near the middle of the notebook, he spots a costume design for a hero outfit that seems a little... familiar. The suit is crudely colored with a bright shade of pink, accompanied by a yellow “W” on the center of the chest that he *swears* he has seen somewhere before. As he flips to the next page, he sees more drawings of the outfit from the previous page, with a couple added details of a mask and such.

Hold on. He remembers this now... from the first day he was looking through the list of heroes in HC, this costume undoubtedly belongs to—

“*YOU’RE* Worm-Man?!” Evan exclaims, turning to face Norman with bubbling surprise.

For a nanosecond, Norman continues jotting down the notes on his board before registering what Evan actually said and nearly throwing his pencil in a panic.

“*EVAN!*” Norman hisses and clasps his palm over Evan’s loud mouth, eyes frantically darting around the classroom to check for any stares. “*Shut up!*”

“*So you are!*” Evan says, muffled through Norman’s hand, and Norman whacks him in the shoulder as a second warning.

When Evan finally closes his stupid mouth, Norman sighs in relief, burrowing his head underneath his arms for a few seconds, just to calm down a little. “Evan... just... get on Discord.”

The two teens then pull out their phones underneath their desks, clicking into each other’s direct messages.

BanaNorman: Yeah i’m worm man

BanaNorman: Gosh i forgot about my sketches i knew i should have tossed them
tax evander: bro how did i not figure it out before

tax evander: LMFAOOOO HELP YOU LOOK EXACTLYG LIKE THE WORM MAN WIKI
PHTOO

tax evander: HELP YOU DIDNT EVEN CHAGNE THE FUCKGINF BRAID LAMAOOO

BanaNorman: LISTEN

BanaNorman: I don’t want to undo it okay plus ponytails feel weird now

tax evander: boy youre real lucky nobody here gives a shit and sees you as a social outcast

BanaNorman: Look who’s talking

BanaNorman: Anyway i see you typing there just shut up for one second and wait until the bell rings

After what feels like five years to Evan (it was actually one minute), the bell finally lets out its shrill cry, signifying the end of class. Without waiting for another second, Evan instantly opens his mouth to ask a question, but Norman stops him with a quick glare.

“*Wait,*” Norman orders, and Evan nods, though barely containing his excitement.

A few seconds pass.

“So, about—”

“Evan.”

“How long are you gonna make me wait? Literally everyone’s gone by now!”

“Half of the class is still packing up.”

Good point. Evan reluctantly waits, again.

And at long last, once the last of the class trickles out the door, Evan wastes no time in pestering Norman. “So *that’s* why you were warning me about being a vigilante!” he says, vibrating in the seat like a child who downed a shot of espresso. “Because you’re *also* a hero!”

“I suppose you do know now, huh?” Norman says gloomily, letting out a long sigh and pressing at his temples.

“Normie, if you had powers this whole time, why didn’t you ever defend yourself?” Evan jabs Norman playfully. “Against bullies and assholes picking on you or whatever? You could totally throw them, I bet.”

“I mean, I *could*, but... It’s just that some things aren’t worth exposing myself for.”

“Well, what *is* worth exposing yourself?”

“I dunno... Free ice cream for superheroes?” Norman laughs. “Or maybe not. I’d probably get sick of it in a day.”

Norman’s laughter dies down promptly as he returns to a pondering expression on his face. “Yeah... I was honestly really worried when you mentioned you were going to join the forces because I didn’t think you’d last a day without getting involved in some sort of an accident. Actually– I’m more surprised Shawn hasn’t found out about it yet than anything else.”

“Shawn’s *never* gonna find out,” Evan scoffs, leaning back in his chair with arms propped behind his head. “My brother wouldn’t notice I was doing vigilante stuff if I was running around outside his *window* yelling his name. I’ll be *fiiiine*.”

Nudging Norman slightly, Evan continues, “Speaking of brothers, does Zaeden know? About you being a hero?”

“Actually... yes. He did figure it out eventually– when I came home injured one day,” Norman says with a short laugh, tensely bouncing his leg up and down. “He grilled me like I was a subject in an experiment, asking about what happened to me and who to track down– I had to explain everything to him of course, and just a few days after that, he just quit his job to join me at HC. It’s ridiculous, but I wouldn’t expect anything else from Zae.”

“So is your brother...” Evan thinks to Zaeden’s face– a blonde man with messy hair and purple eyes like Norman’s– trying to correlate it with any hero on the HC wiki. “Z... Zedaph...?”

Norman nods. “His hero name is Zedaph, yes. Says he got it from mixing ‘Zae’ and ‘PHD,’ which is the stupidest thing ever if I’ll be honest, but it worked out!”

After bursting into hysterical laughter over Zaeden’s name, the two pack up their stuff and continue the talk outside— which is probably for the better, because getting walked in on by a teacher while discussing hero matters would not be ideal. As the two step out onto the sidewalk, the conversation progresses with Norman walking on the ground as god intended and Evan balancing on top of the little curb like the brainless teen he is.

“Do you ever regret letting Zaed find out?” Evan asks while he hops across one curb to another.

“*Totally* not asking in the case that Shawn discovers me, which *totally* won’t happen, by the way.”

“Oh, definitely not!” Norman says, lighting up with a grin. “I was incredibly relieved, actually— it felt like a weight had been lifted off my chest, you know what I’m saying?” He then wrinkles his nose into a slightly embarrassed frown. “I mean... okay, maybe now that you mention— I do regret *some* of it. He won’t stop embarrassing me around the others at HC!”

Evan snorts as he twirls around on the curb. “What? Does he talk about your grades like a proud parent?”

“*Gosh*, no— I would actually punch him if he did that,” Norman says, rolling his eyes. “ But he just makes it *painfully* obvious that we’re related. Always patting me on the head with a mech arm and all the times he nearly called me by name— I’d be surprised if the entirety of HC hasn’t figured out we’re brothers yet.”

Pausing in his steps, Norman pulls out his cellphone and adds, “He does *not* stop messing with me. Zae has a public Tumblr account, you know?”

“He has a *WHAT!?*” Evan shouts out, jumping down from the curb in shock. As he scrambles towards Norman, he makes grabby hands for the phone. “Show me!”

“Here, look—” Norman taps the Tumblr app, bringing the screen to Zaeden’s page. “He keeps reblogging the stuff from my personal blog onto *that* account.”

Scrolling through Zaeden’s page, Evan finds that the majority of Zaed’s posts are just second-long clips of shenanigans at HC, reblogs of various chemistry jokes, images of pretty rocks, and a post about binder safety thrown in there somewhere. “I don’t see any of your posts here.”

“That’s because I made him delete it. I’ve had to fight him physically over this issue *three* times, Ev. He gains traction *so fast*, and I’m not looking to get sniffed out by his followers.”

“Oh so he’s pretty popular here? Can he reblog my memes?”

“You need psychological help.”

“Stop telling me things we’ve already established. *Anyway!*” Evan hands Norman back his phone, skipping ahead on the sidewalk. “Since you told me this secret of yours, I think it’s appropriate for me to tell a secret back, eh?”

Raising an eyebrow and catching up with a few long strides, Norman shoots Evan a look that signifies *go on*.

“So, remember our first meeting?”

“How can I ever forget, honestly?”

“Okay, true. Well—” Evan inhales, recalling events of that fateful day in seventh grade. “*I* was the one who stole your lunch four years ago. And then I offered you my sandwich because I felt bad. But it doesn’t matter now, since we’re besties, right?”

“Evan, I don’t know how to tell you this...” Norman’s face twists in trying to hold back a grin. “but... I knew about that the whole time. You clearly looked like you felt bad, so I decided to give you a second chance.”

“*Fuck*,” Evan snuffles dramatically, pretending to wipe a tear off his face. “You’re *such* a loser.

Never change, Normie.”

As it turns out, neither Norman nor XVoid are scheduled for duty that day, so Evan simply chooses to go home and finish his chemistry homework in his free time. Even if he can't hang out and patrol around, coming home to a plate of Shawn's muffins is more than good enough for him.

However, to his fortune, both his best friend and hero are supposed to be on the job the day after. So as the next day arrives, Evan sprints off to school with his costume shoved in his backpack and the helmet stuffed poorly in his lunch bag (which Shawn fortunately doesn't notice). Then, when lunch arrives, Evan practically begs Norman to let him follow to duty after school.

“Absolutely *not!*” Norman huffs as Evan wails in dismay at the rejection. “You'll get us both killed! What if you tell some stupid joke and I lose focus laughing?”

“Then that's *your* problem!” Evan retaliates, shaking Norman's shoulder like a maraca. “If you die from my stupid jokes, that's just a skill issue!”

“Ev, please— if I get hurt because of you, Zaeden will *not* hesitate to put you in your place. This is a warning for you, too!”

“Then don't get hurt, stupid!” Evan rolls his eyes. *Typical* Norman, always worrying for the worst. “You're a professional hero, right? And you've even got powers! Come *on*. At least let me follow you to the HQ?”

“*No*,” Norman orders sternly, slamming his locker shut. “You're going to get me in trouble for taking in an unauthorized individual. I'm not letting you follow me.”

“Everybody literally knows me already! They're not gonna mind. Plus, me and XVoid have a pretty tight bond, so he'd vouch for me!”

Norman does not respond, but the look he gives Evan says *no* louder than words ever can.

Now that all of his debating has come to a dead end, Evan pulls out his final trump card. “If I agree to playing Mario Kart with you, can I tag along?”

Norman freezes as his eyes widen, which shows Evan he's struck the perfect deal. The thing is, he typically *never* offers to play console games with Norman. It's not like Evan is bad at games per se (or at least that's what he tells himself), but Norman's sibling rivalry with Zaeden has forged him to be really, *really* good at competitive games. Evan has seen the two brothers play against each other on Mario Kart before, and the screen looked like a contest between two gods constantly neck to neck in the rankings.

Compared to Norman, Evan's plays are like a toddler just learning fine motor skills. *Every single time*, Norman would crush him by a landslide to the point where Evan just decided to quit playing Mario Kart with Norman altogether. Still, Norman always asks to play with Evan, because nowadays Zaeden is often busy at work with little time to play games like he did before, to which Evan always makes an excuse to get out of it.

And despite Norman admittedly being the braincell-holder of the two, when Evan actually offers to play Mario Kart, it's a deal of a lifetime that Norman cannot refuse. Evan is well aware of all the logical reasoning Norman is willing to throw out for a good 'ol kart match and will *not* hesitate to take advantage of it.

“Well...” Norman leans against the locker, twirling his braid around his finger in contemplation.

“I... *suppose* you can follow me this *one* time. *Just once!* Then after that, I’m not letting you come with me until you’ve had more hero experience, *alright?*”

Promptly, Norman reaches into his backpack and pulls out his entire Nintendo Switch (which is still probably the least shocking thing Evan has seen all week). “Now, you’d better finish your lunch quickly! But I’ll have you know— I’ve been practicing ever since!”

Suddenly, Evan regrets striking this deal.

As the two exit the school with Evan still reeling in embarrassment from his devastating loss hours ago, the two teens slowly make their way towards the HC Headquarters. However, on the way to the faculty, they stop over at local store *Horsehead* because Evan is running low on snacks in the house.

“Dude, I say this every time, but this place’s managers are so fucking *weird*,” Evan whispers to Norman, stuffing the chips into his backpack as they exit the store. “Dunno what the hell xB has going on, but Hypno did *the thing* again— did you see it? The thing where he appears behind you out of nowhere? *Do you think he has powers?*”

“He’s always like that.” Norman shrugs, seemingly unbothered by (or rather, now used to) the store manager’s strange behavior. “I don’t think he’s ever talked about it, though— even if it is pretty obvious he has supernatural abilities.”

“Hey, speaking of powers,” Evan says, completely turning the conversation from the previous topic. “You never told me how *your* power works!”

Upon hearing the request, Norman’s eyes light up with a sparkle from behind his glasses. “Oh, it’s not too big of a deal, but...” In beginning his explanation, Norman’s excitement bleeds through his voice, instantly betraying his preface. “Well, in short, my ability allows me to travel through the ground! I can go through floors like I’m swimming, so I often assist in rescue missions to get civilians out of danger...”

“Ayyy, so that’s where the name *Worm- Man* comes from! I assumed it’s because you’ve got the confidence of a worm, or something.”

Norman sighs in exasperation. “*Evan.*”

After giggling at his own joke, Evan plays with a grappling hook in hand, tossing the device between his hands casually. “Well maybe *I* don’t have powers, but this thing is *great*. You gotta thank Zaeden for me sometime.”

“Did you get to use it already?” Norman asks, cringing as he watches Evan throw the grappling hook up and catch it with one hand. “Gosh— I’m glad Zae built this with safety precautions. I can’t imagine you using a traditional grappling hook without getting hurt.”

“Yep, I’ve fought a couple people with it already!” Evan now twirls the grappling hook around carelessly, proving Norman’s point further. “Oh, the first villain I fought using this hook said her power was like... spine curvature, or something like that. Which is fucking weird. *Everyone* has a naturally curved spine, right?”

“Not really,” Norman responds, frown hanging on his face. “I mean, I have scoliosis, which is something...”

“Eh? What kind of an STD is that?”

Norman sighs and facepalms. “No, I meant not everyone’s spines are particularly as ‘curved’ as people with— You know what? Never mind.”

Fortunately for Norman, Evan doesn’t ask further, because he’s already distracted with another subject at hand (yes, again).

“Normie, look!” he exclaims, pointing over at a pool of overflowed water on a grassy patch next to the sidewalk. “That’s the pipe leak I was telling you about the other day! Looks like those idiots still haven’t fixed it, so…”

Looking back and forth at Evan and the watery lawn, Norman shoots Evan a worried glance. “You’d better not be suggesting what I think you are.”

“Oh, so you *know* what I’m suggesting.”

“Come on… Wasn’t a verbal explanation sufficient?”

“You know me well enough to answer that.”

“There’s *people* around here. What if they see me?”

“So? I’ll cover you.”

Giving Evan one last uncertain grimace, Norman finally relents and makes his way over to the pipe with Evan bouncing behind him like an excited puppy. Carefully, the two squat down, Evan moving to a spot that blocks Norman from the view of other pedestrians as Norman shakes out his wrist in preparation for his power showcase.

“I usually have my entire body under the ground when I use my power just so I can see my target better, but I suppose I can just search around from above,” Norman explains, rolling up his sleeves. “*Goodness*, I am not thrilled at the idea of touching that damp spot…”

“Don’t be a pussy!” Evan smacks Norman on the shoulder playfully, causing the blonde teen to yelp. “It’s just some water! And you’ve got *powers!*”

“My powers don’t guard against getting soaked,” Norman mumbles, reluctantly hovering his hand over the spot. “Okay, okay, fine. Here we go—”

Like an eagle diving for its target from the sky, Norman plunges his entire arm into the dirt next to the puddle, all the way up to his elbow. After swishing his arm around in the dirt for a few more seconds, Norman makes a delighted noise, then reaches in with his other arm as well. Evan hears the sound of a metal pipe clanking and the trickle of water promptly stopping.

Pulling his arms cleanly out the ground, Norman rolls his sleeves back down and says, “There. Is that good?”

“*Holy shit*,” Evan whispers softly, eyes wide with awe. “Your arm went straight through the ground— You’re just like Secco from *Jojo’s Crazy Journey!*”

Norman cringes. “*Please* don’t compare me to him.”

“Do you want some sugar cubes?”

“Evan, *please*.”

It doesn’t take long after that to make it to the headquarters (given that the two spend a couple minutes arguing back and forth about the logistics of eating a sugar cube). Evan has never actually *been* inside the HC headquarters personally, having only heard it through XVoid’s vague descriptions, so his heart practically vibrates against his chest. However, Norman stops at the

entrance to the local pet store, much to Evan's confusion.

"*Hills Pet Central?*" He wrinkles his nose, turning to Norman. "Didn't you buy food for your tarantula just two days ago?"

"Oh yes, Annie's got enough to eat," Norman says while returning a grin to Evan. "We're not here for that, though."

Grabbing onto Evan's hand, Norman pulls his friend into the store and walks through the rows of chattering critters and up to the main desk. There, they see a man with neon green hair feeding a couple birds on his desk; then, upon seeing the teens, he waves enthusiastically to the duo.

"Hello, Joe!" Norman greets, offering a wave of his own. Evan follows up with a slightly awkward nod, hoping that matches up to respectability standards.

"Norman and Evan!" Joe says, leaning over the desk. "Howdy! Need a place to do homework again?"

"Not this time!" Norman winks. "We're here for *the job*."

Joe's eyebrows raise in amusement as he looks back and forth to the teens. "*Evan too?*"

Now even more confused, Evan glances over at Norman, who nods with a wide grin. And turning back to see Joe's response, Evan sees a sparkle in Joe's eyes (or maybe it's the glasses reflecting sunlight, but he can't tell).

"*I see*," Joe nods slowly, stepping out from behind his desk and opening a door labeled *STAFF ONLY*. "Then, come right this way!"

Stepping into the cramped room as Joe flips the light switch on, Evan eyes the shelves around him, seeing absolutely nothing interesting at all. "Why are we in a closet? This is like, a prime murder location in horror movies." Joe only responds in a laugh after shutting the door, which raises Evan's suspicions more— but Norman's grip on his hand seems to be relatively relaxed, so maybe it will be fine.

"Welcome, Evan," Joe says, placing his hand on a scanning pad attached to the wall. "to the headquarters entrance."

Immediately after Joe finishes his sentence, the pad emits a beeping sound, and the back shelves split apart to reveal a glowing set of elevators in its place. Evan's jaw drops at the display, which he only has a moment to pick it back up, as Norman tugs his hand along towards the doors.

Once Evan steps onto the elevator's smooth marble flooring, Norman rummages around in his backpack to pull out a fancy silver card engraved with "HC," swiping it along another scanning pad on the elevator wall. The glass doors then slide close and with a slight rumble, and their carriage begins its descent as Joe waves goodbye from above.

As the elevator passes by floors on its way down, Evan takes this time to glance around the elegant box, just out of boredom. He notices silly posters hung up on the walls featuring various heroes that he has all met and recognized over the course of a few weeks, as well as what looks like maybe a bird perch sticking out near the roof.

Finally, after a minute or so of non-copyright jazz music, the elevator comes to a stop, doors opening with a dramatic *hiss*. From here, it leads to a row of rooms, each labeled with numbers from 1-10.

“Changing rooms,” Norman says, opening one of the doors. “For costumes and such.” He pauses, looking at Evan with a forlorn grimace. “*Please* tell me you have an outfit with you...”

“No heart attacks for you today, Normie!” Evan exclaims, patting his backpack triumphantly. “I’ve got my fit all lined up.” Throwing open the door adjacent to Norman, Evan then steps inside and says, “I’ll see you on the other side, then!”

Getting his costume on takes basically no effort, as Evan now only wears the bleach-stained jacket and over-shoulder belt along with the helmet—because who’s gonna know, anyway? The chances of someone like *Shawn* seeing him from inside a hero facility are probably lower than his odds of actually winning a Mario Kart game against Norman. After shoving his backpack into an entertainingly high-tech locker with a number pad keycode, Evan adjusts his helmet one last time, properly securing his persona as EX before stepping out of the room.

It takes Norman a bit longer to finish up, but after another minute of waiting, his friend exits the room wearing that awfully hilarious hot pink—bright yellow color combination. EX snorts and the pink-fitted hero glares at him.

“You’re laughing at *my* outfit, but seriously...? *That’s* all you’re wearing?” Norman strides up to his friend, bright pink headband fluttering behind as he makes his way forward. “You look like a third grader’s edgy OC reject.”

“Oh, *fuck you!*” Evan retorts, though the laugh through his helmet completely betrays the tone. “You only know that because you *were* the third grader drawing edgy characters. Normie, you can’t get past your bestie!”

“First of all,” Norman places a firm hand on Evan’s shoulder, staring sternly into his eyes. “you have no proof. I’ve already put my old Instagram account on private and removed all the followers. Second of all, *don’t call me by my real name when we get in*. Like I said, everybody pretty much already *knows* I’m Zedaph’s little brother, and I’m not about to dox myself even more than Zed already has.”

“Right, *right*,” EX nods compliantly, giving Norm—er, Worm-man’s hand a quick pat before shifting out of the grasp. “From now on, you have been promoted to Worm Boy!”

Worm-Man cringes, but EX can tell he has nothing more to fight back with.

The two leave the hall of changing rooms and step out into the open lobby, where Evan finds a few of his fellow heroes hanging around the facility. There’s Tango in the corner lying underneath his car with tools sprawled out all around him, Stress gearing up with a set of sparkly armguards, and Mumbo bent over piecing together a large machine. In the air, Pearl zips around with papers in her hand, only stopping when she notices the two teens standing together.

“Hey there, boys!” Pearl greets, landing gracefully before them and turning to EX. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in the headquarters before!”

“Yep,” EX says with a nod. “It’s my first time actually inside!” Giving Worm-Man a playful jab, he adds on, “Wormie here was the one who took me, actually.”

“I was too distracted with Mario Kart to consider how this might be breaking the rules...” Worm-Man mutters, crossing his arms dejectedly. “Also what? *Wormie?*”

“Don’t worry about it!” Pearl assures with a wink. “Cub was planning to invite you eventually, because you spend so much time around us anyway. Speaking of which, I bet XVoid will be

thrilled to see you!” Hopping up again, Pearl promptly floats back into the air and says, “I can lead you to him right now!”

Nodding excitedly, EX grabs Worm-Man’s hand without hesitation and follows after Pearl enthusiastically. As the three pass through the lobby’s expanse, several other heroes wave hello, sending a warm feeling of welcomeness washing through EX. It looks like they *do* know him enough to say hi!

Pearl halts in front of a room segmented off from the main lobby with a wall of glass, landing beside a blonde man with a messy ponytail and lab coat, which EX recognizes instantly as Norman’s mad scientist of an older brother.

“Pearl!” Zaed— well, *Zedaph* exclaims upon Pearl’s descent. “What can I do for you?”

“Hey, Zed!” Pearl steps to the side, lightly nudging the teens over. “I was just taking these guys here to see XVoid. Is X still in the assessing chamber?”

“We’ve just finished our first trial, actually,” Zed says as he motions towards the glass casing, where EX can see his hero standing in a room full of various obstacles, stretching out his arms. “Let me just call him out.” Pushing down on the intercom button, Zed leans into the speaker and says in a sing-songy voice, “X! There’s someone I think you might want to see!”

From inside the chamber, XVoid turns his head up towards the window and perks up in surprise upon seeing EX. Within seconds, he rushes to the exit and bursts out from the chamber like an excited puppy.

“Worm-Man and EX!” he greets, upbeat. Although XVoid’s face is entirely obstructed other his electrical visor, EX can sense a wide grin underneath the helmet. “I didn’t expect to see you two together so soon! I was thinking you would make good friends, but it seems you have already met.”

“We sure are *great* friends,” EX snickers, patting Worm-Man teasingly on the shoulder. “Inseparable, actually!”

“Oh, this is pretty convenient! This is EX’s first time in the facility, right?” Zed asks, making his way over to the group as he tucks his pen into the lab coat pocket. “Wormie, would you mind taking maybe thirty minutes of your duty to just show him around the area? I’ve just gotta finish assessing this last portion of X’s abilities, then I can take over.”

“Not you calling me ‘Wormie’ too...” Worm-Man grumbles, to which Zed responds with a light laugh. “*Alright*, I will. Come on, EX, I’ll be your tour guide.”

“Have fun!” XVoid waves the two off before stepping back towards the testing zone. “I hope you find it nice here, EX!”

As soon as the two teens walk out of the others’ earshot, Worm-Man decides to bring up the observation he’s made within the last few minutes. “Hey, I never realized this until you two were in the same room, but don’t you think XVoid is a *lot* like Shawn?”

“*Really?*” EX snorts in disbelief, raising an eyebrow at Worm-Man. “There is no way my brother is in *any* way similar to that man over there. What? Do you think XVoid is actually Shawn, or something?”

That is not at all what he had originally suggested, but now that EX said it, Worm-Man begins to connect the stray dots.

XVoid has been a part of HC before Worm-Man joined, and was actually the one who praised him for his quick thinking in saving civilians, also being one of the first to invite him to join the association. In the two years Worm-Man has spent with HC so far, he's always taken note of XVoid's caring tendencies and kind nature, which really does remind him of the way Shawn acts whenever he comes to visit... but seeing XVoid interact with EX made Worm-Man realize a lot more than just that.

"Okay, when *you're* the one saying it, I'm starting to really think they *are* the same person. Do you not feel the same way?"

"*Hell* no. XVoid is actually the coolest guy ever, and Shawn has negative swag. I literally just saw Shawn trip over his own foot and fall down the stairs last week. I'm *pretty* sure XVoid's got a hundred times more spatial awareness than my dumbass brother."

Worm-Man suddenly remembers how Keralis teased XVoid over tripping down the stairs last week. "*For someone whose power needs a sense of space, you're awfully clumsy!*" was exactly what Keralis said. *No way.*

"Hey, is there a vending machine in this place?" EX asks, tugging at Worm-Man's arm. "I need some hydration with a capital H."

"Yes, right here, actually." Worm-Man opts to set this topic aside for the time being, turning down the hall towards the break room. "But there might be some people inside, so we shouldn't talk too loudly—"

"Ayyyy look, I see B-Dubs and some dude in a magical girl dress!" EX exclaims, completely disregarding Worm-Man and rushing into the room. "Hey, guys!"

"Hi, EX and Worm-Man!" B-Dubs responds cheerily and hops down from the table top and onto the floor. "Look, Ladders— that's the kid I told you about!"

Etho (whom EX described as "some dude in a magical girl dress") stands up from his chair and smooths his outfit, then makes his way over to the duo. "It's nice to finally meet you!" Etho greets EX with a cheerful handshake, voice slightly muffled by the mask (as usual). "Your brother sure talks about you a lot here."

"Heh? My *brother*?" EX says, perplexed. "Wait, do you mean *XVoid*? What's up with all these accusations of him being my brother today?"

Worm-Man watches Etho turn to look at B-Dubs, an expression of doubt clearly visible from his face saying, *Is he being serious?*

B-Dubs rolls his eyes, answering Etho's silent question, "EX, literally everybody looks at you guys for two seconds and thinks you're related!"

"*Actually?*" EX squints, frowning. "I never knew we'd come off that way."

"*Oh snap*, I thought you already knew about everyone thinking you're brothers!" Etho laughs awkwardly, rubbing the back of his hair.

"*APPARENTLY NOT!*" B-Dubs screeches, springing up in agitation. "I can't *believe* it!"

EX crosses his arms, leaning onto a wall nonchalantly. "You guys are overreacting. There's *no way* we're like brothers. I mean, I've got a brother and we're *nothing* like that at home."

Worm-Man, Etho, and B-Dubs all stare at each other, disappointed but not surprised. Worm-man thinks there's no way the two seriously haven't connected the dots, but he of all people knows that being an airhead runs in their family.

Sighing, Worm-Man makes a mental note to record how many days it takes for EX to realize that XVoid is his brother, or vice versa. It's going to be a *loooooong* time...

"Do you see the two from your position?"

"Yes. They're right across from the building I'm on. *Over.*"

"How close will I be able to get?"

"Pretty close. They're far from any visible sight of your position, plus they're turned away conspiring. *Over.*"

"Okay, got it. Give me a signal when you're ready."

"I've already got the grappling hook all set up. I'll move when you place the portals. *Over.*"

"You know you don't have to say 'over,' right?"

"It's fun! Let me feel like an agent in a spy movie!"

Although XVoid lets out a sigh, a smile cracks out from underneath his helmet. This kid EX, always finding new ways to amuse him. It kind of reminds XVoid of his brother in a way, at least before the teenage years happened.

XVoid then turns to watch the two robbers converse their plans from his position behind the wall. These criminals have guns on them, which brings XVoid just a *tad* bit of worry— oh, who is he kidding. He's worrying just a little more than average, not for himself but for EX. Unlike himself, EX doesn't really have any armor or proper protection in case of a dangerous situation. Normally, this would be a job for the police but EX had *insisted*, and he can't exactly refuse that.

"Are you sure you'll be alright?" Xvoid asks through the microphone again, just as a confirmation.

"I'll be *fine*. I fought an armed dude with my fists before and won. This should be a piece of cake."

"Okay, if you say so," XVoid relents, because that is technically true. "I'll make my move, then. Be prepared."

Placing his hand forward, XVoid carefully opens up two portals from afar— one right behind the two robbers, and another in front of himself. He expects EX to maybe wait a couple seconds to follow with his move, yet to his surprise, the kid launches off from his side of the building and dives down on the grappling hook, swinging into the two from the side.

"*Get fucked, you pricks!*" EX shouts out a second before he makes impact (XVoid cringes at the swear words, but there's not much he can do). The two robbers turn around at the voice, but by that time, EX already gives them a faceful of his shoe with a sweep of his foot. As a result of the sudden attack, the criminals lose grip on their weapons and stumble backwards— right into the portal that XVoid placed.

With a yell from both individuals, they topple through the void and right out of XVoid's second portal, landing right in front of him. XVoid promptly presses a button on his armguards, sending a webbed net flying out, which latches around their forms and wraps them tightly.

EX hops into the portal as well with an enthusiastic whoop, landing on top of the immobilized criminals. "Take that!"

“What the hell?!” one of the two grunts, struggling against the binding nets, with the added inconvenience of EX’s weight. “What is this?!”

“The end of your stupid plan, that’s what this is. Have fun being burritoed, losers!” EX answers mischievously, hopping off the bundled two and scuttling to XVoid’s side. “See, I told you I’d be fine! We worked well together!”

“We sure did,” XVoid replies. Although his grin isn’t visible through the helmet, the smile reflects through the eyes of his visor. Though the two have only been working alongside each other for about a month or so now, XVoid can’t be more proud of EX’s progress with every fight they share.

Hesitantly, XVoid holds up his palm towards EX for a high-five. Do teenagers do that these days? He sure did back when he was a teen, but maybe times have changed... he hopes it’s still in style. Fortunately for XVoid’s cool points, EX returns the high-five with an enthusiastic slap. Well, it’s nice to know that high-fives are still a thing among the youth.

The duo promptly round up the trapped criminals and deliver them to a police station, thanking the officers for their trouble before walking back out onto the patrol station. However, they don’t get very far before XVoid hears a noise that sounds like a cross between a wailing hippo and a car engine.

“Hey, did you hear that?” XVoid asks, turning towards where the noise came from and landing his sight on EX.

“Uh,” EX says sheepishly, rubbing the back of his helmet. “That. That was me. Well, my stomach to be precise, but—”

“That was your stomach?” XVoid asks again, mind suddenly heightened with a responsibility over the teenager. “Have you eaten today?”

“I mean, I *was* going to eat my lunch, but my friend challenged me to an intense game of Mario Kart over a deal. So I couldn’t really finish...”

Despite being on hero duty, XVoid’s thought process reverts to the most simple of sequences: *Kid hungry. Must do something to feed kid. Obtain food to feed kid.*

“Wait here,” XVoid says, holding out a hand towards EX as he promptly starts off down the sidewalk.

As he rushes away leaving EX confused in his spot, XVoid dashes to his home as quickly as he can. Under normal circumstances, he probably would have just gone to a local cafe and bought a pastry. Wells did that for him on his first patrol, being the one to casually buy him a cup of coffee while on duty— but XVoid unfortunately does not have his wallet on him on this specific day, having left it back at HQ after forgetting to pick it up post-assessment. He curses himself for his stupidity, promising to himself it won’t happen again (though deep down, he knows well that it will).

XVoid is lucky that his house is near the area, having only run for a couple minutes before reaching the narrow building. He can easily snag a bag of chips from the pantry and make it back quickly— no big deal, right?

Oh, wait. Does this count as breaking and entering? Technically, it’s *his* house— but maybe it’s no longer his house when he has the mask on, since the house is contracted to *Shawn* and not *XVoid*... Now that he’s thinking about it, he feels his cheeks flush up with slight embarrassment in thinking

that he's sort of, *technically* stealing from his own house. However, he has no better ideas, so this'll have to do.

Making his way to the side of the house, XVoid quickly scans around to see if anybody is watching and after confirming there is nobody near, he opens up a portal on the wall right behind the pantry inside the room. He reaches into the dark void, shuffling around for anything that feels like a bag of chips on the other side, quickly grabbing one when he feels it. It's a bag of Cheeto Puffs, which probably means that it's Evan's— but Evan won't notice one bag disappearing, right?

Carefully, XVoid opens up his special void-pocket portal and places the bag inside to retrieve later, then darts back to where he left EX. He hopes EX likes Cheetos as much as Evan does...

“Dude, it was *crazy*,” Evan narrates excitedly to Norman as the two step into the Voros household. “My stomach made the worst noise and XVoid straight up just decided to get me some Cheeto Puffs. My favorite! How did he know?”

“*Gee, I sure wonder,*” Norman mumbles, shaking his head in disappointment as he takes off his shoes.

“Oh yeah, you didn't have any lunch either, right?” Reaching into his backpack, Evan pulls out the chips he bought from Horsehead earlier in the day. “Here, you can take one of these. Or the sandwich Shawn made for me.” He frowns upon realizing that he did not touch Shawn's cooking at all. “Oh, I should probably finish that, shouldn't I... he'd be pissed if he found it uneaten.”

“May I have the sacred Shawnwich?” Norman asks with glittering eyes, clasping his hands together longingly. “It's been ages since you've shared some with me!”

Evan plucks his lunch bag from his backpack, dropping the paper sack onto the dining table. “Go crazy, worm boy. I'll just go put these chips in the pantry, then.”

As Norman gleefully unwraps the sandwich, Evan scampers over to the pantry with his arms full of chip bags, nudging the door open with his foot and dumping the bags onto one of the shelves. However, as he turns to go back to Norman, he's suddenly hit with a wave of cravings for another bag of Cheeto Puffs...

Well, maybe it won't hurt to have another bag. Evan opens the pantry again, rummaging around to find his desired snack. He *knows* there's one in there somewhere, because he had specifically bought it at Horsehead a few days ago and was saving it for last— but no matter where he searches, the bag is not there. Which can only mean...

“Mother *FUCKER!*” Evan hollers indignantly, slamming the pantry door shut. “Don't tell me Shawn stole my snacks *again!*”

“You know, since he makes your lunch every day, maybe he deserves a bit of stealing from you,” Norman comments, mouth full and muffled with bread. “At least your brother cooks things that taste good.”

“Aw, shut up!” Evan grumbles, stomping his way back to Norman. “I paid for that shit with my own money that I got from my summer job! He has no right to my snacks!”

Evan furiously pulls out his phone, opening the phone app to call Shawn. Within a few seconds, Shawn picks up asking, “*Evan? What do you need? I'm driving home right now.*”

“I JUST got some shit from Horsehead, so why's it all gone again?!” Evan demands, pacing around

the living room with a grip of steel on his phone. “Literally stop stealing my fucking snacks! I don't wanna keep having to go back there— the managers are creepy as shit and I'm *still* convinced they're drug dealers!”

“You're not wrong,” Norman adds swiftly with a snicker.

“*They're not drug dealers!*” he hears Shawn protest from the other end in defense of the Horsehead managers. “*Also— mind your language!*”

“Then explain why xB looks like *that!* Always smirking like he's got fifty pounds of cocaine hiding under his desk, or something!”

There is a pause from Shawn's end. “*Well, I know Hypno isn't a drug dealer... he was physically incapable of committing any crime in college.*”

Evan swears everything he learns about those guys is against his will. “You KNEW that fu—*freak?* Quick— tell me, did he do *the thing* back then as well?”

“*I'm not sure what you're talking about...*”

“You know, the *thing* where you blink and suddenly he's right next to you?” Evan frantically explains, though he feels himself descending into insanity the longer the conversation goes on. “He's got a power; I *know* it! It's like he can teleport, or something—”

He suddenly stops, remembering another time he's experienced something similar to Hypno's power. A time a few years ago, where he seemingly changed from one place to another within a blink...

“...Hold on. Remember when I almost got run over on the street, and then I was suddenly back on the sidewalk? *What was that about?*”

“*Uh,*” is the only response Shawn offers. “*Oh, an officer! Can't be caught on my phone, haha! Well, see you back at home!*”

And Shawn hangs up, leaving Evan with nothing but the sound of Norman chewing in the background.

“That's... really fucking weird,” Evan finally says after a period of quiet. “That teleportation incident from two years ago— now that I think about it, that was *really* similar to XVoid's portal power... Shawn was *right* there as well.”

Now, Evan thinks about the events that had just happened earlier in the day. “And today, XVoid gave me a bag of chips that just happened to be my favorite. There's got to be something going on here...”

“Oh, yeah?” Norman raises an eyebrow in amusement. “Are you connecting any dots?”

Evan continues to pace around, twirling his phone around as he walks. “There's no way they aren't connected somehow. The powers... the knowledge of my preference... it's got to be...”

Lighting up, Norman sets the sandwich down and sits up, looking at Evan intently. “Yeah? What do you think?”

Stopping dramatically, Evan strikes a pose, pointing at Norman like a certain character from a popular courtroom video game as he makes the reveal: “*XVoid is collaborating with my brother!*”

Once previously bright and excited, Norman's face drops into a confused frown. "Huh?"

"There's no other explanation for it!" Evan exclaims, bounding over to the dining table and pulling out a chair so he can properly face Norman eye to eye. "You see, my brother has been telling stuff to XVoid about me! That's how he does all this stuff! Wait a second, then that *also* means—" Evan clamps his hand over his mouth dramatically. "He must also know that I'm doing vigilante stuff! *Fuck!*"

Norman only stares at him blankly, sandwich held limply in his hand.

"Normie, you gotta help me!" Evan pleads, shaking Norman by the shoulders like a child trying to get shredded cheese out the bag. "I gotta find evidence to prove that they're working together somehow and expose him for spying on me!"

"You're *serious?*" Norman asks humorlessly, despite being rattled by Evan. "You think they're *working* together? Despite everything?"

Prying Evan's hands off his shoulder, Norman scoots back in his chair and pops the remaining bit of the sandwich in his mouth before standing up. "*Well.* Don't get me involved with this." Norman picks up his backpack and makes his way to the exit. "Thanks for the sandwich, but you're on your own from here."

As Norman pulls the door shut without another word, Evan watches his friend leave from the window.

Okay, fuck you too, he thinks, spiteful annoyance emerging within his chest.

He doesn't need Norman to help him. Just because Norman is mostly the smarts in their friendship, that doesn't mean he's lacking *any* brains at all— the ratio of dumbassery has got to be at most 9:1 for him and Norman, right? He can still do this.

So Evan sits down and pulls out his notebook, flipping to a fresh page with the intent of actually using it for the first time in his highschool life. Before Shawn comes back home, he'll have a plan all ready for the coming days— and he's going to expose his brother for these secrets. For sure.

What Evan doesn't know is that Shawn has now pulled over to a curb, frantically fumbling with his phone to call his friend for help.

"Oh, pick up quicker!" he implores as the phone stutters out the waiting tone.

Within a couple seconds, the receiving end picks up with an enthusiastic greeting. "*Shashwam! What is up?*"

"Kasper! Oh thank god, I need your help!" Shawn responds without hesitation, anxiously drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. "I think Ev is onto my identity!"

"*Woah woah woah, slow down! First of all— don't call me that. I'm still at HQ.*"

"Oh. Sorry, Keralis."

"*That's better.*" He hears Keralis's iconic laughter through the other end. "*Anyway, what do you mean he's onto your identity? As a hero?*"

Shawn confirms it with a sigh. "He remembered the first time my powers activated, and now he's

connecting the dots... I really think he's figured it out! *You've gotta help me throw him off!*"

There's a short pause on Keralis's end, then he makes a short hum. "*Dude... it's really simple, actually. I've got an idea.*"

Keralis has had some pretty good ideas before— like the time he helped Etho, a year ago. A couple of Etho's coworkers at Evan's highschool were getting pretty suspicious of him always being late to teacher meetings, so Keralis devised a plan to pin the blame on Beef, who happened to be Etho's roommate. It was quite hilarious to see Beef all flustered from the accusations, but the job was done in the end, and Etho got let off scot-free. Eyes widening with curiosity at what Keralis might propose for him, Shawn leans towards his phone.

"All you've got to do is make a freaking fool of yourself in front of your brother."

Well, that is not at all what he expected. "Eh-?" Shawn says, confused. "What do you mean by that...?"

"Don't overthink it, Shashwammy. Trust me, I've used this method countless times!" Keralis reassures, and Shawn can hear a smile through the tone of his voice. *"Make yourself look stupid. Make your brother think you're stupid. Then, he'll stop believing you're XVoid, yes?"*

"Is... it that easy?"

"Mmm-hmm! For you it should be, since you do it all the time anyway! Making a fool of yourself, I mean," Keralis snickers cheekily.

"Rude," Shawn huffs, but he can't help but to think how correct that statement is. He's always falling down stairs or bumping into furniture on a daily basis, after all.

Despite that, Shawn thanks Keralis for the help and hangs up. Taking a deep sigh and putting his phone away, Shawn straightens up again and places both hands on the steering wheel. As he shifts the car back into driving mode, his brain begins to turn with various ways he can purposely fail. He's going to be seeing Evan at home soon, so... might as well begin to plan now, right?

"Buh-bye, Keralis!" Shawn bids farewell, hanging up on his end.

"Pff, that Shashwam. Always getting into silly situations." Keralis shuts off his phone and is about to slip it into his pocket before the sudden realization of the whole situation hits him like a wave. "Hold on... they haven't figured it out yet?"

"What was *that* all about?" Tango asks, entering the break room and placing two cups of coffee on the table. "I heard 'Shashwammy.' Were you talking to XVoid?"

"Oh yes! We were just on the phone!" Keralis says as he slides a mug towards himself. "Funny story, actually, he was just telling me about how his brother was getting suspicious of his hero identity."

Tango slips into the seat across from Keralis. "*Brother?* That EX kid—" Like a flickering flame, a frown promptly flashes onto Tango's face. "Waaaait a second. *Suspicious?* You mean, like—"

Staring Tango dead in the eyes, Keralis replies, "Yes. Exactly like that."

"YOU MEAN THEY DON'T EVEN KNOW THEY'RE BROTHERS?!" Tango's hair flares up as shouts in astonishment, slamming both hands down on the table. The cups rattle and spill a little bit

of the coffee, but neither of the two care enough at the moment to do anything about it. “What the heck, man! Even *B-Dubs* knows!”

Throwing his face into his palms with a loud groan, Tango slumps down in his chair, exasperated. “Ohhh my gosh... I can’t believe how— what’s a word to describe them? *Stupid*? Yeah, that seems about right. I can’t *believe* how stupid these two are.”

“I know, right?” Keralis chuckles after taking a sip of his coffee, ignoring the spills on the table. “I’ve known Shashwam for ages, and he’s *always* been an airhead, but this is totally on a new level!”

“Well, has anybody been counting the days since these two have met and haven’t realized yet?” Tango glumly drinks his own coffee, also ignoring the evident spills. “Maybe Worm-Man, I dunno. B-Dubs said he seemed pretty close to EX.”

The two sit in silence, both taking long drinks from their coffee and trying to process the situation. In a way, it’s *somewhat* believable, considering XVoid is a self-proclaimed “derp” and admittedly, quite scatterbrained at times. Still, the absurdity of how unaware the two *obviously* brothers are to each other is almost cartoonish, as if the forces of the universe are toying with the plot to make it funnier.

They both drain their cups, still sitting quietly.

“Hold on,” Tango finally says, squinting at Keralis through his red-tinted glasses. “Your name is *Kasper*?”

“Aw *dammit!* You heard that?”

It’s very hard for Shawn to avoid Evan when he comes back home, because Evan seems to be doing the *opposite* of avoiding Shawn, going as far as peeking from behind the wall while he cooks or giving an obvious side-eye as they rinse the dishes together. However, with Evan watching so intently, Shawn decides it’s the perfect time to commence the Embarrass–Self Plan.

Making sure that Evan is looking at him, Shawn takes the stack of plates and purposefully places them in the oven instead of the dishwasher.

“Hey, what the hell are you doing?” Evan remarks, right to Shawn’s plan. “Are you trying to bake some porcelain for later snacking, or something?”

“Ah, silly me!” Shawn laughs lightly, pretending to smack himself in the forehead. “I dunno why I thought the oven was the dishwasher!”

“...Idiot.” Evan mutters, but Shawn still spots the slight indication of a smirk on his face.

Well, this first act seems to be a success. Evan isn’t questioning his stupidity, which offends him just slightly, but at least it’s working in his favor? Hopefully, with more of these slip-ups that’ll pile up, he can get Evan off his back in no time.

Once the night passes over and morning arrives, Shawn starts off the day by informing Evan that he has been excused for the day due to an overstaffing mistake at work. It’s... half true. After telling HC about his situation, they gladly let him off work, but the overstaffing is just an excuse he made up on the fly. In hindsight, it is weird— because he’s never taken a day off before, not

even during the time half a year ago where he was excused from duty to recollect himself... but Evan hopefully won't notice something like that.

For half of the day, Evan will be at school, which means he can have this time to himself for brainstorming. What's the best way to prove that he's too incompetent to be XVoid? A slapstick fail? A trivial mistake? Getting a standard-school problem wrong? One by one, he lists each idea down, making each one more ridiculous in succession. He'll need to do this right, and Evan is no easy target to convince.

Throughout the morning and noon, Shawn spends time coming up with strategies and actually taking a self-care nap to prepare for Evan's return after school. As the time draws near, Shawn sits quietly in contemplation of what he should do first when Evan enters the house, before being interrupted by a sudden knock.

That's strange. Evan isn't supposed to be back this early, unless something's happened at school. Regardless, Shawn steps over to the door, pulling it open to be unexpectedly greeted by a familiar face.

"Hello, Shawn!" the blonde man at his door chimes, shifting a box into one hand to readjust his glasses. "I have come to deliver something by the request of Evan Voros!"

"Zaeden! Nice to see you again!" Moving over, Shawn holds the door open and reaches out to take the box. "It's been a while since we've seen each other, right?"

"Been at least a month or so, eh?" Zaeden shuffles into the doorway, politely refusing Shawn's help with a brief, acknowledging nod. "Looks like we've both been busy!"

Well, that *technically* isn't true. He's talked to *Zedaph* as *XVoid* just a day ago, but as far as he knows, Zaeden isn't aware of his identity and he'd like to keep it that way. So for now, Shawn simply smiles and nods.

After reaching inside, Zaeden drops the box next to the wall and dusts his hands off on his sweater. "Wow! Did *not* think these would be so heavy. Maybe I should use lighter bottles next time."

"What have you got over there?" Shawn asks, curious as to what Evan would possibly ask from world-renowned scientist Zaeden Plays.

"Oh, you know." Zaeden shrugs, patting the top of the box. "Just some homemade testosterone. They get crazy expensive, as you probably know already."

Shawn finds his nose wrinkling at this information. "I mean, they *are* costly... but is this legal?"

To which Zaeden only laughs in response, "I've made homemade epipens for Norman before! This should be just fine as well!"

Deciding not to question the legality of homemade chemicals any longer, Shawn just sighs and says, "We can... discuss this in detail later. But for now, would you like some tea, since you're already here?"

"Heh, *T* in exchange for *tea*. Sure, that sounds just lovely! Lemme just tell Norman I'll be here for a bit before coming home."

As Zaeden texts his brother regarding his whereabouts, Shawn prepares the boiling water and tea packets. The two then catch up on each other's personal lives over a nice cup, and Shawn decides that it actually feels quite nice to have a friend over to just loosen up a bit. He realizes that it's

really been a while since he's last properly relaxed like this— just chatting calmly with someone else and no underlying responsibilities to tend to.

That is, until he hears the keys jingle from outside.

Shawn's head snaps towards the noise, seeing Evan enter the house just in time. For a second, they make jarring eye contact, freezing in each other's stares like deer in headlights.

“Hey, Zae,” Shawn whispers, poking his friend in the arm while keeping the gaze. “Punch me. Now.”

Nearly spitting out his tea at the request, Zaeden sputters, “W-What?! Why would I do *that?!?*”

“No questions. Just do it!”

“Gosh, fine...” Zaeden mumbles, reluctantly holding up his fist. “Here we go...” He takes a swing at Shawn's arm, fist making impact with a light *crack* noise. “*OW OW OW OW OW—*” Zaeden screeches, drawing his arm back promptly, shaking out his wrist as it dangles like a limp noodle. “Is your arm made of freaking steel, or something?!”

In all honesty, the punch didn't really hurt. It felt more like a plastic bottle hitting him, but just for the dramatic acting points, Shawn topples off his chair and crashes to the floor.

“Augh, the *pain!*” he groans in an exaggerated facade. “How are your punches so strong?!”

As Zaeden whimpers miserably over his poor knuckles, Shawn glances over to check for Evan's reaction, seeing his brother gawk at the two in what seems to be a face of disbelief.

“What the hell...” Evan says quietly, cringing as he passes the kitchen and going straight to the stairs.

Once he's completely out of sight, Shawn breathes a sigh of relief and pulls himself back up. “*Well.* We should be good now.”

“Okay, Evan is right!” Zaeden says while crossing his arms. “What the heck *was* that for? That's got to be the most random thing you've ever asked of me— and over tea, too!”

“It's... *complicated,*” Shawn attempts to defend himself, though quite poorly. There's no way he can explain to Zaeden that he's trying to make himself look stupid in front of Evan, because trying to come up with a reason that isn't about hiding his identity will just make him sound insane. “Okay, I'll tell you what. If you don't ask about my reasons, I won't ask about the questionable legality of your practices either. Is that a deal?”

“Ohoho, you sure know how to bargain with a man!” Zaeden chuckles, letting his arms relax and returning to the usual cheery grin, then picking back up his teacup to raise it. “Cheers, I will drink to that!”

The two clink their teacups together in quite the silly fashion, draining the remainder of their drinks to seal the deal.

Now that this ordeal is over with, Shawn will only need to repeat the same stupid acts until he is sure that Evan is off his back. This shouldn't take long, he hopes...

Evan cannot believe what he has been seeing for the past few days.

He knows Shawn can be a klutz sometimes. A lot of the time. Well, almost all the time, if he's being completely truthful. He's seen his brother do lots of stupid shit every day, but never to this extent.

For example, Shawn has probably tripped and fallen down the stairs at least three times now, which is three times too many for an average person. To add onto the shamefulness, he always finds Shawn sobbing pathetically at the bottom of the stairs as well, like a hurt child.

And besides just this, Shawn has been dropping basically anything he's holding, no matter how ridiculously light it may be. He's dropped a pack of tissues. A fork. Even a freaking *pencil*.

Plus, just earlier this morning, Evan watched Shawn spend about ten minutes trying to fix the engine of his car. He pulled around the wires while scratching his head in confusion before *finally* finding out what's wrong and straightening up to grab the correct tool, only to accidentally slam his head on the car's hood.

“OW! You—” Shawn had yelled, and Evan swore that he was holding back a swear word. “Stupid thing—”

In which Shawn then proceeded to kick a tire in frustration, which of course only ended in him hopping around clutching his foot like a cartoon character.

It's all ridiculous. *Too* ridiculous. Evan isn't sure what kind of a bad day or bad week Shawn has been having, but whatever is going on feels like a load of misfortune supreme. Or, maybe he's just noticing Shawn's ridiculous fuckups more now that he's kind of spying on his brother, but...

Actually taking a (metaphorical) step back to ponder, Evan starts reevaluating his suspicions. Would XVoid really trust this dumb ditz of a man to do anything properly? Because even before the Supreme Shameful Saga, Shawn has been pretty pitiful about anything ever. Evan has been living with this stupid wet rag of a man for practically his whole life and is well aware of his brother's lame behavior, so this whole event might as well be... reinforcing that observation?

Evan sighs in disappointment for the umpteenth time in a day upon seeing Shawn accidentally throwing his phone in the trash and putting the wrapper on the charger in a comical mixup.

It looks like he's wrong, after all. The correlation to power and the Cheetos might be a coincidence, but the way Shawn acts is too consistent to be a mistake. There's *no way*, right? Maybe it's time to let the accusation go and chill out.

When Shawn notices that Evan is no longer spying on him and tracking his behavior, he lets out a long breath of relief. It may have cost him the little remainder of his dignity, but at least this means he can preserve his identity and continue to keep Evan safe.

It's a fair trade, he thinks. He knows it'll be worth it, for Evan's sake.

Chapter End Notes

in which i realize that norman really is just the voice of the author. he's like my proxy to roast evan in the story. i love him

also i SWEAR there will be Actual Action after this chapter. i know this is a hero au

but i really intended it to lean more on dynamics between characters in a hero situation but its finally time to own up to my choices and include some good ol' fights ^^ so stay tuned!

official artwork!

check out this awesome [comic](#) that my beta reader xy made!

obligatory [horsehead farms design](#) by me!

FANART TIME!!

a drawing of [norman and evan](#) by lemons-trees!

[a collection of moments](#) so far by ilikecheeseitslit!

interlude: the battering break

Chapter Summary

interlude: in which the reader learns what *actually* happened six months ago.

Chapter Notes

heyyy guys. whats up. i originally intended to wait until next chapter was finished to post this buuuuut.... im publishing it early :]

CONTENT/TRIGGER WARNINGS:

- blood
- typical action violence

proceed with caution.

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

It had been a while since they'd last gotten a Level 3 threat.

Two heroes, fighting side by side, fended off the league of attackers in the midst of chaos. Through all the debris getting flung in the air, XVoid opened his portals with striking precision to transport rubble out of the fight zone. To his left, Welsknight swatted off a flying enemy with an array of swords.

“You’ve got to stop that one controlling the earth,” Wels said sternly, motioning over to the villain at the center of the battleground. “Then, we’ll have the upper hand.”

Nodding, XVoid promptly started off as Mumbo moved in to take his place. He swiftly darted towards his target, being sure to conceal himself behind piles of wreckage. Once he reached a position that was close enough to accurately use his powers, XVoid opened two portals— one in a circular shape above the enemy, and another underneath a pile of rubble. Then, in an instant, pieces of destroyed buildings collapsed into the void beneath it, falling around the target.

This wouldn’t be effective against an earth controller, but it was enough to distract for a second— so once the enemy inevitably broke out, XVoid was ready with his counter. He shot out a net from his arm guard and it latched onto the opponent, binding their limbs together and ceasing control over their powers.

Hopefully this’ll help the others, he thought as he turned back.

However, as he started to run again, XVoid felt a trickle of liquid on his cheek that pooled down to the edge of his helmet. Blood, probably. He decided it might be best to quickly wipe it off and continue, so XVoid lifted the helmet off his head and quickly flicked the liquid off.

*But before he could put the helmet back on, he heard a loud yell and the **clang** of metal against*

metal from behind. XVoid whirled around just in time to see Wels being hurled through the air, metal beam against his stomach. The hero of swords then slammed against the side of a building, dropping to the floor with an ear-splitting crash.

A despairing panic began coursing through his veins upon seeing his friend, and Mumbo shouted something from within the scene, but all of it fell numb against XVoid's ears. Like an animal being chased by a predator, XVoid tore across the ground, boots thumping rapidly against the wrecked floor. He didn't even notice that he had dropped his helmet in the rush.

"WELS!" he screamed, approaching the fallen hero and collapsing to his knees. Frantically, XVoid shook Wels in some attempt to maybe wake him up, then reaching over to his neck to feel for a pulse. "Oh— hang on, hang on, just for a bit, please—"

Wels provided no reply.

By now, Mumbo was also at their side, kneeling beside the knight in concern. "Is he alright?"

Gingerly, XVoid wiped off a stream of blood from Wels's mouth, ignoring his own injury as it dripped into a pool on Wels's armor.

Without raising his head, XVoid slowly asked, "Mumbo... do you know who did this to him?"

"Uh, I believe it was that man over there," Mumbo pointed over to a figure standing amidst the rubble. "But be careful— I think he controls metal."

"That's fine," XVoid replied blankly, standing up. "Watch over Wels, alright?"

His head snapped towards the villain, as he started taking steps towards the enemy, rapidly increasing speed with each second. In a frenzy, the man waved his hand out to send a sharp piece of metal flying towards XVoid. It cut the side of his mouth, but XVoid only ran faster, completely disregarding the blood splattering on the side of his face. Within just a few seconds, he was already in range of a clear-cut attack.

"YOU FUCKING BASTARD!" XVoid growled, lunging at the villain's neck and pinning him to the ground.

Throwing his fist at the enemy's face, XVoid landed a punch, then another, and another, and another, until the only sound that filled the air was angry blows. There was hot liquid streaming down his cheeks now, but he couldn't tell if it was tears, blood, or both. Letting out an enraged sob, XVoid struck the enemy one last time before hopping back. With a wave of his hand and a purple glow from his eyes, he opened a wide portal right over the crumpled opponent, finishing off his attacks by burying the man under a pile of rubble.

"SOMEBODY ELSE WANT TO TRY ANYTHING FUNNY?" XVoid shouted into the air while spinning in all directions, hoping to hit someone with his cutting glare.

Only silence replied to him.

XVoid took a shaky, deep breath. "Good."

Then, silently, he walked back to where Wels and Mumbo were stationed, panting with each step.

"I— er, found your helmet," Mumbo said with closed eyes as to not look at XVoid, extending out his metal arms to hand XVoid back the headgear. "I know you are quite private about your uh, face and all, so..."

It took XVoid a few seconds to properly take back the helmet, but he eventually did, placing it back on his head. "...Thank you, Mumbo," was all that he could say.

Then, sitting beside Wels, XVoid lightly fixed his friend's head on his lap so that Wels could at least rest comfortably. Wels was breathing. Shallow breaths, but they were still breaths nonetheless. There was still some hope.

"I'll go ask for help, then," Mumbo said, nodding.

With that, the robot hero blasted off towards the direction of HQ, leaving the two alone—surroundings now completely devoid of any noise or chaos.

"You'll be alright," XVoid whispered to Wels, though it was probably more to himself. "Help will arrive soon."

Right. They'll be all fine, in just a moment. There was nothing left to hurt them anymore.

Chapter End Notes



welsknight

**me, a person with an iron deficiency: heh try
and get me now bastard**

**villain : *hurls a metal beam at my
stomach , killing me instantly***

Who Would Win? intricately designed plate armor made of magic and lightweight and flexible alloy as well as protective chainmail underneath OR one flingy boy

[shitpost](#) by xy and sky

[animation](#) by sky

[vdhau hermitgang](#) by me

the perilous penultimate

Chapter Summary

chapter 4: in which questions established at the beginning are answered, but new unexpected conflicts arise.

Chapter Notes

look who got this finished a lot earlier than expected? this motherfucker! you guys didn't have to wait that long after the interlude after all!

CONTENT WARNINGS:

- extremely foul language
- very very brief mention of alcohol! nothing descriptive, only talk about it.
- mild depiction of blood/injury
- kidnapping... i guess???? but its like. really not serious at all. like i mean it when i say it's played off as comedy but i thought id mention it anyway

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

The air was cold that night.

Unwilling to continue doing his physics homework with freezing fingers any longer, Evan slipped out of his room in search of the thermostat. As he skimmed across the hall, he passed by his brother's room, the door wide open, finding Shawn sitting on the edge of his bed with his head hung low. His quick feet came to a stop almost instantly, braking in his spot to back up.

*The nerves on his skin pulled him towards the heater, but Evan's heart rooted him to his brother's door. **Something isn't right here.** Carefully, Evan stepped through the door and approached Shawn, who seemingly barely reacted to his presence.*

Evan slowly sat down next to his brother, and only now did Shawn lift his head to meet Evan's.

"Hey," Evan said, furrowing his eyebrows upon his brother's reaction. "Are you alright?"

Pausing for a moment, Shawn opened his mouth, but only a shaky breath came out. He instead nodded in response, promptly turning his face away from Evan.

Sighing, Evan returned, "Damn. You could have at least tried to lie a little better."

Shawn didn't respond.

"You've been like this for what? Two weeks now?" Evan continued regardless. "Don't think I couldn't tell. I mean, you might think I'm stupid, but I notice these things, you know?"

He then gently leaned on Shawn and rested his head on his brother's shoulder. "I might not get what you're going through, but... you know. I'll be there nonetheless. So, you can let down the act

now.”

And just like that, a short sob escaped from Shawn’s lips, which quickly built up into a quiet stream of tears staining his cheek. “God—” he choked out, burying his face into his palms. “I’m sorry. I’m so so so sorry— I’m sorry I was like this to you— I didn’t think I would—” Shawn started off blurting out apologies, but the words he spoke after muffled into his hands. Evan could only manage to make out “I couldn’t do anything to help him” and “I’m the reason that he was lost—”

Uncertain of what else to do, Evan stayed silent, only offering a couple pats of consolation. Every part of his body screamed that this was the most awkward situation anybody could get into, but he pushed those complaints aside. He wanted to be here with Shawn, at the moment, despite anything else.

Shawn eventually did quiet down, returning to his normal sitting position. For a few more minutes, the two brothers simply sat together without exchanging a single word— only accompanied by each others’ presence.

And even though time seemed to freeze right there, the snow still continued to flutter down past the windows behind them, forming little piles on the grounds below, as if nothing changed at all.

The blazing sun beats down on XVoid’s back as he charges down the flame-consumed roads.

“We’ve gotten a report of criminal activity in D-2!” Cub’s commanding voice sounds through the earpiece. “There’s been the sight of a fire-wielding man ransacking the central square. Anyone on duty near the area, head over right now!”

“I am on the way,” XVoid reports back into his microphone while swerving past a flaming tree. “I have our perpetrator in sight.”

“Hey, X!” somebody calls out from behind, and XVoid glances behind to see EX sprinting towards him. “I heard the distress call! I’m here to help!”

“Well, it looks like EX has joined me,” XVoid updates Cub, slightly shifting aside on the path to allow space for his young friend. “We will update you in a moment!”

There’s a figure bolting far ahead of them, and although XVoid can only clearly make out a red cape from afar, he swears the target is wearing some sort of a helmet with a flame blasting out at the top. As the perpetrator swerves to turn down a road, the cape flutters aside, revealing a set of shiny armor underneath. *Armor that looks eerily familiar...*

With a grunt and a swing of his left hand, the enemy’s flaming sword cuts down a row of fences, setting the vulnerable wood ablaze and collapsing right before the two.

Acting quickly as to not run into the fire, XVoid holds out his hand for EX to take (which the kid does, immediately) and leaps through his portals with a powerful burst. Now that he’s directly behind the target, XVoid finally pinpoints the suspicion in his brain: the target is wearing *knight* armor. The polished metal reflects light in all directions, and its gold highlights glow under the sunlight, almost like an image sent from the heavens.

Fortunately for the two (and unfortunately for the target they’re chasing), the road ahead narrows and halts before a concrete wall. The armored individual skids to a stop in front of the blockage, cursing at the plight. Finally, with no options left, the target spins back towards the pursuers with his sword gripped tightly for an attack.

It's the first time XVoid has seen the villain's face during the entire chase, and the sight that greets him strikes a paralyzing horror into his heart. If the armor has not already raised XVoid's speculation enough, the face now in front of him is one he recognizes— or maybe not just recognize— one that he *knows*. One that he's seen every week for three years, one that has smiled warmly at him in encouragement, one that has been the one to guide every step of his hero training, one that has been his friend and mentor up until six months ago. That is the face of none other than —

“*Welsknight?!*” EX gasps upon also seeing the target's face “No fucking way— aren't you the hero who *died* half a year ago?” Pointing the knife in his hand excitedly (and quite dangerously) to the knight in front of him, EX looks to XVoid and exclaims, “I can't believe it— *I'm meeting a dead hero!* This is a limited edition event!”

None of EX's words register in XVoid's brain, however, as his stare remains fixed on his old friend's eyes. Once previously a bright sky blue, they have now been replaced with a menacing red glaring back at him. In addition to this, Wels's hair— rather than a light brown— is now a jet black mop peeking out from under the helmet. Though, despite all that, there is nothing that can ever change how that face has been burned into his mind.

And upon seeing Wels again after *months*, memories of that fight burst open the floodgate of sequences. That day, after Mumbo had returned with help, Wels was carted back to HC with him being sent home to take a break. *He'll be fine*, everyone said. *You can rest now*. Of course, neither of the two assurances proved to be true— the absolute seizing *shock* that he had experienced, like a blast of ice in his veins, after seeing the news report that night still rattled him whenever he thought about it. Now, with his old friend before him again, what is he supposed to believe anymore?

“You— They— they told me that you *died!*” XVoid staggers forward with his voice exponentially raising, and the knight's fingers stiffen around the sword's hilt in response. “They wouldn't let me see you! I thought— I thought I'd accidentally *killed* you for the longest time and I just—”

“Oh. Uh, is this something personal?” EX asks awkwardly, shuffling backwards. “Do I need to leave or...” The kid steps to the side, holding his hands up apprehensively. “Yeah, maybe...”

“I *saw* you!” XVoid feels himself shaking, barely able to keep his legs still enough to even stand. At this point, his eyes are completely blurred to the point where he can only make out blobs of colors. “I couldn't save you— I *held your body*, you—”

“Oh, for *fuck's* sake, Void!” an all-too-familiar voice suddenly cuts in, forcefully dragging XVoid out of his spiral. “Don't let yourself get convinced by that emo son of a bitch!”

Those words act like a factory reset upon XVoid's brain, and as he blinks the tears away, he finds that there's now a second armored figure right next to the black-haired one. This knight's blue cape and plume stand out against the other's blood red, with the addition of a concerning dent in his helmet. Except, he seems more... translucent, in a sense. Almost like a *ghost*...

“Wait, Wels...?” XVoid squints, levels of confusion rising as a result of this sudden twist. “Is that you?”

“No, this is actually the CEO of NileCorp astral-projected into a spirit form.” The ghostly Wels rolls his eyes, voice laced with sarcasm. “*Yes*, it's me! *Welsknight*, in the *flesh!* Well. Maybe not *flesh*, but—”

“You have no body,” XVoid states bluntly.

Wels throws up his arms, mockingly exclaiming, “Why, *thank you!* I wasn’t aware of that at all! Thanks for pointing it out!” He jabs the other corporeal knight with his elbow (though in actuality, it uselessly phases through). “Maybe you should tell this jerk to give it back to me, then!”

“Oy, fucker, it’s your own fault for falling into a coma!” the second knight finally speaks— which sends XVoid through a whiplash, because his voice is *exactly* the same as Wels’s with the exception of it sounding considerably rougher. “First come first serve!”

“Well, maybe *you* shouldn’t have fucking died in the first place, then!” Wels shoots back without missing a beat, savagely combatting the other’s argument. “You wouldn’t have to resort to being a body-snatching bitchy ghost if you had just lived, asshat!”

The black-haired knight attempts to swat Wels’s spectral form away, but his hand also phases through Wels’s torso. “Don’t care, didn’t ask.” Then, turning back to XVoid, he repositions his sword with a toothy grin. “*WELSKNIGHT IS NO MORE!* Now, I am *Helsknight*, Wels’s inner demons personified! *Fear me!*”

“THE RED EYES ARE FAKE AND THE HAIR IS DYED!” Wels shouts back, waving his arm through Helsknight’s head for seemingly no other reason than to be a nuisance. “He bought those stupid contacts using *my* hard-earned savings!”

“Oh, shut the fuck up! Your fit was horrible before me!”

“Yeah? And you’re the one who’s at Heated Subject buying all the clothes in the catalogue! Gods, that’s fatherless behavior if I’ve ever seen it!”

After the entire string of insults, XVoid, with his brain melting faster than a popsicle on a summer day, only finds himself able to reply with one thing. “...Not to defend him, Wels, but I also don’t have a father.”

“Huh,” EX pipes up from the back. “What a coincidence! Me neither!”

“Look kid— no offense, but I could kind of tell.” *Oh, boy.* XVoid cringes in the aftermath of his response. He didn’t mean for it to come out like that, but now it’s too late.

Fortunately sparing XVoid of dealing with his kind-of-rude quip's consequences, Hels strikes back furiously in his argument with Wels. “Well, you’re displaying some real *bodiless* behavior right there! Fuckin’ jealous bitch, that’s what you are!”

“Ohohoho, we’re getting into this, now?” Wels laughs manically, scoffingly poking Hels’s face with his ghostly finger. “Alright Void, cover your ears. It’s gonna get *real* nasty.”

XVoid, as commanded, proceeds to place his finger over the noise-cancellation button on his helmet in preparation, then shoots Wels a thumbs up. At this point, he has no idea what he’s doing either— it’s like he’s still trying to process everything from the point where Wels appeared out of nowhere.

“Why are you *actually* doing it?” EX asks right before he turns it on.

“Oh, I trust Wels! Whatever he says, it must have a good reason, right?” he responds cheerfully, patting EX on the back, causing the kid to stumble forward slightly. “Now, I’m going to be turning the noise cancellation on. Just hit me really hard when he’s finished!”

Then XVoid hits the button, and a blanket of quiet falls upon him. Without hesitation, Wels moves to stand directly in front of Hels’s face and sucks in a huge breath—

“Listen you emo ass, dumbfuck ass, dyed-my-hair-black-to-match-my-soul ass, son of a herpes-ridden *WHORE*, you’re talking real high and mighty for a motherfucker who can’t even read through a couple pages of numbers without breaking down in tears.” Wels’s voice booms like a set of speakers, and his hands motion frantically around like any stereotypical Italian character in sitcom TV shows.

“You’d need to have the wit of a newborn child if you can’t even figure out to put on a couple of belts and the nerves of a *steel fucking beam* to complain about how your fit is ‘swagless’ compared to mine when you’re unable to take a few seconds and present yourself like a *proper adult*. This isn’t Twitter, dipshit, but it’s not like you’d have any sense of social aptitude regardless of setting, or an aptitude for being even a *goddamn* functioning member of society, for that matter!”

Hels’s face shifts from smugness, to confusion, and finally to utter outraged disbelief. “Wait a goddamn second—”

“The world doesn’t wait for *shit*, Helsie Welsie,” Wels spits, poisonous words spewing from his incorporeal mouth. “Like how *you* became a ghost yourself to begin with? Yeah! I sure as hell bet you died because you fucked up a cup of instant ramen *so badly* you passed away from self-afflicted boutulism! Aww, poor baby unable to afford proper food because he’s too busy growing a neckbeard in his mother’s basement? GET A FUCKING JOB.”

“*Holy fucking shit.*” EX watches the verbal beatdown, eyes sparkling gleefully at the entire catalogue of insults that he has been exposed to. “This is the best day of my life!”

Meanwhile, XVoid remains standing patiently, still blocked off from the barrage of personal attacks Wels has released upon his bodysnatcher. *I sure wonder what he’s saying*, XVoid thinks. He hears none of the exchange, of course. Perhaps, it’s better that way.

“You think you deserve *my* fucking body?” Wels scoffs with seemingly no end to his onslaught of biting language. “Don’t think for *one fucking second* that just because you’re flinging around a sword LARPing as a demon in a body of an accomplished man that you ever did even the bare minimum of getting off your *shitstained ass* in your twelve years of living! Oh, sorry? You’re *not* twelve? I could have never fucking guessed from the way you bitch around like a baby starved of attention! *Is this why your dad left you?*”

“A-Alright, shut the fuck up, old man!” Hels growls with his face flaming red (from embarrassment or the heat? Who knows!), suddenly swinging his flaming sword at Wels (and as expected, the blade just passes through the transparent body). “Blab on however the hell you want, but you can’t stop me from throwing these bastards!”

With that, Hels lunges towards the two heroes in front of him, barely leaving any time to think.

“HEY X, I THINK YOU SHOULD TURN THAT OFF NOW!” EX shouts, violently yanking XVoid’s arm.

Luckily, by now, XVoid has noticed Hels’s aggression and instinctively opens up a portal to teleport them both away. While the two drop through one of the void portals and land far away from the action, Hels’s sword strikes into the now empty ground before him, engulfing the floor in flames.

“What in the world did Wels say to get him so aggravated?” XVoid says as he deactivates the noise cancellation.

“Uhh, nothing that concerns you!” EX offers quickly. He then wriggles free from XVoid’s grasp

and pulls out a collapsible bat from his bag. “Anyway, we probably have to fight now, right? Are we gonna use the portal-hopping combo?”

“Seems like that’s our only choice here.” XVoid surveys Hels from afar, who while still disoriented by their sudden disappearance, eventually begins to realize that they have teleported away. “I’ll make sure to let you hit him from behind; he most likely has little experience in that armor judging by his clunky movements.”

“Got it. And as usual, cover my left side.” EX nods, holding up his bat with a laugh. “Fucker doesn’t stand a chance against us two.”

Bursting ahead, EX begins by taking nimble steps towards Hels, winding up the bat for an attack. Hels spots him, whirls around, and attempts to slash EX with the sword, but XVoid opens a portal at the last second and transports EX right behind Hels. Cackling triumphantly, EX swats his enemy’s helmeted head while midair, also throwing a kick into Hels’s back just as an insult to injury. He disappears through another one of XVoid’s portals just as quickly as he came, landing onto solid ground within a matter of a few seconds.

Hels nearly stumbles to the floor from the ambush, needing to pivot in order to catch himself. But by then, EX hops through another portal and whacks him from the side again, knocking off the balance he barely regained. The process continues for a few more rounds— XVoid sets up his portals, EX attacks Hels, escapes, then repeats from a new angle.

Finally, Hels staggers out of the way, swiping his sword frantically in an attempt to somehow parry (though quite poorly). “Okay, fuck you all!” he hisses, starting back down the road. “*This isn’t over!*”

“Fucking running? Aren’t you just the biggest coward?” Wels calls after Hels jeeringly. “Now thanks to you, I can’t even properly talk to my friend after being presumed dead for six months!”

Glancing over at XVoid, Wels’s expression softens from an irritated scowl to a regretful grimace. “Sorry Void— I gotta tag along with him. I’ll be pulled over regardless. Body-bonding soul stuff—it’s weird, I know, but just come over to my house and we can *actually* talk, alright?”

At this point, Hels has already turned a corner and vanished from XVoid’s line of sight. However, when he looks back to answer his friend, he watches Wels’s spirit form dissipate right in front of him, like fog scattering in the morning sun. And just like that, Wels is gone again— his presence as fleeting as bubbles popping in the air.

XVoid spends a good half minute just staring at the direction in which Hels left, trying to process the events that occurred in this short time.

From what he’s collected, Wels is... alive, in a sense? Not exactly *living* alive, but at least not dead. Wels had called Hels a body-snatcher, which most likely implies that he would have still had his own body if it were not for Hels’s interference.

“Uh... what are we gonna tell Cub?” EX asks quietly, stepping next to XVoid. “Do we... go after them? Ask someone else to take care of it?”

Taking a deep breath, XVoid replies, “I’ll take care of it. I’ll inform them of Wels’s status and what he told me to do. In the meantime, you should probably head home, okay? Your work was outstanding, but I wouldn’t want to get you further involved in this mess.”

That’s right. In the unexpected turn of events, there’s certainly been a lot of guilt that was lifted

from his chest. Even still, this leaves many questions... What were they doing all this time? Why was Wels reported as dead? *What happened to cause this?*

XVoid is determined to get his answers. But for now, it's first his job to report back to Cub and get EX to HQ safely— and only *then* will he tackle Wels's situation.

After crashing through the entrance and slamming the door shut, Hels instantly face plants the ground.

“You're a pretty pathetic fighter, you know that?” Wels says with a taunting laugh while stepping into the house after him. “Though it's expected from an idiot who's never previously held a sword in his life.”

“I didn't think I'd have to take on some stupid teleporting tag-team!” Hels groans, slamming the ground with his fist. “God, that little shit's attacks really fuckin' hurt...”

Squatting down in front of the fallen knight, Wels grins smugly and gives Hels a condescending pretend-shoulder pat. “Oh boy, I knew you'd go down against them, but you've managed to impress me! You lost the battle even faster than I predicted, so great job for that!”

“Zip it, old man,” Hels grunts without any further comments, pushing himself up and walking right through Wels.

Then, moving over to remove the armor, Hels proceeds to spend a good ten minutes just wrestling with the pieces. “How do you cope with this shit?” he wails as his hand gets trapped in a plate of metal for the fifth time.

“My power lets me summon and remove anything in an instant,” Wels informs Hels with a smirk. “Get yourself some cooler abilities and *then* we'll talk.”

“Wasn't your stupid sword literally useless before I could set it on fire?” Hels returns curtly, prying off the armor's boots. “That thing *sucks* to hold, by the way. Why is the handle so thin?”

“Hey, don't you *dare* talk about the sacred Well Sword like that!”

“Stop me yourself then, fuckface!”

Hels gives the armor a swift kick after finally getting the last of it off, which proves to be an awful idea, because he collapses to the ground once more howling in pain.

“Dumbass,” Welsknight says, rolling his eyes. “You're really not helping your case of being a twelve year old here.”

“You know what? Fuck you! I'll shit on your name and do some *real* crime!” Hels hops up from the floor, grabbing the sword and stomping back over to the door. “Like— Like... uh... Your stupid Doomguy-lookin friend's brother? Yeah! I'm gonna kidnap that little asshole!”

“Gods, what the hell?” Wels groans in exasperation, uselessly trying to stop Hels with his translucent arms. “Out of literally anything, you're planning to kidnap a whole ass *human*?”

“I'm fucking bored, okay?! You don't even have alcohol in this house! I just *had* to possess the body of a boring ass goody-two-shoes without an ounce of liquor anywhere, didn't I?”

“If you're so bored, then give me my fucking body back! AND DON'T YOU DARE DRINK

ALCOHOL!”

Hels attempts to swing his leg at Wels again, but it phases past Wels’s form. “This fucking shit again? I’m an adult; leave me the hell alone!”

“Oh yeah? How about you *stop* using my name to terrorize my friends?!”

“I DO WHAT I WANT! You’re not my father!”

“YEAH, BECAUSE UNLIKE YOUR DAD, I *LITERALLY* CAN’T LEAVE YOU!”

“FUCK YOU, KNIGHT OF THE WHORE, BIGGEST JESTER IN THE COURT!” Hels shouts back, violently slamming the door shut in front of Wels’s face.

As Wels hears Hels’s pounding footsteps grow further from him, Wels braces himself to be displaced from his spot once Hels is far enough, but... it never happens. He waits in silence for a few more seconds, then a minute, then five, but his form still stays rooted in the same position.

For the past six months, his spirit has been bound to his body that Hels so rudely stole, in the sense that he can never stray far from Hels without being instantly transported back to his side. It was almost like a multiplayer video game where the second player can’t leave the bounds of the main player, except *much* more irritating, especially after dealing with it for half a year. But now? Hels was surely more than far enough away, but he hasn’t been teleported to Hels’s side at all.

“Holy mother of gods,” Wels whispers, a wide grin spreading to his face. “Does this mean I’m finally free?”

After all the months of torment next to Hels, he’s finally *liberated*. Well, given that he’s still in a ghostly form, it’s not *entirely* freedom, but this is a major step forward regardless. Wels can probably theorize a couple reasons as to why this break occurred— Hels gaining his own power now, having spent long enough time stuck together, or perhaps merely for plot convenience— but there’s now an important matter that he can *actually* attend to now that he’s unrestrained.

“I wonder if I still remember the directions to Void’s house,” Wels wonders out loud. “I’d better warn him of that shitty ghost’s plan before it actually happens.”

Admittedly, Evan feels quite strange walking back home after only heading out for less than an hour. After being thanked for his assistance, he was quickly shooed off by XVoid and Cub to go home, and he wasn’t about to question their reasons. With his helmet in one hand and jacket tied around his waist, Evan starts down the road from Hills Pet Central back to his house, pondering everything that happened earlier.

Now that he’s thinking of it, his abrupt dismissal was probably— no, *definitely* less strange than whatever the hell happened with those knights. Evan remembers that night on the news where Welsknight was reported to have passed away in a coma, but now he’s... back? Somehow? With an evil clone too? XVoid had seemed pretty shaken up about it too at first, and it was quite the astonishment to see a man whom he thought was so fearless break down into pieces like that.

Welsknight has awesome roasts, though, he thinks back to the entire paragraph of insults Welsknight dished out to Helsknight, giggling at the memory once more.

“Motherfucker was pretty pitiful for an ‘evil spirit,’ eh?” Evan scoffs at the image of Helsknight’s epic fails against his and XVoid’s attack combo. “I gotta tell Normie about this later.”

At the sidewalk’s corner, Evan begins to make a turn, but a large figure instantly walks into him from the same corner. Like birds against glass windows, the two crash into each other, completely

collapsing backwards upon impact.

“Ow, what the *fuck?!?*” Evan exclaims, rubbing his shoulder and looking to glare at his offender. “Hey, watch where you’re going!”

“Tell that to yourself, shrimp! Do you have eyes?” the tall man grumbles in a voice that— *Wait... hold on a second.*

Squinting, Evan’s eyes trail up to the stranger’s face, slowly taking note of the jet-black hair, irritated scowl, and red... eyes. From the corner of his right eye’s sight, he also sees that the man holds a blade. One that he’s seen from just earlier...

“What the hell?” he says, blinking in stunned disbelief. “You. You’re—”

The black-haired man’s frown deepens, and he glances down at the helmet in Evan’s hand. “Hey... that’s...”

Helsknight. He *knows.* In this mutual realization, the two only manage to stare at each other, but Hels instantly breaks this suspended calm with an attempt to grab Evan. Responding spontaneously, Evan ducks and lunges to the side, leaving Hels with a fistful of air.

“C’mere, fucker!” Hels demands, attempting to grab Evan again, but he swoops again and begins his escape down the sidewalk.

“Come and catch me yourself, Heated Subject addict!” Evan taunts in his sprint (completely disregarding the fact that he’s also wearing a Heated Subject choker at the moment).

As Evan charges down the road with an angry emo shouting behind him, he hurriedly fumbles through his backpack in search of his grappling hook. “God fucking dammit, where *is* that thing?” Finally wrapping his fingers around the handle, Evan yanks the hook out, frantically pointing the tip toward a vague direction above him. Once he finally pulls the trigger and secures the hook, the force yanks Evan up just in time for when Hels catches up to his steps.

Gleefully, Evan soars through the air, feeling the wind stream against his cheeks like a blast of victory. If he has managed to get a good shot, there’s no way Hels can catch up to him! He should also report this assault to HC as soon as possible to help them finally put this case to a close, since he’s here already.

Unfortunately for his visions, Evan quickly finds himself flying right in the direction of a building’s side— one with no railings or supports in sight. *Shit.*

And with a *CRASH*, Evan splats right into the wall like a fly on a swatter. To add onto his misfortune, before he can even recover from the initial shock of being completely pancaked, Evan feels something *creak* from above him and a rattle on his grappling hook. In an alarming dread, he looks up to the hook’s end, which he comes to the ironic realization that the hook has caught onto a weak pipe rather than a secure concrete structure.

Fuck, shit, fuck.

Almost as if the universe mocks him, the pipe collapses without another warning, sending Evan plummeting through the air with screams of bloody murder. The previously gentle winds have now transformed into a cruel zephyr of doom, whipping hair into his face in a harsh blinding.

But there may be an ounce of kindness left in this forsaken world, because Evan crash lands onto a mattress tossed out in the side alley. Though the soft padding manages to break his fall somewhat,

Evan still feels a sharp pain cutting into his side with a sensation like a knife plunging into his skin (and he *knows* how it feels like to be stabbed. That time was a childhood accident, though, and this is not).

Rolling onto the hard floor, Evan winces and grabs his side with a low groan. “*Ghh... motherfucker...*”

Now, Evan’s aware of all the stupid shit he’s done in his sixteen years of life. He’s garnered countless injuries from carelessness, recklessness, or even for things he thought would just be *funny* to try— but all of those choices were still, in a way, of his own doing and decisions. However, this time, the shame of such a trivial failure to even *escape* a pursuer might as well be a pile of salt pouring into the wound. And boy, does it fucking *hurt*— not only physically, but emotionally as well.

While he staggers into the wall, Evan grits his teeth in a poor attempt to direct the attention from the splitting agony at his side. “*Shit!*” he hisses, limping forward pathetically towards the alley’s exit. “I still gotta tell the others!”

Alas, his resolve will never be followed through— before he can even make it past the wall, a shadow looms over the alley and reveals none other than the abhorred Helsknight.

“Alright jerk,” Evan’s head snaps up to Hels’s voice, only to see the red-eyed man lifting his sword over his head. “say goodnight.”

Evan’s mouth opens for a scream, but he’s promptly cut off by a blow to the back of his head with the sword’s hilt. The last thing he remembers is collapsing at Hels’s feet before knocking into a sweeping darkness.

It’s been half a year since Wels has actually run a long distance, and his theoretically nonexistent lungs are suffering.

Though his destination is on the other side of the city, knowing the path to XVoid’s house is not a problem for sure— after all this time, he still has the directions memorized. Back when he still *had his body*, Wels would often bike, take a bus, or even just have a nice leisurely stroll in the afternoon sun.

But now that he has an urgent task of informing XVoid that his brother is going to be kidnapped by the world’s shittiest ghost, none of these options are available to him. He can’t ride a bike for obvious reasons, there’s no time to take a slow walk, and for whatever godforsaken reason, he has not seen a *single* bus so far. So, in the end, his only alternative is running like a tryhard middle schooler during the weekly miles.

“Why are there no buses at this hour?!” Wels complains, panting with each step he takes. “It’s literally the middle of the day! Or was it because of that emo prick’s stupid attacks?”

After ten whole minutes of straight agonized sprinting (though in the end, it became more of a dragging jog), Wels finally reaches XVoid’s door and takes about thirty seconds to catch his breath.

“I’m supposed to be a *ghost!* Why do I still need *air* to run?” he groans, bent over pitifully. “This universe just wants to see me suffer, huh...”

The door in front of him opens, revealing XVoid in his civilian outfit, looking down at him in confusion. “Wels?” he says, confused. “You’re here! I thought you told *me* to come over...”

“Yeah, change of plans,” Wels replies, cringing. “The thing is—”

“What happened?” XVoid asks with a face of concern. “Are you alright?”

As harmless as the question is, that string of words awakens a repressed, visceral rage within Wels that has been simmering for months.

“Oh man, *am* I alright?!” Wels shouts, sarcastically spreading his hands out. “Maybe I *would* be totally fine if it weren’t for that little annoying jerk and his no-good, body-snatching— You know what, Void? Let’s go inside. Wouldn’t want people to think you’re insane for talking to air, after all.”

Though XVoid is still evidently a little perplexed, he pulls the door open for Wels upon instruction. “Alright, come inside. I can make some tea... oh, wait. I don’t think you can drink that, can you?”

“Having my own cup as a sentiment would be nice!”

“Got it.”

After Wels enters the house, XVoid shuts the door and leads him over to the kitchen. “The table is over there and you can grab a chair— oh. Uh. Well, you can sit if you’re *able* to, I suppose? I don’t know how this works; sorry if I’m being rude. I’ll just... be here making tea, then.”

“No no, Void! Don’t worry about it!” Wels waves off the comment dismissively, taking his place in floating above one of the chairs. “I promise you, nothing you do can ever *possibly* even come *close* to topping the shit that Hels put me through. Thank the gods that I’m finally free from that brainless shithead.”

“Ah, I was meaning to ask why you disappeared like that earlier!” XVoid says. “You just *vanished* on the spot.”

“Yeah, it’s because of how my ghost form is connected to my body or some bullshit like that. I’m not entirely sure why I’m able to leave now, but my top hypothesis is that it was connected to Hels developing his own power separate from my Spirit Blade. Whatever the hell it is doesn’t matter though, because I can finally talk to you again!”

While XVoid approaches the table and sets down two cups, Wels continues with his chatter. “I thought you’d realize I wasn’t *actually* dead long ago— we literally made eye contact when you visited my grave a while ago, but you surprisingly didn’t say anything about it.”

XVoid stops pouring the hot water into the cups and looks up to Wels with disbelief. “So when I saw you back then, it was actually you?”

“Yup.”

“And the dark-haired person I saw was—”

“Yeah. *Him*.”

Staring at him blankly, XVoid sets down the kettle with a soft *huh!* “Well, silly me! How did I not notice? Why didn’t you say anything, though?”

“Void, knowing you, you would have convinced yourself it was a hallucination regardless.”

“...Fair enough.”

“I don’t blame you, though,” Wels remarks as he watches XVoid drop teabags into the cups. “Fucker really went out dressed like a Heated Subject mannequin; of course it would be hard to recognize me after all that.”

“Actually, what *did* Hels do to you?” XVoid asks, taking a seat in the spot across from Wels. “I suspect the dyed hair wasn’t the only thing.”

“You’re damn right it wasn’t!” Wels exclaims, crossing his arms. If he could slam the table for dramatic effect, he totally would have. “Fortunately, the *physical* torture ended at just shitty makeup and awful clothing, but the *psychological damage* he’s inflicted... Ohhhh man. I could spend an entire *day* listing off all the heinous crimes he’s committed upon humanity and my wellbeing. Now Void, if you don’t mind...”

“Of course not. Go ahead.”

“*Thank* you! I can finally rant about that shit child to somebody else! Anyway—”

Leaning over and propping his chin on his hands for dramatic effect, Wels narrows his eyes and begins his extended rant.

“Hels is *nineteen fucking years old*. That is a whole quote-unquote *adult*, but he’s got the social intelligence of a toddler, I swear! When the taxes were due, he sat there for twenty minutes straight just staring at the pages and flipping around aimlessly until I instructed him how to perform the standard adult duty. And! On top of that! He acts like he’s never done the laundry in his life! He spilled the detergent all over my washing machine, and I *still* have to deal with seeing that uncleaned fluid every time we pass by.”

XVoid nods sympathetically, taking a sip out of his tea.

“He rarely flosses properly, doesn’t drink enough water, and doesn’t exercise unless I’m screaming in his ear! But out of all of this, the worst attribute of his would be his absolute inability to make anything edible. Get this, Void.”

Wels allows his floating body to tip over the table, so that now he’s face to face with his friend to deliver the line: “He makes *ramen seasoning tea*.”

Cringing, XVoid stops drinking from his cup. “Sorry, *what?*”

“Oh, you heard me right! He did that shit once a week! And I’ve been *tortured*, Void. I’ve been locked up and restrained and beaten down for information. But nothing in my years of service could ever match up to what that little fucker did. *Unseasoned cup noodles*. Then he used the goddamn flavor packets to make *tea*. He *drank it in front of my eyes* and *lovingly described how it tasted*. I did not need to hear that! I could have gone my whole life without knowing about the chicken-broth tea!”

XVoid gingerly pushes his cup of tea aside. “*Well*.”

“That’s fucking right!” Wels huffs, leaning back into his crossed-arms pose. “He’s an absolute horrid, uncivilized, bastard of a fucking human being! I spent *half a year* trapped by his side, helplessly watching him desecrate *my* body! I don’t even want to imagine the amount of damage control I’ll have to do once I get it back! I swear, once I’m able to, I’ll smack that ungrateful bitch into the stratosphere—”

“Not to sound rude, but... You’ve become an entirely new person,” XVoid cuts in quietly. “You were more eloquent out of anyone else, and I don’t think I’ve *ever* heard you curse before this.”

Wels sighs. “Eloquence means to be able to use the right words at the right time. And sometimes, the right word is fuck. Besides, you’d snap too if you had to deal with *him*. Hels is, by far, the most despicable villain I’ve ever crossed, and he’s not even truly *evil*! He just wants to torment me and every fiber of my being, whether it be dramatically reciting thirst tweets directed at me— Void, some user called Jamiemidge or something said they wanted me to *step* on them— how crazy is that? *Or!* Purposely watching my least favorite TV shows or meticulously rearranging all of my plates in size order or deciding to kidnap a—”

Freezing, Wels suddenly remembers the original reason for coming to XVoid’s house in the first place: warning about Hels’s plan.

“Sweet Jesus on a pie tin,” Wels gasps, head snapping towards XVoid. “I completely forgot! Your brother is in danger!”

Standing up frantically, XVoid exclaims, “*Excuse me?*”

“Yeah, that fucking emo was planning to take your brother!” Wels unfolds his legs to return to a standing position. “Gods, I got distracted— Come on Void, follow me!”

“Hold on, I need to get my spare suit!” XVoid clamors off, rushing over to the stairs. “My goodness— What does he even want from a normal kid, anyway? How does he even know Evan?”

“*Hurry up!*” Wels calls after XVoid’s scramble. “The path to my place is pretty far from here!”

It’s only until XVoid slams his door shut from upstairs that Wels processes what he has said. “Huh? *Normal kid? Evan?* Does he not realize that the kid fighting along his side earlier was— *WHAT?*”

Suppose he has never been the sharpest observer on the team. Wels sighs, barely resisting a smile creeping onto his face. *Never change, XVoid.*

Slowly opening his eyes, Evan’s vision regains focus on the sight of Hels, fully armored aside from the gauntlets, sitting on the couch before him and typing something on the phone. Immediately after coming to, he feels the back of his head still throbbing from the earlier attack, which only serves to annoy him more than anything else.

“Hey dipshit, what’re you writing?” Evan scoffs at Hels, turning his nose up mockingly.

“Oh hey, shrimp,” Hels responds blankly without looking up from his phone. “You’re finally awake.”

Evan moves forward in an attempt to smack Hels’s phone to the ground, but quickly realizes that his hands have been bound to his back. “What the hell?” he grumbles, twisting at the restraints. “What’s this about?”

“Well, what does this look like?” Hels says, giving Evan an aggressive side-eye. “Maybe I hit you a bit harder than I thought if you’re having this much trouble processing the situation.”

Craning his neck in trying to make sense of what’s happening, Evan finds that the materials binding his wrists turn out to be floss and zipties. “Did you fucking try to kidnap me using *floss* and *zipties*? Either Wels’s house is emptier than your skull cavity, or you’re the biggest idiot I’ve ever met.”

“Okay, listen!” Hels retorts, finally looking up from his phone to glare daggers at Evan. “The

knight's house is boring as shit! Floss and zipties were the only things I could find!"

"He's gotta at least have some cloth string in the kitchen, or something. *Everyone* has that!"

"Do I look like I check the kitchen, ever?" Hels rolls his eyes as he returns to typing on his phone. "I've got more important things to do. Like figuring out your brother's email, or something."

"*My brother?*"

"Yeah, that weird... portal guy. Armored. Name starts with an X. Wels wouldn't shut up about him for a long time, so I tuned out his name. Anyway, do you know it?"

XVoid, his brother? He sure wishes. Evan swears everybody thinks that about them, but he's considered multiple times regarding how cool it would be if XVoid was *actually* his older brother.

"Oh yeah, I have his email address!" Evan lies cleanly through his teeth. For now, he'll need to make Hels believe that he's related to XVoid for any chance of escaping to work. "If you come a little closer, I could show you on the screen."

Following Evan's instruction, Hels slides off the couch and kneels down before him, holding out his phone in front of Evan. *Perfect position.*

"Alrighty, it's just thiiiiiiis one over here..." Evan slowly leans towards the screen, flexing his fingers behind his back in preparation for what may come next. "Just let me..."

Then, without warning, Evan opens his mouth and proceeds to bite down on his victim's exposed arm, like a viper going in for the kill. While Hels shrieks in pain, Evan promptly pushes himself up from his sitting position and makes a mad dash for the hall.

"Dumb bitch, XVoid isn't even my brother!" he cackles as he turns through the doorway. "Catch me if you can!"

Taking advantage of Hels being disorientated, Evan rushes into the kitchen in search of anything sharp to release him from the shitty floss-ziptie rope. Fortunately, Wels's cooking knives are placed conveniently in a rack on the counter, and Evan uses the blades to hastily slice off his bindings. A sharp end cuts his finger slightly, but there's hardly any time to worry about that right now—especially considering the sound of rapidly-nearing footsteps.

Just as Evan turns to leave the kitchen, he spots his helmet on the countertop, making a point to quickly grab it and place it back on his head, right as Hels clambors into the room.

"Get back here, asshole!" Hels demands, sword gripped tightly in his left hand.

"How 'bout you come get me yourself, ya big medieval cowboy?" Evan taunts with a jeer, swerving through another exit.

For the next five minutes, Evan and Hels scramble around the house, making a mess out of Wels's furniture—smashing a couple vases, topple a few photo frames, nearly bust out a couple door hinges, all that good fun—even managing to circle around the entire building several times in the chase. After a couple cycles, the two end up back where they started in the kitchen.

"HOLD ON!" Evan shouts, skidding to a halt in front of a row of drawers. Hels stops as well, pausing at the other side of the counter.

Motioning over to the drawers, Evan yanks one of them open and reaches in. He pulls out a roll of

string, holds it up above his head, and says, “See? I fucking told you, idiot!” then chucks the roll straight into Hels’s face.

After Hels yelps in surprise at the blow, the two continue their goosechase around the house, wrecking a couple other pieces of perfectly-fine furniture along the way. Still, even with all the adrenaline, Evan can feel his energy slowly wearing down the longer he rushes around. The pain in his side slowly starts to set back in again, and that alerts Evan that he can’t keep at it for much longer. Annoyingly enough, the doors are all locked, and Hels is always too close behind him to properly check for any exits through windows.

I can’t keep running forever, Evan thinks, grimacing at a newly-formed, inconvenient twist in his ankle from all of his sudden shifts in directions. At this rate, that egotistical excuse of a knight will most definitely catch him again— so he’ll have to think of something, maybe a distraction, or a way to subdue Hels quickly. *What would XVoid do in this situation?*

“Yep, just as I expected.” Wels’s ghostly hand grips around the doorknob, rattling the poor thing like a cocktail shaker. “It’s locked. Maybe that emo prick is a bit smarter than I gave him credit for.”

“You can open doors?” XVoid asks, growing more confused about Wels’s condition with every new piece of information he learns. “I thought you were a ghost.”

“Yeah, but I’m also unable to do a lot of typical-ghost stuff like flying or passing through walls,” Wels explains as he steps back from the door, crossing his arms. “Maybe it’s because I’m not actually dead. Not questioning this door thing, though— it’s funny as shit to scare Hels with it.”

Wels turns to look at XVoid with a grin on his face, as if expecting something.

“...What is it?” XVoid asks hesitantly after ten seconds of staring.

“Oh, you know.” Wels tilts his head over to the door in a swift motion.

“I do not know, actually.”

“We need a way to open the door. I can’t touch things. *You* can, though. Does this add up?”

With his mind gears slowly starting to turn again, XVoid picks up on Wels’s not-so-subtle implications. “You want me to *force* the door open?” he asks, voice raising with incredulity.

“Yeah! Don’t even worry about breaking it. I can always replace it once I get my body back, rightfully.”

“Well, if you say so...”

Stepping up to the door, XVoid places both hands on the doorknob, then yanks the metal piece back with full force. A splitting *CRACK* sounds from the door, leaving a fracture in the wood, which XVoid takes as an opportunity to punch through and enlarge the entrance.

“Aw, shit,” Wels suddenly says.

“Huh?” Turning to face Wels, XVoid asks, “What’s wrong?”

“I totally forgot that you literally have portal powers to transport us in.”

“*Oh my god.*”

“Okay, whatever!” Wels steps forward, pulling the unlocked (or more accurately, broken) door open. “We’ll worry about it later! There’s an idiot who has an ass that needs some handing, after all.”

When the two step in, however, the first sight that greets them is EX ripping curtains off the pole and tossing the cloth over Hells. They watch the kid kick Hells back with his heel, sending the cloth-covered knight toppling to the floor with a metallic dissonance. EX then whirls around to face the door, but freezes in his spot when he finds the two at the entrance.

“Huh— XVoid and Welsknight?” EX says, perking up.

“Oh hey kid, it looks like you’re alright!” Wels exclaims. “I should’ve known Hells would be even more incompetent as a kidnapper than anything else.”

“EX! What are you doing here?” XVoid asks as he rushes over to the young vigilante and safely pulls him aside. “Are you okay? Did anything happen?”

EX nods cheerfully and shoots a thumbs-up, reassuring XVoid that he’s fine.

Sighing in relief, XVoid pats EX on the shoulder (more to calm his own nerves than anything). “But Wels, you said that he had my brother. I don’t see him here.”

“The fuck?” Hells crawls out from under the curtain. “Are you two not...” Wels shoots over a glance to the knight on the ground, and Hells’s face shifts in realization. “*Ohhhh*. Oh, so you two are just stupid. Got it.”

As he stands back up again, Hells flashes a grin and picks up the sword. “Well, it looks like I got what I planned in the end. It’s time to finish what we started!” With those words, the blade catches fire and sends a blast of heat around it.

“No no no, don’t you fucking *dare* light my house up!” Wels seethes, stomping up to Hells with clenched fists. He pokes his translucent finger through Hells’s face aggressively, saying, “*I’M* going to end up being the one dealing with all the bullshit property repair! If you want us to live without being disturbed by official government shit, then turn that fucking candle off this instant!”

“God, you sound like my freakin’ *mom!*” Hells complains, swiping the sword through Wels’s neck pointlessly. Reluctantly, he allows the fire to disperse, and the sword returns to its original form. “Fucking fine! I’ll just use your lame ass toy sword, then!”

“Do *NOT* call her a lame ass toy sword, unless you want to *never* get a good night’s sleep again!”

“Shut the fuck up. Now, back to the topic at hand...”

Now being far more alert than the first battle, Hells dashes forward with a swing of his sword in XVoid’s direction. Promptly grabbing onto EX, XVoid opens a portal beneath them and falls through to the other side of the room, away from Hells’s range.

“Okay EX, we’re gonna need to fight.” XVoid turns to the kid beside him. “Are you—”

But unexpectedly, EX lets out a strangled cough and collapses onto his knees, bending over with his hand clenched over his side. “*Fuck,*” he hisses, coughing again. “Give me a second and I’ll—”

Before EX can finish his sentence, XVoid senses movement nearing them and glances to the side, seeing Hells charge over again. He scoops up EX into his arms carefully yet swiftly, relocating through a portal again. After landing, XVoid cautiously lowers EX onto the ground and props the

kid in a comfortable sitting position.

“You seem to be in no position to take on a battle,” he says sternly, face to face with EX. “Stay and recover for now; I will fight him alone.”

“No, I’m fine! I can fight!” EX says frantically, attempting to stand back up, but XVoid holds him down firmly by the shoulder. After a few seconds of struggling, EX gives up and relaxes into the wall. “Okay, *fine*. But make sure to get him into the kitchen. That place is a *nightmare* to navigate.”

XVoid nods, tilting his head amiably. He remembers Wels’s kitchen— it had always quite the mess, and it’s not surprising to hear it hasn’t changed. “Thank you. Now, don’t worry about a thing, okay?”

Suddenly, XVoid hears a sword slash across the air, but instantly parries by opening a portal right before it strikes to redirect the blade’s end. XVoid notes the sound of Hels grunting as he pulls the blade back— an opportunity for action. Swiftly, he shoots a portal beneath Hels, displacing him right next to a wall, in which he promptly creates an opening in to shove Hels through to the kitchen.

“*GET HIS ASS!*” Wels shout as he rushes over to the scene, pumping his fist enthusiastically into the air like a cheerleader (except one that’s considerably much more violent and filled with rage).

XVoid jumps into the room after Hels and closes the portal behind him, effectively sealing the two in the cramped space. As a typical battleground, a huge obstacle like the island counter would effectively seal the doom of both opponents, but fortunately for XVoid, his power specifically deals with creating and manipulating space. Hels might be confined to the limited area of the kitchen, but he certainly won’t be.

He’s gotten used to regularly fighting in pairs again after EX’s arrival, but that in no way detaches from his own abilities when fighting solo.

XVoid smiles confidently under the helmet, preparing for the fight.

By now, Hels has gotten back on his feet and slashes his sword through the air, cleanly cutting down in front of XVoid. Ducking to the side into a portal, XVoid teleports behind Hels and proceeds to kick Hels into another, causing the knight to fall through a void, crashing straight onto the counter facefirst.

“Make sure to fucking beat him up, Void!” Wels calls out from the edge of the room, floating smugly in his place. “Literally pay no mind to the fact that it’s still my body— I want to see that fucker obliterated!”

XVoid hears a noise from the side, turning over just in time to be greeted with Hels’s sword slicing across his armor’s chest piece. The blade leaves a deep gash, but it fortunately isn’t deep enough to reach his actual body, which reminds him that despite how heavy and funny-looking his gear is, XVoid is grateful he chose to prioritize protection over style.

In an attempt to retaliate, XVoid swings his fist into his opponent, but his punch stops dead against the metal armor. *Right. Knight stuff.* With a cocky laugh, Hels sweeps his blade up, slashing the side of XVoid’s helmet. He cringes and retreats, portalling to the other side of the room.

“Oi, touch Void one more time and I’ll never leave you alone again!” Wels threatens from the sidelines.

“It’s okay; I’m not hurt!” XVoid technically speaks the truth— none of Hels’s attacks are really making it through his armor, anyway.

But now, considering that Hels is *capable* of getting hits at all, XVoid must think fast. He quickly recalculates his strategy, shifting through any possible plans to pick out the most effective method.

Regrettably, XVoid’s spare set of armor has not been restocked with nets, but considering the fact that Hels has armor and a melee weapon, it probably won’t be very effective regardless. Straight punching won’t work for obvious reasons, which leads XVoid to his only other solution. It’s not a method he likes to use often due to the energy drain it places upon him, but he’s certain that he can take out Hels quite fast by doing so.

And now, with Hels lunging towards him again, XVoid opens a portal right in front of himself at the last second, resulting in Hels running right into it. He instantly places the output portal on the ceiling, sending the knight tumbling through the air, and then shifts another portal right underneath Hels to catch him and repeat.

Now with his opponent in the portal loop, XVoid enacts his plan to repeatedly toss Hels in the air through the different openings like a salad. Open a portal, catch the opponent, open the output portal, close the old one, reopen in a new position to catch the opponent again, and repeat.

Hels still manages to get close a couple times while midair, landing a few strikes of the sword and nearly knocking him off-balance. In addition, he can feel his strength starting to wane with the rapid portal-firing, but XVoid simply clenches his teeth and persists onward.

Finally, after nearly a minute of throwing, Hels’s sword finally slips from his hand and falls to the floor with a loud *CLANG!* XVoid lets out a brief sigh of relief at his successful attack, knowing that he probably wouldn’t have been able to hold out for much longer past that. Then, acting instantaneously, XVoid allows his portal to drop Hels onto the empty tile floor and moves to restrain Hels’s arms behind his back, locking the enemy down.

“Hey, what the *fuck?!*” Hels growls, writhing under the restraint. “Let go of me!”

“Not a chance, shitbrains,” Wels’s voice emerges from behind XVoid, and he sees his friend’s spectral form step to their side. “Now, Void— like I told you, beat that fucker up!”

XVoid glances to Wels, lifting his fist hesitantly. “Are you *really* sure? I mean, this is still technically *your* body that I’ll be attacking...”

“One hundred percent! I honestly just need him to learn a lesson, even if it means getting hurt.” Wels mockingly kicks his feet through Hels’s head. “Clock his face. Bitchslap him. Hell, even give him a nice steel beam to the stomach, if you can find one. Just totally destroy him, however it might be!”

Sighing, XVoid relents. “If you say so...”

Drawing his fist back, XVoid brings his armored knuckles in contact with Hels’s exposed chin for a bone-rattling blow, completely knocking the fiery helmet off his head.

“You didn’t even put the helmet on correctly!” Wels wails, throwing his head into his hands. “I mean, it’s a good thing that you didn’t, but I’m still offended!”

Now with an exposed face before him, XVoid punches Hels again, grimacing at the thought of hurting his friend, but Wels’s enabling cheers of violence (“*FUCKING DECK HIM, VOID!*”) promptly chase those doubts away. Repeatedly striking Hels’s face, XVoid delivers a couple more

rounds of flying fists before yanking Hels up by the shoulders, where XVoid finishes off by kneeing him hard in the abdomen.

Hels makes a strangled noise and drops to the ground, and upon impact, XVoid sees a silvery form floating up from the body and ahead of him, the flame on the helmet dies out, returning to the normal sky blue plume. When he looks up, XVoid finds another ghostly figure, dressed in a dark tuxedo, looking around frantically in confusion.

“What in the—” the ghost says with an accent identical to Wels’s, though his voice is considerably deeper. “Hold on, am I back as a...”

“*HELs-FUCKING-KNIGHT.*” Wels calls out, menace dripping like tar from his words as he motions his hands in a punching position. “So you’re finally in a form where I can fucking *get* you.”

Without giving Hels even a moment to adjust, Wels viciously leaps for Hels’s ghostly throat and grips him in a chokehold. “THAT’S WHAT YOU GET FOR SUBJECTING MY BODY TO RAMEN SEASONING TEA, DICKWAD!” he shouts, shaking Hels back and forth ferociously. “*Repent!* Repent for all of your sins!”

“Stop that!” Hels growls, attempting to kick back at Wels, but his shoes bounce off uselessly against the metal armor. “Hey— you can’t even hurt me like this! I don’t need air!”

“Oh, is *that* right?” Then, right in succession, Wels holds up his fist to deck Hels, sending him flying back into the ground. “How do you like *that*, huh? Stay away from my body, from now on!”

Hels remains lying on the ground, groaning from the attack. Scoffing with an eye roll, Wels steps over his crumpled physical form and kneels down. He holds out his spirit hand and places it over his body’s heart, and a bright light completely engulfs their forms. After barely a few seconds, the light dies away, leaving behind no sign of a ghost and a slowly waking body in its place.

XVoid watches Wels’s eyes flutter open for the first time in six months. For some reason, even though he has already been talking to Wels for at least an hour now, this feels... different to see. There’s an unexplainable emotion that pools into XVoid’s chest, leaving an overjoyed ache at the center. *Wels is finally back. Officially.*

The knight pushes himself up sluggishly, placing his hand on his face with a loud groan. “Man, Void, you really did a number on him. That’s a good thing— though now I have to deal with a hell of my own making. Anyway, now for the real important part...”

Taking his hand off his cheek, Wels instantly shifts to remove the red contacts in his eyes, flicking the colored piece to the side with disgust. “Gods, finally! I can get rid of these awful things! By the way, do you have any hair dye with you?” Wels asks, motioning up at his darkened hair. “I’d rather die for real than be caught going out with edgelord black hair, you know? Aw shoot, I’ll probably have to bleach my hair before dyeing it back to normal, won’t I? What a nuisance...”

Suddenly, Wels stops in his ramble, turning to meet XVoid’s face with concern. “Hey, Void?” Wels remarks, pointing to the edge of his face. “What’s up with... that?”

“Huh?” XVoid’s hand shoots up to the side of his face and he brushes it lightly, finding out that there’s water dripping from the bottom of his helmet. “Ah, tears, maybe— I didn’t even realize,” he laughs, feeling more water beginning to flow from his eyes. “Don’t worry about it...” he reassures, sniffing, then wrapping his arms around Wels in a hug. “It’s just that I’m happy to see you’re alright again.”

XVoid feels Wels's soft breathing next to him as the hug is returned. "Me too, Void," Wels says, grinning. "I've really missed you and the other guys while I was out... Speaking of which, we probably *should* tell the others, right?"

"Right! Of course!" XVoid releases his hug to grab his communicator. "I was planning on contacting Cub, anyway, but maybe we could just—"

However, unexpected to everyone, Wels collapses onto his back without warning, producing the sound of a hundred trash cans combusting on each other.

"*WELS!*" XVoid screams, panickedly grabbing his friend's shoulders. "What's wrong? What happened? Did you—"

From Wels's unmoving body, a wispy form rises once more, making the biggest facepalm ever seen on Earth. "Oh, for fuck's sake!" Wels's ghost exclaims, groaning loudly. "Don't tell me that stupid prick left my body unusable from all the damage it's taken!"

"HA, FUCKER!" Hels laughs from the corner of the room, floating in the air smugly with hands behind his head. "So you can't have the meat suit either!"

"Shut up, you tin-can looking prick," Wels shoots back with a scowl. With a sigh, he turns back to XVoid to shake his head dejectedly. "It needs to rest a little bit, probably. I know I'll be okay, though— just give us some time, alright?"

"Looks like I've got to be the one who takes you back to HQ, huh?" XVoid chuckles in an attempt to somewhat shake off the leftover worry. "I bet the others will get a laugh out of this!"

XVoid picks up Wels's fully-armored body into his arms, and both ghosts scuttle over behind him.

"Why the hell are *you* coming along?" Wels hisses, glaring at Hels. "Shouldn't you have gone to the afterlife by now, however that works?"

Hels shakes his head. "Can't. I've got unfinished business here in the mortal realm— but that's not the point. I'm just bored and I want to see what happens next."

"Gods, you're insufferable." There's a hint of a smile in Wels's voice. "Okay, *fine*."

As the trio passes through the living room to the door, XVoid suddenly remembers something significant. He looks to the corner for where he had placed his young friend earlier, but finds nobody there— only a few streaks of blood on the ground.

"Hey guys," he says, stepping over the empty spot, staring down at the still-fresh red stains. "*Where did EX go?*"

This is the worst day ever, Evan thinks as he limps on the sidewalk home.

First, it was that stupid fall. As it turns out, the hurting in his side was because of a fucking misplaced spring, which essentially stabbed his side and drew out blood. Then, it was getting conked in the head by the world's worst knight. And then, it was whatever shitshow that happened at Welsknight's house, and now he's here— practically crawling back home with no faster way of transport.

Evan cradles his helmet in his arms, which surprisingly, has suffered the least amount of damage compared to literally anything else. There's a slight crack in the visor, but other than a couple

scratches, it's pretty much fine. Almost cruel, in a way, that their places could not be swapped right now.

When his shoe latches onto a rock in the path, Evan winces at the sharp pain that tugs at his ankle. If he has to walk further, his stupid foot will probably implode on itself, so he makes the hasty executive decision to stop by at another place before returning home.

Evan drags himself to the doorstep of a familiar house, ringing the doorbell three times just as he always does. He hears footsteps thudding through the ground as a response to his call and a shadow moving around in the window, confirming that there is, in fact, somebody at home. The door slams open to the sight of a blonde man wearing a sweater hurriedly adjusting his glasses.

"Hey there, Evan!" Zaeden greets, waving enthusiastically at him. "How's it go—" Upon getting a closer look at Evan, Zae goes completely silent, face shifting into a stern frown. "Hmm... I see. Come in."

Luckily for Evan, Zaeden helps him into the house so he won't have to trip another thousand times over his own feet again. "Norman, Evan's here!" he calls upstairs. "Oh, and— get the first aid kit, will you?" Helping Evan to the couch, Zaeden asks, "Do you need any painkillers? Water? Or, I can just leave you alone, if that's what you want."

"I'm all good," Evan says (though not particularly convincingly, as suggested by his short breaths). "I'll just... sit here."

Zaeden's lips draw into a thin line at the response, but he nods regardless and turns to leave. After barely any wait, Norman walks down from the stairs, carrying a white box. In seeing Evan sprawled out on the couch, Norman's eyes narrow into an almost-glare.

"Why was I expecting for this to happen?" he asks with an exasperated sigh, sitting down beside Evan and opening up the first aid kit. "You told me you'd be going back two hours ago, but you stopped responding to my texts after that. I suspected something went wrong."

"You're damn right about that," Evan laughs lightly, trying to ignore every aching part in his body. "And this time, it was only partially my fault. By the way, can you give me the Switch?"

"Sure." Norman reaches over, pulling the Nintendont Switch off its charging port. "Just don't mess up my saves."

As Evan boots up *Creature Intersection: New Skylines* on the Switch, Norman starts to prepare strips of bandage. Zaeden stops by at some point with some ice, which ends up bagged and resting against the back of Evan's head, along with another ice pack on his ankle.

"Well, what'd I tell you about that double life?" Norman remarks, wrapping a bandage around a cut on Evan's leg he didn't even know he had. "What will Shawn say with you being so beat up?"

Scoffing, Evan says, "He's not gonna say anything. I'll hide it so that he never sees."

"We all know that's not happening. You *live* with him." Norman shakes his head, holding up another bandage. "Can you lift up your arm?"

"Hold on. I gotta finish building the holy phallic lake."

"Evan, *please*. Zaeden and I share this island."

"Will you take a sugar cube for it?"

"Stop talking to me forever."

The two burst into a laugh over the dumb joke and Norman finishes bandaging Evan's bloody side. After that, Evan lies back into the couch and stares at the ceiling for a good forty-five seconds before resuming the conversation.

"Can we play Mario Kart?"

"You *never* ask to play Mario Kart, unless it's for a deal."

"Well, I am now. Also, it's to distract from the pain."

And so, they start up Mario Kart and begin a circuit, talking through the race.

"Who'd you fight this time?" Norman asks, heading straight to the point.

"Oh, you know. The force of gravity." Evan laughs dryly, remembering his fall. (In)Conveniently, his kart falls into a hole at the same time. "Oh, and Wels's evil spirit, I guess?"

"*What?* Actually, you know what? I'm not gonna ask."

"Yeah, and I won against only one of the two. Guess which one I lost."

"...Don't tell me you took another swan dive."

"Heh. *Maybe.*"

"Evan." Norman shakes his head, leaning forward in his seat. "You can't keep doing this and getting into trouble. Shawn's definitely going to notice, and what will you say to him when he does?"

"Man, Shawn does this shit to me all the time, though!" Evan exclaims as his little avatar gets decimated by a red shell. "Leaving without notice, taking extensions for his job, all that bullshit."

"And how does that make you feel?"

Such a simple question, with a similarly trivial answer. However, no matter how hard Evan thinks, he can't bring himself to respond.

"Look." Norman's voice has dropped a pitch, which only happens whenever he's trying not to be noticed in class or when he's serious about something (though in this case, it's definitely the latter). "Whatever Shawn has going on, you can't just expect to play this... *game* of mutual secrecy and come out on top without hurting somebody in the process. With the way this is going, neither of you are winning right now."

A *game*, Norman calls it, and it strikes Evan that he can't be more accurate. Every day, it's a race to see how much he can do without being discovered, and how to avoid any accusations of his behavior. In a way, it's... kind of horrible of him to do, he realizes.

"Listen, you've gotta tell Shawn at some point," Norman sighs. "You can't just keep coming up with lies."

"But he'd make me stop all of this, and I don't want to stop hanging out with XVoI- DON'T YOU DARE THROW THAT BLUE SHELL!"

On the TV screen, Norman's blue shell instantly destroys Evan's rare, hard-earned lead, flipping his kart on its back and setting him behind by five ranks.

"MOTHERFUC—" Evan hacks out a couple coughs in between his swear. "*FUCK!*"

Norman then passes through the finish line in first place— as per usual.

“Bitch...” Evan mutters, slumping down on the couch as Norman laughs triumphantly. “Yeah, whatever. Fuck your stupid victory. Anyway, it's not like me being a vigilante hurts *him*, right?”

“That's what I thought at first, too. But Zaeden got worried seeing me coming home late, missing dinner, or even neglecting to pick up the phone.” Norman says, pressing the “next race” button. The race moves onto the next track, but Norman’s hold on the conversation stays firm.

“Zaeden didn’t just sit around and do nothing about it,” he continues, hands gripped tightly around the remote. “I hid it from him for *months*. Within this time, he managed to figure out that I had quit my swimming lessons without telling our parents. He even went to you, trying to see if *you* knew what was going on with me.”

Hearing this jogs Evan’s memory from two years ago, where he thinks of that one situation where Zaeden showed up at his place randomly one day to ask about Norman. He hasn’t been seeing Norman around at that time either, and the memories of worry and panic come rushing back in the recollection. *Ah*.

“The way he freaked when I walked through the door one day all beat up, just like you. There's no way for me to properly describe the look on his face of just... pure horror, but also somewhat knowing. He was aware the *whole time*, and that was the breaking point for my web of lies.

“Our brothers aren’t stupid, as much as we get tired of them for being airheads.” Norman glances over at Zaeden sitting at the dining table on his laptop, letting out a small breath from his nose. “Zae *knew* when something was up, and I guarantee Shawn will, too.”

Now, taking his eyes completely off the screen, Norman turns his gaze over to the side. “So tell me, Evan. What's more important? Fighting crime, or *your brother*?”

Though Evan’s eyes stay trained on his kart on the screen, his mind slips off thinking of all the times he’s missed Shawn’s calls or returned to a cold dinner on the table. He’s always apologized for it, and Shawn has always forgiven him... but how long can this theoretically last before something starts getting suspicious?

Suddenly, the race-finishing sound effect plays, and Evan regains his focus to see Norman passing the finish line in first, while he's stuck in twelfth.

“...Motherfucker.”

In trying to escape further conversation, Evan tries to click to the next stage, but Norman takes his controller and sets both remotes aside, away from reach. When Evan looks up again, he finds Norman staring him directly in the eyes.

“Ev, you need to know your limits. Know what you *can* do without getting hurt, and what’s too much. You don’t need to fight *everything* that comes your way.”

That’s how I deal with things on my own, though, Evan thinks, staying silent in case Norman has something to counter him with. *That’s how it’s been for years. Bite a bitch bullying you, and they’ll never test your nerves again.*

“Well obviously, I’d never dream of fighting you,” he says instead, trying to lighten the mood. “Especially considering how you folded me like a piece of paper when I tried to steal your lunch that time!”

“Evan.” There’s a sense of exhaustion radiating from Norman’s voice. “Be serious for once. You’re even worrying *me* with all this, so can you imagine how Shawn is feeling right now?”

Maybe he *is* being kind of a dick about this.

“I dunno. I guess you’re right.” Evan shrugs, leaning onto Norman’s shoulder with a slow exhale. “I get sick of Shawn a lot, but... he does still take care of me no matter what. I’ve definitely said a lot of horrible things to him without thinking, and he keeps loving me, so... I’ll talk to him.”

“I’m glad you’re doing the right thing.” Norman nods, hugging Evan lightly from the side. “Good luck with it.”

The two just stay in their spot for a minute, listening to the game music run in the background mixed with the sound of Zaeden’s keyboard.

Evan looks up at Norman with a pleading face. “...Can we finish this tournament, though?”

A laugh escapes from Norman’s mouth. “You *know* you’re not winning.”

“Jeez! Let a man dream, okay?” Evan chuckles, sitting back up again. “Okay, I do feel better now, though. Thanks for taking care of me, and give Zaeden my regards too.”

“Are you sure you don’t need a ride home?” Norman asks as he helps Evan stand up from the couch. “I technically *could* drive, but I’m not interested in potentially crashing into a telephone pole. I could always call a pickup service, though.”

“Nah, I wouldn’t want to make you guys spend money on my dumb ass. I can walk back.”

“Alright, if you say so. See you next time, Evan.”

Where Evan has planned to maybe snuff out the candle before it got too big, he instead returns to a raging forest fire. When he steps onto the house’s doorway, Evan hears a distressed voice, which he can only assume to be Shawn’s. As he enters the room, he finds out that his hypothesis is correct, and finds out the reason for his worry.

“You haven’t seen him around the school, either?” Shawn asks desperately into the phone while he sits at the table in front of his laptop— scrolling, clicking, typing frantically— eyes red and hair in a complete mess. “What about his classmates? Teachers? *Anybody?*”

For the first time today since he left for school, Evan checks his phone. On his cracked screen, it shows twenty-seven missed calls from Shawn in the past hour. *Whoops.*

“There has to be *somebody* who was with him before!” Shawn’s voice cracks in his speech, and he slams down his fist on the table. “Do you know anyone who would take him? Is there a reason? Do you—”

Shawn finally looks up, eyes locking with Evan standing right at the entrance. In the span of three seconds, his face shifts from shock, to relief, and then to the final, dreaded form: *anger.*

“Ah...” Shawn says flatly back into the phone, eyes still locked onto Evan. “He’s... here. I am so sorry for bothering you, then. Have a good night.”

He hangs up and strides over hurriedly, his tall form towering over Evan, exuding irritation. “*Where were you?*” he asks, voice low and firm.

“I... was at Norman’s,” Evan replies hesitantly, knowing that what he says *technically* isn’t a lie (it isn’t the full truth, either), but it’s kind of hard to believe that when he probably looks like he’s

gotten run over by three consecutive trucks.

“And you didn’t tell me?” Shawn says, indignant. His hardened glare makes its way down from Evan’s face, consequently leading him to see the splotches of blood on Evan’s shirt. “*EVAN!*” he cries, instantly grabbing the side of Evan’s arms with panic and kneeling down to inspect the wound. “What *happened* to you?!”

Growing more agitated by the moment, Evan feels a burning frustration in his chest in response to Shawn’s overbearing concern. “God, leave it alone!” he snaps, pulling himself out of Shawn’s grasp. “It’s nothing!”

“What did you do this time to cause this?” Shawn continues to drag on, attempting to reach for Evan again. “I just— What are you even *doing* out there? Are you being needlessly reckless again? *Are you getting into fights?!*”

“I said *leave it alone!*” Evan swats Shawn’s hand away aggressively, stomping past his brother and away from the entrance.

Annoyingly enough, Shawn follows after him, like a dog. “You need to stop being so careless all the time! That time you fell a month ago— you could have *died!* What will I even do if something awful happens to you and I’m not there to help?”

“I don’t need you to treat me like a fucking *baby!*” Evan growls, spinning back and baring his teeth at Shawn. “I’m *fine!* I just fell into something by accident!”

“Don’t think I don’t notice whenever you’re getting injured!” Shawn yells in response, eyebrows knitting into each other. “Over these past few weeks, you’ve used up half of the burn cream in one go and emptied out the band aid box! Don’t you *dare* tell me that this is because of the martial arts club! What’s *really* going on, Evan?!”

Shit. So it looks like Norman was right.

“Evan, I—” Shawn sighs, burrowing his face into his palms. His voice falters. “You’re all I have left— why won’t you *take care?* Stop coming home injured because I can’t lose you too. Listen to me for once because *I want you safe.* I wasn’t there for our parents, and I wasn’t able to save my friend, so at least let me help *you!*”

Finally, after all the tension has been building up within Evan, the pressure reaches its breaking point.

“WELL, YOU DO THIS ALL THE TIME, BUT I’VE NEVER YELLED AT YOU OVER IT!” he explodes, pointing a finger accusingly at his brother.

Any sense of reasonability he has had before the conversation burns up like pieces of tissue in his enraged fire as he releases an onslaught of outraged attacks. “Because aren’t YOU a goddamn hypocrite! You’re not fucking slick! Do you know all the times that I’ve noticed *you’ve* got some fucked up injury you’re trying to hide from me? You didn’t come home for a straight twelve hours one day and I found out you were in the motherfucking hospital! Don’t tell me what’s right or wrong when *you* don’t have a sense of it either!”

Shawn blinks in surprise. “Well— I…” There’s a pause before he speaks again, as if shifting gears in the conversation. “But, how is hurting yourself going to help anybody?”

“I’m actually trying to *protect* people!” Evan retorts, glaring daggers into Shawn’s eyes. “I’ve told you over and over, but you always place the blame on me, me, me— always *me!*” He lets out a

humorless laugh. “Because it doesn't matter who started it, huh? Does it not matter who was the one to start the fight? Does it not matter that I'm responding to motherfuckers trying to hurt me and my friends? Because it's all just the same aggression to you in the end?”

“I...” Shawn's mouth opens and closes repeatedly, trying to find a response. “Evan... it's just—”

“*You don't care about others.*” Evan cuts him off, a growl practically emerging in his voice. “You don't care about how *I* feel about being put in a little protective bubble. Hell, I fucking wish I had a brother who cared more! And you know what? ***I wish XVoid was my brother instead!*** ”

When those words hit Shawn, he freezes in place with his mouth agape and face contorted in astonishment. Evan watches his brother's eyes shift back and forth, unable to keep a proper focus point anymore. Shawn takes a few breaths before stepping back and turning his face to the side, incapable of eye contact with Evan.

“I...” he finally speaks up again, voice quiet and shaky. “I'm trying my best.”

“Well, it's obviously not enough,” Evan says, voice like an icicle stabbing through the snow.

Shawn's jaw tenses up. He looks to the ground, fists clenched and chest rising with trembling breaths. “*I know.*”

Evan rolls his eyes, turning to leave. As he stomps up the stairs, he sees Shawn's mouth move inaudibly from the corner of his eye, but he's arguably too pissed to try and figure out what it said. Once Evan reaches his room, he slams the door with brutal force, then leans against it and slides to the floor with a loud exhale.

While Norman's care has certainly helped his injuries, he finds that it still eats at his strength like a vacuum. In addition to that, a new sensation now overtakes him— a tight knot in his gut, a queasy feeling in his stomach— *guilt?*

Groaning, Evan curls up into a ball, despite his side screaming at him to cut it out. *Ohhhhh man.* Maybe he was a bit harsh to Shawn. Maybe Shawn didn't really deserve all that, even if he was being really annoying. Maybe going nuclear wasn't such a good idea.

Evan doesn't want to think about it. Maybe he'll go to bed early today.

As Evan lies on his back, staring at the glowing stars on his ceiling, he hears noises coming from Shawn's room next to him.

It sounds an awful lot like crying.

When Evan wakes up the next day, he finds his entire body aching from the day before— which is arguably deserved. Grimacing, he pushes himself up from bed and slips out, shuffling downstairs for breakfast. What he finds, instead of Shawn's usual cheery “good morning,” is an empty house devoid of any noises or inviting scents. There's a paper bag on the table with a note on top that reads “Off to work, breakfast is on the stove.”

Shawn is nowhere in the house. His car is also absent from the driveway, so maybe he did really leave.

Evan stares at the paper bag, hesitating to pick it up. He's surprised that Shawn still made him lunch after all that, but he's too scared to question it.

And silently completing his morning routine, Evan leaves for school without another word, mind still running with thoughts from the events last night.

When he meets XVoid again on hero duty, EX finds his hero to be more serious than he typically is. Usually, they would chat while working, exchanging small talk and various comments. However, today, XVoid is nearly completely silent, only speaking when EX asks him a question.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” EX finally asks after an hour of hanging around. “You don’t seem very happy.”

“I... don’t know,” XVoid replies, shaking his head. “I’m not sure if you want to hear it. It’s pretty personal.”

“You don’t need to worry about that!” EX reassures. “I can help, I think. My brother always told me that talking things out makes you feel better.”

Sighing, XVoid says, “Well, you are right. Okay then... speaking of brothers, you know how I talk about my little brother a lot?”

EX nods. XVoid’s brother, from his stories, always sounds awfully rambunctious.

“We... got into an argument recently,” XVoid explains. “I was really worried about him but I guess it came off as me being nagging, hah. Had I not been so bothersome, maybe he wouldn’t have said he wanted to replace me.”

“Your brother sounds like a real jerk. Who would say that? You’re in the right for caring.”

“It’s alright.” XVoid pats EX on the back affectionately. “I still love him more than anything, but I don’t know if he shares the same feeling. Anyway, enough about this— we’ve got a job to do.”

Hearing this, EX is suddenly reminded of his own argument with Shawn. XVoid still loves his brother even after everything, but will Shawn be the same? If something like that can even affect someone so strong like XVoid, how will his emotional wreck of a brother react to this? Shawn must be hurt— and that’s a severe understatement.

He knows what he has to do, later. He’s going to properly apologize to Shawn for everything, and tear down the wall of secrets for good.

Chapter End Notes

fuuck bro. what the hell. how do you write action scenes

anyway! hey yall! whats up? how is that ending going for you guys ay? i cant promise the finale to arrive as fast as this chapter did, but boy will it be a fun piece for you guys to read i expect

official artwork time! (get ready since this is a big section)

here are the official designs for wels and hels! [a post by xy and sky](#) detailing on wels's design, plus [my own](#) for hels's look.

[hels and wels artwork](#), [wels waking up shitpost](#), and [chapter art](#) by yours truly!

check out a [comic redraw](#) and [justice card wels](#) by my beta reader xy!

and another piece of unmentioned backstory... [some art](#) by xy again :D! (though i linked sky's reblog because they put some excellent tags which you should totally read)

[wels and hels](#) and [fireworks](#) by sky!

FANART TIME!!

[interesting... wels drawing](#) by jamie!

until then, see you in the finale :]

the fallacious finale

Chapter Summary

final chapter: in which the game reaches its long-awaited conclusion (and the writer makes a commentary on capitalism).

Chapter Notes

the final part, huh? quite ironically this was the only chapter that stayed within my word count predictions compared to the rest. heh

i would recommend reading [this](#) oneshot first! it's only 2k words, and it gives more insight onto what actually happened to wels with the whole body-snatching deal, plus it has some team canada content too.

CONTENT/TRIGGER WARNINGS:

- violence
- blood and injury
- referenced/attempted mind control
- queunliskanphobia (fear of saliva and spit)

proceed with caution. have fun with the finale!

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

The stagnant air hung heavily over Shawn's head as his fingers drummed endlessly against the keyboard. After hours of staring directly at the screen, Shawn finally looked up and stretched, eyes meeting the drab gray walls all around him. With every second his eyes remained on them, it felt like the walls grew closer and closer, as if encasing him in a concrete prison— which wasn't at all helped by the complete lack of natural sunlight through the blocked-off windows.

Sighing, Shawn sipped his cold coffee, taking in the suffocating silence around him, only broken by the clacking of keyboards or the mouse clicks. There was a day's worth of work left for him to finish on the screen before him, but something in his mind pulled him away from the tiring light. Somehow, despite working at NileCorp for years, he never found himself ever used to the job's conditions.

*He was **tired**. Tired of the suffocating office, tired of the droning work, tired of complaining internally every day with no other solution or plan, and tired of that billionaire pig— ahem, the CEO, he meant. The only splash of life in the entire building was Evan's childhood crayon drawings, which hung on the cubicle wall in front of him.*

Still, Shawn knew well that nothing could ever change so easily, no matter how much he despised the thought. This was the life he chose for himself the day he decided to prioritize Evan over anything else, and as long as his brother was living normally, it was more than enough for him.

Shawn closed his eyes with a sigh, then returned to work. He could only hope for an unexpected miracle to be granted now.

Even after the conversation has passed an hour or so ago, EX still thinks about his talk with XVoid about the brother situation.

Over this time, he's been brainstorming ideas for how to apologize to Shawn, mentally deleting and rewriting the words in his brain. Should he jump right into it once he sees Shawn? Nope, too awkward. Talk over dinner? No, that will probably be annoying for both of them to juggle the conversation while eating. Talk it through text? No, there's a nonzero chance that he might accidentally use a slang Shawn doesn't know, and it will be a pain to explain internet memes.

EX decides that the best idea is asking Shawn for a serious talk whenever they see each other next and then going straight into it once Shawn agrees. Yes— when he gets home, he's going to spawn camp the door for Shawn's return! Perfect!

Now that this situation is all solved and over with, EX turns his attention to Welsknight ahead of him. The hero of swords grips two parallel bars, taking slow, clunky steps forward and gritting his teeth in spiteful frustration.

“Who would've thought *walking* would be such a difficult task to rehabilitate?” Wels groans in complaint. “I was still walking every day as a ghost! I couldn't even fly— I needed to use the stairs while that jerk emo can float around all he wants!”

“Awww, are you *jealous*?” Hels mocks from the corner of the room as he twirls around the air effortlessly. “Try taking a bullet to your chest next time, and *then* you'll be as cool as me!”

“If I weren't in the meat suit right now, you'd be getting a paragraph of swears, kid. Shut up before I call over the ZIT Ghost Hunters.”

“Maybe you should take off the armor?” XVoid suggests with a laugh, holding Wels's arm to ensure stability. “I still wonder how you run around in all that metal every day.”

“Oh Void, don't worry!” Wels reassures, patting his chestplate. “It's just a two-in-one package exercise if I keep it on! Plus, the armor literally has magic that keeps people from recognizing me, so I can't take it off unless I want to be— what do the kids say? Doxxed?”

“Your condition has improved from a few days ago, though!” the bearded man with a clipboard, Beef, announces. “You walked this course three seconds faster than yesterday!”

“*Only* three?” Wels sighs. “Okay, I've got to speedrun that new high score—”

However, before Wels can even finish his sentence, his eyes roll into the back of his head, and he crashes onto the floor without warning. His spirit then immediately floats out from the body, cursing in disgruntlement, “Gods, *FUCK!*”

“Looks like you still can't keep your physical form for too long, though...” Beef frowns, helping XVoid reposition Wels's body into a lying position. “Oh gosh, I'm still sorry about this... maybe if my machine for bringing you out from your coma was faster, this whole fiasco wouldn't have happened!”

“Don't beat yourself up over it,” Hels cuts in with a surprisingly sincere tone. “Your machine was *fine*; it's just that I was a nasty little thief, eh?” He then returns to a mischievous cackle, slapping Wels's ghostly, armored back. “If anything, the knight should be at blame for being such a

slowpoke!”

“He’s right, Beef— it’s not your fault,” Wels says, nudging Hels’s hand off his back and crossing his arms with a sigh. “Honestly speaking, Hels isn’t even the one fully at fault here— I’ll admit, snatching bodies of the living isn’t the most unreasonable thing to do when you’re a ghost. It’s literally only that oily prick of a CEO that had any blame in this! Do you know how it feels to turn on the news station and see yourself reported *dead*?”

“I never got the opportunity to tell anyone but Keralis and Zed— oh, I guess I can reveal it to Etho *now*, since he deserves to know what happened— but I was ordered to be silent about the matter from the NileCorp overseers.” Beef explains as he shakes his head. “We thought about going directly to your house to see if you were there, but we were restricted from taking action. I was scared that they would threaten you all or even Pause if I dare tell anybody the truth.”

“Yeah, I was also penalized for checking your house that day...” XVoid adds dejectedly. “I was confused at the time, but... there’s so many layers behind this whole situation that can finally be unpacked now.” He looks to Wels’s physical body, placing a gloved hand on the knight’s shoulder. “I thought you died, but it turned out to be a lie covering up something prematurely handled. I was devastated... and now, I don’t know how to feel.”

EX sips his juice pouch with a straw through the bottom of his helmet as he intakes the trio’s discussion. All of this information is completely foreign to him; he originally assumed that Wels was just possessed during a coma, but with all this new knowledge, *especially* XVoid’s emotional turmoil, something tightens in his chest.

“Sorry you’re seeing all of this,” XVoid turns to EX and apologizes with a short nod. “It’s a complicated matter; I know.”

Shaking his head, EX replies, “No, it’s fine, I wanted to hear! This higher-up authority stuff is all news to me, but it seems important to you, even though I don’t really get it fully.” EX shrugs. “I mean, I can *kind* of get it... a while back, my brother lost someone important to him and he was struck by it too. It sucked for him, so I want to be able to help here.”

“*Right.*” XVoid reaches over and pats EX on the shoulder firmly. “Thank you for being understanding, but there’s too much going on in the corporate web that’s in no way safe for you. This isn’t your battle to fight.”

EX narrows his eyes. “Well, it is now.”

Wels laughs airily and walks up to face EX. “I do admire your stubbornness, kid, but Void is right. This clusterfuck is something that we would never subject anyone else to deal with directly. But you can still help by pirating NilePrime shows!”

“Oh, don’t worry! I do that all the time, anyway.”

“For once, Wels, I agree with your illegal suggestions,” XVoid chuckles. “Alright EX, you should go home soon. We’ll handle the search for more answers from here. We don’t want to push you so much after yesterday, after all.”

Though reluctant, EX accepts it will probably be better for him to comply. As much as he wants to help the others, he’ll probably get in the way— especially considering that he still feels a draining fatigue from that scuffle with Hels the day earlier. The last thing EX wants to do is pile more trouble onto HC’s plate of problems, so he’ll follow XVoid’s suggestion to head home.

“*WHAT?!*” Norman shrieks through Evan’s headsets. “*What do you mean Wels was never dead to begin with?!*”

“Yeah, as it turns out, that hit didn’t even kill him!” Evan says back into the mic. “He was still alive but just needed a way for his soul to return to his body or some shit— I dunno the technical bits. Anyway, this asshole ghost named Hels stole his body, and those NileCorp pricks straight up told Beef to keep silent about the mismanagement. How stupid is that?”

“*Is that what you meant by ‘fighting Wels’s evil spirit?’*”

“Quote-unquote *evil*, yeah.” With a sigh, Evan leans back in his chair. “*Fuuuuuck*, that fiasco really messed me up, though. I feel like an old man with arthritis.”

“*Serves you right! I used up the entire first-aid kit patching you up!*” Norman huffs. Evan hears him go silent for a couple seconds on the other end, until Norman speaks again in a much lower voice. “*Gosh... I never thought this situation was so complicated. I was just told that Wels had passed away and to not speak about it, so...*”

“NileCorp CEO’s a real crazy motherfucker if he’s running a money-hungry business *and* controlling confidential information on public defenders!” Evan wrinkles his nose, scrolling through a recent article detailing another NileCorp corruption reveal. *NileCorp CEO using heroes to do his dirty work*. Real juicy drama. “What the hell is he anyway, a walking allegory for late-stage capitalism?”

Norman lets out a heavy sigh. “*This all feels so... convoluted. Whatever it is, I hope Zae, Cub, and Beef can sort it out smoothly. But for now, we should probably study for the Civics test on Monday. Wouldn’t want to waste this opportunity since they actually gave us a test date in advance this time.*”

“Aww... do I really *have* to?”

“*Do you want to fail?*”

“...Well, no, but— Okay, good point. I’ll at least review my notes.”

“*My notes, technically.*”

“Yeah yeah, whatever.”

Evan and Norman say goodbye, ending the call. Immediately following after, Evan’s phone lights up with a text from Shawn, which he scrambles to unlock and read. His mind jumps with the possibilities of what it might say— Maybe a check-in or notifying his return? Evan swells with anticipation to finally apologize.

However, once Evan unlocks the text app, the message simply says, *Taking care of something at work. Won’t be home until likely after you’re asleep. Go ahead and eat dinner without me, it’s in the fridge. See you later!*

Oh. It looks like he can’t say sorry until tomorrow, huh? Sighing, Evan reacts to the message with a thumbs up and places his phone back down, then launches himself face first into the bed. Evan squeezes the pillow against his chest and curses his ruined plans. *Dammit!* Now he’s going to have to think of a different way to approach Shawn!

Since tomorrow is a weekend, maybe he can just tell Shawn while they have breakfast? That seems like a plausible idea. He’ll need to think of some backups in case that doesn’t work, but Evan decides he needs to clear his mind a little with homework, as absurd as the idea sounds.

It's 2:46 AM, and Evan remains staring at his ceiling.

It looks like his mind is still racing with the uncertainties and lingering guilt from that argument, but there's nothing much he can do about it now. Even still, his brain keeps him awake with unrelenting thoughts and what-ifs.

And when Evan finally begins to drift asleep half an hour later, he notes that Shawn still hasn't returned.

When Evan wakes up, the first thing he realizes is that he completely forgot to set an alarm last night. It's already *noontime*, and he's completely slept in!

"Fuck!" he curses loudly, launching out of bed. "Shawn? Are you still home?"

"*Evan?*" Shawn calls out from downstairs. "Oh! You're awake!"

Evan sighs in relief. Well, it seems like he still has a chance.

Quickly changing into day clothes, Evan hops down the stairs two at a time and into the living room, where he sees Shawn and Kasper standing in front of the door.

"Hey, good timing!" Kasper exclaims, waving at Evan. "I was just about to take your brother out to lunch. Wanna come?"

"Ah, good idea!" Shawn nods quickly, adding on with a small smile. "We're going to be trying that new place a few blocks down!"

"Uh—" Evan says, glancing between Shawn and Kasper, who expectantly wait for his answer.

His first instinct is to say no, but Evan realizes that if he declines, Shawn might think he's still angry—which he isn't at all! That might end up making things more tense for them. Oh, and it's probably best to take advantage of the free food. It's not like they're making *him* pay.

"Yeah, sure!" Evan replies, dashing over to the two.

"Excellent!" Kasper winks and pulls the door open. "Let's get going, then!"

As the three walk, Kasper thankfully prevents an awkward silence between the brothers by making silly small talk.

"You know what I'm the most excited about?" he says, clasping his hands together for dramatic effect. "*The breadsticks*. I heard they were the most amazing things ever!"

"Really? *Breadsticks?*" Shawn raises an eyebrow at his friend's goofiness. "You're most looking forward to the free carbs?"

"Hey, free food is free food!" Evan adds with a shrug. "If it's good and it's free, then isn't that the best?"

The trio shares a lighthearted laugh. Which is good, Evan thinks. Maybe with this, he can soften the situation with Shawn first before apologizing later.

After a minute or so, the group passes by a road blocked off by signs and caution tape.

"What happened there?" Kasper asks, craning his neck to see exactly *what* is being blocked.

Evan squints and notices a couple burnt fences behind the tape. *Ohhh, yeah. That happened.*

“I heard it was a villain attack,” Shawn explains briefly. “Something about a guy with a fire sword.”

Kasper nods in understanding. “Gotcha. Villains these days are crazy for sure.”

Feeling a giggle emerge from his chest, Evan does everything to suppress a laugh at this interaction. He fought the “villain” in question just two days ago! As far as Evan knows, Hels will for sure get a laugh out of being called “guy with a fire sword” and “crazy.”

“Come to think of it, there’s been more and more attacks as of late, huh?” Kasper mentions, glancing over at yet another roadblock, this time blocking off a street with a giant crack splitting down the middle. “Wasn’t this one just from a few days ago?”

“Yeah, it’s been getting more and more frequent in the past month... Too much happening every day.” Shawn sighs as he shakes head.

Evan realizes that Shawn is right— villain attacks *have* been getting more and more frequent, and he chalked it up to the fact that he became more aware of city crimes ever since he became a vigilante, but it seems like Shawn has noticed it too.

Making a whistling sound with his mouth, Kasper says, “I sure hope something doesn’t happen anytime soon! *Especially* not now, because I’m hun—”

Right on cue, a thunderous explosion sounds from just a few blocks away. All three turn towards the direction of the noise at once, seeing a pillar of smoke already begin to rise from the blast area.

Shawn turns to his friend with an ice-cold glare. “*Kas.*”

Gulping anxiously, Kasper steps backwards on the sidewalk. “Uh— That wasn’t me! I swear!”

“I would hope not!” Shawn exclaims over the alarms that have already started to blare, which indicate a Level 4 threat. *Civilians and multiple areas are in danger.*

At the same time, the two receive a buzzing notification on their phones, which they quickly check. Kasper and Shawn look up to meet each other’s eyes, then glance over at Evan with dead serious faces.

Turning around to face his brother, Shawn orders, “Run back home and get in the bunker. Do *not* open the door until the clear signal is given. I’ll catch up in a moment, okay?”

Shawn and Kasper then start to sprint off until Evan grabs his brother’s arm.

“Wait wait wait, hold up!” Evan demands, pulling Shawn back with all his strength. “Why aren’t you two coming along? What’re you doing?”

“Um, I have to cancel the reservation, or else they’ll charge me!” Kasper replies with a couple stutters. “You know, expensive places— haha!”

“I, uh— the manager will kill me if I don’t save those files!” Shawn blurts out, breaking free from Evan’s grip. “The company is right in the danger zone, so I have to get the laptop!”

“Shawn, wait—”

No longer restrained by Evan, Shawn dashes off by Kasper’s side, barely looking back. “*Stay safe!*”

I'll be back soon!"

"*SHAWN!*" Evan hollers, starting to run after them, but they have already turned a corner and completely disappeared. "*Dammit!*" Evan stomps his foot in frustration. "What the hell is this?!"

Having no better option to follow, Evan defeatedly sprints back home, swiftly pulling open the bunker door and slipping inside the protected room. Right as he flops onto the couch, another loud rumble shakes the ground. Evan sinks into the cushions, promptly whipping out his phone and opening Norman's direct messages.

tax evander: normie

tax evander: normie are you there

tax evander: NORMIE

tax evander: bro youre always on offline mode i cant tell if youre alive or not

tax evander: normie.

tax evander:



tax evander: dear lord are you out fucking fighting

tax evander: oh my god.

Exasperated, Evan shuts off his phone and throws it to the other end of the couch. Just *great*. First Level 4 crisis in years, and he can't even talk to Norman to pass the time. Back then, Evan and Norman would just spend the entire lockdown texting, but that was *before* Norman became a hero. Now? He's gonna have to wait through this entire time. *Alone*. And Evan already feels the boredom creeping up his back like a snake.

He absolutely *cannot* survive sitting in the bunker without anybody to bother. With each passing minute, Evan grows more and more aware of the absolute emptiness occasionally interrupted by a couple explosions off into the distance. And Shawn *still* hasn't come back. There's no way that man needs to spend this long retrieving some files, unless...

As the horrifying realization of Shawn possibly being in trouble dawns upon Evan, he shoots up straight in his chair. "Oh, fuck! What the *hell* is happening out there?"

Evan grabs his phone, clicking into the live news report of the attack, which shows various heroes out in the battlefield fighting against an entire group of villains, right in front of the NileCorp office.

"*The CEO of NileCorp, Jeff Waspsus, has not yet communicated about the situation,*" the news reporter announces. "*Countless heroes are fighting against a group of villains who seemingly emerged from within the office...*"

“Jeff?” Evan’s face contorts into a scowl. “Doesn’t Shawn work for that prick?”

That’s it, Evan decides. He’s not going to sit around and just wait for everything to be okay. Charging out of the bunker, he climbs up the stairs to his room (on all fours, of course) and immediately goes to change into his outfit. Evan throws on his bleach-stained jacket and slings his bag over his shoulder, then drops the helmet onto his head. *EX is back and ready to fight.*

EX starts to sprint, but halfway out the door, he feels a dull throbbing in his ribs. Taking a deep breath, he makes an executive decision to just suck it up. He can deal with it. He’s going to be *fine*.

It doesn’t take long for EX to rush all the way to his destination, where he instantly sees his friends at HC engaging in an intense battle with an onslaught of enemies. There’s Boatem in the corner with Mumbo and Scar swooping in to rescue civilians while Pearl, Xelqua, and Impulse fend off attacks. To his side, EX notices Tango’s run-down car zooming around the streets, picking up any injured fighters or victims and rushing away as fast as he came in.

“What’s going on?” EX shouts to nobody in particular, hoping somebody can answer his question.

“Hallo, kid!” Iskall, the cyborg hero greets as he lands right in front of EX, carrying a costumed person— probably another hero. “Did you just get here?”

“Yeah, just now, actually—” EX glances at the unconscious individual in Iskall’s arms. “Who, uh... is that? I don’t recognize them.”

“Oh, this is a rescued hero!” Iskall explains while she walks over and places down the hero next to Ren, who is crouched over healing a group of injured people. “They were fighting while being mind controlled, so now we’re helping these guys heal up.”

“*Mind control?* Like... Keralis?”

“No no no, not him. Keralis’s powers are much less harmful than that.” With a frown deepening onto his face, Iskall lifts a finger and points directly to the top of the NileCorp office. “It’s *Jeff*.”

“Oh, I *knew* that motherfucker was evil!” EX thinks about all the times Shawn returned home exhausted or had to stay overtime to work, feeling a smoldering anger begin to form inside his gut. “No sane person would charge fifteen dollars a month for the shit they have on NilePrime!”

“Exactly! There’s nothing on NilePrime that’s good anymore!” Iskall huffs, crossing her arms.

“Okay, if you wanna help in the fight, there are a couple guys up there trying to get into the office. I think XVoid is with them.”

“Got it, thanks!” EX sprints off towards the building, waving at Iskall. “Good luck on your end!”

As EX rushes in towards the action, he skilfully dodges piles of rubble and makes his way towards the hero group fighting at front. Up ahead, Etho waves his magical staff, which shoots out a beam of sparkles and subdues the enemy flying towards him, and Doc sends the attacker into a concrete wall with just a flick of his finger. In the middle of the two, XVoid jumps from portal to portal, wrangling the falling enemy and dropping them into an enclosure with his powers.

“Hey, guys!” EX calls out, attempting to get the heroes’ attention.

But before he can say anything else, a figure lunges at him from the side, tackling EX to the ground.

“What the fu—” EX shouts, but he’s promptly cut off by the villain seizing his neck and lifting

him into the air. With this close contact, EX notices the unsettling detail of his attacker's eyes being entirely obscured by a bright, glowing green...

Lifting their other hand, the villain begins charging up a glowing ball of ice— and EX, not particularly thrilled at the thought of becoming a popsicle, swings his leg with all his might at his attacker's stomach. The villain falters for a moment, giving EX just the opportunity to grab the arm holding him and twist their elbow aside, which causes the villain's hand to release the grip on his throat.

Once EX drops onto solid ground, he hears a voice from the distance calling his name.

“EX!” XVoid exclaims from afar. “Keep them in place!”

“You've got it!” EX yells back.

He pulls out his collapsible bat right when the villain regains composure and instantly shoots out a blade of ice right at EX's chest, which he thankfully deflects with his weapon just in time.

Holy shit, he thinks while watching the ice shatter against the ground. *I felt that cold blast so close to my face. That totally could have turned me into a skewer had I not blocked in time.*

With this close call, EX becomes aware that this fight is not like any other he's engaged in before. It's not just any other roadside robber with some stupid power, or tag-teaming with XVoid to take down an escaping criminal, or messing around with Worm-Man, this is a *Level 4 threat*. He's going to have to be extra cautious from here on out.

But he's still got a job to do— *Keep them in place*, was what XVoid ordered. EX's mind turns for any ideas as he dodges yet another blast of ice that would have frozen him in place. He probably shouldn't hurt this person, because they do look mind-controlled, but he still needs a way to subdue them without inflicting major harm. It's not like he can get close enough without the threat of being blasted into an ice cube, and at the same time, all of his current weapons are for melee use. There's really no way for him to fight unless he steals someone else's gear right now at this moment, which isn't really possible... unless—

A beam of ice shoots at EX's leg, and he leaps out of the way right before it hits him. Maybe, *maybe* he can use their own powers against them! With this new thought, EX's brain gears rotate into action, cranking up a proper plan. It'll only take maybe ten seconds tops, perhaps?

Watching his attacker's hands closely, EX waits until they start glowing with blue again to make his move. Like a dart, EX zips towards the enemy, swerving behind them right before the power releases to give them a nice, simple shove from the back. And just as EX had planned, that manages to surprise them into blasting the ice straight into their own legs.

“Ha!” he laughs as his opponent twists around wildly, trying to break from their own ice prison. “Call that a taste of your own medicine!”

Within ten more seconds, XVoid arrives on scene and shoots a portal under the villain's feet, dropping them through the void and presumably into another containment box.

“Amazing job, my friend!” XVoid says cheerfully, landing beside EX. “Turning someone's attacks against them? You handled that so well!”

“Oh, it's nothing,” EX replies bashfully, grinning stupidly under the helmet. “I just did what I could— okay, anyway! Let's go get that asshole CEO!”

XVoid holds out his hand and EX takes it, just as usual, and they hop into the void opening together. Once they land, EX spots Doc and Etho crouched in front of the previously captured enemies, talking to them in a civilized manner.

“What’s goin’ on here?” XVoid asks, leaning into the group. “Weren’t those the villains we caught?”

“Ah, X!” Etho greets, nodding. “We were just talking to some of these victims here— Doc and I think that they were mind controlled...”

“That’s what Iskall said, too!” EX adds, remembering the cyborg’s explanation. “Are these guys seriously *all* controlled?”

“It seems like it,” Doc says, standing up and straightening his lab coat. “It’s nothing we’ve ever seen before, either, since these guys said they were manipulated by emotions for a *long* time. Keralis’s power is completely different from this.”

“But... who’s the one brainwashing *this* many heroes?” Etho asks, glancing over to the shaken group. “Why would anybody do this?”

EX shifts his eyes towards the NileCorp building. “Well, I have an idea who it might be.”

“Jeff?” Etho frowns, uncertain. “Isn’t he the overseer for HC? What good would he get out of launching an attack?”

“Actually, EX might be right,” Doc says, turning towards the office. “X, weren’t you and the others digging into his scandals last night? Zed told me he published the reports anonymously.”

“That must have backed him into a corner,” XVoid says, practically growling, starting to take heavy steps towards the building (which surprises EX. He never expected this reaction out of XVoid, of all people). “All his corruption was exposed, so now he has to make a show for it. What a *coward*.”

“We can all go fight him together,” Etho offers as he holds up his staff. “Let’s finish rounding up the mind-control victims and—”

Etho doesn’t get to finish his sentence as a broken wall crashes between the group, cutting them off from XVoid.

“There’s still more of them!” Doc exclaims, loudly shouting a swear in German. He swipes his finger in the air and lifts the wall up. “Come on, let’s go— hey, where’s X?”

By now, XVoid has already run far up ahead, already at the office door.

“XVOID!” EX calls out. “Wait don’t go yet they can call reinforcements after all of this is—” Something else smashes into the ground right next to EX, causing him to jump. Okay, maybe he shouldn’t stay here. “*Fuck!* Fine!” EX grumbles, chasing after XVoid. “I’m coming along!”

Is this how Norman feels like dealing with me? EX thinks as he sprints down the path to the office. *God, I hope nothing goes wrong...*

There is one of these moments from HC that XVoid always gets a chuckle out of whenever he’s reminded of it. One day during work, Cub’s computer had bluescreened out of nowhere, much to everybody’s confusion.

“Hold on, I’ll call Zed,” Cub said and pressed a few buttons on his communicator.

Seconds later, Zed came rushing into the room with his mech arms strapped to his back, took one look at the computer, then whacked it with one of his arms— fixing the computer in an instant. Everybody in the room had a good laugh back then, and they still laugh whenever it’s brought up.

But XVoid does not laugh now when a giant mech arm slams down into the ground next to him.

“XVoid! It took you long enough!” Jeff says, cackling as he towers over XVoid, propped up by a set of extended robot arms. “How was it working all night with your friends to expose me? Is it paying off now?”

“It’ll pay off when I take you down for good!” XVoid shouts, portalling a pile of rubble directly on top of Jeff’s head without hesitation.

To XVoid’s disgruntlement, Jeff simply shifts to the side, completely avoiding his attack. “Is that all you’ve got?” Jeff mocks while parrying with a swat of his metal claw, which XVoid narrowly avoids by hopping through a portal.

It looks like this fight won’t be so easy after all— but it’s fine. XVoid doesn’t fully know Jeff’s powers, but he assumes it’s some sort of mind control. He doesn’t know what activates it or what the restrictions are, but this just means he should finish off the battle before he can find out. The only fact he can be certain about is that the mechanical arms are not a part of his powers and as long as he takes care of those, the rest of the fight should be a piece of cake.

When another arm strikes towards him for an attack, XVoid roots himself in place and opens a portal for the arm to pass through right before it can hit. Then, gathering his strength, he snaps the portal close, effectively slicing the arm in half— his success further verified by the sound of metal clanging against the floor where he placed the second portal.

“Oh, not a bad idea, actually!” Jeff says, clapping smugly. “But what if there were *multiple* arms coming for you?”

Following up on Jeff’s threat, three arms fly across the air like bullets, aiming straight for their target: XVoid. But when he opens a portal in an attempt to chop the arms off, XVoid’s plans instantly shatter when he finds the arms resisting against the edges of his portals, preventing him from closing it. To his dismay, the arms even manage to force their way through the portal and emerge from the other opening, dealing a blow to XVoid’s back and knocking him onto the ground. XVoid barely even rolls out of the way before another claw smashes into where he was previously.

“XVoid, you’re a skilled fighter; I won’t deny that,” Jeff says while continuing his unrelenting flurry of attacks. XVoid scowls, wishing he would just shut up and leave them to fight in silence. “You’ve got a useful power and years of experience, but no matter how strong, everybody has weaknesses. And I’m *well* aware of yours.”

It must be a bluff, XVoid scoffs in his mind. His coworkers don’t even know what his face looks like, and they’ve been working with him for over three years. How much can Jeff possibly know about him, much less his weaknesses?

“Hey, X!” he suddenly hears someone call from behind. “There you are!”

XVoid turns to see EX standing in the doorway with a bat in hand, and a fear that he wasn’t even aware of seizes him like a choking grip.

Jeff laughs. “*Speak of the devil.*”

“EX, get away!” XVoid orders, shooting out a portal next to the kid.

“Not so fast!” One of Jeff’s mechanical arms completely blocks off the portal. EX yelps and springs away, taking his place next to XVoid. *No no no no no, you shouldn’t be here!*

“You were already fighting Mr. Clean here?” EX asks, holding up his weapon. “I mean, I wouldn’t expect any less— whatever! I can help here!”

“No, you need to *leave!*” XVoid opens a portal into the wall again, nudging EX towards it, but Jeff swiftly throws a piece of broken ceiling over it, blocking the exit.

“Why are you making your friend go?” Jeff teases, swatting towards EX. “He just got here! EX can join the fun if he wants!”

EX dodges the arm easily, but more attacks strike down in immediate succession, forcing him to shift away from XVoid’s side. “Hey!” he retorts, swinging his bat at a claw. “What the hell, man?!”

Though EX attempts to make his way back over to XVoid, the arms swing around like a murder-octopus and constantly push the two away from each other. To XVoid’s horror, Jeff has even turned his attention to EX— striking and dealing blows targeting the kid. As much as XVoid tries to assist EX with his portals, it’s nearly impossible to keep track of *everything* when he’s on the other side of the battle.

While trying to portal EX into a safer spot, XVoid’s concentration on the kid leads him to lose focus on his end. Jeff whacks him in the back with a claw, sending him tumbling onto the ground.

“*XVoid!*” EX shouts as he lands on the floor. “Are you okay?”

“I’m *fine*,” XVoid hisses, trying to ignore the throb in his ribs.

“Isn’t this funny? To think one thing I neglected came back to bite me,” Jeff remarks nonchalantly, as if he had not just practically thrown XVoid onto the floor. “Who would have thought the knight was actually alive?”

“Yeah? Well you should’ve made sure of your mess-ups!” XVoid shoots back, slamming into one arm with a slab of concrete.

It barely has any effect on Jeff; he simply repositions with his other arms. “He was dead to everyone, and the dead don’t talk. And I’ll admit, it was my fault for being so careless.”

They sure told me he was dead, alright. XVoid seethes. He had tried everything he could to prove himself wrong— endlessly searching, contacting city officials, asking other hero associations for help— before finally giving up and wallowing in grief. *The dead don’t talk. Wels couldn’t.*

“But you and your friends could have just accepted Wels coming back and stopped there,” Jeff says, voice dripping with arrogance. “Instead, you went further and dug into my other scandals. You guys thought you were doing the right thing, but if you had just kept to yourselves, none of this would be happening right now.”

XVoid glares at Jeff, murderous rage bubbling inside him like a volcano preparing for eruption. He can already feel himself tiring out with the constant portalling, but he swears if Jeff utters another word—

“The load of trouble that knight stirred up from his reappearance...” Jeff clicks his tongue. “He should have just died for good six months ago.”

And then the explosion happens.

“*You shut your mouth about Wels!*” XVoid leaps up with a new burst of fury, slicing a broken pipe off the ceiling with a portal, and then swinging it into a group of arms.

Though it manages to make Jeff stumble for just a second, he parries by snatching up a couple pipes of his own and swinging all of them towards XVoid at once. XVoid attempts to teleport out of the way, but he only ends up right in front of another arm.

“An interesting power, XVoid,” Jeff monologues as he swats XVoid like a baseball. “Rips through space and portals able to connect any two points in space. Makes me wonder what happened for you to awak—”

“SHUT UP, EGGMAN!” EX taunts, cutting Jeff off. “YOUR WIFE LEFT YOU!”

“Children should be seen and not heard!” Jeff hisses, instantly striking down on EX’s left.

EX reacts with a slight delay, bursting away just in time to avoid the attack, but this reminds XVoid of something he’s never quite paid attention to up until now: EX has always asked for him to cover the left. *EX might have trouble seeing from the left.*

XVoid hopes with all his heart Jeff doesn’t notice this detail, but it seems his prayers have gone unanswered.

Grinning from this newfound realization, Jeff uses the claws to dig into a wall behind EX and pulls it apart, then flings the broken concrete towards EX from his left side— perfectly abusing the kid’s blind spot.

Terrifying possibilities flash across XVoid’s eyes as he watches the chunks of debris sail across the room— for a split second, he sees Wels flying through the air with a beam to his stomach, and every feeling of panic, shock, and *despair* replays in his mind like a video on repeat, condensed into a single millisecond.

He will *not* let this happen again.

Time seems to freeze before XVoid’s eyes as he watches the wall fall towards EX in slow motion, and right before it crashes down, XVoid shoots open one massive portal to transfer the concrete somewhere else. Right upon using his powers, XVoid feels his energy being sucked out like a vacuum— a consequence of pushing past his limits.

Although EX lands safely, XVoid finds himself stumbling onto his knees before he’s immediately snatched by the neck and lifted off his feet. XVoid frantically opens a portal under himself in an attempt to escape, but he quickly realizes that there’s no way for him to enter it when he’s suspended in the air.

“Like I said, you have many weaknesses—as we can see, one of which is EX,” Jeff details, smugly lifting XVoid to meet face to face. It’s in situations like these where XVoid wishes his helmet showed more emotions, just so Jeff could see him glaring daggers. “Your portals are only directly proportional to your own strength, and finally, you have no way of using your portals if you’re immobilized. *Isn’t that interesting?*”

“What’s interesting is how fucking ugly you are!” EX jeers from the side. “Minion-lookin ass!”

“EX!” XVoid gasps. If the kid keeps drawing attention to himself, he might be in more danger than he already is. “Stop!”

Jeff shoots an irritated look at EX. “*You* shut up, unless you want me to kill your dear hero on the spot.”

“Oh yeah? Well I won’t fucking let you, greedy ass prick!”

Just to communicate he isn’t messing around, Jeff gives XVoid’s neck a tight squeeze. “*Stay put.*”

“Hey— let him go, you fucker!” EX lifts up his bat to attack Jeff, but an arm swats him into a wall before he can try anything.

XVoid nearly shouts, but all that leaves his mouth is a strangled cry. Then, while continuing to effortlessly attack EX, Jeff turns his attention back to XVoid.

“You’re always so confident, XVoid,” Jeff monologues. “Confident about your morals, abilities, and *identity*. But how about we get rid of that mask of yours?” Like a cat toying with its prey, Jeff rotates XVoid in his grip and lifts another claw. “How would you like that?”

With a battering force, Jeff swings an arm straight into XVoid’s head, splitting a crack in the helmet. He then yanks the helmet off and tosses it aside, revealing Shawn baring his teeth like a cornered animal.

“Not so cocky now, huh?” Jeff taunts, face twisting into a smirk. “Look at you . You thought you could get away when you quit working as an accountant, but in the end, it all leads back to *me.*”

With nothing left to fight with other than spite, Shawn sucks up all his saliva (though it’s mainly filled with blood) and spits straight into Jeff’s face. By doing so, he earns himself a slap across the cheek with Jeff’s own hand, but at this point, the satisfaction of rebellion completely drowns out the pain.

“Oh you’re *mad*, aren’t you? Well isn’t that convenient for me—” Jeff hisses, flicking the blood off his face and back onto Shawn’s armor. “What if I said you’re the *perfect* candidate for my powers? I’ve heard your good friend Keralis never succeeded in mind-controlling you, but my abilities *always* managed to control the strong, negative emotions of angry people *just like you.*”

Jeff holds up his palm, roughly shoving it onto Shawn’s forehead. Instantly, a green fog sweeps over Shawn’s eyes, mixing and swirling with the red from his rage. Kicking and writhing, Shawn struggles to escape, but his control over actions is already starting to slip as numbness spreads over his limbs—

“What do you think happened to those heroes you fought, *Shawn?*” Jeff cackles.

“*SHAWN?!?*”

Both Shawn and Jeff’s attention snap towards the kid, and EX lifts his helmet to reveal a messy mop of brown hair covering one scarred eye. *There’s no way.*

“Evan...?” Shawn croaks out, the blinding fog promptly dispersing from his mind.

The kid in front of Shawn stares back into his eyes with such a familiarity that it’s unmistakably his *brother*. It’s the face that he’s seen every day for the past sixteen years, the face that breaks into a grin upon hearing his silly jokes, the face that scowls during his lectures, and the face that he’s *stunned* to see under the helmet of his vigilante friend. And suddenly, all the puzzle pieces in the

jigsaw he never knew of click into place.

Shawn becomes suddenly aware that he's been unconsciously treating EX as a proxy for Evan this whole time, and *this* is the reason why.

“And here I was, thinking you were cool,” Evan huffs, a grin spreading across his cheeks. “You fucking *nerd*. But... that was *awesome*.”

Even when held in a chokehold by Jeff, Shawn sighs with a cathartic relief that at least *something* makes sense now. It looks like he needed something to ground him from the wrath that was burning up his insides, and Evan did just that. *Thank you, Ev.*

“*What the fuck?*” Jeff cuts in, scowling with so much disbelief that his attacks have entirely stopped. “You mean... you two *just* realized? After all this time? You guys *just* found out now.”

“Wait, you knew?” Shawn frowns as different math equations float across his brain, trying to figure out how it happened.

“Literally EVERYBODY knew!” Jeff roars, slamming a claw down towards nothing in particular. “There are literally *news articles* on how your dumbasses are clearly brothers!”

“Shit,” Evan shrugs. “It looks like Wormie was right.”

“I can't believe how *idiotic* you two are!” Jeff grabs a slab of concrete and throws it into the wall out of frustration. “I shouldn't even be this angry, but here I am! *My god!*”

Realizing that Jeff has been distracted by the reveal, Shawn twists towards Evan and yells, “Evan! Put your helmet back on!”

Nodding, Evan drops the helmet back on his head while Shawn opens two portals— one above the mech arm holding him and one in front of Evan. Shawn does not hold a single doubt that his brother knows what to do once Evan follows through perfectly by hopping through the portal and stabbing into the arm with his blade.

The mech arm short-circuits, flinging both of them in opposite directions, but Evan swiftly shoots out his grappling hook to safely grab Shawn and bring them back together. Finally, Shawn directs a portal underneath them both and another right above Jeff, allowing them to fall directly in front of Jeff and punch him in the face at the exact same time.

As Jeff stumbles back from the blow, the two take it as a perfect opportunity to properly fight with their tag-team strategy again. Evan starts by anchoring his grappling hook to a secure point, then Shawn portals him around the room, trapping Jeff in a web of rope. No matter how much Jeff flails against it, he still trips over the entanglement and crashes onto the ground.

Without a second to waste, Shawn transports Evan over to the arms' control panel (that wasn't really hard to find, because he recognized it from Zed's design) and Evan yanks the box open, then slashes his knife through the wires— deactivating the entire device. Now, Jeff is but a sitting duck.

Evan hops back to Shawn's side, and both of them slowly turn to face Jeff with their eyes spelling murder.

“I think you're aware of this already, but we're going to beat the shit out of you,” Evan says, taking a step forward. “First, for the city you threatened.”

Shawn takes a step forward as well. “Then, for Wels.”

Evan cracks his knuckles. “Then, for my *brother*.”

Shawn grabs Jeff by the collar, lifting him up. “And then, for mine.”

With the mighty force of gods, Evan knees Jeff straight in the crotch, sending him howling in a fit of agony. Straight after, Shawn tosses him into two portals vertically parallel to each other, leaving Jeff to fall through the openings over and over while screeching in terror. They’ll deal with him later.

And now, with nothing left to worry about except for the screams of bloody murder from a certain CEO, Shawn and Evan turn to properly look at each other’s faces for the first time since the reveal.

“You did great out there,” Shawn smiles warmly, placing a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “I’m proud of you.”

Then, Shawn holds his arms out wide, and without hesitation, Evan leaps into his embrace.

“And you did pretty well for being such a big nerd,” Evan laughs, squeezing Shawn back with his own hug. “Thanks, Shawn.”

Shawn doesn’t remember the last time he hugged Evan, but with the very fact that Evan can feel safe in his arms again, he knows that doesn’t matter. There’s going to be a lot of work they have to do and hurdles to jump over, and even though this won’t be the perfect resolution, it’s at least one important step forward to reconciliation.

It took two of them a long time to put away their playing cards, but finally, the game of mutual secrecy has come to its fulfilling end.

Chapter End Notes

just realized i unintentionally made jeff the minion torment xisuma instead of evil x.
oops!

but dont click off yet!! theres one final part to this and its the epilogue! >:D

some cool [art](#) by sky!

epilogue: the ambivalent afterword

Chapter Summary

epilogue: in which all loose ends are tied up with pretty little bows (with the exception of the elephant that has escaped the room).

Chapter Notes

this chapter is more like a montage of sorts but. yeah! stuff that happened after the final battle minutes, hours, and days later.

please enjoy the final installment! i'll see you guys in the end notes ;D

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

The brothers stand at the building's entrance, waiting for Tango to come pick them up.

"Here," Evan offers his helmet to Shawn. "I know you're pretty protective of your face."

"But what about you?" Shawn asks, hesitant. "You've got an identity to conceal as well."

"Oh, but I can just do this!" Evan pulls up his hood and tightens the strings, leaving only a small gap.

"Alright, alright." Shawn chuckles and takes the helmet, placing it over his head. "Hold on... is this my old motorcycle helmet? How did I not notice?"

Whacking Shawn's arm playfully, Evan teases, "Maybe it's 'cause you've got a derp for brains?"

"Hey! It's not like you noticed I was XVoid, either!"

"Okay, yeah, true, but—" Evan stops, eyes suddenly lighting up. "Oh, yeah! I forgot to ask! Have your eyes always glowed when you use your power?"

"Huh? Do they?" Shawn squints, trying to think of an instance where he has ever seen his own face while using his powers. "I don't think I've ever seen it myself— or anyone has, really— but... I guess that's not the weirdest thing that I've heard."

"Oh. It's still pretty awesome, though."

"...Thanks?"

The two wait for another minute before Tango pulls over in his worn-down car. "Hey, guys!" he exclaims, pushing the back doors open. "Hop right in!"

While on the car ride to the HC headquarters, Tango starts up an unexpected conversation. "So, I see X is missing his helmet there. Did'ja get to see his face?"

“Yeah, I, uh...” Evan scratches the side of his hood. “I found out that... um, I don’t know if you know this, but... Worm-Man said that we were totally brothers a while back, and, uh... it turns out he’s right.”

Tango lets out a loud gasp, shocked. “It took you guys *that* long?!”

“Huh? How’d you know?” Shawn asks.

“Dude, Keralis told me that he recognized EX the second he stepped out of the car on our first meeting, and I was kind of already aware of it when you called him in a panic that day about your brother discovering your identity.”

“Oh.”

Well, that’s embarrassing.

As they exit Tango’s car, there’s a short man in a red sweater waiting at the curbside.

“Here, let me help you,” he offers after seeing Shawn limping.

“Thanks, Grian,” Shawn nods. “But what are you doing here?”

“*THAT’S* Grian?!” Evan exclaims, pointing at the short man in bewilderment. “What in the— huh?! Isn’t he the bird— *what?*”

“The bird?” Shawn glances back and forth between Grian and Evan. “The bird— like, Xelqua?” He squints at Grian. “Waaaait a second...”

Grian doubles over laughing, slapping his knee a couple times. “*You guys didn’t know! Ohhh my gosh, XVoid, you’ve been my coworker for three years! Oh wow, this is hilarious!*”

“So *you’re* Xelqua! I knew it was fuckin’ weird that my brother would hire a *bird* to babysit me!” Evan pokes Grian accusingly. “You were actually some guy this whole time!”

Wiping away a tear, Grian makes a whistling noise and says, “Well, it’s no wonder it took you two this long to find out you were brothers! Congrats, by the way. My bet was that it wouldn’t happen until the end of the year, but it looks like I’ve got to pay Worm-Man now.”

“They *bet* on it?! What the fuck, man!”

Wels sits hovering above his physical body once they reach the inside of the headquarters.

“Hey, Wels!” Shawn greets, waving.

“What’s up, Void?” Wels returns. He scans the two up and down, grimacing. “It looks like they did a real number on ya during the fight.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t matter.” Shawn makes his way to the seat next to Wels with Grian’s help, and then slumps down. “I found out something interesting during that battle. You wouldn’t believe me if I told you who EX really was—” He leans in to whisper, “*He was actually my brother the whole time.*”

Clapping his hands, Wels announces, “Congrats! You two are officially the last people in the entire city to find out!” He points to Hels, who sits cross-legged in the air next to him. “Even *this*

idiot knew before you did!”

Hels nods. “Yeah— *HEY!* Who the fuck are you calling an idiot?!”

“Fifty-four days,” Worm-Man says as he enters the room with a first-aid kit. “It took you two *that* long. I counted.”

“Hey, that’s not too bad!” Evan remarks.

“*Fifty-four days.*” Worm-Man slams down the kit. “You two *live* together. It took you nearly *two months* to recognize each other. Even Zed found out while we were playing Bedwars together.”

“Bedwars?” Hels perks up. “That was a huge part of my childhood!”

“Yeah!” Evan nudges Shawn. “And this guy here invented it!”

“What is a... bed war?” Wels asks. “Void, you didn’t tell me about this.”

Shawn groans and facepalms.

The biggest shock comes to Evan one day when he witnesses Shawn fall down the stairs live, but instead of letting himself tumble, Shawn simply opens up a portal and transports himself to the bottom without his usual stumbling and fumbling.

“Hey, why didn’t you ever do that before?” Evan asks, remembering all the times he found Shawn lying face down at the bottom of the stairs.

“Because I didn’t want to get found out?” Shawn answers, dusting himself off.

As Shawn continues walking on like nothing happened, Evan wonders about all the other stupid things Shawn has done that could have been avoided had he just used his powers. It’s a bit difficult to think of Shawn *not* messing up silly things moving on from now, but he imagines the scatterbrained moments probably won’t stop even with his identity no longer concealed.

Barely a second later, a loud thump followed by a yelp of pain in the kitchen instantly proves Evan’s hypothesis right. Now *that’s* the clumsy brother he’s always known!

“No way, Evan,” Norman gawks at the test in Evan’s hands. “Am I dreaming? Did you actually get a *full score* on this essay?”

“Yeah!” Evan says proudly, leaning back in his chair. “I uh, definitely think it’s because Shawn gave me some tips, though. Turns out, he’s pretty knowledgeable on some stuff that I never knew about. Who would’ve thought he could write an argumentative essay so well?”

“You, properly talking to Shawn?” Norman wipes his glasses lens, just for the bit. “I thought I only needed my eyes checked, but maybe I need a hearing test too!”

“Aw, shut up!” Evan shoves Norman playfully while the blonde laughs. “It wasn’t *that* bad—okay, maybe it was. But talking to him seriously helped with... pretty much everything.”

Norman nods. “Your grades *are* getting better. I always knew you had the potential— I’m going to need to step up my game before you catch up!”

Rolling his eyes with a grin, Evan says, “Oh, I can’t even dream about surpassing Norman Plays,

God of Mario Kart and School!”

The kids share a laugh, putting their tests away and making their way to the cafeteria.

But Norman is right: Evan’s grades have been improving, and it’s directly linked to his recent development with Shawn. Before, he would purposely ignore work or refuse to complete tests out of spite from Shawn’s constant lectures.

After they actually talked, he found out that Shawn was just worried he wasn’t trying (which admittedly, was correct), and they made a compromise after reaching an understanding. Evan now made a resolve to put in the effort for schoolwork, and go on hero shenanigans as a reward.

“EX, I hope you’re excited,” Beef says as he leads EX into the costume hall. “Since you’re officially a member of HC now, I teamed up with XVoid to design you a new outfit!”

Scampering along at Beef’s heels, EX wonders what they have lined up for him.

Beef stops at a metal pod and hits a button on the wall. “Here it is!”

As EX watches the cover lift up, he watches with his heart racing while the pod opens and releases a dramatic fog effect, revealing his new costume.

Upon first glance, it’s a black and red suit with patterns similar to XVoid’s outfit, complete with a jacket like his current one— minus the bleach stain, hopefully. His headgear has also been upgraded, now no longer a simple motorcycle helmet but now made of far more sturdy material, and the horns are also artfully carved!

EX turns to Beef with awe, and Beef nods at him with a bright smile. “Try it on! The changing rooms are back there!”

Quickly grabbing the set, EX rushes into the room and instantly begins changing into his new costume. While putting on piece by piece, he also finds that Beef has added a few new features into his outfit: arm guards with retractable blades and a communicator, plus a smart-backpack made by Zed to store all his weapons for easy access.

When EX finishes changing and puts on his new helmet, it comes to his delight that the helmet is equipped with a communicator and cool sci-fiesque holograms on the visor. With this upgraded fit, EX feels everything become much more *official* now.

After EX steps out the room, he’s greeted by a cheerful thumbs-up from Beef.

“You look awesome, kid! Now, let’s join the others!”

The two head back towards the main lobby, and with every turn down the halls, EX feels his excitement levels rise exponentially. Now, he’ll fit right in with the other heroes! And Worm-Man can’t make fun of him for looking like a Heated Subject model anymore!

All of a sudden, Beef’s phone buzzes, and he stops for a second to read the notification. “Oh, for *goodness* sake—”

EX whirls around. “Huh? What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Zed just sent me a news article about Jeff,” Beef informs, showing his screen. *NileCorp CEO, rumors of experiment construction exposed.* “I can’t believe there’s *still* crimes being

discovered from him.” He shakes his head, slipping the phone back into his pocket. “But never mind that! You don’t need to worry about it, okay?”

Though EX first thinks about asking to see more of the article, he’s instantly distracted by Worm-Man’s greeting once he walks out into the lobby.

“Hey, EX!” Worm-Man hops up to EX, punching him lightly in the shoulder. “You don’t look like a third grader’s emo character anymore!”

“And you still look like strawberry-banana candy packaging!” EX returns, grabbing his friend by the shoulders and shaking him. “Come on, man, when are *you* getting an upgraded fit?”

“My fit *is* upgraded, EX. You should’ve seen my first draft.”

“I did already! In your sketchbook!”

“There was more before that, but I’m not going to show you.”

Giving Worm-Man a shove, EX whines, “Aww, you’re so mean to me!”

“On the contrary! I’m sparing you from the awful art!”

The two giggle like hyenas over their banter before linking arms and skipping off into the central lobby.

“Did you hear? Xelqua and Mumbo built a robot kid just yesterday!” Worm-Man mentions. “I think its name was Jrumbot? Haven’t met, though.”

“Really?” EX raises his eyebrows, mind already running with all possible appearances fit for a robot child. “Well, we gotta indoctrinate it with our sense of humor before anyone else does!”

Making a new friend— that’s always fun. Of course, HC is full of new and old friends, and EX is glad to be with them all.

He can see Wels in the corner of the room, already looking much better in his glorious armor than even a week prior and Hels floating by his side, probably annoying Wels as much as his incorporeal form allows. There’s Pearl and Gri— *ahem*, Xelqua zipping around in the air, even zooming by Tango to surprise him by suddenly lifting him off his feet. And of course, Zed and Cub sit at their front desks, speedily handing each other various papers and reports to document.

This experience isn’t new to EX— he’s been a regular at HC for at least about a month now, but in this specific moment, he’s able to truly appreciate everything he’s learned in his short time with the heroes.

Spotting the man who inadvertently started it all next to the entrance, EX marches up to XVoid— his *brother*, proudly displaying his cool new outfit. “How do I look?”

“You look amazing!” XVoid exclaims, applauding. “It’s even better than I imagined— Beef is an excellent artist, isn’t he?”

“He did great!” EX agrees. “I’m dripping with so much swag now!”

“*You* wearing it, though?” Worm-Man eyes EX with a jokingly disapproving look. “Less of a drip and more of a damp towel.”

“Says the candy wrapper!”

“Alright, kids,” XVoid chuckles, placing a hand on the duo’s shoulders. “Enough of the fuss. Are we going on patrol, or what?”

Nodding excitedly, the two unlink their arms and rush to XVoid’s side.

“Don’t get yourself into trouble, though!” XVoid warns one final time before they enter the elevator to the surface.

“Chill, I can fight competently enough to survive!” EX rolls his eyes. “You’ve *seen* me!”

“Right, sorry; it’s the habits,” XVoid apologizes, playfully conking himself in the helmet. “I’ll stop nagging— I promise.”

EX makes eye contact with Worm-Man, who nods in approval like an old man at an art gallery, then turns back to face XVoid. “The council has decided you are forgiven. Now, onward!”

For EX, it’ll be his first time out again since the attack from Jeff, and he’s brimming with the energy of a puppy to fight again. As they step into the elevator, EX imagines all the baddies he might take down and people he’ll help once he gets out there again, especially now that he’s officially registered as a member of HC.

It’s going to be a blast, especially working side by side with his brother— he can’t *wait* for what’s to come.

Chapter End Notes

before we get into my boring ramble, check out this [animation](#) by sky and this fanart by [cy!](#)

and my [new suit design for evan!](#)

anyway. woah.

that really was five months, huh? 53k words, 120 pages, and a whole lotta blood, sweat, and tears poured into this silly little brainrot piece that has, as of writing this note, accumulated 2.8k hits and so, so many amazing readers. and i cannot be more proud of myself for embarking on and finishing this wild journey that i didn’t expect to go very far initially.

i’ve gotten countless pieces of phenomenal fanart and people actually following what i wrote! which is crazy! like wow! i’m being perceived!!

of course, i could not have done this without my amazing beta readers sky (skyspersonalhell on tumblr) and xy (soemarsono on tumblr) spawncamping my writing doc and helping me with the brainstorming and editing. they’re amazing and i cannot thank them both enough for supporting me every step of the way.

but hold on! this is not the end of the VDHAU universe! for starters, i’ve got a lot of one shots of other characters planned and even a spinoff for wels and hels all outlined for the near future! and if you haven’t noticed from the subtle sequel hinting, yup, i’ve got an idea brewing up for that too. you can always contact me @ kiwinatorwaffles on instagram and tumblr to ask me about the au :]

but for now, thank you all so much for reading! it's been an insane ride that i am thrilled to have gone on. and stay in tune for any more writing and art i may post. seeya all! :D

End Notes

obligatory end note moment! again, my instagram and tumblr are both kiwinatorwaffles, so you can talk to me there or see any posts ive made about this au! especially on tumblr since ive got things sorted out into neat little tags ^^

you can find the art ive made for this au [here](#) and some awesome [fanart](#) others have made! for my fellow lovely tumblr users, make sure to filter out #vdhau spoilers if you dont want to see stuff i havent published yet :D unless you're reading this and i've finished the fic. then feel free to go on

Works inspired by this [one](#): [fighting evil by moonlight](#) by [stressed_sock](#), [it takes two to play \(the mutual game of secrecy\) \[PODFIC\]](#) by [writerofbaddecisions](#), [the devil made me do it \(but i also kinda wanted to\)](#) by [midge1](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!