Black Hearts and White Lies

by TooManyPsuedonyms

Summary

White Hat is the Ultimate Good Guy..... and it's weird that a Villain works for him, right? How did that happen?

Well. It's a looong story.

Like, it kinda starts at the dawn of time, long. Except, humans weren't around then.

Or maybe they were??

Okay, well, maybe time works too weird to properly explain. It's just--

Well, it's weird.

Notes
Here's goes nothing and everything friends...
Prologue: Existence

His existence began like one images it to begin—suddenly. One moment, nothingness, vast and without form, an exquisiteness all on its own. No worries, or care, there is nothing to feel or be or see. Yet, at the next second, he is born. Squashed through the fabric of time and space, if you excuse the phrasing. His is molded, built of light and matter and unbearable heat. The entirety of his newly fleshed being is vibrancy and pain of instant qualities and quantities near immeasurable.

He comes to recognize sound before sight. It is a warble of monstrosity as he howls—so very much alive when he wasn’t before. The first thought is that the experience is most unpleasant, although not in so many words…and he is disoriented. The plane that he has come to exist on is smoky, dim, and the noises of agony fade as his physicality flickers and sizzles and sputters before liquefying. It morphs into a substantially gelatinous form.

Using his eyes, blinking and slowly looking around, he notes his surroundings with a dull throb of still-borned pain. There are other sounds, and his vision focuses on…something else. Another being. It writhes beside him, a dark blob trembling still. The other being is calming down, it’s own numerous eyes and wavering appendages move closer. It seems this thing notices it is separate and whole and that whatever they are…they were created together.

They do not utter words, and their screams have died. They are simply staring, eyes finding similarities and disparities between the two. Of course, there is nothing much to do at first. So, he makes the first move. Raises an arm—and the dark twin does the same. Briefly, their essences bump across the other. They shudder…

And then a voice speaks. It booms and explodes inside their skulls. They drop, slime and smoke and shadow and light and matter coalescing on the pitted grounds that reek of something rotted and old. The voice echoes, perhaps in the actual physical world, but either way—it worms and probes inside their minds, filling the brain, the head, every piece inside without trouble. From this voice comes a terrible sort of knowledge. Every ancient thing of the universe, of the very notion of existence, invades each being with the nature of their birth. It lays down the very reason—an amoral, deadly thing that hangs its own hat on their heads.

His companion—His Twin—is consumed by rage, and in anger demands to know why, why must they fulfill this purpose if their destiny is whimsical at best.

The response, the reward for such a question, is a horrid shrieking unimaginable. The sound persists for what might be it’s own sort of eternity—yet, having just been born, the concept of time is near irrelevant. So…

His twin begrudgingly arises, and they are rewarded with silence. The voice will not speak to them again. They are left, bereft, on a lonely planet at the edge some fever dream universe. This is the first time, but not the last, that a hollowness consumes him in the face of such an unfathomably intense life purpose.

He takes his first breath in their shared noxious air and is duly skewered into the hellish ground by his black twin, who says with such unbelievably malice, “I will kill you and escape. I reject our shared destiny. You’d best do the same.”

These words are not in English, Spanish, or any language that would be created, learned, adapted by man on the plane of Earth some eons to come. Still. These words haunt him.
“Why, brother?” he asked, bleeding, “If you truly wish to resist—why fight at all?”

The answer is the loss of half his body. It comes back to him, though, and he quickly teaches himself how to manipulate the matter of his own body to defend himself. The brothers will fight, endlessly, relentlessly. His dark twin uses anger. He uses… well, he has no proper words for the sort of things he felt. It is simply not emotion so much as something else. The only thing that truly registered was that the chaos his brother would cause must be stopped. As his brother raged against their purpose, their battle became the ultimate backdrop of the cosmos.

His twin—tenacious and oh so clever—was true to form and escaped. He followed and the destiny of their dichotomous nature ran amok against countless dimensions…

Eventually his brother, whose monikers changed many times in their immemorial lifespan, sat in an exhausted heap amidst a desecrated field. He huffed with one hand buried against what would have been his left eye.

“Perhaps you were right,” he says, “In the beginning. What you said.” His skin is blackened, charred as if by fire, but his blood runs green like venom. It poisons and salts the ground with every word spat from his fanged mouth.

“What did I say?” He stands over his brother, cold—skin a contrast in color. He is ashen, icy pale. Like a dead thing walking. Or, more accurately, running after the warmth his insidious twin leaves in a destructive wake. Flames are fanned around them as wind rips across this putrid place. The feeling ruffles along his current image, striking toward his truest form. He lets it slide into place while his twin grins. All the inhabitants of this planet are long since dead, so there is no consequence in unleashing it, lingering in an old skin too powerful for mortal eyes to glimpse.

“If I really wish to rebel, I won’t fight you.”

“This is because you cannot win now—”

“This is because I have won! I will always win!”

“Brother—”

“Do not call me that!”

He says nothing in the wake of the hissing and spitting and growing and growling that his brother provides as his inky body morphs. Ultimately, that is what they are—brothers—but the refusal is more than denial. There is only annoyance now as the fallen one settles, ever calculating…

“… we will no longer fight in this way. Perhaps, even at all. The next world—the next plane—that I find, I will stay and… cultivate it. My place in it, I mean.”

There is a pregnant pause. It stretches between them as an understanding is dawning on the broken horizon. They float on darkness and dust in this endless void. Having smote the sky into an eternal orange and ruby dusk, a new era basks both beings in a shared tragedy that they had brought to this particular dimension.

“A truce, then?” He asks as that familiar hollowness eats at him.

“… yes. A balance, if you will. We are—ugh—equally matched. The only ones of our… kind. Our breed. Our brood. I no longer wish to prove—to play this Old Game… The Great Game.”

“I see,” he answers, never having stood so close, so long to his brother without bloodshed, “How
can I trust you?"

A smirk, a hiss of cloudy breath, “My eye.”

He stands, confused, a tilt coming to his head as he glances at an eviscerated mass bubbling against the offal soaked ground. The eye in question had been rent from his twin’s body during battle. However, exhaustion was keeping him from reforming. It lie in its soupy pool of filth, innocuous.

“I mean,” and there was that breath-like sound in the darkness—which he would come to categorize later as a very specific type of laughter born from some ill-intent—“You can keep it, as a sign of my trust.”

The eye in question was only one of many they could pop in and out of existence. Their innate power impossible and almost unquestionable, not bound by too many laws of physics or any one universe. In fact, the eye still swiveled about, bobbing in it’s syrupy pile, blinking the muck-matter that was torn from his twin. It stopped moving, though, as he stooped to examine it. Harmless enough, once separated from his brother.

He nodded once, “I accept yo—”

“Good, now give me yours.”

The ashen twin twitched, claws having already dipped into the grotesqueness to retrieve the dark offering. He had stooped down to the black one’s level, and his brother had shifted closer, smiling.

“We were built as mirrors, were we not?”

“We were…”

“Then, are you not duty bound to honor my request?”

Ah, duty and honor. That hollow, near namelessness that swelled high in his essence. It called him to follow his twin across the cosmic, infinitive realities. He was not made to fight such things. He was not made of restless fury. He was the cool, numbing balm to be applied after the fact. In that way, yes, he was a mirror to his brother, he supposed.

“I am.”

His twin smirked in a way that stretched his face unnatural, uneasy, with rows of jagged teeth that dripped and spilled more of his rancid bile-like blood. “So, then you accept? I will have your eye?”

There was a heavy sigh, but he agreed. “Take your pick.”

So, his brother leapt with vicious glee. Like a wild beast on prey, he buried dark claws into immaculate flesh—the mask of his original visage wrenched apart. And oh, that was the pain of redemption. He was being born anew… because existence begins like one imagines it. Suddenly, with endearing pain—

“WHITE HAT!”

The Elder Being blinked awake. He rigidly sat up in his bed. With a slight gasp, he glanced around. He was in his bedroom—on Earth, presently—colors gray and blue and a little off-white. Plush and secure with light spilling in from an open wind, fluttering his curtains. An irritated fake cough came from his door. There was head, hidden behind a specially designed sandwich-bag like mask. There were goggles designed specifically for conveying emotion placed atop the bag.
“You overslept,” Slug said, sounding very put out, “And we have a meeting in 15 minutes. Hurry up and go over those files I put on your desk… ya know, from yesterday.”

“My apologies, my dear doctor,” White Hat graciously swung his legs off his comfy and warm bed. He stood, straightening his lapels. The doctor’s goggles immediately emoted into “deadpan” mode. White Hat looked down in the direction of his pointed expression. Oh, still in pajamas.

“Be presentable, White Hat.”

“Of course! Be down shortly,” he replied, genially. He got a scoff in response, so he just smiled. The human shut the door a bit harsher than needed, but he was lucky that it wasn’t slammed.

With a bit of privacy, he changed clothes. The Elder Being quite enjoyed the feel of real fabric in this world. It was so amazing what these little creatures—humans—could do, could make, could feel and endure. All those things they could postulate! He knew very intimately how imagination was both terrible and awesome…

White Hat stopped at his desk briefly—though not for the doctor’s print outs, as he dutifully read them the night before. No, he stood and at a small drawer, wondering why he had dreamed about his origins. Or, well, maybe given what he is, he had relived his past for the night. It was always a possibility.

There was a secret panel in the drawer.

He did not open it.

The empty space where his right eye should be—at least, where it was in this physical form he chose—gave out a pulse so hurtful, he felt the need to close a palm over his monocle. This was what doctors would call a phantom pain. Did it still apply to a being such as him? Could a phantom exist within another type of phantom? He ought to seek out his doctor, he might have an idea or two. The man was accustomed to pain, to loss, maybe Slug would—

The tell-tale stomping of steel-toed boots down the corridor pulled him from his melancholy. “READY YET?!”

“Coming!”

And with a flash of quiet light, he left the room, the drawer, secret panel, undisturbed, but ever ready for watching.
Chapter One: Let Us Start Somewhere Well Established

“I’m not having fun,” Clementia whined. In her arms was a box that Slug packed too tightly. Her slight arms were trembling and sweat beaded out from under her unicorn hoodie. White Hat seemed to glide by with a few more stacks of boxes in his marble colored (and marble sturdy) arms.

“Well, hard work is not necessarily fun,” he started to lecture, but his voice remained light and optimistic. “What comes as the reward is that you have done some good for those who are down-trodden!”

Slug groaned somewhere behind the pair. They were clogging the porch steps as White Hat began some sort of goody-two-shoes lesson. Just behind Slug came a huff from the huge purply bear monstrosity he’d coined as 0.5.0. (the name belied both his attempts and the biological diversity he put into the creature for just the right qualities of an attack dog for the Manor). Clem had taken to nicknaming him “Cero” on occasion. 0.5.0. picked up Slug from his underarms and dropped him off to the side. The little Venus Fly Trap that had sprouted from the top of the furry head wiggled as it lumbered toward Clementia. 0.5.0. used his long claws to pluck the box from her arms and carried it for her without complaint.

“Aww! Thanks, Cero,” she cooed while scratching under his muzzle. The bear gave another huff, but the Venus Fly Trap perked up, snapping its mouth open and close in happiness.

“Oh, Clementia, I thought you wanted to help?” White Hat asked, a bit uncertain. 0.5.0. gave a growl and picked up Clem so that she could sit on his shoulder. Slug nudged his own pile of boxes with his foot—four sat placidly on a dolly by the outside of the Manor door—while he locked up their home.

“Well, she grabbed the heaviest box with her little stick arms,” the doctor reminded him. Clem gave a small, playful cry of outrage.

“I have very feminine arms! I am a delicate, mysterious lady of a magical forest!”

“I thought you were human, dear?” White Hat asked again. Slug sighed as he wheeled the boxes off the porch steps and down the windy path to the security gate.

“She’s just teasing us, White Hat,” the doctor explained, feeling the heat of the day slide down the inside of his protective bag. “She’ll just help set out the stuff from the boxes when we get to the shelter, instead.”

White Hat smiled beatifically—the ethereal, angel-like bastard that he was, “A good suggestion as
always, doctor.”

“And we will sit in the AC while she does it.”

“Hey!”

“This is what happens when you sit inside all day, texting, and let 0.5.0. do all the hard stuff,” Slug responded, pausing to lock up the gate. The all-encompassing homeless/battered wives/at-risk teen shelter was just a few blocks down the road and it was the monthly donation run from White Hat Manor. Usually, Slug and White Hat would take a few trips to and from the Manor to the shelter over the course of a few hours. However, Clem was determined to help them get it all done in one trip—because multiple trips were for losers.

“Well, 0.5.0. likes to help, too!” she insisted. She hugged as much as she could of his massive torso. “Doncha, boy?”

It gave a rumble in response and Slug was unsure if it was pleased by her affection, or disagreeing as 0.5.0. was mostly unaffected by the world around it. Really, it only had one prerogative and it was fulfilling it quite well. So, regardless, no reason to worry about the task at hand. Clem still gave a girlish giggle and squeezed. With an internally nasty chuckle, he reconsidered adding a squeaker somewhere inside of the bear. 0.5.0. gave a decided unhappy growl, as it no doubt had an idea of what his creator was thinking.

“Do not worry, sweetheart,” White Hat said, “I will definitely assist you in unpacking the boxes. Helping is what we all like to do.”

“As long as you don’t take over for her,” Slug warned. White Hat just nodded, beaming at the doctor as they neared the shelter (he wouldn’t argue White Hat’s helping out, but, Slug was fully planning to perch his ass in a chair and bask in the AC while the rest of them did their Good Guy Thing).

Of course, though, as soon as they got to the shelter, there was too much hullabaloo to just sit down and do absolutely nothing. White Hat was swarmed by… well, everyone. Women, children, and the men stood asking to shake his hand. Slug simmered under his bag and had Clem take the boxes to the back storeroom. The doctor shrugged off his white lab coat and crossed his arms. He leaned against a door frame, googles emoting into a cartoonish version of annoyance. 0.5.0. immediately retreated into a corner and took a nap—lazy thing.

White Hat, meanwhile, was smiling and showing off. His physical form was undeniably attractive and approachable. Friendly, in this instance, even as urchins clung to his long, clean coat tails. Any mothers—bruised or otherwise—tried to offer apologies, but the Elder Being just waved them off. He created a pastel assortment of bubbles that danced along the air, which caused the children to scatter, running after whichever one caught their fancy. The men nodded, either chuckling, or returning to ask inane questions for White Hat to answer.

Slug just watched with Clementia darting in and out of his peripherals as she started unloading clothes, food cans, bedrolls, care packages, and other items the Manor had put together over the past month in preparation for the shelter’s donation day. The pastor from the nearby church group waddled over, old age shrinking his supposedly robust figure into a bent, but still jovial caricature. Father David he went by, and Dr. Slug was the one who spent the most time conversing with him.

“My dear boy!” the father said, wrinkles stretching pleasantly across his wide face, much like a pug, “May God be with you this day!”

“And also with you,” Slug answered as the man clasped his hand firmly. The priest gave as good a
slap as his arthritic joints could. It was impressive for a man pushing 80 years.

“I hope the walk didn’t take too much out you,” he small-talked. Slug gave a shrug—he could take the heat, but 0.5.0. would probably sleep the rest of the day. “Only one trip today?”

“Clementia wanted to help,” he said, tilting his chin over his shoulder as a blur of pink sparkles hopped about with armfuls of donations. Tunes poured happily from her in a Disney-esque scene as she bestowed toys to the youngsters gathering around her display of good cheer.

“She’s still so adorable,” the old pastor was laughing into collar as he shook his head, “I hope she never grows out of her love for magic.”

“That’s not very religious of you, Father. Isn’t magic frowned upon in the bible?”

“Ah, well, only the Old Testament,” he clarified. Slug grunted as he re-folded his arms back across his chest.

“As long as they’re following the right cause, I guess.”

“As much as I love your salty comments—”

“Ohhh, look at you, Padre, getting hip with the lingo of the youth.”

“I am afraid we’re severely lacking in our stores this month,” Father David sighed, ignoring Slug’s cutting burn. He handed out an overly large inventory spreadsheet. Blinking owlishly, Slug glanced down. Pulling a pen out of his lab coat pocket, he started to tick down the list, refiguring numbers.

“What happened to the stock we brought in last month? Half these numbers are—”

“There has been a rash of burglaries in the community,” the pastor answered quietly. He glanced over at the Elder Being, unaware and shaking off a group of gropey women.

“Burglars? In White Hat’s neighborhood?” Slug repeated, somewhat baffled. Who’d be stupid enough to steal right under White Hat’s watchful gaze? The old man sighed, clasped his hands on his sagging belly sadly.

“I have my suspicions, but I would prefer you kept your employer… uh,” the man searched for his words carefully, but Slug just shook his head, goggles creating a flat expression.

“I keep telling you, Father,” the doctor started, “I’m not really a Hero.”

“The kids don’t need a Hero, really…” Father David responded. He stared past Slug, who turned around to see what he was hinting at. A trio of young men were loitering about Clementia. One was elbow deep into a box of assorted garments and footwear, making a mess. Another was positioning himself like a predator over the teen girl, while the third was furtively snap-chatting the awkward exchange.

Slug’s goggles narrowed, and he caught himself barking, “Clem!”

All of the youngsters jumped. Clementia accidentally headbutted the oily youth towering over her as she scrambled toward the doctor. The one rummaging in the box was knocked back onto his ass, and the last one dropped his mobile device in fright. “Y-Yeah, Dr. Slug?”

“I thought I told you not to slack off?” he said more than asked. The words were sharp, pointed with a cutting edge. Clem, weirdly, gave a salute, and quickly went back to the storeroom to find another
box. The pastor gave Slug a pat on the shoulder as the man relaxed. “Ugh, fucking scum…”

“Now, now,” the old man tried feebly, “I don’t know about that…”

“I’ll see what I can do for you, Father,” Slug decided, shrugging off the plump, liver-spotted hand of the pastor. He glanced down at the bent man, wrinkles pooling down on his face so he looked more bull-dogish than pug now.

“And White Hat?”

“Asshole teens are below ‘im. Won’t have to know,”’ Slug replied. Father David spent a moment swaying where he stood. He looked back at the grungy trio who were sniffing and dusting themselves off in abject boredom and impotent teenage anger.

“I don’t know, they’re still young. And, boys will be boys.”

“That’s an outdated sentiment,” Slug scoffed, starting to unfold his coat and place it back on as Clem was finishing up behind them. 0.5.0. was snorting itself awake, but White Hat merrily carried on calming the masses. “No one escapes the consequences of their actions.”

“Well, God is forgiving…”

Slug caught White Hat’s eye. The Elder Being gave him a soft look, mouth opened in a perfectly proportioned smile. Designed to disarm, to enchant, to charm the feeble human mind. Lovely, and pure. The tip of a canine gleamed in the dying summer sun…

“Maybe your God, Padre. Not mine.”

…

Slug sat on the roof of the shelter, feet kicking off the edge as he surveyed the neighborhood. A few strays wandered across the street, and a yowl from a Tom Cat accompanied the yip of some pack of dogs. The alleys remained empty, but the park across the way still held a few stranglers that passed through to Main Street.

The night was a new-moon—dark and shadowed, with stars winking in and out of low cloud cover. There was a dead wind, which was good, as it meant that sound wouldn’t be obstructed or easily negated by heavy gusts. Still, the summer heat was oozing up from the concrete of the city, having baked the asphalt and cement until the area smelled of sunburnt tar. The shelter, itself, stood in an unlit corner but had it’s own scent—canned peaches, instant mashed potatoes, and dried out meat (chicken and other by product slush compressed into nuggets, probably). Slug’s stomach revolted, and he raised his coffee thermos toward his face.

He was without the bag tonight—just bandages. Enough to conceal his face, but mostly, to keep any mosquitos, fleas, or the like from landing on and infecting his damaged skin. Try as he might to keep healthy, there was only so much he could do from nature and it’s damning insistence of aging and thus reducing his already compromised immune system.

He probably only lasted as long as he has because of White Hat. By the grace of the scientific process, he was starting to hypothesize White Hat’s presence alone could cure disease, age, or quite possibly even death. Not that he really wanted to test it. It’s just what he noticed whenever he or Clem spent too much time away from their employer.

Slug took a deep whiff of caffeine, sipping lightly. He didn’t want to overheat his system. Just stay awake. Having camped out on the roof the last couple of nights, he hadn’t noticed anything too
strange. No hoodlums or supervillains. Maybe Father David was just becoming senile…?

A clatter from the back of the shelter caught his attention. With a snort, Slug stood and calmly walked over to the other edge of the roof. It was the area more closely connected with the back storeroom. When he peeked over the lip of the building, he saw hooded silhouettes. Tsking to himself, he pulled out a baton stashed in the back of his tactical cargo pants, “Welp, there goes the rest of my night.”

The silhouettes were attempting to jimmy the new security Slug installed after the pastor told him about the broken back door. He replaced the deadbolt with a biometric scanner—fingerprint—that looked like any old combination lock. Two bumbling hoodlums were trying to jar it open with a screwdriver. “Bah, pathetic,” Slug muttered to himself. Cracking his neck, rolling his shoulders, Slug bounced on the pads of his feet before leaping off the edge with an acquired kind of skill from years of boyhood training. He landed softly, with a gracile crouch. A new figure jumped up behind him. In the dimly light back alley, the doctor didn’t realize someone was stationed as a lookout.

“Oi,” he greeted, a bit surprised when the other two figures whirled about, “Hi.”

“What the fuck, man?!” the one with the screwdriver shouted, alarmed when Slug rose to a standing position. He must have noticed the extended baton, because he suddenly raised the screwdriver with a shaky arm.

“Who the fuck are you?!” the jumpy bastard behind said, stupidly lunging forward in a move Slug could only assume was supposed to be threatening. The doctor watched the last unarmed idiot was putting himself in front of his friend with the screwdriver.

Ah, cute, squad goals. Protecting your friends. So young, so dumb.

“Ah, ya know, the friendly neighborhood—”

“A-Are you some sort of Hero?!” he was interrupted by a wavering gasp.

“Rude,” Slug mentioned. He did not raise his baton, but the screwdriver was shaking ever so slightly. Looks like the punks weren’t fully committed to Villainy… “Look, boys, I’ll level with you. Put down the would-be weapon, walk away, and I’ll chalk this up to, well, stupidity. No offence. But why steal from a homeless shelter? Like, seriously, they give stuff away for free.”

The trio seemed to trade looks in the low light. Slug should have brought his night-goggles. This is what he gets, really, for letting the Father guilt trip him. The hoodlums each took a deep breath and came to some sort of overly dramatic conclusion—as teenagers usually did. Father David sure did nail the identity of the burglars.

“We’re not going anywhere,” someone said, and the arm holding the weapon seemed to gain some sort of strength of character. Slug felt himself scoffing again. Fucking kids and their fuckin—

The lookout moved first, protective instinct winning out over the friend with the screwdriver. Slug didn’t even bother fully dodging, just stepped his left foot back, and leaned out of the way of a sucker punch. He raised his opposite hand and bashed down with his elbow in the center of the punk’s back. The kid hit the floor, and by his sharp wheezing, was seriously winded.

“Eddie!” the one with the screwdriver called out, and the other one hit the backdoor in fright.

“C’mon, names? Really?” Slug rolled his eyes. He placed a foot on Eddie—who was obviously the dipshit of the group as he tried to grasp at the foot between his shoulder blades. Slug whacked his hands with the baton as the kid gasped for breath.
“I’ll make you pay for that!” Screwdriver Boy, as Slug was starting to call him internally, wildly attempted to slash.

It was ineffective.

Slug’s reflexes were too fast, and the weapon was swatted out of the boy’s hand. He yelped, grasping his wounded hand to his chest, dramatically collapsing to his knees. “Fuck! I think you broke my fingers!”

“No, I didn’t,” Slug said, steadily growing unhappier by the second, “But one more stupid move and I’ll definitely reconsider it.”

“P-Please…!” the kid against the door was beginning to beg. His voice sounded wet. Slug’s muddy eyes snapped to him. The sound of Slug’s gloves squeaked as he relaxed and then retightened his grip on his baton.

“Uh-uh,” he said, pressing weight into the body beneath him, “I’m the one who made the request before. I don’t think any of you snot-nosed little shits get to plead for me to take it easy on you.”

“Please!” the kid honestly began to sob, shaking as he fell onto his rear-end, pressed against the door like it was a life-line, “W-We had to! Y-You don’t understand, Mr. Hero Sir!”

Slug sort of gagged, “Jesu Christo, get a-fuckin’ hold of yourself…!”

Eddie under his feet began his struggle anew, probably in defense of his horrendously weepy friend. “Don’t! Don’t tell ‘im a thing, Nate! You gotta—You gotta stay strong!” Nate let out a hiccup in reply, and the one with the broken hand tried to scoot over to the door, putting himself in Slug’s crosshairs.

“Your buddy is right, Nathanial,” Slug felt a monologue coming on, “I’m assuming that’s your full name, Nathanial—”

“Nat—Natalie, I’m transitioning…”

“Oh,” Slug said, he paused just briefly, “Well. Good luck to you on that, then.”

“We’re not gonna let you hurt him,” Screwdriver Boy said, and Slug felt a bit touched by such strong friendship—mostly though he had to remind himself that he was here for one purpose only.

“Cool, I’ll leave Nate alone—”

“… is that transphobic?” he heard Eddie whisper. Lord if Slug knew, who just shrugged as the situation was quickly spiraling out of hand.

“I don’t particularly give a rat’s flying ass, kiddos,” he announced, a headache growing in irritation, “But, if you do me a solid and just give up the Villainous act now—”

“Wait, what?”

“OH MY GOD, CAN YOU LET ME FINISH?!”

“B-But, Mr. Hero, w-we’re not… not Villains…” Nate responded, pulling at his hood strings like a nervous tick.

Slug raised his baton, brow twitching, “Yeah! Not when I am finished with you, ya fuckers won’t be!”
“No! He means,” the only unnamed member of the trio took a large, courageous gulp in some sort of youthful attempt at building tension (again, very ineffective), “We aren’t breaking in for nefarious reasons.”

“Oh, nefarious, nice SAT word,” Slug snarked. He paused when none of the teens returned his witty repartee. “Ugh, my genius is wasted on you three…” The doctor stopped, eying each of the young men in part. Eddie was valiantly putting effort into finally reaching for Slug’s leg that now held the majority of his weight. With a sigh, he took his foot off the youngster and gingerly rolled him to his back. He lied there like a dumbass, or a more accurately, a befuddled turtle. Screwdriver Boy was kneeling besides Nate—the only one who started to push down his hood and stare at Slug. Granted, Nate had some wide eyes, but he clearly understood Slug was the one in control here. “Okay, Nate, as you would prefer to be called I am assuming—I would prefer not to be called Mr. Hero. I’m down for, ‘sir’ though. That’s fine.”

“I… I kinda like Nathaniel, but, yeah. Nate. Nate’s fine.”

“Well, Nate, why the fuck you breaking into the shelter?”

“E-Evidence,” he answered, then sat up straighter gaining some sort of confidence, “Sir.”

“Evidence of what?”

“Bad stuff… real bad stuff…” Eddie responded when Nate couldn’t find the right words.

Slug snapped his fingers, squatting to eye level with the teens. It was getting light as the rays of the sun starting peeking over the edge of the city. Nonetheless, he could easily recognize the spooked looks on their individual faces. “Alright, details, I’m a busy man.”

“W-Well, that’s the thing,” Screwdriver Boy looked away, “We don’t quite know. But, people started disappearing. First, the old guys. So, we thought like, a social security scandal or something. Then, some of the moms, right? The ones who lost their kids—so we looked for the kids, most of ‘em safe in the system—” Eddie snorted here, and Slug couldn’t quite blame him, “Well, more or less. Not out here with us, so, safer than whatever is going on in the shelter.”

“So…” Slug was slowly digesting the vague information, “What are you saying? This is a shelter, right? People come and go all the time, don’t they?”

The kids shrugged, Eddie being the only one to vocalize, “Well, sure.”

“Then, what makes you think it’s something bad?”

“I—” Nate began, then stopped. His friends nodded for him to continue, “I just felt something wasn’t right. I went to talk to Father David… but, all he wanted to talk about was how I got on the streets, right? And… well, I told him. He told me not to worry. That it would all get better…”

“Okay…” Slug said, trying to be encouraging, but feeling a dread creep up by the way the teen fidgeted.

“I woke up with him over my cot that night,” Nate said, raising to meet Slug’s eyes. Slug didn’t quite expect the next words out of the kid’s mouth, “He was holding a pillow. I dunno exactly what woke me—I think it was because he was whispering a prayer or something but… yeah. He tried to smother me.”

“Well…” Slug sat back on his haunches, stunned, “Shit.”
White Hat came awake, feeling something amiss in the Manor. He floated up, confused. Glancing over at his bedside table, he saw the clock display 10AM in a soothing light blue color. That was a bit late… normally, his dear doctor would have woken him with the daily itinerary. Last he knew, it wasn’t the weekend either… It left the Elder Being unusually concerned. He changed from his sleep ware to his normal attire.

The Manor had a distinctly different feel this morning—it was morning though. Dr. Slug often demanded a proper breakfast was the start to a productive day. So, off to the kitchen! It was a large and chromatic space. Every space was well utilized and clean, with an island, bar/counter space (often Clem called it the breakfast nook). It was brilliantly lighted, but Slug had redwood cabinets for sanitary and aesthetic purposes. Anyways, the area was completed with a fairly decent dinner table that could accommodate more space so that 0.5.0. might also join them—or any company really—except company was very rare.

Color the normally colorless Elder Being surprised when he saw three young gentlemen sitting at said dinner table—with Clem at the breakfast bar, sleepily munching on cereal. She seemed a bit pouty, which was also highly unusual because she loved company more than anyone. Her daily chore and homework sheet was dangling from her free hand. It looked very full.

Slug’s head popped up from behind the counter, and he held a glass pan. Oh! Breakfast casserole! "My dear doctor!” White Hat greeted.

“You overslept,” Slug pointed out in a caustic tone instead. White Hat made a sad noise. The trio at the dinner table looked between the pair. They all had bags under their eyes, and restlessly squirmed in their seats.

“You didn’t wake me…” he said, sounding a bit concerned. As Slug walked to the table with breakfast, White Hat also made his way over with caution.

“How old are you, White Hat?” the man spat back. He was cutting up specially portioned slices and slapped away grabby hands to dish out the food equally for these unusual guests.

“Oh, well, I don’t know how you would quantify my age in an Earth-like time space continuum,” he began, placing one gloved talon against his chin in thought, “But, I suppose… old?”

“Definitely old enough to wake yourself up like a functioning adult, then…” Slug said, reluctantly serving White Hat some casserole as well, “Or well, presuming whatever you are reaches some sort of developmental stage like an adult.”

One of the guests, a dark-skinned and stalky kid with some acne scars, leaned over to another effeminate male with a smattering of freckles and half a head of curly red hair shaved off, to ask surreptitiously, “Do you have any idea what White Hat is?”

“No clue, Eddie.”

“Oh! I actually do know! He’s an Elder Being!” the third teen excitedly said, he was clearly from an Italian immigrant family background by the way the worlds rolled out of his mouth. His olive green eyes shone as he looked over at White Hat, clearly excited, “Right? I remember I had to do a report on ya before I dropped out.”

“Er, yes, that is what it would translate to in your tongue,” White Hat answered. He spoke English nearly as perfect as he could. Voice deep and smooth, a well of all things light and cool and
beautiful. The teens gushed over it as White Hat smiled benign at the trio. Slug gave an exasperated sigh.

“It’s a bit complicated, boys, but just suffice to say he’s like an angel... like, bibliically weird. Not the cutesy stuff from cartoons.”

“Wooooow!” all the boys clamored for White Hat’s attention.

“Well, I was created by… uh, I’d suppose you’d know them as The Old Gods, or the Old Ones? Elder Gods, maybe, it would translate to. Ancient beings that were alive since the beginning of time. The hide in all corners of the untenable cosmos that you may or may not know.”

“So... cool...!”

Clem, at her nook, gave a groan at the commotion. Everyone gave pause as she pushed her semi-empty bowl into the sink and quickly stomped out of the kitchen. “Enjoy the etymology lesson I’ve heard a bah-jillion times! I apparently have chores to do because reasons!”

Slug shook his head at her antics, while White Hat turned back to the other teens. “It’s more a history lesson… well, personal history, but still—”

“I love origin stories,” the redhead said without thinking, star struck.

“That’s cuz you’re trans,” the Italian boy responded. The redhead stuck out his tongue.

“Alright, SB—” Slug sighed.

“My name’s Tony...” the Italian boy said, sounding like he’d already said it many times before White Hat was in the picture. SB—Tony?—was rubbing his bandaged hand, as Slug shrugged.

“It’s just so cliché,” the doctor said, “Plus I already gave you a nickname in my head so—”

“Not to interrupt, Dr. Slug,” White Hat said, fully intending to interrupt before the man began snarking everyone to death at the table, “But, I would love to hear these three young gentlemen’s, um, what did you call it?”

“Origin stories?”

“Yes, I quite enjoy that concept. I would like to know the origin story here, please.”

Slug shook his head, cutting up his piece of casserole carefully, “Ah, no, no. You know the rule. No business at breakfast. We can start after a proper meal.”

“Oh my… Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes, White Hat,” Slug said in warning, “If you could wake up without help, maybe you could have had some proper warning. But, no. You get to suffer through the next 30 minutes in mystery...”

The boys sat at the table, stuffing themselves somewhat amused, but clearly relieved as Slug’s ire shifted to the Elder Being across from the sour doctor. Well, at least for the supposed next… 29 minutes.

… A full hour later of course…

“And that’s all we know, White Hat, sir,” Nate finished lamely. White Hat clasped his hands together on the table. The casserole long since crusted over. No left overs for the Manor then.
“I am terribly sorry,” he sighed, at both the predicament and the general ideas being tossed around, “But, you truly believe that Father David suspected you were on to him and was planning to kill you?”

“Why else would he stand over my bed with a pillow!”

“Point taken,” White Hat conceded.

“Look! We don’t have to take this bullshit! I expected better from you, of all people!” Eddie erupted, standing up, knocking over his chair. Nate touched his arm, trying to calm him, while SB—Tony—tried to keep Nate covered from Eddie’s flailing hands as he pointed angry fingers around the table. “Clearly that old prick was trying to making it look like Nate committed suicide or something because of his—”

“Shut it, Eddie, that’s conjecture at best,” Slug calmly cut off the teen’s rant. Eddie slammed both palms on the table, which caused Slug to flick his goggled eyes up to the seething youth.

“Yeah?! And what would you know of it, you piece of overcooked bacon!”

“Plenty, Pizza Face—”

“Ouch, Eddie’s sensitive about his acne,” SB murmured to White Hat conspiratorially.

“So I deduced since he attacked my face first,” Slug snapped with venom as he swirled his orange juice around in his glass with a forced nonchalance, “But listen up, Buttercup!” Eddie shoved his hands in his orange hood with the brattiest look he could muster. “I’ve dodged enough court conviction purely on conjecture. You guys said you were looking for evidence. White Hat can probably provide it.”

“Huh? How?” Nate asked, spinning back to Slug.

“Well, before you guys were sucking on your mama’s teets,” he began, and Tony—wait, SB?—gave a groan at the imagery, “White Hat helped develop the Grand Law of the Land.”

“Dr. Slug is speaking too colloquially,” White Hat quickly butt in, Slug sniffed at the jump in, but cooled off quickly. “I aided in the establishment of the Hero’s Prerogative.”

“Oh! Wait,” Tony piped up again, “I read about that too! That’s the idea like, uh, a citizen’s arrest or the Good Samaritan Clause, right?”

“Indeed, my boy!” White Hat smiled.

“Ya know, I know all of those words by themselves but…” Eddie trailed off. He looked behind him at his tipped over chair with a crude longing. Nate reached over and fixed his seat upright without prompting.

“Ideally,” Tony smartly began, “It means that a publicly recognized Hero can use any good-intended information to snoop around a baddie’s hideout.”

Slug snorted, “Close. It’s the Hero’s version of probable cause, as long as there is a witness to verify shady goings-on.”

“Cool, so…” Eddie started, putting the puzzle pieces together in his head, “Since we told White Hat our suspicions he can go in there and kick some ass?”
White Hat paused. He glanced over at his doctor, uncertain. Slug folded his arms over the table, effecting a serious atmosphere to arise. The teens settled, looking at the doctor, tense. With a deep breath, he explained it as sensitively as he could, “The Hero’s Prerogative isn’t as cut and dry as that. If it was, more Super Villains would be behind bars. What it does is quicken the process gathering evidence, not conviction. White Hat can investigate, interrogate, even involve the police without warrants… however, he can only work within the bounds of the testimony given. Nate will have to give a written statement detailing exactly what he thinks the crime he witnessed was. Do you understand? This will be a documented record.”

“What…” Nate whispered, eyes suddenly big again.

“As far as the law is concerned,” Slug said with a troubled sigh, “What you have is suspicion of kidnappings and conspiracy to commit murder. It’s not up to me how detailed you want your statement, but, you could also have attempt at murder on your life, even lay in a possible hate crime because of your gender identification… but, again, all of that will then be in public record, and White Hat will be designated to only focus on these charges to gather evidence. A separate process in the court by judge or jury will then take the statement and any collected evidence into account for a full conviction.”

Nate’s lip trembled. “…I see… so, this could lead to nothing.”

“What?! No! I call bullshit again!” Eddie was back to standing.

“C’mon, man, don’t you see? No one is gonna convict Father David…” SB muttered, running his hand through his greasy hair in frustration. Eddie was shaking his head, looking over at White Hat desperately.

“I do not know for sure what I could find,” White Hat said, navigating the thin line between optimism and realistic assurances, “But, I do know I can help one way or another. Father David’s reputation in the community notwithstanding. I believe Nate must have basis in reality to trust his own instincts. The choice, however, to pursue this option is solely Nate’s.”

Nate swallowed, looking paler by the minute. SB—Tony—held onto his friend’s shaking hands. Eddie looked down at his friend, before kneeling next to the redhead, clasping over Tony’s as well.

“I don’t understand a damn thing, but don’t be scared, okay? Me and Tony, man, we’re gonna be right here. Right beside you, no matter what. Okay?”

“T-Thanks, guys, I’m gonna need it…” Nate laughed through fearful globs of tears, “Because, there’s not really a choice, huh? I gotta do it. I gotta go on record. There’s people missing—and I know Father David is involved somehow.”

White Hat smiled with pride, he produced a note pad from somewhere in the ether and slid it across the table. “There is always a choice, Nate, but I am glad you choose this one. You are incredibly brave. I will help any way that I am able.”

Slug watched, hidden face impassive as the teen cried, worrying over every choice of word he wrote down…

Dr. Slug was leaning against a scuzzy brick wall in the back alley. White Hat easily popped the electronic measures on the store-room lock. White Hat was ignoring the police dogs sniffing around and the flashing blue and red lights illuminating the only shelter in the modest suburb-like accommodations just outside the major cities. The heroic Elder Being was sweeping the area with
some sort of extra-sensory type of vision, eye coming to land on Slug’s face under his bag. He paused, examining the real expression he was hiding.

“You’re mad at me,” he stated.

“No.”

“You are,” he insisted, “Did I flub some sort of human social norm?”

“No—” Slug grit out, looking away as he tried to affect a casual look, hands clenched into fists in his pants pockets, “It’s not social norms… It’s just your whole fucking attitude.”

“I… I don’t understand. I was perfectly empathetic. I—”

“It’s a fucking shitty thing to do!” Slug exploded. The cops in the area stiffened, and a few quickly tugged their K-9 units away from the impending scene. White Hat blinked, eye losing its mysterious and otherworldly glow.

“It was Nate’s choice…” the Elder Being was saying slowly, deep voice penetrating, soothing. It pissed Slug off and he fixed his employer with a glare.

“You probably don’t get it, so I’m gonna fucking spell it out for you, boss,” he began, straightening and moving into White Hat’s personal bubble. “Because Nate doesn’t feel at home in his body, because he identifies differently, the world thinks he’s wrong. A lot like, you, you goddamn alien bastard, he’ll almost always be classified as ‘other.’ The world here is cruel, his parents disowned him. He has to live on the streets. Had to leave school. Father David was supposed to be this beacon, this better person—also kinda like you—but hey, guess what? Turns out, he’s probably the bad guy… I hope the irony is hitting you hard here, because it sure ain’t lost on me.”

“Doctor…”

“Not done, White Hat,” Slug continued holding up a trembling finger in accusation, “You don’t get to tell that kid he has a choice. You don’t, no. You don’t get to tell him he made the right choice.”

“Well, I did not use those words—”

“You implied it, you insufferable asshat!”

“It is the right choice though,” White Hat asserted. Slug shook on the spot, one gloved finger pressing into what should have been the being’s sternum.

“Doesn’t matter! You don’t get to pass judgement on a scared child…!”

“You know I would never,” he said, softening from Slug’s touch.

The doctor huffed, extracting his presence from White Hat’s, “Yeah… whatever…”

“We’re all capable of choices. It determines not only our paths in life, but our strength of character. Humanity’s choice of will is what creates good and bad. Heroes and Villains, my dear doctor…” he trailed off when Slug rubbed at his forehead over his bag, the poor man probably hasn’t had any sleep since this endeavor began. “Nate will grow into a fine man. His ability to see patterns, his instinctual understanding of the world around him. The willingness to put his safety aside for the greater good—”

“Sure, yeah, he’s a regular old martyr. A true blue Jesu…”
“He also has a very supportive circle of friends,” White Hat said, a sweet smile growing. Slug managed to give him a flat look from under his cupped hand. “Plus, a place at our Manor until they have somewhere to permanently call home. Having a fiendishly protective super genius doctor and the world’s greatest Hero should tell anyone these boys are untouchable.”

Slug crossed his arms along his chest again, his red turtleneck bunching up as he puffed up in a flurry of indignation, “Oh, shut up, you smug, smarmy archaic son of a—”

“Surely you would not have brought them to the Manor if you thought there was any chance they’d be in danger there,” White Hat said. Slug didn’t bother to focus on White Hat. Instead, his fumes of anger were directed at the scattering pieces of loosened asphalt along the shoddily constructed alley ground.

“What other choice did I have?”

“Oh, I do not know, but you brought them home with the intent of introducing them to the Hero’s Prerogative. You could have taken them to the police—”

“Like the police would believe a gang of street rats. One a minority, another a confused pervert, and the third a high school drop out? Nah, no. You said it yourself, I’m a genius, I got a metric ton of doctorates…” Slug argued, running his hand over his mouth self-consciously. White Hat closed his eye and began to summon back his extra sensory vision as his doctor seemed to settle.

“In either case, you made a choice as well. You can rationalize it, my dear doctor, but I think I am beginning to rub off on you,” he tried to be playful, to tease, like friends tend to do. White Hat did not often succeed when engaging human jokes, but, supposedly, the action could undercut any tension. When the Elder Being opened his eye again, Slug was toeing at the ground in thought.

He shook his head, tired brain working through something, “No… I don’t think so, White Hat. Father David told me not to involve you.”

“Strange…” White Hat hummed. He was watching, taking in Slug’s face in secret. The thrill of surveying the damage without embarrassment for either party had the Elder Being’s physical form flicker—but only for the quickest of a millionth of a second.

“Seeing as I’m not a Hero, yeah…” the doctor barely acknowledged White Hat’s comment, “But, it just struck me as odd that he said—he said God forgives…” Dr. Slug turned his head to White Hat’s. He met the invasive gaze with a kind of renewed energy. It stunned the Elder Being for split second. In guilt, knowing Slug caught him invading a sort of private moment of reflection, he turned his eyes to the floor.

“I—I can’t really say.”

“Can’t or won’t, White Hat?”

“The Gods’ haven’t spoken to me in a very long time…”

“Doesn’t matter, really,” Slug sighed, “The old bastard tried to trick me.” The man angrily kicked at a rock again. White Hat watched it roll along the ground to an oddly shaped pot hole. His extra flared at the shape.

“Wait… do you… see what I see right there?” the Elder Being was pointing at the sunken spot in the alley. It led to a drainage pipe, but, wasn’t quite… right. The outline looked—

“Holy shit. That’s…” Slug shook his head. He pulled a dog whistle from his pocket, and as the K-9
unit trotted up, he nodded toward White Hat, who was still pointing flabbergasted. “The lightening is fucking terrible around here, but still, someone should have recognized that.”

The K-9 unit unearthed and exhumed a total of 7 bodies from the one spot by the drainage ditch, and then, 12 more in the park across the street at various points along the jogger trails and reworked patches of the gardens that had various “Do not step on the grass” warnings. The coroner could only positively identify nine in the mingled graves. Dr. Slug offered his expertise in genetic splicing and reconstructive building, but seeing as the prickliest DA was assigned to the case, he was not allowed to even be 12 feet within the lab’s range.

“Psh! I coulda hacked into their outdated computers at 20 feet. You kidding me…. 12 feet? That’s like, two basketball players…” he grumbled over his morning OJ. White Hat was dressed in his court duds, Clem preening along the sides with a lint roller.

“Well, your previous… uh, lifestyle choices, are the worst kept secret to date,” White Hat tried to say. Slug gave a shrug as he picked up the paper and turned to the pages detailing the latest on the case against Father David. Why there had to be a trail when he all but confessed to White Hat in the interrogation room at the local police station was beyond his meager paycheck (actually, White Hat was a seriously fiscally irresponsible employer—he let Slug handle the paychecks, the books, everything… probably because he just didn’t quite grasp human economics).

“Well, the worst kept secret to the moon landing,” Clem added. White Hat looked over at the girl in confusion.

“Was the world not to know that America landed on the moon during the Space Race?” he asked, “I could have sworn it was televised.”

“It was fake, happened on a sound stage,” she claimed, stepping back to critically look over White Hat’s suit. The Elder Being looked over at Slug—probably for confirmation—and Slug shook his head almost imperceptibly. White Hat just smiled instead of answering, “Yeah, the dust settles and stuff. That wouldn’t happen on the moon. Plus, I totally believe in the Moon Princess.”

Slug said nothing during the whole exchange, stiffening the newspaper to hide behind. White Hat patted Clementia on her rainbow-colored head. 0.5.0. rumbled somewhere behind them in agitation and blundered into White Hat, moving the Elder Being away from Clem’s delicate human body. Purple tufts of fur were now clinging to White Hat. Clementia whined, shooing the giant monstrosity away.

“Cero! I just finished de-linting White Hat…”

“That was my bad, Clementia, darling,” he soothed, “He probably thought I would not know my strength, hmm?” While he looked up at 0.5.0., the bear barely spared him a glance, instead refloofing Clem’s rainbow pony-tail, and straightening the unicorn hoodie. White Hat shook his head, “Well, one day he’ll like me.”

“No,” Slug off-handedly answered.

“Oh! You’re just salty I’ll get to see the boys in court today!”

“Look at you, picking up modern street slang exactly three months after it stopped being trendy…”

“You say that, but the boys taught me that phrase just the other day,” White Hat said, straightening his bowtie like a dork.
Slug hummed, “Yes, I am sure the trashy trio of colorfully endearing side characters are hip to what the teens say and do…”

“I know you only say nasty things because you secretly love those young men—”

“Phrasing,” Slug reminded White Hat as the newspaper ruffled. The Elder Being pausing, wondering what exactly he said that was so awkward for normal human social interaction.

“Well, anyways! After the trail is over, Nate said he was planning to go to the community college across the state. He applied for a scholarship and it’s full ride—room and board, right next to that inclusive sexuality and identities group.” White Hat was beaming, and Clem cheered beside him. Slug looked up from the paper. He gave a rare smile at the good news.

“I told him that admission’s essay was killer. And the other two?”

“As far as I know, Eddie found and moved in with his biological father. Luckily, he’s a local teacher and has enrolled him in a GED program… Tony—”

“Ah, my good ol’ SB.”

“Yes, SB, he’s just signed up for the police academy. Leaves to train in the fall.”

“Wow, our little trio is gonna be separated,” Slug realized. His heart strings were tugged. Clementia shook her head vigorously. The bear behind her made a noise of protest and tried to stabilize her floppy horned hoodie.

“There’s still social media! And weekends! And vacations and stuff!”

Slug nodded, looking over at White Hat, who was busy bubbling himself as 0.5.0.’s fur ruffled, poofing into the air as he moved after Clem’s enthusiastic exclamations. What a bunch of weirdos they all were. How’d they all get here? What silly choices were made to connect him to such a life right now?

“Yeah… I guess they’re making the right choices for themselves… They’re strong kids. I’m sure their friendship can endure just a bit of distance.”

White Hat looked up at the warmth in those words. Slug rose his newspaper to hide his already hidden face. The Elder Being smiled, genuine, just to himself. Try as he might, the dear doctor wasn’t as—what did the boys term it, again?—tsundere as he made himself to be.

Wait. No, that doesn’t sound quite right…

“Hey, you’re gonna be late, White Hat, ya know, since you can’t seem to wake up like a normal fucking person.”

“I—I’m not human, Dr. Slug.”

“Yes, we’re all well aware. Best do that light teleport thingy that you can do.”

“Why?”

“You were called to the stand like, five minutes ago.”

“WHAT?! OH MY GOSH! BYE!”

White Hat popped out of kitchen area and Slug chuckled evilly. Clementia put her hands on her
petite hips and gave the doctor her best glare. “You know he woke up two hours early.”

“I know. But, he was getting too chummy and I am out of practice in my nefarious ways.”

“Ohhh, using those SAT words, Sluggy?”

“Oh, Clem, add vacuuming up 0.5.0.’s fur to your chore list—ya know what? Bathe him and push out the summer coat too.”

Clem’s draw dropped in mild offense as Slug continued reading his paper. As she whispered, “So nefarious… he’s not fun at all…” while sweeping up a fuzzy purple pile, Slug couldn’t help but grin to himself. He sure was having all kinds of fun this morning.

Chapter End Notes

Please let me know what you think (if ya want).

I'm a tongue-in-cheek kind of person... but I also only semi-planned this story. I tend to just write and stuff happens. Guess its just a process I developed. You'll just have to see what's in story for chapter two--though I am currently working on chapter 18.

Again, if any readers are particularly interested in consistent updates, let me know.

I wasn't planning to just flood the fic with all the done chapters. But, eh. We'll see, I guess?

Ummm... so there ya go. Hope you like. I really want to do these characters justice (pun unintentional), but mostly, I am just having fun after being in about a ten year depression where I haven't done anything fandom/fanfic/creative related. I am just really grateful to feel better, to feel like myself, and add some more life to the communities that have made me smile.

Thank you for reading! :D
Chapter Two: Let Us Also Talk About Dualities

Dr. Slug liked to consider himself a chill sort of guy (as Clem might put it, at least). Whether this was the ultimate truth is probably up for debate, but, really Dr. Slug felt he had an enormous amount of patience. Given his circumstances, this was also probably truer than not—if one could fully quantify truth. At the beginning of every month with working with both White Hat and Black Hat, the ideas like good, bad, right, wrong, truth, lies, etc. were always thrown and tossed on their head. Mostly because Black Hat was a real dick.

One Grade A fucking bag of syphilis dicks.

Slug was meditating in the back of the obnoxiously high-school-prom-y limo that White Hat Manor and Co. utilized for the half a day’s ride to Black Hat Manor. Luckily, crossing state lines into the next major metropolis wasn’t too much of a drag. Slug liked it, the traveling. He could sit in the fancy back—have a whole bench seat to himself—and work on his tablet, or sometimes just catch up on any of the numerous academic journals he subscribed to. White Hat would either be on the phone to someone, or, excitedly watching the roads and leaning out of the window to wave or talk to people if they happened upon traffic. 0.5.0. would be driving. No body questioned it. You see a massive monster with a little chauffer hat on top of it’s already little Venus Fly Trap, you left it alone. Never once had they seriously been pulled over. Clem often climbed in and out of the divider to annoy Slug or White Hat during the trip—mostly she liked playing with the radio and dialing in on her phone to win prizes.

“WOO! GUESS WHO IS GOING TO A JON BELLION CONCERT NEXT MONTH!”

“I certainly hope it is you, Clementia, dear,” White Hat answered through the down divider. She gave him a big grin and two thumbs up. He chuckled at that and turned back to Slug.

“Is that cool, Sluggy?” she inquired. Slug didn’t bother looking up. She’d just have those big, watery, star-struck eyes. How she managed to do it was still a mystery. Must be all the anime she consumed.

“Take 0.5.0., and make sure you get all your chores and homework done the day before,” he simply said, swiping across his electronic device. He decided to check emails as this issue of Engineering
Today was mostly focused on the steam-powered history of America (Boring. He’d already been through his steam-punk phase). It was mostly junk and spam but, “Ah, shit, looks like Heavy Hitter wants to move up his appoint to next week. He’s having a Might Is Right Crisis.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t develop disorder names for our clients,” White Hat said, a bit of frown forming.

“Hey, I’m only a few credits short of a PhD in psych studies so…” Slug trailed off with a shrug.

“What don’t you have a PhD for?” Clem asked, probably sarcastic, as her head and shoulders popped through the divider—unicorn horn poking at White Hat’s half turned face.

Slug took a second to think. “I think just things classified under the Arts… and languages. But, where I came from, I’d already been exposed to several languages—even the dead ones.”

“Ugh, why’d I even open my mouth…”

“Speaking of, Clementia, don’t you have a Latin Languages final to be studying for?” Slug quickly changed the subject, which only caused the teen to pout more.

“You know I can’t read in the car! I get motion sick…!”

“Well, we just entered the city, so we will be at my brother’s Manor shortly. I’m sure you can squeeze in a chapter or two—”

“White Hat, White Hat,” Clem wiggled further into the back, using the Elder Being for stability as 0.5.0 turned sharply into Black Hat’s district, “You don’t understand. A chapter in one of Slug’s text books is like—it’s so! You have no idea! It’s fuc—”

“Language, Clem,” Slug warned absently as he started to rearrange White Hat’s schedule for the next week. He could probably put Heavy Hitter into the 2:30 slot on Tuesday. It would block the day a bit oddly, especially because Slug liked to arrange any Hero-meetings for a full hours’ worth of advice and basic confessional type allotments… but, well, Heavy Hitter often had a high-property damage ratio to his successes. If civilians were involved, he might be a constant headache to corral.
“You curse all the time!”

“Mmhmm,” he answered, finishing a responding email before looking at the pouty teen, “And it’s very fucking hard to stop once you start.”

“Oh, doctor,” White Hat sighed. Slug huffed and placed his tablet down.

“Oh, yourself, boss. We all know I am terrible-ass role model, anyways,” he said. Clementia looked at the frowning White Hat with a slight nod. It caused her to land on the floor in a haphazard heap. 0.5.0. made a grumbly sound, adjusting the rear-view mirror to check on the back of the limo.

“Eyes on the road, Cero!” the girl reminded him as she brushed down her ruffled tutu. The bear set the mirror properly and the ride to Black Hat Manor instantly slowed. She sat beside White Hat and poked at him curiously, “Don’t worry, sir. Sluggy is just salty because your brother constantly brings up baggage.”

“Black Hat is… persistent,” White Hat hedged with the girl, and Slug looked at the window, wondering how far away they were. The monthly meetings always turned icky at some point, but Slug was confident his patience was the least of their collective business issues. “Though I am uncertain why.”

“You ogle Flug.”

“I do not!” White Hat protested, eyebrows shooting up in surprise.

“Yes, you do,” Slug reminded him for the umpteenth time, “It’s really creepy.”

“Ogle implies some sort of—of lechery!” the Elder Being exclaimed in realization. Clementia was immediately dissolving into giggles, trying to hide it behind her hands, multi-colored fingernails dancing about in glee.

“Ohhh! I see! So, this is really just jelly time—”

“Shut up, Clementia,” Slug hissed, feeling his face heat beneath his bag. White Hat looked between
“There’s no jelly…? We do not often have food with my brother and his personal scientist—Dr. Flug does not eat in the presence of others,” White Hat said aloud as he thought. He was trying to figure out what part of this interaction was causing Slug to snap like a wet alley cat. Clem fell to the floor, somewhat on purpose, as she rolled around in laughter.

“No, that’s not what ‘jelly’ means, sir! It’s…!” Clem was giggling through her words.

Slug crossed his arms, a cold finality as he declared, “Alright! You know what—you are on kitchen duty for the next two weeks missy!”

“Huh? What?” she questioned, popping up.

“And when I say that I mean—” he raised one finger, starting to list things like he did when his temper was tested, “You have to clean out the back of the fridge—”

“No! That’s where all of White Hat’s food babies live!”

“I… I really thought unicorn ice cream sandwiches involved sparkly star dust,” he murmured, hands nervously taping together at the memory.

“You showed White Hat Pinterest,” Slug said, and Clem whimpered at the harsh reminder of the Summer of Pinterest DIY That Were Literal Creations, “So it’s only fair you deal with the remainders of his baking trails.”

“Can I at least wear the special suit?” she asked, demurred.

Slug paused, mostly to instill a bit of fear, but eventually nodded. Of course she was going to wear the special suit—a hazard suit that was an anti-cosmic magic/bending of the laws of Earthly Reality. He wasn’t a complete dick.

Unlike Black Hat. Fucking jackass. Can’t just leave shit alone—
“Oh! Good! We’re here!” White Hat exclaimed, equal parts delighted and relieved.

The white limo pulled up to the evil, spiked, dark gates of Black Hat Manor—shaped much like a top hat, but with a jet liner stuck in the side. It was nearly like White Hat Manor. Slug was not 100% sure why these absurdly ancient cosmic terror twins had to mirror their lives, except for the fact that the balance of the universe was essentially linked to a shaky cooperation between White Hat and Black Hat. Dr. Slug was one of the few humans in this world who had the bigger picture, and probably the only human alive, who knew exactly what these two creatures truly were and could do.

In any case, Black Hat was impatiently waiting at the open gates, body stiff and formal, as the limo parked itself by the curb side. Dr. Flug was anxiously by his side, little quivers of either excitement or nerves running along his body. Behind their figures, he saw the lizard girl crawling down the massive walkway—that dumb blue thing waddling behind her while waving.

0.5.0. unfolded itself from the driver’s seat and launched itself down the walkway—tearing past Black Hat and the jumpy doctor at his side. In a flash of purple, it was attacking the blue bear. The blue bear blubbered, just a bit, but was indestructible. As 0.5.0. slashed it’s talons and growled, the other bear just rolled around the grassy knolls of Black Hat Manor and so the two creatures would proceed for the day. Slug was just glad these meetings was an outlet for someone in the White Hat Company.

The other three occupants of the vehicle existed with little flair, Clementia hiding behind White Hat as she laid eyes on Black Hat’s rigid posturing. The Eldritch Horror wouldn’t harm her, of course, but he was still intimidating. A nightmarish thing for someone more used to White Hat’s angelic nature. Still, her interest was piqued when the lizard girl crawled over Flug, cackling. Flug responded by yelping, but soon, Dementia was standing before White Hat, bowing slightly.

“Hey there, Photonegative Boss!” she chirped, “Clem and I are gonna go out and play now!”

“As long as you two are careful,” he allowed, and Clem jumped onto Dementia’s back, pointing westward.

“To the Malt Shop!” Clem decided.

“And then the Mall!” Dem added, quickly darting down the sidewalk.
Slug reached out, yanking Clem by the hood, “Wait a second—”

“Awww, Slug, come on…!” she whined, giving those puppy eyes. Damn, in the light of day and directed at him full force, they were supremely effective.

“You are definitely clearing out the fridge when we return to White Hat Manor,” he grumbled. He didn’t like leaving the two teens unsupervised—especially considering Dementia was chaotic even on good days… “And also—”

“Slug…!” she started, then paused when she felt him sneakily slip a twenty-dollar bill into her hood.

“Keep those tranqs on hand,” he whispered as he dropped her back to her feet. She rolled her eyes at his worry—patting down her skirt that hid a case of specially designed emergency hypodermic needles in a blow dart kit for the event that Dementia ever got manic and went on a slaughter spree. It’s happened before.

“I promise I’ll even clean out the cupboards if you let us go right now?” she offered. Dr. Slug gave a curt nod, and Clem quickly pecked him on the cheek as a thank you. “Alright! I’ll text you when we’re on our way back!”

Slug rested his hands in pockets, feigning casual as his fellow scientist was immediately sneaking up beside him. “I hope they don’t destroy the food court… you know, again.”

“You mean, Dementia doesn’t destroy it,” Slug corrected. Dr. Flug wrung his hands, but nonetheless silently agreed.

“Are we going to just stand here all day,” Black Hat loudly growled, voice a warbled staccato of deep evil. It was like every time he spoke he meant to murder human speech through a vast well of terror in sound. Well, knowing him, he probably did. “Or, are we going to get down to business?”

“… to de-feat… the Huns…” Slug couldn’t help but sing to himself. Black Hat leveled him with a slight unamused look.

“Already did that.”
“’Cause you’re old as dirt,” Slug shot back. White Hat was immediately sighing, and Dr. Flug scooted away as Black Hat trembled, trying to keep his composure. Green flames simmered in the air around the Eldritch Horror—yeah, Slug considered himself a chill dude. Comparatively, of course.

…

White Hat was watching the scientists as they—well, they spoke in such terms that he was not really listening. So, that left watching. It was simply fascinating to him. The two volleyed back and forth ideas, disseminating theories, or other such mechanics that were utterly amazing! They managed to work around each other with such… such good will! Such interesting minds computing, analyzing, dissecting machinery, crunching dizzying numbers without calculators!

It was entirely too impressive.

“Ugh,” Black Hat was slouching against his ornate cane, glaring at his twin, “Your eye is doing that thing again…”

White Hat blinked, wrenching his sight away from the two humans reluctantly. “Which eye?”

“The one I mounted in my pocket dimension,” he sarcastically answered. White Hat only understood it as sarcasm as it was Black Hat’s recent communication strategy since settling down in this universe. He shook his pale head, choosing to ignore the discomfort of the topic, and looked back at the scientists. “Seriously, stop it.”

“They just—” he tried, glancing over at his brother, “—Dr. Flug has a fantastic mind.”

“How many times must we have this conversation?” Black Hat’s claws scratched the jeweled crest of his cane as he righted himself to full height. He cut a dark, dapper devilish image. White Hat was often fond of how well his twin cultivated his malicious little place. Nonetheless, they were bound to their deal to strike a balance between Good and Evil. Villains and Heroes as it played out.

“Brother,” White Hat tried.

Black Hat let out a hiss, figure shifting, growing the slightest bit larger, “I detest that familial term…!”
“It’s the closest we have in this language.”

“Even in our tongue, it still doesn’t mean what you think it means,” Black Hat rolled his shoulders back, the ancient argument also familiar, also tiring. “But, you mean to distract me from the real issue.”

“I have done no such thing,” White Hat protested. He felt the need to sit down under the mounting pressure of his twin’s ire that was surely going to needle and poke at his personal philosophies. Maybe he should create a cane as well? Although, that was a prop used by decidedly Villainous characters.

“You refuse to accept I’ve looked into Flug’s heart—” Black Hat continued.

“You used your second sight to judge his soul!” White Hat reworded it, quiet and cold, throwing his hands up on the air with exasperation. Black Hat jabbed his cane into his colorless identical’s stomach.

“And everything I need to know about him was easily seen,” he continued, undeterred. White Hat swung the cane away from him, defensively crossing his arms.

“Humans can only be known by actions,” he insisted, “Every person’s character is shown based on their choices.”

“Based on their intent, brother,” Black Hat haughtily drawled.

White Hat rolled his eyes at the correction, and the blatant attempt to sway White Hat’s stance on The Good Debate. “You cannot play with the privacy of the human heart, it’s not fair.”

“And what’s fair, White?” he demanded, “Give someone an impossible choice and you expect me to just take it on good faith that they wanted to do the right thing? What? Under your carefully funded system of right and wrong?”

“Choices, especially the good ones, might not be easy to make, but—”
“They’re super easy to make! That’s what I am saying, you feeble brained—Look,” Black Hat stamped his cane on the ground, coming back to himself, “You don’t want to test or tempt human souls, but my original point stands. I saw Flug’s heart. It has such potential for vile things.”

“Brother…” White Hat sighed, feeling such disappointment.

Black Hat, narrowed his eye, “No, don’t twist my words. This issue is over. Flug is mine.”

“You just said he has potential! Your idea that good and evil can be inherent because of intentions is obviously undermined by human choice!” White Hat smugly declared, hands on his hips. Staunchly, he walked into his brother’s space. Black Hat leaned back with a disgusted scowl.

“Back up—”

“So give Flug a choice! He could make the choice for good!” White Hat demanded, but at the same time acquiesced and stepped out the other’s space. Black Hat stuck out his serpentine tongue like bratty child at such a suggestion.

“No.”

“You are just scared that I would win Flug for the good side!”

“Suck my tentacles, White,” Black Hat growled, swishing his cane in hopes of landing a good whack on his brother.

White Hat blanched at the suggested, as much as someone who was practically without color could, “Ew. Why do you have to be so vulgar when you’re losing?”

“I’m not losing,” he reminded, White Hat shrugged, looking over at the scientists (they hadn’t noticed the grade-school antics of their employers yet), “Flug’s soul is already mine.”

“So, I am aware.”
White Hat was back to staring, as if in awe. Because his own doctor began to hide his face via a paper-bag mask and goggles, it was almost impossible to see the differences between the two scientists. You could though. Slug was taller, maybe by a good six inches, but the self-conscious slouch Flug had made him seem extremely shorter. Flug was scrawnier, and his attire much more relaxed than Slug’s. Slug liked his turtlenecks and slacks…

It looked good on him. His clothes. He wore most things well, and had an air of confidence. Dr. Slug walked and talked in a manner than suggested no one and nothing could touch him, could affect him. He operated like a master of chess—understanding every move that could and would be made before you could push any piece across the board. Seven steps ahead, and counting. He knew how to win, and maybe that’s where the good doctor got you. You did not know as much as he did. No one could match him. White Hat sometimes wondered how he survived without Slug planning the next move for his company, for him.

It was clear that Dr. Flug also idolized Slug for many of those same reasons White Hat was appreciative. He always stared up with—if one allows the pun—hero-worship at Slug. Often times, Flug would present some contraption or other that didn’t do what it was designed to. Then Slug would figure out why, or fix it, or rework the entire angle. It was just… just so amazing. He also never seemed to be vexed by any of the interactions. He was an amazing mentor. He could probably also be a convincing reason to side with, well, the good side.

"Ugh, have some decorum! I can practically read your thoughts like a comic speech bubble," Black Hat’s guttered words drowned out the chatter of the scientists in view.

A bit put out, White Hat managed to try out a deadpan face, "You’re not going to get to me today."

"They work so well together because Dr. Slug is—"

"Was."

"—A Villain."

White Hat nonchalantly shrugged, "Call me an optimist. He chose to come to me."

"I doubt there was much choice left," Black Hat said, not so much arguing, just clearly in thought, "I can only think the circumstances were outside of his control to parley with you." White Hat shot him
an affronted look. It was Black Hat’s turn to shrug. “Full offense meant.”

“Well… with you, of course,” the lighter twin said, a bit immaturely in retaliation.

“I still don’t know why you won’t tell me why though.”

White Hat paused. Black Hat was meddling, as he does. Which meant something. White Hat was unclear what exactly the Eldritch Horror was looking for. However, he would not find answers in that curious dark eye. It gleamed with sickly red light, the extra sight begging to be used. Black Hat would not find any resolution by looking through White Hat’s soul—there was no point when immortal creatures carried none.

“He asked me not to.”

“Oh course. He made you promise?” Black Hat gave a derisive snort.

White Hat shook his head. “He did not have to…”

“I see,” Black Hat hummed, one claw rubbing along his chin in thought. White Hat felt a shiver travel through him. He sharply turned back to observe the pair of doctors again, like he was trying to evade the unsettling sensation that was building.

“Don’t read into it.”

“Of course not, brother mine.”

…

Clementia had returned to Black Hat Manor dragging the lizard hybrid behind her. She had to use the sedatives to keep her from smashing up some arcade center in the mall when a busted game machine ate the last of the pair’s quarters. Too embarrassed to call for help, the girl just grabbed a plastic advertisement banner that fluttered down in the chaos wrapped up Dem to carry the other girl behind like a tugboat.
Exhausted, and with the duties of balancing out the universe satisfied for the day, White Hat ushered his company back to the limo. 0.5.0. managed to finesse a hold of the dead-tired Clementia by way of slipping her unicorn horn between the slats of his muzzle and chomping down on it. She curled up like a kitten as the monster walked on all four toward the vehicle. It clamored in, depositing the girl with a yawn before curling up into a ball around her. Both knocked out before Slug even started the car.

Dr. Flug waved farewell, Black Hat standing immobile at the gate. White Hat gave a wave as well as they pulled away down the block. He sat back, buckling uncertainly. His dear doctor’s goggles were half-lidded like he had expended too much energy for the day.

“I can always drive,” he offered, “I don’t really need sleep.”

“It’s fine,” Slug said.

“I just—I like to sleep, though,” White Hat unnecessarily explained.

“Hm, I know,” came the automatic reply. He was probably only partially paying attention. The road was more important. It was dark. Although the doctor had built his goggles to be useful no matter the light visibility, it was wise to pay attention regardless.

“Well, I am uncertain if you could really call it sleep… It’s more like dream-walking, I can—”

“You’re starting to ramble, White Hat,” Dr. Slug pointed out. He glanced over, slightly more alert, “You only do that when you feel guilty.”

“I…” White Hat started. He sighed and looked out at the road. The more eyes aware, the better.

“Black Hat is a dick, remember? Whatever bullshit he was trying to convince you of—”

“He asked, again.”
Slug’s words died in his throat. It was hard to gather them back. So, he just sort of them rot on his tongue. The road stretched empty in front of them as they turned onto a two-lane high way back towards home.

“I did not tell him.”

Slug nodded, “I know.”

“I would never.”

“I know you wouldn’t,” he sighed. White Hat closed his eye.

“I’m sorry.”

Slug paused, breath coming out shaky as he fought to reign in his rage. It burned, he could feel it in his face, across his back, even his patchily healed hands. “I don’t want to hear that. Ever. Not from you. Not from anyone.”

White Hat held his hands in his lap. He wanted to reach out and touch. His words would have to be enough for now.

“Yes, you do.”

“No…” Slug shook his head, “I really don’t.”

“Well, maybe, but even so, it’s still true. I am sorry,” he offered, trying to defuse the bomb he’d lit. Slug tsked, leaning back against his seat. He propped one arm on the window as it rolled down to let in the cool night air.

“And I still don’t want your pity—”

“It’s not—”
“I don’t care, White Hat!” Slug struggled to not yell, conscious of the fact that Clem was asleep behind them. His one hand on the wheel fisted, probably bloodless beneath his rubber gloves.

White Hat looked from his hands, to his face, the saddest look in his eye, “Yes… you do.”

“You can’t possibly know what I feel, what I want, White Hat,” Slug argued, “You don’t do that. You have no idea the kinds of thing I—” The doctor took a deep breath, cutting himself off. He released the pressure in his hands, trying to shake it off. “You knew when you hired me the things I had done. I told you why I went to you…”

White Hat nodded, forgetting that Slug was focused on the road. Still, the man must had known the response as he relaxed into the seat, a small, dark sort of laugh caught in his throat.

“So, don’t. Okay? We’re not going down this road tonight. Not tonight… I’m too tired.”

“I know, Doctor. It’s been a long time, though, so you still have—”

“No, White Hat, no,” Slug pleaded, his exacerbation returning briefly, “Don’t tell me I have a choice. I don’t. No, I—”

The Elder Being shook his head, hands moving across his thighs to grip his nervously bouncing knees. “We will never know until we know. I have faith you will make the right decision.”

“Yeah, that’s why you’ve never explicitly asked me what I will do when the time comes…” he said, and his voice sounded far away.

“Again! Because I know—”

“… if the time ever does come,” Slug lamely finished. White Hat felt himself deflate. All his optimism sapped by the suddenly sullen doctor beside him. He didn’t stop himself this time, he reached over, place his hand softly on Slug’s shoulder. Slug left it there.
“You have been incredibly patient, Dr. Slug,” he murmured, voice so calming, so sure. So smooth and different from his twin’s. “Please, extend your patience a little farther.”

With the chilliest, most hopeless words, all Slug could tell him was, “Like I have another choice. Patience is all I have left.”

White Hat tried to understand why the hollow feelings started to return where the soul normally resides inside a being.

They rode the rest of the way to White Hat Manor in silence.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone who left nice comments and kudos!

I don't really have any notes about this particular chapter. It's sort of just all the characters of the universe and how they act and react to one another after a pretty-well established history. I think in a few chapters I begin to hop back and forth through different times in the characters' lives, depending on which headcannon reveal I felt like exploring.

Also, I hope no one really minds my ramblings on things like evil and good and human beings. :D

So, yeah! Prepare for that. I am having fun and hope everyone also has fun. Thanks again for reading!
Chapter Three: Let Us Jump Back In Time For A Moment

Dr. Slug was breathing heavily through his nose. His blood pressure was skyrocketing and it didn’t seem to be coming back down. Nope, just going to keep raising way past the atmosphere. His hands—still heavily bandaged—were shaking a stack of papers in his new employer’s inhumane, but still uttering captivating face.

“Theeeee. SHIT. Is. This?!!”

“I—” White Hat leaned back in his desk chair, brows shot up near past his iconic top hat, “What?”

“The shit is this, White Hat?!” Slug demanded, throwing the papers above his head in a fit of fury.

“Well… it’s tax season and you said you would gladly handle it,” White Hat said in a way Slug was coming to realize the Elder Being was parsing out some sort of human cultural or social norm. As far as the doctor knew, White Hat had been operating more or less without any mortal companion in well over—well, given his paperwork, Slug was probably his first employee, period.

“I was originally being sarcastic,” Slug informed with a put-upon sigh.

White Hat made a frown, part contemplation and part worried he’d overstepped a boundary, “Are you upset with the extra work?”

“No.”
"Well, I would, of course, pay you extra," he said as he rose. He began gathering the print outs from the floor, turning them this way and that as he tried to order them—in some fashion that Slug was not following. He looked up from his kneeling position, the one eye blinking fiercely. "Someone from the government usually comes by and looks over everything."

"Yeah, so I gathered from the expense reports," Slug said, crossing his arms, "Do you know how much you pay into back-tax military recruitment and weaponry?"

"Um, no," he answered, sounding very confused as he stood.

Slug swiped the papers from him, leafing to a specific page he noted, "It's a lot."

"What is... a lot?" White Hat knew what the words "a lot" meant. Slug knew he knew. Slug was going to answer though, as if White Hat was asking for a specific price.

"When I considered the actual numbers and not these reports, 75% of your gross income."

White Hat blinked at Slug. Slug just waved him back to his desk. He leaned over the desk to grab a highlighter from the neatly organized pen container. As he started to circle articles and readouts, White Hat was also pointing at things.

"Wait, this is—I mean, that's the coded name for the war effort down in—"

"Yes, I know what it is, White Hat, I've hacked the Pentagon before," Slug said, calming down the suddenly ruffled Elder Being beside him, "Where do you think I use to shuffle product?"

"No, you don't understand, doctor," White Hat said, frowning.

"Ummmm, I think I do, the government is taking way more than they need. We can give them 45% at most—"

"No, Dr. Slug, we will give them none."
“I—” Slug sputtered, mimicking his employer from moments earlier, “What?”

“I have sworn in as a Pacifist. They can’t use any of my money for the war,” he explained dully. Slug laughed, folding his arms.

“It doesn’t work that way, White Hat,” he said.

“Yes, it does,” the Elder Being assured, straightening his coat all huffy-like.

“I think I know what I’m on about, boss,” Slug began, tone mocking.

White Hat rose one brow, elegant and unfazed. “Do you? Your history suggests otherwise.”

“Ha, yeah, I get it, Villains get caught via tax evasion,” the doctor agreed, but remained steadfastly nasty in tone, “But, how many times was I imprisoned for such an outdated method of judicial loopholes you Heroes use in the name of justice?”

White Hat’s arrogant eyebrow calmed itself and Slug smirked in triumph. The gauze across his face itched at the pulling skin, but Slug ignored it while he folded up the tax reports.

“Here’s the thing, you were sworn in as Pacifist. Matter of public record. Fine, government is not allowed to use your Heroic tax payments toward war—but this is a code-named war effort. That’s not a matter of public record. It’s not even considered a real war. So, when it comes time to pay up, government is gonna use your money however they want. You don’t get a say.”

“That’s…” White Hat took a gulp, a little less confused, “That’s not right.”

“I’m not saying it is,” Slug clarified, seemingly happy to win this verbal sparring. White Hat looked at him helplessly.

“How do we fix it? How do we make it right?”
Slug felt his smirk flatten.

Well.

Shit.

...

Slug stared at his spreadsheets on his laptop screen, eye’s blinking nearly out of sync. He’d been up for hours reworking the numbers—fairly, of course. He worked for White Hat now. He had to be extra squeaky clean. Though to be honest, there was really no way to cook the books at White Hat Manor. A large portion of money was donated with every Hero session, every meeting, and any services rendered on the daily. White Hat only kept what he needed for the property taxes, vehicle rentals—they really ought to just purchase a car and run it under business coverages—and… well. White Hat’s expenses weren’t a problem, even with a newly gained employee over the last year. It was where the taxes were going that was bothering the Elder Being. The government official was going to be at the Manor later in the week. White Hat got a confirmation call. Slug started to keep a schedule for him, because being an interdimensional cosmic super being really fucked with his sense of time on Earth. Though, he was getting better now that Slug was getting him on a routine.

“Like a frickin’—uh… fuck.” Slug rubbed his forehead as a tension headache built behind his burnt-out eyeballs. He had lost the ability to allegorically insult White Hat in his own head. This whole thing was really taking it’s toll on the White Hat Company.

Slug pushed away from his work desk and decided to call it a night. White Hat had a commencement ceremony he’d been requested to attend in the early morning. If the doctor didn’t rouse and hound him, he would probably show up like an idiot seven hours later and miss the ribbon cutting or some other random bullshit would happen. Maybe the mayor would call a mob on the angelic freak.

Slug proceed up the lift from the lab to the main floor of the Manor. From there, he’d have to take the winding staircase to the second floor and over to the east wing, where his bedroom was located. The walk turned into a trudge, and he stumbled into his on-suite bathroom, half-asleep.

He ignored his reflection over the sink as he brushed his teeth before removing his bandages. He opened the cabinet, plucking up a sterile bag that held some new gauze and wrappings. Carefully smearing his ointment across half his face, hands, and whatever else he could reach, he reapplied his
dressings... was this really his life now? This—thing—with White Hat?

“Fuck!”

He left the dirtied pile of bandages in the damp sink and leaned against the mirror.

“Fuck... I—I don’t know how to fix this.”

Whether his quiet admittance was about himself or the situation, he just wasn’t sure.

...

The morning passed in a blurry and flurry. Partially, Slug felt exhausted, and having to deal with White Hat? Pushing him toward the stage in the new municipal park that housed three complete community centers created in his honor should not have been so difficult. Most Heroes Slug had encountered loved the attention. The pale bastard was exceedingly humble. If he didn’t know better, he’d think White Hat wasn’t as pretentious as he let on.

... fuck, he kind of wasn’t. It left Slug tasting something bitter that he couldn’t pin on the steaming coffee in his mitten-secure hands. The rain drizzled with a sky as foul as his mood at the moment. Tis the fucking season, he supposed.

He took another sip as he surveyed the area, hidden behind a maple tree. White Hat stood, dazzling and pure, awkwardly trying that smile thing.

“That’s just so... disingenuous,” he muttered around the rim of his cup.

“Dis-genu-you-us?” a tiny voice squeaked from the other side of the tree. Slug nearly choked on his coffee in surprise. He peered over the large trunk to see a... well, a ragamuffin.

“Disingenuous,” he restated. The little ragamuffin looked up from his—er, her?—little spot without the gnarled, uprooted ends of the maple. The hollowed-out spot looked childishly makeshift, softened down with trash, rags, and what looked like mats of... hair? However, the area sheltered from the current weather. The child hidden amongst the thicket was trying to reform the word with
some missing teeth.

God damn, that was cute.

“It means ‘not sincere’ or ‘not genuine,’” he explained. The child nodded, dirty face solemn.

“Yup, yup,” it agreed, “That seems ‘bout right. Makes sense.”

Slug found himself crouching down closer to the kid’s eye level. He inspected the little thing—too skinny, malnourished—and saw the little fingers covered in cuts and turning blue. There was a pile of soaked acorns and some kind of berries from the local flora sitting in a pile of mud.

“Making mud pies?” he inquired. The child looked down, and there was questionable bruising along her—more than likely it was a little girl, he realized—pale neck and collarbone. He fought to school the outraged scowl as he recognized the pattern forming from the injury.

“Uh…” she thought, looking back up with yellowing eyes, “You can’t really eat mud pies.”

“Shame, they look tasty,” he teased, voice softening. Her eyes skipped across the bandages. Slug had grown use to them, forgetting how differently he stood out these days. For the first time since he left the hospital, he started to feel the blossoms of insecurity. He raised his cup higher to cover the more unsightly parts of his face.

“If ya want,” she said, coming to only stare into Slug’s eyes, with a toothy, little smile, “I can make one for you. You’re prolly hunger-y too, huh?”

Slug paused, surprised when she reached for the hand holding his coffee. She pulled it down, no doubt noticing the thick bandages coating his revived fingers. Huh. “I… look hungry?”

“Uh-huh, like Missus Lila,” she explained, like it meant something. Which, to her, it did.

“Missus Lila, eh?”
“I haven’t seen her since they found her under the bridge down by my old house.”

“I… see,” Slug said as the child patted the root closest to him. He sat down as she did what all kids do incessantly, talk without context.

“She wanted to learn to fish to be less hunger-y—”

“Right.”

“Fishing poles are hard to make and I know it’s not… like, good, to do. But she was really, really skinny. People say you is a-supposed to be, but, like, not like that. So, I took the one in the closet. They found out though, and so that’s prolly why Missus Lila was taken from her home under the bridge. I gave her band-aids too. I don’t have any now though, but I’ll make you a mud-pie…”

“Thank you,” Slug said, watching her pat the ground. She pulled at grasses, sleet mixing in with the soil. Glancing up under her sheered bangs, she blinked.

“Don’t really eat it though.”

“Right, because you can’t eat mud,” he recalled seriously. She nodded. The child went back to digging up the ground. Slug briefly looked up to see White Hat shaking hands with the mayor. The ribbon still wasn’t cut. He had a meeting with an up-and-coming Hero an hour after the ceremony… but, looks like the whole event was about to take a bit longer than intended.

“Ew—” the child’s squeaky voice broke his concentration, “Worms!”

“Wha? Ew?” Slug said, somewhat offended, “Don’t tell me you don’t like worms!”

“Uhhh, nooo, they’re icky!”

“Nah, kiddo, they’re super cool.”

“Uhhh, hooooow?”
“Well, they actually *can* eat dirt,” he said. She blinked up at him. Then scrunched her nose.

“Nuh-huh. Lies. Dis-ing-genius-ness!”

 Slug burst out laughing, full-bellied laughter. Definitely not ingenious. The child was smiling, apparently proud. Slug sank closer to the ground, carefully pulling the wiggling worms away from the child’s forming mud-pie. He could feel himself smiling too. She should be proud. Slug hadn’t smiled for… well. The hospital.

“How about we get an actual pie?” he offered.

She gasped, “Really??”

“Chicken pot or apple?”

“Pum-kin spice!” she exclaimed.

“Pumpkin spice is good too,” he decided. He was, not for the last time, surprised when she threw her arms around his neck in a too tight hug. Patting her tiny back, she wouldn’t let go.

Oh… he knew what that meant.

With practiced ease, he wrapped one arm under her little legs and scooped her up. Secured to his front like a smudgy spider monkey, he began walking out of the park. White Hat could find him after the ceremony. There was a nice little diner not three blocks away. It wasn’t the season for it, but in any case, he could probably convince someone to find some pumpkin pie somewhere.

…

“That’s all well and good, White Hat,” Slug said, using that tone that did that thing where it sounded nice, but he was actually being really mean. “But consider this—”
“Yes?” White Hat prompted, surveying the mess that was made of the second story hallway.

“White is a fucking boring ass color,” he whispered, covering the tiny child’s ears.

“I made art!” it chirped.

White Hat bit his tongue, not wanting to scare the child—it clearly didn’t realize what it had done—but Slug was grinning almost manically. “I like white. It’s a nice color…”

“Yeah, but a rainbow is better!”

“Yeah, White Hat,” the doctor said, egging on the child, “Rainbow beats white every time.”

“We have a meeting in—”

“I know, I know,” Slug let out a huff, waving the Elder Being away. White Hat stepped back. With a shocking gentleness, Slug moved his hands from the tiny, faded-orange head down to little shoulders. Coaxing her to spin around to face him, he then knelt to eye-level. Unlike most other humans, the child did not seem anxious when staring at his face. “Alright sweetheart, as much as we love your rainbow art, you still drew on the walls.”

“Uh-oh…”

“Hey, it’s no big deal. Sluggy’s got some special spray and we’ll wipe it off,” he said, and White Hat was entirely surprised how… how he sounded like that. His voice was so… it was—

“I… I ran out of paper…” the child began weeping. Now, only now, she was anxious. Slug managed to shush her, wiping away tears, uncaring that they were causing his wrappings to turn mushy. The salt from her dewy cheeks more than likely stinging his burns as well. Yet, he showed no signs that her tears caused him any trouble.

“It happens, darling. I probably should have paid more attention to your art supplies.”
“Am I… bad?” she asked, sniffling. She sounded like she was swallowing globs of mucus in an attempt to brace herself from some horrible fate.

Slug shook his head negatively, “You just got too excited and didn’t think your actions through.”

“So… I’m not in trouble…?” she asked, starting to calm down. Slug was struggling to not smile. White Hat couldn’t fathom why. He could do it so… nice. It made him look—well, just. It was nice.

“Oh, well, not big trouble,” he said. She groaned, a pout forming. He pinched at her little cheeks, “Now, now. None of that. You may be a cute little ragamuffin, but that doesn’t mean you get to act like one without consequences!”

“Sluuuuuuuggy—” she whined and Slug grabbed the other cheek and stretched out her face until she started giggling, “Staaaaaaaap…!”

He let go, and she rubbed her pink cheeks. White Hat was more than amazed. He smiled at the child before standing. “You apologize to White Hat while I go get that cleaner. Then, if you fix up those rainbow walls without complaint, we’ll head to the craft store and get you more construction paper, deal?”

“Deal!”

Slug gave the child a nod and walked off down the hallway. The Elder Being could only stand awkwardly in front of the miniature human. She gazed up at him with her bright, shiny eyes. She took a big, big breath and stood on her sparkly jellied-shoed tippy-toes.

“I’m awfully sorry, Mr. White Hat.”

She looked at him expectantly. Thinking about the doctor’s previous actions, while his footsteps echoed on the stairs, White Hat gallantly kneeled, “I accept your apology, my child.” He tried a smile. The little girl tilted her head, giving him an oddly knowing sigh.

“Ingenuity,” she tsk with a good nature. White Hat tilted his head, confused. She patted his shoulder like he gave it his best try, but still didn’t quite succeed. As those footsteps grew closer behind their pair, White Hat rose back up.
“All good here?” Slug asked, looking between the two. White Hat didn’t answer, but the child held out her hands. She was prematurely reaching for the bucket the doctor was cradling to his chest. “We apologized?”

“Yup, yup!”

“Alright then, my darling,” he said—it seemed to be his favorite thing to say to the girl—as he carefully handed her the cleaning elements. The bucket was nearly her entire size, but, she dutifully wrapped her arms around it and waddled over to the beginning of her art project down the hallway. A few sloshes of water could be heard, and a few drops dotted the pale blue carpeting.

White Hat looked over at Slug, who was busy making sure the child wasn’t overwhelmed by the task. However, she was incredibly self-sufficient the entire time she came to stay at the Manor. The doctor hadn’t quite… relished the idea of finding her parents, or any next of kin. The claim was that the child would not tell him her name—but Slug admitted he had hacked the Pentagon. Surely, he could work some sort of magic to discover who and where the little girl’s blood relatives were.

“Doctor—” White Hat began, inquiry coloring his tone.

“No.”

“You did not let me finish—”

“Don’t need to,” Slug said, cocking his head over his shoulder to glare at White Hat, “You’re gonna try to make me fix something that I can’t.”

White Hat sighed, crossing his arms this time in defense, “No I wasn’t.”

“She has to just stay here, White Hat,” he stated, as if White Hat could even deny him after that tender display.

“I have already conceded this is the safest place for her.”
“So, then what could you possibly ask of me right now?”

“Those things you said…” White Hat tried, arms falling helplessly, “I do not understand.”

Slug furrowed his brow, “Which part confused you?”

“The—” he struggled to pick just one, “The parts where you said… those things.”

“Yeah. That’s helpful,” Slug said, fully turning to focus on White Hat. White Hat waved in the general direction of the cleaning child. The doctor offered to help him out by asking, “The part where I said it wasn’t a big deal? It’s not. They’re water soluble markers and wax crayons. Easy clean up.”

“No,” White Hat shook his head, sounding a bit frustrated.

“I get why you’re mad, but, hate to break it to you, humans are messy. Kids especially,” he explained, and the Elder Being was thankful his voice lacked the usual snarky bite to it.

“I am starting to figure that out,” he confessed under his breath, and Slug just gave him a one arm shrugged as he double checked the child humming happily about the idea of brand new construction paper, “But, no, I mean the… soft words.”

“Soft?” he echoed, startling. He refocused on White Hat, a fierceness causing his body to stand rigid. White Hat was taken aback as he pushed closer, soggy bandaged hand on his employer’s would-be sternum. “What. The. Shit. You. Implying?”

“I—”

“Let’s get this straight right now, White Hat,” he hissed, low and deathly serious, “Never use that word in association with me. Ever. I am not soft.”

White Hat paused, glancing over at the unaware child. “I just saw you—I heard you. You called her those things—um—sweetheart. It was… soft.”
“Oh…” the doctor breathed, then extracted himself from White Hat’s personal bubble. 

“Why does that—”

“Those are just…” Slug waved his hands, and in the flashes, White Hat could see the angry red of his ravaged flesh, “They don’t mean anything. We don’t know her name. They’re nicknames. Place holders. Lots of people use ‘em when dealing with kids.”

“Well, you are good with kids then,” he complimented. Slug stared at him like he was crazy. And White Hat probably was, with his face doing this weird thing where his mouth turned up into a half moon, teeth all displayed.

“Are you kidding me…” Slug muttered, staring at the Elder Being’s mouth. He clasped his hands over his eyes.

“No, no. You are really good with children. It’s something that I quite like,” he continued. His mouth got wider with the words, all on its own. He couldn’t stop it. He didn’t bother… it felt like it was supposed to do that.

“Stop it—” Slug groaned, peeking between his twitching fingers, “You’re fucking… like a god damn idiot—”

White Hat watched the man’s face erupt into colors, and he placed his hands back over his eyes like he could hide all the nice colors—maybe rainbows were better, he vaguely thought—and White Hat stepped closer the inspect the human’s behavior.

“You’re smiling, you buffoon, like… a genuine stupid ass smile,” Slug explained, suddenly subdued. White Hat reached up, feeling the edges. Oh! That’s what a real smile felt like. It must be produced by things that made him, well, feel this feeling. This endearing, warm kind of awe that fluttered low and moved to where the soul normally resides… “I can’t believe something like that would make you smile—”

“Soft words?”
Slug sighed, “I told you, they don’t mean anything.”

“I like them.”

Giving up, the doctor just lifted his hands in defeat, “Alright then, use ‘em. I guess. I dunno! What do you want from me?”

“How do you use them?”

“I don’t—” Slug shook his head, noticing the time on his wrist watch, “Alright, look. I can’t give you modern language lessons right now. You got to prepare for your meeting, and I gotta help the kid. So, tell you what, I’ll pick you up a book on the way back from the craft store. That’s how I’ve learned everything else anyway.”

“Like how to talk to children?”

“Sure, we’ll go with that for right now.”

Oh. Right. White Hat’s smile began to fade. He didn’t like that. Could not stop it though. So, he just nodded.

Slug turned back to the child, ignoring the disaster that were the bandages on his hands. He didn’t quite look at White Hat, but still, the next words were firmly addressed to the Elder Being, “I am not soft. It doesn’t work like that, okay?”

White Hat spared a second to watch Slug approach the child, but, the man was right. A lot of things were turning out to not work like they should. The hollow feeling came back to his chest, and he placed his hand over it. He wished he had a heartbeat, but it was empty inside. He wanted to smile. His mouth almost remembered how to form it… but he kept thinking that the doctor’s hands were probably working overtime.

Red on white walls.

The idea made him ache. Smile gone.
The wind had picked up by the time the humans returned to White Hat Manor. It was dark, rain and hail falling ominously as soon as the pair rushed up the porch steps. Luckily, the doctor had managed to save the construction paper and his employers new books by covering the items with his overly large coat.

“I dunno, Sluggy,” the child worried aloud, hand squeezing the one he made her hold as they were dashing about the streets of the city. He internally winced as the plush layers of his mittens did little to ease the growing rawness of his abused and damaged digits. “Are we sure that it’s just April showers?”

“Well, it is April, and it is showering,” he pointed out. The girl shrugged at his smartness.

“Seems like the sky is mad, just sayin’.”

“I should have bought you that baby science book,” he regretted, checking on the picture book the child immediately fell in love with when she saw it. Call him a sucker for knowledge, but if it got her to read, he’d buy anything. Books are the gateway drugs to critical thinking skills. A sparkly unicorn was winking up at him from the generic plastic bag of the second-hand book store they’d just rushed home from.

He glanced down to see her looking uncertainly at the swirling gray clouds. “I miss the blue sky… It reminds me of Mr. White Hat.”

“Really?” Slug’s questioned popped out. The girl tilted her shaggy, orange-y head back and nodded at him.

“Yeah!” she said, then scrunched her nose again, “Well, not like, a clear blue sky. It needs fluffle-y white clouds, ya know?”

Slug snickered, “Oh, yeah, well. I can see that.”

“He’s very pretty when he’s soft,” she needlessly continued. It was Slug who scrunched his own
nose, ignoring the pull of his drying, dying skin. There was that word again.

Soft.

Why did everybody like soft, anyways?

“My darling, we are going to have to have a talk about that sort of stuff,” he started, moving her closer to the door and unlocking the Manor. He started to push her inside, “But first—”

“Food?”

“You just had food—”

“Well, like, sweet food now!”

“Hmmm,” he considered. This child was going to certainly be a handful. Still, he couldn’t really deny her. They wandered into the main floor, passing the staircase and aiming for the large kitchen area in the back. “We’ll comprise. Have one of those tangerines we got at the local market. They’re only going to last so long.”

“They match my hair!” she tried, as if that explained why she really wanted them. Again, as long as she wanted to eat something healthy—especially since it was packed with Vitamin C for a growing immune system—Slug wasn’t really going to stop her.

“Well, wash up, and have one. That’s sweet, right?”

“Eh, sweet enough,” she consented as she shrugged off the puffy jacket and pom-pom scarf. They fell to a dripping heap on the lush carpeting. Slug tsked her, pointedly looking at the winter apparel. “Uh… Sorry?”

“Why don’t you take your construction paper and White Hat’s books on your way to the kitchen?” he sighed. She nodded sheepishly, and he placed the bags in her hands. Tottering carefully, she made her way with squeaky-wet shoes. Picking up the discarded jacket and scarf, he started upstairs instead. He hung up the damp clothes in the bathroom, then peeled off his own to join the soppy
mess draining down the bathtub.

With a grimace, he inspected his chapped hands and wind-blown face. Slug began pulling out some more bandages—finding his supply unreassuringly lower than expected. Enough ointment for his face, and some sparse dressings. None for his hands. He closed the cabinet, very tired, and a bit more shakily than he meant to.

“Shit… Should have known.”

Sighing, he picked up some dry clothes from his room before making his way toward White Hat’s office. He didn’t particularly want to—but he could try to ask for some of the creature’s otherworldly powers to at least leech away some pain. Their newest housemate was probably going to need help peeling her snack. Best not to get citric acid in his wounds.

As he came to the ornate and beautifully carved birch doors, he paused. Should he knock? The man looked at his hideous hands. The tremors had noticeably increased. He did not want to test the durability of his hands more than he had to.

Rude, but oh well.

“Hey, boss—” began, chiding as he just swung open the door with a well-placed kick. He had no idea that the doors were basically soundproof, because as soon as he was in the open door, his ears were assaulted by a barrage of rage-filled words pouring out of White Hat, leveled at some tweed-suited yes-man.

“AND FOR ANOTHER THIN—” White Hat was spitting mad, and Slug knew spitting mad. When the Elder Being’s glowing eye shot over to him standing, naked hands shaking in his open doorway, all light was immediately extinguished.

White Hat—who had previously been puffed up in some other ridiculous shape—deflated. Extra appendages that had sprouted behind him stopped their furious swarming, settling into an almost wing-like shape. They retreated, being sucked back into his body as it settled into it’s original form.

“Whoa…” Slug breathed, feeling a bit like he’d overstepped a kind of unstated boundary.

“What?” his employer asked, voice like ice. If Slug was a lesser man, he would have flinched. But
no, he stood, struggling to quell the way his hands wouldn’t calm down. The yes-man—the
government official for tax season, the meeting, it apparently hadn’t ended yet—was suddenly
focused on him.

Slug hid his hands behind his back, tried to affect some sort of professional conduct for barging in on
the meeting. “I have returned with your requested… documents. The books are downstairs whenever
you are ready.”

Fuck. Not the smoothest lie, but, it would work. The yes-man seemed a bit queasy at the idea. White
Hat’s face remained impassive at the words. Whether he caught on to the lie, or whether he was
tamping down more uncharacteristic anger—

“And that is all?”

Slug’s hands burned, the twitching and shaking uncontrollable now.

“That’s all. Apologies for the interruption.”

Fuck. He needed to close the door. His face drained of color as the yes-man was still looking at him.
White Hat’s unreadable gaze slid to the other human. “Apology accepted. Mr. Robertson?”

Mr. Robertson, as he was apparently called, did flinch at the glacial words. He spun back to White
Hat and nodded too many times, “Yes, of course, apology accepted.”

Slug seized his chance and grasped the door handle one-handed, pulling the suddenly too-heavy
door closed with a, “Then if you’ll excuse me” without waiting for a dismissal. The door clunked
shut, and his hand dropped. It uselessly twitched along his slacks. Blood was seeping from the cracks
and staining the fabric.

He overexerted himself.

“I fucked up…”

Slug still had to help the child downstairs. He could still fix her a snack.
“You’ve overstay your welcome, Mr. Robertson,” White Hat sounded accusing.

“I am only doing my job, sir, I—”

“You’ve overseen my taxes for the past… how long has it been? How do humans measure their pitiful lives?” he asked, like the man was nothing more than a worm. To White Hat’s lifespan, that’s was the most accurate comparison.

“It’s been almost twenty years,” the man admitted, he rose his briefcase like it was a shield against the Elder Being. “But I swear, sir—”

“I do not want your excuses,” White Hat cut in as he rounded his desk.

“I’m not m-making excuses!”

“Then give me a straight answer,” the pale creature growled, shape morphing in ire, “Why are you sending my contributions toward a shady corporate shell that is funding a war built on pain?”

The man seemed to swallow whatever pride he had left, “I… I don’t have a choice.”

“THERE IS ALWAYS A CHOICE!”

White Hat’s desk cracked behind him and the man jumped. The extra limbs behind him flowed into a vague wing-like silhouette, ruffling, rippling along his physical form, before settling finally. Disappearing from human sight, like they melted into light that emanated from within the Elder Being’s core.

“S-Sir, please…”
“Here’s your choice,” he declared, raising his head to look coolly down at the now sweating human, “You return to your superiors, you let them know that I know what’s going on now—”

“Please, I-I have a family—”

“You tell them they will not use my money to fund their bloodfeud… or,” White Hat stepped forward, lowering the briefcase pointedly.

The man watched the movement, terrified, “O-Or?”

“Or, I will personally become involved… and we don’t want that, now, do we?” there was some sort of promise in those words. Whole nations had been felled on less. Robertson knew the stories. Yet, he never thought he would come to envy Smith, who worked for the Black Hat Manor the next state over—even after the incident of ’89.

The yes-man lived true to his description. He simply nodded.

White Hat smiled—a thing that flickered unnatural on his face between pleased and something else not exactly happy. “Then, I suppose you’re free to leave now. Our business is concluded for the year.”

“You… You probably won’t see me next year,” Robertson said, in a combination of a petty warning and attempt at a guilt trip. White Hat spared him a glance as he looked over the damage to his desk. “After all of this gets fixed.”

“You made your choice, continuously, every time you left knowing—”

“I didn’t. Not for sure,” he persisted. White Hat paused, waiting. The man offered no other words.

While he set to work repairing his shattered desk, he remembered, “You don’t get to act—you cannot choose any path without its own set of consequences. Wrong or right, Mr. Robertson.”

“Sir?”
“I have yet to meet a human who has understood that…” White Hat shook his head, seemingly to realize he was thinking aloud again, “I have no illusions you and your family will suffer after this scandal is revealed, so if you are in need of protection or advice in the coming weeks—”

“Oh, fuck you!”

Mr. Robertson left without further ado, but despite the foul outburst, White Hat would indeed see him again.

Chapter End Notes

Eventful conclusion to this plotline will be immediate in the next chapter.

Also, fun fact: acorns, unless bleached before food production and strained, are poisonous (for humans) to ingest.

Anyways, after such positive response from the last chapter I decide to upload the next part of my fic earlier than I intended. Unfortunately, I have a lot to do today, so... uh, I might upload the next bit tomorrow? Anyways! I will get to replying comments too! Its sort of a personal goal to thank everyone individually because I am just really thankful anyone is participating at all. I feel like I owe it because my writing style and mood will get erratic as the fic has continued? At least, that's how I feel it flows? No one is editing this fic except for me. Uhhhh, it's weird to explain and I hope people don't mind so much if they keep reading.

That being said--Thank you for reading so far!
Slug flexed his digits, working on rebuilding the sinews slowly but surely. After the previous couple of days… well, he was just fortunate it was the weekend. He’d pre-established a lazy routine for the weekend. Half-work day on Saturday, full rest on Sunday. Currently, the tiniest human in White Hat Manor was watching cartoons on his bed, stuffing her little face full of gummy bears.

“Bears are the best,” she was talking to herself as a severely inaccurately depicted forest ranger and a bear argued over picnic baskets.

“Bears aren’t very nice,” he said absently, “Please do not attempt to make a bear-friend.”

“Oh, bears will love me,” she stubbornly argued.

Slug shook his head, resting his hand. A new package of bandages was sitting on his personal desk he kept tucked in the corner of his room. Mostly, he’d use the space for reading or little projects. His personally pinned beetles and butterflies decorated the wall above the lamp and standing magnifying glass.

“I’m sure, my darling,” he agreed, “But they can still be rather mean.”

“I know… mean things always like me…” Her mood dropped and she started watching her cartoons blankly.

He hesitated at her somber words. It was such a switch, and it honestly caused him distress. Standing suddenly, he turned off the television. She didn’t even protest. Thinking quick, he checked out his
window, saying conspiratorially, “Hey, it’s almost May. And if it showered, then that means there is going to be flowers out in the park…”

The child perked up, peering up through wet lashes.

“Can we make flower crowns?”

“We can try,” he said, wondering exactly how one did make a flower crown.

The girl giggled and bounced up, sticky hands outstretched, “Oh, I know how to do it! I can teach you!”

“There we go then! I love learning new things!” he exclaimed, scooping up the grabby ragamuffin.

“That’s why you’re so smart, Sluggy!”

“Well, you aren’t too far behind, kid, knowing all about flower crowns,” he said, “Now, let’s get your hands washed and we can set out, hmm?”

“Mmmhhmmmm!”

...

White Hat was in the kitchen, staring at the redwood-table Slug had commissioned from somewhere. There was a child’s placemat across from him, with broken crayons littering the surface. Vaguely, he thought maybe he should be doing something.

He sat at the head of the table, talon-like hands clasping a glass of water that had long-since gone temperate. The outside world had turned overcast at some point, and the window above the double sink filtered in a sad sort of gray color… like a fine layer of dust that coated his mood.

The sound of the swinging doors startled him out of whatever somberness was settling. He didn’t have to look to know it was Slug, but still, he turned. The human was walking toward the large
fridge, with an air of someone who was well aware there was another presence in the room, but was simply uncaring. Slug was pretending White Hat didn’t exist.

Slug had the child in his arms—she was currently drooling along his shoulder in sleep—and he had… flowers? Yes, he definitely did have a ring of flowers across his head. Mostly white clouds of fluff and petals, bright splashes of yellow entwined, and a few pretty and pink delicate ones dotted nicely along the bundle. The child sported a similar crown, but with a few drooping purple petals all around.

White Hat stared, and Slug was soon sitting before him. He pulled out another ring from his coat and tossed it toward the Elder Being. White Hat was now focused on the woven ring of spring flora, confused. It stood out like a halo on the darkened wood.

“She insisted everyone have one,” Slug said, venom not quite in his voice, but he was hushed.

“I—” White Hat gingerly clasped his hand over the flowers, feeling the silky petal, the dewy texture sinking through his gloves, “What are they?”

“The flowers? Well, we got lucky and found some candytuft. They only bloom twice a year. I have yellow anemone, the kid wanted some irises, and we also have… I think those ones are called bloodroot—the ones that look like white daisies—and we picked some sweet crabapple blossoms,” Slug was pointing at each one carefully. How exactly he knew what each flower was—White Hat found himself awed once again.

“I heard that flowers have meanings,” White Hat said. He didn’t quite know where to place the crown. His hat might break the delicate stems if he tried to slip it on… and that was something he definitely decided he did not want to do. He didn’t want to break anything fragile, any gift, these humans might give him.

Slug brought his bandaged hands back to his side of the table, shifting the sleeping child more securely across his chest, “Yeah. The Victorian Era communicated using bouquets… At least, that’s what I have heard before.”

“I remember that time, yes.”

“I never learned the meanings,” Slug said, conversation strangely tranquil, “Do you know any?”
White Hat felt just the ghost of a smile as he continued to stare at crown, “I’m afraid not.”

“No?”

“No… no one ever gave me flowers before,” he explained, glancing up. The scientist blinked. He scoffed, resting his cheek on top of the shabby orange head of the little girl.

“Yeah, well, technically, you have the kid to thank,” he said with a sniff. He gave a slight sneeze as he inhaled pollen accidentally. It was well controlled to not wake up the child, and White Hat hid another smile by tilting the brim of his top hat down.

“I suppose when she wakes, I will have to…”

Slug didn’t really respond. He just swiped under his reconstructed nose with the back of his hand. The bandages were dirty, coming undone. White Hat was staring at them. The tremble was near imperceptible… but still, he did not need his second sight to see the toll this was taking on his employee.

“Doctor,” he began, like speaking to a spooked animal. Slug followed his sight. He left the hand on the little girl’s back, almost daring. “Is this a wise choice?”

“What choice are you implying?”

“Keeping the child.”

“She has nowhere else to go,” Slug said, firm. White Hat considered moving to help, but the way the man clung onto the small human…

“I have not seen your hands shake so much since—” White Hat paused, thinking if he ever noticed any weakness in the doctor before him. It was near impossible to recall accurately. Sometimes he seemed to vibrate in anger, but mostly, he was a stoic and tough pillar that exemplified human determination.

Slug placed his hand over the little ear not pressed against his body, as his voice raised with his
temper, “Are you suggesting I have not adequately preformed the duties of my job description?”

“No, of course not,” White Hat responded, “I am concerned about the strain this is putting on your physical body… not to mention—”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Did you not come to me the other night because—”

“Oh, so we’re gonna talk about it, now?” Slug asked, seizing his chance to change the subject. White Hat leveled him a stern look.

“I can only assume you wish to beleaguer my resolution with Mr. Robertson.”

“Ohhh, boy, White Hat—let me tell you,” the doctor started to lean back, smirking with a sort of wicked enjoyment. White Hat felt himself growing sour as the man continued with a sickeningly smug tone, “You are an absolute hypocrite. That fucker ran out of here. Nearly bowled me over. I can’t even tell you how badly you crushed him. That was the worst—”

“Enough, Dr. Slug,” White Hat cut through—that icy tone back. Slug’s hands twitched, but his eyes stayed trained on the glint in White Hat’s monocle.

“You’re supposed to be the symbol of goodness that even Heroes look up to.”

“I am.”

Slug turned his face away, “Well then I guess humanity is fucked.”

“Ever since I have employed you, you constantly question my decisions,” White Hat said exasperated, “So tell me, in my situation, what would you have done differently?”

Slug shrugged.
“Then why do you feel the need to berate me?”

“Hey, there’s always a Judas,” the doctor joked, but it fell flat. White Hat was still waiting for an actual answer. Annoyed, Slug took off his flower crown, “Look, if I had anyone else to go to, I would have. You were the last option in a very limited list. And, I get it, we’ve been—” the doctor struggled for words, “Misery makes for strange bedfellows. It does. But see it from my perspective, Jesu Christo…”

“I am.”

“No, you’re not,” Slug shot back. He sat up straighter, brows coming into a deep V. His sight skipped over the impassivity of White Hat’s visage. “You can’t possibly understand. You’re not human. You’re not even from this world—I don’t care how long you’ve been here… You can’t understand how frantic our lives are… You can blink and, suddenly, I’m gone. The whole world’s gone—”

“I wouldn’t let that happen.”

“Why?” Slug demanded, voice cracking, “It’s going to end anyway! We have a limited time—all humans have an expiration date—you know that, right?”

“I do.”

“Then why do you… why are you so cold?”

White Hat blinked, he opened his mouth to say something, but found that there was no rebuttal. He stopped, thinking about it. The air around them was cool, the light was gray, and the smell of dying florals lingered on his fingertips.

“You’re just going through the motions, White Hat,” Slug said, a great sigh escaping him. He stood, chair slightly squeaking across the tiles in the tense atmosphere. “And I won’t stand by and let you think that you’re above it all. You have no idea what it’s like to be trapped by circumstance.”

White Hat wanted to stand, but his legs felt weak as that mounting pressure of destiny hit him again.
He glared up on the human, not quite understanding why the words were being swallowed into the empty space in his chest. “I may not be human, Slug,” White Hat found himself hissing, voice a well of something unfathomable, and the human went stock still. “But I understand better than anything else that every creature has to make a decision at some point. You either stay trapped or—”

The Elder Being stopped when he saw how large the human’s eyes were growing. Suddenly, he felt his physical image was shifting, accommodating and expanding. He concentrated hard on quelling his body before he caused damage to anyone or anything around him. The flowers lay crushed under his palm.

A wave of guilt hit him…

“You’re right,” he admitted, softly, staring at the destroyed flowers. “I’m not human…”

“White Hat…?”

“That’s how I know—” his voice shook the tiniest bit, a melancholy smile growing, “I know you all have such potential. So many choices. I have never seen a world so… so full of growth. You’re not limited… not really. Not like I was—I am.”

Slug remained silent.

“I think I envy you,” the Elder Being realized.

“Don’t,” the doctor sighed. He looked at the little girl.

“No, I do,” he said, tune turning confessional.

The man just laughed, imploring White Hat to understand, “You shouldn’t. Given the choice between good and evil, a human will choose what is more self-serving. You can’t really fault anyone for that, but… don’t envy us. It’s horrible. It is so, so horrible. Trust me, I’ve chosen survival over the moral high ground more times than I can count.”

The doctor’s hands were slipping, tremor returning in his exhaustion.
White Hat stood, offering his arms for the sleeping child. Slug hesitated, but he laid her against the Elder Being’s chest carefully. White Hat just nodded when she was secure. The bandaged hands still rested on her little head. “You know… your injuries suggest otherwise.”

Slug snorted, withdrawing his comforting touch on the child. White Hat thought how it was not fair. The doctor needed kindness just as much as this lost little human.

“While I confess that this situation has been enlightening for me—” the Elder Being started.

“Assaulting the tax guy or… understanding the little darling here?”

“Uh, mainly the child,” White Hat clarified, “I would much prefer we forget that other particular piece of business.”

Slug slowly began peeling off his bandages as he walked over to the sink. White Hat followed, having nothing else to truly do. “Hey, you’re the boss. But… now that you have humans living with you, we’re gonna have to work out your issues with, ya know, everything.”

“Yes, it would seem so,” White Hat said, looking at the child in thought.

Slug smiled secretly as he carefully began washing his hands of dirt, and therefore any germs, “Don’t worry, she’s tuckered out. Sugar crash.”

“She needs her parents, doctor,” White Hat blurted out. Slug’s hands spasmed. He shot a look at the Elder Being. The light in his dark brown eyes was more horrified by the suggestion than offended.

“No.”

“Surely, they are out there somewhere, searching,” he tried to reason.

“They can search all they want—it’s not happening!” he snapped. White Hat sent him a confused look. He thought they had just been through the rough part of the issues concerning human lives. “I
thought you would understand that children—these tiny, drunk human miniatures that are entirely too trusting—need the most protecting.”

White Hat tilted his head, “Even from their parents?”

“Especially from their parents!” he asserted. He leaned against the sink on his forearms. Blood was running down the drain. White Hat’s eyebrows lowered in concern.

“I would think that biological imperatives—”

“I’m the scientist here, White Hat,” he cut off, “And even I know that Nature v. Nurture argument is bullshit.” He started drying his hands on a white dish towel. It was stained with rust-colored smudges by the time he was finished. “Again, you’re just going to have to trust me here… sometimes the biological connection is more harmful than helpful.”

White Hat was transferring the little girl into Slug’s waiting hands without thought. It was just a natural movement they worked out together, no words exchanged. They had a synchronicity that appeared from deep within their cores. He thought about the words his doctor was saying. So careful, so thoughtful.

“I consider Black Hat my brother.”

Slug looked up into the Elder Being’s only visible eye.

“I am certain I love him. I am certain I would fight for his continued existence… even if he might not do the same. Knowing his character, I don’t think he ever would. As much as he tried to fight it, he wants to end me as much as I try to subdue him.”

Slug gave him a self-satisfied smile, “Well, there you go. My point exactly.”

White Hat could recognize when he lost. Graciously, he tipped his hat. Slug’s face smoothed out, as he was distracted by the child starting to rouse. He hid his chapped hands from the girl as she glanced around to see they were in the kitchen. Lying her head back down, she smiled up at White Hat.
“Hi…”

“Hello… darling,” he finally said, leaning down to get a closer look at the sleepy face. It felt… good. He smiled. She patted his mouth, a sort of shining pride in her eyes.

“You did it! Gen-you-ine,” she murmured. Slug let out a little laugh, and it rumbled across the child. She burrowed into his warm coat like they shared a secret. White Hat felt it was somehow including him.

That felt good too.

“Looks like we all had a trying day,” Slug said, “Why don’t we finish your cartoons and then I’ll make us a nice supper before bed?”

“Yeah, okay,” she agreed. She took off her flower crown and held it aloft. White Hat took it with a renewed gentleness. He was nearly flawless as he smiled, entranced by how much he was learning in the presence of his—well, of the—two humans of his Manor.

Slowly, he was remembering the purpose of his place here.

As Slug started excusing himself and the child, White Hat called out, catching the man as he lingered by the swinging doors. “Doctor, please remember to get enough rest… I do worry about you.”

The doctor didn’t catch his eyes, but he nodded his bandaged head. Then he was gone, and White Hat was alone once more.

…”

“This is sooooooooo duuuuuuumb, Sluggy!” the child whined.

They were sitting on a couch in an office way out in the middle of the city proper. Not that Slug minded if they stayed closer to White Hat Manor but… he didn’t quite trust someone would not recognize the little child and—Lord forbid—take her back to her parents.
Shit. That sounded a bit too much like kidnapping.

Slug sighed, he patted her little head, “Well, sweetheart, it’s just a precaution.”

“But I’m fiiiiiiiiineeeeee,” she continued, little body going lax and slipping down the waiting room’s underpadded chair. He didn’t bother pulling her back up, knowing she was using a dead weight tactic. She melted onto the floor, pouting further. “Sluuuuuuuuuuuggggyyyyyyyyy…!”

“Hey, what did I say in the taxi?” he reminded her as she started to whine even louder, gaining the attention of other patients and staff members. The girl rolled on the floor until her face was staring at Slug’s.

“That you’d get me that cool jacket we saw at the craft store,” she said.

Slug raised a brow, expectantly. “IIIIIIIIffff…?”

“If I was good when we went on our errands,” she said, her tongue sticking out at the extension of his promise.

“And are you being good?”

“Yes!”

Slug tried not to laugh at her cheeky little chirp. She honestly sounded like if she said it, she’d get away with anything. With her big tooth-gaped smile and ruddy, chubby cheeks, he might have just given in. But, no, he had to be strong—play the long game so she grew up a decent person with a better chance than… well.

Did it really need to be said?

“Uh, Clementine… Hab-Haberdashery?” a confused voice called across the waiting room.
Slug looked up, raising a hand to let the confused staff member know that it referred to them. He stood up, offering his hand to the girl. She stared, just as confused, but took his hand with the trust that can only come from a child who still believed that the adults in her life must know better than her. “Don’t worry, darling, it’s just your pretend name for today.”

The staff waved the pair into a winding hallway, exam rooms on either side as they followed him. She seemed just fine, and Slug only paid half attention to the man guiding him and attempting small-talk. The girl looked up, eyes burning curiously.

“What’s a… a haba-das—dastard-lee?” she questioned as she tugged Slug’s arm to get him to stoop closer to her cupped mouth.

“It’s a place where they make hats.”

Her little eyes lit up. Slug was smiling as she giggled. Smart girl.

“Here you are, sir,” the staff member opened a door. The girl squealed when a brightly colored room was revealed—full of coloring books, plush toys, and all sort of goodies. It held comfy looking couches and a full-functional playhouse for children. The staff member chortled at the child’s excitement, handing a clipboard to Slug. She bounced on her toes looking up at the two men, and then the room.

“Go on, sweetie. Have fun for a moment,” Slug said, only sparing her the briefest look as he waved the clipboard toward the inside of the room. She did not have to be told twice. Taking off like a bottle rocket, she zoomed all over, gathering up toys and tossing them about as she cackled in joy.

“Enthusiastic little booger you got there,” the staff member noted. He was tanned, hair thick and wavy, with an accent that belied a different country of origin.

“Eu sei…” he responded, more in automation as he looked over the paperwork.

The staff member’s brows shot up, and he let out a slight happy gasp, “Brasilerio?”

“Sim,” he nodded, realizing he’d slipped into his native dialect when he heard the man’s accent.
“Minha amiga!” the staff member said giving his shoulder a friendly push, “Do not worry. The doctors here are all wonderful. Experienced, understanding. Your daughter will get all the help she needs. You do not have to hide a thing, I promise. No biases here.”

Slug gave the man an uneasy smile, trying to appear relieved. “Obrigado. That is good to hear. It’s been… Just, thank you.”

“Oh, no, no. Sem problemas, sir,” he said. He left Slug with one more clap on the shoulder, and made his way toward the nurse station. The bandaged man watched him go, then closed the door to the room as much as he could allow while he sat down to finish the paperwork.

That was… an unexpected exchange.

Still, it calmed any meddling thoughts that this excursion wasn’t a good idea.

“Okay, darling,” Slug called, and the girl trotted over, happily squeezing a teddy bear, “We’re gonna meet… a new friend. You can play as much as you want here, but she might ask you some questions. That’s just what she likes to do. It’s how she’ll get to know us better.”

The little girl looked at Slug, all wide eyes and windswept orange hair, and it hurt how much she trusted him. “Kay… I’ll be good, and then I get my jacket?”

Slug nodded. She smiled and placed the bear in his lap. He felt trapped, like a goddamn manipulative lying bastard. This was, hopefully, for the best. Had to remind himself that he was playing the long game…

Damn it. This was going to be a tough hour.

…Except…

They only lasted 30 minutes before tables were flipped and stuffed animals were ripped open. Granted, the physiatrist was the one losing her shit, not so much the little girl hanging on to Slug’s arm in confusion. He sighed, shaking his head.
Doing the only thing he could, he shooed her to an undestroyed corner to privately pull the woman aside. She was waving her arms back and forth, slinging all kinds of accusations at him under her breath.

“Do you have any idea what position this puts me in?!” she rhetorically asked.

“I don’t see an imposition,” Slug continued to play dumb.

“You’re not her legal guardian!”

“I kind of am,” he said, one shoulder shrugging.

“You lied on official paperwork!”

“I don’t think I did,” the scientist continued on, blasé as he checked his bandages.

“Sir, you cannot play dumb with me,” she finally decided, coming to a stern relaxation, arms fisted at her sides. Slug looked up, ready to quip when she followed through, “I know your real identity. I know who you work for. I do not know why you assumed you could just… waltz in here with a child that clearly is not yours.”

“I assure you, madam, I have no—”

“As one doctor to another, extend me the curtesy of a little brain power.”

Well. Shit.

Shit on a stick.

“I—” Slug began, then looked over at girl re-stuffing the teddy bear with a kind of naïve assurance that it could be held together with band-aids, “Look, she needs help and I… I’m not trained for that.”
The psychiatrist crossed her arms, one hip jutting out as she stared him down, “And I am not going to involve myself with a Villain living under a Super-Being’s roof.”

“It’s not about me—” Slug lashed out, then reigned it back in, trying to remain calm at the rapidly spiraling situation, but the woman stopped him.

“Dr. Slug, I cannot in good conscious let this farce continue,” she warned.Slug felt whatever hair was left on the back of his neck rise at the coming threat.

“Farce?”

“I’ve seen too many of the civilian causalities between Heroes and Villains…”

Slug kept his arms at his sides, breathing steadily, “What I am is none of your concern. What should be your concern is the child. She has nightmares, she shows symptoms of PTSD, and more importantly she—”

“She trusts you… right?” the woman finished. Slug placed his hands in his pockets, trying to seem casual. “Tell me again how this isn’t about you.”

“Ya know, I am really starting to not like this whole ‘talk therapy’ thing people keep trying to drag me into,” he deflected, fingers curling.

“You brought her here, hoping someone would catch you—”

“You’re implying I’m doing something wrong.”

“Aren’t you? A traumatized child living in a Manor of entirely alien being and possibly ex-but-maybe-not-no-one-knows Villain? You couldn’t have thought this would go unnoticed. Such a household is not proper for a child.”

“I really am thinking I’ve been lied to,” Slug said with fake disappointment, “You’re supposed to be open-minded and understanding, but, I hear a lot of bias in your voice.”
“We will see if your bias holds up when I contact the authorities,” she declared.

Slug tsked, hands turned to a fist in his pockets, “Yeah, see, no… I don’t like that.”

“You don’t have to—” the woman gurgled in surprise when Slug struck quickly. A hypodermic needle thrust with swift precision into the side of her neck. He shushed her as he gently laid her along the couch.

He glanced up to see the child duct-typing the bear better.

“Good job, kiddo,” he exclaimed, slipping the needle back into his pocket. She glanced up, smiling, before noticing her sleepy new ‘friend.’

“Uhhh, Sluggy…?”

“Her temper-tantrum really tired her out,” he explained, while motioning for the child to move closer, “So, we’re just gonna say goodbye and finish our errands, yeah?”

“My jacket?” she asked, placing the re-stuffed, taped bear under the psychiatrist’s arm.

“Uh, well, sweetie. We gotta go home and check on White Hat first…” he hedged. She sighed, patting the bear on the head. Her somber expression full of guilt.

“I was bad, huh?”

He took a breath and kneeled, cupping her cheeks. Slug pushed back the tears leaking out. “No, my darling. You weren’t the bad one.”

...
White Hat, until this outburst, had spent most of the day learning how to email. Slug insisted on it. He gave up part way and watched cat videos on this website where people uploaded their own content. All he learned was that cats loved Roombas and he wanted both, in large quantities, all over the Manor. They were adorable.

He was uncertain when Slug returned to the Manor, as he took the child on a secretive errand. Yet, at some point, the doctor paged him from the lab down stairs. He calmly asked for some kind of assistance. Being the stellar employer, he was, he agreed, and walked down to the lab. He passed kitchen only briefly to see the little girl munching on a candy bar. She assured him with a look that didn’t quite seem correct that Slug said she could eat chocolate before dinner.

So, when he finally did enter the lab, it was a bit shocking to be assaulted by the doctor—grabbing his lapels and declaring desperately he had done something wrong.

“Uh,” the Elder Being gracefully said, hands coming up, and hesitating to pry Slug off his trench coat, “I was aware before employing you that had done some… bad… things.”

Slug gave a shake of his head, “No, no, this is a recent bad thing.”

“Oh! Was it allowing candy before dinner?”

“What?” Slug let go of White Hat, brows doing a strange dance of confusion and irritation, “No, that’s not—Why would I—Who—” He paused, pointing at White Hat with determination, “If I go upstairs to a hyper active child with chocolate on her face, you’re going to have to—Oh! Never mind, that’s the least of our worries.”

“I am thoroughly confused, doctor,” White Hat stated. Slug sighed and rubbed his temples. He began pacing in front of the pale being, gathering either his wits or his courage. It was hard to tell.

“I… maaay have… incapacitated a child psychiatrist.”

White Hat blinked. Profusely. “I’m sorry… what?”

“I stabbed a person with a hypodermic needle filled with patented blended of horse tranqs and other
sedatives,” he explained. White Hat opened his mouth to say anything, but only squeaked in a surprised response. “If you wanna know why I did it—"

Another squeak.

“Right, probably not important, but she deserved it.”

A third squeak.

“Okay, well, not  _deserved_ -deserved it. Partially deserved it.”

An even squeakier squeak.

“Scratch that, for your piece of mind she was a _real_ bitch.”

“_Dr. Slug!_”

“I panicked, alright?!” he cried, running his hands over his bandages and what was left of his black hair. “She _knew who I was._ People don’t _know who I am_—and because of that she was going to—” Slug started to get dizzy, and White Hat had to catch him, feeling the trembling in his arms. The touch seemed to alleviate the man, who looked up with red-rimmed eyes. “They’re gonna try to take her away. You have to promise me you won’t let that happen.”

White Hat was struck by how distraught the doctor was. Even when they first met, Dr. Slug had remained cool and collected. Deadly. Certain. He’d ripped right into—

“White Hat,” Slug sharply focused him, grabbing onto to either side of the Elder Being’s hat brim. He was coming back to himself, staring into the impeccable, emotionless pale face, “I won’t ask anything of you except this. Just give me this. We _can’t_ let her go. They’ll _destroy_ her.”

“Who…? Who will?”

Slug’s mouth part, chapped lips cracking. He didn’t seem to have an accurate answer. He just let go
of his boss’ hat. Calming down, he shook his head. “I don’t know. They just will… It’s not safe.”

“Is this…” White Hat watched the man collect himself slowly, “…is this another thing I am just supposed to trust you on?”

Slug wouldn’t look at him. The only thing he did was nod, head looking heavy.

White Hat just sighed. “Alright then. I’ll trust your judgement.”

…

The “surprise” visit by CPS was not a surprise at all. Slug warned White Hat as soon as the Elder Being stepped into the kitchen on Wednesday morning. The child was happily eating a rainbow-colored cereal—but, with orange juice instead of milk. She claimed it tasted better that way. White Hat cocked his head to the side. Slug just gave him a shrug.

“They’ll be here for a meeting around 1:30,” was his exact words.

“Alright,” he said.

“I still haven’t decided what to do…” he muttered. White Hat gave him a smile, finding it easier every day to practice the expression while in the doctor’s presence.

“We’ll figure it out. Just be honest,” he offered.

“Honesty is the best policy!” the child agreed, though without really knowing what was being talked about. Slug groaned, swirling his spoon in his own cereal—boring little yellow circles with low fat milk. He was a very health conscious human.

White Hat decided to emulate him. The humans finished eating first.

Slug spent most of the day in the lab, the child working on something at a desk not far from his. White Hat felt the need to hover over them. Only through sheer will power did he continue on like it
was any other day.

And then…

The doorbell.

Slug stopped working, and the little girl colored on without a care. White Hat went to answer the door and—

“Mr. Robertson,” he said, flabbergasted.

“White Hat,” the government official greeted with too wide a smile.

Slug stood in the hallway, hands rubbing his temples again.

“Well… shit.”

...

They all sat at the kitchen table. Mr. Robertson was leveling file after file on the redwood. Slug remained less than impressed. White Hat was sorting through the stacks, eyes scanning through redacted passages for want of anything else to do. The child was making paper airplanes and tossing them at the general direction of the ex-tax man’s head.

“So, clearly, you see why I was called in.”

“No, not really,” Slug drawled, “By working with White Hat I have official pardons.”

“Thus, the redactions, I know,” Mr. Robertson conceded. Slug placed his clasped hands on the table. The newly appointed CPS agent sneered and backed up, staring pointedly at the bandaged fingers. The doctor only paused briefly.
“So, what else could you possibly be here for?”

“Investigation of an incident,” he said, forced placidity in his tone.

Slug gave a scoff, lounging back, “Psh! I can assure you there was no incident involv—”

“And relocation of a displayed child,” he finished.

“Like hell you’re taking her!” Slug burst, jumping to his feet. The child stopped tossing papers, gasping. She made a move to get closer to him, standing up on her chair, but Mr. Robertson grasped her little forearm, nearly yanking her to the floor.

“As far as the state is concerned, neither of you could possibly be her biological care giver,” he started, voice turning smarmy. The child was staring at Slug, pulling against the other man’s hold desperately. White Hat tried to calm her, making the doctor see red.

Slug’s hands fisted for a second before he pointed at the government man, caustically calling him out, “You don’t get to take this out on her because White Hat got snippy with you for being a limp-dicked weasel!”

“You will refrain from pointing your diseased—”

“Diseased?!”

“That’s mean!” the girl shouted in defense of the doctor.

There was anarchy as the child started kicking in her chair. Mr. Robertson was struggling to maintain her. Slug felt himself shaking, shoulders raised, and arms tightly hidden at his sides. White Hat was looking between the two, knowing he had to fix this somehow.

“Mr. Robertson, please,” White Hat tried, hand over where his heart should be, “I know that I put you in an imposition, but I… I was hurt by the way I had been used. I did not consider your feelings, or your life. It probably wasn’t fair—”
“Fair?!” the man snapped. He stood, gripping the child tighter and yanking her even closer.

“Hey!”

“You want to talk about fair when you are harboring an innocent child knowing full well she’s within breathing range of this despicable piece of human garbage?!”

“I said HEY—” the girl wrapped her other arm around Mr. Robertson’s, gaining leverage. The man continued ranting like it was no big deal.

“You blamed me for doing my **perfectly legal** job while playing refuge to a known **mercenary**, human **trafficker**, drug runner—drug super genius!” his voice cracked wildly with each accusation, and Slug remained standing, immobile with such a dedicated face, “The shit this guy has done, White Hat?! Seriously?! You didn’t want us to create and send weapons to an underfunded army so they could fight for democracy—yet you’re just gonna let the mind behind more than half the death machines to come out of the modern era eat at your goddamn dinner table?! He doesn’t get even get a slap on the wrist?! What—you wanna catch **leprosy**?!”

“Alright! That’s it you little shit!” Slug was reaching into his back pocket, but White Hat grabbed him, trying to keep him from doing something rash.

The child didn’t understand the words, but she knew the tone. With an audible huffing and puffing, she pulled herself up on Robertson’s forearm. He stumbled a bit in surprise at the sudden weight shift. Although she was tiny, she was determined, and sank whatever teeth she had left into the meat of his upper arm. He yelped, trying to shake her loose. She just clamped like a bulldog, her jaw tight.

“Get off you little—”

“**Enough!**”

White Hat grasped the man before he could hit the child. She popped off in a backwards arch, butt hitting the floor with a soft thud. She scrambled to her feet and ran into Slug’s opening arms. He held her tightly, glaring at the bastard. White Hat wanted to shake him like he did to the unsuspecting child. Instead, he straightened the CPS agent out, keeping one talon-like hand curled about his shoulder tightly.
“You come into my Manor—!” he started, then shook off his indignation, “You may not like it, but I have forgiven Dr. Slug. I have had him pardoned, officially. He is to be treated like any man on the street—with acceptance and understanding that he still human. You know nothing of his struggles, you know nothing of the child and her struggles. I have placed my trust in the good doctor that he has made the right decision to care for her… Whether you like it is none of your concern. I have offered my apologies, and services, but your pride seems to be confusing your new job with your old one. If I was in your shoes, I would consider myself lucky to still be employed after angering me so thoroughly.”

The man was breathing harshly, “Y-You’re not human.”

“I’m not, no,” he agreed, extra sight tingling as he looked the man up and down, “But I do not envy the sentiment if you are to be an exemplary human ideal, Mr. Robertson.” The man appeared cowed, and White Hat let go of him, superior. “Now, if you would so kindly finish your investigation with the air of professionalism…”

The rest of the time spent in the CPS agent’s gaze passed quick and without further incident.

As Robertson was leaving, White Hat was cool, and Slug more than smug. The man sighed. He had papers to process. He hoped to never encounter the pallid creature ever again—much less the devious doctor in his employ.

“Alright, so, last question I guess…” his back was to the front door, and he stared at his notebook, “I never got her name.”

“Err—” Slug said. Robertson glanced up to see him looking at White Hat.

White Hat just shrugged, “Names are ephemeral.”

“Riiiiight,” he said, feeling dumb for expecting a being who so casually answered to colored articles of clothing. Like that was fucking normal. “But I still need to input something—"

“Clementia!” the child interrupted. The adults all peered down at her.
“I… huh?” Robertson blinked.

“My name! It’s Clementia.”

“That—That’s not a real name,” he stupidly said. Slug was glaring at him, and White Hat just crossed his arms. Right. Of course. Look who he was talking to. “Alright. Clementia. Nice to meet you, Clementia. Have fun at this freak house for the rest of your life.”

“Oh, I will. BYE.” The tiny child gave him a toothy smile—and he was slightly taken aback—then the door slammed against his nosey, mean face.

Slug stood there proud, as White Hat calmly pulled her away from the door. He tried to explain how rude that was. She didn’t care. Just grabbed both of them by the hands to raise them all in triumph.

“GOOD ALWAYS PREVAILS OVER EVIL! THE POWER OF LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP!”

White Hat was proud, liking the sound of that, while Slug took one for team Villain and simply replied, “Yeah, sure. Let’s go with that for today.”

...

“What are you looking at, my dear?” White Hat questioned as he peered over Clem’s shoulder. Her unicorn hoodie covered her rainbow hair snugly. The teenager rose a ratty children’s book fondly. But, of course, there was a sparkly magical creature adorning the sticky cover.

“Oh, it’s my first reading book,” she said. White Hat blinked, then smiled.

“I see. When did we get this?” he inquired, sitting with her on the floor of her bedroom. There were boxes of stuff neatly piled around her, and the vacuum lay cooling in the corner. She must have been doing some Spring Cleaning.

“Ya know,” Clem said slowly, looking up at the ceiling like it had answers, “I don’t really remember. I just know it was not long after Sluggy brought me home. He was still wearing bandages then… I know because they’d get caught on the pages every now and again.”
White Hat hummed, recalling that particularly difficult time for the Manor and its occupants.

“Did you know he had only been working for me for about a year? When he took you in, I mean,” the Elder Being said. Clementia tapped the book on her knee, excited by learning something new about their ever-mysterious doctor.

“Nu-uh, he never told me that,” she said.

“Indeed, my darling,” he nodded, a bit nostalgic.

She hid her face behind her book, giggling, “Ah, come on…! You guys haven’t called me that in —psh! Ages!”

“It has been a while,” he said, smiling wide, “But it was always my favorite name for you, you know. Especially when our good doctor said it.”

“Hmm, I dunno, I’m really rocking Clementia.”

“I think you had meant to say ‘Clementine’ but,” White Hat thought aloud, and the girl pulled at her dyed bangs with a contemplative face, “Yes. Clementia is a good name.”

“Although, I don’t mind hearing ‘darling’ every now and again,” she admitted. White Hat smiled. She vaguely thought it had grown genuine over the years.

“Any time, my darling.”

She was giggling. Then, with an excited gasp, hugged the book to her chest. “Oh! I know! Let’s have Sluggy read to us from my unicorn book one last time!”

“A last time?” White Hat said, dusting himself off before offering the girl a hand.
“Yeah,” Clem said with a wistful little sigh, “I really loved this book… but I’m almost 18 now. It’s time to retire it.” She swiped a hand along the beloved cover, looking at White Hat, “I think it might do some other little ragamuffin good. I remember feeling so loved whenever Sluggy would cuddle up beside me and just read—” Clementia blushed, stopping herself. White Hat pinched at her cheeks, for old times’ sake.

“Whiiiiiiiteeeeee Haaaaaaaataaat…!”

So. Damn. Adorable.

Kittens on Roombas adorable.

Chapter End Notes

I am very wordy and I hope no one minds. Y’all just read 26 pages.

Thank you for reading!
Let Us Return To The Present Predicament

Chapter Notes

Back in current times. Bit of world building.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Five: Let Us Return To The Present Predicament

As always, Slug’s alarm was blaring.

It was Friday, 5 AM. He groaned, but rolled out of bed. He hit the off button, silencing the siren themed sound. It sucked, but, he had work to do. Rolling his head and stretching his shoulders, Slug stood. His work-out attire was in the bathroom, where he splashed some cold water on his face and slathered his toothbrush in minty-homemade paste. Clem had been trying Pinterest Projects again and replaced their “chemically” store bought stuff. He tried to tell her that everything was made up of chemicals—but she was insistent.

Next, he proceeded to head out for a jog around the park. He took 0.5.0. with him, who lumbered on all fours after him, growling. It was a truly great motivator and caused anyone in his path to scramble up the trees. All except Alfrid, the local drunk who always rooted for the grape colored terror to one day catch Slug for good. Too bad he designed the bear to be an insectivore.

After that, they proceeded home, 0.5.0. spraying itself off with the hose outside while the doctor took a more traditional shower—depending on how sweaty he was feeling. Then, he carefully applied ointment to any parts of his body he was feeling were too sore or chapped. He dressed—red turtleneck that was soft as sin and a pair of beige slacks with his boots. All topped with his off white, water-proof, acid-proof, fire-proof lab coat and a thick set of rubber gloves (purple or yellow, depending).

The bag and goggles, though. They were special. The sandwich bag wasn’t really a sandwich bag—it retained it’s rectangle shape while perched over his head… his visible disfigurement. It kept the sun and other elements away from his now sensitive face, while the goggles worked to alleviate the growing issues with his dried, old eyes. He could still see, but he wasn’t afraid to experiment with lasers and cybernetic inputs if it came to that. However, the goggles were doing a good enough job so far. Didn’t mean he didn’t have back up plans.

With his day started, he then read over client emails, schedules, White Hat’s planner, Clementia’s
educational curriculum, and the Manor’s growing list of upkeep. Taking all of that into account, he set up everyone’s course for the day… normally while making breakfast.

Today was lemon-poppy seed French toast sticks with cream cheese icing. A bit indulgent, but it was Friday and everyone was going to need the calories to stay on track for a lazy weekend—Clem wanted to go see some new blockbuster, and White Hat was doing that thing where he wanted to experience more human social norms. Movies at the mega mall should be good enough.

0.5.0. had come in carrying a sleepy Clementia. She rubbed at her eyes, still in pajamas—a light blue tank top that said, ‘Are you kitten meow?’ paired with black boxers covered in little white bowler hats. One fuzzy knee-high rainbow sock was still on coupled by a plain white ankle sock with a hole on her big toe. Her multi-colored hair was smooshed on one side, part of her long bedtime braid tangled in a worn scrunchy.

It would take her a few moments to realize where she was—and at 7:13 exactly, exclaimed, “Morning, Sluggy!”

“Good morning, Sleeping Beauty.”

“The fairest in all the land—” she declared, banging her fork and knife along the breakfast nook, “Woken by the smell of delicious, delicious French toast!”

“Oh, not by kiss of a handsome prince?” Slug teased, placing down her plate piled high and swimming in the creamy sauce. She laughed, kicking the foot with the rainbow sock up onto the counter.

“C’mon, doc, don’t be so heteronormative!”

Slug just rose his hands in a ‘Whatever’ gesture, but the teen was too busy digging into her helping of breakfast. 0.5.0. patted at a corner where a cobweb had grown overnight. Slug felt a bit bad, bugs and him had a long and loving history, but eh. Well, that was the circle of life… that, he, you know, created specifically so the monstrous Manor guard dog wouldn’t eat them.

“So, when do you think White Hat will wake up?” Clem managed to ask between slurps of food.

Slug checked his watch, frowning, “Well, if he’s not up in the next hour, I’ll have to wake him
again. He’s got a video-conference call with that Super Group in Japan.”

“Ja—Japan?! Are we gonna go to Japan one of these days?!” she asked, chunks of poppy seeded bread littering the counter before her in excitement. Slug handed her a wetted paper towel, goggles showing he was displeased. “Sorry, sorry! That’s just so cool! I’ve been practicing kanji and—”

“It’s just a conference call,” he restated.

Clementia blew a raspberry, “But that’s probably because they wanna formally invite him overseas, right? Like, Japan’s culture is incredibly formal!”

“Did you get this from your culture and language studies, or—” Slug started, cutting up his own food pointedly, “—is if from your fascination of BL manga and anime?”

Clem blinked at him, horrified.

“What? I have access to the internet too.”

“What’s your favorite OTP?”

“Duh, Hannigram.”

“Lies! I bet you were a total Trekker as a wide-eyed baby-Slug!”

Their bantering was cut short as White Hat strolled in, pleasantly humming. His grin widened when he saw his favorite humans enjoying a proper carbo-loaded breakfast. He joined them, a jaunty greeting of, “Well, good morning, everyone!” The bear in the corner growled, blubbing over to nudge at Clementia’s elbow. White Hat chuckled and gave it a pat (it swiped at him, but both remained unfazed by the other’s attitude).

“Good morning, White Hat!” Clem said. She offered him a bite of her French toast stick. He took a bite—those sharp canines piercing through the sugar soaked bread too easy.
“Mm,” he said, wiping carefully along his mouth for any spare droplets of cream cheese, “That is very sweet. I like it. I do believe sweet things are my favorite.”

“Well, obviously, since I am the sweetest,” Clementia declared, stuffing her face.

Slug shook his head, bring a bite of food under his bag to chew without comment. White Hat merely chuckled, agreeing in his ever-pleasant way when dealing with her. “And what are we doing today, sweetheart?”

“Hrm—” Clem swallowed the last of her breakfast, she leaned over the bar area to place her plates in the sink. Slug was quick to hold the back of her shirt to make sure she didn’t tip over on her stool. “Uh, after chores and homework I was probably just gonna listen to this new CD Dementia lent me. I told her I’d let her know how it sounded.”

“Oh? Did she create the music on it?”

“Yup, yup!”

“Headphones or stereo?” Slug asked, uncertain.

“Um, it’s a CD, so, stereo,” she said, raising a brow, “Obvi.”

“Just… try not to blow out the speakers,” the doctor advised. The girl opened her mouth probably with another retort, but then thought better of it, nodding. Dementia wasn’t a quiet person, why would her music be any different?

“Cool, well!” she said, standing. She stretched out one hand for her chore list.

Slug unfolded the note from his pocket, saying, “You know the drill, kiddo. The only thing that should probably get done first is the vacuuming. White Hat has his conference, and another meeting at 3 PM. So, if you need anything between 3 and 4—”

“Page your lab specifically!”
“There’s my clever girl,” he teased. She stuck out her tongue.

“I’m not a dinosaur like Dem, Sluggy!”

White Hat cocked his head, confusion evident. Slug just shook his head, “Movie reference.”

Clem gave the Elder Being a quick peck and bounced out the door. 0.5.0. followed, snuffling through his muzzle. Slug checked his watch—8 AM. He got up and began washing dishes.

“So, my dear doctor,” White Hat announced, “On our docket then?”

“Video conference call at 9 AM from Super League Heroic Team in Japan—”

“Hai!”

“Remember to thank them for working on our schedule—”

“Of course, doctor.”

“I’ll set up the feed for you, and I’ll be in the office to also help trouble shoot… They wanted an hour block, but, knowing SLHT, there’ll be too much bickering to really get to the meat of whatever they wanna talk about. So, prepare yourself for probably three hours of circular round-about monologues of self-doubt and interpersonal turmoil.”

“Oh my… Today is going to be long, isn’t it?”

“You have no idea.”

…
White Hat really didn’t have any idea. SLHT took not three, but, five hours of his time. It turned out there was romantic trouble of all things—a love triangle. He really didn’t know how to handle that. The only thing he could offer was to consider polyamory. It wasn’t well received. Embarrassingly, he could only say that matters of the heart were not his specialty, but he whole heartedly believed that as long as every person communicated and was honest, followed their desires—shared or otherwise—there would be a solution somewhere.

Again, not the most received as at least one party was especially unwilling to put their heart out on the line. That’s couldn’t lead to anything good…

Then again, what did he know? He did not actually have a heart.

“Right,” Dr. Slug said, finally closing out the international broadcast, “That was excruciating.”

“It was,” he sighed. Slug was powering down the camera, mood a bit put-out.

“I was planning on squeezing in a few commercials, but, ah,” he groaned, looking at his watch, “There’s no time. That billionaire techie is on his way here from that grungy city down by the bay… and I need some lunch.”

“Oh, what are we having for lunch?”

“No, no we!” Slug decided, walking with arm loads of cables into the hall.

White Hat sputtered behind him, “I know I don’t need food—”

“I have to eat in the lab! We have seven outgoing orders for Monday, alone, and I have to make sure they’re up-and-running,” he explained, sending his employer a glare.

“Ohhh, yeah, the extra merch sale…”

“Don’t say merch—” Slug shuddered, checking his watch (2:04 PM), “You’re not a twenty-something art student peddling etsy creations in class.”
“It just sounds so cool.”

“It sounds douche-y.”

White Hat crossed him arms as he watched the doctor go, “So mean to me…”

...

Slug was finishing his burrito—black beans, lime rice, and some seasoned chicken—when the pager went off. He put down a soldering tool for one of the items that still needed tweaking, and wheeled himself over to the intercom system. “Ola?”

“Uhhhh, Dr. Slug we have a slight problem at the gates,” Clem’s voice echoed. Slug checked his watch—2:53.

Sighing, he buzzed back, “Alright. Be right there.”

“Hurry, please, Cero is ready to maul.”

Ohhh, today was going to be one of those days too?

Slug had made it to the front gates—paparazzi flashing down the streets as a sleek European styled sports car cruised down the road. There were a few photographers snapping pictures as Clem worried the hem of her glittery tutu in her fingers. Her hood was pulled self-consciously up to hide her face, and 0.5.0. was swiping between the bars of the closed gates at the sleazy guys who were trying to get her to answer questions.

The doctor could feel his hackles rise. He was about to march over and punch out some creep-o leering too obvious as he fiddled with a video recorder. The only thing that held him back was a gaudy horn, singing some Hero Tune that Slug only vaguely recognized from an old cartoon that was wildly inaccurate about Heroes and Villains. It caught the attention of the cameras and everyone swung around to berate the scheduled techie billionaire.
Slug was quickly coming up to stand beside Clementia. 0.5.0. continuously blocked any shots of her as the doctor began steering her back to the house, with the orders to, “Buzz in the bastard, and I’ll take him up to meet White Hat… turn on the sprinklers too.”

Clem nodded, scurrying up the pathway to the porch. 0.5.0. waited a beat, glancing down to his maker. Slug just gave him a nod, and the bear lumbered after the girl, Venus Fly Trap snapping like it wanted to munch on the pests lingering just outside his reach.

After a few moments, the techie Hero had managed to inch closer to the white gates—which swung open to admit him. His back was to Slug, snarking at some reporter or would-be news blogger as they shouted out questions. From what Slug could make out the Hero was as sleek as his fancy car, in a pinstripe suit, with slicked back strawberry blond hair. Not the most robust, but he was still thicker than the average man. When he fully turned to the doctor, Slug was surprised to see a visor running across his eyes. A few second later, Clem must have turned on the sprinklers, because the paparazzi scattered and the gate was closing while the Hero strut forward in swanky confidence.

“Dr. Slug,” the man said, as if they had known each other for years, “Sorry for being late.”

Slug checked his watch—it flashed to 3PM as soon as he set his sight on it. The doctor huffed, “You should apologize for the entourage.”

“I didn’t think it would matter to the Great White,” the Hero said, giving some jazz hands along with the dumbest nickname to ever be thought up. Slug never understood why the Heroes insisted on calling White Hat “the Great White” behind his back. Granted, his dark twin sported some shark-like teeth, but White Hat, in Slug’s opinion, was entirely too focused on looking as normal as possible. It probably was a tongue-in-cheek reference to his… well, just his greatness as a Hero.

“It probably doesn’t matter to White Hat,” Dr. Slug agreed as the other man stood before him, but he made no move to shake his hand or usher him to the front door, “But we still operate in a specific manner. Most meetings are kept private. Many Heroes have loved ones, and should meetings be interrupt—”

The techie Hero laughed, taping at his visor, “Most of the world already knows who I am—so, no harm no foul, really. Not like I could do any damage to my family.”

“Yes, I suppose not,” Slug offered after an irritated beat. He cocked his head to the house and turned around, hands in his pockets. The techie sauntered after him.
“Yeah, born and bred to a family of heroes. My mother was a super genius heiress to a rising bio-firm, and my father a lowly bodyguard dis-honorably discharged who got too close! Ah, the stories I grew up with… They were the ones who funded and founded the International—” the man went on narrating his life like it was a practiced comic-book speech.

“Sounds absolutely fascinating,” Slug deadpanned, opening the front doors to the Manor.

“It should be,” the Hero continued, whether ignoring the tone of the doctor, or simply uncaring that Slug was growing bored of his showmanship, “It’s come to my attention they were probably assassinated not long afterwards. I only recently received a packet in the mail confirming their involvement with uncovering some shady stuff for the—”

“If that is what you are here to discuss with White Hat, let me tell you how the meeting will proceed,” the doctor interrupted before he heard too much. The techie Hero had never actually sought help from White Hat previously—although many Heroes and other Heroic Groups were a revolving door—as it was that this particular Hero had his own complicated networks of Do-Gooders to seek help from thanks to his internationally minded parents.

“Go right ahead, doc.”

“So, you have a complete hour, during this hour you will be recorded in White Hat’s sound proof office. Do not worry, these recordings are stored in a personal, unhooked, unsupported data base as a means of keeping track of who White Hat has met, when, and why. You get the options of advice, sound-boarding, and though it’s highly unrecommendable, you may ask for his physical services to help you. Each request, of course, comes with its own strict regulations.”

“Why is his services unrecommendable?” the Hero asked, instead of the usual outrage that came when the Heroes learned Dr. Slug was keeping a detailed record of all of White Hat’s clients. Slug was leading the Hero up the stairs—for a tech genius, he was probably planning to scramble any recordings, but the good doctor was already prepared for that.

“How do I put this…” he paused at the top of the stairs, turning to see the blond fiddling with his visor. Ah, he was probably scanning the area, or looking for places to furtively place jammers… or worse, his own spy-cameras. “White Hat is the Ultimate Hero. You’ve only dealt with human Heroes, correct?”

“Well… I do have a couple of mutants, a few cyborgs, and I may or may not have slept with Star Princess,” he said with a chuckle.
Slug leveled him a glare, “I’ve met Star Princess before—she often accompanies Clementia to the Femme Fatale Festival on White Hat’s personal request. So, I am going to assume not.”

“Well, not like *that* kind of *slept* if I am honest…” the Hero muttered, blush rising to his face, “But, uh, a guy can hope.”

“Keep hoping, pal,” Slug jibed, then grabbed the visor off his face in a swift move.

“Hey—” he squawked, reaching for it, looking suddenly helpless. Slug inspected them—they were good. High quality. Durable. Not the guy’s first version from the crisp, clean design and fast computing. And, of course, the visor was indeed scanning the Manor.

“You don’t want these on while you’re talking to White Hat.”

“What? Why not?” he asked, reaching out. Slug shook his head, pocketing them.

“This is what I am trying to tell you,” he sighed, “White Hat is not your ordinary Hero. He doesn’t work for the government, he doesn’t work for a specific planet, he is not even a Galactic Defender. The kind of thing he is…”

“I’ve met Magical Heroes before—”

“He’s not even *magical*, kid,” Slug said, refocusing.

“Well, I’ve heard he’s got some kind of hoodoo or something so…” the Hero rubbed at the back of his neck. “Everyone says he’s the best. That he always knows the right course of action. And right now, I don’t know what to do. My parent’s empire will collapse. Everything they’ve ever built and —”

*Ah. Identity Crisis.*

Slug held up his hands, “Look, I’m not an actual Hero. I just work here. I really don’t give a shit
about the interests of your world, okay? My job is to filter White Hat’s daily duties, and that means warning would-be Do-Gooders that my boss is complicated. When you ask for White Hat’s help you give up any control of this situation.”

The techie’s eye brows shot up. He looked younger with each passing second. Did he really not know who Slug was or what he was getting into?

Well, with this Hero’s protected family history, probably not.

“So, you are right, White Hat has all the answers. He can tell you what to do, he can tell you what the right thing is. However, I’m going to tell you what’s the wise choice is before he’ll lecture you. What you got to know is, he won’t do anything. He’ll make you choose. He won’t fix anything for you—unless you ask him to, and then he gets to make all the choices…” Slug said, “You get what I am hinting at?”

The Hero stared at the ground. Hesitantly, he jerked his head in a positive motion. Slug checked his watch.

Shit, 3:13 PM. He spent too long patronizing the techie.

“Alright, kiddo, let’s get you to White Hat—we’re way behind schedule.”

…

Dr. Slug felt his nose get itchy. He glanced around his lab, putting down his tools. For a moment, he took off his bag to rub furiously at his poor, little nose with the crook of his elbow. His gloves were a bit greasy to use as he’d been fixing one of the out-going machines. He should probably put on new gloves, seeing as the merch was more than ready to send out now.

With a practiced peel, he managed to take them off without getting any grease on his skin or clothes. He placed them in the lab sink, and checked his mask-bag for any smudges. Luckily, it remained pristine. Without further ado, he slipped it back on, then grabbed an extra pair of rubber gloves.

His pocket vibrated. He startled, glancing down before remembering he still had the Hero techie’s gadget. Checking his watch, he saw it was almost half past four in the afternoon. Damn, the day had really gotten away from him.
He proceeded back upstairs, and as he reached White Hat’s hallway saw the pallid being showing the Hero-techie out of his office. Dr. Slug raised a hand in greeting, holding the visor. The Hero looked immensely relieved as he plucked it up. However, he didn’t quite put it on. The man probably assumed Slug had implanted spyware in it or something—in another life, he might have, but well, he’d been too busy to consider it.

“I hope our meeting was satisfactory, Tommen,” White Hat said, voice paternal. The Hero—who Slug still refused to call anything other than techie—just gave one of those pained smiles of someone who had a very difficult personal demon to wrestle with.

“Please, man, just Tom.”

“Well, Tom, I have faith in you. I know you will overcome this trying time,” White Hat continued. Tom took a large breath, and Slug rolled his eyes while no one was looking. He hated it when his boss said that. It was practically a death sentence for any newbie Hero…

“I’ll see you out, kid,” Slug said, tilting his head toward the stairs. Tom followed him, pocketing his visor in thought. As they were coming to the bottom of the winding staircase, 0.5.0. was walking up. Slug looked around, “Where’s Clem?”

The bear grumbled, making a box with his talons.

“Oh, good. I was afraid that we’d have to fight off some more jerkwards at the gate,” Slug said, brightening a bit. The techie hedged away as the purple beast barreled on past the pair. He threw out the most confused look the doctor’s way.

“What the heck is that thing, exactly?”

“Oh, that’s our guard dog—” Slug explained, somewhat weirded out that the Hero didn’t know about 0.5.0.’s basic existence as a resident in White Hat Manor.

“He’s my gummy bear!” Clem corrected from the hidden compartment by the front doors. All the security measure controls were placed there—with the backup ones in the lab—and the third emergency ones in White Hat’s office.
The Hero stopped when he saw Clementia. Immediately, his face shifted. He swaggered over, placing his hands near the security camera to box the girl in. “And you must be the mysterious Clementia Habberdash…”

“Oh!” Clem started, looking up uncertainly. She tugged at the strings of her hood, “Well, yes…”

Slug glared, yanking the dumbass back by the collar of his stupid jacket suit, “You know Clementia by name, but you didn’t know 0.5.0.? What shoddy detective work!” The Hero was choking lightly, but straightened out of Clem’s way. She went back to operating the gates and sprinkler system, moving cameras around in search of straggling photographers.

“Okay! You’re all clear, guys!”

“Well, until next time, pretty lady,” Tom said, offering his hand and a disarming smile. Clem gave a giggle as she shook his hand, but Slug coughed behind her. She retracted quickly, brushing her hair out of eyes.

“Star Princess was right about you…” she mumbled.

The Hero gave a fond sigh, and Slug shook his head. “I’m starting to doubt her status as a trustworthy character.”

“Oh, Sluggy, don’t worry. Mr. Tommen is too old for me anyway!” Clem said, patting his arm. Tom started, and Slug let out a bark of laughter—the man was only 24 to Clementia’s 18.

“Yeah, laugh it up, Sluggy…!” the techie Hero was muttering under his breath while affixing his suit. Dr. Slug just snorted at the childish ribbing. It was the worst kept secret that Clementia was prone to nicknames and terms of endearment for anything and everything that crossed her path. Which, when thinking about, was possibly Slug’s fault in the first place anyways.

The Hero walked out of the Manor with Slug at his side, the bruise to his ego fading quickly. The sun was setting over the buildings of the suburban area, casting the day in a softer yellow glow. It made the hero look dipped in gold. Hmm. Appropriate as his claim to fame was that he was the Super Hero world’s Golden Child.

“Well, doctor,” he said, sobering. He fiddled with his darkened visor. Slug waited, and the hero
stuck the gadget in a breast pocket with a sort of weighted finality. “Thank you for warning me about White Hat.”

“All part of the job description.”

“I… I don’t quite think so,” he argued. Slug blinked, posture going rigid as the Hero turned him with a kind of grateful grin.

“I assure you, White Hat—”

“He’s kind of a prick.”

It was said with such honesty, that it rankled Dr. Slug. Like, Slug knew how prickish White Hat could be, but to just call him out like that right after he sought out his boss for advice… Slug crossed his arms over his chest, “Like I said before, I don’t give a shit about your Hero or any Hero’s issues. My job is to filter out the day for White Hat… and at the end of the day White Hat has more on his cosmic plate than either you or I can fathom.”

“You’re really loyal, Dr. Slug,” Tom pointed out. Slug scowled, looking away from a growing, perfectly white smile. White Hat had a better one though.

“Not really…”

“I was dreading this meeting with White Hat,” he admitted, fishing the keys out of his pants as the front gates opened before them. “Everyone is so in awe of him—and I get why. He’s great. He really is. He’s just so… well, you know. You work with him.”

Slug stayed silent. He didn’t quite know where the kid was going, or what he was implying.

“And boy, White Hat does not make it easy…”

“Doing the right thing isn’t always easy, kiddo,” Slug agreed, “That’s the catch I never envied about you Hero-types. You are always expected to know the difference between right and wrong and make that better choice everyone wants you to make.”
“Yeah. I mean, it’s the right choice to make,” he said with a shrug.

“But… you don’t want to be the one to make it.”

The kid’s smile fell.

Slug nodded, “I am not going to say you are obligated to do what White Hat suggested. It’s obviously just shy of self-destruction… all I say is that you have to live with whatever it is.”

“Doing the right thing shouldn’t feel like this…” the techie said, voice bitter as he touched the white gate, like it could help strengthen his resolve. Slug hummed, giving the kid some time to process.

“Maybe we should redefine the idea of right and wrong,” he suggested, partially because he was an ass like that.

Tom laughed, he unlocked his car, and Slug followed to just the edge of the gate, “Don’t know if it works like that.”

“Yeah, I never really cared for the ideas in the first place. I’ve always just lived life by considering the end of the day. It was always about what I could stomach—what I could live with—at the end of the day. Could I look the mirror and not consider myself a monster? Could I sleep at night? If so, couldn’t be half bad. A bit trite but… worked for me.”

The Hero leveled him a weird look, and Slug shrugged. The kid really must not have known who the doctor was before being employed by White Hat. “You, uh, wear a bag over your head…”

“That’s true. Betcha you can guess how well that philosophy turned out, huh?” he admitted, taping at his own googles, “So I’ll just leave you with one last thing to ponder, kiddo—who would you rather be like when all is said and done? The Great White, or this Ol’ Salted Slug?”

…
6:30 PM, dinner time.

Slug was placing the lasagna on the table runner, just as White Hat was strolling in the door. Clementia greeted him from the sink where she pulled out chopped lettuce from the strainer. He’d placed her in charge of salad for the night.

“Did you want a vinaigrette or that yogurt ranch stuff Slug bought?”

“I believe I will try the yogurt dressing,” he decided. Clem stuck out her tongue. She still pulled out the bottle, handing it to the Elder Being. Then, she dumped the lettuce into a bowl mixed with walnuts and grapes. After tossing it for a few moments, she brought it to the table with White Hat. Slug was already dishing out precisely cut squares of the homemade Italian food.

“Can I have double, Sluggy?” Clem asked, as she sat at her place. 0.5.0. curled up at her feet, eying the ground for any ants to lick up. No one could figure out where they kept invading the kitchen from.

“After today’s excitement,” he said slowly, picking up another square for the girl, “I am not opposed. Though you won’t have much leftovers for lunches.”

“Mmm, I thought you said we could go to the Mall this weekend though?” she reminded, already digging into both helpings. The salad beside her remained untouched. White Hat picked up the bowl to help himself and try the yogurt-based ranch. “Food court has food!”

“Well, I didn’t get nearly as many orders finished,” he thought. Clem shot him some wide eyes, and White Hat paused as well, frown appearing.

“Is our merchandise really in such need of repairs?”

“See? When you say merchandise, you sound so much more professional,” Slug teased, baiting out the other two occupants at the table.

“Sluuuuuggyyyyyyy!” the girl whined, catching on, “C’mooooooon!”
With a put-upon sigh, Slug took the salad bowl from his boss and started arranging a nice space for his greens. “Well, I guess if you have some good news about—”

“I passed my mathematics test with flying colors! And even though it’s scheduled for Tuesday I washed the windows and re-sown Cero’s bear-bed! I even filled it with the expanding foam stuff you taught me for chem class!” she smugly declared.

“All on your own today?”

“Well, you guys were in meetings a lot longer than normal,” she explained with a shrug.

White Hat hummed aloud, “Well, I certainly was. Dr. Slug isn’t included in the services.”

“I don’t know why, sir,” the girl mentioned, swirling her fork into the mess she made of her lasagna, “That Golden Child, Tommen, really seemed to like him. They talked for a long time before and after the meeting.”

“Ah! You little snitch,” Slug accused, spilling too much ranch over his salad in embarrassment. White Hat’s eyebrows shot up and he looked over at the doctor. He tried to settle his employer, by giving a tiny shake of the head, “He didn’t do enough history, or research about the company is all. Knew Clem’s full legal name, nothing about 0.5.0., and didn’t even seem to understand I am not a hero.”

“Well, I didn’t know until Dem told me…” Clementia said. Both males glanced over to her, surprised. She blushed at their expressions and attention focused on her. “About you being a Villain.”

“Really? We never actually hid our doctor’s past from you,” White Hat said, thinking aloud. Slug just shrugged. They must have never really talked about much business in front of the growing girl until she was old enough to understand it.

“And…” Slug started, unsure, “Do you have any you’d like to ask?”

White Hat gave him an indescribable look, keeping his voice a murmur, “You don’t have to—”
“I know everything I need to, Sluggy,” Clem answered with a soft smile. The doctor was looking stoically at his food. He took a bite of salad first—the yogurt wasn’t too much different from the mayo-based stuff, actually. He felt White Hat pat his knee under the table. Shooing it off, he pushed back his chair.

“I forgot to bring out the drinks—” he stated, “Do we want milk, or, some apple juice?”

“Oh! What about cranberry?”

“Are you having… plumbing… problems?”

Clem shook her head, face heating, but determined, “No, but, you can never be too careful! Plus, I just sort of like the tart taste to it.”

“Alright, cranberry juice it is,” Slug said, then turned to the Elder Being, “White Hat?”

“Water is fine for me.”

“Well, guess I am the only one who wants milk…” he was giving them a pouting looking as he poured the individual glasses. Why he went to so much trouble when those bums had their own working legs and feet was beyond him. Sure, he asked first, but he wasn’t the goody-two-shoes of the group (pun fully intended).

“So, the more important matter,” Clem decided, reaching out for her drink as Slug returned to the table holding a ring of glasses in his cupped hands, “The Mall?”

All he could do in the face of such sparkly-eyed hope was groan. He gave them a nod, and Clem cheered, bumping the table with her knees. White Hat had to steady his glass of water before it was knocked over. 0.5.0. made a grunt and moved away from the twitchy teen.

“I am probably going to regret this decision…”
If Saturday was going to be so indulgent, Slug was going to go all out. Everyone slept in, and when it was about 9:30 or so, he made sure everyone was roused enough that they could dress and meet in the kitchen—per usual. Though he let them know they’d pick up breakfast at a drive-thru café.

Clementia was wearing her hoodie over a plain summer dress with some tie-dye stockings. She had running shoes on for comfort, and several jelly bracelets along her wrists (“I need to know which ones I don’t have so I get those at the store!”). White Hat, of course, didn’t understand the concept of casual. He had on his three-piece outfit, tie, and trench coat. Slug, for his part, was at least in jeans and blue converse. He still wore a black turtleneck, though a bit bigger than he recalled. Maybe he should increase his protein and reconsider weight training?

“What time is the movie?” Clem asked. 0.5.0. was waddling into the room with his chauffer hat on, “We starting or ending the day in the theatre?”

“Ending,” Slug said.

“Cool! Let’s stop by Lollipop Store and get some candy to sneak in!”

“Clementia, dear,” White Hat started, but Slug hit him in the sternum, wiping a fake tear.

“Clever girl…! So proud!”

Clementia laughed and started tugging them out, “Alright! Pumpkin Spice Latte and then general mayhem and fun times at the Mall, guys!”

Clem, though, was a good girl and the general mayhem was just the regular teenager thing. Dashing from outlet to outlet, spilling her coffee by accident, avoiding the people standing in the middle of walk-ways trying to pull you to the stand where they had the latest Thing You Didn’t Know You Needed. 0.5.0. helped as he trudged behind them with his “Service Bear” vest on. Slug had fun pretending to encourage the youths to shoplift as it was A Rite of Passage, if only to cause White Hat some stress. And in between stresses, White Hat was learning all sorts of things about American Consumerism and Life.

“So… the mall is not really infested with vermin?”
“Naaah, it’s just what people started to call teens who spend too much time here,” Clem said, swinging her shopping bags as they rounded the corner toward the food court. The smell of meat on sticks, too syrupy slushes, and an errant mix of spices assaulted their nostrils. It did nothing to quell the growing grumble of their empty stomachs though. Her eyes zeroed in on some sushi bar, and she darted to it, exclaiming, “THEY HAVE BOBA!”

“Get me a California roll!” Slug called after her. White Hat was searching the area, pointing to a corner booth that looked unoccupied—if a bit sticky. 0.5.0. waited for a second, but ignored the pale being and moved after Clem.

“I’ll save us all a seat,” he said, equally unperturbed by the bear’s snubbing.

“Grab some napkins, Clem’ll forget again,” the doctor said. White Hat smiled, walking quickly now that he had a task at hand. The man just shook his head, glad he didn’t really have to do anything for a moment. He checked his watch amongst the bustle and noise of people around him.

It was only 1:45 PM. They still had a bit longer before the movie.

“Zzzt—And now, we come live to the impromptu press conference at the headquarters of Golden Rule, aka, the International Alliance of Heroes.”

The noise of a nearby floating flat screen cut through Slug’s mental calculation. His attention was caught by the eager announcer and how the words pertained to the Hero he just met. Glancing around, he only noticed a few other people looking up and paying attention to the food court’s obligated stations of entertainment.

“Golden Rule was created by Bree and James De Loin, one of the first Heroes to fight for international cooperation—though some have claimed this an example American strong-arming into overseas affairs. They passed away on a flight to London for a Heroic Convention, survived by their only son, Tommen, often called The Golden Child in reference to the afore-named Golden Rule, itself a reference to the idea to treat others as you wish to be treated. Again, some would say that the unofficial name of the De Loin organization actually denotes how fiercely the organization spread and held Heroes to its standard like medieval knights sworn to a kingship…”

The announcer droned on, and to be honest, Slug didn’t lie to Tom. He really had no interest in the Hero’s World. The scientist turned his back to the television set, even as the broadcast started to gain more attention. He noticed White Hat sitting at the corner booth that was tucked away from any screens, and Clem’s head swiveling about as she carried a loaded tray across the food court.
“Ladies and Gentlemen,” Tom’s voice said, growing distant as Slug waved at Clem to grab her attention. She followed the man’s movements to White Hat’s shining figure. She bounced over to him, andSlug was close behind her. “I must, from the bottom of my heart, deeply apologize. It has come to my attention that my parent’s foundation, the legacy they left me is not what it seems… Even so I—I—I… No. I can’t do this. Here’s the truth, and I will not sugarcoat it to save face—”

Slug plopped down beside 0.5.0 who was helpfully carrying Clem’s bags now. He inspected the table before looking across to White Hat.

“All clean?” he asked, with Tom’s voice faded in the background.

“As clean as it could be,” the Elder Being replied against the gasp in the background of the food court.

Clementia snorted, holding up some wet wipes to the delight of her companions, “You two need to have more faith, sometimes.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading!
Chapter Notes

So I am going to try and not comment back for a little bit. I feel like I am giving away too much for the rest of the fic... I've just been really excited, but now I'm a bit worried I'm over-excited about being back in a fandom. Things have changed, I guess. When I was on ff(dot)net, you never really had a thread comments. Sorry if it's caused anyone to be weirded out.

Also, this fic is long--I'm working on chapter 22 right now. Most chapters go over twenty single-spaced(ish) pages.

Also, also! I might have a job soon, which is nerve-wracking because I have been unemployed for a better part of a year. Is that TMI?

Thanks for reading!

Chapter Six: Let Us Play Devil’s Advocate

White Hat felt a shiver slide up his spine before he felt his eye flare to life. Hissing, he clutched one talon-like hand over the empty space of his right socket. It was the most difficult part of not having one of his eyes within his physical appearance. With a sigh, he leaned back in his desk chair and opened the drawer to his secret compartment…

A black wooden box, unadorned with finery, sat innocuous before him.

His vision swam as darkness burst into the sight of his right eye.

“Hold on,” he murmured, placing the box atop his desk, “You are so impatient, brother.”

He opened the box—crafted from the fallen ruins of an ancient palatial city dedicated to the Old Ones. These were the beings that endowed Black Hat with his hellish, dark powers that the Elder Being could not control. His source of strength derived from the light, the wind, and star dust… well, more or less. Though they held shared abilities, White Hat had been forced to find weakness in their differences. They were few, Black Hat’s weaknesses.

This box was one of them. White Hat molded it to house his twin’s left eye. Why? Well, not for so
“Brother,” he greeted gazing into the box.

The fiendish red eye burst to flames, and distantly, Black Hat’s voice came to him.

“White,” he grumbled. White Hat closed his physical eye—and instantly the only sight he focused on was his twin’s visage with the background of the personal pocket dimension he’d clawed into existence. The area behind his twin was wavering hellishly.

White Hat had not known when he agreed to take his brother’s eye and leave his in return, that it meant they would both be under watch. He’d awaken on the battlefield with a feeling that a human might have called ‘concussed,’ as Black Hat’s burning eye focused on him. He did not think much of it, besides the dizzying, nauseous way his body was reacting…

Until Black Hat pulled his eye out from some hidden place, and White Hat was witness to his brother’s travel into differing dimensions, looking for a place to call home. It sickened him to realize but… because of what they were, there was no true dying. No respite from their horrid existence. His eye went on seeing—still technically apart of him—and with that too came the echoes of screaming and pain as Black Hat saw fit to slaughter and run amok on Earth.

He pleaded with him through that burning eye at first—White Hat having remained silent for as long as he could bear—and that only drove the Eldritch to cackle and double his efforts to torture his foolish light twin. It was his guilt to bear, and he had to find Black Hat, which took a longer time than his poor soul could take. In his search, though, he found the Old One’s long buried settlement…

Black Hat’s eye stopped burning… and when he realized his own empty socket felt freer, far away. So, he scrapped up whatever he could find and left, Black Hat’s uncertain voice asking, “Where did you go? Why could I not see?”

“Tell me where you are,” White Hat demanded, “Keep your end of the bargain, and you will remain whole. I will not end you now that I know how.”

“You bluff—”

“I do not.”
Black Hat, at the time, could not risk it. He told White Hat how to meet him… and he found the Eldritch watching strange creatures atop a mountainous ridge, a carved rock pantheon where he rested. So, White Hat met him, seeing his brother’s newest physical form. Tall, lean, still darkened. Elegant wares for whatever time it was, a kind of walking staff, and a wide brimmed hat. It was balanced just so that his lost eye was hidden from view.

“You said we would work for a balance,” White Hat reminded him. He held out the black box as his form shifted to mirror his brother’s newest look.

Black Hat scoffed, and from his neck hung White Hat’s own eye that glittered like a sapphire.

“I would like my eye back now.”

“No.”

“Brother—”

Black Hat hissed, clasping his claws over it, “You gave it to me! It belongs to me now!”

“I will return yours,” White Hat said, “It is only fair.”

“I can see nothing from it now,” Black Hat sniffed, stubborn. White Hat had rolled his eyes—the one on his twin’s chest shimmering as it too moved—but the Eldritch seemed use to the things unmitigated movement.

“You are lucky, then, mine still sees,” the pale one stated.

Black Hat shrugged, unbothered, “I suppose… you’re frantic running was rather boring after a while. At least you have entertainment.”

White Hat had leapt at his brother, finally understanding anger, and the dark one caught him as he moved to yank back the unattached eye.
“Ah, Ah, Ah!” Black Hat purred, calming his brother, “Perhaps we can come to an understanding…”

Currently, their understanding was to leave the other alone unless the fate of the Great Game was too favored one way or another. It was rankling, on some respect, but Black Hat had been true to his word so far. There had only been a few instances every few centuries where he got ahead of himself and White Hat had to step in and rebalance humanity’s course. This world had been an excellent choice indeed for a level playing field.

White Hat wondered if Black Hat was aware that if the Game ever had a so-called winner, that was it. Everything would be shelved. The Old Ones and the Elder Gods might just stop gathering together to pick sides, to watch, to wait…

“I hate when you do that—” the present Black Hat was saying. White Hat came back to the moment, shaking away his worry.

“I do apologize. It’s been a long time since you’ve contacted me this way.”

“Well, hopefully this will keep you on your toes,” the dark twin said with a slight smoky chuckle.

“Is that all?” White Hat drawled, unamused if this was all he’d been summoned for. He understood Black Hat could torment him mercilessly should the desire arise in that horror-filled shell that he was.

“Ugh, no…” was the grunted echo, “It’s business matters.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t make my quota… You need to loan me Dr. Slug.”

…

Clem was wailing, running about the Manor when she heard the news. Slug was busy packing a
suitcase, while dictating to 0.5.0. about what foods the hysterical teen could and could not eat while he was away. White Hat was standing awkwardly, leafing through the pre-planned meeting schedule.

“Now, remember, if you need me just call or send an email,” Dr. Slug restated in White Hat’s general vicinity. The Elder Being looked up in time to see Clementia toss herself on top of the suitcase.

“You caaaaaaan’t…!”

“Really, Clem,” he said, trying to push the girl off, but she wound her body around his midsection, hiccupping, “It’s only for two weeks. Maybe less if I can get Black Hat’s company sales up—what’s gotten into you?”

“They’re the enemy!” she declared, then looked at White Hat for backup.

“I thought you considered Dementia your friend…?” the Elder Being asked.

Clementia gave him a glare, “That’s different!”

“Black Hat is my brother.”

“A FACT HE CONSTANTLY REFUTES!”

Slug sighed as Clementia squeezed, “We’ve been through this before—I need to go.”

“But I…” Clem’s bottom lip quivered as she stared up at the doctor, “I don’t like it. It feels too weird, too dangerous! You’ll be all alone!”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” he said, and the smirk in his voice was audible. Clementia stared at him for a second, face unreadable. Then, with a strength Slug had no idea she possessed, she curled her fingers into his coat and wouldn’t let go.
“At least take 0.5.0. with you,” she demanded. Slug tilted his head up at the purple monstrosity. As if silently communicating, they stared. Then, with a rustle and bristle of fur, the bear shook its head.

“He doesn’t want to go, Clementia—”

“Traitor!” she hissed at it, tears gathering.

“And besides, his place is here at White Hat Manor,” Slug said with finality. Clem opened her mouth to protest, but he silenced it by cupping his hands around her cheeks. “He protects the Manor, he protects you. That’s his job. My job is to help White Hat. White Hat needs me most at Black Hat Manor…”

White Hat looked away, feeling more and more unease as the girl protested. Clementia had made good points before…but, Slug, as always, was rational about the whole situation. People could say—and had said—whatever they wanted about the scientist, but rational and methodical was how he always saved the day.

“It seems like a long time, but, I’m sure you can manage without me,” the doctor murmured. Clem shook her head, breaking out of the man’s hold.

“I’ll wreck the house—”

“No, you won’t.”

“I’m gonna stay up past midnight—”

“You don’t even do that on New Year’s.”

“I’ll sell my body—”

“Only to science, and only over my dead body.”

“Dammit! That’s what I’m saying!” Clem cried, and Slug glanced over at White Hat for help.
“Oh, no, no, darling! I promise, Black Hat would never harm our good doctor,” the Elder Being insisted. She looked up with her wet face, mascara running in thick streaks, but he dumbly continued, “Of course, as long as he doesn’t get too snarky. Dr. Slug is better useful to him alive. Although both do have a temper so—”

Slug groaned as Clementia redoubled her efforts.

“That’s—That’s just great parenting, boss.”

…

White Hat waited with a sulky Clem (restrained by her purple bear) and the unfazed Slug at the gates as a black taxi cab pulled up to the curb. The Elder Being turned to the doctor, “You’re certain 0.5.0. can’t drive you?”

“No, this is fine. I plan to email Flug from the cab to get a jump start on things anyways,” he said. White Hat could only nod, grabbing the doctor’s suitcase to help. Clementia jumped into the man’s arms for one last hug.

“Be careful, okay?” she asked, and Slug gave her back a few soothing rubs. “Dem says that they… they do things differently over there.”

“I’ll watch my back, don’t worry,” he swore. She gave him a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. It took her a moment, but she let go. 0.5.0. gave her a low purr of comfort, and she ended up shoving her face into his tummy and breathing deeply to keep from crying some more.

“I… I did not expect this,” White Hat admitted, setting the suitcase in the truck for Slug.

Slug gave him a shrug and responded, low and soft, “I haven’t been away from the Manor for so long before. I’ve probably been too… overbearing. Pun not really intended.”

White Hat hummed, closing the truck thoughtfully.
“What’s that look for?”

“I do not necessarily find her reaction… extreme.”

“Aww, you gonna miss me too, White Hat?” Slug taunted.

“Well, of course, doctor. But I mean…” he started, uncertain how to phrase that churning inside him without causing alarm or distress to his companions, “Clementia is ever in-tune with the universe, I have noticed. I fear her own worries are not as simple as separation anxiety.”

Slug pulled out his tablet, feigning nonchalance, “Are you implying she’s physic or something?”

“I like the term Mystic, personally,” White Hat said. Slug stuck out his tongue.

“I’m a scientist. You can’t pull that crap with me.”

“A scientist working for an otherworldly, cosmic being with the sentient purpose of winning an ancient pantheon of gods game of Good and Evil…” White Hat reminded him, pulling the tablet away from Slug’s eyes, “And if we want to split hairs, you sought me out. You are fully aware of what going over there really means.”

Slug scowled, “Yeah, thus I am not fighting this personal request.”

White Hat gave him a pained smile.

“But, seriously? He said loan? What the fuck am I, cattle?” the doctor continued, goggle’s going dopey as he mocked, “Ohhh, White Hat, loan me your cow, I gotta hankering for cheese! Like, Jesu Christo…! That’s just some dickery—WHAT?! White Hat, don’t laugh!”

“But,” White Hat said through some giggles he tried to cover with his hands, “He doesn’t even sound like that!”

Slug couldn’t stop his own hidden grin, placing the tablet under his arm. “That’s the point,
dumbass.”

White Hat took in the other man’s stance, one hand out as if to shake. His one eye flicked up to the goggles, and not for the first time, he really wished Slug didn’t insist on covering his face. He wanted to see an earnest expression like back when they first began working together. The doctor was right, though. This would be the first time they would be separated for so long… and so far.

“See you in two weeks, White Hat.”

White Hat ignored his hand, wrapping his arms around Slug. The man went stock still, and when the Elder Being pulled back wishing he could have held on just a little longer, whispered with such a strange smile, “We’ll be waiting right here, missing you.”

The doctor didn’t know how to respond.

White Hat left him, walking back to the gate and ushered the blubbering girl inside. O.5.0. had to pick her up, little fly trap bobbing as it walked. The cabbie leaned out the window and asked, “Ready to go, doc?”

“Just—Just a second.”

He watched the gate close, and the doors to the Manor lock behind his compatriots’ shadow. Looking down at his tablet, he nodded. Three emails from Dr. Flug already. The cabbie gave a laugh, swinging open the door, “I’m sure your family will do fine without ya for a bit.”

“Oh?” he questioned, startled by such casualness the driver spoke to him with, “Yes. I’m sure they will. They’re—They’re good.”

The cabbie stared at him, uncomprehending how packed that sentiment was. In the end, he chose to glaze over it, asking, “So, where to then, man?”

“Black Hat Manor.”
White Hat was a bit worried. He waited in the kitchen, but Clementia never came in. 0.5.0. had wandered by, pulled something out of the fridge, heated it up, and then left. Still, the Elder Being waited.

Eventually, he rose, and walked up the stairs, heading into the east wing.

Clem’s door was firmly shut. With a sigh, he knocked. There was no response. He tried again, ever optimistic as he asked, “Clementia, dear?”

“… go away, White Hat.”

White Hat thought about what the doctor would do… and found himself at a loss. He wasn’t entirely confident he could accurately predict what Slug would do in such a tense situation. He just always seemed to know how to proceed, how to find the best course of action.

The thought was profoundly disturbing. Normally, White Hat would know the right thing to do—but nothing about today had felt… right. As soon as Slug was gone, it was like the whole Manor floated on its own. It carried on, deaf and dumb in conjecture with the world outside it, but carried on nonetheless. Even with Clementia’s rainbowed self… White Hat Manor was without its color, it’s distinctive character.

It startled him, but the Elder Being realized the feeling was similar to when he’d lost—gave up—his eye. It felt like a vital part of himself was missing… only, this time truly gone. He was blind to whatever would happen…

The irony that Black Hat had taken something that he had considered solely his, again, hit White Hat hard in that moment.

There was movement on the other side of the door, and it cracked the tiniest bit open. White Hat was staring into the red eyes of the young girl. She didn’t look mad, but she didn’t particularly seem her normal, cheerful self either. “Seriously, White Hat… I—I don’t wanna talk to you for a bit.”

“I’m sorry…”
“I know,” she sighed, rubbing at her eyes, “And I know it’s not... a big deal but—”

“It’s scary. I understand, I am finding it hard myself,” White Hat admitted. Clementia shook her head, leaning it against the doorjamb. She bit her lip, and it seemed her words kept starting and stopping as she took deep breathes to stay calm.

“Are you worried for his safety or...” she trailed off, and White Hat felt himself frowning—because what else could there be to worry over? The girl glanced up in time to see the confusion, and she gave a little laugh. Her door opened wider and she straightened. There was a plastic tub filled with cheese tortellini and cuts of chicken in alfredo sauce.

Ah, Slug made her favorite comfort foods... Even when he wasn’t around, he could still fix the Manor and its issues. A small part of White Hat felt a blossom of faith that Clementia and he could run their day-to-day business with only little hiccups.

“Dr. Slug is a very brave man,” White Hat told her, and he placed his hand over what would be area of where humans had hearts, “Too brave, in fact. I believe he can walk into a Villain’s den and whip it into shape in no time at all. Then, he’ll be back to berate us for slacking off while he was gone.”

Clementia scoffed, hand on the door knob. White Hat tried to smile, but he was having difficulty as some sort of anger flashed in her eyes. He couldn’t place it. She shoved her food into his chest, and he scrambled to hold it.

“He better, White Hat, because if he—if he doesn’t come back...” she broke off, staring at the floor.

“Why wouldn’t he come back?”

Clementia shot her seething eyes back up to him. She then lost the fire after a moment, shaking her head. “You really don’t get it, do you? Sometimes you’re just so—” the girl had to stop herself, realizing it was useless. “I’m tired... please leave. I need to go to bed.”

White Hat waited a beat, but nodded. “Alright, my dear. Good night. I will see you in the morning.”

“Yeah... maybe,” she said. She closed the door, a whispered, “Night...” feebly coming through. White Hat stood at the door for a second too long. He caught a rumble behind him. Pivoting slightly, he saw the put out purple bear lingering down the hallway, pacing the top of the stairs.
“Is she mad at you, too?”

It rumbled, settling down on a step. White Hat walked over, glancing down at the left-overs. Neither he nor the bear particularly needed this type of food… still, it felt like needed comfort. His coat fluttered behind him as he kneeled beside the creature, holding open the container. It didn’t move at first.

“Are you also mad at me?”

It let out a huff, one paw raising, and it dug into the container to grab some meat.

“Hope he comes back soon…”

A growl was its response as it dropped the meat into the fly trap atop its head.

…

With traffic, city construction, and just general time to travel, Slug had reached Black Hat Manor late. Nearing mid-night late, actually. Each email Dr. Flug sent also grew increasingly longer reading as a mix between frantic and ecstatic. The poor man was well overworked, and apparently his own evil boss was a task master. The drive was helpful in at least getting an overview of what had to be done, what the main issues were, and Slug fully intended to overhaul a majority of the projects at hand.

Still, when he got out of the taxi—paid the poor cabby extra—and walked up to the black gates, he was surprised to be personally greeted by Dr. Flug. The other scientist was worrying his rubber gloves to ribbons before practically tackling him on sight.

“W-We can fix this, right?!?”

“That is why I am here—"
Slug blanched as the other man pulled him up the steep walkway to Black Hat’s Manor, babbling to the point where it was just espoused theoretical engineering theories and mathematical nonsense that was frankly upsetting in that it would do no good to any of the emails he received during the drive. Granted, it was too risky to send schematics via attachments to an unanchored tablet… still. It was too much to process all at once.

“Dr. Flug, Dr. Flug,” he began, tone both soothing and firm, “You need to take a breath. You are not making sense.”

“No, I c-can’t! There is-is too much to do!” the original bagged man started, hands fisted on either side of his head. He seemed to be reeling at the mounting pressure of a failing business.

“And we’re supposed to do it all in one night?” he countered.

Flug moaned, bringing his hands down, “N-No… I suppose we can’t but—”

“No, Doctor,” Slug stated, finger raising to suggest there was no further arguments, “I have traveled a long way, and it is late. I need rest… and it seems you do as well.”

The other man gulped, looking around as they slowed their walk across the Manor—similarly set up to White Hat’s. Open foyer with a stair case leading into two wings. Although Slug spent his previous visits in the underground lab, he suspected that there was probably a guest room somewhere in the Manor.

“I can’t sleep…” Flug admitted. This came as no surprise to Slug. The other scientist appeared to suffer from severe anxiety issues, if not outright panic attacks. His nerves were shot and working for a sinister creature like Black Hat probably made them worse. It seemed odd he was so desperate to work for the Eldritch, and had once thought to ask, but it was honestly none of Slug’s business. Slug’s said business was entirely focused on other endeavors—ones he had no intention of sharing with anyone unless he had to.

“Perhaps I can help with that,” Slug said, and pulled out a needle to spin between his fingers. Flug stared with wide eyes, uncertain. They stopped at the evaluator that would take them to the lab. “I have already set a meeting with Black Hat for tomorrow, and I will present you with a formulated plan of attack… but, tonight there will be no work. We must start fresh—which means sleep and...”
he flicked his unimpressed eyes down Flug’s thinned out body, “Some proper meals. You can see how I structure my days to be most successful. You can feel free to emulate them when our work is finished—or yours is stabilized. However, you will sleep tonight. One way or another.”

Flug rubbed at his arm, then looked at the elevator. He moved away and redirected them toward the stairs, and presumably, rooms to sleep in. As they ascended, he glanced at the needle still in sight. “W-What’s in it?”

“Perfectly legal substances, if you that is what you are worried about.”

“Is it… addictive?”

Slug replied after a moment, “No, but I have more than enough if you should find it a preferable to conventional methods of rest and relaxation.”

“How long before it affects—”

“Near instantaneous.”

“I—” he hesitated. Then sighed. They’d reached a door and he nodded at it, “This is my room. You can use the one across from it.” He reached out his hand for the sedative. “Good night, doctor.”

“Hmm, cute,” Slug said. He didn’t bother handing over the needle. With a twirling move of his wrist, he jabbed it straight into Flug’s neck. The man jumped, and Slug steadied him with a careful arm around his back.

“Huh—wha—why…?” came the slurred questioned as he slumped into Slug’s hold.

“It’s patent pending,” he replied, “And I am not silly enough to just give away a recipe in a syringe. Gotta be careful, even of your allies, Dr. Flug. That’s Lesson One for the day.”

He swept up the man into a bridal carry as Flug passed out. He moved into the Flug’s room and flicked on the light. It didn’t take him long to locate the bed—as gaudily decked out in childish cartoon planes as it was. Again. How. Cute.
Slug placed him down gently, taking off his shoes, and tossing a quilt over his body. He hesitated with the paper bag… settling for loosening the googles a tiny bit and stopping there. Sparing half a second to eyeball his figure and readjust the pillow to better support his neck, Slug nodded. He turned around to leave—and had to stop himself from screaming at the dark silhouette in the doorway.

“Black Hat,” he greeted, moving his empty syringe into the front pocket of his lab coat. The needle nearly sliced through the fabric, but that was fine. He would disinfect and properly discard it in private elsewhere.

“Dr. Slug,” the Eldritch Horror said in that way where he butchered language. A short, stilting, menacing kind of threat. An assemble and barrage of noises vaguely human, but was really the barking of some hell-beast on the hunt for lost souls.

“You received my email and recommendations for tomorrow?” he asked, just to confirm. Black Hat gave a snort, and his inhuman eye began to burn inside his figure.

“Of course, Dr. Slug. I would not have you here if it was not absolutely necessary,” he said, gesturing around the room. Slug remained still. It felt vital to his survival. Predators saw movement as invitation to attack. “We appreciate how quickly and efficiently you mean to dismantle my operation thus far.”

Slug’s eyes went deadpan, “If you plan to question my ideas every step of the way—”

“Of course not,” came the response, “I specifically asked for you.”

“Then your comment seems unusually hostile.”

“I was merely surprised how quickly you could wrangle my employee to your whims…” he explained too calm, and his claws tapped at the bedroom’s wall… beside the light switch. Slug felt extremely disadvantaged.

“A skill I can gladly teach you—”
“I don’t need to learn—!” Black Hat started, digging into the wall. He must have hit the electrical wires, as the lights flickered, and his form shuddered, writhed in the darkness. Expelling breath that held the scent of something acidic, he chuckled, “Your presence here is a nothing more than precaution. I have no doubt we can bring our business back up without you—but better safe than sorry. What you have to offer is unwanted, Doctor.”

“Noted, sir.”

Black Hat sneered, but, regained himself since Slug didn’t react to his verbal barb. He placed his hands behind his back, tipping his head briefly. “I will see you in the morning for a briefing of what is needed. Nothing more.”

“Understood,” Slug said. He did not move. Listening to his sixth sense, everything was alerting him to how dangerous it would be for any sudden action. Black Hat narrowed his eyes.

“Then you’re dismissed,” he said, clipped. Slug nodded, jerkily moving past Black Hat as fast as his stiff legs could manage. He immediately threw open the door to the room across the hall, peering over his shoulder to see the Eldritch Horror disappear into shadows as the lights flicked out. Slug slammed his door and hit the light switch. It blared down a sickly yellow.

The back of his head hit the mahogany door hard. He tried to breathe into the beats his heart skipped. White Hat was annoyingly confused about humanity most days but this? This was a whole other level of otherworldly bullshit.

Black Hat didn’t bother to hide his true nature. He… He weaponized it.

…

Dr. Slug had just finished his presentation of the course of action for the following two weeks to Black Hat and Flug. Dr. Flug received it exceedingly well. Black Hat sat, claws steepled, with an intense frown the entire time. It was… not unexpected, but Slug’s previous encounters working with a cosmic creature were vastly different. He’d almost take the passiveness to such a toxicity-exuding presence. No wonder Flug was wound into a hair-pin trigger.

“Any questions?” he offered.
“N-No, I am quite ready to get to work,” Flug piped up, determination flaring up in his voice. Slug smiled a bit to himself. The other scientist was quite endearing.

“Well, this is…” Black Hat grimaced, “Comprehensive. But, I feel the need to remind you that your plan executes our current deficiencies. I don’t see how this stops the problem from occurring next month.”

Slug sighed, knowing this was coming. “I know. The current state of affairs with the dismantling of the Golden Rule group has affected us as well but—”

“But the Heroes are bashing down on your door for advice!” he hissed, “I would have thought Villains would rush to us for revenge plans or other inventions but—they’re all just sitting back and enjoying the chaos! How do I get people interested in the fight again?!”

Slug paused…

Damn it. Curse it all… he really was going to have to do this. He was going to have to explain humanity to a being who did not understand what it meant to be a human—which even humans couldn’t properly figure out either. All he could think of was the warning given to him last night, the most perfect example.

“Well, Black Hat,” he said, and the creature gave him a snarl. Slug shoved his hands into his pants pockets to remain unthreatening, “That is to say, sir—” and the being settled slightly, “It’s because your Villains feel a sense of… fulfillment. They feel as if they have been served, somehow. You’re going to have to remind them they still need you. You have to offer something to them that will fill a void they didn’t know they had. That’s what a truly evil businessman does—you create a hunger, and then tell them only you have something to satisfy it… whether it really exists or not. Whether it’s wanted or not.”

Black Hat’s face slid free of any emotion or thought. He digested those words silently. Flug worried at his side. And then, with an evil smile, one filled with jagged teeth that dripped acid, declared, “Well, well… this is certainly a delicious turn of events, isn’t it?”

“I have no idea what you are referring to, sir.”

“Of course not,” Black Hat replied with a chuckle. He gaze moved to the confused Flug, and Slug shuddered while being ignored, “Unwanted, but needed… I am sure we can think of something to
offer in these next two weeks.”

Slug felt the urge to flee, but squashed it.

You don’t run from predators. They’ll give *chase* and then you’re *food*. Slug felt himself slip back into full survival mode.

Black Hat looked back to the doctor with a decisive nod.

“All right, dismissed. Get to work.”

…

White Hat, just a few days later, was sitting at his desk after a particularly grueling meeting. The Hero had burst in, demanding to see him without a scheduled appointment. He had no idea how to turn the distraught man down—a good friend of Tommen, the Golden Child—because he felt somehow abused by the dismantling of the Golden Rule group… Still, White Hat could only offer him nothing more than the group belonged to Tommen, by right of birth. Instead of relinquishing it, he’d rather overturn it and start a new group, if he had friends willing to forgive the idea of his parents’ questionable practices and start anew with him.

“Did you tell him to do it?” the Hero asked.

“That, my friend, does not concern you. If Tommen wishes to share the events of our meeting, he may. As you know, I will not discuss outside these walls what is said in confidence.” The Hero was humbled, and White Hat had offered his hand in peace, “I can only suggest you meet with Tommen and discuss your feelings. Although he is under no obligation to reinstate the group… as a friend, maybe you can air your concerns and move on.”

“It’s just… the *idea* was their thing—the De Loins’ I mean. I know they sometimes worked too close with the angle that the ends justified the means… but still, it was the *symbol* of the Gold Rule that gave people that sense of security they needed,” the Hero argued.

“And I do not fault your logic, but the matter has been settled by Tommen. He made his choice, you must now make yours. We all choose sides, I’m afraid, but that does not mean that one day you cannot find your friends beside you again,” White Hat said.
“I don’t know,” was snorted before being followed up with a fond, “Tom is one stubborn son of bitch.”

“Well, I never did say he would come to be on your side, now did I?”

The Hero decided to leave after that, leaving White Hat with a feeling he may have made some sort of mistake… perhaps Tommen was right. Perhaps Dr. Slug was needed to sit in on some of these meetings. They had never tried before—Slug’s past being what it was. His involvement with White Hat Manor caused a stir those first few years, before, eventually people just sort of assumed the man was part of a forced, undocumented rehabilitation project.

White Hat did not see the need to correct the assumption, as per his rules, Dr. Slug had come to him… well, not confidence at first—but, he had told White Hat things in secret. And White Hat knew, without being told, that such things were best left unexplained to the world at large.

Their arrangement was strictly between him and his dear doctor.

If White Hat was brutally honest… he liked it that way, anyway. It meant that Slug had nowhere else to go. No one else to trust, to rely on. White Hat was the only one Slug had—

“Uh…” Clementia said, tapping on his office door. Startled, and feeling more than a smidge of guilt, White Hat stood from behind his desk.

“Yes, dear?” he asked too quickly.

“Yes, dear?” he asked too quickly.

“Has… Has he called yet?”

White Hat sent her a smile, producing his tablet from the main desk drawer. He flipped it around and showed her the video email he had received from their doctor. The man was in Black Hat Manor’s lab, greasy and sweaty from the looks of it, munching on something all alone from the camera angle.

“And don’t forget they changed recyclables because of the holiday coming up—so put it out on Monday night, okay? Oh! Also, 0.5.0. is due for claw maintenance. I can call if you need me to, or we can always wait until I get back. Just make sure he doesn’t tear up the carpeting—”
Clem was laughing behind her hand. White Hat had already watched it—twice—but didn’t warn her when the explosion happened. She jumped a bit, face worried.

“DAMMIT DEMENTIA—” swearing in a combination of Spanish and Portuguese, “Alright. Well. Now I have to start all over…” The masked face came back into frame, irate and disheveled, “I might not be able to send you an update for a few days because SOMEONE—”

“HI CLEM-CLEM!”

“CAN’T KEEP THEIR GODDAMN HANDS TO THEIR GODDAMN SELF!”

“THE BUTTON WAS SO SHINY!”

“I… I don’t understand how someone could commission a device with a self-destruct button… It’s so… It’s just—fucking self-destructive.”

“It’s a weekly thing, Super Slug.”

“… Right.” Slug turned to the camera, and gave a half wave, “It’s chaotic, but, going really well… guess I’ll see you when I’m home. Bye—” He was reaching up to cut off the recording, but must have missed because it continued for a few more moments. “Since you broke it, Dem, call the client and let him know I wanna talk with him. Give him some pointers on engineering, or maybe the name of a therapist.”

“Yeah. Dude totally needs one—he’s obsessed with platypuses. Weird as shit.”

“I—I hope you don’t mean how I think you mean it—”

“I told you—Weird as shit.”

“… I am going to just go find Black Hat then—”
“Your video?”

“I’ll send it after I update Black Hat. That’s more important right now.”

“Er, no, doc, I think it’s still recording.”

“Oh,” Slug’s head turned back to the recording, tsking, “Oops, stupid rubber glov—”

It cut out, and Clementia stared at the final image of the purple, torn gloves smeared across the lens as the video ended. White Hat watched her face go from excitement, relief, to now, a stony storm of emotions. She handed the tablet to the Elder Being, fingers shaky.

“My dear…?” he asked, unsure why she looked like she was struggling with some horrid internal demons, “Are you—I know it’s short but—”

“You’re not worried?”

“About the explosion?” White Hat posed.

The girl shook her head, “No, not the explosion. I’m talking about all the other stuff.”

“Other… stuff?” White Hat looked down at the image. He moved the bubble back, planning to watch it again later. Every update or call or email they had gotten from Slug he kept—hoarding it as some kind of balm for the sudden inexplicable loneliness that was invading the Manor.

“Yeah,” she said, louder than she intended, “The stuff with Dementia. The way they interacted…”

“I thought you would appreciate it. He seems to be getting along with your friend—”

“You don’t get it, do you?!” Clementia burst out, running her hands through her hair. The multi-colored dye had faded, or was being too quickly washed out, as the natural orange-red hue could be seen growing fast from her roots and altering the look of her current style. The hoodie had been pushed down as she stared seriously at White Hat.
“I… I am afraid I don’t,” he said, feeling her accusing eyes.

“I don’t know why Slug was a Villain, but he was—right?”

White Hat nodded after a pause.

“He—He switched sides, though, right?” she asked this with the voice of a child frightened of some big, bad monster in her closet. White Hat imagined Black Hat lurking in shadow corners… and it made his form waver for a fraction of a second.

He did not answer fast enough for the girl.

“White Hat! He switched to our side—right?”

“It’s—”

“No! Do not tell me it’s complicated!” Clementia shouted, clutching her ears as if to save them from some verbal blow, “This should be black and white! Black and White—He’s with Black Hat now, but you’re White Hat. You’re his—and-and I’m—He’ll come back to you… right? Come back to… to me, too, right?”

Oh.

White Hat stared as she broke down again, weeping pitifully. He rushed to her, taking her in his arms. Softly, ever so softly, rubbing her back as she kept crying. The Elder Being let her get it all out. Let her process it and shake and slump against his form without complaint. He could stand there for all eternity, waiting it out… waiting with that hollow feeling engulfing him.

She sat down eventually, and he kneeled beside her. He held her hands, but couldn’t look her in such scared and broken eyes. Vaguely, he wondered if Slug would be mad that White Hat had caused the situation to escalate so badly—that he was unable to offer comfort.
“The reason Dr. Slug is here… *is* complicated, my dear. We have never spoke of where his allegiance lies, in the grand scheme of things. I cannot tell you, but, I can assure you he will return —”

“You don’t really know that, though,” she mumbled through sniffles, rubbing her nose along her shoulder self-consciously.

“I do, because—” he said confidently, feeling the sentiment puffing his form up Heroically. “He is here for a reason. For me, initially. And I like to believe he planted roots too strong here to just leave and go back to unsupervised Villainy—”

Clementia laughed, squeezing his hands, “You like to believe a lot of nice things, White Hat, sir.”

“I feel as if you are making fun of me,” he tried to lighten the mood.

It almost worked.

“But, even if those nice things are true,” she said slowly, thinking aloud, “Even if Slug had switched from Villain to Hero… how can we trust him not to switch back? How can you say he will return when you don’t know which side he will eventually choose?”

“Because I trust him.”

“You’re missing the point, White Hat…” Clem sighed.

White Hat shook his head, grasping tightly to her hands, “No. I’m not, Clementia.”

“White Hat—”

“No. Trust doesn’t work that way,” he said, eye glowing faintly. “You cannot demand people choose you over another. You have to *trust* that they will be there for you—for one reason or another. You give them the benefit of the doubt first.”
Clementia scoffed, pulling her hands away, “That’s the most irresponsible thing you could say to me! What? I am supposed to just trust every single person I meet to have my best interest at heart? That I am just supposed to take it on good faith I won’t get hurt?!”

“No, my darling, that’s not what I am saying,” he said sadly.

“Then what is the point?!” she cried, frustrated. She stood over him, huffing.

“The point is…” White Hat said, looking up with equally frustrated eyes, “He is the only one who can decide where to stand, where to stay. The only thing I have to hold on to is hope. So, I choose to trust that he will know that White Hat Manor can be his home.”

“That’s… too risky,” Clem tried to point out, tried to find the fault through a naïve, selfish logic.

White Hat could only stand, dusting off his pants, “I didn’t say trust was without risk.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t say a lot of things,” she mentioned bitterly as she pulled up her hood.

“Clementia, please, I need you to understand,” the Elder Being sighed, tweaking the unicorn horn that had somehow crinkled itself lopsided during the whole weeping episode, “I want Slug here only if it’s his choice. I want him to be with me—with us—of his own volition.”

She stared at the pallid creature, knowing only somewhat the sort of being he was. Slug had told her stories, explained things in such a way that it was all so magical, so ethereal. She had always considered him so—so much bigger than whatever she and Slug were made of… but, right now, all she could think was how stupid he was.

“Did he have a choice?” she asked. White Hat’s head cocked to the side, uncomprehending. She stopped his hands as they fixated on straightening her hoodie. “Whatever the reason he first came here… did he have any other choice?”

“We all have plenty of choices, so, I am sure—”

Clementia stopped his lecture, stepping away, “I see. That’s all I needed to know.” She turned away
from him, heading toward the door. White Hat felt he’d made another grievous mistake. Another error in judgement. He stepped forward, wondering what he could do to make her feel better.

“Clem—”

“You know, I never considered a future without our—” She started, then gave him a piercing look, “Without my Sluggy. But, hey, we have plenty of choices out there. So… Maybe we ought to plan for that.”

White Hat was startled, and then, the girl was gone with a slam of the door.

He had to shake his head—and found more than that was shaking.

“No… we have to have trust now otherwise…” he said, even with a shaky sort of breath. White Hat didn’t know what he was going to do. He just knew he wanted Slug back… wanted this void inside him gone—filled by his dear doctor’s presence.
Let Us Talk About Violation of Trust

Chapter Notes

So tomorrow I start a brand new job.

And, I am working on chapter 25 now. To give myself time to finish the series, I will upload consistently every Sunday. Hopefully, no one minds that.

That being said, this chapter deals with some violent things, so TRIGGER WARNINGS for language, violence, sexual assault, bloody and I suppose vague gore? Maybe just triggers for vagueness. And being generally unbeta’d with weird time flow.

Anyways! Mostly, because I am a dork, I wanted to personally thank a fellow ace, TheBlackZodiacQueen, for always leaving me so many wonderful things to read on each chapter, and mostly responding to my replies. You are the best, and in the end, if its just you reading the series, I do not mind. :D

In general though, thank everyone who has ever left a comment or kudos. I appreciate every single one.

And, in advance, thank you for reading. Please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Seven: Let Us Now Talk About Violation of Trust

Working with Black Hat was… well, it was not a picnic. Slug was quick to label it a shit show, if one was to go with an honest first impression of Black Hat Manor and Company. Nonetheless, such a small team did work well together… if you considered the results more so than the process they used.

The typical day at Black Hat Manor was… catastrophic at best.

The control freak Slug considered himself was constantly stressed. He nearly shot himself into the sun in frustration on the first day of sorting through the Black Manor’s schedule. Dr. Flug, for his part, seemed to mellow out in turn, giving him a pat on the back and a sort of “Welcome to my world” reaction. Slug did his best not to be too irritated by it.

That being said, he eventually grew use to many of plans falling through and tried to use it to his advantage. Black Hat was scheming away in his office, tossing out all sorts of ideas for Villainous
catalogue and commercials. Whereas the White Hat Manor had inventions in a re-active sense, Black Hat proactively created instruments of torture and other maladies. Dr. Flug was supposed to take those ideas and make them real—which was a feat in and of itself. Slug was constantly reworking bugs and flipping ideas on their head.

Black Hat did not like it, but, until Flug could find a better solution, it was really all they had.

Take for instance—the Capture Cube. A small device to fit in the pocket one could toss at an enemy, capturing them from wherever they happened to be and later transporting them around for whatever reason (reasons including fun, safety, or to deposit in a dungeon later for some old-fashioned maiming). That was all well and good (or, err, evil), except that the average Hero tended to be bulky bastards. One could theoretically shrink them down to a one-by-one inch cube via reducing the spaces in molecules… but that doesn’t necessarily make said Hero any lighter—if anything, it would concentrate the mass. That’s a literally heavy (potentially more dangerous) motherfucking issue to have chilling in your back pocket. Essentially, Slug thought of it as a neutron bomb too close to sensitive body parts that nobody should be comfortable with.

“If we could somehow merge my anti-gravity device with the cube’s infrastructure—” Dr. Flug was muttering, staring at his white board as Slug wheeled beneath a basic rolling steel-claw trap. For whatever reason, the spring-locked jaws kept re-opening.

“Still ignoring the fact that your device has molecules packed too closely together,” Slug cut in. It was much too hot in the lab, and he had to take off his coat to roll up his turtleneck sleeves. He was much more use to White Hat’s Manor’s constant AC running. Mostly for his benefit…

“Oh, well, we’ll limit the capacity to… three Heroes? Heroes like to come in triplets at most, right?” the other scientist asked. He went back to the board to rework the idea some more.

“Eh, Groups are the hot new thing—” Slug said, grunting as he discovered the problem. A loosened clockwork piece as a stabilizer? Really? So unreliable, so old fashioned! Black Hat must have initially designed it and Flug probably didn’t catch it. He took it out, a splatter of oil landing squarely on his chest with a shake of the machine. The jaws snapped close. He wheeled out, grimacing at his shirt, “Teams. They’re going for teams of five now—at least.”

Dr. Flug glanced over, then grabbed a towel, thinking, “Well… guess I’d rather face two than five Heroes at once.”

“True,” the other man agreed, mopping up the mess, “But I would never trust a Villain to settle for anything less than the whole kit and ka-boodle.”
“Experience talking, Dr. Slug?” Flug asked with a light sort of humor.

A shrug in response, “I’m not bitter. Life is glorious.”

Dr. Flug began laughing, and it was a very unusual sound. Surprised, like he didn’t quite know he could laugh. It came with a sort of unpracticed, unannounced bursts. It was more reminiscent of coughing fits. Still, Dr. Slug was always a bit prideful that he’d coaxed those reactions out of the younger man. Sometimes laughter was all you had in this world.

“Every time…” Flug murmured, shaking his head.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so embarrassed. It’s cute.”

“I-I wish you wouldn’t tease me like that,” he said, rubbing the back of his too-pale neck, “But, really… Every time I ask about you, you just—you deflect.”

Dr. Slug stopped trying to clean his sweater. Ruined. Forever. He was going to have to throw this one out too. He took a second to consider the awkward scientist before him. With a shrug, he turned around. Pointedly, he shucked his top, tossing it to the trash can across the way. It landed with a hush into the metal bin, the oil drip-dripping to the bottom. Flug had let out an even quieter gasp at the sight of his naked flesh.

“Yes, yes. Nice power move, Dr. Slug,” Black Hat’s voice drifted through the room. Slug didn’t bother with a proper response, just shot him the bird, and walked to the elevator. His deplorable laugh followed Slug throughout the Manor, burning like the scar tissue crisscrossing his body.

There was really nothing to say about himself other than that.

And, fuck, was he bitter about it.

…
The bear was nice—certainly different from Cero—but nice. A failed experiment, Flug had told him. Dr. Slug could figure that out on his own, as the thing paraded about in a maid outfit in a Villain’s manor but… well, at least it did something. Granted, it was exceptionally soothing. Colored like the sky. Sounded adorable. Cuddly.

Slug was forced to realize that he hadn’t felt touch in... well, since he arrived and had to tuck the other doctor into bed. Dementia spent a large portion of time breaking stuff, or being a menace. Dr. Flug was always calculating something in his head, and shying away from anyone with an apprehensive eye. And Black Hat?

Slug felt a shiver pass over his very soul at the idea.

The big, blue bear was rubbing the top of his bag—having been at first very confused at what seemed to be two Flugs’ before recognizing it was just Dr. Slug helping out. He probably shouldn’t have the paper bag-mimicking face mask on, but he’d grown use to it over the years.

Originally, it was just a tongue in cheek sort of reference to Black Hat and White Hat needing to be mirrors. Keeping it all balanced—a literal Yin and Yang. But, well... it was oddly comforting after a while. Before, Slug wasn’t much to look at, no one noticed him... and then, well, he was very noticeable. People sometimes stared, and then sometimes pointedly avoided him. It was different but, there was nothing he could do but accept it.

Almost like penance.

Slug snorted into his lunch—he’d never really asked White Hat’s opinions on things like that. He would probably have some dumb extra ultimate goodly thing to say… Not that Slug would really know what it would be. It was always choice, choice, choice… and so. Well. Guess that settles it. Slug’s choices led him to what happened.

It wasn’t fair, though, in Slug’s opinion. Not in the grand scheme of things.

The blue bear cooed at him, and Slug looked up, strangely grateful.

“It’s fine. I’m just...” he said, then shrugged, “I guess I can’t help missing things. People, points, a pain-free existence. That sort of deal.”
“Awwww, you miss Clem-Clem and White Hat?”

“Good afternoon, Dementia,” Slug said, sobering. His goggles revealed a peeved expression.

“Ya only got a couple of days left,” she pointed out, hopping up onto the kitchenette counter. She swung her legs, bashing the heel of her feet into the cabinet. They dirtied the wood and left dents. The bear made frustrated noises at her. She shooed it away, sticking out her tongue. It huffed and left, apparently done with her disrespectful attitude toward cleanliness.

“And how I relish the last day already…”

“I like how *snarky* you are,” she purred, and Slug backed up as she invaded his personal space with a slither.

“Glad to have your approval,” he quipped. He tossed the rest of his sandwich, feeling queasy as the Manor’s guard dog stalked around him. She snickered, mismatched eyes crinkling. The reasons behind their coloring doing nothing to settle his stomach either.

“I wouldn’t worry so much about *my* approval,” she said.

Slug rolled his eyes and picked up his lab coat, saying, “I don’t worry about any approval. This little exchange program is nearing its end, and hopefully, will never be needed again.”

“Well,” Dementia said, thinking aloud, “It’s not really an exchange program.” Slug paused as he shrugged his coat back on. The lizard hybrid continued, smirking, “Unless White Hat would want Flug instead, ya know?”

Slug said nothing, just glared at her.

“Just saying…” she mentioned, and then jumped off the counter. “He does… *ogle*.”

“White Hat is an idiot,” Slug said, “He doesn’t understand social norms.”
“Eh, neither does Black Hat,” Dem countered.

Slug didn’t know why he was bothering to explain, but, “White Hat believes in choice. Sometimes he wants to be the one offering choices or… you know, pointing them out to people who think they don’t have any left.”

Dementia leaned in, and Slug stepped back. She was just reaching for an apple placed in a bowl in the sink behind him. He forgot he had washed a few earlier to go with his sandwiches. He’d been too busy brooding. Part of him wanted to huff, claim that fruit was his, but she sank her teeth into it.

“You’re right,” she claimed between crunching, spitting juice across his mask, “White Hat is an idiot.” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “If he thinks Flug gets a choice, he obviously doesn’t know Black Hat—or me. The doc’s ours. We’re keeping him.”

“And how does Flug feel about this?” Slug questioned, folded his arms across his chest.

Dementia laughed at him. “Who knows? And who cares?”

“Hmm, you could lose him with that kind of attitude,” the scientist taunted. Dementia shook her head, little lizard eyes on her hood spazzing out. It made her look slightly crazed. She took another bite of the crisp, blood colored apple.

“Dunno how,” she said, “It just means we want him all to ourselves. Wanna keep him. It’s a compliment, right? Means he belongs here.”

“Means he belongs to you, like an object.”

“Means he belongs with us!” she shot back.

Slug felt he was winning, it wasn’t hard against a newbie Villain. Just point out how detestable their logic could be and—

“But what the fuck do you know about belonging somewhere,” she grumbled. With her black painted nails, she peeled off a section of skin on her apple, “Black Hat and Flug think you’re sooo
gifted, but you’re just a soft-ass wannabe. Don’t know anything about Villainy. Ran off to White Hat when things looked scary for you, right?”

“Watch it, girl, I’ve been in the Game longer than you.”

Dementia crushed the apple in her hand, “You were, I’m sure… but the Game’s changed.”

“If that’s true, I’m still ahead of the curve,” Slug said. The girl laughed darkly before she threw the pulpy apple—Slug caught it—and she tried to attack during the distraction.

Except.

Slug wasn’t lying. He was no Newbie. He knew every trick in the book. He expected it. With little thought, he grabbed the handle of the sink, twisting the knob to the coldest setting—and it was icy cold for this time of year—to level it directly against the girl’s throat.

The blast of water stunned her, and then the temperature kicked in. The liquid poured across her vulnerable larynx and soaked across the front of her chest, making her wheeze. Her body seized instantly. Knees locked, and thighs shaking, she struggled to stay upright. Dementia’s face turned blue and she grasped the front of her clothes, trying to pull the cold water farther from her skin. It seemed she was having trouble breathing, lungs shocked from such immediate drop in temperature.

“Tell me again, little lizard, how am I disadvantaged?” Slug mocked, he ran the water across his neck, feeling instantly cooled in the overheated Black Hat Manor, “Can you adapt to change as quick as I can…?”

“F-Fu—uck… y-y-you!”

“DEMENTIA!”

Slug stopped looming as Dr. Flug sped in, dropping an armload of metal and wires. Calming, Slug was turning off the water as Flug stood in front of the hybrid, partially to shield her, and partially to help her stay upright.
“It seems your creature has an obvious weakness, doctor,” Slug offered, “If one understands the basics of reptilian biology, I mean. The Manor’s unnaturally higher temperature makes sense to me now.”

Flug nearly growled, “She may be annoying, but you don’t have to be cruel!”

“You should have considered such reactions before playing God, Dr. Flug.”

Flug said nothing, just decided to turn around, taking his labcoat off and wrapping the lizard hybrid in it. The girl shivered, but her face was returning to normal color as he rubbed his hands along her arms. Slug glanced over to the doorway, feeling the back of his neck prickle.

Sure enough, Black Hat was there. Watching. His face devoid of anger, but his tone mocking, “You continue to act in such a manner, Dr. Slug, and you might leave here with no friends.”

“Seeing as I don’t work for you, I am unbothered by this.”

“Except—” Black Hat reminded, walking forward and lying a hand on Dementia’s still shivering shoulder, “For the next few days, you do. And I do not appreciate fighting amongst employees.”

“Could have fooled me, the way this place is run,” Slug said, leaning against the counter. Black Hat’s eye twitched, brows shooting up. His claws grew the tiniest bit longer. He was looming like an elongated shadow.

“And by the way you run your mouth you’re assuming you’re still needed here…”

“If not, I can leave,” Slug offered.

Dear God, please, let him not be needed here.

Black Hat scoffed, settling down. He took his hand off Dementia’s shoulder. Fixing his hat to a jaunty angle, he let out a sigh, “White Hat suggested two weeks—it would be a waste to let you go so soon.”
Well, shi—wait. What?

“White Hat?” Slug asked, bewildered enough to let his boss’ name pop out of his treacherous mouth. Black Hat paused, catching on—shit, shit shit—before nodding.

“I asked for a week and he said, take two,” the Eldritch Horror explained.

Slug felt himself growing defensive, “Well, you certainly need it. What with being so far behind and unwanted—”

“S-Someth-thing you know a-all about, r-r-right?” Dementia murmured under her breath. Slug didn’t even bother with a response. Black Hat spun back around, not needing to have the last word with Slug.

“Come, my doctor, we a few more videos to film before the night is out.”

Flug looked between everyone, confused, but stood dutifully and followed his boss out the swinging doors. Slug’s hackles raised and he didn’t realize the apple he’d caught had turned to mush in his hand, he was so tense.

Dementia lounged back, holding her doctor’s coat close, “See? Even White Hat knows you can’t be trusted… He’s all about choice, you said? How’d you think he feels about a guy who doesn’t have the balls to pick a side to stay on?”

Slug threw the apple in her face. It plopped nicely with a disgusting weight to knock her back.

“Doesn’t matter,” and a demented laugh interrupted him, but Slug continued, choosing to hide himself in his room for the rest of the day, “Think whatever you want… but I didn’t really have a choice.”
Slug went on like nothing happened. In retrospect, it was probably not the wisest move, picking a fight with the more deadlier members of Black Hat Manor. Still, the whole incident had just sort of been… automatic.

Dr. Slug slipped back into bad habits, is all. He’d forgotten, almost, how demanding Villains were. They were always pushing, seeing how far they could get away with things—and if you gave an inch—you weren’t going to make it. Perhaps he didn’t have to cut so deep and so quick with Dementia… then again, the girl was hacking away at him with whatever she could find… twisting things into him until something snarled and took.

Slug just had to remain cool. Remain calm.

_Control_ himself. His bitterness and anger would get him nowhere.

Not that he wanted to go anywhere with the Black Hat Company… he was here only because White Hat had—had apparently decided he was more useful with _Black Hat_…

“Dr. Slug,” Flug pulled him away from another project with a soft call. Slug looked up, blinking dully. He felt weary and it was only—checking his watch—11 AM. Fuck… Still, at least the other scientist acted like nothing happened the previous day.

“Yes?” he asked, walking over to a work desk. Beakers were aligned and tubes ran into and out of other glass containers over burners. Slug waited a step away from the table for Flug to answer him.

The other man briefly glanced up, seeing Slug, before pointing at the further most pitcher. He held up test tubes in a wooden holder in his other palm, “I need that green liquid—” he instructed, and Slug looked over to see a thick sludge beginning to boil over, “Preferably before it bubbles anymore.”

“Of course,” he answered. He walked a bit closer to the table, pausing only because the heat from the resulting mixture hit him from so far away. Slug scanned the table for tongs—finding them gleaming along the wall just behind the chemical set up.

With a sigh, he inched closer, vaguely aware of the heat. He reached up on tiptoes, fingers barely grasping the tongs when he heard the alarmed gasp. It caused him to pause, and he jumped back just in time for the green bubbles to pop along his labcoat.
“C-Carefully, doctor!” Flug warned, placing his test tubes down, “I’m trying to recreate dragon fire…”

Slug sighed, holding the tongs to his chest feebly. He shook off the tenseness in his arms, starting to stretch toward the concoction, “Right, no harm don—”

He spoke too soon as another popped, speckles of liquid leaping across the air and landing squarely along the midsection of his sweater. His eyes widened, and with a searing heat that crackled along the seam of his cotton blend, it went up in sickly lime bursts of flame. Flug yelped, and Slug tossed the tongs to the side.

In his panic, he stripped off his lab coat and tried to yank the fabric farther from his skin. Like he could move away from the fire, he backed up, tripping over his own feet. He went down, arms and legs wheeling blindly, shouting, “N-NO! GET IT OFF! PUT IT OUT!” His mask went flying somewhere behind him as he shook his head away from the puffing flames—

and the heat spread further. A gray smoke enveloped his vision, and he felt suffocated, trying to scramble… Being in engulfed in soot and tar and flame and the screams…

But, through his panting he found that there wasn’t heat really. And the gray smoke was just his coat thrown over his face. A hand was patting harshly down his stomach and up to his chest. Slug yanked the fabric off his face, scooting backwards from the fierce whacks he was receiving.

“W-Wait! STOP!” he demanded. Suddenly, Flug was still above him. Slug panted, checking his sweater—ruined, a whole strip burned up along the front. Without thought, he tore his gloves off, fingers inching along his previously ruined skin for any new damage.

His whole body collapsed backwards as he sighed. He was unsure how long he laid on the unforgiving floor, thanking whatever deity cared, but eventually, the nervous voice of Flug asked, “Are you o-okay…?”

“Give me a minute.”

“Of course, I understand. PTSD?”

“What?!” Slug growled, sitting up so fast he got dizzy. Flug was hunched over him, holding a bundle
to his chest. Dr. Slug eyed it with distaste, instantly back on edge. “What the fuck do you think you’re—”

“I don’t think you’re weak,” he said.

Slug glanced away, seeing his mask behind him. It had been damaged as he fell. He swiped it up, scoffing, “I wouldn’t give a shit if anyone thought I was. Mostly because I’m not—momentary panic is all.”

“It’s perfectly normal,” Flug said. He extended his arms, and there was a new shirt and another sandwich bag to use. Both were fresh and crisp. Clean. Slug stared, deadpan. “G-Go on. You can borrow my extras for the day. I always have a few pairs stashed down here for this kind of thing.”

With a sigh, he took the bundle, “… thank you.”

“It’s no problem…” he said, and then sat down next to Slug as the other scientist shrugged it on. He glanced down to see it was a large blue t-shirt. Poly blend… with an airplane on it. Of course. What a frickin’ nerd.

“Really?”

“I like what I like.”

Slug shrugged, he couldn’t exactly blame the man. He had his own fascination with… bugs. Yet, no one would ever get him to admit it. It was just too… on the nose. Flug was staring at him—and yes, that suddenly felt uncomfortable. He tugged the bag over his horrid face, which he hadn’t quite fathomed yet that it had been uncovered after so long. The fire had triggered something else, but now he was…

Well, he scrapped up his own goggles, lens now faulty.

“So… does anyone else know you’re afraid of fire?” Dr. Flug asked, breaking his concentration.

Slug stood, ignoring the question before he could deck the other scientist. He pulled on his coat,
fixing the lapels arrogantly, “My goggles are broken—do me a favor and grab my repair kit from my bedroom… since this accident is your fault in the first place.”

Flug frowned, but slowly rose to his feet. He paused, as if to verbally respond, but shook his head with a sigh. He left the lab with a sort of defeated gait… Slug glanced back just to make sure the other scientist was gone before he stumbled over to an unused corner to hug himself.

He trembled on the spot, trying to breathe… and the scent of ash and smoke filled his head. His eyes watered instinctually. Slug wanted to beat the memories out of his brain. It wasn’t fair—it wasn’t fair! He did everything he could!

No—No.

That was a lie… he could have laid there and burned to death.

Slug had to come back to the moment in little pieces. He paced across the floor—found a sink tucked in a corner behind a medical curtain. His hands skinned along a metal gurney. It felt cool. He needed—He needed water.

Just turning on the faucet, letting the feel of water cascade against his patchy hands. It was enough. It soothed across his palms and he slowly felt better. His sanity ticked back towards something vaguely stable as he continued to let the sink sputter, water falling in lines of thick droplets along his fingers. Dark in parts, pale, grayed, decayed in others. Thin… but they worked. Nerve damage minimal, surprisingly. By some miracle, they were all there. He could still go on working and toiling and doctoring. It was possible some student, somewhere, tried something experimental on him to keep his whole body intact.

When he woke up in the hospital, fully, the process was nearly done.

Yay. He survived.

Like the disgusting Slug he was… he always survived.

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. That sixth sense he’d honed was ringing. Someone was there—
In the quickest second, Slug’s face was bashed against the porcelain edge of the sink. It was sharp—bursting across his bagged face in an instant—and the blow discomobulated him. The next second he was thrown against the metal gurney, face down. A claw was around his neck and an inky, heated body pressed up behind him.

Ah, fuck. Black Hat.

“Finally alone…” he breathed. Slug wanted to bite back something, but fuck was it hard to catch his breath being pinned down like this. The Eldritch Horror took one of his arms and wrenched it behind his back. Then his long legs kicked Slug’s own apart. Black Hat slotted right into the open space and Slug’s eyes went wide.

What the fuck?

“We don’t have much time before that meddlesome doctor returns from his room—” Black Hat said, breath ruffling along the paper bag. Another claw moved to the front of his jeans, ripping open the button…and something squirmed against his ass when Slug jumped away from the action.

What. The. Fuck?!

“Try not to scream,” Black Hat warned, tightening his hold on the fragile human neck. Slug jolted when his shark-like teeth tore into the junction of his shoulder—mouth opening in a choked cry. The horrible creature chuckled, blood falling against the gurney, pressing harder against Slug’s backside. There was definitely parts moving along his legs, his thighs, and sneaking into his opening pants.

What. The. FUCK?!

As Slug’s mind reeled at all the new information about to be literally thrust into him, the medical curtain obscuring the gurney was pulled back. The harsh light from the rest of lab falling onto the pair. Confused, Black Hat’s movements ceased. Slug blinked, catching the sight of the shaking Flug—holding the goggle repair kit to his chest.

He promptly dropped it, pivoting on his heel, and rushed off.
Black Hat’s hand around his neck spasmed. Then it slid up, ripping off the paper bag on the man pinned down. He growled when he saw Slug’s disfigured face glaring right back up at him. He coughed lightly, struggling against the immobile hold, “T-Think you’re in trouble, _jefe_…”

Black Hat let out an ungodly screech, yanking Slug up by what little hair he had left. The man winced, reaching up to fight the hold. Black Hat snarled and tossed him across the lab for his efforts. Of course, Slug had to land along the chemical station—smashing every single glass beaker and test tube and anything vaguely breakable that could slice into his squishy human body. He rolled along the work desks, before dead dropping off the table and onto the ground in a very painful heap.

Black Hat just stalked past him, curses—some probably literal, and others figurative to any language of choice—sputtering and spitting out of him as he made his way back up the elevator after Flug.

Slug groaned into sore ribs, trying to raise himself on to his hands and knees. He trembled lightly, vision wavering as he looked for somewhere to crawl. There had to be safety somewhere in this crazy-ass Manor!

“F-Fuck…” Slug mumbled, eyesight going hazy and darkening, “N-No… just—just make it to a door—a wi-window…” He reached out, searching hesitant in the fading light. Even some kind of trap door. Something… anything…

He blacked out.

…

Everything hurt.

He knew that.

For a heart attack inducing second, he briefly thought he’d dreamed his life in one of his epileptic fits in the hospital. His eyes sprung open, and bright lights were over him. His arms came up to look for IVs, and he winced, feeling like slivers of something danced under his scarred skin.

“_Arrooo!”_ something cooed at him from the side. His arms came down—unhooked to anything, but nevertheless covered in band-aids and still oozing. Slug’s fuzzy head looked over at the sound. A bright blue blur was trying to calm him.
“5.0.5.,” he realized. The bear gave him a smile of comfort, Slug struggled to sit up, “Y-You gotta get me out of here.” The bear worried itself, glancing about. It was gesturing in a pseudo-form of sign language and maybe even charades. Slug shook his head. He started pushing himself off the—fuck back on the god damn gurney in the lab. “Look, bear! I over stayed my welcome. I’ve got to go!”

“I’d say,” a voice taunted him.

Slug’s head spun as it shot up to look at whoever said that. Dementia was idly toying with a new chip in the sink. Her green hair spilled over her shoulder as she also sent a triumphant look his way. Slug remained silent as she sauntered over to him. He wasn’t in the mood to play.

“You sure fucked up—”

“What do you want?” he asked.

Dementia’s eyebrows raised.

“If you’re here to watch me before Black Hat comes back to finish the job—”

The lizard hybrid let out a cackle. She shook her head, holding out a phone. “Nah, Black Hat hasn’t left Flug’s room yet. I found you first, ya know, and brought Fives here.”

“… why?”

“I consider Clementia a friend,” the girl responded. She gave a half shrug. Then, showing him her phone, displayed a message that read Slug-Bug passed out in lab, poor thing. Overworked.

Slug narrowed his eyes, “So, you’ll help me escape?”

“Psh! No,” she answered, pocketing her cell. Slug made a move to swipe it—but she easily restrained the injured man. He let out painful yelp as she pressed against his sore ribcage. Her
demented eyes shone when she realized how she hurt him, “I still got a bone to pick with you…”

5.0.5. fretted, and as it bounced around, Slug saw it drop a pair of medical pliers. Adrenaline pumping, he quickly lunged for them. With the dexterity of a man fighting for his life, he spun around and stabbed them directly into Dementia’s hand that fumbled to hold him down on the gurney. She yowled, skittering backward. Slug barrel-rolled off the gurney to place it between the two of them.

“You touch me again, lagarto loco, and we’ll see if any of your limbs can grow back!”

“That seems unnecessary,” Black Hat’s cold voice spoke behind him.

Fuck.

Slug leaned one hand on the gurney, breathing harshly against the ripples of agony and anticipation. He hadn’t notice Black Hat’s return, but, by the startled face of the lizard girl and the shivering bear in the corner, they hadn’t sensed it either.

“Dementia,” Black Hat barked, “Leave me and the good doctor.”

“B-But he—”

“LEAVE.”

She let out a pathetic whimper, and slinked away, holding her hand to her chest. Slug watched her go, keeping Black Hat’s figure in the corner of his eye. She looked up at her boss with wettened eyes. “It hurts.”

“5.0.5. will see to it,” the Eldritch Horror nodded at the bear to follow the girl. Both scampered away, fearful as the dark figure seemed to breathe shadows to life. Every inch of the lab seemed danker, flickering, as an otherworldly ire seeped from Black Hat and into the ether.

Then, as the lift softly shut… they were alone.
Slug gulped, focusing on the dark thing growing nearer.

“I want to leave.”

“You’re mine for the next few days.”

“You cannot keep me here!” Slug shouted through a wave of pain, eyes screwed up tight.

“But I can,” Black Hat said, gazing at his claws in thought, “White Hat gave you to me.”

“White Hat doesn’t own me!” Slug hissed through clenched teeth. Shit… It really hurt. He edged his body along the gurney, moving away from Black Hat’s daunting silhouette. The creature waited on the opposite end.

He gestured to it, “Lay down. White Hat will be displeased if I returned you beaten… though you do deserve it.”

“He doesn’t own me.” Slug repeated. He felt himself twitch as he placed a hand along the bite mark on his aching shoulder. “Not like you own Flug, at least.”

Black Hat stilled. His claw retracted. A split second later, the gurney flew past Slug, hair ruffled as it missed him by centimeters before crashing into the wall behind him… Slug made sure he stayed perfectly still, holding his breath as Black Hat stalked nearer. “I am quickly losing my patience.”

“I am leaving—” Slug made sure his voice was firm, though it hurt and scratched his larynx raw, “—and you cannot stop me.”

“I-I can.”

Slug’s eye’s widened at the glint of a needle entering his peripherals. He spun in time, arm raised to block a hit, but it forced a hypodermic too deeply. A shudder rolled through him as the tip nicked his ulna. Flug’s hidden face gave no indication of remorse… well… of course not. He had just used
Slug’s own sedatives against him.

“Sorry, doctor... It’s n-nothing personal. Just a precaution. We can’t trust you not to tell White Hat.”

Slug wheezed, body giving up, head swimming with the two Villains looming over him.

Again, he blacked out.

...

Slug woke up with a blink.

The sound of a car engine revving confused him before his sight fully came back to him. A cabbie was pulling away, and his hands were heavy. He turned slightly, body light, as the sunny sight of White Hat Manor’s gates were pulling open. A brightly colored girl was running down the pathway to him—dressed in a silvery tunic and galaxy-print leggings. Her unicorn hood flopped behind her as she jumped, and a purple bear galloped after her. An Elder Being was calmly walking toward him as well.

“Sluggy!”

Slug’s mouth felt like cotton, but his arms automatically caught the girl as she landed square into his chest. The suitcase he was holding clattered to the sidewalk. With a loss of breath, he returned her hug. Though she squeezed as hard as she could, nothing gave a twinge—not his ribs, nor his arms. He glanced down, noting he was wearing his mask as the movement occurred. Clementia was happily babbling into a red turtleneck knit.

“Welcome back, doctor,” White Hat said, and Slug nearly jumped at his velvet baritone. It felt like it had been decades since he had encountered something so... **comforting**.

“Y-Yeah. It’s good to be back,” he answered.

White Hat smiled, his dazzling, beautiful smile, and stood before the two humans. 0.5.0. ambled past, picking up the suitcase, after failing to drag Clementia off Slug’s chest. In a daze, Slug was ushered
back inside. They sat him at the table and wanted to hear about everything as they pulled Tupperware out of the fridge to heat up for him.

He didn’t eat. He just listened to his companions list questions, ramble about the days without him, and eventually demand some quality time. After what he considered enough attention for the two excited Heroic members of the Manor, he stood, feeling unmistakable shaken but refusing to show it.

“It’s been—” he started, but found he had no words, “Sorry. Tired. I’m going… to go sleep for a bit. We’ll get back at it tomorrow.”

They watched him go, understanding, and seemingly, more relieved than he could feel at the moment.

What…

What the fuck happened to him?

…

After a few days, life did return to normal. White Hat was—well he was White Hat. Oblivious and open-hearted and just generally superior to everything that could ever happen. Nearly aloof, but generally optimistic. Nevertheless, after a two-week crash course with Black Hat, Slug believed he was preferential to this sort of behavior.

Clem (and 0.5.0.by proxy) hovered for a bit, apparently grateful for his return more than White Hat let on—as he seemed to float on a cloud of self-sustaining air. Whatever happened between him and Clem had caused some tension, but it cleared up like a mist on Summer’s day. Still, Slug felt a little worried about the girl.

About a week and a half after he’d been home, he started up the difficult conversation, “Everything go smoothly while I was away?”

She paused, poking at her overly saccharine-saturated oatmeal. She was already dressed, which was a plus as it meant she could get her day started right away… but, she was rarely ever this ready and prepared. It was like she was being extra responsible. “I mean, sure. We forgot ‘bout the recycling during the holiday, but. Yeah. It was—I did exactly as you told me to. I even got started on some
Earth Science Projects. I’m gonna try to solve global warming, I think.”

“Lofty task,” he hummed.

Clem looked up, taking a breath, “I mean, that’s—that’s a really big thing. People need the Earth.”

“Yeah, it is what we live on,” he agreed.

“You can’t live on it if it’s gone… or, ya know, take over something that isn’t there.”

Slug paused, refocusing on Clem’s waiting face. She seemed… blank. Just. Waiting. “I—I don’t disagree, but… doesn’t that defeat the purpose of saving it?”

“If you wanted it,” Clem started mumbling, swirling her spoon in the oat and sugar mush she called breakfast, “I’d give it to you. Like, you could keep the Earth for yourself, if that’s the end goal. I don’t mind. I just wanna be in on—I mean, I wanna be on it with you.”

Ah. Slug felt a little piece of himself break. Of course…

“That’s very kind of you, Clem,” he said carefully. The girl gave him a hopeful smile. But he ended up shaking his head at it, “But that’s not what I’m after.”

“I can do something else—”

“Okay,” he cut in as she started to panic, “Well, what do you want to do?”

“I… Well…” she said, hesitating. She seemed to think too long.

Slug sighed, “You’re a kind girl, Clementia. A good girl. I don’t want you to lose sight of that, ever. You stay true to yourself. That’s what I want for you.”
“But you—”

“What I am doesn’t matter to you,” he said it like it was a fact.

“That’s not true!” she cried, and soon, his arms were full of the teen again, “You—You’re my Sluggy! And I… I don’t ever want to lose you.”

The doctor pulled her away, just a bit. He brushed some rainbow-colored bangs away from her eyes before the tears could run along and ruin the newly dyed strands. She spent a lot of time and energy into expressing her normally cheerful, happy-go-lucky self. He wanted to make sure that they stayed just the way she liked them.

“I know it’s… unconventional… but, my past should never define your future. I would very much like to be in it, but I can’t tell you how life will turn out. I will fight for you, though, never doubt that. I will never give you up without a struggle—but I still want you to define yourself outside of me. Even outside of White Hat. Be your own person, whoever that may turn out to be. If that person turns out to be someone who doesn’t need me… I guess I can consider that a win too, because that means I raised you right,” he said.

Clementia sighed, but gave him a half-smile, “You’re just as dumb as White Hat…”

“Hey! I have several doctorates, you know!”

“Yeah… but,” she said, hugging him again, “I still love you. I still want you here with me.”

“Well, I am probably going to be here for a while, so…” he answered with a big bear hug. 0.5.0. snorted in his little webby corner. Slug let go of Clementia, just a little.

“Really?” she asked, pulling back, “You won’t just up and leave? Go work for Black Hat?”

“Trust me, my darling, nothing on the rotting earth could ever force me to go back to Black Hat.”
Slug was in his lab, looking at his arms for the hundredth time in the last few weeks that he had been back to White Hat Manor. There was no evidence of the injuries he received just before he passed out. It was as if all the damage was reversed, never there at all, really.

It unnerved him that his recovery came with a blank space of the last days of his stay at Black Hat Manor.

The idea of him having no memory crawled across his brain like a big, black spider. It tickled his neurons and made his shoulders rise. His spine convulsed the slightest bit as those neurons fired in false sympathy. Everything had felt wrong. He’d done bloodwork, stood naked in front of a mirror, and melted all his clothes, and even any equipment he had returned with. Slug called up the cab company who drove him back… and the guy said the whole ride back was peaceful. He’d napped in the back, woke a few times, stared at the scenery… then paid a bit too generous once left at the white gates.

Although nothing was amiss, or unusual… his body was in top condition… something inside was screaming at him, telling him some great violation occurred.

Yet, he had no evidence. As a scientist, it was beyond frustrating.

0.5.0. buzzed in, cutting short Slug’s contemplations. The bear placed a package delivered in the mail on top of Slug’s desk. He hummed some thanks at the bear, who just grumbled past his muzzle before leaving. Shaking his head, he pulled the package over wondering what exactly it was. Mostly, it was an 12x12 envelope. The only usual thing about the package was that it was… all black.

With a sort of dread, Slug ripped open the top to shake out the contents.

A magazine plopped on his table. With a sigh, he re-checked inside with a cautious eye. Nothing. Taking a pencil, he pushed the magazine so that it was facing him properly. A large black top hat adorned the cover, embossed and glossy. With red trimming, it read for the next month’s date. So, this was the infamous Black Hat Company Catalogue…

There was a blocky message written on it with a blue sharpie—
That was about a little less than half-way through the catalogue. Slug flipped the pages until he got there—a folded book mark falling to the ground—and his blood froze.

A two-page spread of him, strapped to that damned gurney, and being injected with his own sedative! In fact—it was the fucking item on sale! Motherfuckers! He would have thrown a bigger fit, but his face was conveniently shadowed. He only knew it was him because of the pixelated patchwork of healed skin of a not-so covered hand lying against the jeans he wore the day he blacked out.

He read the description of another item off to the side—held by Black Hat himself—and saw it was a hypno-ray device. Oh. Great. That explained a few more things. He was a fucking test subject...! Asshol—

Slug stopped mid-close of the magazine.

The book mark that had fallen was a... a polaroid. Did they... have photographic evidence of his torture? Blackmail, maybe? The irony of Black Hat mailing blackmail seemed like a poor cosmic joke.

He bent down, and saw an elegant script in black ink.

Come back if you—on one folded side. Slug spin it around, noting the edge was bubbled, a smoky dark smudge ruining the shine of the paper. He continued reading—want real answers.

He opened the polaroid.

It smelled of ash, and he gagged, falling to his knees at the image staring back at him.

Black Hat knew.

Chapter End Notes

Major headcannon reveal in the next chapter.
I am super worried for it.

Sorry you have to wait a week to read it.
Let Us Really Get Into the Thick of Things

Chapter Notes

So! This was probably my favorite chapter to write.

I have always had a very non-linear story telling style and this one literally jumps back and forth through time to tell and wrap themes all together. I loved writing it and it's heart-breaking, basically. To me at least.

In this chapter, we find out exactly why Dr. Slug started working with White Hat.

My headcannons for their relationship/partnership is pretty strong... but I worry that it is a little too much? I don't quite know how to explain it. Of course, these ideas for this came to me about six months ago and I have been writing chapters on and off since November. So... I guess, keep that in mind?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eight: Let Us Really Get Into The Thick of Things

Slug was staring at the photo. Just staring. It had been so long… he’d almost forgotten.

In the back of his mind he thought he should probably feel guilty but—it was all too much. Everything hurt, his heart stuttered almost gratefully. His eyes watered. He took off the mask to scrub at his face. Slug cursed himself, holding the photo to his chest, bending over it like he could shield the people in it from the horrors they didn’t know were coming.

It was all his fault.

…

Slug wasn’t quite sure, but he was born somewhere along the Serra de Mar range of Brazil. His mother was unwed, young, and if he had to guess, probably taken advantage of by some tourist or something. All he remembers was his mom telling him she’d been exiled from her village, her tribe for having him. She had to walk all the way to Rio—and from the way it had crippled her step, he believed that. There was nothing for a pretty, unschooled girl to do besides walk the streets… she didn’t last long.
He was nine, he thinks, when she finally passed from all the illnesses she contracted.

They wouldn’t bury her because they refused to touch her leaking, diseased body. So, Slug burned the shoddy lean-to. He used (stole) poorly moonshined grain alcohol a neighbor tried to sell and found flint. Didn’t bother to contain the flames. Just walked away calmly amidst the screaming masses of the shanty-town until he found a spot on a cresting ridge overlooking the sea… and waited for someone to find him. To save him.

No one came.

At least, not that day… and not to save him.

It was only when he was much older that he considered that maybe this thoughtless action is what sealed his horrible, ugly fate.

…

White Hat had been kept busied by his doctor, so much so, he hadn’t realized he missed dinner. Not wanting to miss a memorable moment, he rose to go downstairs. He left his office, humming a bit, and when he reached the corridor to the kitchen on the main level had stopped. Listening for chatter, he was surprised to find none. He stuck his hatted head in the swinging doors and glanced around.

Clementia was slurping up some chicken and dumpling soup. 0.5.0. was sitting across from her, apparently working on a puzzle. It was of a spider catching a fly. White Hat shuddered at the graphic image and walked over, asking, “Where is our dear doctor?”

“Cero said Sluggy got some mail,” she explained through a mouthful of food, “I buzzed him, but he said he was busy.”

“Well! Guess I better to convince him to take care of himself! Don’t want him falling into bad habits like Dr. Flug,” he said. Clem gave a bit of snort, but tossed out a thumbs-up as she tipped her bowl up into her mouth like a savage. White Hat wanted to scold her—but she had been running around just as much since Slug returned. She was probably famished.

Instead, he went to the elevator to the underground lab.
The doors dinged out, and White Hat saw Slug scrambling with his work desk. The Elder Being walked over, ready to berate the man through use of some ‘tough love.’ He didn’t get a chance as the doctor quickly snapped, “I said I’m busy!”

White Hat stilled. His form flickered, though he couldn’t pinpoint why. It was about then he noticed the mask in the shape of a bag lying defeated on the floor. White Hat wasted no time, drawing near and taking the man by his upper arms.

Something was horribly wrong.

“What happened?” he demanded. Slug seemed to struggle, whole body vibrating with a kind of urgency. White Hat controlled the urge to shake the fragile human. The man wouldn’t even look at him. “Dr. Slug!”

He hadn’t seen Slug’s eyes in a while… but they still managed to tear through him. They were so earthy brown, irises broken and scattered with yellow filaments of deteriorating sight. His lashes had regrown, long and dark, and they drooped with the weight of tears threatening to overflow. White Hat thought it was all at once, beautiful and terrible.

“Tell me…” he begged, wanting to catch every drop before they touched the red rift of scars along the left side of Slug’s face. It would probably hurt, those tears, more than it already did.

“I—” the man couldn’t speak. His eyes closed and he leaned all of his weight into White Hat’s open chest. White Hat wrapped his arms around him, could feel his body wanting to reform, create a cage around this human… keep him safe from whatever had caused this. “Black Hat knows.”

 Slug had ended up making a name for himself. He was clever—too clever. He started small, by watching. Learning things. Listening, especially, was crucial in those early days. Then, he started to experiment. Tricking tourists, weeding out the local thugs, stealing things. Of course, his name wasn’t really Slug. Who names their kid after a slimy little bug? No, he was coined Lama by some gang somewhere who couldn’t figure out how to get rid of the little pest. Eventually, he dismantled their operation by going to the corrupt authorities.

A calculated risk—but the head honcho of a local mob liked his spirit. He was adopted into the fold,
and they roughed him up, taught him the ways of the world. Slug spent a long time in fighting rings, at cock-fights, running errands, and eventually, studying. He was always studying in his downtime. In his slickest move to date, he offered to infiltrate a local college as a STEM major so he could have access to the clean labs—the mob could get a leg up on the South American cartel business.

He took to it all like a duck to water. He was good. He was clever—too clever.

He’d made a name for himself—Slug.

…

White Hat was silent at first. He didn’t let go of Slug though. But, his voice was strong, the crashes of ocean against a cliff, “How?”

“I—” Slug paused. He didn’t know if he should really tell White Hat the intricacies of how. The thing was… he’d never lied to White Hat before. There was never a need to. In fact, White Hat was the only person he could ever be wholly honest with. He—He didn’t want to stop now. He didn’t know if he could.

“Dr. Slug?”

“I—I don’t really know,” he said, carefully. It wasn’t a lie—he really didn’t know how Black Hat found out. It obviously had something to do with the new inventions in the catalogue… but he couldn’t tell him about the last thing he remembered suffering for at Black Hat Manor.

White Hat leaned back, lifting Slug’s face. He was searching for something. Slug let him.

“I… I don’t remember how I got back…”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” he tried to keep his voice steady, but there was a note of panic, “One moment I was—I was at Black Hat Manor, and then I just… I just woke up in front of the gates. Here. I have no memories of the last few days before Clem was running into my arms.”
White Hat was staring hard, his talons gripping the underside of Slug’s jaw like an unbidden twitch. Cool, serious, he questioned, “Did He hurt you?”

Reflexively, Slug made to grab the shoulder that was bitten. He didn’t mean to—there was just something about White Hat that made it impossible to resist. Slug held his tongue, aborting the move at the last minute. White Hat’s blue eye traveled to his risen shoulder, gazing too closely. He swept the tips of his fingers over it—and then yanked them back immediately as if shocked by an electrical short.

“He—” White Hat started, voice raising, but cut it off with a quick snarl. Slug placed his hand over it, like that could stop whatever the Elder Being had seen through some cosmic power only he and Black Hat could wield. “What did He do?”

“I don’t know,” Slug replied voice too low.

“Tell me!”

“I don’t know!” he yelled. His arm dropped off his shoulder into a self-soothing hug. White Hat settled, his form ruffling and calming into a less sharp, bright shape he was unconsciously morphing into. “Other than what you can see… I really don’t know… It’s all… It’s just black.”

White Hat scowled, “I’m starting to like that descriptor less and less.”

“It’s… It really freaks me out,” Slug confessed. White Hat sighed, face going back to its impassive, ethereal quality. He glided forward to hold the doctor again.

“Tell me what you do know,” he said. Slug couldn’t bring himself to look at his boss.

“Black Hat really freaks me out…”

White Hat stilled, hands uncertain as they hovered around Slug’s body. Slowly, he retracted them. The doctor still wouldn’t spare him a glance. Wouldn’t chase his touch…
“He threatened you.”

“I don’t know.”

White Hat had to take in a calming breath, saying, “I cannot help if you do not let me.”

“I—it’s fine,” Slug tried, finally looking up, with painfilled eyes, “You know I make bad choices.”

…

Slug had graduated top of his class—both in the university and in the Villainous world of South America. He was exceptional and the Mob Boss he worked for… well, he was a task master. Demanded all sorts of things, and Slug complied, especially if it meant living in the lap of luxury in one of the most beautiful places of the world.

You know, unless he was sent elsewhere because someone had to disappear, and Slug was always clever enough to figure out how exactly that could happen.

Which is where the story turns. He’s supposed to follow this punk—Fernando—who was causing trouble. The Boss didn’t say what trouble, but it’s not Slug’s job to ask. He follows the punk, looking for an opportunity that might make a good disappearance.

The guy is careful, and eventually, Slug opts to wait for him in the dude’s safehouse.

Lazing on the bed, Fernando catches him, and they tussle. Of course, Slug has the upper hand. He rolled him up, knocked out in a carpet, and rolls that carpet in netting and a tarp. He fireman carries the dude to his truck. Then, down to his personal pier. Afterwards, he’s driving out his little schooner, having to use nothing but the stars because any sort of radio or sagittal transmissions could be traced back to him. It takes a bit longer, but eventually he does find a good enough spot. Chums the water a little.

When he peels back the rug, giving the guy’s face a nice cut that ends up soaking into the carpet, Fernando startles awake. He spits at Slug, calls him names, and tells him he is gonna burn in hell for what he’s doing.
“Yeah,” Slug answers with a shrug, “Probably.”

“I hope she kills you when she finds out.”

Slug was hauling the guy over the edge, but pauses, curious.

“Who?”

He should have killed Fernando like he was paid to… But, Slug was always top of his class for a reason.

…

White Hat stares at Slug, feeling everything inside him ripple at the notion that the man standing before him could blame himself for being so—so violated. That wasn’t how it worked! At all! Slug’s choices must have been taken from him. He didn’t remember! He couldn’t consent to anything—

“No, that’s—that’s not how it works,” White Hat declared, echoing the statement Slug so often slung at him, “I won’t hear that from you again—ever. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Slug was clutching something in his hands, holding it tight to his heart. White Hat moved closer, wrapping his fingers around the other man’s scarred wrist. “But I have… before. I have.”

“I don’t care,” he murmured. Slug let his hand be pried away. White Hat cautiously opened his fingers to see a scrunched picture. It was severely heat damaged… but the faces could still be recognizable.

“Oh…”

“There’s a message on the back,” Slug said, gazing at the faces with such a look… a look White Hat did not like. It caused him mounds of distress. Though, he was unsure if he could ever articulate why. There was too much to unpack to fully name each emotion that he was now cable of experiencing.
“What does… What does this mean?” White Hat asked.

Slug was tracing the faces on the polaroid, whispering, “Maybe he knows what happened.”

“We know what happened, Slug,” the Elder Being responded. In a quick move, he folded the picture up, away from Slug’s wandering eyes. They flicked up to White Hat, anger quickly rising.

“Fine! Maybe Black Hat knows who made it happen!”

“If you are suggesting—”

“I need to know, White Hat!” Slug demanded, reaching for the picture. White Hat took a step back, keeping the outstretched hand away. He placed the polaroid into his handkerchief pocket with a stern look.

“I know,” he said, “You came to me for help. I am helping you now.”

“Helping?! Helping how?! It’s been how long, White Hat? There has been nothing! No more information than the day I bust in here!” Slug pointed out, snatching his arm away to cross over his chest. White Hat sighed, and adjusted his hat slightly… trying to hide his expression.

“We will find them, doctor, you have to have faith—”

Slug slammed his hands on his work desk in frustration. “I’m done with faith! I’ve been doing nothing but looking after your nonsense when it’s your fault I’m even here!”

“You know that’s not true.”

“It might as well be!”
Slug wasn’t much to look at—this he knew. He was average, he blended in. He was what they deemed “non-threatening”… which is what you want to look like when you did what he did. So, when he met Miranda, Fernando’s sister, he instantly wished he was better looking.

Even lying half-naked on a filthy mattress in the “store-house,” Miranda was a work of art. She was smooth and tanned, hair a shimmering copper and bronze. Her oval eyes sparkled like amber, and her smile was sent in a lush mouth the color of raspberries. When he saw her, he became a poet. She was so beautiful.

That was probably why she was the Boss’s favorite.

And, though he never believed in love at first sight, he was willing to go down fighting for a chance at it. He could be a Romeo, even if this beauty would be his Rosaline.

Fernando and Slug worked the Mob Boss over, saved Miranda, and BAM. They were top dogs. Slug, for his part, wasn’t too interested in The Business. He was fine being A Man with A Plan. Worked behind the scenes. Blushing and dumb, he asked Miranda to dinner once the dust settled.

She said Yes, anything for my savior, and charmed him with kiss on the cheek.

A year later, they married on the beach. It was cliché, but, hey he liked the sea and she wanted to make love in the sand, bathed by the setting sun. She laughed at him when the cold water of the sea splashed along his calves and he ran half-way up the beach, crying about sea-weed. Still, he felt accomplished as she followed with such a grace that he promised he’d do whatever she wanted if it kept her looking so happy.

He set her up on that cliff at the ridge of the ocean. She could go down and visit grottos and little pools that created their own eco-system… even if they did sometimes contain that dreaded sea-weed.

Another year later for their anniversary, she presented him with a sea-slug in a soft sanded terrarium—a glorious thing that looked like a fantasy creature—white and blue and winged. She told him that when she saw the thing just floating there, she just knew it that was for Slug… slugs could be beautiful too.
Slug likes to think that was the moment when they had conceived their first, and only, child.

Even if he wasn’t much to look at, he did manage to make something even more beautiful.

…

“If Black Hat knows something you don’t—” Slug halted his speech, trying to keep his hands from shaking, “I have to go back to him.”

“No.”

“No!” the Elder Being cut through Slug’s argument like thunder. He wasn’t moving, but his form couldn’t stay still. Light braced off him, the area around him a halo-like shimmer of dangerous things. Like when the moon eclipsed the sun. Slug had to look away for fear of ruination. “You will not return to Him. He—”

“Please,” Slug asked, eyes closed.

White Hat didn’t answer him. Slug wanted to open his eyes… but didn’t need to. His employer was still there, presence lifting and pulling and breaching the whole lab like a tempest. “I… I will speak to my brother.”

“What?! No!” the doctor started, eyes popping open. White Hat held up a hand—whether to silence him or to keep the human’s delicate eyes unharmed, he did not know. Maybe he just didn’t want Slug to see the Elder Being so unstable at the thought of Slug leaving again.

“I will not allow any harm to come to you.”

Slug sighed, reaching for the hand, and holding it between his own. “I—I know… Black Hat knew too. That’s why he… he wouldn’t let me leave. I tried to. He stopped me.” White Hat said nothing.
but Slug could feel the energy radiating off him in stronger waves. The human squeezed tight, “Please, don’t. Whatever if going on in that cosmic dumbass brain… Don’t be like him.”

“What? I’m not—” White Hat’s form snapped to normal, finally, and Slug breathed a sigh of relief. “I am not like Black Hat.”

“You call him twin… you call him brother… and I know the two of you are made of the same stuff. I know you can be capable of—of similar stuff.”

White Hat sighed, but he couldn’t deny it.

“So, live by your own philosophy,” Slug pleaded, “Don’t be like Him. You got to let me go—”

White Hat shook his head, pulling away, “You just returned—returned having been hurt. It’s my job to protect you. I will not make this mistake twice.”

“White Hat!” Slug blurt out, following him to the lift. White Hat would not turn to face him.

“Remain here… where you are safe—”

“White Hat!” Slug tried again. He reached for the Elder Being’s rigid back.

“I will get to the bottom of this. Please await me,” he didn’t order, but the shaky smile he threw over his shoulder was asking something much deeper than mere words. Slug was shocked by it. He withdrew his hand, holding it over his broken heart.

Slug looked at the ground.

“Can I at least have the photo…?”

White Hat called the elevator down, and it sank as low as that hollowed gutted feeling in his chest. “No.”
“But it’s mine! It’s the only thing I have left of them since the fire!” Slug explained, feeling like he was being punished. Fuck, maybe he was…

“I need to know how Black Hat came by it,” White Hat answered coolly, “If you are still here when I return… You may keep it.” He stepped into the elevator with finality. He turned, slow and gracile like the elegant beautiful bastard he was, just as the doors closed on Slug’s dismayed face.

“What the fuck kind of choice is that…?!?”

…

Whenever Slug walked by, people whispered. He had heard everything. The theories were hilarious, were amusing, more often than not. Fernando ran the business, and occasionally, he’d call Slug in. Not that Slug needed more money—having several bank accounts across the globe and double that in hidden caches in major cities around the world. Suffice to say, he knew he was covered.

Fernando, though, wasn’t as careful. Sometimes people tried hostile take-overs. They would end bloody about 80% of the time. Especially when *Heroes* got involved. Ugh, Slug considered it lucky that they’d managed to cut Brazil’s local and nationally recognized Heroes in half since they took over the business…

Still, his brother-in-law made waves. It wasn’t long before people started seeing him more of a figure head than the actual boss. Slug was getting called to the Main Office almost on the daily to come and control the spiraling situations.

“Fernando, Fernando,” Slug recalled saying as they sat in a bought-out, still being built skyrise covered in convenient sheets of plastic, “This wasn’t the plan.”

“You told me I had to hit hard, and fast, if we were going to make it to the next day.”

“You’re not thinking your punches through, my friend.”

Fernando—just as beautiful as his sister despite the scar Slug gave him—shook his head. He stared at the city lights beneath them, for a long while. He stayed there the entire meeting with a rival boss.
Slug shot the impudent bastard as soon as he called them brothers. It was sudden, startling, and quiet as the fat body splatted forward into the plastic. The rest of the goons that came with the dead man tried to fire back. Slug activated the industrial magnet above the unfinished room, and suddenly, everyone was friends. He made them drag the ex-rival’s body away.

“This wasn’t the plan, Fernando.”

“Go back to Miranda. I promised her you’d be home for dinner.”

Slug had heard everything—except that he and Fernando had to be family to be involved. It was too close to fact, and facts had no place in their business.

Eventually, he came to hear the rival boss—the man he had just shot in fear—was an undercover Hero-in-Training.

...

White Hat stalked to his office, nearly tearing the door off in his haste. They banged closed and soon he stalked to his desk. Immediately, he ripped open his secret compartment. He controlled himself enough not to smash the box that held Black Hat’s eye. However, he didn’t bother restraining himself from sinking his talons into it and screaming for his brother in their native tongue.

The eye erupted and swirled around wildly in White Hat’s palm. He closed his as the icy-coldness of his own missing appendage awoke in the nightmare zone Black Hat kept it. His twin’s enraged face was swimming into view, oozing smoke and malice.

“What?!”

“You hurt him.”

Black Hat smirked, slimy teeth glinting, as he said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I trusted you—”
“A bold move for sure.”

“You said you needed help,” White Hat growled at his brother, squashing the urge to also squash Black Hat’s vulnerable eye, “And yet you abused him at your convenience.”

“If it makes you feel better, did not plan for it. Happy accident, really,” Black Hat confessed, a sick, sinister smile growing. White Hat’s other hand slammed down on his desk. He tried to remain calm… it was difficult. He could not fathom the exact reason he was growing impatient.

“Why?!?” he demanded.

Black Hat scoffed, mirth dwindling the longer White Hat seethed, “That doesn’t concern you.”

“He’s mine—”

“Your employee, yes,” and Black Hat raised a claw as he also pointed out, “But he asserted you didn’t own him.”

“Because I don’t. He’s a free man—”

“Meaning he’s free Game to me,” the Eldritch Horror said. White Hat had to take a shuddering, deep breath.

“He doesn’t belong to anyone. You cannot just—”

“Oh, I can just,” Black Hat bit out, bored with the conversation it seemed, “You seem to forget— whoever enters my Manor is subject to me. You should not have offered his services to me for so long if you truly believed he’d leave unscathed.”

White Hat’s hollowness was eating away at him… “You said you needed help.”
'And help requires sacrifice, you know.'

"I did not sacrifice his safety!" he argued, "I would never—"

"I stand by my statement," Black Hat said, as if this was the end of the conversation. His claws raked across his pocket dimension, and White Hat bellowed, again, in their strange, ancient language. The Eldritch Horror cocked his head, form rippling and twisting.

"I am not done with you, brother!"

"What more is there to say? You chose poorly."

White Hat grasped the photo and held it before the blazing eye. "How?"

Black Hat smirked again. He was toying with the shredded end of his doorway back to their current, shared plane of existence.

"You will answer me. I will not rest until—"

"Oh! Come off it," Black Hat shot back. He squared his sharp shoulders, smoothing down the front of his suit. White Hat waited. His brother finally, with the lightest of words said, "If it matters so much to you, someone merely owed me a favor. This someone is particularly good at finding things. All I did was tell them a place to start digging. Most of it was garbage… the photo was the only thing that seemed worthy."

"Worthy of what, brother?" White Hat asked, folding it back up to place in his coat pocket.

Black Hat gave him a shrug, "How about an apology?"

"You don’t apologize, Black Hat," the Elder Being said, still thinking about squashing the eye smoldering in his palm.

"If you think that," his twin replied haughtily, "Then perhaps you had never trusted me in the first
“Don’t try to—” White Hat was cut off as Black Hat existed the dimension with his cold eye. He shrieked, attempting to will the one in his hands to flame back to life. It would do no such thing. His brother seemed to have an iron-clad determination to ignore his cries.

White Hat eventually tossed the eye back into its prison. He slammed his compartment closed... and then reopened it and slammed it closed again... and then repeated the process until he was out of breath and too tired to continue the action. Slumping into his chair, he placed his head into his hands and wondered if this is what failure felt like.

Is this what happens when you lose?

...

Slug had laid on the hill, telling the little girl lying on his stomach all about butterflies. They should have been migrating soon—the monarchs—and he was thinking of taking a family trip across the country to watch the yellow and black clouds of them for his baby and wife to see. The two of them enjoyed the breeze and the clouds drifting overhead.

“Meus amores!” his wife called, and Slug hugged his daughter.

“Shh! No, no! She’ll find us and make us eat vegetables!”

They had giggled conspiratorially and continued lying in their cloud watching spot. Miranda, of course, had found them behind their house on the hillock—it was the dastardly duos favorite place to be lazy and take in the natural wonders around them.

“Really? You two are the worst!”

“Oh, don’t blame us—” Slug insisted, holding his child aloft in the air. She laughed and flapped her arms, saying she was a butterfly flying away, “It’s really Amarelle’s fault! She doesn’t want to eat her veggies.”
Miranda raised a brow, carefully picking up their daughter into her arms, “Ama is a perfectly good girl who loves peppers and carrots and all sorts of vegetables, husband. It’s you who is constantly pushing them off your plate.”

“I am a terrible example, you know this.”

The woman, as beautiful as ever, laughed. Slug could only smile up at her from his spot. “Yet, I love you still,” she had said. And Slug had smiled wider. He likes this moment, this memory the best, even as his daughter stuck out her tongue at her silly, lovey-dovey parents.

When they walked, altogether, holding hands back to the house, the little girl had pointed at a large, fluttering moth colored like bleached bone. She cried, “Butterfly!” as Miranda crossed herself.

Slug waved it away, explaining it was just a moth, no need to be scared.

“The moth is a sign of death to come! Tragedy befalling the house it rests on!”

“Those are old wives’ tales, Miranda. A moth is no more an omen than an approaching storm.”

“I don’t care, Slug. Just promise me if Fernando calls again… you’ll stay home with us.”

Slug promised… and in the morning, when his brother-in-law telephoned him on the work burner-cell, he told him he had car trouble and could not make it into the city proper until the next day. Fernando was mad, and hung up on, but he promised Miranda. He would always keep his promises to his beloveds.

It was a lovely day he spent with his family. Normal, without many issues. He had breakfast, read the paper. Sent his daughter off to school, made love to his wife, and then they laid around—teasing one another before laundry had to be done. They ate flat bread and carne for lunch, and Miranda picked up Ama. Slug spent the afternoon making coffee-filter butterflies with his little girl. They strung them together with yellow ribbons, hanging them from her ceiling. He took polaroids when Miranda joined, as they looked up at them spinning in the wind with pride. When they sat down to eat, his wife made him say grace. He did the best he could, and Ama had to take over for him. Not that he minded…

But that night, when Fernando called him again, he had walked out to his cloud-gazing spot. The
ringing had woken him, but he had just missed the call. After shushing Miranda, urging her back to sleep, he stepped out to call his brother-in-law back. Fernando did not pick up. He tried once more. Frustrated, he shook his head. Nothing else to do but go back in.

When he turned around, the inside of the house was glowing. His first thought was that Miranda couldn’t fall back asleep and had wandered into the kitchen to wait for him. As he grew closer he felt… an unnatural heat.

“Oh no…”

He’d ran to the back door.

It was locked.

Against his better judgment, he smashed a nearby window. Flames hit him in a backdraft. He could hear the screams from inside now. He tried to tell them he was coming. Turning on a hose to wet himself, he found the watermain was cut off. Barely a sputter dribbled out—maybe enough to fill a wine glass.

Even with this damning evidence, he climbed in the broken window, ignored the cuts and scrapes. He remembers calling for his wife and daughter. The heat was unbearable, the smoke rising and curling around everything. He dropped to his knees, pulling his shirt over his nose as he followed answering shouts from the backroom where his daughter slept. He had to crawl through a maze of flames. They waved and flicked and licked across everything. It seemed they were fueled by an otherworldly fury.

Slug had only just reached his daughter’s room, door ajar, when the house’s structure started to give way. Ama wanted to run to him, but Miranda held the girl back, and in that moment the doorway crumbled. Slug, stupidly, tried pulling at the smoking wreckages. They were crying for him, horrific screaming, as they burned. And then, finally, a beam fell. It pinned him deep into the smoldering ashes, roasting him alive.

He was trapped, still trying to reach for his family. Crawling fruitlessly, writhing in the ash and smoke, hands grabbing and grabbing as he called out to them, frantic and burning and blind.

Eventually, it grew quiet, and all he could hear was the crackling and sparking of everything around him. He wanted to die—tried to—but… somehow, he woke, lying on the hill looking at the cloudy
sky. Rain drizzled and sirens rang all around him. The salt from the sea wafting on the wind stung him. A coffee-filter butterfly flapped noisily against a broken window. The water weighed it down. A lopsided wing was shredded by a broken piece of glass not quite melted.

Slug reached for it…

But, it was lost. Someone had him strapped to an evac gurney. They lifted him away, flew him to a hospital where they put him into a coma and worked on his broken body night and day for several months. When he was strong enough to finally leave, he did so in the middle of the night. He simply walked out calmly amidst the screaming masses.

He went back to his spot at the hill.

He waited for someone to wake him up from this nightmare. A white moth greeted him with the sunrise, bloody between the haze of smog and sea wind. It landed, fluttering against his stomach, before lying deathly still. Slug bitterly reconsidered that maybe the old wives’ tales had some merit to them.

…

White Hat returned to him after a long while. Slug hadn’t left his lab. He stayed, waiting for something. Anything. All he did was produce the photo and hold it out for the doctor.

Slug snatched it back, cradling it to his chest securely.

“You had no right.”

“I know…” White Hat said, quiet and ashamed. Slug looked away, scoffing. He wouldn’t be guilted into forgiving the Elder Being’s rash demands so easily.

“And what did Black Hat tell you?”

“Nothing useful,” his employer sighed, opening his arms to the side, “He tried to blame me. He’ll blame everyone else for his own deplorable, meddling, abusive actions. It’s what he does.”
“It’s what all Villains do,” Slug snapped. He was frustrated. He was tired. He looked at the photo again… it was of all three of them, lying on a purple-pink washed bed. Coffee-filter butterflies that had been colored with water colors into splashes of yellow and black were floating above their naïve, marveling faces.

He ached. Deeply. An unfathomable stretching of still unsung injustice inside his heart.

“They’re beautiful… your wife and child.”

Slug snapped his face back up to White Hat. He stared for a blank second, then tried to control himself. He didn’t want to scream. He didn’t want to cry. He just wanted answers. They had lingered in the back of his mind for far too long. They were the reason he sought out White Hat.

“Who did it?” he demanded, “Who burned my family alive that night?”

White Hat shook his head, “I do not think Black Hat really knows.”

“That’s bullshit!” Slug said, stomping forward in the Elder Being’s space. He pushed against the solid chest, shouting, “Why send me this then?! Why drag them out to—to taunt me?!"

“Because,” White Hat softly tried to explain, placing careful hands onto Slug’s steadily raising shoulders, “That’s what Black Hat—what a Villain does.”

 Slug broke. He slumped into White Hat once more, clutching onto immaculate lapels. He tried to stay silent as fresh waves of tears left him. White Hat wound arms around him, hiding him from the world. Comforting him the only way he knew how.

“It’s alright… I told you… we’ll find the Hero who did this.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't mind answering any clarifying questions if anyone has them. Please feel free to ask me anything!
Also, thank you so much for reading!

Please be gentle me :D
Let Us Discuss the Arrangement

Chapter Notes

This chapter goes back in time to when Dr. Slug and White Hat first met.

After such a heavy chapter, I felt the need to show how far their relationship had come.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Nine: Let Us Discuss the Arrangement

White Hat Manor was not always well maintained. Truthfully, it stood as a beacon over the decades as symbol for all Heroes to seek the advice or help of the Great White Hat… Its existence was of a minimal, practical use. The Elder Being didn’t need it, really, but it served as a kind of way-station for Earthly inhabitants to more easily encounter him. Unlike his brother, he did not spend his time integrating with humans. He preferred to wait until they sought his otherworldly expertise.

Leading by example, rather than ham-fisting his way into human negotiations and/or earthly regulations. White Hat considered the idea of choice was what the deeds of the good should boil down to. Humanity had to make the collective decision to fight and do right, not because he wanted them to, but because it was what was right. The correct path was a path forged by those who actively sought it, and walked it without being prompted to… otherwise, there could be no good and bad.

Heroes and Villains differed only in philosophy.

Heroes seemed to naturally understand that their choices were their own, and sought to follow the better road, while Villains… Villains never even considered anything other than their desires. That was what drove each of their decisions. They were enslaved by the notion of better things… but they didn’t feel they could achieve it without ruthlessness. It was almost pitiable, the hunger of Villains, but White Hat could not find it in him to hate them for at least trying. They simply had to readjust their attitude.

White Hat believed this with every fiber of his being.

That’s why, on occasion, he allowed Villains to parley with him. Many just needed a guide to set them on their way. He could not boost a 100% success rate, since many felt embittered by the world, but every now and then he got lucky.
Every request for an audience with him was through the mail. Letters. Genius invention. Yet, one
day a particular letter was sent via telegram. Rarely used in the modern era, but, still a delight to have
a carrier knock on his door (quite confused) and handed it over with a nervous nod to the Ultimate
Do-Gooder.

It written in a functional script, and formal English, reading:

*I am looking for a Hero. In need of your assistance. I will arrive in due time. —S*

White Hat would look forward to it… except he didn’t quite know when this appointment would
take place. And, to be honest, a simple S wasn’t much to go by. It was enough to deduce, by the first
part, that he would not be meeting with a Hero. Probably, a Villain.

Nonetheless, White Hat couldn’t put his tasks on hold just to wait for one man. He went about his
daily life for… well, it was several weeks, actually. It took so long for anything to come of the
telegram, that when this mystery S had finally arrived, White Hat had forgotten all about him.

White Hat had been in his office, resting, when something **crashed** into the side of his Manor.

He jumped to his feet. Rubble was raining down from the roof. He had to evacuate all the way down
to the main floor. He looked up to see… what was that new-fangled contraption called again? Oh, a
*helicopter*. The wing blades chopped away along his staircases like slicing through melted butter
before the thing sputtered and died. It fell into the widened foyer as the building was shaken down to
the foundations.

Well, then. *That* entrance caught his attention.

What was even more surprising is when a man, nonchalantly, unbuckled himself from the main body
of the helicopter. He plopped down onto the broken front window and existed the broken mess. It
was smoking lightly, and the man quickly walked toward White Hat’s stoic figure. The closer he got,
the more the Elder Being realized this man was covered in sterile bandages.

They had wrapped around most of his face, secured around his chin and temples, with a mask
stretched over his mouth and nose. He pushed flight goggles up enough to reveal his intense, earthy
eyes. His eye brows, and the neat slivers of hair remaining atop his burned head, was dark. The
hands, also, were tightly compressed in their own dressings, and each step the man took was
measured and sure. He looked dressed for combat.

White Hat wasn’t entirely surprised when the man pulled a gun from his flight jacket, but it was a tense moment before this man did anything.

“S, I presume?”

“Slug.”

“Ah…” White Hat said, thinking on the name, “I do believe I have heard some stories.”

“I’m flattered,” the man—Slug—said. However, it was a tone White Hat was very unfamiliar with. He tilted his head as he stared at the man, then, his weapon.

“There is nothing flattering in what I know of you.”

Slug blinked at him. Then, leveled his gun squarely at the Elder Being, “That’s a damn shame—considering I’ve only heard good things about you.” White Hat did not respond to the threat. Slug cocked back the safety, saying, “And that’s was sarcasm earlier, by the way.”

“What?”

“Sarcasm,” Slug repeated, but he did not drop the gun, “I really don’t give a shit what you’ve heard about me.”

White Hat paused, nodding, taking note of the new information. Sarcasm. Interesting communication method. Doesn’t quite make sense or, theoretically, build better interpersonal communication skills, but now White Hat might be able to better recognize if someone used that tactic to confuse him in battle again. “You said you needed my assistance.”

“Yeah, but see, I’ve been watching you—”

“Watching me?” White Hat said, startled. He hadn’t sensed anything.
“And I doubt you can actually help me, so,” Slug said as he pulled the trigger. White Hat moved in a flash—his particles scattering into light and reforming a few inches to the left. He followed the bullet’s path with his eye critically. It landed squarely into his front door.

Looking back to the man, he rose a brow, “Really?” he asked... but, Slug had moved closer while White Hat’s back was turned. He was now pointing the gun into the secured monocle. He tsked at the Elder Being. It was slightly unnerving, but, no more than when one finds a creepy-crawly where one ought not to. “You cannot harm me with your standard weapon.”

“It’s not standard,” Slug responded. Before White Hat could question it, he lowered the gun and put two bullets into where each of the pale creature’s kneecaps would be.

White Hat cried out—shock and torrid pain careening through his form—collapsing to the disrupted ground. He was once again, eye-level, with the weapon—though only because he was now on the ground before the man. Sleek fluids escaped him, teal and shimmering. It was strange, as he’d never really seen his own blood before (at least, on this plane), pooling out around him in a mesmerizing puddle. His hands fell into the mess, and he tried to hold himself up. “H-How?”

“Spent some time in Egypt. Some time in Providence. Even more time in Alaska. Not really in that order necessarily. Even so, came by something,” Slug vaguely explained. He pulled a tome from the other side of his flight jacket. White Hat’s eye widened. “You’re not totally indestructible. Immortal, sure, but I’m a scientist. Basic ideas teach us that while energy cannot be destroyed, it can be made into something else. So. You know, I worked with the stuff in this book to figure out how I can make you fucking miserable if you, and your kind, don’t behave.”

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said. I am looking for a Hero. A Hero who did a very bad thing to me.”

…

White Hat didn’t want to believe the story when he first heard it. But, Slug left him alive, a pile of evidence at his feet. He looked into it all. There seemed to be no denying it—this was the work of an elemental Hero. Someone who could naturally use fire to their will and purpose. Probably a friend, or a connection, into one of the many Heroes that the man had… indisposed.
A rogue Hero who went into full revenge mode. Probably a symptom of his unstable power as a Firestarter and wielder. White Hat had seen it before—seen humans who became special, or were born with an extra something, and they just didn’t know how to cope. It was his job to help guide and comfort them but… sometimes humans still felt inexplicably lost.

He sighed, rubbing his wounds, and looking around his dilapidated Manor.

No one had called on him since the incident.

Granted, he was still healing, and walking to his mailbox was a chore but—well. He could see the mailbox from where he sat in his now open-aired office. The mail man waved, sometimes, but mostly walked past his box with a sort of grimace.

“This can’t be good for business.”

“It’s not,” Slug said. White Hat spun in his broken chair, a bit alarmed he didn’t notice the man scaling the shattered steps toward the second floor.

“Oh, that seems dangerous…”

“Yeah, it is,” the man huffed. He heaved himself up to sit amongst the debris across from White Hat. He plopped down, eying the area. “Why is this place still… uh… ya know, my helicopter could probably explode at any moment.”

“Could it?” White Hat inquired. He peered over the side of his destroyed second floor to inspect the rusting hunk of junk still below them.

“I mean… it could,” Slug repeated.

“I’m not… a scientist. I would not know,” he answered. Slug nodded. He folded his hands over his stomach and glanced over his shoulder thoughtfully.

“Well, if it hasn’t by now, you’re probably safe.”
"I believe I am safe, regardless."

Slug snorted, gesturing at the poorly dressed wounds White Hat was sporting. "You’re weakened. While it might not kill you, it won’t help with recovery. Definitely won’t help with business."

“Oh, are Heroes worrying about a possible explosion then? Seeing as a majority of them are not really doctors either,” White Hat asked. He poked at his own injuries as the man had also brought them to his attention. “Oh, ow… that doesn’t seem to be getting better…?” He glanced up to see Slug, hand over his mask, brows creeping up his forehead, “Er, yes, Slug?”

The man shook his head.

White Hat watched him internally struggle.


He scaled back down the ruined Manor and left. White Hat decided to wait a bit longer. He should probably figure out how to fix his legs so he could get the mail… when he eventually had mail to bring in again.

…

White Hat was very glad to see Slug again.

The man must have showed up when he slipped into an unconscious state during the middle of his watchful night. It was Sunday morning—so no mail, and no needing to worry about walking anywhere really. He opened his eyes to the chirping of birds, and the sounds of someone rustling about below him.

He looked over his lopsided desk to as he heard Slug tugging out large pieces of debris. Currently, he was sorting them into different sized piles. With a wave, he greeted, “Hello, Dr. Slug.”
Slug glanced up, brow sweaty, and nodded.

White Hat sat back slightly, only a little confused. “What are you doing?”

“Cleaning.”

White Hat blinked, and the man mopped his brow with bandages. He went back to shifting through the wreckage of his helicopter and pounding along the Manor’s structure. White Hat sat, a little uncertain of himself for the first time in… well, for the first time.

“Why?”

“Why not?” Slug shot back, unthinking. White Hat didn’t quite know how to answer that. Slug continued anyways like it was unexpected of him to remain silent. “Not like I got much else to do with my time. I’ve hit a dead end.”

“I’m—I’m sorry,” White Hat said. Slug looked up, brow falling. He replaced his goggles and continued working on clearing out the Manor without a proper response.

It gave White Hat a lot of time to think.

Finally, as the day grew dark and Slug tiredly scaled up to the second-floor landing, White Hat came to a decision. He just didn’t quite know how to express his new found interest. The man had sat though, unprompted, dragging over a shredded cushion from an old couch, and angled himself to sit between White Hat’s useless legs. Slug had brought a tool-box up with him, dropping it from under him arms, and onto his crossed feet.

“Lucky for you, your dumb book has remedies,” he explained without truly explaining what he was doing. White Hat stared down at the man, confused. Slug pulled out some liquid, some shaved bark, and a whole mess of gauze and wrappings. There was even something shrouded in plastic under the bandages. In the fading light, he couldn’t quite make it out.

“You’re… helping me,” White Hat stated, more than asked.
“No.”

“You are. You are fixing the Manor. You are cleaning out my wou—ow,” White Hat twitched as Slug harshly swapped into the slowly closing holes. He was picking out dirt and metal and the shoddy cloth White Hat used to staunch the bleeding.

“You’re really clueless,” Slug mumbled through his medical mask. He moved his aviator goggles off, and picked up a pair of glasses with a headlamp and magnifying glass. Inspecting the injuries, he hummed. “I’m not—” a grunt as he found a bullet and pulled it free from bone, “I’m not doing this for you.”

“… but it is?”

“No. It’s not,” Slug continued. He looked up briefly, then went back to cleaning. He started lying gaze on the open wounds. They began closing nicely, if a bit slow. Then, he started wrapping the bandages in a zig-zag pattern like a professional.

“You’re very good at that,” White Hat mentioned. Slug leveled him with a glare.

Well… he has probably been bandaging his own wounds for a bit now…

“Look, White Hat—” the Elder Being nearly preened when Slug addressed him formally, “You need your Manor, because you need Heroes to sustain your business, right?”

“Um, yes, I suppose that is true…”

“And I need to find a specific Hero. So—obviously. Best course of action is fix your Manor. Fix you. You bring in clients, and I can get my own kind of revenge.”

“Justice,” White Hat corrected.

Slug snorted, leaning back onto his hands as he finished bandaging the Elder Being. “Sure. Let’s go with that today.”
“Does this mean you plan to just… stalk each Hero that would come to White Hat Manor?” White Hat asked after a pause. Slug gave him a shrug, pulling out that plastic wrapped thing.

“Stalk is a bold word,” he hedged. White Hat frowned.

“Fine, you’d… what did you say,” he thought, before finishing with, “Right, you’d watch them? Watch me?” Slug, annoyingly, said nothing. He raised his shoulder, continuing to open his plastic thing. “And what is that?”

“It’s calamari,” he answered, a bit taken a back. White Hat blinked.

“Cala—”

“Breaded and fried octopus,” Slug clarified. He paused, then gave the Elder Being a sort of confused, near offended look. “I thought your—whatever you are—ate things from the sea? Maybe it’s a bit… cannibalistic but, it’ll recover you faster.”

“Oh…” White Hat said. To be honest, it did smell delicious now that it was fully uncovered and sitting in the light of the dawning moon.

“Don’t tell me you’re the kind of Hero who refuses to eat meat or something.”

“Uh… I don’t… really… eat… anything,” White Hat hesitated to explain. Slug looked up at him for a moment.

With a shake of the head, he figured it out, “Right. You don’t need to.”

White Hat nodded.

“Again, shame,” the man said. He grabbed a piece and pulled down his mask. His nose had obviously been remolded, and his mouth was chapped, severely, thinned and whitened by the strain of ravaged skin across his face. He was healing slowly, as one did from a fire-starters burns. He
chewed slowly, holding the calamari up to White Hat. It took a second, but the Elder Being reached out and picked up a piece between his talons. It squished, a thin streak of grease warmly coating the tip of his finger. “Don’t stare at it. Pop it in and bite down.”

White Hat did as suggested. It sat there, drenching his tongue in a unique flavor. The bread was spicy, but the meat was juicy, near rubber-like in texture. Slug sighed as he watched the emotions race across White Hat’s face.

“Idiot. Chew it, and then… uh, just swallow it down.”

White Hat did as instructed.

He waited.

“Now what?”

Slug sighed, holding up the food higher, “Take some more and just enjoy it.”

“Okay.”

They passed the night this way… in quiet contemplation and food. Slug stayed until the next morning. Then, he went back to cleaning out the Manor. White Hat waited for him to finish again, slipping in and out of a sleepy sort of state, a filled stomach an odd comfort as the sun shone above him.

When Slug came back to, applying new bandages, and presenting him with some shrimp that was cooled, and a dipping sauce, White Hat decided then and there to offer him a job.

“What…”

“You’re already working for me, in a way,” White Hat mentioned around a tail still dripping in tangy red relish, “So, we should make it official. Then, you do not have to stalk anyone. All information will be freely given to you so we can discover who… the…” he paused, wondering how to say it.
“The murderer who burned my family alive.”

“Yes… I’m sorry.”

Slug bit harshly into his shrimp. He seemed to be thinking it over… Finally, he sighed. He stuck out his hand. “Alright.”

“Really?” White Hat asked, eyes alight. Then glanced down at the bandaged hand in confusion.

“You shake on it. Like a deal.”

“Oh, no, I don’t do deals,” White Hat jumped back, hands up like Slug was pointing his magically enhanced gun at the Elder Being, “That goes against everything I stand for. Your soul—or, um, heart, I am unsure what you’d prefer to term it—but whatever it is, it is yours to keep. I don’t—”

“Calm down, you’re rambling.”

“I don’t want your soul.”

“I’m not offering my soul,” Slug clarified, hand still held out pointedly. He bitterly laughed, “I guess I should be relieved you don’t do that, but, damn. Way to make a guy feel unwanted.”

“Well, I still want you,” White Hat said. Slug’s mouth fell open, and then closed with a snap. He looked away, trying to gather his thoughts.

“You are really, really fucking dumb? You know that?”

“Um. No, I have lived on this plane for—”

“I’m going to stop you right there,” Slug butt in, shoving his open hand into White Hat’s face, “I will take your job offer. You shake my hand, not because I’m giving up my soul, but because this is a
mutually beneficial arrangement. It means you’re honor bound to it. You have a duty to help me with my cause. My cause is answers. I want to know who killed them. I know it’s a Hero and you, White Hat, will have to come into contact with the bastard one day—right?”

White Hat squirmed in his seat at such close contact from the passionate man. All he could do was nod. So, Slug glanced down at the waiting hand before the Elder Being. Then, with as much courage as White Hat could muster, reached out with both hands and clasped the injured one.

Slug gave him a look, but, after a second… his mouth rose, quirking up at the sides. It was a good look on him, injuries and all. White Hat… liked it.

“Well, not quite a shake, but,” he said, “I’ll take it. Good to be working with ya, boss.”

White Hat later learned this expression Slug was softly giving him was a smile.

…

The renovations took a little time. Slug was working a little bit every day, and was very displeased to see the White Hat’s place lacked many basics. So, he put in a few orders for some contractors to help speed up the process (now, there was a kitchen and a lab being built into the foundation). However, what really kicked started rabid development was when a Hero was passing by, and thought to stop in on the Manor…

She was relatively cool—a calculative, smooth talker. She was a magic user, trained far in a temple up in Tibetan mountains. Some sort of Asian descent (her origin story being a third generation child of immigrants, and returned to the home country when she came of age as her powers came to her in a dream? Truth be told, she often retold a different story to anyone who asked), her head shaved clean, and mysterious tattoos littered practically every part of her body.

Slug wasn’t too impressed, but she was concerned for White Hat. White Hat having been relocated to a tent on ground level. No other Heroes had sought him out while he’d been healing. Of course, the Elder Being could walk now, but Slug was only letting him pass back and forth to the half-finished kitchen for dinner before they went to bed in a moderate sized tent.

“Ah, Master White Hat,” she called, sauntering past the gates while Slug was occupied with a foreman. White Hat looked up from his new mystery novel—and was pleasantly surprised.
“Oh, Miss Hanna?” he asked, “What brings you here today?”

“Well, I was dropping by on my way back from a Golden Rule debate,” she explained. Her eyes darted around the tent, judging slightly. White Hat followed it, wondering why it was to her distaste.

“I see,” he answered, breaking a sort of stiff silence as she thought too hard.

“Do you—Where is your Manor?”

White Hat pointed behind him indifferently, blinking up at her.

She sighed, “I meant, what happened to it?”

“Oh! Well, my new doctor crashed into it with a helicopter.”

“I’m sorry—” she said, eyes bugging, placing her hands on her slim hips, “But, what?”

“Originally, I planned to land on the roof,” Slug said. Miss Hanna jumped, turning to see Slug walk in, dusty from the construction.

“Originally?”

“I… am not the best pilot.”

“Clearly!”

White Hat stood, wincing slightly from the position he’d be resting in for too long. He gestured to the woman vaguely, and then back to Slug. “Doctor, this is Miss Hanna. She is a Hero that keeps time… well, most places. She’s not often working on… physical threats to your plane of existence.”

“Our plane of existence,” she corrected. “You live amongst the earthly inhabitants of this planet as
well, Master White Hat.” White Hat graciously tipped his hat.

“Heh, kinky,” Slug muttered under his breath. He was shaking plaster loose from his bandages. Miss Hanna did not react. She placed her hands into her sleeves and looked down at the doctor settling himself on the floor of the tent. Slug spared her a glance as he thumbed through some paperwork for the reconstruction. “Are you here for an appointment or…?”

“I will send you some men who will not attempt to prolong work for a larger paycheck. In fact, you will not be required to spare any more of your already limited funds, Dr. Slug—”

“How did you—”

“The Master needs a place to reside, not to have shelter, but instead, to have a home.”

Slug dropped his paperwork, turning instead to glare at White Hat. White Hat raised his hands defensively again. “As I stated… Miss Hanna works on another plane more often than not. The universe speaks to her.”

“Only because I have no doubts of my role. I have found, and accepted, my place in a much larger narrative, Master White Hat.”

“I feel as if I have been insulted,” White Hat mentioned. There was a coolness that swept through the tent. Miss Hanna turned to him briefly. She gave him a mysterious smile.

“If you would like me to reveal your story, I can,” she said. White Hat stood awkwardly, upsettingly looking everywhere else. Magic Using Heroes were often difficult just for the fun of it.

Slug threw his hands up in the air, declaring, “Well! I’m a scientist and this weird mystical shit is too much drama for me. I’m going to fire my foreman, and you send your men later, Miss.”

Hanna nodded at him, watching him leave with an unreadable look. White Hat sighed, sitting back down, a bit put off. The Hero didn’t turn back to watch him as he thumbed back through his novel… she would talk when she was ready. And, boy, would she say things.
“That poor man…”

Oh.

White Hat looked up, surprised. Her tone was so… defeated. Strained.

“What do you know?” he questioned.

“The better question,” she replied, still looking into the distance, “Is what do you know?”

“I would rather not play games, Miss Hanna.”

“You have been alive for so long playing your Great Game—The Game.”

White Hat rustled at the words. He knew. He was aware.

“Yet… for all of your existence, you actually have yet to choose,” the Hero said. She looked at him, eyes filled with pity. White Hat stood again, his lone eye blazing.

“I don’t know what web you have starred into but—”

“The universe is no spider web… not here. It’s the patterns that bleed across a monarch, White Hat. Black and Yellow and White. Every decision a flutter of its wing that can cause a hurricane… or, a ripple along water’s surface. But, until you choose a path, I can see no bridge that will lead to the man before you,” she warned. White Hat’s brows slouched down, confused.

“I—I do not understand why you come to me and demand I pick a side. I am the side. I am the Hero. I have saved the universe. I am saving the universe,” he insisted.

Miss Hanna shook her head, prayer beads rustling, “You made a deal with your shadow. That is not the same as playing the Game. As being on a side. As choosing where to stand.”
“I am standing!” She looked pointedly at his still healing legs. He scoffed and crossed his arms petulantly, “Figuratively, of course.”

“There is nothing figurative here.”

“Miss Hanna,” White Hat said with a bedraggled sigh.

“I only tell you this now as my time is limited. I came to wish you a farewell. Hopefully, you will heed my words before it is too late. You do not know it, but you will be faced with something much bigger than the universe could ever prepare you for. It will shake you to the core. It could destroy you,” she said. White Hat paused, suddenly weary, “You do not know what has been offered you. What lies before you. What trails the Slug will create…”

White Hat said nothing. That hollowness inside him railed against the words.

Miss Hanna smiled lightly, “You are angry. That is good. Anger is what prompts us to seek justice.”

“I have not been wronged.”

“Not yet,” she cautioned, “But wait until all your choices are taken from you. Wait until the wings of monarch have been pinned and you are forced to hang in your indetermination.”

…

The Manor finished twice as fast after the Hero sent help—and a few others, too, brought food and furnishings. White Hat was flattered, and immediately, his new employee went about setting up all sorts of new technologies. Including, but not limited to, the internet. Now, electronic mail could easily be sent to White Hat Manor.

Everything was going swimmingly, and Dr. Slug was surprisingly efficient. He went about testing things, becoming super involved, and even offered to handle finances and the day to day planning. Of course, Heroes were offering to stop by more often. It worked splendidly in Slug’s favor. Though, no fire-starters were crossing over the threshold.
After a while, White Hat sent a letter to Miss Hanna’s private temple. He wanted to apologize after they had left on such a dour note… The Elder Being was harsher than he meant to be—after all, he never truly understood his purpose, even when it was directly given to him. Black Hat refuted his own, and White Hat felt… well. White Hat didn’t quite know why he felt as he did. Just that everything was swallowed by this unquenchable hollowness within his being. It left him no room.

White Hat received his letter back with hasty scrawled *return to sender* on the envelope. He wondered what that meant.

He was told several weeks later by another magic-wielding Hero that Miss Hanna had disappeared into the void. Her essence probably scattered across time and space and, presumably, imagination. Saddened by this news, he hoped to see her again, maybe, in a dream.

Slug, many years later, suggested taking Clementia to see migrating butterflies.

White Hat first saw a monarch when an errant strangler landed on Slug’s classic red-turtleneck. He had carefully unstuck it from the fuzzy fabric, and released it into the wild from his cupped, scarred hands.

“There we go…” the doctor had murmured, “Fly away before I’m tempted to keep you behind glass forever.”

“You would do that?”

Slug’s hands lingered in the sky, “It’s terrible, I know. They’re just… they’re beautiful…”

“It is terrible,” White Hat had repeated, and his own claws itched to reach out, though he didn’t understand why. Slug laughed, shaking his recently hidden face. He looked to Clementia running unsupervised in the fields.

“I guess you could say I want to preserve them. Save their beauty for generations to come but…” he shrugged, “That’s too romantic a notion, even for me. I just—I just love them is all, and I want to keep them.”

“But… you just let the monarch go.”
Slug gave him a shrug.

White Hat stood confused as the man walked away. Slug never really talked about butterflies again… but, the longing to understand had found its place inside of White Hat. It did not ease the hollowness, but instead, gave it a companion that was easier to recognize.

He left a pinned butterfly print for the man in his lab.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone for reading, and for all the wonderful responses I had last chapter. I was quite happy.

Ugh, work is killing me. All I wanna do is write these two!

Working on chapter 26... it'll get heavy later chapters, and this chapter alludes to that. So, if you're still interested, strap in for it! We'll get answers, slowly but surely!
Chapter Ten: Let Us Slow Down Again

Slug had never felt so beaten down.

After Black Hat, after Dr. Flug, after the found photo.

He was lying on his bed, just staring at the faces of his lost wife and daughter. In the picture, his face was smooshed into a pillow—much like it was now—as he openly gazed at the chubby, delighted face of Ama. Miranda was lounging, almost seductive, around her husband and child. She was softly beaming. Light had spilled in through the painted wings from that tragic day. It colored the whole polaroid in a certain sunshine-like golden glow.

Slug smiled through the tears.

Out of every memory he had of them… he was grateful to have this one good thing left.

He sighed, looked at the time—1:54 AM.

No matter what he tried, he couldn’t relax. Couldn’t sleep. Refused to use his own sedatives. The idea was too much after everything that happened at Black Hat Manor. Everything weighed so
heavily on his heart now.

“A bath…” he mumbled, raising to his feet, “A bath will help.”

He went into his private bathroom. Ran the tap on cool, and stripped out of his clothes. He sank into the wide tub, scarred side resting like lead on the porcelain surface. Then, waited until the water fully encased him. All the world disappeared as he floated away in his cocoon…

Except. That’s not what Slugs do.

They don’t transform into something better.

He had to come up for air eventually… just… not yet.

…

“Hey, White Hat…” Clem asked, brushing out the burrs caught in 0.5.0. grape-colored undercoat, “Has Sluggy been… I dunno, acting weird lately?”

White Hat paused, still reading through his schedule the doctor had provided for the day. Slug had been in his lab since breakfast ended, and well, that was what he’d been doing for two weeks straight. Normally he was more involved than perhaps was necessary for a former Villain but… he just buried himself in work. Making antidotes for the influx of Heroes coming in with severe after-effects of his own stolen sedative mixture. Black Hat and Dr. Flug apparently added a truth serum Slug discovered during a variety of tests on blood samples. It wasn’t often that Heroes came in for ‘check ups’ since it was notorious trait for the Do-Gooders to grin and bear it (the it often being broken bones or bruises). Many Heroes had their own secret doctors or nurses to go to. Still, Dr. Slug was a doctor. He offered his limited, but notable, intellect to run diagnostics on any Heroes who wanted such options included in meetings.

“Slug is just—” White Hat cut off as he looked away from the girl. It was hard to explain. He was also acutely aware of how he was uncertain as to what Slug would even want Clementia to know.

“I’m not dumb,” Clementia said, but there was no venom in her words. She continued brushing the purple bear—who had its eyes closed in a lazy, calm atmosphere—before looking up at White Hat’s uncertain figure. “I’m guessing something happened at Black Hat Manor.”
White Hat sighed, nodding. He didn’t elaborate, though.

“Slug normally has it all together, ya know?”

“Yes. It’s really…” White Hat lost his words again. He kneeled on the floor, alongside the teen who kept going with her current task. Clementia just nodded, refocusing on a secret matt of fur on 0.5.0.’s white tummy. He quietly confessed, “I guess I just don’t know how to help this time.”

“We just have to be there for him,” she said. The fur-clump was stuck on her brush.

White Hat began helping, talons sniping away at the too-dense parts of the fur. “And how do you suggest I do that, my dear?”

“Well,” Clementia thought, picking up the freed fluff and stuffing it into a bag by her hip, “I guess… we just let him know we’re here whenever he’s ready to ask for help.”

“In all this time, I don’t know if I can remember him asking for help,” White Hat muttered, growing a bit frustrated. He looked at the over at the contemplative girl.

She gave him a shrug, “I thought he was here because he needed your help in the first place?”

White Hat opened his mouth, a small, “Oh” escaping. Clem was right, of course. Everything he had ever done in White Hat’s employment had been done because he had specifically asked for White Hat’s help. He started picking at a burr that the girl hadn’t noticed. “I… suppose I have taken him for granted… all this time he’s been working so hard. I guess, he’s always been hiding behind work.”

“Hey,” Clem said, soft as she reached out and gave his hand a pat, “You aren’t the only one. I took him for granted too. We’re just going to have to be better about it from here on out.”

White Hat smiled at her in thanks.

They both went back to cleaning up 0.5.0., thinking how to could help their dear doctor.
Sunday was a welcome day. No work. No thoughts. Just… just rest.

He was so tired.

So.

Tired.

White Hat and Clementia had asked him the night before if there were any plans for the Manor during the weekend. Slug just shook his head. He had nothing planned. He was running on empty. They’d shared a look, and told him that was fine. They wanted to try something on their own. They had told him to take it easy.

He… didn’t want to, but… he couldn’t muster up the energy to do anything. To use any more brain power after the last few weeks. Though, ironically, he didn’t want to do anything anyways.

The photo of his family was on the nightstand.

He reached over his pillows, lifting it. Used the crease down the middle to stand the polaroid up so he could stare at the image without exerting more energy than needed. “Hey, meus amores…”

Of course, they could hear nothing. Truthfully, he really didn’t even know if he could recall their voices… The timber of Miranda’s voice escaping him, the laugh of his baby too faded. Slug wished it hurt more, but part of him was thankful that his mind wasn’t so fractured than to imagine ghostly wails during moments of silence.

Actually…

Now that he thought about it… the silence seemed to ache more. It rang with a clarity all around him. There was nothing to distract him. Nothing to make him feel less… alone.
That’s what it was.

Alone.

Left behind.

He had… no one. The people he loved most in the world… gone.

It was silent and—

Wait. It was silent.

Instantly, Slug was sitting up in his messy bed. He went into his bathroom, (didn’t look in the mirror) splashed water on his face, and then, applied some bandages. He quickly threw on a new, clean pair of pajamas—plaid draw string pants, and a white T that would work for now—then left his room, eyes blurrily searching down the hallway.

The Manor was never just silent.

It was like a toddler—silence was bad.

“Clem…?” he tried at first. Her room was closest. Knocking on the door, there was no answer. He peered in—no one inside. Humming, Slug checked White Hat’s office next.

Also, nothing.

“Is anyone even home?” he called out when he reached the stairs. He peered over the railing to see dust mites floating. Still. Light and airy, blanched of color like always.

Not a peep to be echoed in the large Manor.
He walked down, inspecting the foyer. Just before he gave up he heard that tell-tale *clik-clack* of 0.5.0.’s polished toes on the tile entryway to the kitchen. With a cry of “Ah-ha!” he burst into a light sprint, demanding, “Wait a second, Cero!”

The bear rumbled something—but in warning it sounded like—and Slug rounded the corner, pushing out at the swinging kitchen doors. The scene he came upon was… not quite what he expected.

“Oh! Shoot! Slug! We weren’t ready yet…” Clem pouted. She looked over from her spot on the kitchen table, kneeled over something. White Hat froze, on a step latter with push pins hanging out of his mouth. 0.5.0. continued moving, tossing pillows across the floor. The bar was littered with junk food, both in and out of their respective bags or boxes.

“Well,” White Hat said, spitting out pins and quickly securing a plain, white sheet to the wall opposite the kitchen table, “We were hoping to do something nice for you.”

“I—” Slug started, then shook his head, confused, “What?”

“It’s, like, a home-movie night!” Clem explained. With a flourish of her arms, she showed him the projector she was working on. Slug stared, unable to move. The girl crossed her arms over her chest. “And we’re not ready yet.”

“Uhhhh…”

White Hat had walked over, calmly taking the man by the shoulders and motioned to a cushion on the floor. “Suppose it’s too late to surprise you now.”

“No, no, this is very surprising,” Slug declared, taking a seat on the floor. 0.5.0. threw a blanket over him, and gave his uncovered head a pat. Slightly embarrassed, he secured the blanket around his shoulders and brought it up to hood his head.

“There! All hooked up!” Clem crowed in triumph, “Now hand me the CD, White Hat!”

The projector buzzed to life and immediately beamed Clementia’s laptop home screen onto the white
sheet before him. Slug glanced back—the girl was opening a program and White Hat walked over to
the lights—but then 0.5.0. plopped down behind him, snuffling. The creature dropped a bowl of
popcorn in his lap. In it’s claws was a bottle of soda, which it carefully uncapped and manhandled
into Slug’s confused hands.

“Um, thanks, Cero…” he said. He took a sip—of course. It was his tangy favorite. He sighed,
smiling just as the lights flicked off and the glow from the screen became entirely too hard to ignore.

White Hat sat down on his other side, grabbing a handful of popcorn. Slug side eyed him, but the
flickering lights before him gathered his attention.

Clem was on screen, adjusting a camera, and Slug blinked, confused.

Oh. An actual home movie—

“Hey Sluggy!” the girl said, waving on screen, “We know you’re not feeling the best… and to be
honest, we don’t know how to help. But we do want to! So, whenever you’re ready to talk to us
about it… we are here. That’s what this video is about! You do so much for us and we want to repay
you. We’re gonna remind you that we’re here—we’re not going anywhere. We wanna help. I put
together this video to show you how much we appreciate you—all the evidence of our love right here
on this convenient CD!” She lifted her arm and then pointed directly at the camera, “SLIDE SHOW
BEGIN!”

The whole video did a cheesy transition to an actual photo-collection. Somehow, someone had
gotten pictures of the construction to White Hat Manor, where a heavily bandaged Slug was barking
orders at monks struggling under the weight of drywall. “I honestly had no idea you crashed into the
Manor. White Hat said it was very lively first impression.”

“Well,” an echoy, ethereal voice said in the distance of the dialogue over the bundles of pictures,
“He isn’t the best pilot.”

“He doesn’t need to be! He’s the best Slug we could ever ask for.”

“This is true, my dear.” White Hat, recorded, sounded more like music notes than anything. Slug
was snickering into his soda.
The images jumped ahead to a tiny Clementia sitting at the kitchen table, coloring. She was being adorable—her tongue sticking out and feet a blur as they kicked under her.

“Aww! Look! Mini-me!” Slug was usually the one taking pictures. How Clementia found them all was beyond him, but she found a good deal. They transitioned with silly heart and star edits. Every now and again, Slug was posing with the young girl—mostly at birthdays or as she was going off to events with Heroes. “We don’t have too many of baby me, but, I do remember all of these pictures.”

Slug wasn’t sure what she meant. They were sliding through tons of photos. Each one a big moment of accomplishment for Clementia that Slug had commemorated one way or another. 0.5.0. was starting to appear in them—one of them she’s riding him like an epic warrior mount. That was a fun Halloween. “Haha! We got soooooo much candy that year! I remember telling you not to go as a mummy—” There was Slug, dressed as a mummy as they walked down the street. White Hat’s fingers inching into the camera. He’d apparently taken to stalking them that night. “White Hat!”

“You two were very adorable. I could not help myself.”

“You have an infinite capacity to remember stuff.”

“I just wanted something tangible to hold onto.”

“Slug’s gonna be mad when he sees this!”

“Worth it.”

Slug glanced over to see White Hat pointedly smiling. He grabbed another handful of popcorn. Slug shook his head, fingers lightly playing at the edge of his bandage. It was just natural to hide the scars on his face… but that night he let a few peak out. He remembered feeling normal for the first time in ages.

He was going to find White Hat’s picture and make a copy for himself to keep.

“Oh! Look, it’s the Christmas We Don’t Talk About—” Clementia blurred out some of the photos and Slug openly laughed at the gag. Present Clem laughed too, and the slide show commentary continued. “I hope that Mall Santa is doing okay. We should send him a card.”
“I said I was sorry…”

“It’s okay. We’ll stop talking about it, White Hat.”

0.5.0. rumbled, and suddenly, there was pictures of the bear being created. Being given to Clementia. That one where a neighborhood kid saw him walking out to the 24-hr pharmacy the night Clem got her first period. Cero was labeled a local cryptid for a good month on a conspiracy website. “I mean, he does look like Sasquatch in low light and with a shaky cam.”

“I’ve met Big Foot, you know.”

“Really?”

“Indeed. He’s quite a gentle beast. Just wants to be left alone.”

“What a nerd!”

“That seems a bit rude…”

The montage switched gears to White Hat—and it’s difficult to capture an Elder Being’s image. Half of them are overly washed out, or he is extremely haloed. Worse is when everything else in the photo looks like a scrambled TV set. Still, Slug had to figure out a way to photograph and video tape him for their own catalogue and commercial specials for Heroes. Especially the ones too afraid to publicly leave their lairs of solitude to make an appointment. Many of the pictures are tests before Slug designed a completely separate camera and security system for the Manor.

“Is any of those images your actual… uh… image?”

“Hmm, nope. Not even close.”

“Would you burn out our retinas if we ever saw your real… uh, body… thing?”
“… I do not know. I have never tried to test out the theory.”

“Well, Slug certainly figured out how to show you off to the world.”

“That he did,” White Hat’s voice announced. There was photographic evidence as Clementia showed up in a selfie with the Elder Being. Slug started appearing in a few as he was leaning on White Hat’s desk, explaining something. White Hat was looking at him with a fondness that made the present Slug… squirm. He hadn’t been paying attention at that moment apparently, as one hand gesticulated, and the other was crossing over his chest in his signature grumpy attitude. “You took this photo, Clementia?”

“Yeah. I liked your smile. You got better at smiling whenever Slug was in the room.”

“I do?”

“You do.”

“Well! I bet you do too!”

Clementia and Slug working on homework in the next picture—Clementia laughing about something, and Slug patiently walking her through her textbook. 0.5.0. was in the background, itching his stomach, but the creature looked genuinely amused too. “And Cero it seems!”

“Grrr… prrrrrrb.”

The creature next to Slug gave him a short nuzzle, and when he looked at it, it blankly looked back. Irritated, Cero laid down and stared at the ceiling, spreading out it’s limbs and deciding to nap. Slug took a drink of his soda and kept watching the slideshow.

It went on like this, with pictures jumping time and places, with Clem and White Hat making idle pratter that was both heartwarming and achingly wistful. Every now and again, a bear would rumble in the recording. Soon, the whole video began slowing down, a faint music in the background. Some instrumental that was mellow and wordless. Probably free on the internet… but it was soothing. Like cool rain.
The last picture was all of them together, standing outside the Manor. White Hat standing tall and beaming, Clem giving a peace sign on either side of her cheeks, 0.5.0. looming behind her and glaring into the camera. Slug was turned to the side, googles displayed in a deadpan stare, arms crossed. He remembered that photo. It was a promotional. He didn’t want to be in it—everyone insisted though, and he just couldn’t say no. Still… they all looked happy, leaning in close to him.

Clementia came back onscreen with a fade to black. She was nervously fiddling with her hands.

“I—I want to say I know you probably have a reputation in the Villain world but…” she sighed and looked into the camera with her heart in her eyes, “But I really don’t know. I only know the Slug in these pictures. The Slug I grew up with. I don’t know what hurt you—but, you got me. I am not much, but I will be here whenever you need me.”

White Hat joined her, placing a hand on the onscreen Clem’s shoulder.

“We both will. We just want you to know this. You have a place here, no matter what.”

Slug felt his heart stop. He looked at his hands, gripping the popcorn bowl too tightly.

“We love you, Sluggy. That’s all.”

The video ended. Clementia flicked on the lights.

It was too bright and Slug hid under his blanket, trying to gather his thoughts.

“Uh… Sluggy?”

“Dr. Slug?”

“Grrrt?”

Slug lowered the blanket, three anxious faces staring at him.
“I—I don’t know what to say!”

He could feel his face heating… but, Clementia was smiling too wide, 0.5.0. tapped at his muzzle, and White Hat? White Hat was looking at him with reassurance. Fondness.

“It’s not much but—” the Elder Being was saying. Slug wrapped the blanket tighter around himself, knocking over the bowl of popcorn as he sat up straighter.

“It was everything!” he blurted out. Then, tried to regain his composure. It—It just wasn’t happening.

Clementia cheered, launching herself at him with a hug. The big purple bear gave a sigh. White Hat just sat back on his heels, slightly confused, but relieved. Slug couldn’t look at any of them.

“DOG PILE ON SLUG!”

“Wa-Wait! Guys—no—”

Too late.

The bear flopped like a cut tree on top of him and a Clem, while White Hat happily flung himself into the mix. All of them on the kitchen floor—giggling. Like idiots. Popcorn mess everywhere, soda seeping into the pillows beneath them. Slug, tangled in his blanket and literally being crushed with love, was staring at the ceiling, unable to comprehend it all. He was never going to stop blushing at this rate.

“Well…” he wheezed, “I have never been so thoroughly beaten in my life.”

He smiled again, just a little guilty, and just a little grateful.
Clem let him keep the CD, and slowly, life got a little easier. Sometimes, he still got a bit dazed and had to sit for a moment. Other times he was still the commanding doctor of White Hat Manor. Lucky for him… everyone understood…? Well, they certainly tried. It made the ache in his chest lighter, and for that, he knew he was hopeless.

He’d do anything for these idiots. He truly would.

Not that he was going to tell them, though.

“My family meant the world to me…” Slug said, voice hazy, thick with things he doesn’t like to talk about, “When they died… I was devastated. When I started to investigate… I was so, so angry. I—I don’t know if you can imagine that.”

“I… believe I am starting to…” the Elder Being whispered.

Slug gave him a laugh. White Hat placed his hands, hesitantly, on the man’s upper arms. Slug didn’t shake him off. “When I came to you, I didn’t realize what was going to happen…”

“Clem?”

“N-No… more than just Clem,” Slug said, biting at his bottom lip in thought. How could he phrase this? What could he say to get through to White Hat? “I—I don’t want to admit it out loud, White Hat.”
“Admit what?”

“My family… I had forgotten them for a bit, or at least, forgotten to be angry every day. I—White Hat. That is to say I—”

“Yes?”

“Shut up! Don’t interrupt! This is very difficult for me!”

“Sorry, sorry! Please, continue.”

White Hat had gripped the doctor’s arms tighter, in anticipation of something. Slug felt more than unease. Still. It had to be said. “White Hat, I—”

“Yes?”

“White Hat!”

“Right—continue!”

Slug sighed. He thumped his head against the Elder Being’s chest. “I need you, White Hat.” If White Hat had a real heart, it would have stopped. His hands twitched. Slug sighed even harder, pushing away to look up at his boss. “I still need your help. I can’t catch the person who murdered my family all on my own.”

“O-Oh…” White Hat said, feeling his non-existent heart now sinking. Though, he could not fathom why. Still… if his dear doctor was asking this of him—“Of course, of course. I will always help you. I—We will find them justice.”

Slug nodded, looking at the hands still holding onto him. “You know… It’s why I am here. It’s the whole reason… I can’t live with the thought that they suffered because—because of me.”

“No! Slug—”
“It’s the truth, White Hat!” Slug exclaimed, finally shaking off the other male, “I don’t even care about that I—it’s never been about—I was the one who was supposed to die!” He hesitated, pulling at the edge of his bag-mask. White Hat chased the doctor as he tried to step away.

Reaching out, he grabbed the man’s fidgeting hands, pleading, “Don’t say that…”

“It’s true. You know it’s the truth,” he softly said. The words choked and raw from his throat. White Hat knew instantly his hidden eyes were filling with tears.

“No.”

“They were innocents. They had no reason to be targeted… it was me,” he was trying to wrest his hand out of the tightening grip. White Hat backed him against the colorless desk. “You have no idea how I wish I had d—”

“Stop saying that!”

“No! I won’t pretend to be alright because you want me to be!” Slug cried out. White Hat let him yank away, pushing against him. The Elder Being didn’t move. He simply took the abuse with grace. Slug lost steam against his immovable force. He wouldn’t look his employer in the eye.

“You’re right… you shouldn’t pretend… but I…” White Hat moved his hand under the mask. He moved it away. Slug still avoided his sight. He closed his lids as tear tracts were traced over his disfigured cheeks. “I cannot imagine it. I cannot stand to see you so. I will do everything in my power to make this right.”

Slug’s face was tilted up. He finally opened his eyes… White Hat’s gaze was intense. Tracing every despicable, deserved burn across him. Under such scrutiny, he felt entirely wretched. It was like… like White Hat was preserving this memory as something more important than it shouldn’t have been.

“Please…”

“You didn’t—You don’t even have to ask this of me.”
“No… I mean,” he said, tongue feeling clumsy, “Just—Just not for me. For *them*. They were the victims. Never do this for me…” White Hat paused. Part of him looked upset by the request. “I don’t want that. I don’t want anything… except *them*. It’s always been about them. I can’t forget that again. They need to—They need—”

“Stop,” White Hat whispered. His thumb fell across Slug’s trembling lips. He tried to soothe whatever stream of self-deprecating words were about to leave, “Stop…”

Slug shut his mouth. He breathed deep. White Hat breathed alongside him… and that was good. It had to be. His breath had to be enough. It meant they were there. Together. Sharing a space. Still alive. Somehow. The rest could come later. Progress. They would work together. They would get there—wherever *there* was.

“I will do as you ask,” White Hat said. It felt like a lie. He didn’t know why. Still, Slug gave him a relieved smile. It was enough. It *had* to be enough.

“Thank you…”

“You’re welcome,” White Hat said. Now it felt like the words were tearing up everything in his empty gullet. Why? He wanted to help. Why did this feel like a death sentence? Why did he want to cry now? Could he cry? He’d never felt strongly enough to do so before… why was this one request so—so heartbreaking?

Can you break something that doesn’t exist?

“White Hat, I—”

Suddenly, the Manor rocked. White Hat, shocked, pulled the doctor closer. The red alarms went off—sirens blaring. Slug startled. He’d grabbed his boss’ lapels. He squirmed, though, as he came back to himself. The whole place felt vaguely tilted. White Hat glanced around, feeling the out the area with his second sight. His whole body shivered as darkness seemed to encase the Manor.

“That’s—” Slug tried to say, face smooshed against the Elder Being’s chest, “That’s the intruder alarm. It means a powerful Villain is near. One who uses—”
“It’s Black Hat.”

“—cosmic or supernatural powers… yeaaaaah…” Slug finished lamely.

A certain thundering came from the main foyer. Slug pushed off his boss and started into the hallway. White Hat sputtered after him, trying to catch the slippery doctor. “Wait! Where are you going?!”

“To figure out what he wants,” came the gruff answer as Slug tugged on his mask again. White Hat followed, swift and a little more than deadly.

“After what he—”

“WHITE!” the obnoxious, demonic tone of Eldritch roared from the busted in front doors. White Hat made his own, quiet growl, but did not fully respond as he went to peer over the edge. Slug was part way down the steps, before stopping in shock.

Dr. Flug was shakily supporting Black Hat—whose body smoked and smoldered. Rancid green blood spilling, sloshing across the floor in large quantities. The Villains were slipping in it as Black Hat limped along. He was holding his chest area together, and his whole being seemed to quiver in and out of it’s desired physical form.

“B-Brother… Help…” he demanded, biting, pain laced through the words.

Chapter End Notes

I suffer from severe depression—so all of Slug’s symptoms are my own past experiences with being depressed. When I wrote the chapter months ago, I was in a mentally stable place and used personal experience to highlight my own thought process/feelings. It was cathartic. Recently, my home life got scary and messy and I am once again in danger of falling into a debilitating depression cycle...

But editing the chapter was strangely comforting so--

If anyone who has read this feels the same, just know you are not alone. Please seek help, seek support, in any form you can. Learn the proper ways to cope and recognize depression and harmful thoughts. Mostly, though, try to make it through the day... We'll all start again tomorrow.
Lots of love to anyone (and everyone) who needs it today. Feel better, friends.

<3
Chapter Notes

This chapter is highly influenced by HP Lovecraft and especially his Cthulhu Mythos.

WARNING for Depictions of GORE and WEIRDNESS.

Also, I have plans to upload a couple of Villainous Character studies I did. Let me know if anyone is interested.

All reader comments and kudos give me life. Thank you so much. Please ask any questions if you have them!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eleven: Let Us Not Read from the Book

Black Hat was now panting, waiting for an answer. White Hat stared, impassive. Slug shivered. A coldness was sweeping through White Hat Manor. Dr. Flug lost his grip on his boss, and the Eldritch grunted, falling to his knees. Without much thought, Slug started down the steps.

“Do not move!” White Hat said, voice like thunder. It carried, harsh and sure. Slug nearly tripped over his own feet. Black Hat’s claws tried to clamp his weeping chest cavity shut. It wasn’t working very well.

“What? He’s hurt and—” Slug was gesturing, meaning to move closer. White Hat stopped him.

“And last I recall,” White Hat said, beginning his descent, eye never leaving his dark twin’s weakening body, “He thought he could get away with harming my employee and then lying to me about it. Insisting it was somehow our fault that such a travesty could happen.”

Dr. Flug was shaking, trying to help his own boss stay upright. Black Hat did not respond. His lip twitched in a scowl but maintained unblinking eye-contact with White Hat.

“By that logic… why should I help him?” the Elder Being demanded. He was at the main floor landing, standing in front of Slug still uneasily perched on the stairs. Slug, cautiously, was inching downward, watching the stiff demeanor of his employer.
“B-Because you’re a H-Hero!” Flug stuttered. He was trying to move in front of Black Hat—who snarled in response, pushing the man back absently. The acidity of whatever his blood was made of was sizzling through Dr. Flug’s clothes. “A-And you consider him f-family, ri-right?”

“White Hat—” Slug tried.

A noise, too much like a hiss, escaped White Hat. Honestly, it scared both humans in the room into silence. He was standing before his brother. Black Hat was now twitching, body fuzzing in and out of the material plane. It made Slug sort of nauseous and discombobulated. He had to look away. Things were getting dangerously out of hand for the fabric of reality.

“You have the audacity to stand before me and—”

“You need me alive, brother mine,” Black Hat spoke, blood escaping between his pointed teeth. They seemed the only thing real as a smothering darkness leaked in from around every corner. Slug shuddered in memory at their damage.

“So you insist, but—” White Hat started in the language of man, and then his speech warbled into something else entirely. A music only they and the universe could understand, “This will be the second time you have been injured and demanding I spare you from my victory.”

“You’re gonna be bitter about that now?”

“This is experiment is beginning to tax me, brother.”

“White Hat,” Slug said, urgently as he felt… weird. That was the only way to describe it and have it make sense. “You have no idea what will happen if he dies here. You two aren’t exactly… made of the same stuff as humans.”

White Hat scoffed, but would not take his eyes off his brother.

“P-Please?” Flug tried. White Hat glanced only briefly at him. Poor creature. Trapped by the darkness… White Hat thought about how much better it might be if he’d let his twin perish… Certainly, it could not affect the Great Game. He himself had dealt Black Hat no killing blow… Perhaps this was a loophole to be exploited.
“I can fix him,” Slug interrupted the damning thoughts, coming to stand beside White Hat. He was holding out a calming hand to the other doctor. Lightly, the other hand was resting against the Elder Being’s elbow. So soft… like he didn’t want to frighten off White Hat. “I can fix him. White Hat isn’t the one you need.”

Black Hat’s vision snapped to Dr. Slug. White Hat pressed the calming hand down, physical form rippling in pure anger. “After everything you just—”

“It’s not about me,” Slug said, partially reminded him. He gestured to Flug, shaking, clothes sizzling. “I am serious. If Black Hat dies we have no idea what it will do to the way he warps the reality around him. Look at what’s happening here.”

White Hat did, eyes scanning… noticing all the strange things happening in the Manor. Matter shifting and darkness creeping along the crevices. Other dimensional shadows swarming and slithering across his white halls. A torrid heat rising and rippling along the seams of reality. The Manor was, of course, only sort of protecting the outside world around it… but…

“I don’t like this idea.”

“Tough. I’m the only one here who has a Necronomicon.”

…

The Necronomicon was an ancient tome—a grimoire—bound in human flesh and written in blood. It contained the writings of ‘the mad Arab’ and was considered by many archaeologists to be nothing more a fantasy. A treasure hunter’s own sort of cryptid. Supposedly many men died trying to locate an actual copy. Floods of fakes were everywhere, coming in and out of fashion depending on the mood of the general populace…

However, Black Hat and White Hat did not exactly shy away from the public. It was a very long held belief that if creatures like them existed, then there must have been a man who wrote a book like the Necronomicon.

With Slug at his wits-end investigating his family’s death, he decided that “normal” tactics were getting him nowhere. He would have to involve White Hat’s aide in finding a rogue Hero seeking revenge for Slug’s past deeds. Still thinking like a Villain, he figured he would need something to
leverage. The Necronomicon. Supposedly, the only thing that had the secrets to the cosmic and reality bending powers the Hat Twins wielded.

He went on the longest search of his life. Starting with the writings of an amateur quasi-scientist and para-psychologist from New England. According to extensive research, this infamous amateur had published to several journals on the nature of creatures similar to Black Hat—this of course was in America during the bootlegging/corrupt political atmosphere of the 1920’s-1930’s. Mob mania at it’s height was spearheaded by the Eldritch. Supposedly, this writer claimed to have recovered letters from a friend of a friend of his family detailing an exploration to the Artic.

Slug had started there, in the icy tundra, still covered in healing burns. He’d found more documents at a long-abandoned excavation/exploration site that he’d calculated from vague descriptions of the letter’s excerpts. Global warming, dammingly helpful, had unfrozen previously buried evidence of ancient civilizations and Slug had spent a long while digging through iced-over artifacts and trying to tract a path through a subterranean city—much destroyed by early archaeologists’ love of simply using dynamite and crowbars to open hidden temples and tombs.

All he could find was references to another ancient city—supposedly covered by a tomb of a famous pyramid. Urban legends frequently involved cosmic involvement with such monuments…and in that moment, Slug was pretty pissed to discover it was probably true. However, he was willing to follow wherever the clues led.

It had been a wild goose chase as he darted across the globe…

Before he found himself standing in front of the Misaktonic College. Originally, he was just going to get his hands on the original publications of articles—and the denoted pages of reference material the amateur writer had been referencing. He was surprised to learn that the section of the library he needed had previously been destroyed in an odd storm—more a hurricane. A lot of the things he was searching for had been missing for ages. However, the old librarian was kind enough to dig up records of the last time these items had been borrowed from storage.

Turns out, the pages, books, letters he was searching for were never returned.

He was directed to an address near a salt-soaked bay-town. Of course, it was a mansion. A dilapidated mansion. Slug had walked up to the mansion as a gang of burly, sour-faced men were pulling boxes out. After a few hard digs, it turned out the old coot who lived in the mansion finally, and mysteriously, died. Slug didn’t ask much questions in regards to the deceased. It was probably better that way—but he did ask to go through the some of the boxes with claims of being a distant relative. The men didn’t question it, and he spent a few good hours shuffling around into the dingy depths of a dead man’s possessions.
All he could find was a map with the warning—*DO NOT READ WITH WORDS*—scrolled around a red X. After a few moments, he realized it was leading down to a rocky cove he drove past on his way to the address given to him by the strange librarian. He pocketed the map, hopped in his car, and ignored the fishy look of the men as they watched him leave.

It took him until the moon had crawled up far above his head before he had dug up a steal lock-box wrapped in plastic bags upon plastic bags. With water quickly seeping into his ankle-high rubber wellies, he left, also deftly ignoring the dark things bobbing past the buoys in the sea. He then drove, without stopping, until he got very far inland and then hotwired another type of car when the gas ran out.

He found somewhere to bunker down and read through the book—never speaking a word aloud. Slug had to do research, but eventually, he deciphered the book… mad as it was. Still, he came to understand what sort of things White Hat and Black Hat truly were.

So. He made a weapon and went after the monsters that they were, nearly forgetting why he went searching for the book.

It was too much power for him—he knew this. He toed close to that thin line between curiosity and ruin. Thankfully, the memory of his family had brought him back, and he locked he Necronomicon into a steal safe with an ashwood frame. He tied the book into a silk bundle, and thought no more on it after accepting White Hat’s offer for a job.

At the current moment, though, he was unwrapping it. His hands were steady as Black Hat bled across his work table. Dr. Slug flipped through the… um, *leathery*… pages with a delicate touch. The ink was brown, and the whole thing let off a sickly, sweetly, foul stench. He shuddered.

He found the pages detailing Black Hat’s… uniqueness… and let out a sigh.

“Alright,” he said, loud to drown out the damning thoughts in his head. Black Hat grunted in response. “This is not going to be easy—and it’s probably going to be painful.”

“I don’t c-care! Just fix me!” he snarled. Dr. Slug began gathering some items from under his desk before rereading a passage. He glanced behind him to the anxious Flug.

“I need you to get me a bottle of absinthe that we keep in the liquor cabinet. White Hat can show you
“Absolutely not,” White Hat interrupted. Slug glared at him, but the being stubbornly continued, “I will not leave you unattended in Black Hat’s—”

“He’s bleeding out on the table—what’s he gonna do? Stain my clothes?” Slug snarked, crossing his arms.

White Hat shook his head, “Even in this state, he’s still stronger than any hu—"

“I’ll figure it out on my own!” Flug butt in before their argument could escalate.

Slug sent him a glare as well, “I trust you even less than Black Hat, doctor.”

“Dr. Slug—” White Hat began.

Black Hat let out an ungodly shriek, sitting up from his prone position on the desk as he held his gapping wound, “CAN SOMEONE GET THE DAMN ALCOHOL?! I’M FUCKING DYING HERE!”

“You don’t need the alcohol,” Slug snapped, setting up some sort of station with beakers with jerky movements, “We need wormwood—and that bottle is the closest thing we got. If we could extract and distill absinthe to get that the main ingredient, it would be a great help… If not, your chances of survival are greatly decreasing by the second.”

White Hat sighed, looking over at the nervous Flug. He looked ready to burst in tears.

“White Hat, trust me—” Slug said, pointing back toward the elevator, “I’m more helpful here, alive, to your brother. Go with Flug, grab the absinthe. Be quick.”

Dr. Flug tugged White Hat’s hand, pulling him toward the elevator. Without difficulty, he went. Slug sighed, not quite in relief, as he turned back to the Necronomicon. He had to focus and figure out his next few steps. The thought struck him that the damage was so extensive he might actually need to sew up Black Hat… and, ick… touching him…? The mere thought was causing his brain to
scramble in fleeting fits of mild panic.

He read through some passages, difficultly as he tried to silently remember how to decipher the erratic writing inside the noxious tome.

Oh, great. No suggestions on what to use for stitching up an injured Eldritch. Then again, it was exceedingly difficult to harm creatures like Black Hat and White Hat... which lead to an even worse thought. Slug glanced over at the dark thing, asking quietly, “How did this happen, Black Hat?”

“D-Don’t know…” the creature hissed, clearly lying, before rolling into a wave of pain.

“I have to look at it. Can you… is that possible?” Slug swept his hand down his own chest to indicate and imitate the area that was Black Hat’s body.

Black Hat groaned, but took his hands off the gaping wound. “Have at it, doc—tor—Arrghhh…*fuck…*!”

Slug stepped closer, drawing over a swiveling desk lamp. He switched it on, ignoring the creature as it yelped at the sudden explosion of brightness to study the inside of the Eldritch…

Yeah. Slug had no idea what he was truly looking at. Fleshy bits wriggling and writhing. Things that looked like eyes, seemingly pluppy and bloated. Bones and teeth sticking out at awkward angles… and that acidy blood welled up, then turned sludgy as it cascaded over Black Hat’s shorn, dark, dense skin.

“Ugh… well… no puss… so nothing infected,” he analyzed, although the unmentioned I think was floating between them, unsaid. “If I had to guess… something tried to hack at you? Or, someone unloaded a fair amount of some kind of blessed buck shot into you?”

“No quite,” Black Hat said.

Slug hummed, “Will whatever did this be coming for White Hat?”

“If only I was so lucky—” Black Hat laughed at first, but it caused him pain as it rose his eviscerated
chest in staccato movements. He clutched at the wound again, and lie, resting a bit. “No. It was foolish of me… I sensed there were… hunters. Lurking.”

“Hunters?” Slug parroted, moving the Necronomicon closer so he visually inspect any difference in the diagrams sketched on its pages.

“I do not know how else to translate what they—what they are,” Black Hat said. He nodded to the Necronomicon, “They come from a different place. Made by an Elder God. Like a… a bloodhound, almost. They attack mostly in the realm of dreamers… White Hat, as a Dream Walker, will be an unhurt. Dreamers, though…”


Black Hat paused, looking at the ceiling with an impassive face, “Have you had dreams where you run… and run… and you seem to be going nowhere, wading through quicksand, or water, or just cannot seem to be running fast enough… but you must escape? You never look back, cannot look back… but you know there is something behind you. You feel it gaining on you… but all you can do is run?”

Slug didn’t respond, just placed his hand on his suddenly racing heart. He looked away and skimmed the book. Those weren’t things he considered dreams. Nightmares. He was no stranger to nightmares… Then, he started looking for some sort of thread that he could use on the Eldritch before him.

“… Flug had not slept in days,” Black Hat said into the silence, unaware or uncaring about Slug’s mental health.

The doctor paused in his search. He tried not to respond. He didn’t want to know how any of these events were connected to Black Hat, to his injury. To things that force him to find empathy in.

Still… the Eldritch spoke, “They—the Hunters in these dreams—chase the guilty, the scared, the humans who play with things they should not.”

“… and which is Dr. Flug?” Slug asked, knowing he probably shouldn’t. He wouldn’t receive any answer that would make up for what happened at Black Hat Manor.
“Dr. Flug is mine,” Black Hat replied, casual… but something else colored his dark voice.

Slug scoffed expectantly. He went back to searching for something strong enough to fuse an Eldritch back together. He found a steel-centered, thin cable cord. This would have to do. But how to weave it into Black Hat’s skin…?

“Well then… does he know? About what caused his nightmares?” Slug posed absently, checking his watch. The absinthe adventure was taking too long.

“Is it important to know?” came the caustic question, “Other than this is what can happen between what White Hat—and what I—am?”

“Does only damages things like you?” Slug asked, bitterly gleeful to throw this barb back.

“I have heard most humans say they wish to die in their sleep,” Black Hat said, smug, closing his eye. Slug raised a brow, wondering that was entertaining to such a dark creature. He didn’t have to wait long for the answer as Black Hat whispered sinisterly, “But… I have never known the chase to end peacefully.”

Slug’s blood froze at the idea. The elevator dinged—the lowering mechanism droning too loud in the heated silence.

“So… tell me how well you sleep tonight, Dr. Slug, with such guilt weighing on your conscious.”

The doors opened a second later—Flug nearly flying out of the elevator, holding aloft the absinthe.

Slug felt like he needed it more than Black Hat now.

…

Black Hat was yowling. Twisting around as the dear doctor dabbed and swabbed at his injuries. White Hat would have watched—arms crossed and secretly enjoying this sort of physical comeuppance… until Black Hat had reached out and tried swiping randomly to escape whatever painful sensation he was experiencing. Quickly, White Hat was restraining dark arms and other
broken masses of tentacles securely to the table and staring at the two other doctors who’d both already jumped back up in surprise.

Flug was cowering a little, but Slug was standing still, equipment being awkwardly held aloft.

“You are alright? Both of you?” he asked, taking a moment to breathe through the struggling of his brother below him. Acidic blood was coagulating along his gloves with each new shout and movement.

“Y-Yeah…” Flug gulped, checking down his body.

“I’m almost done disinfecting… but, I think I am going to need to readjust some of his… bones?” Slug replied, then checked his fetid book again. He gave a prolonged sigh. “Yes. Yeah, I am going to have to do that… Keep holding him, White Hat.”

White Hat tightened his gripped, even as his brother let out the foulest of curses at the action. Slug returned to his painstaking work. As soon as the doctor placed his hands along bones and jolted them back into place, constantly checking the diagrams writ in the accursed book, Black Hat began kicking out. The Elder Being was close to barking and biting—but Flug tossed himself across his boss’s lower body and wrapped his arms as tight around the Eldritch as he could.

“Almost done, Jefe! A-Almost…!”

Slug didn’t bother pausing, just rotated his tense shoulders and kept pushing and shoving shattered bones back into place. White Hat was astounded that Black Hat managed to bite his forked tongue to instead stiffen under the multiple hands holding the darker creature down.

Finally, Slug leaned back, looking toward Flug’s shaking profile. “Did you manage to grab any pieces that might have… come off?”

Flug nodded, unpeeling himself from Black Hat. He opened his coat, carefully reaching into an internal pocket and grasped for something thick and slimy. With a sort of ceremonious bestowing, he gave it to Slug. The man blinked down at the squirming substance—a large chunk of Black Hat’s chest. It still breathed. Pulsing in human hands.

“That’s fucking nightmare fuel…”
Slug took dripping piece over to a different table, wiped his gloves a little, and disinfected the chunk as best as he could. Black Hat let out a low groan, thumping his still hatted head along the table. White Hat was well aware he could probably feel every sting and swipe as the dear doctor carefully prodded at his broken off part. Slug changed gloves, then returned with the flesh, aligning it along the gaping cavity. There was a length of cable wires wrapped around one of his arms.

With a heavy groan he looked at White Hat, “I don’t quite know how to ask this, but I need to suture the wound closed… His skin is more or less impenetrable but, uh, I know that—”

White Hat let go the arm farthest from the scientist, and extended his hands into razor sharp talons. “My pleasure. Show me where.”

“Pierce here—” Slug instructed, darting his fingers in zig-zags along the differing sides of the chunk of flesh, “—And move like so. Think of it as lacing together tennis shoes.” White Hat wasted no time skewering his brother, and Slug was quickly following by gliding the cable through the new holes. “No, tighter together. We don’t want to risk infection or—”

“Of course,” White Hat said, remaining emotionless through the process. Black Hat snarled under him. He dug his own lengthening claws into his pale brother. He cruelly sank his menacing digits into White Hat’s forearm. Rivets of shimmering blood slipped over his sleeves, and Slug looked up, trying not to be visually concerned. “Doesn’t hurt. He’s not actually preventing anything. It’s petty revenge.”

“Fuck you! You’re enjoying this! You sic—ARGH! FUCK!” Black Hat’s legs jumped in shock, skittering along the table as White Hat dug a talon in too far. Slug hesitated for a moment before the Eldritch yelled at him as well, “JUST GET IT OVER WITH ALREADY.”

Slug huffed, quickly finishing the process. By the time he’d snipped off the end of the cable, melting it with a small blow torch, he was exhausted. Black Hat just lie there, breath too harsh, but at the very least he wasn’t actively bleeding anymore.

“Right. Now to just…” Slug took a moment to compose himself as he set the torch down and looked over at the chemistry station where Flug had a prepared the wormwood extract, “… put on the paste and wrap it up. Dr. Flug?”

“Oh! Yes, here—” the other doctor had leapt over from the Necronomicon. Slug gave him a warning tsk, but, took the prepared sludge they’d concocted from the absinthe. There was no need to be so
delicate with this part. He dumped it on the seams they just created on the Eldritch to rubbed along the whole of the injured areas. Black Hat gave a great shudder… settling further into the table like melting ink colored jelly.

His eyes slipped shut as he and Flug began wrapping Black Hat’s chest in gauze. White Hat stepped away as his brother seemed to instantly relax. He glanced down at his sleeve.

Ruined.

He ripped off the stained fabric to inspect his forearm for serious damage. None, really. Still… Slug had turned around at some point. He gave his employer a critical eye before returning to his Villainous patient. “We aren’t in the clear yet. It’s still be a little bit before we know if the process takes…”

“How long will they need to stay?”

“Two… maybe three days,” Slug lowly declared in his mental math. White Hat placed his arm behind his back, regaining some ounce of regality.

“I see…” he hummed, “I assume you do not intend to leave Black Hat unattended?”

“I-I can always b-borrow the Necro—”

“Absolutely not,” Slug cut off Dr. Flug’s suggestion before it even fully formed. The younger doctor wilted slightly.

“It—it’s j-just so I could t-take Black Hat home and—”

“Dr. Flug,” Slug said through gritted teeth, “The Necronomicon is not a textbook. It is not a source code to use on Eldritch maintenance. Nor even a true book of magic. What it is—is nothing you want. Trust me.”

Flug sighed as Slug stepped away from the exam table, finally finished. Immediately, he went to the Necronomicon and re-wrapped it in silk. He had White Hat step out of the way so he could place it
back in his overly complicated safe. With a put-upon sigh, he continued to glance at the wounds still leaking teal fluid from the Elder Being.

“I’ll go upstairs and grab your first aid kit. Watch them, please,” Dr. Slug muttered. He stood tiredly, leaving the lab without further ado. White Hat stared after him, conflicted. Nonetheless, he did as asked, left alone with an anxious Dr. Flug and a drooling Black Hat.

…

Slug’s hands shook as he washed them in his sink.

That was… definitely the weirdest thing he’d done to date in White Hat’s employ… But, he had to shake it off. They weren’t done yet. Slug checked under his sink for what he internally deemed as his Emergency White Hat Tool Box. He kept it stuffed with things the Elder Being could need if severely injured. Though it was unlikely (given Slug was pretty sure he was the only human alive who’d found a real Necromonicon), it never hurt to be prepared. No thought had ever crossed his mind that he would have to do that for an Eldritch.

He’d better put together a list for Flug.

From memory, he scribbled down as much as he could in neat lettering. Then, he double checked it, adding a few things that couldn’t hurt to include. Satisfied after a few more anxious checks, he then went into Clem’s room. 0.5.0. was snoring like a chainsaw… but the young woman was louder. Slug was vaguely impressed.

He still had to wake her. With gentle shakes, he cooed at her. It always took a while, as he hadn’t had to actually do such a thing in years since Cero was so protective of the girl. Blurry, she blinked up at him. “H-Huh? What I miss?”

“That” perked the girl up, “24 hour? Credit card? What…?”
“Nothing to worry about. Just get dressed and do this. I’ll tell you more when you’re fully awake,” he said. The girl roused herself enough to skim the list, eyes blinking out of sync. She gave a thumbs up and shuffled out of bed. He poked at the purple bear warily. It yawned, grumbling, but luckily didn’t bring down a massive paw on his—frankly—unprepared self. “You too, Cero. Go with Clem.”

Clementia was pulling open her dresser and rummaging around. Knowing she was getting closer to being fully awake, Slug left her to return to his lab.

It was going to be a long night.

…

White Hat let his dear doctor tape up the puncture marks in his arm, having taken off the more restrictive parts of his suit. He sat on a stool, arm propped on a small work table in the corner while Slug stood. More than anything, he wanted to ask if the man was alright—tonight was a particularly emotionally extensive night. It didn’t sit well with White Hat.

Still, Slug wasn’t giving away some of the tells White Hat had picked up over the years… he seemed fine. Hands steady and goggles displaying a calming half-lid like expression. Concentrating. White Hat opened his mouth to speak but—

“Clementia should be back soon. She’ll have shellfish, octopi, and whatever else she could find at the store. No doubt these little boo-boos will be gone by then,” he said, voice edging on something… something not as nice as he had been lately. White Hat didn’t like the regression. A few hours ago they’d just been—been supportive. Friendly.

He could only blame Black Hat for interrupting.

White Hat nodded, looking over at his brother. The Eldritch was… sleeping? Maybe. Probably floating in and out of stages between consciousness and not quite conscious. He hadn’t asked what caused the damage, but he recognized it well enough. Any creature following the line of the Elder Gods could do this. Black Hat had more than likely been pissing off a cousin-creature of theirs. Served him right…

“If Clem comes back with eel, set it aside. It will probably heal him the best,” White Hat said. Dark, sinuous, sharp teeth… Evil things that hid places they were not suppose to be. Striking without
warning. Yes, eels and Black Hat—hideous, happy being a predator—that should do well enough to give him strength to quickly leave their Manor.

“Got it,” the doctor nodded.

White Hat sighed just as Slug finished bandaging him. He glanced briefly at the wrapping work—still as expert as ever. He nodded, rotating his aching wrist before relaxing his arm into his lap. The Elder Being stayed seated, even as Slug leaned against the table with his hip. The doctor didn’t clean up his equipment just yet. They both went to watching the Villainous pair…

Dr. Flug was in a folding metal chair, waiting at Black Hat’s side. Black Hat, of course, now unmoving. Deathly still. He needed to be so his body could fix itself… but, Flug was yawning, and Black Hat’s eye opened at the jaw-popping sound. It slid to the side and took note of the doctor.

“Sleep,” he commanded. Dr. Flug shook his head. Black Hat growled and closed his eye again, moving his arm to grab the bagged head pull it down to the table. “There’s no point in both of us being too tired that we can’t defend ourselves.”

“I take offense to that brother,” White Hat grumbled.

Slug gave a shrug, with a snarky, “Well, he’s got reason to be worried,” said under his breath. White Hat snorted at first, but quickly covered it with a cough. Slug made no other comments, or even acknowledged White Hat’s amusement. The way he seemed to be ignoring White Hat stung…

“While we may have a truce, White,” Black Hat said, clutching at Flug’s head, “You and I are still… adversaries. I’m not foolish enough to let my guard down.”

“We healed you—”

“No. Slug healed me. You would have let me die at your door because of some petty disagreement!” he hissed. White Hat did stand, knocking over his stool and stomping over to his brother, finger pointed.

“Then you have no reason to worry! The person who should have wanted you dead the most was the only one willing to come to your aid! Do you have any idea how lucky you are?!?” White Hat asked, losing his cool quickly. He pointed back behind him to the doctor who was cautiously
approaching his employer. “And to call it a petty disagreement?! You—you tortured him! You have no idea how—”

“White Hat, stop,” Slug demanded. He grabbed at the hands starting to flail about. Teal liquid was already seeping through his wrappings. White Hat visibly shook as he tried to calm himself.

“I am having a very difficult time not ripping you limb from limb, brother.”

“And I am somewhat proud of that,” Black Hat chuckled darkly. White Hat scoffed. He went back to his stool to set it rightside up. He briskly went to sitting down, morose and scowling at nothing in particular.

Slug stayed where he was standing. He gestured to the exhausted Flug, barely clinging to consciousness. “I can show him to a guest room—”

“For now, he stays…” Black Hat muttered. Flug yawned, and then, seemed to go lax instantly. Slug hummed, realizing the man must have drifted off despite the tension that would normally cause him to panic. He was probably more than drained by the events of the last couple hours. “If my brother wouldn’t mind keep his voice down for a few hours?”

White Hat stayed silent, still pointedly looking elsewhere. Black Hat gave a wicked smile and relaxed in the tension. Slug shook his head. He looked over at his employer, telling more than asking, “I am going to check on Clem and those errands. Behave while I am gone. Any further damage and he’ll need to stay longer.”

White Hat waved him away, face turning impassive. He seemed to be regaining his composure little by little.

Slug knew that was the best he was going to get right now.

…

Clem had indeed returned, setting the items she purchased on the kitchen table and going through her eco-friendly tote bags one by one. 0.5.0. was placing his chauffer hat on the little rack they kept hanging by the doors to the kitchen. The sun was beginning to rise through the curtains.
“How’d it go?” he asked. Clementia gestured to the table in tired response as Slug walked over. It looked like she got most—if not all—of the things he asked for. In fact, she had a few extras. There was a new unicorn plush peeking out of a bag. He pulled it up and flicked at the iridescent horn. The girl blushed and grabbed it before he could lift it out of her immediate reach.

“Present to me for being a good and going on an early morning shopping trip. What happened while I slept anyways?” she asked. She placed the plush toy on the counter. Slug found a new tool box lying on it’s side in that same bag, the sale sticker stuck to the handle.

“Well, Black Hat showed up—”

“No! What?!” she squeaked. She suddenly grabbed her plush and held it tight. Slug held up his hands soothingly.

“It’s fine…” he said, as if she was a frightened animal. 0.5.0. eyed the whole kitchen, sniffing, before standing in front of the doors protectively. Just in case. “He was badly damaged during… something. A fight, I guess. He came to White Hat for help.”

Clementia slowly released her toy, placing it back on the counter. She then turned to another bag—this one filled with seafood and the like. Walking to the fridge, she sighed, “And I guess he helped?”

Slug hesitated.

“Sluggy?” she paused. She tossed the tote into the freezer without thinking and walked back over, “White Hat…? He helped or… he got hurt?”

“Oh, no, no. White Hat’s fine—” Slug assured, before remembering he had been literally punctured by his twin’s claws during the healing process, “But he almost didn’t help.”

“Oh,” Clem said. Then nodded, walking back over to the table to unbag the other items from Slug’s list, “That makes sense. Doesn’t surprise me.”

“Wait. It doesn’t? Why not?” Slug questioned. He was organizing the things into neat piles so he could store items in the tool chest accordingly.
She shrugged, gathering up the totes and storing them away in a cabinet. “I mean... He was really lost when you were gone. And, I know something happened when you were over there—Black Hat Manor I mean. I’m still mad at Dem that she tried to hide it from me. But, even she doesn’t know what really happened. As far as she told me, you two... fought?”

Slug tilted his head in thought, trying to remember. The skirmishes between them were, at best, moments of lapse in Slug’s otherwise carefully devised methods for staying out of Black Hat’s radar. In comparison to Dementia—well, nothing to really worry about.

“But, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t wanna, Slug,” she added, starting to help the man peel off price tags and cut away plastic casing.

“Dementia does not have good impulse control,” he finally said.

Clem laughed, “You don’t have to *me* that! I once had to unstick her head from a hole in a fence!”

“What? How even—”

“She thought it was the right size for her head. Her hair got caught and she tried to claw the whole thing down.”

“That’s really weird...?”

“She thought there might have been a secret behind the fence.”

“Well—”

“It was a chainlink fence, Sluggy.”

Slug paused, shaking his head, and starting to fill the toolbox. The girl hummed, handing him items willynilly. She seemed more at ease with the situation then him... but he had been awake too long. “Did you find any eel?”
“I did, why?”

“Oh—” he said, then tilted his head towards the direction of his lab, “For Black Hat. White Hat is thinking Eldritches probably heal faster with eel.”

“I don’t… quite understand. Why eel?” the girl asked. Then looked curiously into the toolbox, poking at items.

“I guess I never did tell you,” Slug mused. The girl was 18 now. She is considered a legal adult but, until now it did not seem prudent to teach her more than basic first aid for humans. Still, she was a good girl—if her unquestioning nature about running errands way past her bedtime (which she still kept up at 18 years old, needless to say) didn’t further convince him, he did not know what might. “But, uhhh… I have a Necronomicon.”

Clem jumped at the confession like it was a hot wired buzzword. Then again, Necronomicons were a popular source for ultimate evil things of cosmic nature in the general public opinion. She cupped her own face, exaggerating her shock while exclaiming, “A what?! Seriously?! And you just casually have one?!”

“I made sure I did before seeking out White Hat,” he explained. The toolbox was nearly complete. He then pulled out a pen from his pocket and went to the junk drawer to look for a note pad.

“Hold the phone!” the girl said, continuing to reach up to clutch her head now, “But that’s a bad book, right?!”

“Yes. So never, ever read aloud from it, Clem,” he ordered, pointing his pen at her. Then, he went to writing out some instructions and sigils pertinent to Black Hat care and health.

“Um! I don’t even want to read it,” she claimed.

Slug nodded, distractedly, “Good, good.”

“What—What are you even doing with it!?”
“Better I have it than leave it for someone who doesn’t know better,” he said, walking back to the open toolbox. He sealed the notepad papers into a baggie and placed it inside the makeshift medkit. He closed the lid and locked it, tapping the handle in triumph. “Done! Black Hat Emergency First Aid Box. I’ll give it to Dr. Flug when he wakes up. Hopefully if something like this happens again, Flug can just take care of it himself.”

“Uh—that’s nice, I guess,” Clem said, giving him an incredulous look, “But let’s backtrack. I wanna know why you just didn’t destroy the Necronomicon?”

“Much like Black Hat and White Hat, it’s neigh on indestructible,” he explained.

Clementia walked back to her plushie and held on to it tightly, seemingly still stunned, “Okay…but… like, doesn’t it curse you or something?”

“Eh,” he said dismissively, moving toward the girl and giving her shoulder a comforting squeeze, “This is why we never, ever read from the book.”

“You say we, like it’s mine too,” she mumbled into the fluff of her unicorn. Slug gave her a soft look. He nodded, before moving to the fridge to find the seafood.

“I already willed it to you in the event of my death,” he confessed. Clementia gave him wide eyes. She shook her head continuously.

“Nu-uh! Nope! No! Do not want! Do not want! That’s a bowl of O-Hell-Nah’s I will never partake of!”

“That statement seems like a double negative,” he mused. Clementia gave a small growl. She hugged her unicorn protectively.

“I already said I don’t want nothing to do with that book!” she declared. Slug shot her a smile, electing to ignore the newest double negative, as he picked out the container of eel and moved it to the counter. Would Black Hat prefer it raw and slimy…? Probably. Still. Best to make something White Hat would like to eat, too. As well as he and the other doctor. Maybe sushi…
“You can just leave it in it’s safe. Don’t have to ever see or touch it. Pretty sure holy fire will destroy it. You can do that when I have shuffled off this mortal coil,” he said. Clementia walked up beside him, glaring.

“Stop saying that. You are never, ever dying!”

Slug laughed, “While I am hard to kill off—”

“My favorite thing about you, yes!”

“I am not really young, Clem. I’ll keep getting older. And this line of work—Villains and Heroes—” he started, sighing uncomfortably. Clem gave him another shake of the head. She set her unicorn elsewhere as she tried to spin him to face her.

“Never, ever dying. I don’t care what side we’re on, just like you said before. You’re always gonna be alive and be my Sluggy,” she said, voice fierce. Slug smiled, patting her hands.

“Alright,” he agreed. She beamed at him as she let him go. She then moved over to her breakfast nook spot and sat down. Slug tossed her a cheeky brow over his shoulder and said, “Ya know, the Necronomicon does have an immortality spell. So, if you are willing to break your convictions about the book—”

“Do not tempt me, Slug! I’m sure it also has a spell for raising the dead—and I’ll use it on ya if you die! Just to annoy you!” she argued. Slug shuddered, because she wasn’t wrong, but it was still a horrific spell.

Maybe it was best to change the subject, “I’ll be making some sushi. Elder Beings and Eldritches can be recharged faster through shellfish. Specifically, things that have any tentacles and tendrils. But basically, anything from the sea should do the trick. And I mean anything, Clem.”

“That’s good to know. I’ll just chuck a blob fish at White Hat when he’s moody,” she teased. Slug laughed at the image. She grew a bit energized by his mirth, standing on her seat and raising her hands manically, “They practically look the same so it should be super effective!”

“Clem!” Slug tried to sound firm, but he lost it at the mental image of a sad blob-fish-face White Hat be-bopping around the Manor after Clementia in thanks for the meal.
Even 0.5.0. at his sentry gave a noise that could be mistaken for laughter.

“You’re just—” he said between giggles, “—Just the worst, you know that? Such a brat.”

“Eh. I learned it from both of you,” she waved it off. Slug went back to preparing food for the Manor. “But, seriously… anything else I need to learn about that sort of stuff? I’d rather hear it from you than get anywhere near an evil, probably cursed book.”

Slug nodded, “Yeah. Grab the rice from the pantry and I’ll tell you some basics.”

Clementia and Slug spent the dawning morning like that. It was immensely calming for the doctor. It was the best he would feel for the next few days… things were about to get rough.

Chapter End Notes

Again, thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed! Everything is unbeta’d so if you need more info about the general world-building, I am more than happy to provide! Thank you, thank you, thank you!

<3
Let Us All Weigh Our Souls

Chapter Notes

Not as gore-heavy this chapter.

Little bit of angst heavy, though... and full of dialogue.

Writing Black Hat is too much fun. I am not gonna lie. I hope you all like it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twelve: Let Us All Weigh Our Souls

Black Hat was now able to sit up. However, he was apparently nauseated easily by such actions. Still, Slug considered it progress. Dr. Flug dutifully waited beside him, the toolbox carefully placed along his bouncing legs. He seemed to soak up all the information eagerly. White Hat smiled at both the men—working in tandem so efficiently.

Black Hat was scowling. White Hat ignored him.

“Of course, the only way to really know what will work will be trial and error in the end,” Slug was finishing saying. White Hat blinked, and Slug was unwrapping Black Hat’s bandages. Too easily touching the dark skin and saying, “See? I thought the cable cords might have to be pulled out—but the acidity of his blood has already eaten through most of these stitches…”

“Will it have to be re-stitched?” Black Hat asked, voice warbling in his own kind of unease. White Hat made sure to stare blankly at his brother. He really wouldn’t mind stabbing Black Hat a few more times.

Slug lightly tapped along the edges. The Eldritch barely winced. “Hmm… no. Doesn’t seem so. Your chest is staying together. We’ll wait for the top layer to pop out though…” Flug stood up with another jar of salve and began re-applying. Black Hat sighed in near relief. Together, they wrapped his chest back up. Stepping back, Slug noted Flug having to help the creature back to a prone position, “I am concerned that this nausea is indicative of some other internal injury we didn’t realize was there…”

“Anyway to know for sure?” Flug asked, nervously placing a hand along Black Hat’s stomach. He was probably feeling for something out of place. How he would know what was normal and what
was not, White Hat could only guess. Slug took in a deep breath.

“Other than exploratory surgery? Not really.”

“I can help, if that is the case,” White Hat offered.

Black Hat sneered at him, “Oh, I am sure you would just love to.”

“Anything to help you, my loving brother,” came the retort. Black Hat gave him a gag and closed his eye. His hand clenched at his side, but he made no hateful rebuttal. White Hat was a bit surprised, but he had noticed his twin hedging and remaining distant…

Perhaps he wanted to leave more than White Hat wanted him gone… you know, before they rescinded their pact to remain neutral on the Great Game. Of course, Black Hat was also the one at a disadvantage. White Hat’s victory could be easily assured. Still—something felt off. Black Hat was growing increasingly perturbed the longer he and his doctor remained at White Hat’s Manor. The Elder Being and Slug were never far, so maybe he just felt smothered but… considering their natural instincts, being in each other’s presence for too long was something to worry over.

“I was going to make some scallop and blue-shrimp pasta with ink noodles. If that seems too decadent, then I can always just bring something softer,” Slug said. Black Hat placed a hand on his stomach, apparently thinking.

“No… that should be fine,” he finally said. Slug nodded. He left the lab and Flug paused, looking between the two creatures. Black Hat sniffed, but not as derisively as he normally does to his pale twin, “Go on. I know you’re curious.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll return with something to eat soon,” he said. He quickly followed Slug up to the kitchen, intent on watching the other doctor cook. It was apparently a role revision in Black Hat Manor. The Eldritch was the only one who could make a decent meal. It was surprising as no one even dared let White Hat never the microwave or stove. His creations always… sort of… came alive. It was one of the few terrifying things he was capable of as a cosmic being.

Soon, the brothers were alone.

White Hat took Flug’s seat. He stared down, baleful at his twin.
“What?”

“You know what.”

“I do not,” Black Hat insisted. His claws twitched, but his eye remained closed. White Hat vaguely wondered if his brother could feel his other orb—lone, contained—in the black wood box upstairs in the white desk. White Hat found he didn’t particularly care. If it’s closeness made the darker one uncomfortable, it suited him right for everything he tried to pull before.

“You were cruel to my doctor,” the Elder Being said, “Yet now he dotes on you.”

“Ugh… how many times must we go over this?” Black Hat complained, and White Hat crossed his arms haughtily, “What do I have to say for you to let it go?”

“I do not know. All I know is that I am sorely angered by your betrayal. I am very upset that this has caused him distress. I am—”

“UGGGGH…!”

“Do not pretend to be in pain,” White Hat dismissed, placing his hands on the table and looming over his brother, “You will listen to me and answer any questions I have on the subject. You cannot escape it now.”

“That’s why I am groaning, fool,” Black Hat grumbled. He finally opened his eyes, hands falling off his stomach as he tried to at least raise to his elbows so as not to be at a height disadvantage.

“Did you think I would not find out?” the Elder Being asked. Black Hat frowned, then sort of shrugged. “Verbal answers, brother. If you wish to move past this, you will tell me why you intended to make him suffer. It is in your best interest to—”

“Fine, fine…!” Black Hat growled. He cracked his neck, swiping off his top hat—revealing a bowler hat beneath, of course.

Black Hat looked at him. Then, carefully, laid down to stare at the ceiling. “Will it come as a surprise if I say that I wish to invoke the human law of the fifth amendment?”

“It will not, and I feel no need to remind you we are not truly bound to those laws.”

“Worth a shot…” he muttered. With a sigh, he looked over at his brother. “I got carried away.” White Hat immediately bore a glare into the darker twin. Black Hat tried to school his face. “He would not have been hurt under different circumstances. There was… a misunderstanding.”

“That is all you—and even he—will tell me. Am I to assume the situation on my own? My imagination is lacking compared to your depraved one,” White Hat bit out. Black Hat only sort of smirked.

“Is that what this is about? You are just unhappy without details?”

White Hat found himself standing abruptly, more than perturbed, “What are you imply—”

“Your dear doctor does have a delicious scream, you know,” he stated. White Hat grabbed him, sinking his talons into still healing flesh and yanking the Eldritch up. Black Hat only laughed, brilliant green blood slipping between his fanged teeth, “No doubt you saw how well he could be marked and manipulated and pushed and prodded. I would have done more had my own doctor not—” Black Hat began coughing as White Hat dug deeper.

“You can be so despicable—”

“Are you so innocent, brother?” he demanded. He did not reach up and inflict physical pain.

“I would never use him like you use your own employees!” White Hat hissed. Black Hat’s eyes blazed, and for a moment, White Hat could see his own horrifying image reflected back in that dark monocle. He threw his brother down, who hit the exam table with a harsh thunk, and turned away, trying to regain a softer appearance. Something less… less demented than what they were. “You know what side I was made for, so how could you suggest—” he stopped trying to find words in English. Their own tongue was lacking whatever he was searching to express as well however.
“You do use him though,” Black Hat hummed.

White Hat sighed, “I will not stoop so low into asking what you mean. Surely, you will twist what you think you know about us to suit your own needs.”

“What I think I know?” Black Hat laughed, and flecks of spittle and blood soared through the air, sizzling as they landed on the metal table and tiled floor, “I know everything. Like you said—I tortured him to know all about your arrangement. Not that he really remembers. Flug was kind enough to insist on the hypno-ray. He really doesn’t remember anything I might or might not have done.”

White Hat seethed in his spot, but would not be goaded further. His brother was just doing his best to push all of his buttons.

“His whole reason for living was taken from him. You know that can often push people to Villainy. So, you kept him. You know who did it I bet. I can already tell—”

“I do not,” White Hat said, voice soft, almost broken. Black Hat paused. He let out a sort of intrigued hum.

“Well… I suppose I can believe that,” he said. White Hat sat down, head in his hands.

“I never forgot why he came to me… I just could never find the thing he was looking for,” he confessed. His brother rose a brow, glancing over. He let out a low whistle in pseudo-sympathy. White Hat looked up, disapproving. “Please do not pour salt into this particular wound.”

“You know I can’t help it,” came the toneless comment.

White Hat shook his head, “Why do you feel the need to create these—these harmful things between us?”

“Which us? You and I, or you and the ‘good doctor’?” he asked, giving air quotes snottily.

“Either or, I suppose,” White Hat said, not really clarifying. Black Hat closed his eye, thinking about
it. He breathed deeply, ignoring the sluggish flow of blood from his chest. White Hat regretfully realized the doctors would be severely annoyed when they returned. He took to opening the tool chest and rummaging around in it.

“You like to believe in choices, brother?” Black Hat asked, though it was more statement. White Hat began to tend to the injured Eldritch. It was odd, the entire experience between them. “You know that I, more than anyone, would have agreed with you at some point. We could choose what to make of ourselves…”

“We are choosing now, aren’t we? Our own personal armistice… I still hope for peace.”

“There can be no peace between us,” Black Hat said, ironically, as his brother cleaned the wounds he made, rebandaging them anew, “As I grow older… I realize this more and more. I have too much hatred for you. For this damn Game. I did not ask for this. I did not ask for my nature to be bathed in blood—”

“Then, do not do so. Do not give in,” White Hat nearly begged.

“You misunderstand me, White,” Black Hat said with a sigh. He raised his claws and stared at them, “Every terrible thing I do… it gives me a greater sense of peace than fighting against it. I was made to be The Villain. I do not hate that. I hate having to prove it. I hate that we could not choose sides for ourselves. I might have chosen to do so anyway—but I can never fully know.”

White Hat stared at him, uncertain. Black Hat smirked, catching his twin’s eye again.

“Evil is much easier to understand, brother. You care for nothing other than your own needs. You damn everything else. It is for you, and you only, your own darkness. Your own demons. Relinquishing every whim to feed them, to please them. It’s easy enough to practice… Everything has a shadow. I delight in all of them.”

White Hat looked away, closing the toolbox. “You are despicable.”

“I know,” Black Hat replied, voice betraying nothing more than this was a fact.

White Hat locked the box.
The doctors returned with food soon after, and White Hat felt jilted as he thought Black Hat did twist his words. He never gave any proper answers for his wretched behavior. Could he simply accept that Black Hat would be Black Hat?

Slug twirled his fork in the dark, ink-stained noodles, no expression displayed. No words to enlighten the atmosphere. White Hat watched his hands carefully… a tremor was beginning to make his eating progress slightly slower.

No, White Hat decided. He could not believe that these shadows must be excused. There was no excuse good enough for harming anyone.

 Slug couldn’t tell when the mood shifted, exactly, but White Hat was keeping an eye on him… and Flug. It was almost… disconcerting. It was probably because he and Black Hat were, well, what they were. Which was a creepy ass thing to be. In general.

Dr. Flug didn’t seem nearly as repulsed as he should have been—which didn’t bode well for the state of his sanity.

Unconsciously, Slug was rubbing at the indelicate skin at his neck. White Hat touched his elbow, neat and light, eye too soft. “Are you alright?”

“Oh? Uh—” Slug stopped his rubbing, instead focusing on White Hat’s sudden presence beside him, “Yeah. I’m alright. It’s just been a bit of a hectic time. I’ve had to re-schedule with a number of very insistent Heroes.”

“I see,” he answered. Slug didn’t bother to add more. He instead turned to his work table and sat down. He went to pulling out his tablet and going about doing more managerial tasks. Black Hat, from his spot, lounging on the table took interest in the conversation.

“Dr. Slug,” he said, with the air of someone who was being sly but made no move to obscure the knowledge, “I believe I need further assistance…”
Slug gave him a confused look, walking over, as White Hat glared at his brother. Black Hat started showing the bandages that had been wrapped—not as tight and as clean—around his torso. White Hat instantly froze as Slug started removing them, asking, “How did this happen? Did the stitches tear?”

“Oh no, no. You see, my dearest twin thought—”

“That’s enough from you!” White Hat declared. He walked over, trying to put himself between Slug and Black Hat, just as Flug gasped at some of the closing wounds being revealed as the bandages finally slipped off. Slug pushed away from White Hat’s grasping hands.

“Are you serious?! Did you two fight?” the doctor glared over in White Hat’s direction. Goaded, he raised his hands nonthreatening and opened his mouth, but Slug would hear none of it, “No! No! If you two can’t fucking behave for 20 minutes—”

“H-He started it! I didn’t—”

“You’re the Hero, White Hat! You should know better!” Slug clenched his fists continuously as he tried to calm down.

“He wouldn’t tell me why he—”

“You don’t need to know!” Slug shouted suddenly. White Hat jumped at the venom in his voice. It was obvious he couldn’t understand. Fine. He would fix this—end this stupid tension once and for all between the two cosmic creatures. “White Hat, take Dr. Flug upstairs and stay there.”

It was White Hat’s turn to suddenly turn enraged, “No. There is no—”

“Do it or I quit!”

White Hat grew silently, still. He didn’t even breathe. All fight went out of him.

“I mean it. We all know why I am here. You said you would help me. You cannot help me by fighting with Black Hat. If this is going to consume your energy I—”
“No, no,” White Hat cut off. He walked forward, hand held over his would-be heart, “It’s not. I just —”

“Stop it. Go upstairs. Figure out your issues. I’m done trying to—” Slug roughly sighed. He shook his head, pointing at the elevator. “Go. I need a few moments.”

White Hat hesitated. Dr. Flug had tiptoed closer, pulling at the Elder Being’s sleeve. The lightest of tugs, starting to lure him toward escape. They awkwardly awaited the lift as Slug counted his breaths to calm himself. As soon as the doors behind his boss and the other scientist closed, Slug sighed in relief. Then, scowled, looking back to Black Hat. The dark creature laughed.

“Isn’t this familiar?”

Slug took off his mask. He tossed it on the table and sat on the stool next to the slowly bleeding Black Hat. He crossed his arms, unwilling to fix the Eldritch further. Black Hat did not cease smirking, gazing directly into the mutilated face before him. “I have no doubt White Hat is telling the truth. You baited him. You wanted to speak with me alone, no doubt. I’m not a gullible idiot. What are you planning?”

“Honestly, nothing,” he confessed. Slug rolled his eyes. He did not relax.

“Your secrets are safe. Tell him whatever you need to. End this. I haven’t had a moment’s peace since you decided to meddle,” Slug ordered.

Black Hat’s smirk slowly fell. He rested back, frowning, “It doesn’t work like that.”

“Why not?” Slug asked, put out.

“He won’t except any reason that’s not the truth,” Black Hat tried to explain.

“You’ve fooled him before—”
“Yes, but he knows my tells more than I do. I couldn’t get away with any lie that wouldn’t involve Flug. He already disapproves of my methods to… keep him with me,” the Eldritch mumbled, certainly unhappy. His frown pulled at his face unnaturally as he said, “If I could get him not to try to save my doctor I wouldn’t feel the need to meddle—as you put it.”

Slug slumped forward, holding his forehead with one hand. “He’s never acted like this before. It’s really annoying. Please, I am begging you—”

“What? What do you mean?” Black Hat asked, genuinely confused.

“I mean all this—this coldness. This causal cruelty. He’s—”

“He’s an Elder Being, Dr. Slug. This is what he is. This how he has always been,” Black Hat insisted. Slug shook his head, irritated.

“No. He’s awkward, but he’s always been gracious and kind—”

“Well…” Black Hat snorted, “To you, perhaps. But you are not a threat. You are not an enemy. You are not what we are. You could not hurt him if you tried.” Slug did not comment. Black Hat tilted his head in thought. His one eye moved to the Necronomicon’s safe. His smirk returned, with teeth. “Oh. I see. That’s interesting.”

“It’s none of your business is what it is,” the man growled.

Black Hat tapped at his healing wound in thought, “And he’s still so gracious to you… I wonder why…”?

“Alright, I can see why White Hat decided to poke more holes in your stupid body,” Slug said, grabbing the toolbox from the floor. He started pulling out items, and angrily swabbed at the sore spots along the inky colored flesh.

“Well, I do have nothing to entertain myself with while I lie here—probably dying,” he said, wincing as the man no longer cared to be gentle with his bedside manner. Not that the healing process had been overly gentle in the first place—but at least no one was actively trying to harm the dark creature further.
“I used to think White Hat was stupid.”

“White Hat is stupid.”

“Yeah, and you’re stupider,” he shot back.

“That’s not even—” Black Hat started to say, but howled as Slug dug in too deep. The human was rubbing paste harshly across all the open areas. “What did you do that for?!”

“Because I hate you, you jackass!” the human ground out, voice raising an octave, “You don’t get to torture me—you don’t get to torture White Hat—and you certainly don’t get to bring my dead family into whatever cosmic feud you two are vying for! I don’t give a shit what you’re fighting for! I don’t care if you wanna molest your goddamn employees—you don’t get to disrupt my peace and quiet and make me grieve like this again!”

Black Hat blinked at the open hostility, claws wrapped around the table, twitching.

“You’re so fucking lucky that I don’t rip you open just for—”

Slug was stopped mid-rant as one of those claws dug into his chest. In an instant, he was paralyzed. There was the feel of his skin being depressed, indenting as the dark hand turned smoky. It plunged deep—and Slug lost the ability to feel much more than the quick successions of his heart turning frantic as a shadow closed around it.

There was nothing but numbness, nothing but the burning eye looking into the core of his soul.

“Oh. That is interesting indeed…”

Slug’s mouth fell open as Black Hat let go. All sensation of life flooded back. Slug gasped, the room turning and spinning. He rocked backwards, knocking over the chair and crashing too hard on the ground. His whole body shook. He heaved a breath and looked over at the smiling Black Hat. “What —What the fuck?!”
“White Hat can do the same thing,” he said. Slug crawled a bit away on his elbows, clutching at the front of his shirt. He looked down—but could find no evidence that his body had been invaded—punctured—in anyway. “We can look at your heart… or I guess soul? Doesn’t really matter. It says a lot about a person.”

“So?! What’s that have to do with anything?!” he spit out, voice cracking. He shakily tried to climb onto the tipped chair for balance.

“Nothing. Just wanted to see it.”

Slug shook his head, raising to a standing position, rubbing his aching chest.

“Obviously, White Hat would never do that sort of thing,” Black Hat said, nearly disappointed.

“Obviously,” Slug panted, glaring, “That was fucking horrible.”

“And it’s a good thing too. Your soul,” Black Hat nodded. Slug gulped, he tried walking over to his work bench for better balance as his heart beat at an odd sycophantic frenzy.

“I don’t care.”

“Oh, but you do,” he said, voice a hiss and slither, working it’s way into his heating ears. Slug tried not to shudder. His instincts were all out of whack. All he wanted to do was run, and keep running, until his heart gave out.

“No, I don’t. Shut up. I’m going to bring White Hat back down here and you can figure out whatever the fuck you want to tell him. I’m done. I’m not—”

“You got such a heavy, dirty soul.”

Slug stopped. He looked over at Black Hat.

Impassive.
Slug tugged back on his mask and left the Eldritch.

Black Hat could rot for all he cared.

Which he didn’t.

He didn’t. He didn’t care.

…

“Why do you even stay with him…?” White Hat asked, talons curved around his favorite mug. He’d made cocoa and was now staring at the frothy concoction—trying to fill this cold void with something else.

Dr. Flug looked up from his borrowed cup, a bit surprised. “Y-You mean Black Hat?”

“Yes…” White Hat murmured around the lip of his mug, “He’s terrible.”

“Well—” Dr. Flug fidgeted, trying to grasp words almost. He struggled. Coughing a bit around his own drink. After a moment, he collected himself. His shoulders stiffened, both in a shrug and because of his normally tense demeanor. “That is probably why I stay. He is Black Hat.”

“If you are scared, I can always offer protection—”

The man laughed, shaking his head, “Of course I am scared, but… not really… scared of him, specifically. The things he is capable of, yes, but… Black Hat has given me nothing but opportunities.”

“What do you mean?” the Elder Being asked. White Hat felt his brows scrunch together in confusion. Flug shrugged.
“I am a Villain, sir. I am not… not sure I have the capacity to explain it in words properly. I am drawn to—to troubling things. And, at first, it was very frightening. I hid it well enough, the things I wanted and even could do—” Dr. Flug was staring at his hands in thought as he said this, “I won’t lie. I tried to stop. I suppose I could say I tried my hardest but… I don’t know. Black Hat found me, you know.”

“I… I did not,” White Hat gulped down some hot liquid. It did not to settle his suddenly churning stomach.

Flug nodded, “There was an—an incident at a lab I worked for… and, um, Black Hat… he… found me. Literally. I was in a closet, hiding. He did—whatever he does—and I… I remember staring into his face. Astounded. I had only ever heard rumors of him. I had never actually seen him before. I just—I just knew at that moment I was obsessed.”

“That’s not… too unusual,” White Hat commented. He swirled his drink in thought. There was a dark sludge coalescing at the bottom of the mug. The heaviest (the densest) matter would always sink, always fall to the lowest part. That was science, he knew this. The dear doctor had explained it once.

“I know… but, he didn’t let me chase after him. He just told me, then and there, I didn’t have to hide who I was. I could be whatever I wanted to be… and… no one ever said that to me before…” he muttered. Flug looked up, shoulders lightening, “Well, I mean, he said it and meant it. The world expects a lot from us, doesn’t it? People want the surface. They only want to see you doing something. They don’t care about what’s underneath. They don’t care about what you want to do, as long as it ultimately serves them, you know?”

White Hat stared into his drink. The top growing too light, clearer, as the dark substance hardened along the curved bottom of his mug. Why couldn’t the drink just stay mixed together better? The taste can’t be very good now…

“Scientists have a lot of people clamoring for things they don’t even understand,” Flug said, pausing to see White Hat’s focused glare into his mug. He tapped his own glass, gaining the Elder Being’s attention. It snapped up, a little more focused. “Your brother is… well. You know what he is. I won’t excuse how atrocious he can be. I am not a fool… all I can say is that he is what I want. I gave my soul to him, no hesitation. I don’t want to leave him… and yes, he’s terrible. He is so terrible… and I—”

“But you could do so much better! You could—” White Hat said, seeing how choked up the man before him seemed to be getting. He couldn’t understand it. He really couldn’t. This doctor seemed to be in more than just… awe of Black Hat.
Flug sighed, “I told you... I can’t explain it in words. I just know he’s what I want. I will follow him anywhere... even if he would not do the same for me. I know it’s...” he shook his head. “Maybe it’s too human for you. Maybe I’m too weak. But, I chose this, knowing what he was. It—it does sound like Stockholm or something but—"

“Dr. Flug...” White Hat stood, concerning growing.

“If you truly believe in choice, please know,” he pleaded, “I don’t want help. You can’t help me. I don’t think it’s good for my sanity but—but I think I like it that way. I want it. Is that so terrible?”

White Hat looked down toward his drink again. Yes. It was definitely no good to swallow now. The bottom too gritty, it would create rot from so much sweetness, and the whole thing less comforting as it sat, untouched, for so long.

“I—I do not know. Maybe...?"

“You would really judge me, White Hat? You can cast stones? You have never wanted something so badly? Something that sometimes made you question if you were above saving?” Dr. Flug asked. He did not sound angry, just curious, like this was a conversation about anything other than the dark direction his heart and soul had taken.

“I—” White Hat started, nearly jumping, not liking where this conversation was going anymore.

Before he could finish his thoughts, however, the elevator gave a great clang. The thudding of Slug’s boots catching his ears in their familiar rhythm. Each step radiated with force and White Hat cast Dr. Flug a look. The man turned to the sound, and immediately, both were heading to the swinging doors.

White Hat barely caught the figure of his dear doctor fleeing to the stairs, and he called out, “Doctor —"

“I am done with him! You two take care of it! I no longer care!” came his snarl, and he stomped upwards. Vaguely, the sounds echoed as he made his way to his room, and White Hat pressed his hand against his chest.
He turned to the elevator, dragging a reluctant Flug behind him.

This was going to have to end—one way or another.

…

Black Hat seemed to be scratching at his skin. His shoulders were rolling and he sat on the edge of the table without help. White Hat glared, noticing the brim of his dark hat pulled down enough that it obscured his face. “Brother,” he greeted, but with a touch of menace that negated any familial warmth that might have been attached to the word, “Please, kindly, release my scientist.”

“I could say the same to you,” White Hat snapped, though, his hold on Flug’s arm was gone. The man still stood anxiously beside the Elder Being.

“I have no intentions with what’s yours,” he said, head jerking to the side as his physical body seemed to have something slithering under his skin. White Hat’s eye narrowed as he took in the odd image. The dark twin slipped off the table, standing taller, and bringing his red eye to lock onto him. “If only you could say the same.”

White Hat paused, hand reaching out to stop Flug from moving forward.

“Release him,” Black Hat commanded, smoke spilling from his fanged mouth.

“Something’s wrong.”


There was a groaning of metal as the heat around Black Hat’s body intensified. He stepped forward, growing closer. Darkness descended and lights flickered above them. Flug shuddered, looking over to White Hat. White Hat paid him no mind. “What did you do to—”

Black Hat snarled in an intelligible animalistic noise, leaping forward, a blur of matter and motion. His claws sank into White Hat’s stomach. White Hat didn’t bother moving. The dark face morphed into a many mouthed, green spewing monstrosity. His eye blazing like an inferno…
Black Hat jerked back, falling to his knees, face retreating to it’s normal form. He was panting, pawing at the last remaining stitches. The Eldritch dry heaved, looking up, hazy and confused. White Hat’s injury bubbled, but he remained standing. Meanwhile Dr. Flug was hanging onto his immovable arm, clearly panicking.

“Black Hat! Sir!”

“He… doesn’t… want you,” Black Hat said through heaving breathes.

“So, your Dr. Flug has mentioned.”

The dark twin chuckled, green blood tinting his fangs, “Yes. He doesn’t want you either.”

White Hat paused. Flug had finally ducked under the pale arm, quickly checking his boss over for any injuries. He appeared to let out a sigh of relief, resting a shaky hand over the dark chest. Black Hat held it there, breathing returning to a normal pace. Flug didn’t look anywhere other than the shadowy face. “I-I think we’re done here.”

“Done?” White Hat said, “What do you—”

“Perhaps I did not phrase that correctly,” Flug replied, barely turning his head to give the pale brother a reproachful look, “I mean to say that we are leaving. I think I am confident enough to tend to Black Hat in the privacy of our own Manor.”

White Hat shook his head, “I do not think that wise, Dr. Flug. Did you not see his aggression just now?”

“You’ve threatened and belittled us since we came seeking your help,” Flug said. Black Hat made no noise. He closed his eye, head hung as he grew tired.

“Doctor—” White Hat tried, but Flug just slung his boss’s arm around his shoulder and heaved the clearly heavier creature upwards.
“Thank you for your hospitality, but, in hind sight,” he said, bumping past White Hat pointedly, “It was a mistake. You certainly don’t care for your own family.”

“You say that as if Black Hat is capable of—” White Hat started, agitation causing him to spin around and stalk the pair to the elevator.

Dr. Flug hit the call button with the side of a closed fist, staring intentionally at it. “Believe what you want. I have no idea how your own doctor puts up with you.”

White Hat fought the urge to scream and shriek obscenities in his native tongue. Why was everyone acting like he was the Villain?! He was the one on the side of the light. The right side! The good side! Had he not taken in the fallen Eldritch, despite his own—

He was clutching his head, watching the pair leave, before realizing he was following a beat too late.

He exhaled harshly, giving up seeing his own brother to the door.

They knew the way out.

…

Slug wasted no time. He filled the tub with ice water—and threw himself in whole heartedly.

It shocked his system, and instantly, he entire body recoiled and shook. It wanted out of the stinging water. He hadn’t bothered to even take off his clothes. He just dived right in and sank to the bottom. Everything hurt for a while…

But he was growing numb, breath slowing as his teeth chattered. He clunked the back of his head on the tub, turning to stare at his ceiling. He kept his hands clasped in front of him, and they shivered. The water was turning a bit… weird. Rainbowy, murky, milky. A little from the dyes on his sweater, a bit of dirt from the bottom of his shoes, and probably even chemicals he’d just picked up from the lab in general.

It probably wouldn’t be good for his already damaged endocrine system but—
“SLUG!”

Slug jumped, sitting up straight in surprise as White Hat flung the bathroom door open.

“What the fuck—”

“What happened?! What did he—”

“WHAT THE FUCK?!”

Slug was slipping, trying to grab the edge of the tub with his tremoring hands, as White Hat bled all over his fucking bathmats. White Hat paused, also a bit shocked. He pointed at the man in confusion, “You are bathing with your clothes on?”

“DID YOU BURST IN EXPECTATING ME NAKED?!”

“Uh…” the Elder Being said, in his usual eloquent way. Slug managed to crawl out of the tub, onto a heap on the floor. “I—”

“Don’t even answer—I don’t think I care enough to find out,” he snapped through chattering teeth. He came to be standing after some gratuitous effort, dripping water everywhere.

“I was worried. I didn’t think,” White Hat said, standing awkwardly.

Slug head hurt for a number of reasons, “Yeah. You don’t do that a lot…”

“Are you okay?”

“Shut up! I should ask you that!” he responded, pulling White Hat toward his sink and pulling open the cabinet. He brought out his own bandages and a container of witch hazel sanitizer. He manhandled the Being enough to lift his shirt and pour the contents out. White Hat shivered, his form
flickering slightly, before it settled. The wounds were already closing. Still, Slug was winding bandages around him, glaring.

White Hat clasped the damaged hands, stuttering a little, “I’m sorry… I am worried. Were you hurt again?”

Slug sighed. His heart was no longer racing, and though rattled by everything, “Physically, I am fine. I just—I just need a moment, alright? Just a moment.”

White Hat nodded. He didn’t let go though. Slug stood there, feeling his body temperature slowly regulate. Breathing was fine, nothing squeezed cruelly through his lungs. His skin was a bit irritated, but, nothing that wasn’t fixable. Also, irritation buzzed in his skull, but, with White Hat keeping a steady hold on him…

“Did you leave them alone in my lab?”

“They left.”

Slug looked up from the hands folded over his own. “What?”

“I seem to have… upset everyone now. Dr. Flug is also mad at me.”

“Right, Dr. Flug…” Slug muttered. White Hat rose a brow.

“Oh, yes. He thinks he could take care of Black Hat on his own,” he explained. Slug gave him a shrug, then slowly started to wiggle out of White Hat’s grasp. He went back to calmly wrapping the bandages. It was soothing. It was something he could do in his sleep now. The act of crisscrossing the cloth around a bleeding, broken body a sort of meditation on its own. “I apparently don’t care enough about Black Hat for him.”

“Just… leave them be,” Slug ordered more than said.

White Hat did not really reply. He just leaned against the sink as Slug finished the wrappings. He gazed into the cabinet, commenting, “That’s the last of your own bandages…”
“I’ll buy new ones.”

“You look like you’re in pain though—”

“Shut up.”

White Hat flinched as Slug tied the end a bit too tight. He tried again. “I’m worried.”

“I don’t care!” Slug said, a touch too close to shouting, “It’s not your problem! I’m not your—” He cut himself off, turning away to scowl at nothing in particular, “Why are you so—so fucking try hard? What’s the point of this insistently meddling? You can’t help me. What’s done is done! Focus on—”

“What did he say to you?” White Hat demanded. Slug bit his tongue. His hands fluttered, one automatically pressing against his heart that missed a beat whenever his employer spoke like this. Like his sole purpose was to—to save him from himself.

“It’s nothing. Black Hat isn’t to blame. I was stupid enough to leave myself open,” he said, suspiciously avoiding looking into White Hat’s hardening face.

“Tell me.”

“No!” Slug exclaimed, hands coming down as they went ramrod straight at his sides. Pouting like a petulant child now… White Hat reached for him, but, at the last second, pulled back. He looked at his own hands, as if he realized how dangerous they could be. Slug was feeling more and more ridiculous the longer they stared, dripping and hurt. For some reason, he couldn’t ignore the Elder Being in front of him any longer… “I don’t want to tell you.”

White Hat gave him a broken smile, “Please? I just want to help… I thought we—”

“Never look at my soul,” Slug demanded without thought. White Hat jerked forward, hand outstretched to comfort and the doctor stepped back in a flight response. He stilled when he realized. Slug let out a breath, trying to regain his control. “I didn’t—I didn’t expect it. I get why you don’t deal with souls but… I…”
White Hat seemed to be at a loss for words.

“Why didn’t he do that when I just wouldn’t remember? When I wouldn’t know?” Slug hid his eyes behind his palms, digging in with the heels. Trying to stop the stream of tears threatening to escape. He felt dizzy and his head was really killing him now. “I don’t even care that he did it… but I didn’t want to know. I didn’t want—”

White Hat embraced him quickly. Securely. Folded him in pale arms as he shook a little bit more. “It’s okay… it’ll be okay…”

That’s all White Hat could say. Slug tried to believe him.

They stood there, heavy with dripping water, and dirtied by sluggish, shimmering blood.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I want to personally thank you for reading.

If you have any questions, please feel free to ask. Though life is busy, I am always willing to answer... in fact, I kind of what to go back to answering every single comment people leave again. Haha, I am a mess, let me tell you. I just love fanfic and fandom and all you wonderful people out there so much. ^_^'

So again, a little redundant but! Thank you so much! I hope you liked!

<3
Let Us Take a Step Back to Go Forward

Chapter Notes

I forgot I wrote this chapter?? I was fully expecting a different chapter to be here--but according to my computer I last worked on this chapter Feb 5th. Soooo...?

Anyways, totally unrelated to the plot. Just sort of a nifty fluffy-filler chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirteen: Let Us Take A Step Back to Go Forward

0.5.0. can’t talk. That’s not surprising though. He’s—It?—What is 0.5.0.?

Well, 0.5.0. was made by a one, Dr. Slug, while under the employ of the Great White Hat—defender of those that cannot defend themselves! The ultimate Hero! 0.5.0., though, is not a Hero. He was not made for being a Hero. Nor was he made for the scientist, to do anything vaguely science related. Of course, 0.5.0. does have a purpose.

The first time he opened his eyes he saw it—his purpose.

A chubby cheeked child, with wild orange hair clad in colorful clips, wearing a white hood with a strange sparkly pointy bit on top. He saw the child, and waved his little palms for her, slipping out of his… shell-thing. He tumbled right into her lap, and she hugged him to her chest, crying out. She sounded so excited, and 0.5.0. knew immediately, that he would do anything to keep this creature safe. She was important. She was color. She was everything to him.

…

0.5.0. grew fast—like a weed—his creator had said. This man, with his painful looking face always covered, continuously called him an “it” and a “bear” and named him “0.5.0.”

His purpose—named Clementia—called him Cero more often. He liked it, purring. The little plant on his head wiggled in happiness. It ate bugs for him, and he grew stronger and bigger through that process mostly. Dr. Slug had seemed a bit confused by it, but never attempted to rid him of the plant. Of that, he was thankful. When it grew sleepy, he grew sleepy. Clementia kept it fed, watered, and
gave him sunshine. Sometimes, she would paint his claws. He let her.

It was his purpose to keep her safe and happy.

The more he got to know her, grow with her, the more he found he enjoyed his purpose.

She was a worthy purpose.

…

“Hey, Cero,” the girl said, holding on to his paw. He was as big as her now, and they walked along
the path in the park, looking for her downed kite. The breeze was nice and her hair could still not be
tamed. Maybe he should learn to fix it for her? They could spend more time together that way. “I
don’t see Sluggy anymore. Did we walk too far, ya think?”

Cero growled a response. His claws clacked together in her soft hold. He was careful though, knew
that her flesh was delicate and he would not put pressure while they held hands like this. He glanced
around, scenting the air, but they were in a headwind and he could not catch Dr. Slug’s unique
burnt-sad-scent.

“Slug said if we get lost, to stay put. He’ll find us,” she instructed. Immediately, she plopped down,
legs crossed. 0.5.0. continued to simply stand behind her. Still, they held on—hand and paw.

They waited in silence.

Well, mostly silence. The wind rustled the trees too much, and the leaves made whispering-rattling
sounds against the backdrop of tweeting birds. The sunshine of such a nice day being blotted by the
thick branches and leaves of the trees as the overgrowth rubbed together. Clementia sighed, no doubt
bored, and a bit disappointed that her kite was probably gone forever. Cero rumbled alongside her,
meaning to giving comfort. She smiled at him.

He liked that.

Another figure approached them from behind. A twig cracked and 0.5.0. fell to his paws and stood
between the noise and Clem. Clementia spun, resting on her knees now as she looked over the purple bear. “Who’s there?!”

“Hey, hey, hey!” a voice said, male and a little croaky. A little toad of a man. The figure tumbled from the nearby brushes. On the wind the scent of something sleazy and eager approached. 0.5.0.’s hackles raised. “Don’t be worried! I just saw this and thought it might be yours—”

The figure pulled out a crinkled paper kite. The string was snapped, and the tail decorated in bows fluttered against the breeze. He held it out like he meant to exchange it. Clementia reached for it, but 0.5.0. growled low, one paw swiping forward. “Woah! It’s okay. He just found the kite, Cero.”

“That’s, uh, an interesting doggy you got there, little girl,” the man said, frozen stiff. 0.5.0. rumbled in mild approval as fear filled the charged air.

“He’s not a doggy! This is Cero! He’s my bear! Sluggy made him for me!” she happily explained. She pet him to soothe the still raising fur along his hunched spine. “He’s made of, like, 50 things or something. *Mostly* bear, and part Venus Fly Trap! It’s so he only eats bugs… which is kinda silly because Sluggy *likes* bugs, ya know? I think he’s embarrassed by it though—since it kinda rhymes—but—”

“S-So he won’t attack me?” the man asked, interrupting the girl.

She scrunched her nose in annoyance, “I mean—I dunno. He doesn’t like strangers. We’re not suppose ta talk to strangers… which is weird because that’s how I met Sluggy and he became, ya know, my Sluggy buuuuuuuut—”

“Look. If I just leave the kite here,” the man interrupted again, and Clem puffed out her reddened cheeks at how rude he was being, interrupting her like that before she finished explaining things, “It won’t, like, bite me? I will just *go*…?”

Clementia paused, blinking in thought. She shrugged. The man seemed to keep standing there, struggling to move without 0.5.0. also making a threatening move forward. Which was unfortunate for him because that’s *exactly* how Dr. Slug came upon the scene. Clementia, swiftly growing tired, cold, irritated, and the sleazy adult male sweating bullets of fear as Cero continuously growled and padded forward if the man so much as twitched.

“Clem!” Slug had called, huffing up the path, and quickly bringing the girl into his arms. 0.5.0.
stood, looking up with a fixed stare at his creator. The doctor’s gaze zeroed in on the sleazy bastard in front of him. “Is there a reason you are holding my child’s kite hostage?”

“Me?! Holding—hostage?!” the man squeaked, backing up and getting stuck in the thick foliage. Slug narrowed his muddied eyes at the man who skirted his sight around the bandaged face. “L- Look! I’ll just leave it here—”

“And find another innocent target? No, I don’t think so.”

“Sir! I swear! I just found it and—” the man stammered, hands raising and kite dropping. Clementia sadly watched it bounced across the ground, further damaging the thing she and Sluggy had spent all morning making.

Cero leapt over it and instantly sank his teeth into the man’s shaking leg. He fell backwards in panic more than pain, and the bear locked on.

“Oh—Oh dear… that’d be the bulldog I put in there…” the doctor said with a sigh before covering Clem’s eyes swiftly.

Slug had to call White Hat—as well as the local police and paramedics—to come rescue the sleazy man. Luckily, they saved the leg. He’d forever have a limp, but it was the nicest thing that would happen to him for a long time. The police took his DNA into evidence—what with all the spilled blood—and connected him to at least 4 unsolved cases involving children. Of course, since 0.5.0. was considered White Hat Manor’s guard bear, no charges could stick as assault. However, to discourage another incident, they’d been warned to either keep him on a leash (which wasn’t an option, really) or give him a muzzle.

They went with the muzzle.

“S-Sorry, Cero… it’s my fault, isn’t it?” Clementia asked, scratching around the thick leather straps. Cero shook his head. His little fly trap shot upwards, jaws snapping open and closed. Slug reached over, dropping a number of crickets into the sticky maw.

“Even though you’re supposed to protect Clem… we’re gonna have to teach you some restraint,” he said with a sigh. 0.5.0. purred, ignoring his creator, who was showering him with yummy insects. He felt a bit stronger, a bit bigger, the more this went on.
“Shame,” White Hat mentioned across the table, “It was only because of the biting that the police were able to bring those missing children justice…”

Slug snorted, “Yeah. But, at the same time, the police could have just taken 0.5.0. to be put down or something…”

“What?! No! He was just making sure I was okay from the bad man!” Clementia exclaimed. She wrapped her arms around the bear and squeezed. A slight wheeze came from 0.5.0. Slug calmed her with a couple pats on her own head.

“I know, my darling,” he soothed, “And we are proud he does such a good job, but it was… uh,” he struggled for words that didn’t invoke a horror movie, “… a bit of an over-reaction.”

Clementia pouted, pulling back and smooshing her hands against the bears face. Slug hissed, wanting to stop her, but the bear was muzzled… “Cero! Listen very closely!”

Strangely, the bear nodded. White Hat and Slug could only stare.

“You be a good bear! Okay? Protect me—but don’t hurt other people for me, okay?”

The bear paused, apparently processing the words. Then, he nodded again.

“Good! That’s a promise then!”

Slug and White Hat exchanged a look, which Clem and Cero ignored, going back to their respective dinners. The bear puffed up in sized as the crickets fully digested. The chair broke, and comically, 0.5.0. gave a deep sigh. He continued to lie on the floor in the debris, but was uncaring as Clementia happily giggled at the scene.

…

White Hat, the bear came to learn, smelled weird.
He smelled… void. Just… a nothingness both cold and dusty. Like he was a pale afterimage that lingered too long on an exposed photograph. Cero did not like that.

White Hat smelled of a different sort of creature. An other. An outsider. He could sneak up and be lingering in an area long before 0.5.0.’s sensitive nose could pick up on it. White Hat could also be exceedingly quiet. His steps only made noise when he willed it, it seemed. Sometimes he floated, glided along a path before his physical body made contact with the world around it. He seemed both phased in and out of reality.

And the way he sounded? It was deep. Echoed. A hollowness that lived inside of a seashell collecting dust. An ocean long forgotten—or better left forgotten. A misunderstanding of sound, because really, when you press that sun-bleached conch to your ear, there is no memory of waves crashing inside. That sound you hear is no sound at all—just the realization that your blood is pumping, rushing with each mortal beat of your heart.

No, White Hat unsettled 0.5.0. because it was unclear where the Elder Being was really standing. Was he here or there? Was he friend or…

Was White Hat the real threat in the Manor?

…

Dr. Slug was his creator. An absurdly smart man. Human. Overly snarky and sassy. His voice was always collected, his razor-sharp wit only turning deadly when his temper flared. It was easy to tell what was things you shouldn’t say to him. Anything vaguely threatening to children had him simmering and reacting quickly.

Anything about family had him immediately sour and bitter.

0.5.0. never worried about making the doctor mad. He couldn’t speak—though sometimes he said more without words. Cero was especially concerned with the way the doctor smelled. Slug’s scent was char and anger and heartbreak and ridiculous amounts of hope. His flesh was dry, slathered in balms and often times, slow, steady healing. It was the oddest mixture, but it was strangely comforting. It was proof of some innate human courage—resilience, survival, and ultimately, a deep, abiding sort of love for something greater than ones’ self.

It almost felt like failure when he stopped showing his hideous face around the Manor. Still, the
man’s reasons were his own. It wasn’t the bears place to judge. Hopefully it was just a good enough reason.

…

Clementia started hanging out with Dementia—Clem being close to 11 or 12 at the time, and Dementia… well. The bear didn’t know exactly how old she was. She was certainly a few years older.

Dementia was part lizard. The little Venus Fly Trap wiggled and 0.5.0. didn’t particularly like it too much. It made him hungry. Dem was also shrill and annoying and much, much too strong to be so casual around Clementia. It was a tad distressing, but the doctor always had a solution… and with a wary eye, allowed the friendship to form.

Cero and the other bear—big and blue and incessantly stupid—at first began accompanying the girls about the town. Clem wanted to explore, and of course, they’d end up at the mall. Sitting in the food court, with the lizard hybrid eating everything in sight. She often shoplifted, Cero making sure Clementia was unaware. It would do better for her to look as innocent as possible when (not if) the little hybrid got caught one day.

Of course, it did not take long, and, sadly Dementia responded by tearing the security guard’s arm off when he tried to cuff her. 0.5.0. calmly hauled Clem up by her arms and took off sprinting away from the crazy lizard girl. The teen was… slightly shook up, and they sat outside the black gates of the Villainous Manor, Clem sourly sniffing, and Cero rumbling sympathetically.

Dem had sauntered up a few hours later, dripping in gore. “Hey, girlie, why’d ya run off so soon?”

Clementia didn’t look up from the curb. 0.5.0. kept her shielded from the horrid creature smiling manically.

“It’s the bear, huh? Your guyses bear is super badass, ya know?”

Cero rumbled, growling, his fly trap snapping in agitation. Clem calmed him by running her newly painted nails down his stomach in a comforting scratch. Comfort. He should be doing that to her, not the other way around.
“Dem… you can’t do that around me again,” the girl said. Cero was surprised by how strong her tone was. No whimpering or simpering. She was entirely too calm—which could be shock but—“I won’t hang out with you if you can’t check your urges to maim.”

Dementia scowled, crossing her arms, and a sticky squelch followed. “Well, that sounds like an ultimatum.”

“An ultimatum?” she parroted. Dementia gave a sneer, shoving Cero away from her friend as she bent down to intimidate the other girl. Her strength was easily enough to bodily move the guard bear a few good feet away from the two girls.

“Yes, ultimatum. Your Slug taught you that SAT word, right?” she demanded. Clem gave her a half-hearted glare, but nodded. Dem continued snottily, “Because that doesn’t seem very Heroic of you. Asking me to give up on something I love just so you can stand to be around me!”

“You like hurting people! And, I get it, I guess, but you expect me to be 100% okay with that?! What if you hurt me?!”

Dementia seemed to pause as the other girl’s words grew in volume and tears started to slip out. She raised her hands and Cero was quickly coming in, trying to put distance between the two as Clem was finally breaking down from the horrific sight she just experienced. Fat tears cascaded down her cheeks and she hugged her knees to her chest.

It was just bad timing all around that the monthly meeting with Black Hat concluded at that exact time and White Hat and Dr. Slug were coming down the walkway to the street. Slug had paused briefly, when he saw the scene. White Hat was quicker though, dashing down the walkway to the girl and trying his hand at soothing Clementia.

Dr. Slug approached the other teen, sharp voice cutting through the tension, “And what happened here?”

“Nothing!” Dem was quick to cut back. Slug barely eyed her before turning to Clem and helping her stand. She was immediately hugging his stomach and burying her face into his coat, sobbing loudly.

“I believe these excursions are perhaps done for a while,” he decided.
Dementia started forward shaking her head, “Wait, no! I—I won’t do it again! I swear!”

Cero rumbled, satisfied as Slug was calming the girl, before carefully moving her into the bear’s body. Without too much communication, he knew it was time to load up his purpose into the car and take her home. Safe. Hopefully never to come back to this hellhole.

He didn’t know what transpired with Black Hat Manor’s occupants in the few minutes as he gathered her up. He just placed her gently in her favorite spot up front, and securing her with the travel blanket and pillows she always brought so she could (unsafely) lounge in the backseat sometimes. Still, by the time he brought the limo around, Clem was breathing softly, eyes red, but no longer upset. Slug shuffled in the car first, gently inspecting the teen. She scoffed and adjusted her blankets securely.

“Nothing happened to me,” she vaguely explained.

“Good.”

White Hat was in, and Cero did his best not to be startled by his, once again, just appearing presence. He looked tight lipped, as Slug patted the girls head soothingly through the separating window. “I am so sorry, darling. You do not have to return if you do not—”

“I’m fine. I got a good bear,” she interrupted. Cero smiled lightly as she closed her eyes, “I’m just…I don’t know why I didn’t expect her to—you know.”

“It’s okay,” Slug sighed. He withdrew slightly.

“I do believe you are a good influence on the girl, though,” White Hat offered.

She hummed, briefly fluttering her eyes open. She made a noise of surprise and pointed out the blue bear awkwardly waddling in a tired run back to Black Hat Manor. “Should we…?”

Slug groaned, but White Hat calmly tapped Cero on the shoulder and gestured to the bear.

He growled, but, did as asked and picked up the dumb thing so they could drive it back.
No. Clementia probably should not have a Villain for a best friend. Nonetheless, they had much to bond over, and though this incident would not be the last, it did nothing to sway the girls from continuing to pursue their ventures into friendship. Whether or not this is a good thing has yet to be fully understood, but for the most part, Clem and Dem learned to keep the casualties to a minimum.

…

And so life for 0.5.0. fell into a routine of sorts. Dr. Slug would wake him for a morning jog, to help combat any pent-up energy and frustrations, and then they’d return to the Manor. Breakfast would normally be made by his creator as the bear went upstairs to awaken Clementia. Often, she fought her blankets and so Cero would just pick her up entirely and lumber down to the kitchen with her still yawning and complaining.

They’d all eat—well, Clem, the doctor, and White Hat would eat. 0.5.0. would sometimes search out bugs, but he didn’t particularly need much to subsist from. Sometimes a trail of ants would suffice, but he preferred winged insects that would directly land on the Venus Fly Trap. He worked less when they just sort of landed on the plant bobbing along his head.

Of course, Dr. Slug would have the daily grind planned out for Clementia, and so Cero just followed her around. She had chores and homework, and depending on her mood, she’d hop between the two with little difficulty. Anything she didn’t manage to finish; the good doctor would just add it to her list for the next day. The bear was always proud when she managed to completely clear her schedule.

They were allowed to wander outside the Manor on those occasions. Sometimes to get ice cream, other times the park, but Cero enjoyed wandering the malls or museums. Clem liked those days the most. She’d softly hold his talons and tug him with a happy hum as her sparkly eyes took in the fantastic sights. It left the bear peaceful and content. With his purpose shining and smiling, he felt he was doing the best he had been created for.

*Amor fati*—the love of one’s fate. There was something comforting and alluring in an existence that was inescapable and infinitely the same, day in and day out. Especially if you found love within it. 0.5.0. was programed to love and care for Clementia… and really, he found himself unbothered by it. There was no dread in being her companion.

She was… she was everything one could ever hope for. Caring and brave. Sweet and silly. Smart and oh, so colorful. Her beauty was exactly like a rainbow, and her love exactly like unicorns—rare and mystical, mythical, and so very, very pure. You had it as long as you believed in it, and for those who said it was imaginary? Those bitter, boring people didn’t deserve her. 0.5.0. didn’t care for
anyone who thought she was too much or too childish.

She was so much more than fantasy. Cero loved her, dearly, and deeply. He was glad he was made
to protect her from such a grungy, undeserving world. The bear thought about this as a shadow of
despair started to seep into White Hat’s Manor in the recent days.

“Cero?” Clem turned over in her bed, dyed hair a messy halo stuck to one side of her head, “What
time is it?”

She talked to him as he if could ever physically speak. The bear sat up from his bedding, glancing
over at her unused alarm clock. Clementia blinked bleary, watery eyes in its glowing direction.
Shuffling around in her skewed covers, she reached over to grab the clock. Finally, focusing, she let
out a suppressed sigh.

“9:52… this can’t be a good sign for a Thursday…”

0.5.0. gave a sympathetic rumble, raising. Clem put down the clock and followed his movement
shortly. She walked into her private bath and got ready for the day. Cero peaked out of the doors,
looking down the hallways.

Empty.

Clem walked up behind him and pat his back. The walked downstairs together, both quiet in an
uncomfortable way. Cero blinked down at her. She scratched her forearm nervously, glancing up.
She tried to smile. The bear growled (though not really in a menacing way, nor really at her, this was
just one of the few noises he could make). She seemed to understand and gave his paw a pat.

When they’d entered the kitchen, White Hat was leaning against the counter, holding a glass of milk.
He caught sight of the pairing tiptoeing in. “Good morning.”

His voice was… still hollow. Well. To the bear. It seeming to flow like waterfall in the eerie sort of
silence the Manor had developed. Clem, however, seemed a bit comforted, and walked toward the
Elder Being. Cero padded a few steps inside, but ultimately hung back, taking a place at the table as
he watched the two move about the kitchen area.

“Is Slug okay?”
White Hat sighed.

“I saw Black Hat and Dr. Flug leave from the video feed…” Clem was pouring a bowl of cereal, not quite looking up, “Do I want to know?”

“It is probably more that our doctor would prefer you didn’t know,” he answered, cryptic as always. Clementia just nodded. She started to eat her cereal, eyes dulling. She took a big gulp and wrapped one arm around her bowl.

“He was… he was getting better,” she mumbled. White Hat also wouldn’t look her in the eye. Cero found it irritating. It meant guilt.

“He’s still asleep. I have kept an eye on him all night. So far he’s been… He will be alright.”

“Can you promise me he won’t go with you to see Black Hat for the next meeting?” she asked. Her voice grew harder and she looked up at the pale man. White Hat blinked. Solemnly, he nodded.

“Good. Thank you.”

“I will protect him, Clementia.”

“You will try, White Hat,” she corrected. There was no fire in it, though. She was merely reminding him that, so far, the Elder Being’s track record was starting to show otherwise. White Hat could say nothing to this, and he tilted the milk around the bottom of his frosted glass.

Cero gave a growl, plopping down on the table with a huff. White Hat ignored him. Clem looked over and open the cabinet to pull out a box of chocolate covered crickets. She shook it once to make sure there was enough of the treats inside before bringing it over to the bear.

“I am growing tired of this, White Hat,” the girl said, opening the box slowly. Cero looked up, a bit surprised by how much ire was growing in voice. Her eyes were more steel than sunshine, and he found himself both impressed and upset. She should never look like this. Not in the bear’s opinion. It was tearing his little heart apart. The chocolate crickets she gave him was a poor, but welcomed balm. Like she was apologizing for hurting him almost… “This is the last time. I never want to wake up like this again. I never want to feel like Slug is—like some part of him has died all over again.”
White Hat looked at the girl, his only eye wide and mouth opening.

She didn’t let him speak. She turned him with a stern expression.

“Figure your shit out,” she warned, “Otherwise we—” Clementia forcibly stopped herself. She sat down the box with a terrifying slow, thoughtful move. “No. Sorry. Not we—just you. You will lose him. I’ll… I’ll take him away. Away from whatever Black Hat is planning. He won’t use Slug against you. I won’t let this happen again.”

“Use him—” White Hat echoed, voice garbled in such deep emotion the bear had to suppress a shiver.

Clementia scoffed, almost fondly. She plinked a few crickets into the Venus Fly Trap. “Sometimes you really are oblivious… It’s normally endearing, but—”

“I won’t let Black Hat hurt him,” White Hat said, louder. It was slightly terrifying for the bear. The cold, hard determination in those words. The way the world vibrated in response to the promise. Clementia, though, brave and human, didn’t seem to be affected. She paid little attention to him. “Clem—”

“Me and Cero are going out for the day then. Slug probably doesn’t want people around while he’s feeling bad… so… I guess we’ll get him a present or something.”

“Clementia—”

“I’ll pick up my own dinner. Don’t let Slug worry about it,” Clementia continued. She started walking toward the double doors, and 0.5.0. started after her. White Hat was left, stunned. Cero glanced back, only to see the creature place his head in his own claws. His eye blazed and the bear shuddered.

He almost felt sorry for White Hat’s predicament.

Almost.
Cero supposed the Eldering Being made his choice. No choice was free from consequence, as White Hat was fond of saying, even if you choose to remain without choice. That stagnant road had just as much heartbreak as any other…

“Why can’t he just admit it, Cero?” Clementia murmured as they walked, subdued.

The bear huffed, letting his talons curl around Clem’s hand carefully. She looked up at him with a grateful smile. Slowly, her eyes were brimming bright again. 0.5.0. felt the world calm around him. Focused only on her. Her safety, her happiness, her everything.

She probably didn’t know. Didn’t understand. Cero had no true way to communicate it to her. It was tragic, in a way, he knew. She was his purpose. He was made for her, but she was made for far better things… And surprisingly he was fine with this. 0.5.0. didn’t feel the need to rebel, rail against what he was made to do. He loved this very human, this very emotional girl—well, young woman now.

Cero would stay be her side, for as long as she wanted him to. To be her protector, her companion, her pet. Whatever she wanted or needed of him, he was going to give… never mind his origin was for this purpose… in the end, 0.5.0. found he probably would have chosen to stay beside Clementia.

His colorful, unicorn-obsessed ward. He loved her too much to deny her anything, he realized for the millionth time as she continued a steady hold on his deadly paw without fear. The warmth of her love spread from their touch to his heart.

Clem slowed to a halt beside him, and he gave a questioning rumble.

“Wait… Cero… do you think maybe…” she started, staring at the damp sidewalk before turning her wide eyes to his muzzled face, “Maybe White Hat doesn’t even realize he—that he doesn’t even know how he really feels? About Slug?”

The bear tilted his head, Venus Fly Trap snapping thoughtfully.

“Oh my gosh… Cero… White Hat—Slug—” the girl sighed, pushing her hoodie off her head as she ran a free hand through her bangs in shock, “Those two emotional idiots don’t even know, do they?” Cero could only shrug in response. “Well… that explains a lot. I always thought—” Clementia ended up giggling a little, “Guess I shouldn’t have been so mean to him lately.”
The bear rumbled. She understood and continued walking them down the street. He’d follow her anywhere.

“No point dwelling on the past, Cero. Can’t change it. I’ll just have to apologize to them when I get home, I guess…” Clementia hummed, looking back at the purple monstrosity that she cared for (in some form 0.5.0. was sure of at least). He had to live with whatever he could receive. “I hope it’ll be enough. They’re gonna have to work out that issue on their own. Can’t help them there.”

Cero gave another rumble, slightly confused. Clem just smiled at him, a bit relieved and hopeful, and he found he didn’t really care about the subject of White Hat and Slug’s questionable relationship anymore. Keeping his purpose unharmed and happy was what he was more concerned with.

She was right—as always—those two would have to work out their issues on their own.

Chapter End Notes

My headcannons are strong.

Thanks for reading! Hope you enjoyed!
Chapter Fourteen: Let Us Move On

“Shit, this hurts!” Slug winced as White Hat slowly pressed against the man’s chest.

“I can stop,” the Elder Being looked up, stilling his talons.

“No, it’s fine. I just want to make sure” he mumbled. White Hat nodded. He went back to pressing and feeling gently. His one eye closed and a deep ringing hum was echoing from somewhere inside him. It made Slug’s insides… wiggly? Was that a good enough description?

It was just very strange. His body seemed to squirm and dart around on a subatomic level. White Hat was preforming a type of supernatural—preternatural? paranormal?—MRI on him. Dr. Slug had asked him to, though. Paranoia was running rampant inside him. Black Hat could not be trusted and if he really could look into the soul, hold the human heart to determine Slug’s character maybe the demon left something as well? Sure, there were some ugly seeds sowed in the Doctor’s brain, but did nothing more than confirm what was already rattling around in there.

White Hat pulled away, quieting himself. Slug looked at him expectantly from his spot on the examination table. A soft, relieved sigh came out of White Hat, followed by, “No… He… there is nothing inside your body. You remain uncorrupted by whatever darkness Black Hat controls.”

“Yeah… alright,” Slug said lamely, but nonetheless convinced of his boss’s assessment. He pressed his hand against his ribcage distractedly.

“I—” White Hat started, brows falling as he took in the picture of the unsure doctor. Slug hopped down, legs shaking as they had been numbed while he sat rigidly waiting for some gloomy news. “I want to apologize again for… for my brother’s behavior.”
“Don’t worry about,” Slug responded, flippantly waving the sentiment out of the strangely thick air.

“But you—”

“It was startling, yeah. It was also kind of painful, but,” the doctor sniffed, crossing his arms over his chest in a noticeably defense move, “I am fine. Recent events aside, we have a goal that needs attending.”

White Hat sighed, deciding to let the subject go for the moment, “Of course. You’re family.”

“My family.”

...

White Hat was put off. He did his best to hide it, of course. The good doctor shouldn’t be made to feel bad that this one request was becoming a particular upset to White Hat’s general… uh, well. To White Hat. Generally speaking, White Hat was upset—in many definitions of the word.

The Elder Being sighed for the nth time, flipping through some tedious paperwork. Annoying, but, needed. Dr. Slug was sitting opposite of him also reading copious amounts of papers. His goggles showed he was bored but, White Hat guessed he was more diligent about their current goal. It had been a week and so far...

So far, the only good piece of evidence to tracking down an errant Hero was an innocuous note on some police report that read, possible electric malfunction? Which Slug insisted wasn’t the cause because, of course, he is a scientist, and when he built the house on the hill he was very careful with the electricals (and other such things). White Hat believed him, but that was really all the two had to go on.

“You never sought the actual police reports?” White Hat had dumbly asked, and it probably wasn’t the first time either. Still, he felt the need to review even the minimal amount of progress. Slug had looked up from the paperwork ever so briefly. He flicked his eyes back down to stare at a line of text, avoiding White Hat’s soft gaze.

“No… I would have snuck in to a station and stolen them eventually… but… at the time…” he sighed and put down the papers, crossing his arms over his chest like the words had to be squeezed
out of him. He’d been doing that a lot. That gesture. “I was injured. I couldn’t move as fast, and everything was painful. It’s not like you could trust the police, either. If I went there first, I still wouldn’t have known anything.”

“I see…” the Elder Being hummed, “You still managed to think so logically.”

“It was better than thinking about—” Slug started to say. He suddenly bit his tongue, though, scoffing.

White Hat gingerly put down his stack of papers and tilted his head. He didn’t know too much about human psychology, but he was aware when trauma was too much to bare. Perhaps he should change the subject? “Well, what thoughts made you find… me?”

Slug blinked, turning his gaze fully at White Hat—who was beginning to feel the tiniest bit selfish. He really wanted to hear where the idea of him started to cross the doctor’s mind.

“Well,” the man shifted in his seat, seemingly comfortable with the switch in topics. White Hat tried not to be obviously giddy about it. “I had… contacts. I did some digging around. The night the house burned I had a feeling something wasn’t right. I found out about some program for in-training Heroes—powered and non-powered—and I had… Um.” Slug seemed to pause, re-shifting for a third time before looking everywhere else than White Hat’s curious face, “I did not have a good reputation with this program. Some of the trainees had been caught in the crossfire of some hostile take-overs.”

“Am I to assume—”

“You know, in my defense, they were undercover. That’s hazardous work. They knew it could mean—”

“Doctor, you don’t have to explain. I am well aware how Villains operate… and how undercover assignments work. I can shape shift,” he said. Slug stopped rambling, and then shrugged.

“No point in being ashamed of it after the fact, but,” Slug toyed with the end of his mask. White Hat felt himself hoping the man would remove it. Stubbornly, he did not. “I did everything to make sure it would never get back to me… to those important to me. I am unsure how it did. I can only assume a Hero of some kind of power or influence was able to trace something back to me, given the events leading up to…” Slug paused again, fiddling with papers in front of him in thought, “… to the fire.”
“It makes sense,” White Hat murmured, trying to avoid the—oh what was that human metaphor?—the elephant in the room.

“Yeah… and I figured that out of all the Heroes in the world, the only one who’d feel obligated to help me would be, you know, you,” Slug said. He leaned back, staring blankly at White Hat. If White Hat was capable of flushing, he would. Part of the Elder Being was internally dancing in a sort of smug happiness.

“Well, I am sure that some of the other Heroes—”

“Nah, none of them would have lifted a finger for me,” he interrupted. White Hat said nothing as Slug moved to stand. He was gathering up the paperwork, not quite tired, but certainly not happy. “I didn’t know anything about you though… except for rumors. You were just the first who popped up in my head—” White Hat found himself smiling, and he tried to squelch it before the man would glance back at him, “—so I went looking for real answers about you. That’s how I found the Necronomicon. Almost by accident. Maybe it was fate… either way though…”

White Hat found he was standing himself, following Slug unconsciously to the door of his office. Dr. Slug was too at ease with it, White Hat thought vaguely, because he himself hadn’t been sure if he was using his own powers of light-travel to be closer to the escaping human. His good doctor wasn’t paying enough attention to the Elder Being. He was just continuing on, full trust, saying, “I think finding you saved me from myself, in a way. If you hadn’t offered me this job—”

“Yes?” came the eager interruption. White Hat had one hand on the door as Slug was reaching for it, in a premature effort to stop the scientist from leaving his immediate presence. The man made a surprised noise and turned around, blinking rapidly.

“Uh… well,” Slug said, and White Hat held his breath. He learned in too closely, listening raptly to anything his dear doctor might confess. Slug leaned back, shoulder’s thumping against the doors to the hall. “White Hat.”

“Yes?”

“You… okay?” the man’s surprised, unsure voice rang out.

White Hat stepped back, coming back to himself in a snap. He visibly checked his coat, looking down at his hands, trying not to frown. His physical image remained unchanged… but something
felt… *different.* “Uh, yes. Yes, sorry. I just—” White Hat shook his head, breathing out of his mouth before giving a stupid smile. “Yes, sorry. I got excited. You don’t talk about your past much and I wanted to hear more.”

Slug let out a relieved laugh. He tucked his papers under one arm as he straightened out. White Hat felt the tension between them lifted and he felt a bit better. He hoped the good doctor was also feeling… better?

“I swear,” Slug grumbled, but there was no heat in it, “You’re too excitable sometimes.”

“Probably. You’ve taught me more about being—well, being better I suppose.”

“Hmm, don’t let people hear you say that,” the man warned.

White Hat frowned for a second, “Despite your Villainous past, it’s true.”

“It’s *weird,*” Slug insisted, reaching for the handle and turning his back on the conversation.

“Well, being what I am…” White Hat mused trailing off, but made sure to keep his feet planted in the same spot. His whole being wanted to follow the man out of the door. It was a might bit concerning and flustering.

“Yeah, you being what you are is weird too,” the doc said, but paused slightly, looking back over his shoulder. He gave another shrug. “But, you’re also nice. So…”

White Hat felt a little breathless again.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind it.”

Slug left quickly and White Hat felt himself go… *melty* inside.

What *exactly* had they been talking about again?
Clem had spent a good amount of time hiding behind the rosebushes in the backyard. She and Slug were weeding out some of the overgrown vines, while Cero was trimming some of the trees. Bees buzzed sleepily in the distance, but luckily, the Venus Fly Trap wasn’t snapping at them. Probably the stingers. However, the real interest was in their haphazard smatterings of random gardens surrounding the gazebo and other lattice work arches that littered the rarely seen area. The trellises had to be stabilized, and she was watching White Hat lose interest, and then come back to staring at the overhanging, overgrown plants in front of him.

“Hey Sluggy…” she started, peering under her the bangs that had sprung free from her copious amounts of colorful bobby pins and other clips. Slug’s head was covered by a very wide brim hat and his hands were in buried in thick gardening gloves (which were also buried into the dirt as he yanked at roots choking at their garden).

“Yeah?” he asked with a grunt. Then gave a gleeful smirk in victory as some stubborn collection of dandelions were tangled along his wrists. A fistful of wishes.

“Has White Hat seemed…” Clementia struggled for words as she poked at the fluffy flowers, “I dunno, weird lately?”

Slug looked up—and due to the type of work for today, Clementia could see his face demasked. She supposed she should be… unsettled? Or at least feel something like horror but… This was Sluggy’s face. It was very… Sluggy. She had always known, looking at him, that he was hurting. Physically, sure. She recalled times when he was all bandages and band-aids and growing up she always caught whiffs of burn cream and other antiseptic ointment regularly.

At some point though, he switched from sterile gauze to… masks. Bag-looking things. She remembered crying briefly, but he explained, at the time, it was necessary. People didn’t like looking at his face—hell, she realized then, he probably didn’t like looking at his face—and that this way, in the dark, his skin could heal better. It was, in essence, science. All Clementia remembers is missing his smile and warm, dark eyes.

Today, though, was a rare day. No appointments. No out-going merchandise. Just some good-old Manor bonding… well, and also upkeep. Namely, the backyard garden Clem insisted on having. They’d been neglecting the flowers and things (but that was unsurprising given the amount of hectic heftiness that had descended upon them as of late). Slug suggested everyone help out to tackle the chores faster—so here they all were.
Slug had shown up in his garden hat and gloves, sans the mask because there was probably going to be more sweat than he wanted to deal with. Dimly shaded spectacles rested on his nose, and some gauze was wrapped around the worst side of his face. The side Clem couldn’t really see from her crouched angle.

Still, there were angry lines, dark edges, and burnt parts she could still make out from her spot. Slug had probably chosen their placement carefully… although she didn’t mind his face. She really didn’t. She couldn’t explain why… she just sort of thought he was okay, either way. He was her Sluggy, scars and all.

“White Hat is always weird,” Slug said in response to her question. He kind of turned toward her, one brow raised (she thinks as the brow was sparse and never truly grew back).

She gestured to the Elder Being sniping at random flowers. “Yeah but like… distracted-weird?”

“Huh,” Slug said, turning his inspecting gaze to White Hat again. His mouth scrunched in thought—Clem smiled, fondness blooming at recognizing it from her childhood and finally seeing it in person again—“Well… Distracted, yes. I suppose he has been distracted lately.”

“Yeah! I mean—” she started whispering, hiding beyond a cluster of roses and leaves, “He just kind of, like, loses his thoughts? And he’s been really, really clingy lately?”

“Clingy?”

“Uh, yeah. Like, he just… sticks a lot closer? Especially to you, you know,” she tried to elaborate. Slug gave her a shrug and went back to his weeding almost indifferently.

“Well, after the incident with Black Hat—”

“Sure, sure,” Clementia waved off. She peeked through a hole she snipped through the brambles and stared, hard, at the Elder Being. He was dressed… not as appropriately. Still in that three-piece suit with the long coat. Did cosmic monstrosities sweat? He looked vaguely uncomfortable… but not sweaty. “But it just seems different. Like he’s—well, I dunno how to explain it.”
“Clem,” Slug said, sitting back on his heels with a sigh, “This is starting to sound like one of your things again.”

“I do not have things!” the girl insisted.

“You had me stay up all night to make sure the Fairy King didn’t steal you.”

“White Hat said they exist!” Clementia reminded, then shivered at the thought, “Plus. I was a cute baby then.”

“You were nine,” the doctor continued, “You didn’t stop believing in Santa until you were seventeen.”

“In my defense, right, there was a man named Chris Cringle who delivered presents to children. Like, Saint Nick is a real thing, Sluggy.”

“Yeah, way in the medieval period…” he mentioned under his breath as he watched Clem inspect White Hat with her unsubtle type of grace.

Frustrated, Clementia stood, pointing at the Elder Being, “I’m just saying! Somethings up! And its up to us to get to the bottom of it!”

“Um, why are we pointing at me?” White Hat nervously asked behind his shears. Somehow, he noticed the girl’s wild gesturing. She tried to remain unbothered, bordering on a denial of being caught staring. She just tilted her chin, woodenly walking over to help 0.5.0. instead.

In response Slug gave a shrug. “She’s on one of her things again.”

“Oh my… I hope she didn’t find out about the Easter Bunny…”

“No way, that’s a thing too?”

“… I think? Maybe in this dimension. Probably… I should double check that before April, actually.
I’ll get back to you later.” White Hat dropped his shears and walked into the Manor—floating, flighty, and airy as he left (to which Clem made a kind of wild arm waving gesticulation at him). Slug watched him go confused (ignoring Clem), before turning back to his rose bushes.

No one was going to get any real yard work done today it looked like…

…

“Well… this sucks dick,” Dr. Slug muttered as he looked at something under his microscope. So far, his solution to flesh-restoring appliques kept falling apart after about 101 minutes of exposure to UV light. He sighed and sat back. Taking off his gloves, he looked at his patchy hands, flexing the digits tiredly. “Not yet. But better than the last batch, at least.”

The lift to his lab dinged, and Slug tugged on his gloves quickly. He spun in his seat to see White Hat exit from the doors, expression a bit blank. It wasn’t too strange to see him down here during the work week. Checking his watch—3:34 PM—Slug realized White Hat should be well into a meeting in all actuality.

“Something gone wrong?”

“Huh?” White Hat queried, coming to stand before Slug’s seated form. Slug glanced up, goggles wide in uncontained concern.

“White Hat? You have a meeting right now—”

White Hat’s head kinda lolled downward and before Slug could prepare, arms were around his shoulders, pulling his entire front half into White Hat’s chest. Immediately, Slug stiffened up, on high alert. Gingerly, he put his hands on top of the Elder Being’s biceps.

“White—”

“You were too far…” the being mumbled. Slug’s brows shot up. He struggled to leave White Hat’s grasp. The Elder Being made an unhappy rumble, deep like thunder, and circled his arms tighter. Listening to his instincts, Slug quickly stopped moving. White Hat purred in response as Slug forcibly tried to relax. It was really—well. It was weird as shit.
“I’m… I am just in the lab. You need to go back to your meeting,” Slug tried, voice unsure whether to be firm or to maybe try for something softer. He didn’t know quite what was happening with White Hat.

Clem might be right. Something was up.

“It’s over. I sent—I had to check on you.”

“Oh—Okay,” Slug tried, tilting his head up a bit to catch White Hat’s gaze. White Hat was trying to bury himself in the crook of Slug’s shoulder in response, “Hey, look at me. Let me see your face.”

White Hat pulled the tiniest bit back, lid sluggishly blinking. The space behind his monocle was glowing a faint bluish light. Slug pushed up his mask enough to let his lips be visible. White Hat watched. In a move Slug hadn’t made in a few years, he pressed them lightly along the crest of the Elder Being’s forehead, just below the askew brim of his top hat. Cold…

Like the void of space.

Slug wasn’t sure what he was expecting. Elder Beings weren’t known for catching fevers or human sickness. Still… it wasn’t quite the normal temperature his boss sported. He was more cool to the touch—like a breeze in the dead of autumn. Not cold as a winter storm…

As Slug looked over his boss in concerned thought, White Hat seemed content, and the dazed look slowly faded away. His skin warmed the barest of degrees… and he pulled back, seemingly confused about his surroundings. “Slug?”

“I’ll look over the Necronomicon. You should go rest,” he suggested, “I think Black Hat’s presence—or maybe even the injury itself—must have triggered something… His blood is toxic right?”

“Um… to humans… I have been covered in it enough in the past that—”

“Still. Go lay down or something. I’ll figure it out,” Slug assured, gently pushing White Hat away. White Hat, suddenly conscious of the fact he was near strangling Slug, slinked backwards. He
glanced everywhere but the doctor as he left the lab.

This was… this was too weird even for White Hat.

…

White Hat was only just now aware of himself, and felt incredibly embarrassed. He hadn’t even realized he’d left his office… Struggling to untie his tie he realized the void of his eye was burning. Place his palm over it he moved to his desk.

One hand holding open the black box, he started tapping at Black Hat’s orb.

“Wake up… something’s wrong…” White Hat grumbled.

The eye shot upwards, spinning around before landing on White Hat’s uncomfortable visage. Slowly, his vision started to fill with the inky pocket dimension Black Hat controlled. To his surprise, his brother was lounging against a cloud of sickly green, dense gases. Black Hat was wearing his beanie, though, and it seemed he had swaddled himself in some dark, possibly silk sheets.

“You have very poor timing, White,” his brother croaked. White Hat could only shrug.

“I don’t feel right. Did you do something?”

Black Hat seemed to slow blink at him. Then, that signature shit-eating grin came to life. White Hat felt his stomach plummet at the look. “Ohhhh, this is funny…”

“Black Hat—”

“Ack! It’s nothing that’ll kill you,” Black Hat cut off, snuggling down in his pocket dimension. White Hat sighed, opening his mouth, but his brother seemed to be content to chat and tapped his claws along the blue orb before him, “You’ve been through it before. We both have. It’s just the changing of our season.”
“What…?” White Hat asked, tilting his head.

Did… Did Black Hat mean—

“Yup. The moon is high and the doors are open, brother.”

“No! It’s—it’s too soon!” the Elder Being protested.

Black Hat shrugged, “You know time doesn’t flow the same in different dimensions.”

White hat sputtered for a brief moment. Then, he collapsed into his chair behind him. He hid his face, more than humiliated. Black Hat only cackled at his misery. White Hat refused to let it affect him though.

“It’ll be easier with a partner,” his brother suggested.

White Hat sighed, “I don’t want a partner!”

“Well, I’m sure that’s not entirely true…” the Eldritch muttered. He burrowed further in his blankets… which had their own strange lumps filling out Black Hat’s profile. White Hat stared, trying to figure out why the shapes were confusing him. Black Hat distracted him by pointing straight into his wavering vision, “Look, just let your instincts guide you. You’ll find someone or something that will soothe the urges.”

“Why are you so… certain? And how can you be calm about this?” White Hat questioned.

Black Hat just rolled his one eye, “I told you. Poor timing.”

Before White Hat realized, he was dismissed.

“Oh…” he realized aloud.
All he could after that was sit and ruminate. Until his good Dr. Slug walked through the door. And then he had another realization.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked!

As always, questions are very welcome.

Thank you for reading!!
Let Us Now See Black Hat’s POV

Chapter Notes

SURPRISE FOR THE FAITHFUL READERS!!

Three chapters on one Sunday?! GASP.

WHY?????? Um, well, thank DeeJay_Gomie who left a comment that surprised me.

I planned a Black Hat chapter--but I warn ya'll now, it's not /heavily/ detailed...? It's just sort of to show you how untrustworthy(ish??) he is??? And probably how he'll grow? Since I already know how the fic is gonna end...???

Anyways, I was like:

"Well. Shit, they guessed it........ I'm pretty far ahead, I can upload two chapters."

But, I forgot that chapter thirteen was the 0.5.0. chapter.... and so THREE CHAPTERS IN ONE DAY.

Looking back, I have no idea why I smooshed a sort of plot point chapter between two character-filler chapters?? I just... did???

Probably because I felt the story was getting heavy...

Oh, I warn you now, I was so naive.......... a month ago.

Anyways! Currently working on 29. So.

Yes. Very long fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Fifteen: Let Us Now See Black Hat’s POV

Black Hat wasn’t born. He was made. This he knows, but, in someway, he was very much given birth to. Every sort of malice and darkness was poured into some damnable mold which in turn, produced him. It was not pleasant.

It probably was not pleasant for his… well, Black Hat did not like familial terminology for what he and White Hat were. White Hat was his photonegative—everything opposite Black Hat could be, White Hat was made up of. He was light and wind and stardust and the calm, cool balm. He was dull ash on the ground that would inevitably follow Black Hat’s dark flame of destruction.

And Black Hat instantly hated White Hat for that. He remembers this. Remembers vividly when the
pain finally, **finally** faded away, and White Hat stared at him—this look in his crystalline eyes… this pitying, worrying look. Unsure. Alone. He wanted Black Hat alive, probably. Maybe.

It didn’t matter though. Black Hat hated it—still hates it. Cannot fathom ever trying to not torment his White twin. Then again… everything good was inside White Hat. And inside Black Hat?

Well. He did what he was made to do. No need for soul searching.

…

Flug came into his employ first. Before anyone had anything substantial to their respective businesses. Black Hat was having fun when he found the little scientist—curled away in a closet, hiding in more ways than one. Black Hat would have slaughtered him but… **well.** Something stayed his hand. Instead, he tried one of his favorite tricks for gathering soldiers—he looked into the man’s heart, his soul.

It wiggled, not unlike a squirming newborn, terrified of anything light and cold. Yet, these were not things Black Hat could even try to be. The doctor was, strangely, unafraid of the dark and the heat. Flug was strong enough not flinch and gasp—just grit his teeth and barred it all. In fact, the man nearly looked intoxicated by the pain.

Black Hat remembers that moment clearly too, not just because it was more recent, but because of his excitement at finding such a human heart. The first ever person whose heart was gray, was flexible. Was easily **excited** by pain… wanted more but didn’t know how to get more. Frustrated by mortal limitations and moral obligations.

It was—and Black Hat rarely used this term—**cute.** The first thing on this plane of existence that he found himself feeling fond of. He could squish it… but decided to wait. Told the young scientist where to find him.

He did not know if he was surprised when Flug showed up at his doorstep.

But he came with blueprints and bags and Black Hat let him in.

Which meant he could never leave now.
White Hat was against the idea of soul-taking since the new venture on Earth. Honestly, Black Hat couldn’t care any less about souls—the power was originally supposed to be used to gather soldiers in the battle of Good and Evil. On this plane, at least, that amounted to Villains and Heroes. Still, Black Hat used the power for his own, and White Hat refused… on some righteous principle which was more idiotic than noble.

“If you bound them to your—”

“None of the souls I have are bound to anything. All they want is… certain things. I deliver it, if they give me their souls. That’s all,” Black Hat responded. White Hat was frowning at the collections of bottled human souls—some whose physical bodies had long since perished. Now they sat, floating immaterial in dusty glass and ready for consumption if Black Hat needed it.

“It’s… disgusting,” White Hat finally settled on saying. Black Hat rolled his eye and tapped at a fresher jar.

“Want one?”

“I just said it was—”

“Disgusting, I know. But, the hunger will return, eventually.” Black Hat wanted to uncork one, just to further tempt and mock his twin… but souls were hard to corral sometimes. Though, most of the ones he’d gathered were weak enough that consuming them was more a snack than actual fuel boost.

“Eventually. I feel no strain yet…” White Hat sat down on the edge of Black Hat’s desk. Black Hat was flicking at one soul—testing it for vigor. Most of them were tinged a sickly green now. Ripe for picking…

“How much longer before you must, though? You should collect some,” Black Hat continued on the topic only because White Hat was uncomfortably shifting and staring at the stack of reports he’d brought over. Running a business was not relaxing… but it was necessary if Black Hat wished to fill his own sort of purpose without interference.
“How long have we been on this plane?”

“Our time doesn’t work in the same way.”

A sigh, before, “I know.”

“That… you’d best figure out a way to sustain yourself.”

White Hat left early that day.

Black Hat counted it a minor victory.

…

His brother would return at some point with his own employee. Much to Black Hat’s shock, it was the infamous Dr. Slug. Black Hat was astounded. The man had been off-grid for a while at that point in time. It had always been a joy to track to his exploits via news and gossip until he disappeared overnight. No one was certain exactly what happened to the conniving man, yet, here he was after two years of complete silence. Black Hat would not have believed it, but here he was, seeing the doctor with his own eye.

And what a sight.

Black Hat saw the man’s face and was—frankly—amused by it. It was glorious. A hideous thing. It looked so very *excruciating*. Dr. Slug did nothing to comment on it. Did nothing to draw attention to himself. He was only in bandages, and Black Hat’s own scientist stared at Slug with such wonder…

Black Hat could have been jealous—was totally envious, if he was honest, but *is* he honest? No. He’s Black Hat. What Black Hat felt was really just… *curiosity*. He wanted to know how such a beast could walk into White Hat’s Manor, get a job for the other side, and still—*still* seem so unaffected by the world around him. Like working for White Hat was like working any other job.

What a marvel.
He was going to get to the bottom of White Hat and Dr. Slug’s little secret.

Especially after their little conversations about human souls.

…

His Manor expanded—Flug added to it—unfortunately, in the failed experiment 5.0.5. Who was so… ugh. Loving. However, Dementia seemed a good addition. Highly loyal. Chaotic. Incredibly fierce but, clingy. Very clingy. Clearly smitten by Black Hat. Which was not all that unusual. Females of any species tended to find him irresistible. This worked for Black Hat more often than it didn’t… but Dementia was… well, extremely annoying.

Black Hat didn’t complain though. They were more needed than they were irritating. He’d get over it. Dr. Flug, of course, was very grateful and Black Hat was becoming increasingly convinced the man’s heart was growing darker and darker the more time they spent with one another.

“Jeffe?” Flug had called, and Black Hat’s attention lifted to see the man behind the door, “I— I have this idea…”

…

“Cool beans,” Dr. Slug was saying flippantly, and the sarcasm had a thrilling bite to it, “But this puts White Hat Manor behind for the quarter. Do you have any other suggestions for the company?”

“No, but, that sounds more like your problem than mine,” Black Hat responded. His hip was balanced against Flug’s desk, ankles crossed. Flug was nervously looking between the two. The “good” doctor was seething, hands flexing ugly behind his bandages. White Hat was placing a palm on the man’s shoulder blades. Slug had snarled at the contact, yanking away and into Black Hat’s space. A strange look flashed across White Hat’s features in the quickest of seconds. Only Black Hat could see it, it passed so quick, unconsciously. It was enough to make the Eldritch pause.

He wasn’t quite listening to the rant the little human had. He was more focused on the pale face floating closer and hesitating—clearly, he wanted to touch his doctor but… White Hat was restraining himself. And that was more than interesting. It meant something.
“Listen, bug—”

“Dr. Slug,” the human spit back.

Black Hat continued to ignore him, “Perhaps if you did not have such a face, you and your employer could also do commercials. Nothing is stopping Dr. Flug.”

He gestured to his own doctor—wearing his signature bag like it wasn’t an odd piece of apparel for everyday wear. Dr. Slug had instantly halted, whole body going rigid and tense. He stepped away from Black Hat—but more importantly, White Hat’s rising hands—and started to walk away, cursing in his native tongue. Black Hat smirked.

“Whatever!” the doctor continued in English, flipping him some insulting hand signs, “Fuck you too, then. I’ll figure it out by myself! Unhelpful demon!”

“Lovely to see you again, doctor!” Black Hat called after him, smug.

White Hat was glaring at him.

“O-Oh my…” Flug had sighed. Black Hat melted into a smile and ran a claw over Flug’s bag.

“It was your idea. I liked it. We’re going to continue doing it.”

“That’s not the problem, brother,” White Hat said, shattering the nice moment. It was Black Hat’s turn to heavily, dramatically sigh. “You do not have to be cruel. His physical appearance is—”

“Again. None of this sounds like my problem, White.”

White Hat left early again.

It was definitely a victory.
Dr. Flug was flattered when the other doctor began to copy his style, i.e., hiding one’s head in a bag. Black Hat was slightly put off, in truth. It felt more of a petty slap in the face than a solution to Dr. Slug’s problems. White Hat didn’t seem bothered at all.

“Well, no, since you are no longer looking at his face,” Black Hat muttered over his steaming cup of coffee—flavored with arsenic of course. He couldn’t help but love the taste.

“That’s unfair, brother,” White Hat said. He was boring. A glass of ice water. Ugh. If they were going to live on this plane, why not have fun with it? Ingest things meant not to be ingested? Well, whatever. One thing to complain about at a time.

“I mean—I appreciate a monster, White Hat, but…”

“He’s human, brother,” White Hat continued, firmly, and Black Hat wondered (not for the first time) if his brother could even understand sarcasm and mockery. Poor Slug. With that man’s rapier wit, he probably often went unappreciated when White Hat was being a pompous prince, “Also… I miss his face.”

Black Hat was silent, sipping his drink.

That was… unexpected.

“Why?”

“What do you mean?” White Hat inquired, swirling his water around.

“You can’t answer why you miss the human’s ugly face?” Black Hat asked, confusion and stark annoyance evident in his tone. White Hat shrugged. He waved one hand down his face for a second in an unsure gesture.

“We don’t look human. We aren’t human. How can we have concepts of beauty when we ourselves are not static creatures? He looked… fine. To me. I liked to—” White Hat suddenly cut himself off.
Embarrassment colored his features a soft glowing blue. Black Hat smirked.

“You liked looking at him.”

“I—Well, yes. But that’s not what I was originally going to say…” White Hat mumbled before taking large gulps of his water. Black Hat flicked at the glass, annoying White Hat who had to move away before the dark twin decided to break it, if only to mess with him.

“Tell me.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No!” White Hat stubbornly continued to turn away, instead watching the doctors go over print-outs and discuss things neither Elder Being or Eldritch Horror had much patience for, “It’s none of your business and you’ll just be mean about it.”

“No, I won’t,” Black Hat lied.

White Hat harrumphed and wouldn’t look at him… no, he spent his time watching the two scientists. Black Hat could feel his ire rising. Was his brother—no. White Hat couldn’t stop watching both humans. He was definitely—there was something White Hat wasn’t sharing. It was annoying.

“I want to know. Just tell me already. I’ll figure it out eventually,” Black Hat somewhat threatened. White Hat rolled his eye. He stopped only to glance at Black Hat. Inspect the seemingly calm Eldritch.

With a sigh, White Hat cross his arms defensively, “He was burned.”

“Yes.”

“Obviously,” Black Hat mumbled. White Hat sent him a glare, which only earned him a shrug.

“He said about 75% of his body was damaged. So… I… well, he doesn’t know but, sometimes I’d
heal him. At least the pain…” White Hat said quietly. In their old language, the one only they could speak, he continued, “I miss touching him. His face… sometimes. As he slept…”

“Woah,” Black Hat said.

White Hat was still glowing, his pale face wistful, “Do not tell him.”

“But that’s… really creepy, brother,” Black Hat stage-whispered. White Hat shot him a deadly look. Black Hat raised his hands, a momentary surrender. “I will say nothing. Not like I care in the first place, White. I was only curious. Still… you are unbothered… mostly.”

“It’s his choice. Nothing I can do.”

White Hat’s sigh was resigned.

All Black Hat could think was that his twin would touch a human.

Black Hat stared at his claws… and he wondered.

…

Dr. Flug belonged, fully, to Black Hat. As they would continue to work together, it only grew increasingly obvious. Black Hat found himself calling for Flug, calling out to the human. Found himself searching for the little scientist. Found himself…

Found himself inside the scientist somehow. Tracing the lines of smooth, deathly pale face. Watering red eyes imploring him to do something.

Black Hat found himself breathing life into Flug.

He was never letting go.
Being a Villain meant things—at least to humans. For Black Hat, he did what his heart willed. Whatever he wanted. *However* he wanted. They called him cruel. They called him a monster. They were not totally wrong… but he wasn’t without some decency. Without some of his own rules.

“No one can touch you,” Black Hat said, and Flug startled. The screwdriver he was working with tossed into the air as the human turned around. Black Hat was standing at the entrance into his lab. Hands behind his back, posing, commanding.

“W-What?”

“I do not want anyone else to touch you…” Black Hat demanded.

Flug blinked at him. “As in—”

“You know what I mean,” Black Hat continued. Flug nervously looked elsewhere. “You also cannot leave the Manor. Not without me. And I—"

“*Jefecito*…” Flug breathed, and he stood, brave. He padded a few feet forward… before all strength left him. He clasped his hands together… then strangely opened them out to Black Hat. Black Hat could only stare, uncertain what the human was offering him.

“Show no one else your face.”

“I don’t want anyone else to see it—”

“It’s too—It’s mine. You’re *mine.*”

Flug took a steadying breath and took off his bag.

“And the rest of me?” he asked, as if he was bared completely naked. To Black Hat, he had already had been several times… so what was a flimsy paper bag?
“All of it. Mine.”

That was as much as Black Hat could give. Could do. Flug, fascinating Flug, seemed to understand better than Black Hat did. This one thing... Black Hat could only take the human... keep him for his own. Consume him in ways that had little to do with the soul... but everything else to do with his non-existent heart. Flug, impossibly brilliant, seemed to grow something inside Black Hat that hadn’t been there before.

The very first thing he was fond of, Black Hat realized, floating in his pocket dimension.

He breathed noxious fumes and thought, maybe, probably, he wouldn’t totally destroy this plane. He was coming to quite like running a business.

...

His business was failing.

Somehow, just somehow, he knew it was White Hat’s fault.

He complained to his brother. Insisted it had to do with the dissolvement of that Golden Rule Superhero Association—ugh. How pretentious. How disastrous! It was definitely White Hat’s doing somehow.

“Whatever you said to that Gold Boy Brat or whatever...” Black Hat knew he was starting to whine, but he couldn’t stop himself, “I should be running laps around you...! Why are all my Villains just sitting back and watching your stupid people crying in corners about how their whole lives are a lie?”

“Er, well, brother... I don’t—”

“White! I’m not gonna have enough to keep the IRS off my back—and the Manor needed repairs again! I don’t have the money to keep the business from going into the red. I need help. If I can get Dr. Slug in the Manor, I’m sure it’ll increase reputation and Flug won’t have a heart attack...” Black Hat was thinking aloud at this point, rubbing at his face.
White Hat hummed, seemingly uncertain, “Well… how long would you need him for?”

“A week, tops,” Black Hat said.

“And… your situation is dire?”

Black Hat paused. Finally, he nodded. “Yes. You know if the business fails we… I do not know how long we can balance out the plane. We might have to resort to old ways.”

“There’s no need for that. You know that,” White Hat insisted.

Restlessly, Black Hat started to itch at his skin. He felt more… uncomfortable… than he’d like to admit. “The need to destroy is there, brother. I cannot stop myself from it unless—”

“Take Dr. Slug for two weeks. If you need his aid for longer, you may have it.”

Black Hat would take it.

All he ever did was take, after all.

…

He could satisfy his urges by souls. He crushed one in his claws and sucked out the essence. The exquisite suffering that tasted unique to each soul… It calmed him in ways that was indescribable to any other experience. There was no way White Hat couldn’t be doing the same… yet, that wasn’t his problem.

At least, for a moment, Black Hat felt more in control.

He looked out his window and wondered if any of the Old Ones were watching him, amused, on the back of a great turtle… He knew he would be amused by this sort of predicament. But, he wasn’t
really a god. He was just—

“Black Hat. He’ll be here soon,” Flug told him, having softly opened the door.

“You know, he used to be this fantastic Villain,” Black Hat mused.

“Hm. I use to idolize him,” Flug said, “Second to you, of course.”

“Of course.”

...

Dr. Slug was good—if a bit rusty. His instincts were still there though. He reminded Black Hat that people always wanted things. Black Hat just had to provide them something only he had… which was slightly difficult.

The Villains were thinking they were in the lead—they weren’t. Unless they took action. The ranks of the good were already disrupted. It was crucial to strike now. Very crucial. This was the smallest victory during the greatest war ever played. Black Hat sighed, wondering just how to get that across to the humans… but...

Dr. Slug was proving to be more of a pain in his side than anything.

Black Hat Manor was running smoothly. It was contrary to his tendencies. His claws twitched, needing some excitement. Something chaotic. Destructive. Something… something vile to do. He needed a little bit of pain to sup on, just a bit. All this—this order and structure and maturity was so… it was doing weird things to Black Hat.

He couldn’t stand how calm the atmosphere was around Flug. Where was that insane crackle of dormant energy? Where was the disruption of peace? Where was—

Black Hat was walking around in a funk—pent up, he realized.
He needed to see Flug. Needed something.

He was practically blind with it. He hadn’t touched his human in too long. Black Hat was not truly too patient. The things he wanted, he got. No questions. Nothing but his wants. Nothing but his. When he wanted it, Black Hat did not sign up for a lesson in patience.

He noticed a figure dashing away from the lab, very briefly. Caught the scent of fire and felt the tension. He quickly moved into the lab, slinking like a shadow—saw the paper bag and hunched shoulders in a too dark, too obscured corner. Could taste the anxiety in the air. Finally. Flug was alone.

Except, damn his luck, it wasn’t Flug.

Black Hat could only suspect it was meddling. On purpose meddling.

He vaguely recalled tossing the imposter across the room and going after Flug.

He spent most of his time comforting Flug, trying to explain something—but of course, Flug understood. More intelligent than the rest of these putrid humans. Stared at him with eyes the color of blood and sighed. Knocked their foreheads together. Breathed into Black Hat.

His kiss reminded Black Hat of the taste of crushed souls.

He got lost in Flug after that.

…

Black Hat was staring down at the drugged Slug, before turning his surprised face to his own scientist. Already put together. Ready for mischief. And after Black Hat had been so rough with him. Truly a remarkable—

“Um… I had an idea… if you don’t mind?”
“Why would I mind?” Black Hat questioned. He hauled up the unconscious man and tossed him on an exam table.

“Well, I need a test subject but—”

“I can heal him. If that’s your worry. White Hat will never know,” Black Hat said, not quite lying. White Hat could easily find out. They both had the gift of second sight… but, as long as he didn’t turn it on Dr. Slug, he’d never be able to see the threads of malign magic used to tie the human back together.

“You can really do that?” Flug asked, putting down stolen syringes.

“I can do most things,” Black Hat teased. Flug laughed softly, trying to hide his amusement. Black Hat put his hands into his coat pocket and began walking away, “Have fun, querido. I’ll be back tomorrow to assess the damage.”

The whirr of a machine echoed down the halls and blood filled the air as he left.

It was magnificent.

The screams, delicious.

…

Black Hat sighed, stitching together Slug.

Flug was embarrassingly twirling an invention. It looked new.

“I would like you to come back to bed,” Black Hat reminded his scientist, “As fun as this is—I do miss… well. You.”

“I—I know…” Flug murmured, voice slightly hopeful… but Black Hat could hear the incredulity, still he let it go.
“So… what did you spend all night making?”

“Ah! Right… well, it’s… kind of a mind control device. Since Dr. Slug has been so resistant to constant dosing of his own knock-out formula… I was tinkering with the idea of truth serum. You see, most truth serum is more suggestive than anything. But! I thought if I used this hypnotism ray in tandem with my version of his stuff and truth serum… we could… ya know. Test it out…”

Black Hat smirked, taking the device in hand and turning it about.

“Excellent… I have a few things I’d like to know…”

He turned it on, and as Dr. Slug groggly began to waken, Flug pumped him full of more sedatives and serum.

And boy did they have some fun with that.

…

“You don’t feel the tiniest bit sad,” Dementia asked, playing with Slug’s phone. She was charging it, scrolling through pictures. “Oh! That’s a cute one of Clemmy. Have to have it…” Her tongue was stuck out as she manually input her own number and set some photos to herself.

Flug was glaring lightly at her, “Dementia, delete those incriminating messages before you give back the phone—”

“Clem’s sent, like, a hundred texts! You should have let me answer them. She started to text me—”

“This is what happens when you fraternize with the enemy,” Black Hat hissed. He swiped the phone from her and then mass deleted the text messages. He sent the phone to airplane mode and tossed it back at Dementia.

“Awww, c’mon! Think of it like…” Dem crawled up to the ceiling and hung down, swaying in
thought, “Well. You guys suck. For like, girl company. My Clementine is super-duper nice and that’s just—well, it’s nice. Ya know?”

“No, I do not,” Black Hat responded, disgusted. Flug sighed, helping to dress the practically comatose Dr. Slug sitting on the exam table.

“Clementia is not a threat. She’s a good girl, Black Hat,” he said, unfocused on the conversation so much as his physical task of readying Slug. Black Hat glanced over, brow lifted.

“She’s so… sparkly.”

“Yeah, girl’s got glitter on the brain. Glitter-brained!” Dementia popped off the ceiling in excitement. It startled Flug, who looked up in time to see Dem run up to him and shake his arms for a second, “Hey! Hey! For her birthday could we make her some glitter bombs?! BAM! All her enemies glitter-brained!”

“Glitter bombs like… like bath bombs?” Flug asked.

“What’s a bath bomb?” Dementia asked with a cocked head.

Black Hat rubbed his face in exasperation, “We’re her enemies, Dementia.”

“Bath bombs sound fun. I want ten!”

“They’re not—Nevermind,” Flug said, shaking off the young girl and continuing his task.

There was a honk outside.

They sent the mentally incapacitated Dr. Slug away in a taxi.

Dementia paused as Flug waved impotently at the man in the backseat. Black Hat had turned away to his study when he heard her ask once more, “But like, seriously. You don’t feel bad about him? About what happened? It’s really sad… like, I can’t imagine losing my family like that. If I loved
someone… the people I care about… I’d just—I’d just die.”

Black Hat thought about it later. Thought about how hard a single week without seeing Flug’s face was to him.

He sent Dr. Slug a magazine. He helped make it after all.

The photo was more a peace offering than anything.

But that was all.

Not like he had to admit it, though.

…

Seeing White Hat truly angry was a rare thing. Black Hat can only recall a handful of times—but the rage that was swirling under his twin’s pale visage was interesting. This, too, meant something. Color Black Hat surprised when it was over the “good” doctor’s treatment.

Although he was returned unharmed… well, healed.

Still… Black Hat considered it a gift that he’d taken the liberty of stripping Dr. Slug of memories of his time as a test subject. He could have left it. However… it was a courteous gesture, really. A sign of his hospitality. Dr. Slug was well taken care of, to be honest.

If White Hat only wanted to see the negatives of the situation—

That was White Hat’s fault. He knew what Black Hat was capable of. He warned White Hat earlier. The urges were always there. He wasn’t one to deny them. It wasn’t like White Hat couldn’t understand—well, maybe he couldn’t. Not totally… but. He still knew. Knew that Black Hat couldn’t stop himself from evil-doing any more than White Hat couldn’t be overly noble.

Black Hat, though, was a bit unsettled when he thought about how Dr. Slug looked under the lens of
their extra sight. That was probably what set off White Hat more than anything. There was some terrible damage. Still, Black Hat fixed it. The man was whole. None the wiser physically… mentally, well, that still wasn’t Black Hat’s problem. His power could only extend so far. Things that happened in the brain were more difficult to heal.

Flug knocked on his door.

He looked more tired than usual.

“I—Can I sleep with you tonight?”

“… yes,” Black Hat agreed, surprised. He normally had to drag Flug away, kicking and screaming. It was rare for the human to seek him out—too anxious. Too cautious. Which, while disappointing, was ultimately smart. Black Hat was dangerous. He knew this. They both knew this.

And soon the things running rampant in Flug’s nightmares would know this too.

…

Flug had collapsed after the meeting. Black Hat would have been impressed by his dedication to the business if he wasn’t so upset by the turn of events. He had to take off the paper bag, hidden in an abandoned warehouse a few blocks away from their drop off point with a Villain they’d been vetting for a potential client… no telling if it was the Villain’s doing at first but—

No, by the cold sweat pouring off of Flug’s forehead, what was happening to him clearly wasn’t something natural to this plane. Black Hat heard the milky screeches before the smell of hunger and guilt and deathly intent wafted across the night air. Eye glowing, he turned in time to see a beast hulk it’s horrific weight across the dusty floor, sweeping in and pecking around the air blindly. The second sight flared, and he sighed.

“Of course. But—if you are thinking about taking him,” Black Hat swiped his hand over his cane, morphing it’s shape into a thin cutlass, “You’ll have to contend with me first.”

…
Flug had come to, following the acidic blood trail to Black Hat, slumped on a crate. He picked up his boss, who then told him to find whatever chunks of his body he could. It was not a pleasant experience. But, much more so than birth had been, Black Hat thinks distantly.

They ended up at White Hat Manor. It being closer and Flug was panicking too much to really understand what was happening anyway. White Hat would have to help. Black Hat would make him help—but, again, White Hat’s fury was proving to be harder and more permanent than even Black Hat’s normally short fuse. Dr. Slug though… surprising, he was able to talk some sense into White Hat.

Which piqued Black Hat’s interest, yet again.

It would be fun to figure out their end game.

…

White Hat spent too much time with Flug. It made Black Hat angry. So he’d get his own kind of payback. That’s all he really remembers, every move and thought and action a jumble of time. His skin was so itchy. All he knows is that Flug had stood up to his White twin. Took them home, not knowing exactly what Black Hat had done—or what was even really wrong inside his own brain.

Black Hat was staring down at his hands, feeling… well, he felt nothing. Touching Dr. Slug’s heart was so very different from Flug’s—

“Did you get some sort of revenge?” Flug asked, staring at Black Hat’s claws, curious. Not judging. He just wanted the truth. What could the Eldritch say?

“I wanted to know what White Hat was hiding,” he said, but didn’t know how to explain.

“What was White Hat hiding?”

“I don’t think he knows how to hide anything from me,” Black Hat admitted, dazed, thoughts broken.
Flug placed his hands inside of Black Hat’s claws. They curled around the delicate fingers automatically. “I don’t understand, but I’ll listen.”

“Will you be jealous if I told you I looked at Dr. Slug’s heart?”

Flug blinked. He didn’t let go of Black Hat’s claws. Black Hat smirked and tilted his head back. He looked out at the bright sky—finding he sort of disliked it. It didn’t fit his mood. He made his eye hurt. He wanted to slink into the dark and sleep for a while. He needed time to heal.

“Everyone thinks gold is the best—but it’s just shiny and pretty. Makes the worst armor. Too malleable. Still… I understand this is the standard. Everyone wants to have it… but it’s really a useless metal…” Black Hat rambled in thought, growling, “Yellow like the sun. So beautiful—bah! I much prefer the dark… gray skies… rain clouds. I like that. I like it dark and stormy…”

Black Hat didn’t realize he fell asleep against Flug’s shoulder until the cab driver roused them for payment. Black Hat took the cabbie’s soul instead, and then picked up Flug to limped into the Manor with as much grace as he could muster.

…

Black Hat felt it stirring in his blood. It woke him in the dead of night like a rip in his healed gut. He let out a brief curse in his original tongue. He shed his night clothes and groaned into his silk sheets. His body was alight with a need that he was very well attuned to.

Well. This was going to make business slightly difficult for a little while.

…

Flug was more than happy to help ease the pain. Black Hat popped them into his pocket dimension, kissing the human and giving him a bit of a chance for survival against the fumes billowing along the ground. He should be fine though. He’d already written into the contract he’d drawn up for Flug an eternal life and youth clause.

Hopefully… well, no hopes. Black Hat was going to make it work.
Flug was his.

Forever.

This one time, he was being genuine.

...

Black Hat was in a period of satiation… Flug out cold on his chest… and Black Hat took the time to inspect the pale figure drooling lightly. Poor thing… worked to the bone… He moved his claws carefully along the red and purple and blue marks along his body. Counted them slowly, pleased to recall how they’d been created. Pressed a touch to make them blossom brighter. The human barely stirred. Black Hat smiled.

Until his brother demanded his presence.

His stupid brother who couldn’t have called at a worse time.

His stupid brother who didn’t even realize that their time of mating was here.

Well. That wasn’t Black Hat’s problem, though, was it?

Chapter End Notes

There you go!

Any questions or comments, I will gladly take!

Everything is self-edited, so if something is amiss or didn't make sense to you, please by all means, let me know so I can correct it somehow.

Thank you all for reading! I hope you enjoyed!

<3
Let Us Return to Our Main Pairing

Chapter Notes

This is the chapter I am most nervous for.

... because here are some TRIGGER WARNINGS:

Mature Content--ANAL PLAY. SEX. TENTACLES. OVIPOSATION.

Ya know. That stuff.

Because everything about White Hat and Black Hat I have based on some really out-there Lovecraftian Mythos...

Yes. So!! If you aren't into those things, most of it happens after the asterisks. Feel free to skip... though I do tend to write vague-ish and overly romantic. Still, if you don't want it, you can skip it. But, future chapters do continue to have mature, sex scenes.

Because... uh, well, I guess, why else read or write a fic that's really just about pairing your OTPs???

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Sixteen: Let Us Return to Our Main Pairing

Slug was blinking rapidly as White Hat paced in front of him.

“I—I’m sorry. I’m still not getting it. Go over it one more time. Something about… biology?”

White Hat sighed, nodding. He sat, resigned in a seat across from Slug’s semi-paralyzed body.

“So—it’s not Black Hat’s fault. Not really. It could just be bad timing. Er, well, it is timing. Our bodies are... well, you know they are not really this,” White Hat gestured to his physical being. Slug nodded to show he was listening, “What am I is—Well. Black Hat and I are the only two of our kind. Somewhat. It gets tricky to explain. However, we have the… uummmm, we have the need to dominate. Our bodies are satiated by either fighting one another or... well, when we are apart and are not battling...” he paused here.

Slug was kind enough to wave his hand encouraging-like saying, “Yeaaaah…?”
“Well, we… go… into… heat.”

“Yeah, ya know,” Slug said pointing at White Hat’s softly glowing face, “You say that like I am supposed to understand those words. And while, individually, I can clearly tell you what each of those words mean, I’m just not following you here.”

“I—I need to mate?” White Hat asked more than said. Slug scrunched his face behind his mask and looked up at the ceiling.

“See. I thought that was what you were saying…”

“Well, I have explained it three times…” White Hat mumbled, mostly to himself.

“Look, I’m not—” Slug said, sighing. He pinched the bridge of his nose as a tension headache started to appear, “I’m not mad. I understand. It’s like salmon. I guess. Something. I’m more concerned about—”

“I’m not saying you have to! I know it’s extremely inappropriate!” White Hat popped up, moving forward. He stopped himself at the last minute from reaching out though. Slug didn’t move, however, barely looked up as he placed his chin in his hands in thought.

“No—well, yes,” Slug said, shaking his head and finally gazing at White Hat concerned, “Yes, you’re my boss. But you’re also—you said Black Hat gets violent, what do you get like?”

“I—I don’t really know. I go blank,” White Hat confessed. Slug sat down next, placing his head in his hands in thought.

“But, it’s a risk… right?”

“I would find somewhere else to go. Unpopulated,” White Hat said. He raked his brain—he wasn’t as great as creating pocket dimensions as his twin. You had to upkeep them constantly and finding one already unpopulated…? That was a task.

“But… this is a solution?” the good doctor questioned pointing between them. White Hat paused,
looking down at Slug’s unemotive mask.

“… it is,” he gulped, “But I’ve never—there has never been, uh, a… focus.”

“Never?” Slug asked, a small hiccup of mirth bubbling out of him, “You’ve never wanted to have sex with anyone, ever?”

“It’s not—!” White Hat started, mood instantly sour and a bit more… well, certainly not remaining calm in his usual detached fashion.

“Look, no, it’s fine,” Slug said, rising and put his hands up in surrender, “I was just trying to—”

“You just can’t understand—” White Hat insisted before biting off the statement. Really, not many could understand the circumstances of creatures like an Eldritch and Elder Being.

Slug fought the urge to scoff in response to his boss’s frustrated mood. “Maybe not, you might be right... But,” he started, nearly at a loss. He decided to rest his hands on top of White Hat’s fists that were starting to shake by his sides, “I don’t need to understand every little thing as long as I can help.”

White Hat seemed to go slack, mostly at the touch. That soft glow returned, and he looked more… shimmery. More alive. Less far away from Slug. Less far away from anyone. This was actually scarier than his previous mood. “You don’t have to though. I just—I wanted to explain why I’ve been—”

“Don’t worry about me. Worry about what you want,” Slug suggested. White Hat wouldn’t look him in the eyes. Slug knocked his head against White Hat’s forehead to chase his gaze. “Hey… don’t worry about your urges either. Just tell me the truth. Whatever you want. We’ll figure it out.”

“I don’t want you to—”

“Look, we’re gonna go around in circles if you are so damned concerned about what I want, or what you think you’re forcing me to do. I want to help. Just… tell me. Okay?” Slug implored, trying hard to keep his irritation at bay.
White Hat met his eyes, clasping the man’s hand hard, afraid, “Would you please… would you mate with me?”

Slug let out a sigh.

“… yeah, alright. I can do that.”

“Really?”

“Well, let’s prepare the business first. But, yes, tonight if you want,” Slug offered, stepping away from his frazzled employer with a much more collected posture.

“Oh—Yes. Of course. That’s probably… probably best,” White Hat said. He looked dazed again, and Slug sighed.

What was he getting himself into?

…

Slug knocked on Clementia’s door. She made a muffled noise of consent, and as Slug peeked in her room, the peppy music blasting from her phone was turned down. She had been reading some comic before quickly sticking a ribbon bookmark inside of the page she was on. 0.5.0. was snoring in a corner—making the doctor shake his head at the bear.

“Hey, what up, doc?” she asked with a wink. The action then sent her blinking one eye and rubbing the other.

“Mmm, reading starting to become difficult?” he responded as he walked over to her bed to sit beside her. She swung her legs over the edge and playfully kicked at his shins.

“Noooooo,” came her obvious lie, and Slug mentally noted he was going to have to make her an optometrist appointment in the near future. Clementia’s eyes started to steady as she took in the packet Slug was holding in his hands. “Hey, what’s that?”
Slug held up the freshly printed stack to show off the fancy letter head, sing-songsing, “It’s a little something from the U of V…”

“What?! No! Are you for real?!” Clem cried out reaching for it. Slug almost pulled it back, but she honestly seemed too excited. He let her snatch it and she quickly startled rifling through it. She glanced up at him, confused. “Wait… is this…?”

“Yeah. I managed to pull some strings and you’ll be spending a week on campus. Ya know, just to see if you like it,” he explained. He tapped at the ticket for a private jet setter to the secret campus location.

“The University of Valiant does that? Just… whenever? For whoever?” she asked.

Slug gave her a shrug, “It’s a private college for Heroes or their children… but, it is mostly their kids, so, yeah. It doesn’t work like a civilian university. Since you’re the ward of White Hat, you’re pretty much guaranteed a spot. If you want it. Think of the over-night experience as a formality.”

“I dunno, Sluggy,” Clementia shifted uneasily as she thumbed through the extensive paperwork, “I just barely turned 18… I know it’s standard and all to start secondary school at this age, but… you’ve always homeschooled me.”

“Most Publicly Recognized Hero’s kids are homeschooled.”

“Well, sure, but…” she started to say.Slug nudged her with his shoulder.

“Hey, you were always telling me I made your classes way too advanced,” he teased. She snorted and batted him away.

“Uh, yeah, but I knew you really weren’t—I’m dumb so—”

“What? No, Clementia…” Slug exclaimed in surprised. He quickly grabbed her chin and tried to catch her eyes, “Don’t say that. Are you really serious? You are very, very bright. Trust me, I already sent them your marks in class and—”
“Ugh, no, Sluggy, it’s not really…” she hedged, but met his eyes meekly. She backed away with a sigh.

“That’s nice, but I really—” she said, then rubbed at her messily braided hair, “I don’t know if I am ready for any of that yet. I still don’t know what I wanna do with my life… and I don’t want to make such a big decision right now.”

Slug looked at her, a soft sigh escaping. Quickly she sat straighter and hugged the packet.

“But! No, I’m sorry! It’s just how I feel and—”

“Clem, darling,” Slug put up his hands, “Don’t worry, don’t panic.”

“I’m not—I’m not ungrateful I just… I just had to tell you how I feel…” she finished lamely. Slug placed his hands on her shoulders and looked her in those teary eyes.

“I’m glad you told me. I won’t pressure you. That’s not what this is, I promise,” he explained. Clementia paused, then deflated. She breathed easier, slumping against her headboard. Slug sat back, casual. It was going to be hard to fully explain. “The truth is the next week is not going to be an easy one for White Hat. I would prefer you to be safely outside the Manor. This just happens to be the best way. I really don’t mind if you don’t wish to go to U of V… I just thought, maybe, you might like to see it anyways. You never know, it could be a pleasant experience.”

Clem ruffled her packet in thought, “So he does have a… thing going on?”

“Yeah, sorta.”

“Well. I told ya, didn’t I?” she smugly asked. She started to unpack the papers and dog-ear certain pages.
“I suddenly don’t recall,” Slug said, looking at the ceiling in mock-thought. Clem stuck out her tongue, placing her papers in her lap.

“So, what **is** his deal?” she questioned.

Slug gave a half-hearted shrug, not entirely lying, “I couldn’t explain it properly even if I tried.”

“Yikes,” Clementia shuddered lightly, “That bad?”

“Probably. So, take this as the best time for you to enjoy being free and young,” the man said in false wistfulness. Clem laughed at him, popping up to rummage under her bed for a suitcase.

“You can’t be *that* old,” she said. Slug put his face in his hands.

“Evil ages you,” he sagely said. Clementia made an aborted snort-laugh. She glanced up at him while pulling out a sparkly, light-weight carry-on case. “You don’t seem to believe me.”

“Sluggy, no offense, but you’ve been really shitty at being evil for a while now.”

“Hey! Language, young lady!”

“Seriously? That proves my point,” Clementia gleefully said.

Slug paused for a second. Then narrowed his eyes. “I’m changing the Netflix and Hulu passwords as soon as you leave. You’ll have to socialize with the other Hero-kids once you get to the U of V.”

Clem gasped as Slug stood triumphantly and waltzed right out of her room. She ran to her door and leaned out to cry, “I take it back! You’re a monster!”

“Ahhh, still got it,” he said to himself and pretended to dust his fingernails on his lab coat.
Clementia and 0.5.0. left in a black SUV, tinted windows, with special plates depicting Hero-status—meaning there was extreme safety precautions in the vehicle as well as immunity to traffic laws if need be. It was both a boon and a relief to Slug. While Clem would more than likely be safe… he hated the flashiness and bright target-signs these particular modes of transport were. But, the university had standard practices, and this was one of them. Still, 0.5.0. was with her… and he’d trained her from a young age to be wary. She was resourceful. She’d be fine.

Slug just had to tell himself that as he purchased some items to prepare for… well, for whatever White Hat might need from him. The Necronomicon had been vague at best when it came to how Elder Beings reproduced. Also, early lecture notes back in the 1920’s from a supposed amateur researcher on previous encounters from sexual encounters that people claimed to have with otherworldly beings were extremely roundabout—probably due to the sexual repression and representation at the time.

As far as Slug could gather, White Hat was more light-based than Black Hat was—Black Hat being made of shadows and heat. Like the heart of black star. Condensed to a single point—waiting to explode over and over again. White Hat was… devoid of that. Like a reflection of the color spectrum through a prism. He seemed to just float on this plane. He could touch you, and you could maybe feel it, but it was hard to capture just exactly what he was… other than beautiful to behold.

Slug sighed, emptying his eco-tote into his bathroom sink, and started arranging the items he bought a number of miles away from their usual convenience store. They really needed to switch up their routine. It was painfully obvious. In his old life, he never would have been so routine but—White Hat Ironically provided a type of security that Slug had never really experienced before. Now… White Hat was the one who was feeling insecure.

What a strange turn of events, Slug realized, as he stripped naked and read the instructions on the douching box. He sighed, unsure, but determined. White Hat said he had the urge to dominate. Might as well make it as clean an experience as possible for them.

He proceeded carefully and slowly, following the instructions to the letter. It was… definitely one of the weirdest things he’d physically done to himself for White Hat Manor. He hopped in the shower afterwards, trying to breathe calmly as he decided to continue prepping himself. Lathering his body with his specialized-medical soap, and then rinsing, he waited for the tub to drain. He placed some towels down, patting himself mostly dry.

Now came the lube.
Slug turned the innocent, non-descript bottle between his fingers. He’d read a few articles online, just to keep himself informed and occupied while he was—well—when he had the time cleansing himself internally. Back when he was married… Miranda had suggested once adding fingering to their rather vanilla list. At the time, Slug had politely declined. Despite his intelligence and somewhat open attitude, the social climate of Brazilian masculinity still managed to make him hesitate. He was lucky Miranda never minded his… uninteresting bedroom antics. Though, given her history, that was probably something she found comforting as well.

In fact, Slug had never really been with anyone besides Miranda. There was never really the time—and little opportunities. He was too busy staying alive. He was clumsy around the “fairer” sex… at least, he thought so. So, he remained aloof. Some women liked that. Miranda found his shyness endearing. He was truly lucky, he thought.

Slug sat on the edge of his tub, rubbing his ring finger.

Part of him felt… felt like he was undeserving—he certainly was in some regards. Miranda had been the best thing to ever come into his life. He should have treasured her more. He should have let her have whatever she wanted from him. All those things she suggested, he should have laid himself bare. He should have—

Well. He learned his lesson, he supposed. Flicking open the cap on the bottle, he squeezed some lube on fingers. Testing the liquidity by spreading it along his pads, he gulped down his nervousness. He edged a bit off the tub, and reached between his legs.

This was for White Hat.

White Hat needed him—strangely. So. He was going to do this right…

Slug started by feeling around his slightly sensitive rim. He remembered to relax as he rubbed softly. The idea to think of White Hat entered his head as he tried to enter himself—not uncomfortable, yet, but certainly something he wasn’t use to—and Slug tried to rationalize the situation he found himself in.

White Hat said that this was the first time he wanted to mate with a human—ultimately, to dominate. To be the superior being. It felt oddly primitive for whatever an Elder Being was supposed to be. Then again, he was made to do battle with a vile Eldritch. Slug was—is—a Villain, a seed of human evil. The only Villainous human he’d spent so much time with. It makes sense that when it came
time for White Hat’s biological needs to kick in, he’d feel the urge to slake it using Slug.

So. Yes. Not that weird… if you wanted to think about it in technical terms. Which, the doctor was trying very hard to only think of the technicalities.

Slug was exhaling heavy breaths as another finger joined his first one. He needed more lube. Surprising sure handed, he poured more in a sloppy fashion with his less dominant hand. He pressed two fingers inside, wiggled them around. He had to get use to the feeling.

It wasn’t… wasn’t all that bad, actually.

He was getting into the sensations a little too much, though. His member twitching and swelling with blood. He bit his lip, sliding off the tub and onto his bathmat. Twisting around, he gripped one hand on the tub for balance and kneeled wide instead. He reached back this time, stretched oddly, but found he could reach slightly deeper inside. It was also a bit easier to add one more finger.

“F—” Slug startled himself with his own noises. He slapped his clean hand over his mouth.

He breathed out once, calming his shaking legs. That was when he crawled into the tub and laid on his back. He added more lube without restraint. Pushing more into himself and trying to slick up his insides, stretching with clinical precision with the intent to stay in control. This experience wasn’t about him. It was to help White Hat, his mind supplied as his hips canted subconsciously. He could experiment later—

Maybe.

He tried not to think about anything other than White Hat waiting down the hall.

He still had a few things left to prepare.

At some point, Slug gave up, feeling too hot and too slimy. Uncomfortable and shaky, he turned on his shower again for a light dousing. He dried himself, adding a little bit of antiseptic moisturizer to the worst burns. There was a slight pause as he wondered if he should wrap them in gauze, but… he placed on his mask instead.
He put on a white long-sleeved shirt, and some cotton sweatpants. Then, Slug headed to the kitchen, picking up a cooler and filling it with water bottles and plates of cling-wrapped fruit and shrimp platters. A box of crackers and kid’s cartons of milk were tucked carefully in the corners. Hauling it up to White Hat’s study, Slug ignored the fluttering of his heart.

Seriously… what was he doing?

*****

White Hat didn’t stir at all. He sat on the floor, right next to his bed, arms around his legs. This whole thing was new to him. Strange. It wasn’t something he practiced… it wasn’t—

Slug had managed calmly, somehow. White Hat would be envious, but his good doctor was… well, he entered White Hat’s bed chambers, setting down a cooler by the beside table. His mask was on—which was a disappointment. But White Hat couldn’t find it in him to speak. Didn’t have any words inside his mouth at all. He just vaguely looked in Slug’s direction, but couldn’t quite follow through. Instead, returned his gaze to the floor, feeling… things that made him squirm.

“That can’t be comfortable,” Slug commented as he sat on White Hat’s bed.

White Hat shrugged, briefly relaxing. He leaned his head into Slug’s leg, closing his eye.

“Why don’t you come up here?”

White Hat shook his head.

“Do I need to go down there?”

White Hat sighed. He moved lead-like, pushing himself up onto the mattress top. One leg hung uselessly off the side as White Hat faced the good doctor. Still, he was staring at the sheets. “We—You don’t have to do this.”

“I know.”
“I have no idea what’ll happen to you—”

“I know that too.”

“Then why—” White Hat’s face scrunched and he looked up. Slug was toying with the ends of his mask. White Hat lost his train of thought. “Can—Can you take it off?”

“What?” Slug asked, a bit surprised by the sudden transition. White Hat was doing that glowy thing again. He seemed to be focusing, rather than morosely questioning the situation now.

“Your mask. I want it off,” he demanded. Slug blinked at his determined tone. He glanced to the side, but nodded sharply just once. With sure hands, he lifted the paper-bag like mask. White Hat was staring, eye wide, and smile growing. Slug scoffed lightly, but had no malice.

“If that’s all you needed…” he mumbled, and White Hat swiped off his signature hat—revealing a casual beanie beneath. “Well. I guess that settles what you and Black Hat have underneath those things.”

White Hat grunted, scratching at it. He started to toy with his suit pieces uncertainly. “Well… no. Not really. I mean… we’re… We are not easily comprehensible by human eyes. It’s sort of just what my… powers decided to resemble for you. I don’t think you could see my true form without going insane.”

“Huh,” Slug said, leaning back on his arms, watching White Hat start to self-consciously undress, “So I probably shouldn’t be watching you during—uh—whatever it is you need to do.”

White Hat paused, then shrugged. He placed his hands in his lap, a bit defeated by the thought. “I… I don’t know. Maybe this isn’t—”

“White Hat,” Slug sighed. He scooted closer and started working on the stuffy tie and button-up collar. He slid the silk off and tossed it somewhere. A pale collar was exposed, and he swiped a thumb along the line of bone it appeared to hide. It wasn’t entirely human-like. Something seemed a bit off—maybe the angle. Definitely the density… and he was so smooth and flawless. Like… carved marble. It reminded Slug of the Greek statues of gods. It looked like he should give way to touch… but he just… he wasn’t. White Hat was hardened light. Something ethereal and special.
White Hat had closed his eye, let Slug strip off his top layer. Let him feel the sculpted, and almost-human physique. Study him with a doctor’s keen eye. Curiously, Slug moved to White Hat’s tapered waist, but suddenly came to notice what he was doing—nearly horrified by his patchy, disfigured hands carelessly touching the immaculate White Hat. They slipped away, clenching onto bed sheets.

“Sorry…”

“I—it’s fine,” White Hat’s strained voice responded. Slug peered up to see the glow in White Hat’s eyes returned—sharp and cutting in the not dim enough room. “You can continue.”

Slug decided to move away slightly, beckoning White Hat to follow. The Elder Being did, his movements akin to a stalking beast. The human pulled on the canopy strings, shielding them from any ambient light. He started peeling the shirt off of himself, not quite looking at White Hat. He lightly shimmied his pants farther down. White Hat stayed still, perched over him. The intensity of his gleaming eyes and blue glow too much for Slug to bare. He turned around, propping himself up on hands and knees, staring resolutely at the headboard of his boss’s bed.

“There—” he stuttered out, false confidence, “This should be a safe position—”

The human made a strangled sound as pale arms wrapped around his stomach and pulled him closer. Pressed him against something… something writhing. “Astute as ever, my dear doctor.”

Slug didn’t know how to respond, the timber of White Hat’s voice hypnotic and calming. He took in a breath and nodded. White Hat was moving his hands up Slug’s spine, and Slug fought his instinct to shiver and shift away. This was for White Hat—not him. But…but the hands were so cool—soothing his overly heated skin. A balm for every ache spreading deep into his muscles. Unconsciously, he relaxing into White Hat’s oddly moving groin.

Slug let his forehead fall into a pillow and shifted enough to open his legs wider. He was just going to let himself enjoy the sensations of White Hat’s searching hands. It was only fair after his own exploration of—

Slug startled at the feeling of something firm slipping up both his thighs, followed by another echoing sensation along his sides. His head popped up and he glanced behind him to see—well, White Hat bent forward, chest to Slug’s back, with his whitish tendril-appendages wrapping over Slug’s forearms. “O-Oh…”
“Is it too much?” White Hat asked, “I can’t really seem to—stop myself.”

Slug moved his eyes back to the headboard, ignoring how suddenly… wet… he was beginning to feel in the places where White Hat’s unusual anatomy was touching him. Something smelled faintly… electric. Like ozone during a summer storm. Something clean and energizing. Slug shuddered, his legs pushed farther open as White Hat starting to nuzzle his neck. His hands were firming placed on his stomach, preventing Slug from moving too much. Breathy, he answered, “No. Do whatever feels—whatever is natural.”

White Hat hummed, and somehow, didn’t need to shift too much. Something found it’s way along the cleft of Slug’s posterior. He clenched his hands into the pillow, eyes following suit as…whatever White Hat had that counted as, well, genitals, probed at Slug’s rim. White Hat pushed up slightly, making an, “Oh?”

“W-What?” Slug meant to snarl, but it came out choked as the tendrils around his forearms slid up to his shoulders and circled around. It bent him at an odd angle—not quite uncomfortable because they moved to support his chest as well. His nipples immediately hardened as their interesting texture lazily wriggled across his scarred body.

“You’re—It’s—You are dripping.”

“It’s not natural—” Slug started to inform, a bit embarrassed, but more worried that human physiology might be misunderstood if he didn’t explain, “I had to—I figured you’d want to—Uhhh…”

White Hat started to move, the tendrils tightening all along Slug’s body. The Elder Being parted Slug’s cheeks and something was beginning to unhurriedly work its way inside. “So… you readied yourself for me?”

Slug lost his ability to speak as that electricity in the air crackled. And indeed, he was dripping fluid as a tendril pushed into him. It was much more intense than fingers. White Hat didn’t seem to mind, having made himself comfortable behind the presenting Slug…

Slug tried to breathe, relaxation being key. It was hard with that not-quite-there scent clinging and clogging up his airways. The tentacles that seemed to sprout from White Hat moving and pushing and pulling and Slug didn’t have the energy to fight it. Not that he would—whatever was happening to his lower body was just—
It was incredible. Indescribable. Strange. Alien. New… but certainly pleasurable. Almost inhumanely so. The feeling was too quick and too hot. Slug’s legs opened even wider and he drooled into his pillow, sight fuzzing out. The feelings of being filled and opened—barred for such a powerful being—it was making him drunk. Making his mind fog and his body ache in ways it never had before.

He… He wanted more.

He wanted it all.

Everything White Hat had.

“W-White…” Slug whimpered, not even sure he was speaking English. His body was trying to rut backwards. Yet, the hold on him made it impossible. It was maddening. White Hat seemed content messing around with Slug’s insides. He barely made a noise in response. “P-Please—Get—Get on with it—”

“… what do you mean?” White Hat asked, dazed.

“More…” Slug tried, lifting his head, daring to look at the Elder Being. A cool hand was placed over his eyes, smoothing up over his forehead. It raked across his hair, “Do more.”

“Hmm… whatever feels natural?” came the question, excitement in the tone making Slug’s body shiver. He could only nod against the calming hand.

The non-verbal reply seemed to flip a switch. Suddenly, with light speed, Slug found himself kneeling again, pressed hard into White Hat. The tendrils snapping around his arms, caging them to his sides. His fingers spasmed, and the thing buried deep inside Slug was coiling, thrusting and roiling. Undulating in frenzied waves. It wasn’t all a smooth motion—like several things moved and pulsed inside of him at once, stretching and teasing and pumping in time with differing, conflicting desires.

Slug couldn’t stop himself from wailing as he came, untouched and without warning. Amazingly, he stayed hard, aching and arching. His voice cut out and he hiccupped breaths of unexpected ecstasy. His eyes were open, but unseeing, and found his fingers digging into White Hat’s hips. The pale face pressed to his cheek, one hand clutched around his neck to keep him from trying to move to look at
the Elder Being.

White Hat’s own voice seemed a rumble of something ancient—unfathomably deep and melodic. Slug’s whole body jolted when he felt the appendages inside him shudder—moving and swirling to coalesce into a single, thick shaft. It bulged and swelled, moving, before sputtering and filling Slug.

“Whi—White Haaaah—” Slug panted out, somewhat alarmed as something viscous dribbled along the edge of his stuffed hole. He felt heavy, and, though White Hat wouldn’t release his neck, there was something making his stomach lining… weird. There was an odd sensation of things too bulbous knocking about inside of him—though White Hat was still rigidly amassed and unmoving inside. “What…?”

White Hat laid his forehead on Slug’s shoulder… he didn’t answer exactly, though his mouth moved up Slug’s flesh. The human’s instincts went off for a second as White Hat murmured to himself, “That’s right—it was here… where it happened.”

“What ha—” Slug was once again, cut off, shocked into a silence as White Hat sank his fangs deep into Slug. He would have cried out—but a fresh wave of more fluid pumped into him and, even more shockingly, he came, dry. Slumping fully into White Hat’s iron-strong grip.

Slug’s eyes slid shut, and then, White Hat slipped out of him. What followed was a gush of dense seed. It clung stubbornly to Slug. Globs of the stuff plopping heavily under him. If he wasn’t so thoroughly debauched, he might have sobbed, embarrassed and possibly mad at the indignity… but White Hat was cradling him, lying him back, to stooped over his exhausted figure. Slug placed his hands over his over still hard self, and then felt the fluids still unsettlingly popping out of him.

With bleary, disbelieving eyes, he saw there was… oval-like clumps, a bit smaller than ping-pong balls. He glanced into White Hat’s clearer eyes, burgundy blood staining the corners of his mouth in thin rivets. “Eggs?”

“… yes?”

“Ah… okay…” Slug breathed, turning his face into White Hat’s chest. He breathed harshly, feeling more and more empty. He legs quaked, straining as he tried to stop the flow of fluid from his body. He felt—He was—Why was he so aroused? “I… I still want more…”

“Al—Alright. I can do that,” White Hat said. He ran his hand along the bite mark he’d given Slug.
“You did something to me,” Slug accused. White Hat shifted, moving Slug onto his back and grabbing onto his legs. The human slung one arm over his eyes as he tried to remember to breathe. The Elder Being entered him again and his back bowed with the cresting motion of White Hat’s thrusts.

“I—I don’t know for sure… but, probably.”

“This—This isn’t humanly possible—!”

“Is it too weird?” White Hat asked, arms bracketing Slug’s face. He didn’t move the man’s arms from his eyes—just in case—but he did press his mouth along the patchwork of flesh on his palms. The tendrils had returned—wrapping around Slug’s ankles to splay him wide.

Slug just moaned, crying out as the speed increased and his whole body braced for the incoming flood of whatever White Hat was already spilling into him. Unfortunately, there wasn’t anyway to explain to him how humans reproduced… not that Slug could really have the brain capacity for words anymore.

Not when White Hat was suddenly the only important thing—not when Slug stopped feeling low… when all pain faded… and everything whited out into a blissful cloud of sensation. Everything turning calm and serene. Not when they became stardust, colliding and exploding, and mixing their atoms all into one.

They were no longer empty.

They hoped it would last forever.

Chapter End Notes

As always faceless friends on the interwebs, thank you so much for reading (if you made it this far ^^’)! I am extremely embarrassed and nervous! Still, I hoped you all enjoyed!

Again, always open for questions if anything confuses you.
LOTS OF LOVE

<3
Let Us Talk About Mornings After

Chapter Notes

I am very sorry if this chapter seem to come out later than normal.

Most weekends I work on my fic since I don't have a lot of time during the week. My new job is very labor intensive and we're about to go into a massive overtime schedule. I had boxes fall on me, cut me open, and bruise and bang me up on Friday. So, I've been recovering. Depression hit me pretty hard because its a tough job and I am still in the probation period. Any wrong step and I could be fired...

It's been tough.

Not to make this all about me. Just explaining. A friend of mine literally said I have been "whumped" and I was just flabbergasted, because, honestly. Real person, here. Not a writing troupe. It's a seriously physical job. Getting injured is no joke.

Take care of yourselves, readers! No job is worth killing yourself for! But, I get that there are bills to pay and mouths to feed (even if its only your own).

Errrrr--that being said, enjoy the fic! It has not been as thoroughly edited as other chapters! Let me know if you see any mistakes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Seventeen: Let Us Talk About the Mornings After

White Hat was lying, somehow, the right way. Meaning, his head was closer to the headboard, and sheets placed more less correctly around him and Dr. Slug. Glancing down at the human, he smiled softly. One talon wiped at the semi-dried tear track of sleep and over-stimulation. Groggily, Slug turned around, smooshing his face into White Hat’s bare chest.

“’M asleep…”

“Apologies,” White Hat softly cooed, but didn’t stop touching. Slug grunted, breaking the stillness of the morning by shifting. His naked legs running alongside White Hat’s. It was… pleasing. White Hat smiled brighter. The blankets pooled as Slug crossed his arms over White Hat’s body to prop up his head.

“You did it on purpose…” Slug sleepily accused. White Hat didn’t answer. The man swayed upwards. His legs moved across his body—straddling White Hat’s thighs.
“Slug?” White Hat asked. The doctor pulled back the bangs hanging in front of his eyes. He looked quite dashing, if still a bit dazed from sleep. White Hat felt himself stirred up. Although he didn’t feel the need to really pursue dominating Slug—his body was excited by the look the human was assessing him with.

“You still have another round in you…?” Slug’s tone a little incredulous, still husky from sleep—slurred by his native tongue that flavored the syllabus in a way that intoxicated White Hat. The Elder Being paused… then, strangely, found himself nodding.

He really didn’t need to—but… he couldn’t stop himself. One more time… just to be sure—Slug didn’t have to know… did he?

Slug began bending forward, knees on either side of White Hat’s hips now. One hand reached behind, feeling along the tendrils beginning to bubble with an aphroditic secretion. He sighed as they moved of their own will—embedding themselves deep inside of Slug like they were coming into a wonderous, secret home.

White Hat let out a puff of silvery breath, eyes closed. It felt so welcoming. So warm. So… much like he had found completion, found reason, found a restored faith in his purpose on this planet. He wanted to sing out just how good it felt to—to be one with Slug.

His hand reached up and he placed it on the badly burned portion of the doctor’s face. Slug made a whimper—pushing his cheek into White Hat’s broad palm. He rocked his body into White Hat’s, holding on to the talons that touched the hurt parts of himself. “W-White Hat…”

“Almost—Just hold on,” White Hat said, more music than voice, staring rapt at the pleasure building inside of Slug.

The both rode the wave together—pretending for different reasons this was still some spell they had been cast under from some far away time.

…

Slug was sipping on a mostly room-temp water bottle while White Hat was fitting on his suit again. He looked his old self—unclouded and eerily beautiful. Maybe still a bit luminous. Though, it only added to his appeal.
“You don’t need all that, you know,” the doctor mentioned. White Hat blinked, turning to Slug’s still unmasked gaze. The Elder Being flicked his sight elsewhere as the human didn’t have much more energy than to lie on his side, semi propped up with a pillow, blanket haphazardly thrown across his sticky, lower body. “The tie and the vest, I mean. You can just wear the slacks and button down. You look fine.”

“I—Well, if that’s what you meant by that,” White Hat muttered. He closed his wardrobe and rolled up his sleeves—smooth forearms showing. He left the very top button open. Slug shook his head before taking another sip of water.

Still looked wonderful even in casual attire. So unfair.

“Do you need my help dressing?”

Slug tried not to let his face color in embarrassment, but White Hat was earnest. Unassuming. He meant only good will. “Uhhh… no. I’ll figure it out. But, if you could take me to my tub, that would be nice.”

“Of course,” White Hat had said, all smiles. He was quick, wrapping up Slug like a burrito before the man could protest. Walking unhurried down the hall, even as Slug squawked and flapped like a prickly parrot, cursing in Portuguese.

Slug was placed with the utmost care inside his pearly bathtub, as White Hat untucked the sheet from him. The human crossed his arms, raising his knees to hide what was left of his pride. White Hat was staring at him with the softest look. Slug shoved a washcloth into his face, growling, “Either get out or start helpin—”

And to his surprise, White Hat turned the knobs before he could really finish. Then he was picking up soap to lather. Slug went silent, before looking away. He decided to wait. The Elder Being running water along his body—reverent and cautious. It felt more intimate than the last week they spent rolling around in bed together.

“W-Wait, it’s fine—” Slug tried, but there was already a soft cloth running over the healing bite mark on the juncture where shoulder met neck. He hissed, and White Hat lifted the cloth… moving it
down his clavicle and between his pecs… slipping under the raising water and toward—“White Hat!” he hissed, but his boss was steady, using Slug’s rustling to maneuver him for easier access. “Stop it! You don’t—”

“But… it’s the most uncomfortable here, right?” White Hat asked without aplomb. He was pushing the tiniest bit inside, the edges of the cloth fluttering in the waves Slug was making as his legs twitched unconsciously.

Slug felt the words die on his tongue, mortified. His hands shaking where he’d grabbed White Hat’s immovable wrist. He didn’t quite let go, his fingers just slipped further up as he hunched over White Hat’s arm. “You don’t have to…”

“I want to…” he said.

The words an echo of their previous conversations.

All Slug could do was breathe, gasps and pants against the calming sensation of White Hat’s hands on him. It wasn’t sexual. But it was—Well, Slug just closed his eyes and remembered this is just what White Hat needed. It wasn’t for him.

Not really.

…”

Slug had taken a heavy dose of pain relievers—and vitamin C. He was sitting (sort of leaning against the breakfast nook) in the kitchen, cutting a mango to put in a salad when he heard the front door slam. Heavy footfalls came down the halls, and just as he turned, Clem burst through the doors like a rainbow explosion of glitter and happiness.

“SLUGGY!”

She hurled herself in his direction, and he quickly dropped the knife just as she threw herself around his shoulders. 0.5.0. waddled in, holding suitcases and what looked like shopping bags. The girl squeezed him hard enough that he wheezed.
“I’M HOOOOOOOME!”

“C-Clem!” he squeaked, “C-Can’t breathe!”

She perked up, eyes bright, and grin wavering. “But, I missed you.”

“Missed you too…” he sighed as his lungs filled with oxygen.

“I was really worried. You never answered any of my texts until last night…”

“Ah…” Slug hedged, looking away, “Things with White Hat got intense.”

“But, you’re okay?” Clementia questioned. She looked over at 0.5.0. The bear promptly dropped their baggage and held open the door in an unspoken invitation. Slug lifted an eyebrow suspiciously at the pair’s non-verbal communication.

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well… just. After everything with… ummm—” Clementia stuttered. Cero shrugged, letting the kitchen door swing shut at the hesitation in the girl’s actions. Slug managed a laugh. He patted the seat beside him. She climbed up, watching him reach for the knife to begin slicing up his mango again.

“White Hat has a protective streak to rival Black Hat’s destructive one. No need to worry.”

The subject dropped after that. Clementia clearly relieved and now excited to tell all about her exploits at a potential university that seemed tailor made to her interests and experiences.

Slug didn’t mind. He needed some distraction from his thoughts on White Hat anyways.

…
Clementia was happily bouncing in her seat at dinner, filling in White Hat about everything that happened at the University of Valiant. White Hat was smiling, laughing appropriately at all the stories she was dramatically recalling. Which felt very, very nice indeed. She had been feeling their relationship was straining in the last couple of weeks. It felt like a weight had been lifted from her.

“Oh! Oh! And then—” she energetically shoveled food into her mouth, gesticulating in amalgamations of sign language and charades, “Me and Cero, right? We met a group on campus that also brought their Super Pets—their term not mine—and this one girl had a rabbit-sabretooth hybrid that can change it’s shape because of their telepathic connection! OHHH, it was the coolest thing!”

“Oh, I think I know who they might be related to,” White Hat said, thinking aloud.

Clem nodded her frizzy head, “Yeah, I didn’t need to ask. She looks like her dad. There’s this policy of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell that no one really follows anyway. Most of them were super cool to me though.”

“Most?” Slug offered. Clementia tsked. She swirled her butternut squash spaghetti with nonchalance before popping it in her mouth. Shaking his head, the doctor decided to wait for her to continue.

“Well, I mean... yeah. People were nice. I sat in one class that’s a pre-req, like, they made me. The History of Heroism…” she started with jazz hands, and both the adults at the table hummed. Cero rumbled, pushing himself under the table until he was wedged at the point before he started to knock it over. Clementia absently pet him, continuing, “Which had a whole section on White Hat... which also happened to be the day I sat in... and I’m pretty sure it wasn’t a coincidence.”

Slug placed his elbow on the table, resting his slightly heavier head into a hand. He was looking at the girl who tried to make light of her day in class. “Annd?”

“Well. I mean, every ten minutes or so, the teach would be, all, ‘Is this right?’ or ‘You know?’ And I’d be like, ‘Yeah. Sure. Totes.’ But really, I was just thinking, ‘Ummm, nah man. White Hat sometimes forgets how to use doors,’” she said, voice warbling for differences in her characterizations of people that her guardians had never met. Slug started to chuckle as White Hat groaned at the other end of the table.

“It’s not weird! Doors get in my way!”

Clem gave him a look. “White Hat, doors are easy to understand. Turn knob—pull or push,” she
explained, like one might to a toddler. White Hat frowned lightly.

“Well, yeeees,” he argued, “But I use to light-travel from room to room before I lived with humans. Our dear doctor did not appreciate it.”

“Okay, one, it was creepy,” Slug snarked, tone slipping into a confident and somewhat well-oiled point-system that spoke to years of bickering about this particular topic of conversation, “Two, you live with humans, you act human. Three, better for business, and four, did I mention how creepy is it? Like, one minute, I’m alone, next—‘Oh, Dr. Slug, found you! I accidentally popped into the supermarket and found jello! Did you know it looks like a cousin of mine—’”

“I did not say jello,” White Hat insisted, “Ambrosia. Ambrosia looks like—”

“I know what ambrosia looks like,” Slug said, a little too loud, and Clementia grinned at their antics.

“They had ambrosia in the Commons,” she unhelpfully added on.

“Exactly, Clem, please continue, you said someone wasn’t nice to you,” Slug ended that topic swiftly, deciding to ignore White Hat before he could rile up the conversation. It was already severely bugging him to know what happened with his happy-go-lucky girl. There was no way anyone was going to distract him.

The girl then gave a shrug, “Well, the teacher wanted me to come up at the end of his lecture to answer questions from the class…”

“Oh,” Slug breathed. He looked down at his own food as she gave yet another shrug.

“That does sound invasive… I’m sorry you had to experience that,” White Hat offered. Clementia waved off the sentiment half-heartedly.

“It was okay, really,” she said, but still gave him a grateful smile, “Like. Most people were nice. Things like, ‘What do you do for the Company?’ and, uh, ‘Does White Hat personally train you?’ and I was like, ‘Meh. I don’t do much. I just grew up there,’ and like, ‘Bah, Dr. Slug gave me 0.5.0. so it’s never been brought up.’”
“Huh,” White Hat thought, “I suppose I could train you.”

“I’ve already given her lessons in basic self-defense,” Slug reminded them.

Clem rose her finger in White Hat’s defense, “Well, that’s for if I was kidnapped or taken hostage. I don’t have any Hero Training.”

Slug remained silent at this. Behind his mask, his brows scrunched. He’d been so preoccupied by the idea that someone might use Clementia as leverage against the Manor that… well, he never stopped to consider the idea that she lived under the greatest Hero on the planet. Did that mean she had to become a Hero as well? All Slug was certain of was that he wouldn’t push her to follow the paths he’d forged in his previous life… that didn’t mean White Hat wouldn’t have been an influence on her either.

Shit. How could he not have thought of that?

“I didn’t realize you’d be interested in it,” Slug mumbled. It didn’t bother him—not Clementia’s life choices—but it did make him uncomfortable that he hadn’t given it a thought. Clem was just… just his little ragamuffin he had to keep safe. He couldn’t think of her in the same terms as Hero or Villain.

“Well… yeah,” Clementia cleverly navigated the distinctly awkward Slug, “But, it’s not a big deal and nobody was overly mean about it. There was just the one dude who’d taken the last couple of questions and was all, ‘What makes you so special then? You don’t have powers, blah blah blah…”

“What did you say?” White Hat curiously asked.

Clementia looked up at him, confused, “Uh, I didn’t, really.”

“You didn’t say anything?” the Elder Being paraphrased. He seemed slightly dimmer in color. Clementia sighed, shaking that rainbowed head mostly at herself. Cero began rumbling under the table.

“I may have… uhhhh, cried a little bit, and the dude was forcibly removed by the professor,” she confessed, as if she was guilty.
“Good! It’s none of his business,” Slug said confidently, parental fervor overriding every other need in his body. He reached over to touch her elbow in comfort. She didn’t bother looking at either of them, “You don’t have to share your home-life or life-story or anything with anyone if you don’t feel comfortable with it. You know that, right?”

“Well… I guess,” she muttered. Then took a large bite of food.

“I agree with Slug,” White Hat added. Clem looked up from under her bangs, not quite believing him.

“I’m not…” she trailed off before sitting back to properly look at both of them, “I am not saying you’re wrong. I’m just kind of—It was a weird thing to be thrown in my face in public is all. I’ve seen the tabloids and gossip rags. But, I know you guys love me and stuff. It’s just… I mean. He wasn’t wrong to ask either. I just don’t—I guess I don’t think about us in those terms.”

“In what terms?” White Hat questioned, clearly struggling to follow her thought process. Slug gave him an unreadable look. White Hat looked back at him, silently asking for help.

Clem just laughed, folding her arms on the table, “Like this. At the dinner table. We all—We’re kinda family. This is my home… meaning you two make it home for me.”

“Oh…”

“Yeah. I could go to U of V,” she continued, fond and looking at White Hat, “And be White Hat’s ward—people thinking it means I’m the next Ultimate Hero or something—but I mean. No one knows about how I use to place stickers under the table when I got bored or—”

“Wait, there’s stickers under the table?” Slug interrupted, confused. He checked just to be sure. Sure enough, there was faded glitter stars and shiny princess-themed bits stuck in old angles like they could tell a story.

White Hat was blinking at the pair still, much more taken aback as Clementia laughed, “Yup! Like, it was really fun growing up in White Hat Manor. Sluggy taught me so much—and no offense, Mr. White Hat,” she teased, “But you always seemed really silly to me.”
“Well… I suppose it’s just as well. Humans are sometimes silly to me,” he mused in response.

“There are stickers under the table…” Slug muttered, scratching at one.

“Focus, Sluggy.”

“They’re probably never gonna come off now,” he said with a distracted sigh. Clementia shook her head and looked over at White Hat. With a knowing brow, he pointedly looked at Slug as if to say, ‘See? So silly.’

“Yeah,” Clementia verbally replied, and Slug blinked back into the conversation. She continued, thoughtfully, “But, yeah. Aside from that guy, and I guess it was a really informative class… It wasn’t bad. And I got a leg up on some stuff.”

“Like what?” Slug asked, perking up.

“Well, I took a Hero aptitude thingy—” she said, then paused for a while, frowning, “Um, it was kind of like an orientation? Not really though. It’s part of the offered weekly overnight itinerary. The Student Life and Health Services provide it continuously for all the kids who go there. Some only take it once, and others don’t bother at all. Like, kids either know they have powers and whatever, right? But it does help if you wanna see a counselor and be properly placed on the right track—Hero or otherwise. I took it just to see where I fell on the scale.”

“Scale?” Slug asked.

White Hat nodded. “All Heroes fall into a scale category—” he stated unnecessarily. Slug put up his hands in surrender.

“Yeah, yeah. Powered, Non-Powered, Magic Users, Elementals, etcetera. So I’ve learned coming to work for you,” he waspishly said, “It’s too convoluted. Like, Villains had three categories: Villain, Super Villain, and Black Hat. That’s it.”

“Mm,” Clem said around her food. White Hat didn’t know what to do other than turn to Clementia and put out his hand in a ‘Continue, please,’ movement. “‘Kay, well. I’m Non-Powered for sure… and like, I’m not in the best shape. I didn’t finish the obstacle course. So really low marks—though they did offer to let me come back and use Cero in a Super Pet team.”
The bear gave a snort at this, rolling underfoot before his snores could be heard muffled by the redwood. Slug vaguely thought it would be hilarious if Clem’s old stickers got caught in his fur for being so lazy.

“What was kinda interesting though was I got inconclusive marks for Magic-User,” she said. Slug blinked, attention fully away from the guard bear now.

“No shit?”

Clem laughed, “Yeah. Well, they split it up weird. Like. Certain people can learn, apparently. My pseudo-roommate for the week was a Magical Girl. She found an item out in the woods, I guess, when she was like, 12, I think? In middle school and high school she had some adventures and stuff. It was totally awesome—but like, she never took it off. If she loses the item, she loses her abilities.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of responsibility,” White Hat mentioned. Humans lived such short lives… to become a Hero so young. That must have taken a toll on her. He cocked his head at Clementia thinking. “Do you envy her experiences?”

“Well,” she shrugged, “No? I mean, she’s lucky I grew up with you guys, because there were douches down the hall who kept bugging her and asking her which item on her person it was. Like, I guess, they were dumb freshman, but it was rude. I dunno how exactly they knew, but, seriously… She didn’t come in Hero persona. She wanted to get a civilian education—she’s been in the game for a bit and was already swore in Publicly.”

“That’s probably how they knew,” Slug mused.

White Hat shook his head, “Oh, no. Any underage Hero has the option of refuting the Alter-Ego Clause.”

“Ohhhh my gooooosh…” Slug groaned, “See? This is why Heroes are so complicated! So much politics and laws and governances—I just can’t keep up with every new rule.”

“Heroes can’t either,” Clementia added in, “You gotta take at least three semesters of Criminal Justice classes… Like. If you go in as a Hero or you wanna leave as a Hero. They won’t let you graduate either. It’s apparently super regulated.”
“That’s… uncomfortable…” Slug said, squirming.

White Hat shrugged, “Heroes need protecting too. It’s for their own good, really.”

“Yeah, my roomy called it a necessary evil,” Clementia added.

“Hmm… minha mãe use to say that about Judas…” Slug whispered, unthinking, still squirmly. Clementia glanced over, slightly surprised.

“Your mom?” she translated, and when Slug popped up, surprised, Clem gave him a wavering smile, “Uh… well, my roomy was from Portugal. Sorry. We ended up talking more in her language when we were relaxing in our room so… yeah. Been practicing and I guess maybe it’s just a cultural thing?”

Slug shook his head, “No, the idea is an old one—but from Europe, yes… Sorry. I just… I always hated that phrase.”

“Really?” White Hat asked, surprised, “I would have assumed it fit your sensibilities quite well.” Slug looked up at White Hat astounded. Clementia looked between the two, uncertain. A tense second later, Slug turned his gaze away, scoffing, “… what?”

“It’s just funny. Coming from you,” he said, sharp, “Necessary evil trivializes morality. It implies there are no other options but to tolerate that bad things must be done for more important things.”

White Hat didn’t exactly respond. Clementia rocked back in her seat, suddenly feeling the tension grow again.

“ANYWAY,” she tried to declare to cut through the thickening atmosphere, “My Magic test was inclusive—probably because of White Hat’s cosmic abilities, right? Like, this is my home and it rubbed off or something on me, so… Like. Maybe if I’m trained I can get better at that stuff or… Yeah.”

The quiet descended as Clementia ran out of steam. Slug’s head was resting in one hand, arm trembling as it kept him propped up. The screeetch of White Hat’s chair moving backwards startled
both Clem and the doctor. The man’s head looked up in time to see the Elder Being quickly move around the table, arms too straight.

In a move that had the girl gasp, White Hat grabbed either side of Slugs mask and pulled it upwards. Slug shouted out an intelligible noise of protest, the one hand on the table instantly moving to cover his face. White Hat was too quick about that as well, and grabbed hold of his wrist and yanked down.

“What the fuck, White—?!” Slug started, voice cutting, even as he shrank back from the glowing blue eye darting around his uncovered face.

“You’re flushed,” he said, concern in his deep voice somewhere, but it was more factual than anything, no apology in his tone at all, “And you’ve been unfocused for a while now… I—”

Copying a move he vaguely remembered, he pressed his lips into Slug’s forehead.

“Wh—” the man startled. He used what little strength he had to jerk away, his own chair clattering behind him as he came to an awkward stand, half bent as his only free arm steadied him by using the table as leverage.

White Hat barely took a step back, saying, “You have no fever though—You can’t be sick. There’s no way you can be. My powers eliminate illnesses in those around me. So you—”

“White Hat!” Slug said again, pushing with more force until he was farther away. He grabbed his mask, glaring daggers freely without the use of his emotive goggles. White Hat let go of him finally as Slug straightened, trying to compose himself.

“You’ve been acting weird—”

“Me?!” Slug cut off, pulling on his mask, and backing away since White Hat decided to crowd him, “You have a lot of nerve after I just—” The doctor bit his tongue, looking over at Clementia, who sat stunned. Wide eyed at the exchange, probably…but, terrifyingly…maybe not. Her mouth was slightly open, and she remained stock still, just watching. Overly conscious, Slug turned back to White Hat and pointed at him, panting in time with a wildly fluttering heart. “Do. Not. Touch. Me. Again.”
White Hat nearly jumped at the words, whole body rising high and tight. Slug just stomped out of the room, not looking at anyone. White Hat swiveled on his feet, meaning to rush after the man—but Dementia grabbed at his coat at the last second.

“No!” she warned.

“But—”

“White Hat, no,” she said sternly, scrambling out of her chair to keep a better hold on the Elder Being. “You fucked up. Just—” she hesitated before giving him a pitiful look, “Just accept it.”

“I was only—”

“White Hat…” Clementia tried to explain, but it fell short. She let him go as he softened, clearly not moving from where she’d stopped him in pursuit of the doctor.

“He was acting odd. He was,” White Hat asserted, thinking back, too hard.

Clementia shrugged her shoulders in return, “Maybe… but, if he’s not ready to let you in, you can’t force it.”

“I—I did not force him!” White Hat said, too loud. Clementia found she making herself smaller as the Elder Being moved closer. He stopped though, just before he reached out for her as well.

Cero was growling from under the table.

“Calm down, boy,” she said, a bit breathless, but the bear simply bumped under the table and rose to his full height. White Hat found himself going lax, staring over at the giant with an impassive face.

“I’m not a threat, bear.”

“White Hat, no,” Clementia nearly begged. She managed to keep her tone from getting too high, but still, there was a quiver in there of uncertainty. White Hat didn’t focus on her, not really. Nor was he
truly concerned about 0.5.0. overprotective instincts.

“I am not—” he started, then covered his missing eye, “—I’m doing the best I can.”

“I know, White Hat,” Clem said, brows pulling.

“I know the difference between right and wrong,” he continued, and in that moment, Clementia realized this was more a mantra than a fact. She stared at him with new eyes.

Sadly, and with no other comforts could only say, “Oh, White Hat…”

“I need to talk to him—” he decided, looking up.

“He probably doesn’t even want to see you right now,” Clementia added, woodenly walking over to the table. She started righting the chairs and gathering plates. White Hat blinked, coming back into focus.

It took a second before he added, “No. You are right. Dr. Slug does not want to see me. I meant my brother. I have to—Uh…”

“Black Hat?” Clementia asked, more than a little alarm.

“Yes. I—” White Hat looked away when 0.5.0. roughly lumbered closer to the young girl and placed a claw on her shoulder. Clementia glanced up at his muzzled face, expression flickering.

“That can’t be a good idea either,” she muttered.

White Hat straightened his lapels, brushing off imaginary dust, “Well, he is a necessary evil—”

The air grew stale, cold at his words. Clementia stopped gathering up the food. She just crossed her arms over her chest. The Elder Being barely gave a grunt of dismal and strode to the door. Pushing the swinging doors open with more force until they banged against walls—he knew this but didn’t care.
“You can’t use your brother to alleviate your guilt, White Hat,” the human called after him.

“I am not the guilty one—” he started, ice dripping through every word. The doors swung back to close, and he had to pause. There was clinking and soft bear noises. White Hat tsked, “And I am not going to play this Game of last words. They change nothing.”

…”

Slug was more than tired. He was slightly sleep deprived.

Still sore, he only had enough steam after his panic attack and self-conscious anger to make it to his bed—which he flopped down on face first. He tossed off his mask and curled up into the fetal position. Breath shuddered out of him, in exhaustion and also maybe defeat.

It was entirely possibly that White Hat was still experiencing symptoms of his—actually, they never properly gave White Hat’s general issue a proper term. Mating season? Biological imperative? His domination gene? Urges that were more like addictions to certain stimuli?

Really, though. Was he truly going to try to *science* whatever the fuck his boss was?

Slug scraped his hand down his face.

“*We can’t keep doing this… I can’t keep doing this…*”

…”

White Hat was just about to waken his brother’s eye when it reared to life all on its own. White Hat jumped back as it floated before him, focusing intently. He felt his own in the pocket dimension alight and aware just as swiftly—leaving him with headache as both eyes tried to focus on their surroundings.

He closed the one physically attached to him, and his vision cleared to only Black Hat’s impressed
“That was fast,” his brother said. White Hat didn’t bother to explain he’d been readying to call on Black Hat just a moment before.

“Hello, Black Hat.”

“You seem less… relaxed… than I expected,” the dark twin noted. White Hat felt himself shrug. Black Hat lounged back, body hitting an invisible wall in his pocket dimension, “Well, no matter. I have a question for you.”

“And I have one for you,” he replied, one hand pressing into his desk in reflex as he leaned over his brother’s eye to better intimidate the Eldritch.

“Mine first—” he immediately demanded, holding onto his elbow and gesturing with a claw, “Do you know about Anti-Heroes?”

White Hat’s irritated bubble instantly popped, and he stood up, confused.

What in the world…?

Chapter End Notes

Any questions? Feel free to ask!

We’re getting to the meat of the story!

THANK YOU FOR READING!!!

<3 <3 <3
Let Us Get Some Definitions Out of the Way

Chapter Notes

SLIGHT TRIGGER WARNINGS FOR:

Little bit of blood, little bit of oral sexy times at the end...

And mostly for me being a goober and poorly editing. If this chapter seems choppy, it's sort of just because the plot gets heavier over the next couple of chapters, but /emotional/ things happen here.

Also.

The Depression (TM) is back and its bad. As usual. It's been hard to do things. But I am trying, the fic is still going. Working on chapter thirty. Very slow going--also a very emotional one. Lol

I want to personally thank so many people for reading, for commenting, and for the bajillions kudos that I get! You are all very wonderful and the feedback makes me very happy. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Eighteen: Let Us Get Some Definitions Out of the Way

“Anti-Heroes?” White Hat repeated, flabbergasted, “How can there be an Anti-Hero? Isn’t that just a Villain?”

“You’d think, given the definition of the prefix,” Black Hat grumbled, “But, alas no. The human language of English is continuing to conflagrate humble concepts.”

“So, what is an Anti-Hero?” White Hat posed.

Black Hat tilted his head to the side, “From recent personal interactions, *not* a Villain.”

“Well, apparently the category of Villain is fairly easy to distinguish,” the pale brother mused. Black Hat nodded, unable to deny that.
"As far as I know, it’s a recent phenomenon…” he continued, “There was… an intruder during the week. Dementia found him snooping around the property. Military trained—in Cairo. Guess what he stumbled across?”

White Hat sighed, “I don’t have to guess.”

“Well, you are the one who taught the Egyptians how to read stars so—”

“And you taught the Olmecs about—”

“Hey, look,” Black Hat cut through their old squabbles quickly, “Some of the Old Ones like blood sacrifices. And, no one invented television yet. I was bored. Sue me.”

“Black Hat, what happened?” White Hat asked with a put-upon sigh.

“Well, he apparently came with the intent to murder us,” he said pointedly.

“You know I do not advocate for—” the Elder Being started, hackles raising and voice pitching in abject horror at the very idea of unneeded death.

“I know, White,” his twin said, “That’s why I am telling you. This human came at us with C4 and machine guns. Half my Manor? Gone. He knew exactly when I’d be vulnerable.”

White Hat murmured to himself, talon on chin worriedly, “That’s not good…”

“Dementia found the floor plans for your Manor as well.”

“What?!” White Hat exclaimed, “Why?!"

Black Hat pulled something out of vest pocket. They were torn and blood splattered papers, folded into a neat enough square. The Eldritch waved them open a little, showing shaky, sloppy print as he explained, “According to his inane journal entries, he blames human discord on the Great Game. Thinks that if neither embodiment of Good or Evil exist on this plane, then true peace is possible.”
“That’s—” White Hat scrunched his non-nose. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“Hence, I called it inane,” Black Hat said as he refolded the papers.

“Can you mail those to me?”

“Sure,” Black Hat agreed, “You might understand it better. I just wanted you to know. If you have unsupervised Heroic types running around, the balance will suffer.”

White Hat nodded, feeling blindly for his chair so he could sit. This was a little too much for him. He’d never advocate for—what was it?—Anti-Heroism? That’s a thing? What does that even mean? “Thank you for telling me, I suppose.”

“The enemy of my enemy, and all,” Black Hat mentioned. White Hat ruffled a little.

“We’re not exactly enemies,” he found himself unconsciously arguing.

“You have to stop insisting that there is more to our relationship than rivalry,” Black Hat responded, and White Hat jumped, so lost in his thoughts he wasn’t fully aware that his brother hadn’t given up the conversation now that he’d delivered his intended message to White Hat. It nearly ran against their usual interactions. “As adorable as your naivety is…” Black Hat said, somewhat with a fond sort of scathing quality, “You know we were not created to be brothers.”

“Well yes, but—”

“No buts, White, one side will be the victor. Eventually you’ll realize this too.” And Black Hat wasn’t mean about it. He just said it. Plain as day, clear as the wind.

Glancing away, White Hat found his old dialect coming through, “Then why are we doing this?”

“Not all wars are blood and battle.”
“That does not sound like you…”

“I’m tired too, brother mine. Think of this as only a respite. One day, I will finish the Game properly.”

White Hat shook his head, “And here I thought we were coming to a true understanding.”

“Strange as our connection is to the world, you cannot forget what we are. I do not want to lose—to die by your stupid hand. But, all the same, if you do not play equally, what is the point of battle?” Black Hat posed.

“You want a challenge?” White Hat nearly snapped. He slumped in his seat, scowling harshly at his brother. Black Hat readjusted to stand up straight, hands clasped behind his back.

“This notion is strange to you?”

“Coming from a Villain—”

“I’m not just a Villain, brother mine,” he hissed lightly. Turning his body away from White Hat’s gaze, he tapped a claw along the thin seam of his different dimension, “And you’re not a meager human playing Hero. Do not let this plane make you forget that…”

White Hat took off his monocle, rubbing the empty socket, “You were the one who wanted—”

“I know what I wanted!” Black Hat, however, did snap menacingly, foaming at the mouth. His hand tore into the fabric of reality and rent it asunder, “But as of now, I know what I am and I know what I have! Be difficult, if you must—but do not treat our arrangement as one sided! You could have won! These consequences are yours, White Hat. So, fix your mess before I do!”

Black Hat’s torn eye fell dead in the box—dropped like a stone as the putrid flames extinguished as he cut off open communication with his pale twin. White Hat reopened his eye and replaced the frosted glass over his blank socket, where there was nothing but skin and gaping tragedy. He went back to shuffling the black box away, profoundly empty.
“I never got to ask my own question…”

…

Slug moved in his bed, and although every bone and muscle in his body felt weighted like cement bricks, he reached for his bedside lamp. Something stopped him mid-action. A cool hand with a soft blue glow… and Slug sighed (after a slight heart attack, though he couldn’t say it wasn’t too much of a surprise).

“How long have you been watching me sleep?” he groggily asked.

“A while.”

“A while as in, hours, or probably since I started working here?”

White Hat’s voice did not light up the night.

“Tell me what you want from me,” Slug demanded, slipping out of White Hat’s hold and tossing the crook of his elbow over his eyes, “I can’t be your goddamn babysitter and charity piece all in one. Decide. Do you want to save me, or do you want me to save you?”

“I—I don’t want either of those. I don’t like the idea of you calling our relationship—”

“You are my boss!” Slug shouted, balling his hands into fists, and glaring up at his darkened ceiling. “Our relationship is based on—” Slug stopped his rant, letting his fingers spread out as he tried to let go of fresh anger bubbling over as he grit out, “Okay. Okay fine. It’s not a regular employer-employee situation. We live together, we’ve protected a child together, and we recently had sex. At least I am assuming that’s what it was and, while all of it just sort of makes sense to you I am still—"

“Slug…”

White Hat didn’t attempt to touch him.
White Hat was always touching him—one way or another. They were always in close proximity. Perhaps it was Slug’s fault. He never put up a fight about it, just sort of it let it occur. Probably even encouraged it. And God, dear Lord, did Slug wish this could keep happening but—

“I am so—” Slug choked on his own words, “I am too messed up for you to count on me like this. I am not the person who can help you. I can’t give you answers, White Hat. I don’t have them. And I am so—I’m bitter. Just let me fucking—Let me be lost and bitter, okay?”

“You do continually confuse me…” White Hat murmured. Slug laughed through some tears. He felt the bed dip on his right side. With a snuffle he masked as an aggravated sigh, he turned his face to see White Hat’s figure lying close, but still not touching. The Elder Being smiled, teeth glinting, “But I’m not really—I don’t mean to make… this… difficult for you. I am sorry. I don’t understand either. I just had to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m not, White Hat,” he said, plain and simple, but still pained.

“I—I won’t ask you to do anything more, I just—” White Hat took a deep breath. He shifted slightly closer…but would not reach out. They were on their sides, trying to make out their faces in the dark. Close, closer, and closer still…but not touching. A hair’s breath away, hands on pillows, fingers twitching, inching closer. “Same ‘not okay,’ or different ‘not okay’?”

“… same,” Slug confessed.

White Hat hummed, pushing his face into the pillow, “So not really my fault?”

“Well, you don’t help,” the doctor answered, noticing the brim of the top hat askew. Literally throwing caution to the wind, he lifted it away and tossed it somewhere close to his desk chair. White Hat smiled, blinking his eye that glowed like a nightlight in dewy tones.

“I’m trying—to help, I mean.”

“I believe you,” Slug said, yawning lightly. He blinked away some tired tears.

“I’m starting to think I’m not very good at this…”
Slug laughed, placing a hand over that glowing eye, which was probably using some otherworldly sight on him. “Yeah… you’re the worst.”

“You—you’re actually too nice, I think.”

“Mm, you’re the only one who thinks so,” he was starting to slur, and White Hat hesitated, just let Slug tap at the monocle. “This is too much like Black Hat. We should do something about that… Something more… White Hat…”

“You need rest,” White Hat said, pulling the scarred hand down… letting the fingertips settle over his lips.

“Mmm…” Slug already had his eyes closed, and White Hat watched, “Oh! I know—I have bandages… I can help…”

“It’s an old injury,” White Hat found himself whispering.

Slug nodded, “I figured… But sometimes the older ones hurt more…”

“Do yours?”

“… not around you…” his voice was a slumbering confession, mind clearly too hazy to properly guard itself from White Hat’s inquires.

“Then, I will always be near you,” he promised. His talons moved down the scars on the sleeping man’s face… soothing. Calming. Pouring something with the lightest of touches into every line, every agonizing rift along his skin.

Slug was asleep again, and White Hat stayed awake.

He didn’t need sleep.

He didn’t even need answers anymore.
He just didn’t want this quiet, dark peace to become broken again.

…

Slug yawned into his pillow as his mind started to prod at him that something wasn’t quite right. He peeled back his lids as much as he could…

He was met with only his too-faded pillow cases and the gentle filter of light through his blinds. Dust motes sparkled and danced across his old, aching vision. It took a moment for him to realize while, as tranquil as it was, something felt amiss. He blinked more fully awake as he turned his head to the other side, where his bedside lamp and electric alarm clock sat (6:57 AM), unperturbed.

Slug let out a soft sigh.

White Hat.

The burns on his face didn’t even tingle. He brought his hands up in front of him—still patchy, a little wobbly from age and injury—and they too felt fine. Not bad, not good, just… fine. He crossed them over his stomach.

Such a dumbass.

Gentle and dumb.

And sad.

He really was a blobfish-bastard.

…

Clementia was downstairs around 8 in the morning, having smelled something wonderful wafting
from the kitchen. She poked her head in to see the coffee maker percolating, and her Sluggy in a chef’s apron rolling out crepes on their special electric burner thingy. He had bowls of various ingredients along the counter.

“Ohhh, I can make my own?” she questioned, pulling up her too long hair into a pony-tail.

“Yup,” he said, not quite all there that morning... much like last night. Clementia sighed. She walked over and picked up a thin crepe edge to toss on a nearby plate. She started to look over the different bowls of things—and gave a happy squeak when she saw the jar of Nutella by the strawberries.

“Well, I am gonna have, like, seven.”

“Uh-huh—” Sluggy mentioned, hands moving automatically.

“Sluggy,” Clem began, reaching over him for a can of whip cream. He seemed to snap out of it instantly, placing his own hand on her stomach and bodily keeping her from getting any closer to the special crepe burner (she was still a good three feet from it).

“Hey! Careful, it might not have an open flame but the heat it generates can still—”

“Sluggy,” she said again, but with a forced calm, “I’m an adult. You’re gonna have to let me near the stove sometime.”

“Uhhh…” he eloquently argued, apparently having to think about her statement. Clementia was quick to turn off the electric burner while he wasn’t paying attention. There was already a supreme mound the doctor had built next to him. And the crepes’ size was not small either.

“If you’re thinking about it this hard…” she teased. Slug seemed to come back to himself. He folded his arms over his chest, ladle nearly smacking his mask off.

“I let you near the stove,” he said, as if she was simply being childish again.

“Yeah. But never when it’s on… and I just got rid of all the electrical-baby proofing thingies. Also, I can’t even go six feet into your lab without you immediately shutting down everything that you’re
“working on,” she pointed out.

Slug’s goggles blinked twice in thought, “I… really do all that?”

“Well…” Clementia said, deciding not to talk about their really weird Christmas traditions where they don’t have a fireplace to hang stockings on, or participate in the lighted vigil parade of the Virgin Mother at the local church homes, “Yeah.”

“Oh,” he said. He put down his ladle, stepping away from the burner. He was already a couple feet away from it, balanced and ready on his toes. Like any mishap meant he had to react instantaneously. Clementia didn’t mention that either. There were some things she knew that Slug just wasn’t ready to see yet. It… wasn’t exactly a secret around the Manor that fire and open flame caused the good doctor some anxiety.

“Don’t worry about it,” she shrugged, “It doesn’t bother me. You’re way better at cooking than I could ever be anyway.”

Slug snorted, “Well. You never asked to be taught. Plus, it’s not hard if you just follow instructions.”

“So, you’re just saying all the tasty stuff you make us is all written down somewhere?” Clem asked, picking up the bowl of sliced bananas and another one with rainbow sprinkles. Slug walked over to the sink, already washing his hands.

“I can neither confirm nor deny your theory,” he said. The girl laughed, rolling up her crepe with too much in it. It ripped and she reached for another one with absolutely no guilt. Slug looked up, confused, “Wait a minute. Where is 0.5.0.?"

“Oh, he heard the UPS guy,” she said, pointing behind her. As if on cue, the bear staggered into the kitchen with a neat stack of boxes balancing in his paws, that moved up over the struggling Venus Fly Trap.

“Mail this early?” he asked.

“UPS doesn’t really work on normal mail schedule—” Clem said, before sucking on a spot of honey and peanut-butter that oozed out of her crepe, “Annn’ if yo’ wond’ring, I didn’ buy anyt’ing.”
“That doesn’t sound fishy at all, sweetheart,” Slug taunted. He picked up a package, so the purple monster didn’t have to worry about not seeing where he was going. As he walked over to the table, Cero continued waddling over to Clem to set the boxes down. The doctor looked at the paper taped over the flaps—only seeing WHITE HAT MANOR—but no return address. “Huh. Strange.”

“Maybe it’s all from the university,” Clementia suggested, having also glanced at the stack. She then took a huge bite of her many layered crepe, which was more like an overstuffed sweet burrito at this point. Slug walked over to their junk drawer to rummage for a pair of scissors.

“Or possible rival universities,” he added.

Clem lifted a shoulder, “Don’t t’ink the Schoo’ fohr Gif’d Youn’st’rs wud wan’ me.”

“I dunno,” Slug mused, grinning when he found an unopened packet of razor blades, “White Hat seems to think you have some Mystical inclinations.” Slug had already walked back to the package and was feeling along the edges. Clementia gulped audibly behind him.

“H-Hey…” she softly said.

Slug paused, turning around to see her down cast eyes. “Is something wrong, Clem?”

“Are you and White Hat…” she began, fidgeting from foot to foot at her standing spot with all the crepe stuff, “Are you guys still fighting?”

Slug sighed, placing down a razor on the kitchen table and walked over. Cero snorted, but allowed the doctor to take her sticky hands in his. He ignored the texture of breakfast foods stuck along the webbing of her fingers, saying firmly, “We’re fine. We’re not fighting. We’re just… You know I am not here for normal reasons.”

“You guys aren’t always on the same page, I know, but—” Clementia said, stopping abruptly. She looked up at him and gave him an unsure smile, “I just want you to be happy here.”

Slug stopped. He didn’t know exactly what to say. One thing ran through his head—and he just couldn’t stop his stupid, treacherous mouth from opening.
“I—I had a daughter.”

Clementia’s fingers spasmed. Slug held on tighter.

“It’s—I’m here for her and—”

“Had?” the girl breathed out. Slug looked away from her watering eyes.

“She… didn’t survive. She was five—no. Six. She just turned six the month before—”

“Stop, stop!” Clementia pulled his hands closer as his voice wavered at the thought that he couldn’t even remember how old she’d been when he’d lost her, “You don’t have to tell me anymore.”

“But I…” he stuttered, couldn’t find his voice. How could he explain it to her? How could he properly put in words just how bad he was? How he didn’t—He didn’t deserve whatever White Hat Manor wanted to give? “I lost her because I was—I am—a Villain. I know this. White Hat knows this… and it’s probably time you should too.”

“Slug… no,” she said, determinedly, though her cheeks were starting to drip.

“I need you to know this. Whatever is happening between me and White Hat—that’s what it comes down to. I’m not here for—I am not here for me. But I—” he said, then found he couldn’t stop himself from bringing the girl in and hugging her, “Fuck! I am so sorry! I didn’t mean for you to love me back—”

Clementia laughed wetly, sniffling into his sweater as she tightly hugged him around the middle. He felt warm, and he smelled of cooking flour. Her heart ached though…

“I… I had no idea…”

“I—I was too afraid to tell you…” he muttered, “But I promised myself I wouldn’t—I wouldn’t forget them. I need to find out who—someone took them from me. And I—”
Oh. Clementia found herself clinging even tighter to her Sluggy. His words painted her childhood in bright new colors. Filled in gaps that she never quite questioned—they were just little things what made her Sluggy so protective, so fierce. And she loved him so much… it wasn’t fair he had to hurt like this.

“You’re not gonna loose me, Sluggy.”

“You can’t promise me that—”

“Well I am,” Clem declared. She pulled away the tiniest bit and butted the side of his head softly, trying to nuzzle like a kitten. “I am not going to do that to you. I want to help—”

Slug laughed at her words, not broken, but close. He pushed at her shoulders to slow her affectionate movements. “God, no! I have enough help from White Hat…!”

“Well,” she said, frustration causing her to puff out her cheeks like a chipmunk as she glared at the obviously embarrassed doctor, “Not like, White-Hat-Help. I mean… I will be here if you ever wanna talk. I will just… I am going to stay with you, no matter what. I like to think of myself like—”

Slug was blinking again. Clementia took a breath and went slack, eying the floor.

“I like to think I might be your daughter too…”

“I—” Slug gasped. He fought the urge to drop to his knees and bawl like a baby. How did he ever get so lucky a second time around?

“But I understand if—”

“No, I—” he said, hands clasped on either side of her round cheeks, “I like to think the same.”

Clementia smiled so bright, so fast, with her eyes whipping up to meet his. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, I—” he was cut off as she tackled him into another hug. Luckily, Cero, who was still behind
them, a silent witness to this tender moment, managed to catch them mid-fall. They were held aloft by careful claws and a grunt. Clem was happily giggling and Slug breathing a sigh of relief.

Part of him hoped his long-gone daughter didn’t mind… but a bigger part of him?

“You know… I think Ama would have loved you as a sister.”

…

White Hat winced, pulling at the medical tape that got stuck to his cheek. He was mid grunt, ripping it off, as the office door clicked open. He didn’t quite scream in mild-surprise—but he did find himself fluffing up—tentacles wavering as he turned to see Dr. Slug’s mask, unamused, poking into the room.

“What are you doing?” the man questioned, expression and voice flat. White Hat tried shrugging, holding his bundle of gauze and wadded up tape to his chest. The hand-mirror had sailed somewhere behind him—probably thrown into a different dimension to hide his actions. He kept his lost eye covered with one hand, trying to smile like he wasn’t doing anything.

Dr. Slug let out a long sigh as he walked inside, kicking the office doors closed behind him (if they left smudgy boot prints, so be it). He strut over to White Hat’s desk and perched himself on the edge, one leg folded up as he held out his hands. The Elder Being awkwardly glanced away, a slight hum of uncertainty following.

“You shouldn’t bother me when I’m trying to sleep,” Slug warned. White Hat let the guilt simmer low in his gut, hand pressed firmly to his uncovered socket. “I sometimes end up saying weird things —”
“I don’t think so…” White Hat murmured, mostly to himself.

Slug gently touched his fingers to the back of White Hat’s hand, “Lemme see.”

“It’s—” he started, a bit unsure, “It’s fine. I’m not…I’m not bleeding or anything.”

“I know,” Slug said.

White Hat’s fingers twitched. Slug gave a shake of his head. With a sort of finality, he finished raising his mask until his face was barred again. The mask was placed behind his back, lying unassuming. White Hat looked at him, unaware his talons quivered at the sight. With a gulp, he then raised his hand up, swiping off the top hat—beanie complacently covering the back of whatever mysteries his head held.

“There we go,” Slug whispered, trying not to smile. He tilted White Hat’s face to get a better look at the gaping cavity.

In this dimension, White Hat’s missing eye was supplanted by a void. His pale skin stretched along an indentation that held nothing but darkness… darkness and a vague, vast shimmer of specs of light shining past crisscrossing thin membrane that tried to contain whatever cosmic powers White Hat’s body contained. It looked as if his body was trying to construct bone ridges that would follow a humanoid pattern but… when Slug brushed his thumb just underneath, the inside seemed to shift, swirling into a blue glow.

“It doesn’t—” White Hat tried. All words seemed to die on his tongue. Dr. Slug was looking into the emptiness that an Elder Being was… but he wasn’t running away, “I’m not really… um, like this.”

“Mmm-hmm. I know,” he said again. He gathered the gauze in his lap and elegantly made a square.

“But I—Human minds can’t, uh, they can’t comprehend it.”

“I’m doing well enough,” Slug mildly supplied. White Hat went back to watching the doctor as he moved the square over the patch of White Hat’s unseen socket.
“Black Hat was here first. I just… I copied him and—” he took a breath as Slug tore at a strip of medical tape with his teeth. There were years of practice with the movement. An ease to such an action that was… unsettling attractive and heartrending in the knowledge of how it came to be born. “Well. We are not the same. I do not want anyone to think of us as the same.”

“Anyone…? Or anyone in particular?” the human asked. White Hat tried not to think about the microscopic points of where Slug’s teeth tore at the tape, or where the miniscule amounts of the man’s saliva were held fast to the adhesive and now to White Hat’s own skin.

“I—” White Hat lost his thought as Slug sat back, pressing his fingertips along the edges of the tape. Holding it down securely. Neatly. Perfectly aligned.

“You didn’t have to take my suggestion literally,” Slug said, “Bandages have to be changed everyday you know. It’ll be exhausting for you.”

“No, it won’t,” he argued. Slug started to reach for his mask. White Hat stood, bending over Slug’s body to stop him. The doctor stiffened as his space was invaded. He visibly forced himself to relax as he turned to face the Elder Being.

“Trust me when I say it will be…” he mumbled.

“You don’t have to hide your face from me,” White Hat said, shuddering as Slug’s breath was too close. Too warm. Somewhat sweet… somewhat bitter. He must have just finished a cup of coffee with creamer.

“It’s not you who’s the problem,” Slug reminded him, shifting uncomfortably until his leg fell open and White Hat managed to slide between the slot accidentally, “Haven’t we already established that I’m… I’m not good. Not in life. Not at this. Not at whatever you might be looking for.”

“I’m not asking you to be,” White Hat said, glancing away.

“You’re not sure what you’re asking at all, are you?” Slug realized.

White Hat grasped Slug’s hand, pinning it to the desk without meaning to as he balanced. “I’m not
going to ask you to stay, if you are uncomfortable, I swear I’m—"


“But when you do?” he demanded.

“You’ll… You have Clem. And 0.5.0. You can look for an actual Hero to take my place—”

“No! I don’t want that! I want—”

“White Hat,” Slug harshly cut off, more force in his hand as he righted White Hat’s posture to standing. The Elder Being allowed it… but when Slug stood, he would not step backwards. Scant an inch apart, staring at one another, as if in challenge. “I don’t belong here. I thought you knew this. I am a Villain. I—I am not made to be by your side. You cannot expect this to end without… without one of us more broken than we already are… Please. Don’t fight me on this.”

“You are human, you have a choice,” White Hat declared.

Slug narrowed his muddy eyes, “And you don’t?”

“I am different—” he began, fangs glinting. Slug found himself crossing his arms in defiance.

“Tell me, then. Your eye—Black Hat’s eye. What happened?”

White Hat stopped, leaning away from Slug. He turned his face to the side. The stark gauze annoyingly pristine and glaring as the doctor contemplated it. He wondered if White Hat was truly blind on this side. When he looked away was it as if, by not looking at Slug, he didn’t have to face the truth?

“You know what happened to me. So now it’s my turn to know about what happened to you. Is that—your missing eye—what made you call a truce with Black Hat?”
White Hat placed his hand over his mouth, brows falling. He spared the barest of looks at Slug… but the human was waiting. With a heavy finality, he let himself fall back into his desk chair. One hand gripped the arm rest, the other moving to swipe at the itchy line of medical tape. “I—I let him take it.”

“What?” Slug asked. White Hat didn’t look at him. He was too busy glaring at his desk drawer.

“I… We had destroyed another planet. Far from here. Our fight… It was brutal. I had cut out his eye during battle. He’d sustained too many wounds. He was going to die. I was going to win… but I hesitated. Instead of just finishing him I let him talk me in to—He said he wanted the Game to end. Both of us alive. He said I could keep his eye as a promise… and when I agreed, he took mine.”

“You just let him… you let him mutilate you?” Slug asked, nearly breathless. He slumped back against the desk, looking at White Hat, nearly horrified. The idea had a pit sinking in Slug’s stomach.

“Yes. I would rather that then end the Game. I don’t—” White Hat closed his one eye and placed his forehead in his talons as he stared unseeing into the ground, “I don’t know what would happen to the universe if one of us won.”

“You think your Gods would just… what, wipe all existence away once they know which is stronger? Good and Evil? That doesn’t seem very smart… What would the point of all this be then?” Slug asked, snorting.

White Hat glanced up, letting go of his face to wave his hand in the air, “A famous philosopher once said, ‘The world is round, it has no point.’”

Slug leveled him with a glare. White Hat gave him a shrug.

“You asked.”

“Your Gods are bleak, man,” Slug sighed, scooting a bit closer now that White Hat was looking at him again, “But… even so… you don’t have to suffer for their entertainment.”

“Obviously it wasn’t for them—” his tart reply was bitten off with an edge of self-deprecation. Slug’s brows shot up as White Hat quickly covered his own mouth, just as surprised.
“You let—I mean—Did you do this for you? The eye thing?”

White Hat glowing softly, he looked down at his hands, saying, “I’ve never really… thought about it. Since everything happened.”

“That seems like a lie…”

“Well, it’s not like I can’t see out of it—” White Hat mumbled. Slug ticked his head to the side, as if to process that comment. White Hat continued, after a pause, “Black Hat and I are… We are what we are. There’s nothing more to us. When we lose eyes or arms or pieces, they remain alive. We reattach them. We keep fighting. So, when he offered me his eye… I thought, for once, we could remain in peace. Since he took mine—we were even. In all things we were made to—”

“White Hat,” Slug interrupted as the Elder Being’s word gathered traction, growing faster, more rehearsed… like this was a daily lie he told himself to feel better. “The truth. Please. Why are you doing this?”

White Hat looked up at him, mouth opening and closing. Finally, he sagged against his chair, firmly biting against a knuckle. It looked like that was it. The end of the conversation—with his boss seemingly stumped by every question. Avoiding the real issue.

The doctor let out a breath. He decided this wasn’t really part of job description… so he just picked up the colorless top hat… grabbed his mask and held it under his arm. Still, he hesitated to place it over his face just yet.

“You know,” he said slowly, unsure where to look other than his mask, “When I woke up in the hospital… I was heavily drugged. It messed with my memories… and I thought, maybe my family was alive. I kept asking the doctors to check the other patients. I would scream their names—thinking—no, hoping that I wasn’t alone. It’s—That loss. Being alone? The fear that I would have to live without them…?”

“Slug…?” White Hat asked, worry growing as he looked up.

“I didn’t really expect it—I feared it everyday until it happened, and when it finally did—” Slug started to glare down at his mask. It stared, blank, right back at him. He handed over White Hat’s signature hat slowly. “I guess I thought it might have been fate. I can’t have nice things, you know? I
wasn’t born to—"

“No, no, that’s not how it works—” White Hat said, tightly grabbing the brim of his hat as his hands shook.

“So… I get it. You don’t have to explain, boss. You really don’t. We don’t have to worry about it until it happens, right? We’ll just be—we can enjoy this while it lasts.”

White Hat stood, leaving his hat behind him. The human just tugged on his mask quickly.

“For now, we’ll carry on like any old business day. I’m fine with that.”

White Hat shook his head, moving after the doctor walking to the door, “Wait! No, stop! I’ll—”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Dr. Slug said, all emotion gone.

White Hat grasped his shoulder without thinking. Slug startled—an electric current traveling through him. The Elder Being was shaking his head, a bit terrified though not knowing why… until he realized which shoulder he’d grabbed. The same one he bit, the one he marked. He made to let go. The doctor was faster. Placed his own hand over White Hat’s… but pressed down harder.

“It’s fine… it didn’t—” he murmured, turning his face away from the wide-eyed White Hat, “It didn’t hurt.”

“That sounds like a lie…”

Slug didn’t respond. He was reaching behind for the door.

White Hat’s body reacted faster than his conscious mind allowed. A pale tendril slammed into the door. Kept it closed. Dr. Slug’s upper back was pushed against the door. His goggle eyes popped open wide, perhaps a bit in shock. Another tendril tugged away Slug’s hand. White Hat was pulling down the man’s labcoat, and then tearing into his red turtleneck with a vivacious need… until finally, the bitemark White Hat made was properly exposed.
“It’s—” he said, staring, losing breath. Slug, himself, was a bit winded by the suddenly inhuman movements. White Hat placed his hand along the wound, feeling the ridges he’d made. “Oh… I see… It’s—This is the place Black Hat—”

“It is?” Slug asked, head hitting the solid wood behind him. He would continue to play dumb. White Hat fingered the healing seam of skin in thought.

“It took me a moment to understand the things I had seen done to you… and I could not stand the thought that perhaps—” White Hat was murmuring, almost to himself, but Slug was quickly becoming aware of much closer his employer was drawing near. He took in a steadying breath as White Hat leaned down and pressed his lips against the mark. “You’re body is fighting both of our lingering powers. This is why you’re so out of it. This is why you aren’t acting like yourself.”

Slug couldn’t move in White Hat’s hold. He was looking past the Elder Being, trying to keep calm, keep his breath even, “Whatever you need to tell yourself, White Hat.”

“It’s possible if I flood your system, you’ll snap out of it,” White Hat thought aloud. Slug stiffened at the words.

“What the hell are you—”

The human lost his breath again as those tendrils snaked around his leg, up his back, and pulled forward in a snap. Slug was suspended in the air before White Hat. Instantly, the doctor kicked out as one hand was raking up his ruined shirt. Another was swiftly unbuckling his pants.

“WHITE HAT!”

“This isn’t for me,” he assured. Slug struggled as he lost his vision when the mess that was his sweater was pulled up along his head. It got caught on his mask, and unfortunately, Slug had enough of being so naked—well. Not that White Hat was giving him a choice as he raked talons along his pants as well.

“SERIOUSLY?!”
“Give me a few moments and—”

“I SWEAR TO—”

Slug’s body bowed as White Hat decided to respond to any threats by running his cool, dripping tongue up the length of the human’s cock. Which was not something that had a chance to happen in the last week, if one would believe. It was an entirely foreign experience—but certainly not disagreeable. In fact, Slug’s body automatically switched to agreeable.

“T-This isn’t—” Slug tried to say, but was finding the word thing difficult as his brain melted at the sensations he could feel but not visually anticipate. White Hat’s hands moved, opening his legs while the tentacles held him aloft. It was slightly dizzying.

The Elder Being’s tongue, of course, was not exactly normal. It had a distinctly silky feel. And where humans were warm—hot—in many places… the Elder Being was not. White Hat was like a fresh breeze on a newly Spring day. The texture of his salvia was not watery, but more substantial. Dense, almost, like oil. It dripped freely and Slug was shuddering. The meat of White Hat’s tongue was as equally packed and certainly powerful. Weighted, almost, and it soon roamed wildly—leaving a slick trail over Slug’s perineum and toward—

“Wait a se—!” Slug shouted in alarm, but was quickly cut off into a gasping moan. His thighs quivered as he tried to push against the hands holding him spread eagle. They were light iron, and the more he tensed and fought against the tendrils, the more they seemed to vibrate to soothe him—which was really just riling him up faster. “White Hat!”

White Hat wasn’t listening to him, of course. He was too busy exploring the inside of his good doctor. Which was, also of course, very well heated. Tight. Fluttering… inviting. And much apparently filled with wonderful surprises. A squishy bundle of nerves that was entirely too fun to press against, and that made Slug arch deeper, spasm, and rut against him. White Hat had to stop and pull himself away. His legs were shaking, so he found himself lowering both himself and Slug closer to the floor.

He could lean over the man now, and easily bending down to bite thighs—draw blood—and then drag his tongue across the wound until it reformed, closed. Each time he bit another expanse of flesh, cutting through fire-created scars, or pieces of grafted skin to sink into the muscle beneath, Slug always cried out. But… he soothed it.

Soon, he was tugging at the man, pulling him up, as letting him rut against the undulating bulge White Hat accidentally created for himself. White Hat placed his sharp teeth against the first mark on
Slug’s shoulder. He did not bite hard at first… just edged along his own indentations… and just as Slug started to babble in several languages, he pierced into the mark. Deep.

Slug—who by now was sure he’d gone insane—didn’t even have the capacity to scream. He just jolted, arms tangled around his own head, and silently exploded over his own stomach…

And dazedly, in some amount of time later, becomes conscious of the fact he’s suddenly staring into White Hat’s eye. He blinks a few times, entire body floaty. Slug winces a breath inwards, seeing the smear of blood across White Hat’s chin and the drops staining his usually pristine clothes.

“Did you just—”

“… yes?”

“So, it’s like…” Slug struggled for words, voice hoarse, “Just always that intense?”

“Um…? I was only trying to—uh—” White Hat was saying, and Slug couldn’t exactly find it in him to follow logic at that second. He just nodded, hands coming up the try to wipe some of his own blood away from White Hat’s mouth. “Well. If my ability to heal is the one that’s more prominently in your system… You should be feeling better.”

“I felt fine before,” the doctor muttered, before unconsciously smiling at the newly cleaned face of the Elder Being, “Ah… there you are. All better.”

White Hat looked at him, glowing lightly. “You—what?”

“After last night, I woke up fine. I just needed some rest. You kept me awake for most of a week,” Slug said. White Hat’s hands were holding Slug mostly upright, twitching along his back at the words.

“I… oh.”

“Do not do that without asking me first.” Slug warned, grasping the now spotless chin with one hand. The other was pushing a finger into the Elder Being’s sternum.
“Uh…” White Hat leaned back from the very harsh poke, “I didn’t even—”

“As mindblowing as that was—” the doctor interrupted, “We do not do that again unless we—”

“I’m so sorry!”

“Yeah! You should be!” Slug caustically said. White Hat wasn’t letting him go, though—but Slug didn’t mention it. He wasn’t going to mention anything else, really… He still felt a little woozy and off-balance.

“I was just trying… to help…”

“Were you, now?” Slug grumbled. White Hat was nodding. The human slumped into him, closing his eyes and sighing. “I can’t move now. You have to carry me to bed. You’re bed. If someone were to catch me coming out of your office like this—”

“Of course! Whatever you need!”

White Hat was overly accommodating. Slug didn’t bother to do anything more. No talking. No instructions. No pressing the issues. He was still a little exhausted. He was just gonna let his boss worry and stew while he slept some more…

Because, really… he didn’t want to go either.

Dr. Slug and White Hat’s relationship was slowly, surely, changed in ways they weren’t ready to talk about yet.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed.

As always, I love hearing your thoughts, and feel free to ask clarification for anything plot or character wise.
Thank you so much!

<3
Chapter Nineteen: Let Us Talk About What Happened in Cairo.

Clementia had entered White Hat’s office at some point, leaving him a black package on his desk. It stood out like a charred blemish on the otherwise colorless surface. When White Hat saw it, he knew exactly what it was and where it was from. He toyed with the edge of the envelope before deciding to shake Slug awake from his canopy-drawn bed in the adjacent suite. The human grumbled, but turned, gazing up with dull and slightly confused eyes.

“There is this… new thing… I’d like to discuss with you,” the Elder Being kept his voice soft, but he had no choice in how urgent the words left him. Slug sat up slow, rubbing his eyes with the heel of one hand. He reached out with another for the black envelope. White Hat handed it over, sighing as he explained what happened to Black Hat with a, “Perhaps you can understand more—”

“Alright,” the doctor cut off, he nodded toward the floor somewhere that his goggles might be. White Hat picked them up and quickly handed them over. “You said this intruder trained in Cairo?”

“Or, perhaps stationed there, yes.”
“Well… we both know what’s there.”

… Well over thousands of years ago…

The pale being left his brother to reside over these new creatures he’d found in the temperate, green land. A place both beautiful and wild… where the peoples had ran rampant with animals and found lands for themselves to grow and create. Erected stone monuments that the dark one presided over, much like a god…

But the pale one could not. He traveled, skipping across the sands and the crashing seas like a lightening strike. The waves of the world roiled in revolt, but he moved, aimless, with nothing to occupy his time beside his journey. He should fight his mercurial brother—he knew this, felt it jar and move against his blinded face like a crushing blow. Still… he could not. They would make peace here. Cultivate my place his brother had said. Those were the words. The dark one wanted to live, feast, be more than the Great Game intended for them.

The Elder Being stood at a white shore and looked up at the stars. Clustered and bright, splattered against the deep blue backdrop of the universe… how this little planet did not know what was above, or even below, them. These… other creatures. In such strange shapes, that walked upright, on two legs. How they were soft and how they screamed into the night…

And in the day, as he walked by their roving bands, they fell to their knees.

He listened, mostly, to acclimate to their speech—and soon found himself being asked, “Who—What are you?” For some, silly human had struck him with a rough-hewn weapon made of stone. He stared down at the object, still embedded in his flesh and gave a hum.

“Not what you may be.”

And, there, he planted roots along a winding river.

…”Nothing of importance remains in Cairo,” White Hat currently said, sitting beside Slug’s form as the man carefully inspected journal entries. Slug, in the meanwhile, had shifted enough that he had rested his tired head on what was possibly White Hat’s breastbone. Part of the Elder Being was extremely
satisfied with this position, the other part of him went absolutely still as the human made himself comfortable. He was unsure whether Slug consciously chose to be this physical or if he was still too tired to really control his actions.

“Well… when I was there, nothing seemed important,” the doctor added.

“There was too much grave-robbing at the turn of the century. Whatever I may have left at the site is long-since lost,” White Hat needlessly explained—as if Slug, well educated as he was, did not understand history and human greed.

Slug ruffled through the papers, peering up from the loose goggles around his head, “Well, you hope so. Mummy-mania may have gotten rid of some things… but, private collectors were what was really funding the early expeditions. I checked the British Museum myself.”

“And?”

“I found some interesting tidbits,” he added, frustratingly vague, “But, nothing anyone would possibly know is connected to your early days on this planet.”

…

The people of his new residence were somewhat welcoming after a while. The banks of the river fertile, easy to predict, and made for plentiful crops. These little creatures, each with their own set of eclectic cultures, were fast at settling close to the banks. Smart and resourceful. The temperature mild, especially coming from the heated and vast expansion of golden dunes that rolled further from the watery channels. Upper and Lower the people separated themselves into disparaging groups—the pale being coming into contact with many.

Over the years, they settled into calling him Menes.

He Who Endures.

It was appropriate.
Soon, he found these tanned, different, and most importantly, observant peoples coming to him, asking him for things he could produce, he could show to them. And, foolishly, he did. Taught them the many techniques he’d discovered along many different universes. And oh—oh how quick they learned.

Humans began to build him a place to live, a large, sprawling temple—an obelisk—many things in white. Capped in faience—special blue glass. This was something special only they could make, eventually, lost to time these things. Splendid things. Grand things, as he united the lives of the people. They sought his guidance, and he gave it to them, as he watched their lives pass quickly, quietly, before him.

Until, one day, he found his brother crawling up the gilded steps of his home.

... 

Slug tapped at the last journal pages.

“Yes?” White Hat asked.

“We’ll make copies... but, what’d I’d really like to do is run tests on these stains. If there’s animal blood—he’s been practicing some dark stuff. Probably from a knock-off Necronomicon. If it’s human...” Slug sighed. He rested his head against White Hat’s shoulder, “We should test it against this Anti-Hero. If it doesn’t match—”

“We’ll need to find the victims.”

“Yeah...”

...

“What is your name here?” his brother asked.

“Menes—” he began.
His brother laughed, “How foolish!”

“And yours?”

“I’m nothing more than a Banded-Eye,” the black twin said as they stood against the setting sun. The people along the banks were pulling their flat boats into the reeds, docking them as they carried woven baskets back up to their squared homes. “This is quaint…”

“They are… peaceful, now,” He Who Endures said, “The river provides them life.”

“And what do you provide in your stone hall?”

“Security, I suppose. They come to me with questions—and I have shown them stars.”

The dark one shook his head, reaching toward a date tree. He plucked the dark fruit and tapped claws into it’s silky skin until the violet juices poured… staining the marbled courtyard. The pallid brother did not speak, just eyed him warily. The dark one was muttering, “You are obviously well loved…”

“What have you come for, brother?”

Banded-Eye tsked, growling at the endearment, “Nothing. I merely have time to spare as I wait for my peoples to raise from the ashes—”

“I see. You have already destroyed another—”

“I have done nothing! They are greedy! Blood-thirsty!” he argued. He bit into the date and spat out the thickened seed. It tumbled along the sand, sticky, and sizzling from acidic salvia. Grumbling, he folded his legs and sat along the wavering flora planted at the edge of the white palace. “And I am simply waiting for the winners to finish their squabbling.”

“You cannot try to show them peace?” A pale hand motioned toward the lands before them.
Different groups of people were chatting, stilted in dialects, but nonetheless, working to haul in nets of fish while shooing water predators farther away.

“As you have?” the Banded-Eye questioned. He looked not at the humans, but his pale brother. A nod followed. Humming, he went to flicking beetles in thought, “Well. Perhaps you could allow me to watch you…”

The Elder Being should have refused.

…

White Hat was helping Slug up, helping him stand on wobbly legs. The doctor rolled his eyes. White Hat handed him a button up to replace his ruined sweater. The human just sighed, tugging it on with a red face. He let it drape over his ruined pants before searching for his shoes.

White Hat was smiling brightly at the sight. Slug had barely caught it as he glanced up. For a second he looked confused and then, with just the right amount of venom asked, “What?”

“It’s really nothing…” he murmured, trying to hide his mouth behind his hand. Slug stood, arms coming to cross over his chest. The Elder being was bad at hiding though, finding himself relaxing the closer the human got. He was staring at the button up—the way the fabric sat innocuous on scarred skin. White Hat was running a talon along the collar to fix it to lie flat.

“Is this gonna be another weird thing with you?”

“I don’t think so,” he said, standing tall with his hips unconsciously canted forward into Slug’s space, “But it could be. I just feel…”

“Yeah?”

“… warm. I think. I believe so,” he tried to explain. Slug’s arms uncrossed, and he glanced down at himself. The dress shirt didn’t quite fit him, too broad in the shoulders, obviously made for a tall being. Tailored to the slim waist, with buttons at the right strength and size for the Elder Being’s unusual fingers… but it was nice. The gesture was definitely nice. Still—
“Don’t forget. We have to talk about this. You can’t just go and—and use me like that,” he said, fierce and pointing a finger straight into White Hat’s cheek. It squished a little, and Slug poked at him some more. Just to be annoying.

White Hat was beaming, as if he enjoyed any contact his doctor was willing to share.

…

“Brother,” the Eldritch said, taring cloth away from a white stone box, “I have a surprise for you.”

“What is this?” came the question as he set down the papyrus scroll some servant of the temple handed him earlier. It was a summons for help, supposedly, as a new group of invaders prowled the broader of the lands.

“Well…” the dark one said, snorting like a swine, “If I told you, it would not be a surprise.”

The Elder Being walked along the box—finding it had a lid—and was carved with intricate details that were in his image. It displayed this dimension’s visual representation of him—clad in sheer, draping garments and adorned with amulets. His cowl protruding and his eye closed. The other—blue. Glass. “It’s… lovely. Thank you, brother.”

“It is for sleeping,” the dark twin had lied. Sweet and easy.

He’d help the pale being step inside. He’d closed the lid securely… and He Who Endures found the endless dark of his sarcophagus welcome to the glaring sun. He’s sighed, arms crossed. He would use it for sleep—for rest. He went to tell his brother as much—but found the lid stuck fast. Tarred shut. The hiss of the heat escaping between the sculpted body and the lid.

In fury, he pounded against the top, but his brother had carved old symbols into the marble. Protective wards to trap his physical being inside the box. Things he’d not noticed in the lack of light.

Oh, how foolish he’d truly been.
“We could speak now…?” White Hat offered. Slug stuck out his tongue, twirling his mask between his hands lazily. These last few days had been some of the longest times he’d allowed White Hat the pleasure of looking at his face without anything to hide the horrid disfigurements.

“Nah, this Anti-Hero business is more pressing,” he declared. White Hat just gave him a shrug. He was glad the man hadn’t put the mask on yet. He seemed too busy thinking. “It’s… odd. This new classification running about.”

“Agreed. I am uncertain if it’s just one, or if this is… well, if it is bigger than I realize,” White Hat confessed. His top hat sat on his desk, and he was tapping at it in thought.

Slug placed a hand on a white shoulder, awkward, but encouraging, “We’ll figure it out.”

“How? I am somewhat out of my element,” he said, but still found himself with a smile as the warmth of the human’s touch soothed his nerves.

“Well, first,” the doctor started to say as he finally pulled away to tug on his mask, making White Hat accidentally frown at the sight, “We do our research. Collect data. I’ll run my tests… and I may have contacts left in the Villain world. They would be more than happy to know if there is a whole subset of Heroes running around and just—"

White Hat paused as Slug seemed to choke on his words. The Elder Being blinked as the goggles short-circuited briefly before the human cleared his throat. He was forcing himself to be calm. “Slug?”

“White Hat you don’t—you don’t think that maybe… Maybe this Anti-Hero thing is… That it could have started with—with me… do you?”

White Hat could only stare, losing his breath.

No… no? Slug’s family couldn’t have—
Could it?

…

The Elder Being, in all honesty, did not need sleep. There was nothing he could do, though, sitting in his tomb. Tar making it nearly impossible to separate the lid from his coffin. He tried to scratch out the wards keeping him locked away—unable to use any otherworldly strength to save himself from this prison he’d let himself crawl into. He should have known better… still, his brother had seemed amiable. Like he wanted peace between them….

So, one of the few powers the pallid creature had over his dark twin was the ability to walk in dreams of other beings. He could not unlock his physical being—but he could project the image of himself in the shaky reality of those asleep… the soul of other creatures being slippery things, untethered in unconsciousness. Briefly, everything and anything could live in the world of Dreams.

The Elder Being was a creature of light, a creature of the Elder Gods. Beings whose immaterial forms often resided inside the Dreaming mind, hopping from creature to creature… living like a dense fog in all realities… well, if the Elder Gods could even be described as alive.

They were nothing more but gossamer, except to those who slept.

And He Who Endures can walk in Dreams. Often, he searched for his creators only to find the minds of differing creatures. He could settle nightmares… or make them. If he chose to.

He started Dream-Walking. Moving along blank sands, finding nothing for miles, where red eyes hovered in the sky. They blinked in and out of sync. He looked up, shouting at them. Wondering who was watching—only for them to close and disappear into a dark nothingness.

Vast and wide, he reached up.

It felt like a film over dark water. A thin sheet of ice… and he grabbed a handful, yanking it away. The sound of shattering glass startled him. His eye popped open—and it glowed, illuminating the inside of his sarcophagus—and he was outside of the Dream World.

“Damn…”
White Hat didn’t know what to say to the good doctor. The man seemed unable to move, as if he waited for confirmation. White Hat could only offer, “I—I suppose? I mean, I have never heard the term Anti-Hero before now. I have no idea how to contact anyone about it.”

“But, it makes sense,” Slug said, moving forward and placing his hands on the desk to steady himself, “If—and this is hypothesizing wildly—if Anti-Heroes have existed as a whole undocumented set for the side of the good… then, it’s possible. It’s possible that this is why we have been having trouble finding the Hero who—”

“Dr. Slug, we don’t know for sure.”

“You said yourself that a Hero would have—” Slug started, waving his hand wildly, unable to finish his thoughts. He slammed it back on the table, huffing, “If there is a whole group of Heroes who believe in the eradication of anything evil… then why not target whole families? Why not just destroy a whole Villainous household?”

“You know I would never advise any Hero to do such a thing!” White Hat was quick to remind him.

“Exactly!” he exclaimed, pointing at his boss in bitter triumph. He stood properly before pressing that same pointing finger to his chin in thought.

White Hat nervously shifted his weight to his other foot, asking, “What are you—”

“Supposing that you’re to keep an eye on all things Heroic… if Anti-Heroes know you wouldn’t be on their side… we could be looking at completely underground operations. The best way to find them is probably through disgraced Heroes,” he mumbled. Looking at White Hat as he nodded decisively, “I’ll see if anyone from the Villainous side has run into some strange Hero-types. You—Well. You are going to have to contact some of the bigger Hero groups.”

“Like who?” White Hat asked, uncertain.

“I don’t know. Who has the most connections?”
White Hat sighed, knowing exactly who to call.

... 

The Elder Being was wondering in Dreams again... before finding himself somewhere vaguely familiar—if not exactly right—the whole area appeared fuzzy around the edges. It was only colors and movements and light. The land was glittering, dancing on the horizon in such a lovely way.

It was warm at the riverside. A woman was weaving reeds into a basket—a bowl of powered dyes separated at her hip. He waded through water, the barest hint of slumbering crocodiles slipping away into the muddy depths. The wind played with the woman’s beaded wig.

“Hello,” he greeted, standing before her.

Gasping, she looked up in awe, “Menes?!”

“What is your name, mortal?”

“Where have you been? It is you—is it not?” she demanded, standing. It knocked the dye into the river. Lines of color sinking into the liquid, swirling ribbons like a rainbowed bridge to him. They could not sink into his being. He remained untouched. A ghost on a bank of dreams.

“I have been hidden, in the dark, and I need you to find me.”

“Hidden? Where?!” she demanded. Laughter was glancing along the edge of her dreams. Small and child-like. The woman moved, reaching out to the Elder Being, in desperation. “Where are you?! There is a dark creature in your temple—”

The Elder Being felt himself drawn back—and the woman yanked from her dreams. All went dark again.

But, soon. He felt his prison shift.
And then break.

His black twin scattered his weak body across the sands.

...  

“Tommen,” White Hat greeted from his tablet. The Golden Child was in his office in New York, smirking when the Elder Being called for a video conference. The young man looked good, disheveled in a way that appeared natural, but had clearly taken most of the morning to accomplish.

“Hey, White Hat. Rang to check up on my new team?” he inquired. He gestured to his fancy building, gleaming in chrome and lined with gold accents. He was alone in the main conference room it seemed.

White Hat smiled, shaking his head, “It was bold of you. To let go of your parents’ company. Yet, you seem to be doing well.”

“Eh. I dunno about that. Most of the people I use to roll with have… uh, well. I lost some good friends. They didn’t understand… but, Heroes need checks and balances,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck, “I mean. I wanna do the right thing… but I believe in working within the law, too, ya know? Good doesn’t mean anything if we don’t all agree about what is right and wrong… its, uh, been surprisingly controversial among Heroes actually.”

“Yes, I have noticed,” White Hat agreed, sounding not as awkward as he should have been about the topic. It certainly felt like an awkward thing to admit to the Greatest Hero on the planet… but, well, White Hat was well aware humans and their emotions were confusing to him on the best of days.

“We’re doing good, though,” Tommen finished off, relief sweeping over his face as he leaned into the video, apparently comforted by White Hat’s words, “Me and the ones who stayed together, I mean. We’re working to change a lot of things, too. I’m hoping to get my friends to eventually come back.”

“That’s good. I’m glad,” White Hat said, genuine at first.
He paused, and the human caught the hesitation easily through the video feed. Tommen shifted, a seriousness descending on him as he asked, “Is there something else going on? You, uh… You seem tense?”

“I am afraid so. I was hoping to talk to you about something… and given your family and the recent revelation of the Golden Group’s missions…”

“Oh no,” Tommen said, hanging his head heavily, “Tell me what happened.”

…

The pale creature found himself sitting back on the fuzzy bank again, when a sweet voice called out, “Menes!”

The Elder Being looked up to see the woman, clutching a sleeping child. The pale head tilted.

“You’re temple has fallen…” she panted, “We only found a sarcophagus… and what is probably blood. The dark creature is gone. He is razing the land.”

He nodded, “My brother. I should not have trusted him.”

“A brother?! There is more of you?!” the woman cried, falling to her knees. She cradled a dusty head to her breast. The child slumbered soundly. He dreamed of feathers. Looking back, White Hat might have smiled at such innocence. At the time though, he pointed at the child.

“You have brought me something?”

“I—” the woman held tight, “I cannot find you. I have a son. I cannot—”

“What is your name?” the Elder Being questioned again.

“My name?” she asked, looking up. He nodded his head, and it bobbed along the water of the river, detaching strangely. She looked with realization as pieces of the pallid being moved away from her.
“My name is Isis. And I shall find you, Menes. Now I know exactly what your brother has done to you!”

White Hat was writing down names as Tommen spoke them off the top of his head. The human used his own computer system, and sighed, saying, “I’ll send you a complete list in a couple of hours. But, as far as I know, these were the majority of Heroes my parents teamed up with. A lot of them were at my birthday parties. It’s hard to see them as… well. Whatever Anti-Heroes are.”

“I know,” White Hat said, giving Tommen a sympathetic look, “I am very sorry to be dragging up such terrible things. You are trying so bravely to move on from your parents’ sins.”

Tommen waved it off, “It’s really alright. I knew exposing their methods could lead to something like this down the road… I just didn’t know it could be, uh, this, is all.”

“Still,” White Hat sighed. Tommen gave him a tired shrug.

“You can’t say anything I haven’t heard before,” the man muttered. He placed his hands together in front of him as he thought.

“Well, I can say they probably did not imagine this sort of life for you,” the Elder Being said, accepting said challenge. The blond man let out a static laugh, shaking his head at White Hat. He leaned closer as the image of the other Hero moved away slightly.

“Which part? The part where I destroyed everything the worked for or—” Tommen asked, placing his visor on his head, “The part where I became a Hero? Because, I can tell you for certain, my mother made me work my ass off as a kid.”

“She did? Bree? Really?” White Hat asked. He’d come into contact with her a number of times, mostly at Heroic events. Never for missions. The woman—gorgeous by human standards apparently, but frigid—rarely bothered the Elder Being for his opinion. She always… To put it mildly, she had an air about her. White Hat viewed her as devoted. Perhaps it was more than that.

“God, man, she could be—” he started, but stopped, as if it was natural to temper his thoughts when publicly speaking about his family. He shook his head of the instinct and looked White Hat dead in
the eye, “I loved her with all my heart, you understand. But, my mom was a mean one. She did not forgive. She trained me from a real early age. My dad wasn’t hands on. He was a figure head, ya know? I think… everything he did, he did for her. He let his love for her cloud his judgement… not to just dump all this on you like a therapist… but that’s probably why I’m so scared of loving Star Princess, you know?”

“Well, she is engaged to Sparrow-Heart, I hear.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me…” he groaned, placing his head in his hands.

“I am truly sorry, my friend,” White Hat offered again. The hero tsked and righted himself back to sitting. With a shrug, he went back to his personal computer, trying to remain nonchalant.

“Well, whenever you get your heart broken by a pretty little thing, you let me know. We’ll commiserate. I’ll introduce you to vodka or something.”

White Hat paused for half a second, and the Hero glanced at his stoic face. A grin was lighting up his previously dour look.

“Oh my gosh, tell me.”

...

The Elder Being had been chopped up, torn in fourteen pieces. Buried along the river. Isis found him, stitched him back together, wrapped him in gauze, chanted songs of healing. She kept him in her bed, hidden. The pale creature came to, eventually, from Walking the Dream World, only to find the woman playing with a child in her lap. She was hiding her face, and then, revealing it with a smile behind cupped hands covered in henna.

“Welcome back from the dead,” she greeted.

“Hello,” he had said. The child looked at him with wide eyes, awed.

“Greet our guest, Horus,” she told him. The child hid inside her clothes. She pat his fuzzy head… the
smoky smell of incense burned on the windowsill. The pale being looked up, trying to raise to his elbows. He felt the stitches and his muscles tremble with the movement. “You are still weak.”

“I cannot die,” he explained.

“So, it seems… but you can still be broken.”

“I cannot wait in the shadows—” he started, voice biting. She raised her hands to placate him. He waited as she re-shifted her child.

“I do not intend for you to wait, just to heal,” she said.

He scoffed, but stayed lying on her soft bed. “My injuries are too grievous. It could take years for my limbs to be fully settle in place… I had been held captive for too long.”

“What will heal you faster?” she asked.

He glanced at her. Then the child.

“I need a soldier.”

…

Tommens was nodding.

“—And I only tell you this, as it will help our current investigation of any Anti-Hero groups—”

“Hey, hey,” the young man interrupted, “It’s cool, White. I’ll keep it a secret. Personally, man, I love Dr. Slug. I was contemplating stealing him from you or something. But, yeah… someone told me later he use to be one of the Big Bads.”
“Big Bads?” White Hat asked.

Tommen nodded, “That’s what a lot of us young Heroes called the iconic Villains. Black Hat, obviously, being top tier. But, uh, yeah. The Big Bads. There’s, like, ten of them or something. Depends on who you talk to really. Dr. Slug use to be ranked among them. When he started working for you, I guess people just took him off their lists, ya know?”

“Huh, I had no idea,” he said. Tommen shrugged.

“I mean, it’s not, like, a real thing,” he explained, “People tend to have a personalized list of who to watch out for. I mean, me, personally—my arch-nemesis is that quack that came out of that glowing comet ten years ago…!”

“Wasn’t the story that he got hit by a comet?” White Hat asked, wondering if they were talking about the same Villain. Tommen shook his head in the negative.

“Nah, man,” he said, “You’re thinking of GiGi. Her and her childhood friend got hit while camping, right? She used her powers for good, then the friend went rogue when he got all… ya know… scaly.”

“Ah, yes,” White Hat remembered. GiGi flew all the way from the boarder of Canada and to the White Hat Manor not long after she received her super powers. She was reeling from her best friend breaking off and tearing her hometown apart. Not that she told him everything, probably from guilt, but her friend ran off and the GiGi spent the better part of a month learning to control her cosmic abilities with White Hat’s help.

Tommen hummed at White Hat’s far-away look, “Strange, isn’t it?”

“What is?” White Hat inquired as he was pulled out of his memories.

“The people given these extraordinary powers, these opportunists…” he mused, “They always come right down to the wire, huh? GiGi and her friend. Me and my parents. You and your twin… It’s like, the closer you are to someone—”

“I don’t understand what you are saying, Tom,” White Hat said when the man took a deep breath.
The Hero sighed sadly, “Man, I don’t really either… I just mean, we all got choices, but I keep seeing this pattern. You love someone, so much, and suddenly… you’re making the wrong ones. The people we love the most, ya know, that’s the ones that end up hurting us.”

“I would like to think it’s not on purpose.”

Tommeh didn’t answer him right away.

…

Horus trained day and night. The Elder Being told his mother everything he would need to do, to study, before they met the dark twin for battle. Even with the help of Isis—who traded her soul, and the pale creature plunged his hand into her chest, weighed the weight of it—told her it was feather light. Bright, clean enough. She had taken the pain with minimal tears. They placed it in a hawk shaped jar.

Before long, the pale being could stand. Could walk, and they traveled to the capital. They gathered a small army of soldiers. A group of believers. The Elder being walked, entirely in his wrappings—they renamed him once again.

Osiris.

Isis walked beside him, cold, and brazen. She wore a cowl like the Elder Being. Horus, now a young man, strode behind them, always with his long bow half-drawn. Waiting.

The dark twin sat on a darkened throne, slaves scattered around him. Some still had bleeding wounds dripping as they offered him food and drink. Osiris shouted out in their original tongue, until a shadow crossed into the blazing sun. The people who heard, cowered, covering their ears.

“They call me Set, here,” came his caustic reply.

The Elder Being scowled, “It matters not. You betrayed me. AGAIN!”
“We are what we are,” Set replied, but did not walk down to his brother. Did not offer apologies. Did nothing to show his remorse, “I am only doing what comes naturally to us.”

“So you wish for peace?! At all?!”

“WHAT I WISH FOR IS TO BE LEFT ALONE!” the black thing said, slithering closer, heat and fire cracking the steps as he rushed forward. An arrow pierced through smoke and clattered along the onyx stairway. It lay, a thin line of light and steel. Blue words were scratching into the wood. A hiss escaped the dark twin. “You mean to kill me.”

“I mean to try,” Osiris growled.

Set lifted his face and gave a sniff, “You mean to have the mortal try.”

Horus let loose another arrow. It pierced into the dark shoulder. Sludge the color of jade welled in the wound, ate through the wood. The creature left it, smoldering and shook his crowned head. Osiris stayed beside Isis as her son climbed the steps.

“I have been offered, made to kill you. You are nothing but evil and—”

The dark creature shot forward, claws swiping at the youth. The human stumbled back, raising his bow. Horus been taught to never physically engage the Eldritch Horror. And a horror it was. Racing at him, face twisted and body nothing but a mobius rumbling of vile things.

And of course, a human could stand no chance.

Horus lie on the ground, a gushing fountain of blood erupted from his face. His mother screamed, a raged and ragged cry on the dry wind. She was immediately running past as the dark creature as it stalked forward. He stopped in front of his bandaged brother and slowly tsked. He raised one bloody claw in warning. “You know better than that.”

“I do,” the pale creature agreed.

The dark thing was shocked, for a moment, as a silvered arrowhead was thrust into his spine. He
turned around, to attack, but found the deranged woman, shaking. His eye wildly scanned—saw she was empty and turned back to his brother to hiss again.

“You BAITED me?!”

“You had done the same,” Osiris reminded him.

Isis had torn the dark creature with her light hands, with the arrowheads, with whatever she could find. The people stepped away from her wild slaughter and the Elder Being waited until her energy had run down. He then began to pick up the pieces of his brother.

She sobbed openly in the street, rending her clothes, scratching at her face… until her son moved. Even the pale creature was surprised.

The dark, bleeding mouth huffed, “It seems he only lost an eye. Much like us, brother.”

“Quiet,” the Elder Being hissed.

“Horus! Horus…!” the mother wailed, cradling his head. He weakly held her shaking, acid-covered arms. The people cheered in the background. Swathes of them running forward to aid the pair. One—a scribe, a scholar—found the eye and held it aloft.

The Elder Being offered to place it back.

They did—but it could no longer see—and the iris was milky, blue.

Isis and Horus sat among the palace steps much later, and the pale being stood before them, holding his brother’s sopping body parts. They asked him what they were to do now. With a sigh, he said, “I must move on. Send my brother’s body elsewhere. Try another land. I leave this land to you—Horus, Isis. As a token of apology.”

“You used my mother,” Horus stated. A pale head nodded. “It was cruel of you. She loved you—I loved you.”
“I know,” he answered. Horus placed his hand over his blind eye.

“I hope your actions haunt you—”

“Horus!” she exclaimed, but the young man turned, walking into the palace. He left them, angry, mutilated, and his mother sighed, turning back to the Elder Being. “I am sorry for his words—”

“He knows better…!” a muffled voice sang from bloody baskets, but the pair ignored him.

“He will know, one day,” she said, “All that I have given for him. All you have done for us. He shall be—You’ve made him a king. A legend among men. His legacy will last forever. His name, never forgotten… He cannot die—His soul…” she was weeping, “His soul cannot be lost to time.”

“Isis…” Osiris said, placing his hand on the kohl that ran down her cheeks.

“Will it hurt?” she asked, taking his hand. He shook his head. She smiled, threading their fingers together, “Then it was worth it. Use my lifeforce, my ka, wisely, will you?”

“You cannot know what will happen when—”

“Oh, I know,” she said, tears still leaking, but no longer sniffing. The Elder Being thought it strange when she smiled at him, “I suppose—if my soul goes anywhere, it will be wherever you may go, Menes. Osiris. My Osiris. Should you ever perish, maybe our souls will meet again… in another dream.”

The pale creature could do nothing more. Could only soothe her with a nod. Could only walk away while she was still at peace with the idea…

He walked to the Red Sea. He set his brother into the waters.

The dark mouth was uncovered, and, smirking.
“You may be more heartless than I, brother mine. I am impressed.”

“You made me do this. I want peace. You said you wanted peace.”

“No! Not peace! I simply wish to be alone! To be rid of you!” his twin barked.

The Elder Being sighed, “This last incident proves you can not be trusted to be alone.”

A growl was the only thing he received as he pushed the healing pieces of his brother off into the sea. Perhaps, by the time he crossed it, left only with his thoughts… he could see reason.

…

“White Hat?” Tommen questioned. The Elder Being was smoothing down the sticky tape of his bandage in thought. “What do we know about the Anti-Heroes family?”

“Huh?”

“Well, it’s just… thinking about our previous conversation… like, the things that make a Hero the maddest is his loved one’s getting hurt, right?” the man posed.

White Hat nodded, “I suppose so. But, most of this Anti-Hero behavior was preceded by his findings in Cairo.”

“And what’s in Cairo?” the human asked.

“Bad memories… mostly.”

White Hat felt his eye ache… and a soft thunder of pain made his stomach clench in hunger.

Chapter End Notes
Fun fact—the dream world White Hat walked through *is* a literal dream I have had before. Red eyes in the sky. Scary as heck. Absolutely one of the many weirder almost-nightmares I had as a kid...

But anyways! Any questions, comments, or concerns are always welcome!

Thank you for reading!

<3 LOTS OF LOVE TO YOU ALL!!
Chapter Twenty: Let Us Refocus Our Attention on What Matters.

Slug was on hold—and it had certainly been for over twenty minutes—but every so often an automated voice would assure him five more minutes were left in his wait time. Still, he was a patient man. After a sudden click, and a huff of breath he heard, “Hola?”

“Ah! Hola, como estas?”

“Bien. Como puedo ayudarte?”

“Estoy buscando a alguien…”

Dr. Slug spent several minutes describing the man he was looking for. After a few moments, the operator connected him to a line that he vaguely recognized as belonging to an off-shore service provider. He was eventually rerouted to an establishment in Argentina. And finally, finally, a voice came over the phone that he hadn’t heard in several years.

“Lama?” a smoke ridden voice asked, astounded. A cough followed as the man over the line laughed raucously. Slug was also laughing in recognition, “What the devil are you calling for? And
at this time of day? I’m up for canasta in 15 minutes…”

“Ah, it won’t take more than 15 minutes of your time, Victor,” he said.

Victor, with a graveled sigh, asked, “Of course. You’d never call to just chat with an old friend.”

“You would still consider us friends?” Slug asked, leaning back in his work chair. He toyed with the end of his pencil, tapping it along his notepad. “After everything that happened in Panama?”

“Times were different, then,” he argued. Some grumbling and caws from exotic birds could be heard from the receiver.

“Yes, and you managed to escape,” the doctor reminded him, “While I was held in a guerilla POW camp for seven months! I only escaped when Heroes RAIDed the area!”

“Yes, yes, so you said. But, as far as I knew it didn’t look like you’d survive anyway. I did the smart thing—”

“You ran, like a coward, and left me to fend for myself,” Slug told him.

Victor whistled low, “Calling me a coward? When you live in that fancy White Manor? Shame, shame, Lama.”

“Well, things happened…” the doctor explained. The older man on the line hummed, clearly waiting for more. Slug picked up his note pad and hugged his cell to his head as he said, “It’s too long a story before your canasta game begins but… suffice to say that there is dissention among Heroes. I didn’t disappear all those years ago to suddenly switch sides. I had been attacked by what we believe is a new class of Do-Gooders. They call themselves Anti-Heroes.”

“Anti-Heroes?”

“Yeah… and these guys don’t apprehend. They kill Villains.”
“Oh… well, *that* explains a few things.”

... 

Dr. Slug was later synthesizing the blood from the journal passages. It came back inconclusive. A mixture of both animal and human… which was disturbing, no doubt. As far as his machines could tell, the animal blood was chicken, canine, and feline. He sighed, shaking his head. The human blood—type O negative—was healthy. More than likely from a male due to the concentrated amount of testosterone hormones. Clean from STDs and illnesses. Though, he was taking too large of doses from caffeine pills. Whoever spilled blood was on the journal pages was purposefully trying to stay awake.

A trucker, perhaps?

Only one way to know who it came from for certain.

Slug hacked his way into the government’s database for criminals and military personnel. It took about five minutes for him to find a match—a Lt. Phil Riker, from the Marines. Stationed in Cairo during insurgent infiltration as tensions from opposing religious police and the public mounted enough to advise outside governmental supervision. Somehow, this man ended up assigned to babysit an American archeologist that was in Egypt working on a secret dig site.

“Hmm… interesting,” he murmured. He printed some papers, and then started looking through more official reports. When he’d had his fill of the questionable and redacted stories he found for Lt. Riker, he switched off his computer and headed up to White Hat’s office.

He knocked once, and it was followed quickly with a, “Come in.”

“Hey, boss,” Slug said, opening the door. White Hat was at his desk, apparently doing his own research. “Think I found our Anti-Hero.” He slapped the stack of freshly printed info on White Hat’s light blue folder. They were compiling lists of potential other suspects. Tommen De Loin’s help had been instrumental. So far, White Hat had already contacted four Heroes—two of which admitted to the rumors of an underground Heroic movement. The other two vehemently denied even entertaining the thought.

“What did you find out?” White Hat asked, looking up from his tablet. He immediately turned it off and focused solely on the good doctor.
“To save you some peace of mind,” Slug began in warning, “The only things printed are what can be officially found or requested. Everything else I am about to tell you is… well, they covered it up.”

“They?” White Hat echoed as he reached over for the papers.

“The American government. Or military. As far as I know, our Anti-Hero didn’t become involved with any Heroes until he was Honorably Discharged. Medical reasons. Lost his arm to an IED… as well as his asset. An archaeologist he was protecting. During her autopsy, turned out she was pregnant. Lt. Riker was on his way to take her out of the country and back to the states. It was an attack of opportunity, supposedly, by extremists protesting American involvement in foreign affairs,” he explained.

White Hat put down the pages and looked up sadly at Dr. Slug, “Oh no… that’s terrible.”

“That’s politics for you,” Slug said, slightly less sympathetic, “But, as far as I can tell, the archaeologist was clean. Honestly believed in preserving past cultures. Won all kinds of scholarship awards. Passionate. Everyone mourned her loss… and well. No one really ordered a paternity test buuut… it was apparently no secret that she and the Lt. were close.”

“No!” White Hat gasped, appropriately. Slug would have laughed at him, but he just found himself shrugging.

“He refused therapy afterwards. Applied for Wounded Warrior type projects, but, again. Therapy. Refused it, and ya can’t get in programs without addressing the PTSD.”

White Hat nodded, “Understandable.”

“Then, he drops of the grid for a few years, okay?” Slug started, and White Hat blinked up at him. Slug’s goggles rolled their eyes, “It means that no one could get ahold of him. No cell, no address, no one sees him for a while. Disappears. But!” Slug held up one finger as White Hat sat back in his seat, a captive audience, “Get this. He shows up near New Mexico, right? Brand-spanking-new prosthetic arm. Super tech. Which means—”

“Someone made it for him,” White Hat realized, standing.
“Bingo!” Slug said, smirking behind his mask. He rapped the black envelope on the desk. “I get that arm, I can probably tell you who made it for him. Tell Black Hat to send it over.”

“Uh, how did you know that—”

“It’s Black Hat,” Dr. Slug cut off.

“Right…” White Hat sighed. Slug gave him another shrug as he crossed his arms.

“I’m not judging,” Slug said, and he sounded honest about it. White Hat toyed with his bandage. The doctor pushed his hands away, tsking, “Stop that. You said you weren’t going to mess with it. I won’t help if you constantly take it off. You promised not to use my expertise like that—”

“I’m not! It’s just itchy.”

“Hey! Leave it! Stop,” Slug growled in warning, batting his hands away. White Hat threw up his inching talons. Slug was re-affixing the tape. He let out a frustrated sigh as he flicked at the top hat. It slipped upwards and he pulled out a roll from his coat pocket—along with another gauze sheet.

“You don’t have to—”

“It’ll bug me otherwise,” the doctor mentioned as he got to work stripping off the ruined eye-patch. White Hat thinned his mouth into a line to keep from smiling as the human went back to helping him. “You have to just leave it alone.”

“I can’t help it,” he said.

“Fidgety bastard…” Slug teased but held no malice in the words. He just concentrated on his task.

They spent their time like that. In silence. Helping one another.

…
Clementia heard the doorbell ring… which was odd. Since she hadn’t heard anything from the security system. Normally, it alerted her when the gate was so much as nicked. She put down her comic and headed toward the stairs. As she rounded the banister, she hopped on, sliding down the winding case. Cero was galloping the stairs to reach her as she bounced off the end.

The purple bear leapt up, paws out, and caught the girl before she hit the floor. His white stomach sliding along the marble and collecting dust—and making the hair stand up along his hackles as the whole action caused static. Clem was giggling, patting his snapping Venus Fly Trap.

“Thanks, boy,” she said. Cero let out a gruff huff, but still let her hop out his larges paws to stand on her own. The monstrosity closed its eyes and began snoring as she walked over to the wide double doors. The bell insistently rang again.

By the time she opened the security panel to check the porch, the bell was now repeatedly pressed. She saw Dementia standing on the welcome mat, peering into the camera until it bug-eyed her whole manic face. Clem immediately popped open the door.

“Bestie!” she cried. Dementia laughed and chucked something over her shoulder in excitement as she bodily threw herself into Clem’s open arms.

“Howdy, howdy, howdy! It’s Dementia!” the lizard hybrid announced as they fell into a heap on the floor. As the pair laughed, a cough came from somewhere down the hall. 0.5.0. had rolled over at some point in the exchange, finding it hard to stand as he wobbled back and forth on his rounded form.

White Hat was trying to pull the creature up, but Dr. Slug was already walking past the scene to the pair of girls in the Manor doorway. His goggles displayed a distinct lack of amusement—and in fact he seemed more than angry as he watched Dementia wrestle Clem around.

“Ya know, when Black Hat said he’d send the arm, post haste… I hadn’t realized I’d have to return the trash to the sender,” he caustically said.

Dem scoffed, “It’s easier for me to cross state lines than illegal prosthetics.”

“I’m sure Black Hat could have bribed someone somewhere,” Slug said. Clem looked between the two, suddenly tense.
“Yeah, well, we like to threaten more.”

“Prosthetics? Is someone hurt, Sluggy?” she asked. Dementia grinned, reaching behind her to slap the heavy metal contraption into her own lap.

“Well, not anymore…!” she sang. Clem felt her brows raise. The other girl said nothing more, which caused the doctor to grumble.

Slug quickly snatched the armored prosthetic from the hybrid’s lax grip, and luckily Dementia didn’t fight him on it. “Well! Task complete, run home to Black Hat and—”

“What?! Sluggy,” Clem interrupted before the man could explode, “Dementia came a long way!”

“By foot, too,” she added.

Clementia pointed at her friend, “She can’t leave now. It’s late and—”

“Dementia can survive it!” he waved off, turning around as he placed the arm into White Hat’s chest when the Elder Being arrived. Cero was already sniffing around Clem for injuries, pushing the lizard girl away by a few feet.

“It’s night!” Clementia argued, “Which means it’s cold!”

“So, she better get a move on!” Dr. Slug said, annoyed as White Hat fumbled with the arm. Slug was already turning away, tugging on his boss’s coat. Dementia flipped him off when he wasn’t looking.

Clem sighed, “Sorry. He’s still protective.”

“Yeah, well…” Dementia said, brushing off her legs as she stood. Slug and White Hat had disappeared down the corridor, “It’s not like I expected different.”
“You really don’t have to leave for a bit,” she said when Dem offered her a hand to also stand up. The lizard girl gave her a wink.

“Didn’t plan on it.”

“Great! Let’s get you a coffee then, and we’ll catch up,” Clementia suggested.

“You’re not mad at me anymore?”

“Oh, I am fucking pissed. No one messes with my Sluggy—” she said, grabbing the other young woman by her green pony tail and tugging her through the open Manor doors, “—And that’s what I am about to catch you up with.”

…

They were sitting inside a warm café, Dementia clasping a large cider in her too strong hands. Clem was sitting, legs crossed at the high table, and staring straight at the other girl. Cero stood, impassive, next to them.

“And that’s all I heard, honest,” Dem explained at the end of her very long, very edited story of Slug’s time at the Black Hat Manor.

Clementia closed her eyes, sighing, “I can’t even.”

“I’m really, really, really sorry, Clemmy,” she asserted again.

Clem shook her head, trying to remain calm, “I can’t believe you. You know I can’t after that!”

“Oh, come on you know I’m—”

“What I know,” the girl with rainbow hair asserted, glaring lightly at her friend, “Is that you knew Slug had been hurt. You lied to me those entire three days I tried to get a hold of him. You know and you were willing to let me worry.”
“You would have told White Hat,” she mumbled, cowed into her cider.

“OF COURSE I WOULD HAVE!” she exploded.

Dementia backed up, surprised, and raised her hands in surrender. Visibly, Clementia forced herself to relax. Cero was cooing softly at her, rubbing her back. The girl shook her head, placing her own hands on the table while breathing deeply.

“You’re lack of empathy does not surprise me. It does not surprise me——” she chanted.

Dem scoffed, “Sure sounds like it does…”

“No!” Clementia barked out, gaining the pouting hybrid’s attention once more, “You don’t get to be the one whose feelings are hurt. You don’t get to have this. Don’t you dare act like you have to endure this talk! If you are going to be my friend, you have to know when you hurt others that are close me that I get to be mad at you. Alright? You don’t get to——”

“Fine! Fine!” Dem hissed. She slammed down her drink with murder in her eyes, “But cut to the fucking chase, Clementia! What did I do?! Tell me so I can apologize, and you can start fucking talking to me again! I hate that you’ve been——”

“Oh, so that’s why you’re here…!” Clem said, sitting back with a smug, infuriated smile.

“Of course, that’s why I’m sitting in this stupid, cutesy pastel motherfuck——”

“No. Not the café,” she interrupted, tossing her hand around the fancy, girlish parlor, “Which I really like by the way. It’s my favorite. You knew that——” she added and Dementia gave a rough sigh while eying the décor, “I am talking about is why you literally ran all the way here to deliver that prosthetic.”

Dementia didn’t let her mismatched eyes settle for too long on Clem’s face.
“No… look at me. I’m only going to ask this once,” she said, clearly gathering strength.

Dementia dragged her eyes up to the other girl’s face.

“How can we be friends if you continue to do things that hurt me?”

Dementia began to tear at her hair as thick beads of tears welled in her deranged eyes, “I don’t know! I don’t know! Please—You just—You can’t—I—I didn’t want to! I don’t want to! You know I—I don’t have a choice sometimes and I—”

Clem sighed, reaching over the table to untangle the black fingernails digging into a worried scalp. She started soothing her friend, pushing away the lizard hoodie and drawing in closer. Dementia clung on to the front of her shirt and wept. Cero picked them up and moved them into a corner where there was a plush couch and a thrown blanket. Clem used that to cover the pair of them up—Dem starting to hiccup her way into silence.

They rested briefly before Clementia started talking again.

“I’m going to have White Hat train me…” she said, “I’m going to be a Hero.”

“What…? Why would you do that?”

“Why would you be a Villain?” she asked back.

Sighing, Dementia burrowed into the throw blanket, “It’s all I’ve ever known. I was made for it… Dr. Flug broke me and made me this way. I’ve told you that.”

“Yeah… and my Sluggy told me I didn’t have to be anything but what I wanted.”

“Ugh, he sucks at Villainy. I hate him,” Dem muttered. The other girl just laughed. Then, with a sigh, Dementia nodded. “But, like, respectfully. He used to be really great at it. Don’t know if his heart was ever in it though…”
“No?” Clem asked. Dem just shrugged.

They sat in silence for a little while longer. Just waiting for the sun to raise. There was no rush—Clementia was often given the key to hang out or work in the café after hours. Being the ward of White Hat had its perks, and this place of solitude and warmth was one of the few she utilized.

“You know,” Dementia mentioned, sitting up and taking the blanket with her, “If you do become a Hero… I don’t know if I could ever see you again.”

“I—I don’t know either,” she honestly answered.

“I hate this,” the hybrid said. She fisted the blanket around her and hid her face inside of it.

Clem nodded, “Yeah… me too…”

“You’re my only friend… We’re best friends, right?” she asked. Clementia nodded, eyes tearing up, “God! I hate this so much! I don’t want to not talk to you, or not see you. I don’t want us to be enemies…!”

“Oh, Dem, I can’t—I can’t not be me,” she said.

“I’m not asking you to be different! Just—Just be a civilian! Please don’t become a Hero! Please!” she begged.

Clem shook her head, “No… Dementia, I—I want to help people. I’m not… I am not going to just let others be hurt. I can’t do that. Not anymore… not after everything you just told me.”

“It wasn’t just anyone! It was only—”

“Not it—He. Sluggy. My Sluggy…” she whispered, and Dementia flinched, “I love him. And I can’t let anyone else be hurt by this stuff.”

“But…” Dementia asked, “But what about me?”
Clementia placed her hands over her mouth. Cero stood, an immobile guard and shadow over the two girls. The hybrid reached out and took the hands into her own. She squeezed—lightly, aware of how badly she could injure her human friend. Clem shook her head.

“That’s the thing,” Clem started, slowly. She extracted her hands and laid them in her lap.

“Clementia?”

“None of this is about you,” she explained, standing resolutely.

“No, no, no!” Dementia began to cry as she leapt for her friend. The bear prevented her from reaching the other girl. “No! Please, no! Don’t do this to me! Don’t—”

“I can’t be your friend, can I?” Clem asked, eyes misty. She couldn’t look at the hybrid, trying her hardest to climb over 0.5.0. It did nothing as she was repeatedly moved back down to sit haphazardly on the couch each time she was in contact with the creature’s massive paws.

“No! Don’t say that!”

“I don’t want to!” Clem shouted, hugging herself, “But you need to hear this! I need to say it!”

“Clem—Clemmy—My Clementine,” Dementia tried begging, “Please, please, please. I can be better. I swear, I will never, ever hurt you again. I am so, so sorry. Just believe me! Please don’t leave me—”

“No,” Clementia said, shaking her head.

“I DIDN’T EVEN TOUCH HIM! I TOLD YOU—”

“Dementia,” Clem tried to shush her, and finally, the girl just tossed the purple bear away. Straight through the painted window. Clementia jumped at the immediate violence, but stood firm as the hybrid stalked forward and grasped her shoulders. Cero was growling from outside, shaking off
glass. It clinked against the sidewalk distantly.

“I would never hurt you. You know that. And if anyone tried, I would kill them. I will kill anyone that stands between you and me. You know this,” Dem said, low, certain.

Nodding, Clementia said, “Yeah. I know. Look what you just did—”

“So, don’t do this. Don’t make me do this.”

Clementia was perhaps the bravest soul in the world. She cupped her friends face and gave her a sad smile. “This is exactly why I have to do this. You’ve made me draw the line too many times. I can’t keep giving you excuses. Dementia—”

“I love you.”

Clementia sighed, resting her head against the other’s shoulder. Cero was climbing back through the window now, salving at the mouth. The fly trap was snapping wildly, and Dementia glared at the beast, cradling her friend’s head.

“I’m sorry, I am,” Clem said, pulling away.

Dementia lost her grip, eyes wide in surprise, “But I—”

“I love you too, but—” Clementia crossed her arms over her chest, “But I don’t know if I can trust you. I can’t. What we are—as friends—cannot survive like this. And if you’re—”

“Clementia, it’s—” she started, then stopped. Dementia looked at her own hands, confused. What could she see there? Callouses? Blood? Nothing?

“It’s almost light out. Go home…”

“I—” the hybrid took a breath, pressing one hand to her chest, “I don’t know what this is…”
“Go home, Dementia. Go back to Black Hat,” Clementia suggested, tired.

“I—Yeah. I did a good job, I’m going—I—” she stuttered. Then looked up as Cero picked up the human and placed her on his shoulders. Clem have him a pat on the head as the creature calmed down.

“Goodbye, Dem,” she said, “Go back where you belong.”

Dementia watched her walk away. A thousand words on her tongue. None of them came out. She walked a few paces behind the purple bear and her friend in white… she would not turn around. She would not look at Dementia’s face, at the mouth that struggled to form words.

She hissed, “I—I lied! I hate you! I fucking hate—I hate you so much… for what you’ve done to me.”

Cero didn’t stop walking, but Clem’s head twitched, as if she meant to look back. Dementia turned away instead, running over to the broken window and leaping out. Clementia heard the crunch, smelt the blood on the air, and then nothing. Her friend gone, running back into shadow.

She shook her head, fluffing out some glass from the grape fur. 0.5.0. rumbled in sympathy.

“It’s okay, Cero…” she said, and no, it wasn’t really, but, “Sometimes… love alone isn’t enough to save someone… though, maybe if I just tried harder…”

He made a questioning growl.

“I don’t know…!” she started to cry. “I honestly don’t know! But I can’t—I—I am not strong enough!”

Cero disagreed. He just wished he had the ability to say so.
Slug was in the kitchen, waiting for her. He took one look at her red eyes and hugged her close. “Do I have to maim that vile little reptile?”

“Oh! Please, don’t,” she sniffled against his coat.

“Did she hurt you?”

“Not physically,” Clem confessed, “I honestly doubt she could.”

“She’s—” the doctor went to argue, but White Hat was striding through the door. He looked between the pair—then was just there beside Clementia. He was squishing her chubby cheeks in his gloved hands, eye alight as it searched her for damage.

“Oh no! My dear! Please tell me you’re okay—”

Cero rumbled behind him, giving Clem enough time to wiggle out of the Elder Being’s hold. He let it happen, tipping his head back to see the bear nearly shaking. 0.5.0. had a difficult time tonight as well—not that anyone could really tell—but he had felt as things nonetheless. Slug gently steered the Elder Being a couple of feet away from the bear.

“She’s fine,” he assured, then paused as Clem blew her nose in her sleeve, “Well. In body.”

“Oh… I—” White Hat tried. Slug waved his hands to quiet him as Clementia was picked up by Cero again. She motioned him toward the other two in the kitchen.

“Really, I’ll be okay,” she insisted.

“I would still like to be of help, though,” he said. Clementia nodded.

“We’ll talk about it later,” she promised, then steeled herself, “First. Tell me about this illegal prosthetic arm business you guys have been keeping from me.”
Chapter End Notes

As always, I encourage any comments or questions in regards to the fic.

Thank you all for the previous kudos/comments (especially for anyone who kept up with the notes and was worried about my mental/physical health), but mostly, thank you so much--from the bottom of my teeny-tiny heart--for simply reading.

<3
Let Us Ruminate on the Immutable

Chapter Notes

Let me just say this--

This, so far, has been my absolute favorite chapter in this entire fic.

I love this chapter so much, and it does focus on Clem. Gives us a little bit of background for White Hat. But mostly, it is an extremely optimistic chapter, in the weirdest way possible. I had this idea in mind for a while and then I wrote it and rewrote it and I just--there is just something about this chapter that reflects something very personal to me (or inside of me, I guess). Things that I have thought and learned in lots of different ways.

So, please. Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-One: Let Us Ruminate on the Immutable

Everything is…

White. Colorless.


Which—Which is not right. Somethings not right—who—what is she? Where is she?! What’s going on—

Is she thinking? Or screaming? Can one hear screams when there is nothing to create sound—Except, yes, except for her. She exists! She knows she does—Somewhere, at some time, as someone. How… How did she get here?

Running.

A mouth that does move—but words can be heard.
The clang of metal.

The shine of white—a blankness.

Light in a prism.

Her mind remembers she’s—

“Clementia,” White Hat is saying, rubbing her back soothingly as she throws up in his wastebasket. She’s 18, training, in his office. “Dear, I am so terribly sorry! I—”

Clementia holds up a hand to pause his rambling and continues throwing up—bananas and oatmeal—after that very dizzying test into opening her third eye. White Hat nervously shifts to kneel beside her, making sure her high pony doesn’t fall into the chunks she’s spewing. Shakily, she wipes her mouth and collapses over the basket.

“Owie…”

“I—I tried to warn you,” he said.

She groans in displeasure, flopping onto the floor. She feels sweaty and shaky. “I knooooow, but if you think I’m psychic or something…!”

“Darling, being psychic and being connected to the universe are two very different things,” he said. White Hat pressed his cool palm along her brow, and she sighed. It tingled—but hadn’t completely thrown her into a tizzy spell like earlier. “A third eye is an… well, it’s having knowledge about things otherwise unseen.”

“Like your spoopy sight thingy you can do?” she asked. White Hat was rubbing his thumb along her forehead—and that was soothing. She relaxed into it.

“Somewhat, I suppose,” he said, as if he wasn’t entirely sure.
Clem pressed her hand on top of his with a sigh, “So, I won’t be able to do what you do?”

“Well,” he said, stilling his hand as it warmed from her skin, “Of course not. The human mind is—and I am not insulting you, dear—underdeveloped for the sort of things I can do. Not that I cannot help, of course.”

“Hm, ‘course,” she answered, peering up at the Elder Being. His eyebrows twitched, and he took his hand away.

“Are you certain you really wish for me to train you?” he asked for the zillionth time. Clementia rolled her eyes, coming up to her elbows and nodding fiercely. White Hat offered her a hand to stand up fully, and she accepted. Though teetering, she was feeling immensely better. He was watching her carefully, saying, “I know you said you scored inconclusive under Magic while visiting the Valient University but…”

“White Hat,” she interrupting the trailing thought with frustration. He moved to his desk with an apologetic look. He shuffled into drawers as Clementia crossed her arms, one of his extra appendages helping in his search.

“My physical place in this world is extremely charged with cosmic radiation so,” he decided to continue, in hopes of reassuring Clem of something, before exclaiming an “Ah-ha!” and held up a silk bundle in triumph.

“I know, sir, I’ve read Sluggy’s stuff,” Clementia sighed, curiously staring at her new mentor, “But it’s good, apparently.”

“Yes,” White Hat agreed absently, extra tendrils disappearing as he unrolled his bundle.

“So, like, we can use your weirdness to make me—” she started before White Hat leveled her with a hard look. She threw up her hands in surrender and plopped down into the chairs set up for clients.

“Dr. Slug would never forgive me if I ever did anything to help you in the ways you’re suggesting,” he said, pointing at the girl with what looked like frayed playing cards, “And you know that.”
“Yeah, well, you *can* though, right?” Clem asked.

White Hat started laying down these cards on a coffee table, and Clementia noted they had a muddy brown backside. It looked like there was supposed to be a white diamond in the middle of them, but they were obviously old, scratched, crinkled by time. “Let me rephrase, my child, *I* would never forgive myself.”

“… oh, right,” she shook her head, moving up the seat to stare at the cards distractedly, “It’s the soul thing, isn’t it?”

“Indeed,” he answered. Once finished with his cards he straightened to stand beside the table.

Clem looked up at him, “Just… ‘indeed?’ That’s *all*?”

“The subject of the human soul is…” White Hat struggled with his words, “… overly complicated. In fact, any creature with a soul has a complicated relationship to it.”

“Soooo… what does that mean?”

“It means that souls are immutable,” he said.

“*Immutable*? We can’t change?” Clementia inquired, trying to figure out exactly what White Hat meant. It was quite possible this sort of subject was too… *strange*… for her to fully follow.

“Well…” White Hat said, tapping at the cards, “No. Your soul cannot change what it is. And you cannot change your soul. It is what determines what you are capable of… some beings can feel more, or less. Some beings can see more, or less. Some beings can do more, or less. Each soul is different. Unique… and, actually, that limits you. You are whatever it is that you are.”

Clementia paused at the explanation, before shaking her head, “No. That doesn’t sound right. You always say we get to choose our paths in life.”

“And I mean it,” he said with earnest conviction.
“Okaaaaay, but—”

“Clementia,” he started, “You chose your own name. You chose to be a Hero. You made these choices—but your soul is human. Your life is only so long. Your, uh, abilities—if you have any—are limited to what makes your soul your own.”

Clementia was silent, blinking at him. White Hat swept his hands over the cards.

“Let me demonstrate—” his voice sounded hollow, and his eye flared blue and bright, “I can see what is hidden from you. What the cards say. I can see the images, and, if I looked hard enough, I could tell you what kind of soul you have.”

“Okay, what kind?” she asked.

White Hat shook his head, “No. If you could not handle the third eye, you cannot withstand that sort of punishment.”

“Ugh! Then what is the point of these stupid cards!” she nearly yelled in defeat. He tapped the back of a card with a claw. She pouted into his glowing eye.

“Tell me what is hidden.”

Clementia slumped back in her seat with a groan, “Really?! Card tricks—”

“Clementia.”

“Like, I dunno, what do you want me to say? Stars? Triangles? I obviously don’t have ESP!”

“Darling, don’t think about that. Just focus. Tell me what is hidden,” he said again. Clem grumbled to herself and sat up. She huffed, looking very hard at the pointed card. With a glare she looked at him. He stood, waiting.
“I don’t know,” she finally said, shrugging.

White Hat raised an eyebrow, “Are you even trying?”

“Well! I don’t know how! Like—” she stood up, feeling the urge to kick the coffee table, “What do you want me to do? Mediate? Chant some ancient Himalayan mantra? Become one of the force?!”

“I would like you to use your instincts.”

“My instincts are telling me this is a stupid idea!” she exclaimed, tossing her hand in White Hat’s direction.

“Are they? Or is this your insecurities clouding your judgement?” he posed, smug.

Clementia sighed. She closed her eyes and spun back around. The Elder Being had his hands behind his back. He wasn’t exactly smiling—but he didn’t look put off either… Still, he was patient with her. They’d spent most of the morning doing little exercise like this to determine what, exactly, she should be trained in.

Taking a deep breath, she walked over to the coffee table. The cards sat, undisturbed, innocuous. There was nothing standing between her and them. She could flip them over, she thought, if she wanted. If there was some other grand, underlying point White Hat was making she wasn’t getting it though. She thought about it—the cards, White Hat, the whole soul thing.

But everything was just…

“I got nothing. Blank, sir. I can’t see whatever it is you’re hiding,” she confessed. She glanced over at White Hat, waiting with a sort of sad little look.

He was beaming.

He speared one card with a talon and held it up to the girl. Clementia paused, dazedly staring at the front.
Nothing was on it.

A blank card.

“See? Trust your instincts,” he said, “Your soul, my dear, is listening to the universe.”

“Ohhh…” she breathed, picking up the card.

“You’re unique in the way that you can hear better than most,” White Hat said. He tapped her on her cute button nose.

She swiped him away. “How do you know that?”

“Well,” he said, gathering up all his cards back into their silk wrappings, “I’ve had these cards a long time, and they’ve never been without pictures before.”

“Wait… what?”

“Hmmmm, yes. Given to me by an oracle in another dimension… they… respond, I suppose, to souls,” he said. Clementia hummed in thought, looking at how pristine the front of it was. She went to hand the card back to White Hat. He merely shook his head. “No, that’s your card now. Keep it.”

“You just give these guys away?” she asked.

White Hat laughed, “They’ll either come back, or they won’t.”

Clementia shook her head as she sat down, turning the card in her fingers, “Sometimes, I forget how… weird, you are.”

“Well… you never expressed interest in Heroism before now,” he said. Clem nodded, stashing the card into the pocket of her trendy yoga pants. She’d expected more of a physical training session
when she asked White Hat to teach her everything he knew.

Surprisingly he knew both very much and very little.

“I… I think I’m finding out who I am,” she said, softly, unwilling to look him in the eye, “If—if what you say is true… if souls don’t change—if they can’t change—I need to know where I stand in this world… and I would rather stand on the side that fights against pain… even if all I can do is listen—” Raggedly, she stops. Then looks up at White Hat, determined. “No. I don’t want to just listen. I need to learn how to fight too.”

Uncertainly, the Elder Being glances away. “I am… uncomfortable with your request. Perhaps if you spoke more with Slug—”

“Sluggy is down in his lab contacting every Villain he’s ever known to warn them that death is coming,” she reminded him, “He’s been tortured for years because—because some sort of Hero is now hurting people.”

White Hat sighed, “You knew?”

“Dementia told me some stuff… and so did Sluggy, just in case,” she said.

“Well, our current enemy is not really a Hero—”

“But there are other’s like him, isn’t there?” she demanded.

White Hat paused, but eventually, nodded.

“So, then you need to teach me how to fight back against these people. They’re… They’re traitors. Resorting to horrid ways because its for some undefinable ‘greater good.’”

There came to pass a period of silence. White Hat was rubbing his palm with his thumb, clearly thinking as he stared off in the middle-distance. Clementia watched as he rose, gracefully, and stood beside his desk. He offered her one hand, and the other hung in the air.
“Alright,” White Hat assented.

“Really?!” she asked, jumping up. She grabbed his outstretched hand as the other one tapped along the air. She tilted her head, confused, asking, “Like… you’re really gonna teach me how to fight and stuff? I—I mean like how Dementia can.”

One talon ripped against the air, and it shimmered. White Hat nodded, turning slightly to eye her up and down, “I know what you are asking. I am uncertain if you realize what it means, though.”

Clementia gasped as the fabric of reality was cut before her. White Hat clasped one hand inside the shimmering air and pulled it apart—like a curtain on a stage. She watched with wide eyes as the Elder Being stepped through, lightly pulling the girl in behind him…

And boy was that a strange experience. Her whole body felt as if it had been doused in a sparkling liquid. Her atoms rippled and all of her bones grew heavy… though her head stayed light. Stayed strong… and when she finally found enough faculties to stop feeling, she saw.

“Oh… wow…” she breathed, the atmosphere smelling of spilled mercury. Her eyes darted around the otherworldly landscape White Hat brought her to. The sky was an effervescent pink, and the ground a soft blue, the high grass quivering in the wind. All of the trees along a cream-colored dirt path were white—like birch trees. They were blossoming star-shaped flowers, and petals were falling, colored just like lavender, but oddly, smelled like water-lilies.

She turned to White Hat standing beside her—only to find it wasn’t quite her White Hat.

The Elder Being was still tall in this dimension—six and a half foot for sure—but he wasn’t as slim. His clothes had melted to something else, armor in what she could only fathom as a type of rose-gold. A chest plate and bracers adorned his limbs—same number as hers still. Yet, instead of his long coat was a bleached cape, and his top hat was now a warrior’s helmet similar enough to a roman soldier. Clementia stared, nearly in awe—she recognized the shining teal of his eye, with his other stitched closed… but… he didn’t look the same.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, ill at ease as the impassive, stern face was staring down at her, “But where are we? Why are you…” Her words faded, partly from lack of energy to fully finish her thought, but also because something sounded different. Her own voice was distant to her, the pitch also not quite right. It took her a moment to adjust.
“Follow me,” he ordered, and White Hat definitely seemed different. He was harder. His sound dense. His movements, as he strode down the path, were sharp and confident. Clementia, with nothing else to do, followed.

They walked over knolls, and through brambles. Stalks of flora hazy in the distance as pollen settled low, like a glittering fog. There was no sun in the sky, only swirls of glowing colors, ambient light that came from nowhere. Clementia tried not to become enchanted by this wonderous world White Hat cut through—she had to jog to keep up. Her breath, and the wind, the only sounds she could hear.

“White Hat—” she tried again, glancing down at herself, and was surprised by how she, too, had a flushed and rosy glow to her skin. Her flesh was tight and compact. Her own hair felt like needles as it brushed along her back. The sweat that beaded down had a sheen. She had to shake herself from thinking too long on it, “Where are we? Are we the only ones here?”

White Hat glanced back, his eye burning bright in such a soft place. He sighed, sweeping a hand out over the hillock, and said, “Yes.”

Clementia felt her brows scrunch, and she huffed past her mentor. She followed the path of his hand into a shadowed valley… finding it less a valley as a type of coliseum. A winding path led into an opened arena. Targets dotted the grounds, and various weapons were hung along walls, left in crates, balanced or abandoned on tables. Several yards away were gray stone seating in ascending rows. There were stains along the sandy grounds, and Clem found herself walking down into the area.

Her chest was heaving from the physical excursion, but White Hat remained undisturbed, striding into the middle of the ring of weaponry. His eye did not pause on any one thing, and he waited for Clementia to gather her thoughts.

“Where are we?” she demanded this time.

“This is a dimension I have saved for training soldiers,” he answered. Clem gulped, glancing around, feet crunching along slivers of broken arrows and shards of sheared metal.

“Soldiers?” she repeated to herself. She looked at White Hat—feeling a shiver run down her back, “You mean… Are you telling me that—Is this where you bring Heroes?”
Her face was confused, and White Hat shook his head somberly. Clementia took in a breath to steady herself.

“You’re—I know you’re not…” she started before awkwardly pointing at the Elder Being, “You’re not this either. But is this closer to what you are?”

“No.”

“Right so then…” she tried to work out.

White Hat took pity on her, waving his hand over to a rack of swords and maces, “I fight evil. I have been fighting it for millennia. Black Hat represents all those horrid things that cause pain and misery. He fights for power, for himself, for… for fun, I suppose.”

Clementia stepped forward as White Hat became subdued. She wanted to reach out and comfort him, but, he seemed too far away.

“When we were created… we were made to fight one another. To determine which side, Good or Evil, was stronger. We call it the Great Game—in your world, you can think of it like chess. With Black Hat and I, the kings… we cannot win alone. So, we…” he paused here, finding difficulty as memories seemed to swarm him, “We were given the ability to create our own armies. Our knights and rooks. We can give other living things more endurance, more power by—”

“Souls,” Clem realized.

White Hat nodded, “We can determine how to use our soldiers wisely by their souls… and by taking their souls, taking away limitations.”

“This is—” the human started forward, shoulders rising in agitation, “That’s crazy! What happened to the souls?! White Hat, why is no one here?!”

White Hat looked away, speaking no words.

“You said you wouldn’t take my soul,” Clementia said aloud, stepping back as she eyed the arena.
“No…” he murmured. It hung in the air, tightly wound.

“But you… you are telling me you have taken souls before,” she said. White Hat was so still—like a statue. A marble guardian in ruins. She sighed, “And you’re trying to scare me… aren’t you?”

“No, I—”

“White Hat,” she interrupted, then paused. White Hat didn’t try to continue. He just stood in front of her… lost. Lost in times unspoken. Maybe he was, since he wasn’t bound to things like sickness, old age, death… time. Time didn’t matter to whatever White Hat was. Nothing mattered but the battle between him and his shadow. “I am not asking to be a soldier.”

White Hat blinked at her, confused.

“These words your using…” she began, waving her hands around, “They’re… dangerous.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know you don’t,” she said, smiling sadly. “I’m not… I’m not anything grand like you are. I’m a human. And humans are…” Clementia looked around her, shaking her head. She couldn’t find the words. What could she say? “We’re not chess pieces. We’re not indispensable—but we’re not disposable either.”

“I know!” he said, rushing forward, but stopped himself suddenly, cape swishing behind him. “I know… I just need you to understand what you’re asking of me.”

“I’m asking you to teach me how to—” she went to say, but found the word die on her tongue. How could she talk to White Hat about dangerous words, when she herself kept insisting she be part of the fight.

“Clementia,” he said. White Hat moved his cape aside and a scabbard glint in the low light. He drew it—held it out in his talons that looked much sharper—presenting it to the girl. “I will deny you no knowledge, if you ask it of me… but, I cannot deny how much it hurts. I do not know if I could survive your choice to stand beside me.”
Clementia clasped her hands over her mouth. She fought the tears gather in her eyes. They nearly *burned*. “No, White Hat—that’s not…”

“If I teach you—”

“Stop!” Clementia cried out, “You don’t understand!” White Hat was startled when the girl angrily kicked the crate closest to her. Things clattered across the sand, and she panted, the air much thinner in this dimension. She was kneeling down, tired among the broken weapons. White Hat lowered his broad sword. He was strutting forward when Clem called out again, “*Stop!*”

He halted, and the human pushed her hands into the sand. “I’m sorry…”

“No, you’re not,” she said, staring hard at the sand. She could feel something buried there…and perhaps, buried within her. There was recognition sparking in her dewy eyes.

“I truly am—”

“White Hat,” she decided, swiping her shoulder up to dry her eye without using her still buried hands, “Attack me.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

The Elder Being raised his sword, staring down the length of it. The shining gleam reflecting Clementia’s calm face. “You cannot withstand your third eye. You cannot withstand the view of your own soul. You certainly cannot do battle with me.”

“I’m asking you to trust me for a moment,” she cryptically said with a gulp

White Hat raised the sword, moving into the proper stance with a breath. He told her he could not deny her—and this apparently meant he could not deny her *anything*. His face was impassive, but
the glow in his eye was dim. She nodded to show she was ready. White Hat only hesitated a fraction of a second. Then, after that, his form flickered, and he was gone.

It was only the softest shift in the wind, the slightest sound of her hair being sheared, that made her instinctually spin around. The sand flew across the air, dazzling. A cloud of mist and then, a distinct clang of metal contacting on metal.

Clementia found herself sliding backwards from the blow, arms raised and braced. Her whole body shuddered as White Hat had leapt back, surprised by both the sound and the sudden movement from the human’s direction. His eye was wide, and Clem felt her heart beat out of her chest.

Holy shit, she had vaguely thought.

She rose to her feet as the sand settled back against the ground, taking calming breaths. She was holding a shield found deep in the forgotten sand. The leather straps had cracked, but still, she had twisted the ends around her forearm—which tingled from the reverb. Clementia held it at her side as she looked at the stunned White Hat. It took a second for him to shake it off, “Are you ok—?!”

“I’m human,” she said again, “I am not a soldier… and I don’t want to be. I want to be a Hero.”

White Hat looked down at his sword, then at Clem’s scratched shield.

“I kept saying I wanted to fight… but, that’s not really what I meant,” she admitted, loud and unabashed.

“What did you mean then?” the Elder Being asked, hand twitching on his weapon.

Clem raised her shield, “I’m not fighting against evil because it’s evil… That’s too big for me. I’m human, I’m selfish… I just want to protect the people I love. I want to defend them against any kind of pain. That’s what a Hero does, White Hat.”

“Then what are you—” White Hat had dropped his sword, and Clementia’s arm grew too tired to hold up her shield. She was smiling at him. It was literally disarming.
“I’m not gonna stand beside you like some kind of soldier,” she said with a laugh, “I’m gonna stand in front of you. I’ll defend you. And Slug. And Cero. And, maybe one day, even Dementia.”

White Hat was shocked into movement, running toward the girl, and crushing her to his armored chest. Clementia rocked with the motion, hugging him back. “Ohh… I definitely will not survive you if you ever—”

“I love you, too,” she cut off.

White Hat popped backwards, laughing in surprise. He covered his mouth, and Clem was beaming up at him. The noise of his laughter—like windchimes and ball lightening crackling through the air on a summer night—startled something out of another crate. Both the human and Elder Being jumped as some animal skittered down the dusty container.

A motley furred thing no bigger than a squirrel scampered away. It turned back with orange, watery eyes and a squished snout. It’s long ears flapped and a thin tail fluffed up, letting out a tiny squeak. Clementia cooed at it, and then a couple of other similar animals popped out of hiding places… and they left the arena, clearly frightened by the strange aliens that invaded their home.

White Hat just blinked at the dust trails left behind, unconsciously wondering, “There’s… life here.”

“Yeah… I guess some things aren’t so immutable after all,” Clementia hummed. He glanced back at the girl curiously, but she just cheekily shrugged before motioning over the opposite hill, “Let’s go home, White Hat.”

…

Slug was making dinner, trying not to sigh into the homemade pizza he was rolling out (made with ground cauliflower instead of regular bread stuff). He was spreading his homemade healthy tomato sauce, before sprinkling on the cheese and other toppings. Wrapped up in his own head, thinking about all the Villains he contacted—apparently no one was aware of an underground group of Anti-Heroes roaming about looking for vengeance. Still, a member of his old crew was kicking around in Puerto Rico, and had given him another contact to try in the US. Supposedly, there was something afoot that someone was looking into.

He’d just placed his healthy pizza in the oven (taking out Clementia’s more traditional one) when he heard the footsteps entering the kitchen. The click of paws alerted him to the bear sneaking up
behind. 0.5.0. dutifully grabbed Clem’s pizza and wobbled over to the table to set it down. It belabored a great sigh before bodily flopping onto the floor. It’d been put off all day as Clementia spent a majority of her time resting after her previous training day with White Hat.

“I’m sure she’s fine,” the doctor soothed the creature as he wandered over and started placing down napkins and glasses. The toaster dinged and the smell of garlic bread was wafting in the air. “Why don’t you be useful and grab the marina out of the fridge?”

That was about the time he noticed the doors to the kitchen swing open. Slug was placing the bread into a little bowl padded with cloth as White Hat walked in. He was in his usual attire and seemed less… dazed than yesterday. Slug was terrified he was going into heat again, especially given the circumstances, but White Hat bounced back quickly enough.

“And how are you?” he asked with a renewed cheer. Slug shoved the bread bowl into his stomach as answer and pointed at the table. Humming, the Elder Being gladly walked over to the table to place it in the middle. Slug brought out his healthy pizza, then wiped his brow from the heat of the oven.

“Did you want some of mine, or Clem’s?” he asked, immediately shutting off the oven. He was walking to the fridge, slightly glaring at the bear that had simply rolled over onto his side to paw at the chair his ward often sat in.

White Hat glanced over, owlishly asking, “Where is our Clementia?”

“Mostly been in her room, I think,” Slug said, “She’s graduated, and I didn’t give any chores after yesterday. Cero’s been bothering me all day about it.”

“I see…” White Hat hummed again. He sat primly in his spot and didn’t quite meet Slug’s eyes.

“How did yesterday go, anyways?” he inquired. It wasn’t subtle, but Slug was busy balancing a cold jar and hot pizza to really put too much thought into approaching the subject with tact. He’d set down his food and already opened the jar before realizing White Hat wasn’t answering him. “Uh, hello? White?”

“I…” the Elder Being muttered, tapping a talon on the table, “I don’t really want to say.”

Slug sighed, standing and crossing his arms. He was about to lay into his boss when the telltale bang
of the kitchen doors hitting the wall announced Clementia’s presence. “I SMELL BRAZILLIAN PIZZA!”

“Well, sorta,” Slug muttered, embarrassed by the chocolate spread he’d left at Clementia’s place at the table. It took him a second, but as Clem bounced toward her spot, Slug pointed at her freshly washed head. “Oh my god! Clementia! Your hair is so cute!”

Clem stuck out her tongue as she pulled at her newly cut bangs. The front of her hair was a light blue, wavy and wispy, while the back had been trimmed to just about her shoulder in curling layers. That part was bright pink. She still had her unicorn hoodie but was wearing a pair of overalls with stains from her hair dye.

“Yeah?”

“Of course!” Slug exclaimed. He went about fluffing up her bangs. She giggled as she pushed his purple-food-prep gloves away from her face. “Aw! It reminds me of cotton candy!”

Clementia tilted her head to both sides, letting the strands glow against the pale, sunlight mimicking fluorescents. “I guess it is like that, isn’t it? I just liked these colors the most right now. What about you?”

“Love ‘em,” Slug decided with a nod, taking off his gloves. He tossed them at the quiet White Hat, goggles quickly showing his narrowing expression. “What about you, White Hat?” His tone suggested there was only one possibly correct answer.

White Hat had that dazed look on his face again, “What made you change from rainbows?”

“Mmm,” she replied, tugging at a slice of pizza, “Well. I am human, ya know… sometimes, people change.” She kept her own tone light, conspiratorial. White Hat blinked at her. Slug gave a shrug and sat down beside the girl.

“I dunno about that,” he added. Clementia nudged him with an elbow as she took too large a bite. She went to dipping the chewed end into the chocolate spread.

Slug tsked at her as she muffled a, “Wha?” through a full mouth.
“Manners,” White Hat said distractedly as the doctor started cutting up his pizza and handing some over to the Elder Being.

“Listen to White Hat,” Slug said. Clem made a noise of disapproval. She went to just dumping a whole melty pile into the middle of her pizza. “Really, Clem… Talk about changing. You still eat like a starving ragamuffin.”

“Bu’ i’s sooooo guuuuuuuuuuuuuud!”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Slug said, rolling his eyes as she continued to devour the pizza like someone was going to snatch it away.

White Hat was chewing his own slice thoughtfully. He put down the food to say, “I do like your hair, Clementia dear…”

She paused briefly, swallowing a large chunk of chocolate. Then, she beamed, making Slug laugh at least, as the oily cheese coated her normally impeccable teeth. “T’anks,” she said, as spittle and bread pieces scattered across the table.

“Ah, c’mon!” the doctor sighed, bending over to wipe the table free from the wet crumbs, “You really don’t change….! I had to clean up after you two bums last night too!”

“You don’t have to,” White Hat said, and he stood for a second to help. Slug sighed and pushed his shoulder firmly until his boss was seated again. Clementia was still eating, while 0.5.0. nuzzled her dirty pant leg.

“Yes, I do,” he insisted, “Because people don’t really change. It just takes them a while to show their true selves.”

Clem watched him walk over to the sink and draw the water to wet a towel. She was scooping chocolate out of the container with her finger as she pointed him, “Oh yeah? Then what’s the deal with your true self?”

“Ehhh,” the doctor thought, mostly to himself as he wrung out the towel, “I’m just a Slug.”
“Pretty sure, you’re human,” Clementia teased. The man shrugged one shoulder as he returned to the table to clean up her mess. He motioned for her to raise her plate—and with sticky fingers she followed through.

“See? Still taking orders like a kid,” he teased right back. She stuck out her tongue (covered in saliva and masticated food) immaturity.

White Hat, meanwhile, had been smiling. He placed his chin in one hand as they bantered back and forth. Young and old in so many ways. With so many paths to take—too many. “Maybe you’re both right… humans are capable of change. Evolution, I believe is the term, but maybe sometimes they’re just determining what’s already dormant in their genes…”

“Way to keep the peace, White Hat,” Slug muttered. Clem was laughing as she placed her plate down. Slug managed to chuck the dirtied towel into the sink without looking. The girl clapped as Slug sat triumphant. He pointed a pizza slice at White Hat, “Also. You’re stupid. So, get dunked on.”

“I am afraid I don’t understand this reference.”

Clementia remembers laughing, smiling at two sitting across from each other. She remembers this moment vividly. As bright as the colors of White Hat’s other world, bubbled safe from some untold tragedy. Maybe the tragedy was White Hat—Maybe it was Black Hat. It’s an old memory, not quite crisp at the edges. Soft and fuzzy. Maybe like Cero. Maybe like Slug.

Right. Sluggy.

That’s why she was a Hero.

That’s why she trained with White Hat.

That’s why she felt—

Colorless and void, Clementia pops back into existence, her feet hitting the metal floor hard. She drops to one knee, and the padding of her interdimensional suit scuffs with a squeak. Her body
blooms in pain, her breath a weightless shudder as she dry heaves.

She rips off her helmet, tearing at her eyes with the meat of her hand. The tears burned, nearly—except they don’t. That was a long time ago, in a different plane.

“*My Lady!*” a voice wavers, breaks into her skull. If something cannot make a sound, it strangely has a tune like a whistling bass hum. Clementia looks up—her blue bangs having faded from the sweat pouring off her as she recovers. She had been snatched by *that phase shifting asshole* who had stolen Black Hat technology. He dropped her into the slight space between worlds in hopes of stopping her from completing her current rescue mission.

“*Estella!*” Clementia barks, legs wobbling as she falls onto her ass. The plasma shield on her belt clatters to the floor, and she grabs the handle to point the docile device at the young woman with floating golden hair and black, void eyes. “Do you have any idea how dangerous that was?! You can’t just—I told you to run!”

“But, *My Lady,*” the telepath says inside Clem’s brain, and though she cannot physical speak, her cheeks puff out as her lightly glowing skin flushes, “I did run.”

“Really? Then how are you here? *Your* mission was extraction! I was here to deal with—” Clementia took a deep breathe to calm her rattled nerves, hooking her shield back to her white belt. She blindly swept her hands out to the sides for her helmet. A machinal arm whizzed close to her side. She glanced up to see Cero, with his cybernetic replacement eye zooming in on her. She sighs as he hands her the helmet. The Fly Trap was fat and bobbing its leaves in the lower gravity serenely. “I… I’m not really mad at you.”

“I know, *My Lady,*” Estella answered. In her arms she was still cradling the cylindrical carrier to her flat chest. Clementia breathed a sigh of relief.

“You have to realize,” she began as her long-time companion aided her to a standing position, “I promised your grandparents that I’d look out for you. You were all they had left, you know.”

“I know…” came the whisply-sad voice inside her brain.

Clementia nodded, deciding not to think too much about Tommen and Star Princess, least the young girl go swimming around in her head. She wasn’t as mentally clear as she normally was… being trapped in that dimension between dimensions had clearly caused her brain to fry and rewire… *why*
she fell into that memory to just to be violently yanked out of it—

“Still! You should have known better than to come back for me. The most important thing is that
container,” Clementia said, wiping off the imaginary grime from her helmet with her flowy cape. The
antenna had been tweaked askew. She sighed, flicking at it sadly.

“That’s the thing, My Lady!” Estella suddenly boomed, anxiousness like a shattering crystal inside
Clementia’s old bones, “I didn’t come back for you! It was—”

“Hey Clementine,” a rough voice behind the rescue group cut off. Clementia startled, pink head
wiping around, though the length was severely shorter than it was in her memory. The ghost of it
haunted her, in a way, but in another, she felt lighter. Less held down.

The hulking figure of a security guard stepped out from the shadows, twirling a device in clawed
hands like a shotgun. The scaly, scarred face of Dementia nodded, smirk growing. The only thing
unchanged was her mismatched eyes. Clem felt her brows dance in surprise and sorrow.

“You… You saved me?”

“Ehhh, saved my boss’ tech, but—” the hybrid gave her a shrug, not quite looking at her face, “Well,
I figured I owed you one.”

“Dem…” Clementia sighed, but it was one of relief and fondness.

Dementia scratched at her borrowed armor, clearly in poor disguise, “Okay, maybe more than one…
maybe a few.”

“Thank you,” she said, and meant it with every fiber of her being. Dementia paused, but turned
around, her bloody hair swaying behind her. Clementia wanted to run after her, but Estella placed a
cautious hand onto her cloaked shoulder.

“My Lady, the mission…”

“Right,” Clementia mumbled, “Right but—just—”
“You guys got five minutes before our mutual enemy gets out of the pocket dimension I kicked his sorry ass into,” Dem said, and her maniacal grin stretched her modified face into an unbalanced semblance of excitement.

Clementia shook her head, echoing a memory, “You—You didn’t have to.”

“I told you before, didn’t I?” she said, and this was a threat, a promise, a love confession the Lady in White had heard many times, “No one comes between me and you. Only I get to kill you, Clementia.”

“I know…”

“Take the brat home. Finish your mission,” Dementia suggested. She started stalking down the hall. The red sirens of the space station began to bath the corridors like a poor horror movie, and panic was erupting several floors below them.

Clementia rattled the metal floorboards under her as she moved forward, cupping her hands over her mouth to raise her voice above the din, “You know it doesn’t have to be this way! We’re capable of change! Both of us!”

Dementia paused, looking over her shoulder. She glanced down at her claws, at the blood stains soaking into the keratin nail beds. She nodded once. “I’ve changed enough.”

“Dementia,” Clem sighed again, hands falling as the hybrid turned her back and continued to walk away.

“Until next time, my Hero.”

Dementia was gone, and Cero was pulling at Clem’s cape. Estella handed her mentor the capsule and Clementia held it close. The group, in unison, darted the opposite way to their escape.

Estella, of course, was young and curious. She didn’t need to waste any energy on words and asked with her unreal voice, “What was that about? What was so important about this mission? How come Black Hat’s lackey saved you like that? What’s in the container?”
Clementia was panting, and Cero picked her up, tossing her across some catwalks as they scrambled higher to their docked ship, hidden secretly on the shadowed side of the station. Estella floated up beside her, tossing things with telekinetic powers. As Clem collected her breath, her thoughts, she glanced down at the golden light darting about in the cylinder. She smiled at it.

“It’s a human soul…”

A plasma bullet hit the rafter above her, showering green sparks along the walkway. Clementia quickly powered up her shield and held it aloft in front of the group. Estella turned sharp, arms moving to mysteriously shove debris harshly in front of the clattering guards running at them.

Clem beamed at her, “You learn quick.”

“Heroes defend.”

“Yeah… Heroes defend,” she repeated, shield at the ready, “Now. Let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so much for reading.

I received a very wonderful comment last chapter, and would like to remind anyone that if anything is ever confusing in the fic, to please go ahead and leave me a comment and I will totally reply to it. I love sharing my headcannons and ideas--but I am terribly vague writer and this fic is a complicated mess of interwoven headcannons and world-building. So, go ahead and let me know if something is unclear. I will gladly explain.

So! Lot's of love to everyone! I hoped you enjoyed!

<3
Chapter Notes

I am so sorry this chapter came out so late!

This weekend has been long and FULL of all kinds of projects and chores and family drama!

And HOO BOY. Don't get me started on work.

Anyways—TRIGGER WARNINGS.

Mild Gore.

Panick Attacks.

Brief Frightening things.

Brief Sexual Implications?

Ahhhh, let's just say, things happen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Two: Let Us Move On to Catharsis

Dr. Slug was on the phone—again—but there was no one answering. There was ringing, so that meant the call was going through. The name was true and someone out there had it. This phone number existed. No dial-tone either, so the line wasn’t busy. The problem was, it just didn’t stop ringing. So, that had to mean this was a landline with no answering machine connected. Which wasn’t strange, really, because he was calling out of country, but… no answer meant no one was home. However, he had been calling this line repeatedly for the past two days.

Slug checked the time—12:37 PM.

Maybe he was calling too early or too late for this latest contact. He was pretty sure he was calling…Slug double checked the number again… Haiti? So no, definitely wasn’t a time difference issue. This issue was no one was picking up.

Slug sighed and hung up his cell phone. Cero rumbled on the floor. The scientist nudged the animal with his foot. “None of that, you big lug. Clementia said you couldn’t come to training, so you get to be my lackey for the day.”
The bear gave a groan and the little plant on its head snapped closed. Slug rolled his eyes and decided to go back to work. He spun his desk chair back around to pick up a screw driver. He went to work on the new specs for a time dilation device. The idea being that if an accident was unavoidable—say, like a car crash or too-quickly falling debris—a hero could toss it into the air and briefly (very briefly) slow down the vibrations of atoms, thus the movement of time seemingly stops. Then, *carefully* remove civilian bystanders from harm.

The bear gave another loud growl of displeasure.

“If you don’t stop moping, Cero,” the doctor warned, “I *will* use you as a test subject for this thing.”

The scientist shook the small device—no bigger than a baseball—in the air threateningly so that 0.5.0. could see it.

With a grumble, the beast heaved itself off the floor and stumbled forward. Now, he lay on the edge of Slug’s table, awaiting it’s sorry fate. The doctor sighed raggedly. He ended up petting the poor thing instead of lobbing the unfinished device at it.

“Why don’t you just go water the flowers around the Manor then?” Slug suggested, not looking at the bear as he focused on the inner mechanisms stoically. “Clem will be done soon. White Hat has a client meeting at one o’clock anyway.”

The bear made what Slug could only assume was a happy noise. It tottered off toward the elevator. So, the scientist continued his work in the lab, undisturbed.

…

He checked his watch again. 4:15 PM. Setting down the finished device, he let out a breath. He clunked his head on his desk, but, with triumph. Slug wheeled away from the table and hopped off to the floor. He was tucking one hand into his pants pocket as he hit the button for the lift. Truthfully, he should be done in the lab for the day.

He went to setting the alarm as he stepped into the elevator to travel up to the main floor. He exited in time to see White Hat striding down the corridor toward him. Tall and elegant as ever, and, unsurprisingly, beaming at him with genuine excitement.

“What’s with that look?” Slug questioned as he came into step with the Elder Being.
“Well, today was an excellent day!” he exclaimed, cheer evident. Slug shook his head, taking off his
dirtied gloves to sling over his labcoat. He was about to make dinner and that normally meant the
coat and gloves came off. “First, our girl has greatly improved her stamina, and mental fortitude! I’m
proud of her.”

Slug hummed in acknowledgement, pushing open the kitchen doors. White Hat continued to trail
after him, rambling on. The doctor half-listened, tired, but enjoying the melodious voice of his
employer. He went to washing his hands and looking for his apron. Without thinking, he gestured to
the stovetop, and White Hat dutifully turned on the electric burner farthest from the doctor searching
pans in the cupboard.

“Is ramen okay for tonight?” Slug asked.

White Hat nodded, “It’s strangely cold enough for it.”

“Right? The weather has been really weird lately…” Slug mused aloud. White Hat was leaning
against the opposite counter, watching as the man calmly walked to and fro as he gathered
ingredients. “Wanna crack the egg?”

“Yes!” he exclaimed, reaching over for an egg. He held it gently in the palm of his hand, waiting as
Slug was starting to lay noodles and other tasty things into the large pan. White Hat rocked on his
heels excitedly—but, of course, the egg crunched. Both of them paused, and, a yellow chick popped
out of the egg.

Slug blinked as the little chick tumbled around the Elder Being’s palm. He glanced up at the startled
White Hat. The human placed his hand on his cheek and asked, “You grabbed the organic egg from
the farmer’s market, didn’t you?”

“… maybe.”

“You brought my egg to life…” he mumbled, picking up the chick and setting it into the sink.

“In my defense, we had no idea it was fertilized,” White Hat began as he guilty started to dust off the
egg shell pieces from his hand.
Slug lowered his face to the rim of the sink and sighed, “I was gonna make myself some balut…”

White Hat tilted his head in curiosity. He reached for the bleached infertile eggs purchased at the grocery store instead. He cracked one into the pan and set the lid on top as the doctor poked at the little chicken with a spatula.

“Be lucky little chick, you would have been in my stomach in three weeks…”

“That sounds absolutely disgusting,” White Hat said, folding his arms on the counter as they looked at the little chicken together. Slug glanced up, goggles clearly displaying his minor irritation.

“You don’t get to judge me. It’s a delicacy,” he argued.

White Hat didn’t have a response, so he just shrugged. Slug sighed and stood up, just as Clementia wandered into the kitchen, yawning harshly. The doctor grabbed a clean utensil and lifted the lid to their ramen to stir the ingredients a little bit. The Elder Being was smiling as the girl took a seat at table, fluffing the new flowers the Manor received in the mail in the previous week.

These huge, anonymous “thank you” bouquets were strewn about in practically every room. They were a welcome splash of color in the otherwise subdued Manor pallet (chrome and white and off white and pale blue). The flowers were Marigolds and yellow carnations that breathed a tiny bit of sunshine into air. Especially given that the weather had turned gray suddenly. The wind was chill and picked up, blowing away leaves struggling on tree branches.

Clementia was pushing her pink hair behind her ear, her sigh causing the pollen to scatter on the table, “Cero! You said you’d taken care of the flowers for me.”

The bear made odd hand gestures that the girl interrupted with no problem. She put her hands on her hips, scrunching her nose, but otherwise didn’t argue. She just went to sweeping pollen away with a napkin and the bear plopped on the floor, snuffling as the particles were waving by on the air.

“Careful, Clem, I am cooking,” Slug said as a particularly sticky piece of yellow smudge adhered to the front of his goggles. White Hat smiled. As the doctor was glaring at the sheepish teen, White Hat reached over and rubbed at the lens—unhelpfully smearing the substances into a thin sheen on the entire surface. Slug roughly sighed.
Clementia turned around, hand over her eyes, “Don’t worry, I won’t peek.”

“Yeah,” Slug grumbled, taking off the goggles and then his mask, “It’s fine. Nothing you haven’t seen recently.”

“I did apologize, by the way,” White Hat added, as he glanced over at Clementia. She waited half a beat, before turning slightly to see the de-masked Slug picking up a chick out of the sink so that he could use the facet.

Clementia squealed in excitement and ran over, quickly snatching up the fluffy little thing.

“Don’t get attached,” Slug warned, turning the hot water on. He was rinsing the pollen off his goggles while Clem forgot about anything else beside the baby chicken in her palms. “Once it grows up, we’ll have it for dinner.”

“Aw! What?! No! It’s family now!”

“It’s food, is what is,” Slug said. He tapped the goggles against the sink before drying them.

Clem stuck out her tongue, “Too late! I already named him!”

“What’s the name?” White Hat unhelpfully asked. Slug punched the side of his arm in a silent reprimand, but the Being didn’t even wince, barely moved.

“Bartholomew!” she exclaimed, wiggling her fingers as the chick rolled around with weak little legs, “Or Barthy for short!”

Slug tsked, tugging on his goggles, but left the mask off—progress, everyone vaguely thought, but didn’t mention. Clementia was smiling widely at him as she nuzzled the chick with her face. White Hat tilted his head at the doctor. Slug ignored both of them to finish stirring the ramen.

“Whatever. You guys take care of it then,” he flippantly waved off.
Clementia shouted in victory and White Hat just smiled, leaning against the counter again.

It was an excellent day indeed.

...

Slug had the little, growing chick in a box on his lab desk. It was sitting under a heat lap, napping. Meanwhile, the doctor was flipping through printed read-outs from the Lt’s prosthetic arm, before sighing. He set up a video call with White Hat, who was busy in his own office. It only buzzed once, before the Elder Being’s face was immediately in the camera.

“Hey, results just in,” Slug said in way of greeting.

“Already?”

“Mm-hmm,” he continued, “Inconclusive.”

“What’s that mean?” White Hat nervously asked.

“Means the samples I’ve taken have been contaminated,” Slug said, leafing through papers, “Too much Eldritch Horror, I’m guessing…” White Hat did not respond so the scientist continued, holding up a sawed-off portion of sheet-metal and running a pencil along some scrubbed out numbers, “Also, interestingly enough for our Anti-Hero—this is stolen tech.”

White Hat sat back in his seat, frowning, “They call themselves Heroes and they steal?”

“Guess so. I think I found the source though,” he added in triumph, putting down the scrap of the prosthetic arm, then went to clicking open pages on the internet and mailing the screenshots to White Hat’s tablet, “It’s from a Canadian Institute of Robotics. A lot of experimental stuff goes down there. Mostly volunteer based, though. So, no detailed records of whose got what.”

White Hat’s talons clicked across the screen as he scrolled through the different images. He was shaking his head sadly. Slug took a moment to look at the little chick and rearrange the bedding before turning back to the computer screen. White Hat still looked slightly confused.
“So, did our soldier volunteer for this Institute, or did he take the arm from someone else?”

“I found some skin cells under the metal plating… two different samples,” Slug said.

White Hat sighed, resting his forehead in his hand, “I was hoping you wouldn’t say that.”

“DNA doesn’t lie, boss,” Slug said, “And I only had enough to cross reference that it wasn’t Dementia’s and wasn’t connected to any criminal or military database.”

“So, there is some poor human out there without an arm?”

Slug paused, then flipped over to the pages where he had retro-engineered a basic schematic for the robotic arm. “Maybe… it’s quite possibly a Caucasian male, aged approximately 40 years at the most, given the specs of the model and anthropological tables of human deviation…”

“Okay,” White Hat nodded, “We can work with that.”

“Well, I’ve been testing the oxidation rate on this type of metal—” Slug explained, “And this is probably a two-year old proto-type. So, the person it was stolen from probably doesn’t know it’s missing, or more than likely, had it recently replaced and gave it back to the shady Institute. And they definitely wouldn’t have advertised that their security has been comprised.”

“We can still find them, though,” White Hat said more than asked.

Slug gave him a shrug, “I checked hospital records, morgue records, and missing persons. I couldn’t find anyone matching the description… This Institute has serious firewalls. I’ve been trying to code a backdoor into their database and—”

White Hat blinked blankly at him. Slug sighed.

“It’ll take me a while to hack into their system. They have on-site servers and upped the digital security.”
“I see…” White Hat murmured, “So we have reached a dead-end?”

“Temporarily.”

The Elder Being flicked impatiently at a Marigold petal that fluttered across the screen. Slug moved his own tablet down his desk as he settled onto his forearms and gestured around his lab.

“Don’t worry, boss. We’ll find out who was connected to this arm before the Lt. Hopefully it’ll lead to another clue, and then we can put a stop to this Anti-Hero business,” he said. White Hat seemed dour and went back to prodding at the flowers on his desk. “Really, I mean it. Just put your faith in me for a quick second. I’ll break through eventually.”

White Hat smiled, sneaking a glance at the doctor’s hidden, calm face, “You know I have faith in you.”

“Good,” Slug said. The chick started peeping.

“Oh! Hello, little Bartholomew!”

“White Hat, please, I’m raising him as dinner.”

“Eventually!” the Elder Being mimicked, “But I know you’ll become attached soon enough!”

“You still owe me a fertilized egg. Maybe duck instead, so you don’t confuse our cooking eggs with my snack eggs…”

White Hat stuck out his thick blue tongue in disgust. Slug had to look away as his face heated up, remembering exactly how such an appendage felt on his body. He honestly tried not to… but sometimes, when it was just the two of them—

Slug’s phone buzzed from it’s spot of the counter. Unknown caller.
“Ah, I got a call,” he said, surprised and grateful, “And you’re gonna have a client meet you soon. So, I’ll email you the results and see you for dinner in a bit.”

“Of course, my dear doctor.”

Slug ignored him as he dismissed the video call and picked up the ringing phone.

“Uhhhh—” he said, uncertain at first who this could be, “Hello? Ola? Mochi Mochi? Hullo? Salut?”

No one responded. The receiver clicked. Slug sighed, mentally counting. Not on long enough to trace cell towers. He put his cell down before looking at the chick. Meanly, he poked it until it flopped onto it’s side. It chirped, whether agitated or just because it could, he was unsure.

…

Clementia was sniffling, picking at her nose irritated. Slug had to stop her several times as he was taking her temperature. She groaned through her teeth before wheezing lightly as he took out the thermometer.

“Hmm, 99.2,” he read out.

The girl, having been swaddled by the bear was now rolling around in her bed upset, “I’m dyinnnnng!”

“It’s only a few degrees higher than average,” Slug assured, “You’re probably fine.” The bear growled at him and started climbing onto the double-twin in hopes of cuddles. Slug tsked and tried shoving the thing down, “Ah! No! That being said—”

“Wait—am I really dying?!” she asked. Slug laughed lightly, shaking his head. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a tiny bottle.

“No, but I brought some fever reducers. Just take these and rest for the day,” he advised. She reached out a shaky hand and he dumped a couple of pills into her palm. Parts of her fingers looked red, and her wrist had a strange bump in it. “Hey…”
Clem was tossing the pills into her mouth, blinking up at him, “Mmm?”

“Did you get hurt in training?” he asked.

She shook her head no as she reached for a water bottle. 0.5.0. was uncapping it for her before she took a large swig. The doctor sat on her bed, taking her other wrist and checking for the same physical anomalies. Indeed, plain as day, there was a rash growing on her sensitive skin.

“Huh… no, wasn’t hurt. I dunno how those got there,” she said, staring down, almost as surprised as Slug.

“Well,” he said, thinking about the recent changes in the Manor residents lives, “Maybe you’re having a reaction to all the pollen in the Manor…?”

She shrugged, “I guess? It’s the only thing different…”

Slug let go of her hand and stood up, nodding to the bear across the other side of the bed at him. He headed for the door as the girl settled into bed. First thing’s first—he’d better sweep up and get rid of those flowers then. He decided he would come back later with some cream and allergy pills after the fever reducers were out of Clementia’s system. Just to be on the safe side.

…

15 flower pots and a couple of hours later meant that most of the Marigolds and carnations were now conglomerated in a secured corner of Slug’s lab. They were pretty, no doubt about it, but cleaning up after the pollen had been a bizarrely difficult chore. Slug had participated in several Día de los Muertos parades and festivities where Marigolds didn’t leave half the amount that Slug dumped into the Manor’s waste bins. It seemed quite possible that the carnations were the ones to blame—but they seemed sedately interspersed in the bouquets. It was almost obnoxious, these bright colors in his otherwise clean lab.

He hummed, not quite wanting to just toss all the plants in the garbage, or even relocate them to the gardens. If Clem was allergic to the pollen, it was best to just get rid of them. Still—something seemed off. He took a sample and was looking at the spores underneath his microscope. He pulled up reference photos… his frown deepening as he compared what he assumed was a typical specimen of the flora.
“That…” he said mostly to himself as the little oblong shafts shifted and moved in the watery solution, “… doesn’t seem right…”

Maybe this species of carnations and marigolds had been specially bred?

Just as he went back to analyzing the pollen, he heard the lift ding open. He glanced up to see Clementia stumble out the sliding doors and into the lab. It seemed as if she had been slouching against the cool metallic doors almost. She was holding her stomach, folded over, as she shakily walked closer. The doctor was immediately standing, knocking over his chair.

“Clementia?! What’s—”

“C-Can’t…” she tried to speak with a wheezier voice than she had earilier, “C-Can’t breathe…!”

Her eyes were wide, wet and scared, as she struggled to draw in a gasp of air. Slug ran up to her and pushed her back into the elevator. Stubbornly, she clung onto the sides and shook her head. “No, no. Clem, we’re putting you back to bed—”

“Can’t!”

“I know, I heard, but the pollen—”

“Pl-Please!” she said, grasping onto his lapels, practically dragging him to the floor as her legs suddenly gave out. Slug’s boots squeaked against the tiles as he fought to keep her upright. She was clawing at her own skin, where the rashes had spread exceedingly fast, sometimes catching his hands as the doctor was attempting to keep her from doing more damage to her body.

He glanced back at the flowers sitting innocently not too far from his work table.

“R-Right, just hang on!” he decided after a moment. He peeled her off and motioned toward his examination table as he sprinted off into another corner to grab supplies. Mostly, a medical exam kit he normally kept for seriously injured Heroes who asked for his physical service charges. Slug tossed a tarp over the flowers before rushing back to the girl as she doubled over the exam table.
“H-Hurts…” she was coughing into her hands, legs shaking as she managed to roll up onto the table. Slug was lowering the height when he heard the wet splat that followed her words. A relieved sigh left her as she settled onto her side. Immediately feeling a shiver run the length of his spine, the doctor grabbed Clem’s hand for the second time that day—and her wrist felt bloated, no, **clotted**, with something.

In the palm of her hand was a broken stem and dripping yellow petals. He stared in horror as Clem went to breathing only slightly better. “What the **fuck**…”

“I don’t… I don’t feel so good…”

…”

White Hat was in his office, rereading emails. It just… It just didn’t make sense to him. Why would a group of people fight for the side of good but use such… **barbaric** tactics? How could you call yourself a Hero when you used the same dirty tricks as Villains? It—it didn’t do anything to help lessen the suffering of the world. Wasn’t that the point of being a Hero? Alleviating pain?

What Hero sought vengeance like **this**?

White Hat put down the photos of scenes the good doctor identified as more than likely Anti-Hero work. Villains who didn’t quite die of natural causes—whose whole operations had been uprooted. If Anti-Heroes had existed for a while, they were suddenly becoming sloppy. Uncaring as to who figured out what was happening.

White Hat was startled when an alarm went off. The windows of his office suddenly sliding into lock-down mode when metal security shutters slammed closed. He whipped his head around, looking for intruders. His blue eye flared, immediately kicking into it’s extra-preceptory sense, but all he could see was two figures down in the lab, and a large blob in the kitchen—everyone under his employ accounted for.

He quickly moved toward his private monitor and flicked it on, scanning through the cameras outside. That was when Slug paged him, with his static voice called through the intercom, “We have a problem!”

“I noticed, what’s happened?” White Hat demanded.
Slug had taken a haggard breath, and it instantly set the Elder Being on edge, “I’m sorry, White Hat. My system caught it too late—we have a biohazard in the Manor.”

“A biohazard? What kind—”

A scream from Slug’s end cut off White Hat’s question. Slug’s intercom momentarily buzzed out, and White Hat went back to searching with the cameras. Down in the kitchen, 0.5.0. was writhing on the floor, foaming at the mouth. It’s pain was crystal clear in the black and white image. When he finally located the lab camera, Slug was slightly off screen, bodily holding Clementia to an exam table. He apparently found enough strength to restrain her to the table before sprinting back to the intercom closer to the lift.

“I’m pretty sure,” his panting voice answered after a buzz, “It came from those flowers we got in the mail—” his head swiveled up to the camera and nodded over to a tarp-covered square of space off in an unseen corner, “Clementia had been tending to them the most—if I had to guess, the pollen is contaminated or bred with some kind of pathogen that will grow anywhere.”

“Is she alright?”

“She’s not, White,” Slug gulped, “You need to get down to the lab immediately.”

“Oh my way now.”

White Hat stepped away and went to the door. It wouldn’t budge. Lock down procedures. Of course, being built by Dr. Slug, they wouldn’t open for anything. He slashed once, just to try. It was barely scratched. White Hat nodded, impressed, but choosing not to focus on it. Best course of action would be to light-travel downstairs.

He sighed, focusing his mind on the long stretch of hallway.

The air was charged with static electricity. It zapped and skipped along his skin enough to disrupt his thought process. Huffing, he swiped along his clothes—his gloves coming back coated in yellow dots. They stuck along his coat in barbs. “What…”
He quickly shucked his coat and tried again, eye flaring as he closed it. He jolted a few feet forward before his body slammed into the opposite hallway wall. Bouncing off, confused and a little more than annoyed, he backed away, rubbing at his stinging cheek. He looked around only to find he was just outside of his office doors. He didn’t light travel very far at all.

Looking closer, there were specs of pollen hanging in a thick network of growing microscopic growths. White Hat shuddered, slashing at them in anxiety. They fluttered down before re-growing along the plush carpet. He quickly raced down the hall to the stairs.

He had to reach Clementia. If this pollen was growing like this on the outside… what could it do if it managed its way inside a human body?

White Hat had barely reached the shut-off elevator when he heard a groan of metal come from the kitchen. He turned in time to see 0.5.0. barrel out of the double doors. It crashed into the opposite wall, crumbling the drywall and denting a support beam. The beast looked over at him with wild eyes, slobbering.

“Oh no…” the Elder Being said, “This can’t be good.”

The great bear rushed him.

…

Slug was breathing through his mask—probably the only saving grace he had. Being constructed with an air-filter system in his ever-growing scale of paranoid need to control unforeseen emergencies. However, he had not anticipated the young girl ever being caught up in a sneaky biological assault. Clementia was crying, legs twitching, as her hands jerked against the restraints enough to upset the whole table she was lying on. He tried to hush her, running his hands over her suddenly overheated forehead. She was sobbing, incoherent in her pain.

“Just a second, okay?” he was saying, “White Hat’ll be here soon.”

“N-No!”

Slug tried to keep his composure—but the sounds coming from upstairs were rattling his shot nerves. The Elder Being was taking too long and Clementia was starting to go glassy-eyed. Little vessels
were bursting along the edges—she was not getting enough oxygen. Her brain had to have been going haywire by now. Slug quickly walked over to his instrument drawer and began pulling things out. He dug out a machine from under the cabinet and settled it on the floor beside the bed.

“Okay, okay,” he was muttering to himself, in an attempt to remain level-headed.

“Don’t m-make meee…” Clem was saying, and blood was starting to spill out of the corners of her mouth. Slug brought out the flashlight from his coat pocket and peered inside. Something was butting against the back of her throat.

“Darling, darling,” Slug was saying as she thrashed her head to the side, “You need to stay calm. You have something inside your—”

“NO! NO! GET IT OUT!”

Slug grabbed both sides of her face as she screamed. He was near his wits end watching her sanity dissolve in her panic, “Baby girl, please, White Hat can—”

“DON’T LET HIM TOUCH ME!”

Slug startled as she dug her fingernails into the meat of his biceps, eyes too wide and bloodshot. She was unseeing, brine spilling in huge bubbles, streaked pink by blood. He let her carve out chunks of his skin as he tried to reassure her.

“It won’t hurt, I promise—”

“Daddy, please…” she was begging now. Something about it caused Slug to tense up, any hair left on his rising high into the air. She never called him that before. “I—I—” she tried between laboring breathes as she squirmed, restrained, on the table, “I’ll be good, please do—don’t hurt me—please don’t—”

Oh.

Slug disentangled himself from the girl quickly. He ripped off his mask and goggles as quick as he
could to buttress his forehead against hers. Trying to breathe through his own worried tears he told her, “No, no, no, no, no. It’s me. It’s not—”

She started wailing loudly, and Slug saw something shift beneath her skin. He shuddered and redirected her to look into his eyes. She whimpered, only somewhat seeing him, recognition barely there.

“C’mon, it’s okay. It’ll be okay. It’s not—You’re safe now.”

“Please. P-Please get him out, Sluggy.”

Slug’s useless hands curled around her face. He shook his head against hers as a fresh wave something roiled under her skin, just inside the ribcage. Sitting up, he pushed against the mass, inspecting it as she started to lose her voice after all the shrieking. Gathering his courage, he said, “He’s not here. I promise you he will never hurt you again. I took care of it.”

“H-Help…” Clementia croaked, and after coughing, something thorny scattered along her shirt.

Dr. Slug looked up at the ceiling. There was no more time. He couldn’t wait for White Hat.

He turned on the canister and placed the mask over Clementia’s face.

…

White Hat bodily threw Cero back into the kitchen, huffing and puffing. He dodged out of the way of another tackle. The claws of the monster shredding his left sleeve. His skin remained unmarred. It was unlike the creature to attack him.

And it was taking up too much time.

Dr. Slug had created the bear to be incredibly resilient. It was not tiring at all… the attacks were endless. As if the creature perceived White Hat as the threat.
“0.5.0.!” White Hat cried out, enlarging his talons and locking them against the purple beast’s swinging claws, “Enough of this—UMPH!”

White Hat was crushed into the floor as the rounded body smashed into him forcefully. The pollen caught along his fur stuck, dragging along White Hat’s cotton shirt. It dug deep into his otherworldly flesh. However, it wouldn’t be able to grow and sprout inside his body. It wasn’t made like a human’s, like the beast attempting to crush him. The pollen had disrupted light enough for him to be unable to travel quickly, but it couldn’t burrow into his body at all.

With all of his might, White Hat slammed a knee into the bear’s stomach. The whole of the beast shuddered, body elastic, as it bubbled up and crashed into the fluorescent lights of the kitchen. The glass and filament rained down. It sparked enough that the pollen shriveled at the electrified contact. Narrowing his eye once more, it fired to life, and White Hat quickly raked blue-tinted flames into the air with his claws.

A faint screaming from the air, and sick sizzling from the yellow pollen burned across the webbing. It floated down in charred, thin lines. Cero hacked, holding onto his stomach still wounded from the kick. White Hat was breathing harshly, reaching closer with his hand covered in wavering flames. Suddenly, the bear was on all fours, heaving out tumbleweeds of thorns and yellow petals. Mucus, blood, and bile sloshed along the tile floor.

0.5.0. collapsed backwards and White Hat caught him with ease.

“There we go…” he comforted lightly. The bear groaned at him. He lowered the creature to the floor. It shakily made gestures with it’s paws. “Yes, I know. We need to get down to the lab.”

It let out a sigh and nodded.

…

Slug’s ears were ringing, and his vision was wavering. He was elbow deep into Clem’s chest cavity, yanking at twirling branches and flower buds bursting between bones. Her lungs were minced meat, but he just kept ripping out the growing bushes. Once exposed to the air, they’d exploded, developing faster and more rapidly than his scalpel could handle.

“Slug!” White Hat’s voice cut through on the intercom. Slug couldn’t answer. He was busy, dammit. He had to find the root of the problem. “Disable the lockdown! I can’t get down with light travel!”
Slug wiped along his sweating brow, finding it hard to breathe. He was just panicking. He needed to calm himself. Clementia’s life depended on it. He took in a shuddering lungful of air.

“SLUG!”

A bang from above him.

He needed to focus. It was hard to think with the noise and perfume clogging his senses.

“The pollen—it’s not—we need to burn it out!”

The doctor stopped. He looked up—and the tarp was wiggling in his vision. “Burn…?”

He stepped away from the girl and walked, as if in a trance, toward his work desk. A film of something spread over the top of the little chick’s box. He barely spared it a glance as he grabbed a highly volatile chemical. The black and white picture of a flame warning him. He had matches in a drawer somewhere.

Before he realized it, he was already grasping the edge of the tarp.

It clung and stuck to the flowers, which oozed and wept the sticky pollen in globs of menacing fungal-like webs. He hummed as he tossed the chemical over the pots. It splashed down with a crash of breaking glass. He was looking at the tiny cardboard box in his bloodied gloves.

“Slug—We’ll get down there—just wait!”

The doctor nodded.

This is what he deserved, of course, he thought as he struck the match. It flickered and burned in his vision as he held it before his eyes. The black curls of smoke were entrancing—and he almost forgot what he was doing.
The destruction of the ceiling behind him barely registered.

He flicked the match into the plants.

It erupted into a mushroom fireball of beauty.

…

Cero finally just battered into the floor until he and White Hat fell through into underground lab. The Elder Being was horrified as the dust cleared.

Clementia’s body lie spasming on a table, luckily unconscious, and the thick pollen had coagulated into a perfect mycelial patchwork along the lab. White Hat rushed to her side, placing his hands onto and using his magical fire to burn out the swathes of flora bursting out. He was trying to quickly heal her when he caught sight of Dr. Slug walking toward a burst of flame in the middle of the lab.

“Cero!” he called out, and the purple creature leapt over debris, rushing for the doctor. A backdraft of fire had him rearing back and White Hat quickly glanced around. That’s when he noticed a small, round canister on the work table. “There! The device!”

The bear spotted it and nodded. It swiped a paw across the entire counter, spilling all the contents. The device bounced across the floor, rolling to a stop just behind the doctor. It exploded in a soundwave—creating a halo effect—bursting all movement into a pallid, broken rainbow.

Just as sudden as the fire had been, the slow crawling of time came as a shock. White Hat managed to extract his hands from Clem, bursting forward with a renewed speed to bypass the clumsy bear. He dodged rolling flames, flicking slow, but certain around the edge of the lab. He kicked at cloying fungal fingers, ignoring the crunching glass beneath his elegant shoes. His hands came up to circle Slug’s face, the extra sight of his eye dancing around—

Just as he feared. The doctor was infected too.

He had to get Slug out of the blast zone of the fire, as well as the device’s dilation radius. Going to pick up the man, he found the arrangement of atoms didn’t respond. They were holding firm, and White Hat realized, with some slight panic, that if he tried to move the human, it might completely disrupt and disjoint his physical form.
Slug was stuck.

He looked around the fire moving ever closer to the man… and the man who would soon be moving toward the fire.

Thinking quickly, he bubbled them in a soft teal colored energy. This might shield them enough—and there was a ripple as the device’s blast subsided enough to catch up with time. Slug’s body collide with White Hat’s solid one… the action startling both of them. He wrapped his arms around his doctor and held on.

The human was choking in his chest, and he squeezed tightly, sending out the healing power Slug needed in soothing waves. Slug was pushing against his chest, shaking his mask-less head. “I—I saw th-them!” he insisted through his coughs.

“Who?!” White Hat demanded. He grabbed the man’s face and forced him to make eye contact. He was dazed, lids half-drawn and pupils too wide.

“They’re st—still alive! I need to—”

“You’re hallucinating,” White Hat said, cutting through the babble urgently, “It’s the pollen. We have to get out of the lab—”

“But I can hear them,” Slug said, trembling hands rising to cup against his ears futile.

“Slug, we—"

Slug seemed to startle, shaking his head as he dropped to the floor. White Hat bent with him, placing his own talons over the man’s ears to help speed his magical healing process, “Eu sinto muito! Por favor! Pare!”

“Slug!” White Hat shouted, and the man jumped, looking up with clearer eyes, “It’s not… They aren’t there. They’re not here anymore…”
“I—I know that…” he whispered, hands curled as he slowly lowered them. White Hat kept cupping his face. He didn’t want him to see the raging inferno all around the pair. White Hat breathed a sigh of relief as the human continued to stare at him, lungs working better with each passing second.

“I’m right here.”

“I know…”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter, I referred to as Reverse Hanahaki when describing it to my friend.

The flowers make you seen the things you fear the most. So. There ya go, in case you were wondering.

Balut--by the way--is a delicacy where one eats a fertilized duck or chicken egg that's been left to age for several weeks (sometimes buried and sometimes in alcohol, I think?).

Also, I am very sorry that I don't write down the translations for Slug--he speaks several languages, and I mostly use Google translate. In this chapter he spoke greetings in a couple of different languages that I sort of happen to just know in general. At the end, he is crying out Portuguese because this is what he would be speaking with his family... so, feel free to reverse google translate the phrase (if you don't speak the language). Because, I am very sorry, but I am terribly vague and like to leave things messy and mysterious.

BUT, as always, thank you so much for reading. I hope you enjoyed.

If anything seems amiss or if you want some more information because I just am that vague and terrible--please, feel free to leave a comment. I will happily overshare!

Lots of love!!

<3
Let Us Discuss the Aftermath

Chapter Notes

I don't know what to say about this chapter?

Mostly feels.

And mostly, I believe wholeheartedly in communication.

Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Three: Let Us Discuss the Aftermath

Slug stood by the air-lift that was taking Clem to New York. 0.5.0. was growling at him and made Slug step away as the Hero in the helicopter told him she would be fine. They would take her straight to Tommen’s new compound and make sure she recuperated there. The wind from the whirling blades buttressed his thick fleece blanket against his face.

He had to look away, watching vaguely, as White Hat was directing Heroes who had come to the Manor’s aid immediately. The security system sent out warnings to all Heroes in their database as a means of precaution should the White Hat Manor ever go into Lock-Down Mode. Which, honestly, had never happened until tonight.

Mostly, Tommen’s new group rang to action—sending in some high tech and military grade response units. The four occupants of White Hat Manor had barely made it out of the door before the chopper landed and another team of Heroes were running up the steps. When it was clear there was both a fire and hazardous pollen in the area, they coordinated off the entire neighborhood. Several non-powered Heroes were going door-to-door to warn people to stay in their homes, as well as contact the county officials to set up road-blocks.

Slug was wrapped in a blanket by some healer-type, before all attention focused on the unconscious girl in the Cero’s arms. White Hat was fielding questions as Slug stood dumbly among the hub-bub growing around him. What shocked him most was how quickly his own creation refused to let him help to inspect Clem.

Not that he blamed the creature.
As fire-fighters were jogging in and out of the Manor (and someone else was creating a thin membranous curtain that stopped the spread of whatever the flowers had been created to secrete from spreading into the neighborhood) Slug found himself perched by the white gates, far from the flickering flames. He watched strangers take his girl away from him and sort of stopped responding as the Heroes rushed about asking him questions.

He hid his face in his blanket, and stared at the ground for who knows how long.

At some point in time, he heard Heavy Hitter (private responder, not associated with Tommen’s group) tell White Hat that his construction company would come as soon as they were given the all clear for containments. The Elder Being was tied up, talking to each of the responders as they came by to report to him about the on-goings of clean-up and investigation.

The whole event lasted well into the morning, and eventually, the membrane came down. Other scientist-based and tech Heroes were taking samples. Someone handed White Hat the box with the chick in it, asked him what they should do with it—the thing now a charred mass of bubbling flowers and wretched cheeps.

“Put it out of it’s misery,” Slug remembers saying, and the din of noises hushed, though he didn’t look up to confirm anyone was listening. He was staring into the muddy, ashen ground, not quite begging, “Please…”

White Hat murmured something, and then whoever was brave enough to carry it out the lab, left. Slug closed his eyes, back aching as he pressed against the cold, white gates.

No one bothered him for a while after that.

The sun rose to a peak in the sky, and he didn’t move. White Hat’s shoes entered his vision. The Elder Being didn’t speak for a second.

“What?”

“If you need to go to—”

“You healed her?” Slug asked, flakes of blood rubbing off as he shifted the blanket over his face. White Hat gave an affirmative sigh. The doctor tilted his head away from the pristine shoes lingering
in his vision, “Then it’s fine.”

“Are you fine?”

Slug paused, the flicker of something moving past the white gate coming into view, “I’ll survive.”

“But—” White Hat was cut off as another pair of Heroes entered the calamity and bustle of the Manor’s destroyed acre. One was small child, pulling on the hand of his guardian as they stumbled into scene. The child was insistent—black hair in a bowl cut, with a classic Japanese school uniform on—while the adult was certainly fair-skinned and ethnically ambiguous.

The child was making motions and pointing at White Hat and Slug. The adult, clearly put upon, nodded and allowed the hand tugging him to move them toward the flabbergasted pair at the gates.

“Uh, hello?” White Hat greeted as the child stopped in front of Slug and the adult in front of him.

“Yes, hello. Sorry to bother you,” the adult said. He held out a business card, which White Hat took in, mirroring the formal gesture of the culture, “We had an appointment—but…” the man looked around. White Hat gave him a small smile.

Slug was looking down at the kid, as recognition struck, “Oh, right. Psy-Kid.”

“Er, yes, that would be his American translation,” the adult answered. The child stared blankly up at Slug. The doctor pulled his blanket tighter around his face. White Hat nodded.

“You’re new,” White Hat said, “And I assume you’re his mentor?”

The adult shrugged, “Ryo Cannova. Mixed—if you were wondering. Never been in the Hero scene. I’m just… uh, it’s hard to explain.”

Slug barely turned to White Hat, briefing him quietly, as White Hat was rarely aware of who he was meeting until the morning of, “He moved back to Japan after his father died. Psy-Kid is his younger half-brother. They inherited their mother’s gift for speaking with the dead—uh, it’s kinda like being color-blind. His brother shows signs of significant power and wants to train as a Hero. Ryo came for
advice and… well, yeah. They’re your two o’clock.”

“Oh… well, now isn’t the best—” White Hat began. Ryo held up his hands, understanding.

“Yes, I know. We saw on the news, but, uh… Mobu was insistent.”

“I see, but I am still—”

Mobu—as the child was apparently named—held up a folded paper. Slug startled when he realized what it was. He snatched it out of the child’s hands.

“Where’d you—?!”

“Mobu!” his brother exclaimed, reaching forward but then the young boy touched Slug’s bloodied gloves to calm him. Instantly, a wave of warmth and sea-breeze hit the doctor. He recognized it vaguely. Home. He fell to his knees after the powerful sensation left him. Ryo was instantly bowing and reaching for his brother’s hands to push away, “You can’t just do that un-announced—”

“They wanted me to give it back to you,” Mobu muttered, looking Slug dead in his surprised eyes, “They brought it to me. To give it back.”

“What—”

“Mobu! Please, that’s really—” Ryo was admonishing, looking put out. Like the child often overstepped his boundaries. Which he probably did. He might not have understood such a deep and piercing concept of loss… yet. It would take time to temper.

“No!” Slug near shouted in panic, pushing the older brother’s hands away as the child stood immobile in front of them, “It’s fine! They—They talked to you? Did you see them?”

The child nodded, eyes blinking soft, lashes long. The things he may have seen… “They were glowing. Like warm sunshine on beach sand. Pretty. Most of the time, when people die like that— but you must love them a lot. It keeps them safe.”
Slug was looking at him with wide eyes. Ryo sighed and looked up helplessly at White Hat—who was stock still and seemingly dazed by this small child’s brazenness.

“I—I’m sorry. He woke up this morning and had the photo sitting opposite his breakfast cereal,” he explained, waving his hands uselessly in the air, “Sometimes, uh, the spirits… they’ll move things out one spot in this dimension and place it somewhere else for safe-keeping. Mobu really only talks to spirits, or about them… So he insisted they’d wanted this returned to you.”

“Did—Did you see them?” Slug glanced up briefly.

Ryo shook his head negatively after a sad second, “I’m sorry. They went back to rest after Mobu saw them, I guess.”

“Rest?” White Hat had said, voice a rasp in the warm air.

Mobu nodded at him, then tapped the photo. “He needs it.”

“What? Why?” Slug asked, pressing it to his chest.

The child shrugged. Both White Hat and the doctor turned to the older brother. Ryo gave a confused shrug, saying, “Sometimes the dead are attached to certain things—and sometimes the living are. All I know is Mobu wouldn’t just let me mail it. It was important that Lama knows about—oh, what is it…? Uh—”

“Moths,” the child said, “Moths are attracted to flames.”

“Lama?” White Hat said, tilting his head.

Slug—Portuguese.

The doctor looked at them with even wider eyes.
The child was silent, and Ryo reached out his hand. The little hand went back into his palm. “Good job, I guess. But we have to work on your timing.”

The child sent him a look, and the adult rolled his eyes.

“I know, important.”

“Wait,” White Hat said as Slug seemed to slip into a comatose state, staring at the photo of his lost wife and child, “You said they are safe?”

Ryo, who was collecting his brother and dusting off the child, gave a nod. “Yes. Make no mistake, their spirits don’t linger in this realm. They have no need to. It’s clear they were well-loved and felt business was not unfinished. It’s strange, given the tragedy of their demise but—”

“They were murdered—” Slug hissed, “You can’t just walk up to me and say that.”

Mobu looked up at his brother, squeezing the man’s hand. With a sigh, he gave another nod. “I’m sorry for your loss, doctor. But spirits rarely lie. Their souls are at peace. It’s yours that needs to be cleansed.”

Slug tensed, but said nothing. White Hat looked at him, expression unreadable.

“My younger brother is sure you’ll understand one day…”

“I think it’s best you two be on your way home,” the Elder Being said. Mobu looked at him, unafraid. He tapped at his little ribcage in a strange communicative sign language while Ryo shivered at the hollowed words. He bowed to White Hat, shaking the little hand in his to urge Mobu to do the same. Stubbornly, the child remained upright.

“Miss Hanna warned you,” the child whispered when Ryo straightened, “Make your decision, White Hat. Her spirit is much disappointed.”

White Hat glared, impassive as the brothers left—one mortified, the other justified. Slug breathed heavy, staring up at his boss, and then down at his photo.
Nothing made sense anymore.

...  

It was growing closer to sundown by the time Heavy Hitter—a dark skinned man with no hair, but wonderful goatee—returned to White Hat with the all clear from the clean-up crew. He was handing the Elder Being a burner phone, explaining, “My team will come back at 6AM sharp and we’ll start reconstruction.”

“Ah, thank you. What will I owe you?”

“No, no. Free. Pro-bono, White Hat,” the man explained, shifting his feet nervously, “We all need you. You need your home. But... Please, take your time decompressing from this attack, alright? I mean, poor Clem—and your doctor. I can’t even imagine—”

“Ah, White Hat,” another team-member dealing with the plant contamination interrupted. Heavy Hitter gave the person a nod and tapped at the phone.

“Right. I’ll call you guys in the morning, in case you wanna supervise or anything.”

White Hat thanked him as the burly man turned away and walked back to the cleaning crew he was managing. Then, he faced the other human—fully sheathed in a hazmat suit. The Elder Being looked at the man, waiting.

“Uh, right. I—” clearly someone new to dealing with otherworldly entities as this particularly person was blushing and gesturing ridiculous behind him to shower curtains newly installed near the exit gate, “Since your gate has made a physical quarantine, everyone leaving the area is going to have to take a chemical shower—Uh, I just wanted to warn you. Mr. De Loin has already paid us over time so we’re just gonna—”

“Is it me, or are you missing a point in your speech?” White Hat asked, glancing over at the doctor still uneasy beside the gates. He was looking anxiously at the shower heads.

The human blanched, gulping, “As a precaution, we recommend a shower. We’ll provide clothes
and incinerate the ones you have on currently. Uh, so... whenever you're ready to leave. That's what you'll... have... to... do..." The words faded with an awkward choking noise.

“I see,” White Hat murmured. He glanced down at his attire and sighed. Any signs of contagions had been melted by the heat of the fire earlier... but, he did appreciate the thoroughness of Tommen’s subordinates that rushed to help. He sighed, walking over to Slug, who was leaning against a pale bar, folding and re-folding his photo over in his fingers.

“Hey…” Slug murmured, not quite looking at him, still eying those showers.

“I have been informed—”

“Mm, I know. It’s a standard procedure in the event of bio- and chem-warfare,” he said. Then, rubbed the bridge of his nose, “It’s a chemical shower. They’ll probably scrub with rough-bristle brushes so…”

“We can wait,” White Hat said.

Slug shook his head, “No... let’s go. Tom called, he set us up in a hotel already. I have a taxi on speed-dial.”

White Hat paused, then decided with a nod of his head. He walked straight into the group of humans and began stripping. As predicted, it caused a bit of an uproar and people were scrambling to grab what they needed—and some were flabbergasted by the physique of an Elder Being.

Not that White Hat was vain. He was merely aware of how different, but for lack of a better word, perfect his body was. Muscular and smooth. Lean and mighty. Hairless, elegant. Tall. He certainly wasn’t from Earth. While several humans were focused on him and directing him—trying not to stare at the distinctly smooth, but bulbus space where genitals normally resided—White Hat watched out of the corner of his eye as Slug shook his head.

The doctor had managed to discretely undress and enter a stall, turning on the shower until a nearby attendant snapped to, and distractedly helped the scarred man wash off any lingering pollen spores. Granted, it was an oddly dilute experience for White Hat as other humans lingered both gazes and hands on him—and indeed the coarse bristles were scouring his body intently. At some point, he remembered to take off his soggy eye bandage. He kept one hand pressed against the empty space... just in case.
When he was allowed to step out of the shower, dripping, Slug was already clothed (dark gray sweats and long-sleeved cotton shirt with Tommen’s new logo emblazoned on the breast), and had a clean, white towel draped over his face. White Hat sighed in relief, accepting his own handful of clothes to slip on. He swiped off his top hat, and someone else handed him a tight-beanie he placed on, as well as a string-tied eye patch.

“L-Looking good, sir,” a very brave human commented. White Hat gave a subtle bow to the person before walking over to his doctor who was already waiting by the curb-side.

He had barely placed his hand on Slug’s lower back before the man scoffed, “Didn’t take you for an exhibitionist…”

“Only when it’s for you,” White Hat said, earnest. The taxi pulled up just as Slug peered up through his towel, frowning.

“No, thank you. I prefer to be naked behind closed doors.”

“Duly noted, doctor.”

Slug ignored him, climbing slow into the cab. White Hat followed, settling as Slug read out the directions to the hotel Tommen booked them in. Not that they needed his connections—but the gesture was greatly appreciated.

The building, of course, was city-center and clearly the tallest establishment. Ornate and gilded, with red carpeting even. A doorman and several bellhops. White Hat and Slug had barely made it to the front desk to check in when they were already being escorted to a presidential suite. The doctor stood with folded arms, not particularly enjoying the sights as they rode in a glass elevator to the highest point, a whole wing dedicated to only them. The manager of the hotel was practically genuflecting as he let them into the suite—holding out menus and explaining the various amenities.

“Thank you,” White Hat said, pushing the man out of the door, “We will certainly look through this later.”

He shut the door on the noisy human, spinning around to rest his back against the gleaming oak wood. The manager was still rambling, and White Hat purposefully strode away, walking over to the doctor now gazing down at the coffee table in the middle of their suite. It held a gift basket of food,
treats, wine, and a card.

The man didn’t reach for anything. His fingers were twitching along the edge of his clean towel. The cracks in his skin, ugly and bold against the white linen. White Hat took a breath, moving into his space. He untangled the aching fingers from the fabric and let towel fall around the man’s shoulders.

“You’re in pain…”

“Yeah… chemical baths don’t…” he started, looking at White Hat, and then flexing his hand, “They aggravate my burns…”

White Hat moved his own talons along the hands, feeding the damaged tissue with his own healing aura. Slug closed his eyes for a second, resting his forehead against White Hat’s shoulder. The Elder Being didn’t let go. Just held him for a few moments longer.

They let the dark descend.

It was the only thing left to do.

...

When Slug woke up in the morning, in that very big, very plush bed of the suite… but White Hat wasn’t there. Not that the doctor particularly cared. He stretched out in the sheets, before staring at his hands—still patchy, but less red—and definitely not as agonized. They flopped beside his head and he stared up at the canopy top.

He only knew it was morning because the soft sounds of an alarm clock tuned to some classical station. The noise of flutes and violins was wafting in from the closed canopy curtains. He peeked out, seeing a small white note folded next to the clock. He squinted at the curling script of White Hat —

*Overseeing construction at the Manor. Be back shortly. Please rest.*

“Yeah… okay…” Slug said aloud, unnecessarily.
He turned on his side to the fetal position, now holding White Hat’s note in one hand, and the photo of his deceased family in the other. Not for the first time… he wondered if everything was all his fault.

If only he was a better man…

…

White Hat was stepping into the wreckage, looking at points and structural columns as Heavy Hitter was tapping at for attention. The Elder Being happened to be in jeans and a shirt with a safety vest on—the reflective tape blue—as well as a pale hard hat. The construction workers nodded at him as they passed by. Heavy Hitter, meanwhile, shooed people for slacking off, shaking his hairless head. He wasn’t in his Hero suit—modeled after a ball-player apparently. Though, White Hat himself wasn’t too keen on sports enough to distinguish one type of uniform from the next.

“—we’re actually pretty luck the damage was minimal,” the human was saying. He leaned slightly against a beam to test its weight. The man was a solid 6’10” and one of the few humans who could stand well above White Hat. “Structurally, you’re sound. We’ll fix up the fire-damage, and I got Tommen’s contact info from the clean-up crew. He’ll send a decorator if ya want.”

“I have no way to thank you all,” White Hat found himself saying, glancing around at all the humans moving debris, affixing dry wall, and others sweeping up or cutting into support systems to minimize damage.

Heavy Hitter was shaking his head, “Really, no big thang, my man. You know you got us in your corner.”

Graciously, White Hat was nodding. Heavy Hitter went to sweeping his arm outside to the back gardens. A couple of humans were sitting among squeaky benches, eating out of bags or metal boxes. Heavy Hitter waved to some, and a one or two rose and continued back into the Manor. He gestured to the gazebo farther out so they could sit in the shade from the rising sun.

White Hat sat down in a spot opposite from Heavy Hitter as the man stayed standing, rapping a knuckle against the wood. “Had this for about six years, huh?”

“Clementia’s idea. It used to be bare for while… she wanted some color,” he needlessly explained.
Heavy Hitter frowned, eyes falling from the sturdy woodwork.

“I’m so sorry, White Hat… any news about her condition?” he asked quietly. White Hat was looking at a pink-stained rose, sadly shaking his head. The man gave a heavy sigh, “What about your Dr. Slug?”

The fact that the man had called Slug his created curls of warmth where normally it was cold and void inside him. White Hat unconsciously pressed his hand over his heart, humming at the feeling, answering, “As well as can be expected.”

“I—uh—I got a look at his face, and, well—” Heavy Hitter edged, scratching the back of his neck nervously. White Hat glanced up at him, blue eye narrowed. The man shook his head, waving calloused hands in the air supplicating. “I just mean… I was worried he’d been hurt or something. No offense or anything.”

“Why would offense be taken? He was burned long before,” White Hat explained, stilted. He didn’t particularly like telling other’s stories to uninitiated parties. Still, Heavy Hitter was normally a man of good standing, good conscious… if a bit over-powered physically.

There was a shrug in response, “Sorry. I was worried… I don’t always think straight when that happens.”

“None of us do,” White Hat said, voice tinged almost in apology. But, not quite.

“Well, I’m glad to know he’s a’ight,” Heavy Hitter paused, then continued with a nearly out of place, “Previous injuries aside.”

The Elder Being looked at the other human, tilting his head. Heavy Hitter took a few breaths and walked over to sit beside White Hat. He grabbed his feet and moved them to sit cross-legged on the bench—a risky move given how beefy the man was. Still, there was a calmness and assurance in the action. White Hat inspected him for a minute, thinking aloud, “I had no idea his safety mattered to you.”

“Of course, man,” Heavy Hitter insisted.

White Hat found himself crossing his arms and leaning back, letting his posture ask the questions for
him. The human stilled, probably sensing the growing agitation from the Elder Being. Heavy Hitter placed his hands on his knees, cracking his neck, but not aggressively. He was clearly working diligently to rebuild the Manor in a quick time-frame.

“I—Uh—Over the years I’ve had a lot of interactions with Dr. Slug,” he explained. White Hat was frowning openly, and the human rocked to the side, moving his hands up and down his thighs in nervousness, “All Heroes do. We all gotta go through him to get to you.”

“Yes, I know,” White Hat said, not exactly snapping, but not sure how much he enjoyed someone else telling him how the good doctor worked for him.

“Ya know, before Dr. Slug, people didn’t like coming here and—” Heavy Hitter abruptly cut himself off. He took another deep breath, holding it for five counts, pausing, and then released it in a steady stream.

White Hat blinked, watching the tension leave the human. “You didn’t start coming to me until the doctor was under my employment.”

“Yeah…” Heavy Hitter remembered, eyes far away, “I mean… look at us, White Hat.”

White Hat paused, glancing between himself and the human. He frowned even further, confused. With a sigh, the man sat back, relaxing onto his hands behind him. He sent a White Hat a forgiving smile.

“I don’t exactly… fit in… ya know? With the other Hero-types,” he said.

“But, of course you do! GiGi has immense physical strength—though she does have flight. And, you’re also in the same category as—”

“White Hat, White Hat,” the man interrupted, pointing between the two of them, “You’re not human so you don’t understand. You don’t get the social disparity about… ya know… folk like me.”

White Hat was blinking, before whispering, “Oh…”
“I mean, I didn’t think you were bad,” he said, unhurried and unperturbed, but nonetheless tired, “I just always sort of… I didn’t come from the best background. People like me—we’re not inherently seen as Good Guys, ya know? And when my powers developed… man, I was angry. I was another stereotype. I hated that, ya know?”

White Hat nodded, not quite knowing what to say.

“And then, BAM!” he said joyously, loud. White Hat nearly jumped. Heavy Hitter managed a chuckle, and White Hat followed suit. The human took a breath again. “Slug was in the picture. And, man, let me tell you. I heard rumors and was like—wha? A Villain in that pristine White Manor? Nah, man, nah. Not real, not true.”

“But it was,” White Hat responded, sitting less rigidly, copying Heavy Hitter’s own stance. It was quite relaxing. It opened him up in a weird way.

“And it still is,” Heavy Hitter reminded him.

White Hat gave a shrug. His thoughts on Slug’s Villainy were best left for another day.

Heavy Hitter took in a breath and looked up, past the slanted roofbeams, and into fluffy clouds drifting by. “It was… honestly, I was ready to crucify you. I was just, shiiit, Imma go over there and beat that white ass for harboring a Villain!” The human was energetic and clearly willing to laugh at himself. White Hat, also amused, but probably for different reasons, just nodded. It was understandable. A lot of Heroes in those early days came by with the same thought. “But… ya know, I met him and was just… confused, mostly.”

“He is confusing,” White Hat agreed. Heavy Hitter paused to say more here.

“Yeah, but…” the man shifted, setting his feet back to the floor. White Hat watched curiously. The human sighed, “I mean… he knew. He understood me… before I even did.”

White Hat waited patiently as the man gathered his thoughts.

“He took one look at my paperwork, my documents, at my emails… and he just… he knew,” Heavy Hitter emphasized. White Hat felt like he was missing a piece of crucial human social disparity again. He remained silent. He could always ask Slug later. “I came outta that first meeting so mad, so upset
that I couldn’t fault you for anything and—he was walking me out to the gate. Stopping me from lighting a cigarette—told me there were other options.”

“Huh?” White Hat asked, super lost now.

“And I was just, like thinking, Ah-ha! I knew it! He’s gonna run a drug ring out of the basement or some shit, right? But no…” Heavy Hitter laughed. White Hat watched as the man fumbled in his pocket with something as he continued his story, “Dr. Slug told me, no lie, Yoga can alleviate depression and anxiety. You should give it a try. Don’t let the world define you, kid.”

White Hat stared as the man scrolled his thick finger along a smart phone, photos of Heavy Hitter and a slimmer Indian-related man were posing in various stances. Then, taking selfies, and eventually, the slim man was lounging on a well-loved couch scratching a fat orange tabby on the top of its head. “Who—”

“That’s Kam,” Heavy Hitter said soft, nearly choking up. White Hat looked over at the large man, who was just smiling. “I found him, ya know. Gave Dr. Slug’s advice a shot… and God, let me tell you, he was a whole ‘nother thing I had to fight for, you know?”

White Hat noticed a shining gold band hanging from his thick neck on a durable chain.

“It’s dumb, I know… but I sometimes thank the doc in my emails more than once. I’m just so, so grateful. If he wasn’t such a little shit that first time—” Heavy Hitter let out another laugh. He put his phone down and took a cleansing breath.

“I see,” White Hat murmured. He pat the man’s shoulder.

“Accidentally or not,” Heavy Hitter said seriously, “I owe you guys. Our meeting helped me find a home. I can return the favor at least once.”

“Thank you, my friend,” White Hat said, and he meant it. The man nodded, moving to stand. White Hat tried to untangle his legs to follow, but they felt slightly numb. Heavy Hitter was laughing at him again, gesturing for the Elder Being to follow in a cheeky manner.

“Yoga isn’t for the faint of heart, boss man!”
“So, I’ve learned—” White Hat started to say before he tumbled onto his face. Heavy Hitter winced and, using light travel, White Hat moved behind him and gave a cough. His legs felt better already as he started walking.

“That’s cheating,” the human informed him with a bit of fondness. White Hat just beamed at him. “Right. Well, if we go back to the kitchen, I’ll have a rough estimate for when we should be finished.”

Slug rolled out of bed, eventually. He went down to the lobby—which had a fucking gift shop and café built into the plans for the adjoining spaces of the hotel. This was lucky, really, because the doctor didn’t feel like strolling the city to look for clothing stores… Both he and White Hat had left the Manor without grabbing any essentials. Though, the clean-up crew more than likely incinerated everything just to be on the safe side.

So, he grabbed a couple pairs of pants and the plainest long sleeve shirts he could find—most of these things came from the clearance rack, actually, like the store’s summer hats and shoes—charging everything to the room, because again, they left without grabbing anything from the Manor. White Hat didn’t need to worry—being a master shape shifting creature with cosmic powers, he could just… fabricate whatever he needed to wear directly on to his person. Being human meant that Slug had a few more physical dilemmas that needed literal addressing.

He then stopped by the café and ordered a large Americano and a couple of muffins. From there, he carried everything back up to their room—ignoring the eager bell boy because he had nothing to tip the youth with.

He just dumped his bags on the freshly made bed, thinking in awe how quickly the staff came to clean up in the mere hour he had been downstairs replenishing his pathetic stash of necessities. First thing he noted was he had luckily been carrying his phone in his pocket, and was able to take it with him, but it died not long after he and White Hat had made it to the hotel. So, he’d bought a charger and plugged it in.

Slug went to sorting out his purchases, yanking off tags, before neatly folding them up. He placed each article of clothing in the dresser opposite his bed. As he did so, he wondered how much was left in the Manor that hadn’t been ruined by the attack… but he shook it off and went back to his steady organizing.
Once finished, he sat down at the desk where he was charging his phone.

No messages.

He scrolled through to find Tommen’s number… he hesitated.

Clementia was alright. She lived… she just—she just knew now. Knew about how much of a monster he was. That was all.

He wouldn’t call. She needed rest.

He put his phone down and walked toward the bathroom. When he flicked on the lights, everything was sparkly and shiny. Most of it made of marbled and smooth chrome. Plush towels were literally everywhere. Another gift basket of assorted bath salts, oils, and loofas sat on the counter. Slug eyed each thing as he pulled it out to read the ingredient list.

“… fragrance,” he mumbled, making a pile that was no good for his skin, “Ah, all natural. Okay… wait, citric acid… That might sting…”

It didn’t leave him with too many options. But, it was better to soak his skin than to leave himself cracking apart from the harsh chemicals he was previously treated with. He finally found some aloe-infused natural bubble bath product and started dumping that into the hot-tub sized fancy bath. He spun the dials to something a little bit better than luke warm. After a thought, he added the jets and watched the bubbles swirl.

He laid down a couple of towel mats and then found a robe to hang on the door. He went to stripping out of gray clothes given to him by the hazmat crew. As he was folding them up to place on the counter, he caught sight of his reflection.

Not that he was unused to it, by this point. It had taken him by surprise, of course, because he sometimes forgot the pain, forgot there were scars and grafted skin. He was… well, he wasn’t pretty before, by any means. It didn’t bother him. He didn’t need to be attractive. He was smart and quick… but sometimes, just sometimes, he found himself naked in front of a mirror.

Part of him is always disgusted, but a much larger part of him remembers being 17, sitting in a public library, hiding from some asshole who caught him grabbing a wallet. Slug remembers sitting in the
classics section, a bunch of high schoolers goofing off in a corner, and how manged to slip into the group. Books propped up all around him, and these teens are discussing *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*. It’s part of a AP class or something, and Slug sits around as they discuss it and miss the point—he’d already read it years beforehand.

Whenever Slug catches his reflection he thinks… *maybe this is his punishment*. Every evil little thing he did, he told himself it was because he *had* to. He *had* to survive. One way or another, he wasn’t going to die in the slums. He wasn’t going to always be the bastard, the son of a whore that he was. He wasn’t going to be a mixed kid, he wasn’t going to just let the world take him and make him pay for a single goddamn thing he may or may not have done. He was going to *survive*…

He did survive. He knows he did—and god, sometimes, he wished he didn’t have to. He couldn’t stop himself. He had to keep taking, he had to keep living. The need to beat life at its own game—Slug sighs at his reflection, feeling along the ridges of his face. Presses the pads of his fingers against his thin lips. Slug thinks about *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*. The vile deeds of Dorian’s soul had been infused with the painting—Dorian had wanted to live life, regardless of the consequences.

“A dirty, heavy soul…” Slug whispers mostly to himself.

Slug enters the bath, trying to remember if he ever *liked* the book. He just remembers, instead, a time when he looked human enough to sit at a table full of kids his own age, and no one knew any better.

…

White Hat entered the hotel suite, seeing the lights dim in the main room. The bedroom door was closed, but the bathroom door around the corner had light spilling from it. He walked there, dropping an eco-tote onto the couch as he passed by it.

He didn’t bother knocking, just walked in. Slug was sitting in a very large tub, the water held a layer of white foam over the top. Only the top of his head was out of the water, lying against a rolled up towel. White Hat softly smiled, seeing the man had his eyes closed and was breathing evenly. Possibly asleep.

He walked over, sitting on the edge. He moved damp, dark hair away from Slug’s cheek. He smoothed the locks neatly, and the human gave a great sigh, eyes scrunched as he slowly came awake. “Uhhh… too *bright*…"
A wet hand came up and covered his delicate eyes. The layer of foam broke easy, and White Hat could see strips of the man’s flesh obscured by the soothing water. The Elder Being helped, a little, moving until he shadowed the harsher light glaring from above the vanity mirror.

“How are you feeling?” he asked. Slug moved, sloshing the water softly. His knees came up protectively, and he wrapped his arms over the top to lie his head down them. The side that was destroyed by the old fire more hidden in this pose. White Hat moved that straggly piece of dark hair away again.

“What time is it?” he inquired instead.

White Hat shook his head, “My question first.”

“Hmm,” Slug wrapped one arm around his head, the move pouring scented water over his neck. White Hat had a nice view of the mostly healed bite mark. “What do you want me to say?”

“Whatever the truth is.”

Slug nodded. He scrubbed a hand over his face. He apparently had to think about the question. Finally, he just gave a defeated shrug. “Fine, I guess. I wasn’t too badly infected by the time you healed me. The chemical shower hurt like a bitch. The bath has helped… I don’t—I don’t know. Can’t do any work without materials or files… I haven’t checked in with Tommen either so—”

“Slug,” White Hat said, moving a hand as he dipped down. Without worry, he slid into the large tub. It displaced water gently, but the doctor scrambled back as the Elder Being moved into his space. “I’m not talking physically.”

“This is a pretty physical move—” the man went to snark back, but White Hat just smiled. He moved a hand around the back of Slug’s neck and lightly squeezed. The human froze up, partially in surprise as White Hat crawled over him. “Seriously—What the fuck, you’re gonna get water everywhere!”

“No one will mind.”

“I will!” Slug protested, crawling up the side. He paused, only briefly in mortification that he was still nude. Then, with a small combination somewhere between a growl and a scoff, slid back down
into the water. White Hat kneeling next to him with the human’s awkward legs bunched up to somewhat hide himself.

“I want to know how you’re feeling.”

Slug sighed, shaking his head.

“Please?” White Hat tried. The doctor lifted one shoulder, hiding the worst parts of his face, definitely, as he looked into the water. White Hat placed one hand under the man’s chin, urging him to look directly at White Hat. But if Slug was anything, he was stubborn…

No matter. White Hat had all the time in the world.

“It really doesn’t matter,” Slug said.

White Hat shook his head, moving closer, “You should know that, by now, it matters to me.”

“But it shouldn’t,” Slug insisted, “You can’t understand. I’m not—” he took a breath and placed his head against White Hat’s shoulder. “I’m still tired… I’m probably in shock… I don’t want to—”

“Okay,” White Hat murmured, placing his arms around the man and holding him again.

Slug had found a button on his shirt and was toying with it. White Hat gulped, near inaudible, but the human wasn’t doing more than feeling the smoothness of the plastic. “You’re dumb.”

“I know.”

“You need to stop trying to help me.”

“I can promise you nothing.”
“Why are you even doing half of this?”

“Half of what?” the Elder Being asked, and his hands felt down the naked, textured back of his doctor. The human wormed closer, probably in an attempt to escape the hands, but White Hat didn’t mind.

“Well…” Slug mumbled, squashing the aching part of his face into White Hat’s healing presence, “I don’t know how to word it…”

“You don’t have to say it in English, if you don’t want.”

“Uh, no, it’s more—” Slug tilted his head to look up at White Hat. He took his hands and flicked off the top hat. It revealed a shower cap. The human let out a barking laugh, sitting back. “Did you plan that?”

“No, it just happens. The most appropriate headwear will always appear first,” he said.

Slug hummed, disentangling them with reluctance. White Hat tried not to pout, but the moment of unexpected mirth seemed to ease the human. He would take it for now. “In every dimension?”

“In most, yes,” he answered readily, quite warmed whenever the dear doctor asked more about White Hat. Whether in scientific curiosity or not, he did find sharing with Slug was… it was always a therapeutic experience. Over the years he has learned he enjoyed it. He would tell the man anything, if he asked… he wished Slug would feel the same.

“Do you…” the man paused, tilting his head up as he thought over the words, “Does it bother you when you don’t have a say?”

“What do you mean?” White Hat asked, moving to sit cross legged in the bath.

Slug moved his arms over the bubbles, making them pop as he reworded his thoughts, “Well. When your physical form does that. Like, when it just randomly assigns you some kind of image. You don’t choice, the universe, I guess, does that for you, right?”
“Not really,” White Hat answered. Slug gathered bubbles and cupped them in his hands. The Elder Being continued, “It’s better for people. I’m not human so… my real form… it’s not sustainable here. It’s too—”

Slug dumped the bubbles on top of the shower cap. They sat, jiggly and happy looking, in a pyramid shape. The doctor was smirking a little. It stopped White Hat’s words. He liked it when Slug was having fun—whether it was at his expense or not. “It’s what?”

“What?” the Elder Being asked, stupid and sitting still without breath.

“Your real form. What is it?”

“Oh…” White Hat looked down at his talons. He and Black Hat couldn’t quite make their hands human-like. Too sharp. Too distinctly predatorial… He didn’t give his real form a thought very often. It never mattered before. “It’s not… like a real body. I was made to be something else. There’s no way to accurately describe it for this world. It’s really just—”

Slug placed his hands into White Hat’s, without prompt. “Sorry. You don’t have to explain it. I’ve read the Necronomicon. I know it’s more… uh, amorphous. I just… I wondered how you felt about it.”

“It was painful,” White Hat said. Slug blinked at him, clearly surprised. The Elder Being was glowing in the way to meant he was blushing.

“Oh…”

“Being created like I was… I didn’t—I couldn’t ask for it,” he said, thinking, “And it was made to withstand all of Black Hat’s attacks so… I always just remember pain… and emptiness.”

Slug squeezed his hands. White Hat lowered them under the cooling water. “That sounds very human, if you ask me.”

“Does it now?” he posed. Slug snorted. He reached past White Hat, who froze, waiting for something he couldn’t explain for a split second. All the doctor did was pop the drain. Slowly, the water swirled behind the pair. Bubbles catching along clothes and skin.
“If it helps,” Slug muttered, “I can understand those feelings.”

White Hat smiled. Slug didn’t… the Elder Being moved closer, resting a hand along the man’s shoulder. He fingered the bite mark softly. “And if it helps, for you I mean… there’s nothing wrong with your form. I enjoy it.”

“Clearly,” Slug managed to say through a bitten off snort of bad humor. He sighed, but wasn’t hiding as much as the water drained. White Hat couldn’t stop smiling at him. Slug rolled his eyes, jerking his head to the door. “Grab me the robe.” White Hat rose dutifully and made his way to the hanging garment. His shoes squelched on the tile and Slug hung half way out of the bathtub, angrily waving his hand, “And dammit! Don’t trail all that stuff out of the tub! I’ll slip!”

“I’ll catch you.”

“You’ll catch these fists!”

White Hat was calmly helping the man into the fluffy robe. He was surprised when Slug also started to unbutton his constructed shirt. Feeling cheeky, he let it melt away. Slug let out a long-suffering sigh. White Hat just found himself fighting the urge to laugh, not wanting to rile the human up farther. Slug grabbed a towel to sling around his employer instead.

White Hat followed the man back into the bedroom, remembering to grab the eco-tote as Slug was flicking on lights.

“Oh! I stopped by the pharmacy—”

“You didn’t have to,” Slug said, voice lowering in vague embarrassment, “I was just gonna leech off of your… uh… you-ness.”

“Perfectly acceptable,” White Hat said, but still put down the bag on the bed as Slug rummaged in dresser drawers, “And always welcomed. But, mostly, I bought bandages.”

Slug was tugging on a shirt, before he glanced over, shaking his head. “Ah, for your eye?”
“Hmm, or any part of you that feels uncomfortable being exposed.”

Slug pulled on a pair of black track pants, nodding to himself. “Exposed… yeah. That’s the word of the day… How is the Manor doing?”

“Heavy Hitter’s construction company should be done in a few days,” White Hat explained. He wasn’t ordering the gauze at all, just shifting through it. He bought colored wrappings in pretty blues. One tiny bundle had pretty cherry-blossom cartoons on it. Slug walked over, poking at the Elder Being.


“Look! This one has cartoon me!”

Slug shook his head as White Hat opened a tin can—band-aids exploding all over the bed. He grabbed one and ripped it open, proudly showing the doctor.

“See? It’s really adorable!”

“Sometimes I wonder why I ever leave you unsupervised,” Slug crossed his arms. White Hat opened the band-aid and quickly ‘boop’-ed it over the doctor’s nose.

“Aw! Now you have me on your face!”

Slug colored several interesting shades, hiding his face in his hands, shouting, “Phrasing, White Hat!”

White Hat opened his mouth to ask why that was a weird thing to say, when from the desk, Slug’s phone lit up. They both looked at it for a second. Then, Slug moved toward it—the screen displaying a NY area code. After a second, Slug opened his phone, putting it on speaker.
“Ye—”

“SLUUUUUGGGYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY!”

The doctor placed a hand over his mouth and White Hat was beside him, resting a hand on his shoulder. The darkness seemed to evaporate as the young woman on the other end of the line berated the good doctor for not calling her, and how she’d been trying to reach him for a few hours now. How dare he not have his phone close by, wasn’t he worried?

“So worried,” he practically whispered.

“Well! You should be! All Tommen and Star Princess wanna feed me are salads! Do you know she’s vegan?! Ugh! Like—I get she’s an alien that believes all life is precious and bullshit, but plants are living things! I just—”

“Clementia, dear,” White Hat said, gently taking the phone away while the man collected himself, “They were kind enough to evacuate you from the Manor.”

“Yeah… The news has played the fire non-stop…”

“According to Heavy Hitter, it wasn’t that bad.”

“Good!” she said, then paused. “And Sluggy?”

“I’m fine,” he answered, a bit distantly.

“When are you guys gonna pick me up? When it’s gonna be okay to go home?”

“Soon,” the doctor promised. White Hat nodded.

Soon couldn’t come fast enough.
Ya know, if anyone is wondering, what I kind of imagine Slug's injuries to look like... it's always kind of been a cross between a Phantom of the Opera and Ruvik from the Evil With In sort of injuries... Don't know why. But, yeah. There ya go.

I've answered a comment about what I think White Hat looks like--and summarized--just gorgeous. I think he'd be hella attractive. I do not know why. Fannon/Headcannon instinct I guess.

Anyways! If there is anything confusing about the world, or the characters, let me know! I will be super glad to share!

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING!

LOTS OF LOVE!

<3
Let Us Spin a Story

Chapter Notes

I AM SO SORRY IF THIS IS LATE.

I honestly forgot what day it was... because I have no job again.

YAY!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Four: Let Us Spin a Story


“AND WE LOOKED FOR HELP, BUT NONE CAME

Or,

How I have Been Hiding a Villain in my Apartment”

By: Miles Namiag.

Editor: Suze Wies

Long time readers will know I am not the type of guy to shy away from controversy. I guess that makes me sound like a pompous writer who hasn’t had enough outdoor experience. That, at the end of the day, I can just go back to my laptop, sit in any old café, and bang out a rough draft about tyrants half a world away without suffering real world consequences after publishing my opinions. And, sorry to all of my faithful fans, but this has been mostly true... until eleven months ago.

It was seven at night when I had just sat down on my bed, notepad in hand as I watched the repeat announcement Tommen De Loin had made about the dissolvement of the Golden Rule. My editor wanted a hard-hitting piece about “Heroes doing Bad things.” Eagerly, I took the assignment. Unpopular opinion but, I was never the kid to collect Hero Card(ians) or figurines. They never interested me. I liked to consider myself a rebel. It’s only now as I write this how dumb I must have sounded as a kid. Heroes were something to look up to—characters of the highest morals to emulate… Again, it was seven at night, when I realized just how in over my head I was.

I will skip the boring details of how I traced and researched everything the Golden Rule International Alliance did in the shadows to keep the world safe. To be honest, you don’t want to know, dear readers. I don’t want to know—and luckily, I only have half a story about all that
business anyway. There was too much redacted and kept off-book for me to amount in paper-trail or evidence. All I have is hearsay… but that brings me to my tag-title.

It was on a personally funded expedition into the Caribbean. I pretended to be on vacation… and I met someone. A Villain, who shall remain nameless and powerless, least someone come after her. These ‘someones’ being none other than Heroes. And I will name the Heroes.

Anti-Heroes.

...

“Ugh, seriously?” Slug said, angrily punching in Tommen’s number for a third time. No one in New York was answering him. Well—they probably blocked him. There was a good enough reason for it, but, still! “White Hat, gimme your new cell!”

White Hat handed his phone to the doctor pacing around the re-made office space of the Manor. Heavy Hitter was correct, it had not taken very long to get the damaged fixed, nor for them to move back in. The Elder Being was being calm, shrugging off the current predicament with the explanation of, “They may be busy.”

“Yes, hello,” Slug said loudly when White Hat’s number connected straight to the conference room in that gaudy tower Tommen was calling a home. White Hat hummed in mild bemusement. Slug was placing the phone down on the desk, tapping open the speaker option.

“—p it, doctor,” a mildly annoyed voice answered.

“You haven’t let me talk to Clem in a week,” he accused, crossing his arms as he menacingly leaned over the phone, “And you better tell me why.”

A rough sigh was heard on the other end. Finally, after a moment, a distinctly grumbling Tommen rasped into the phone, “It’s not me. It’s Star Princess…”

“Why the hell would Star Princess—”

“She’s convinced Clementia is traumatized. She doesn’t want her to return to White Hat Manor until she goes through therapy,” the techie Hero responded, nearly sheepish.
Slug paused, backing away from the phone. White Hat looked over at the doctor, brows scrunching. The good doctor seemed to be processing the words. After a moment, White Hat found himself answering, “She, uh, hasn’t had a *good* history with therapists.”

“*So I guessed. They’ve been arguing about it non-stop. It’s really... really frustrating.*”

“I understand,” White Hat said. He leaned against his desk, idly checking his drawers, as he asked, “Do you want us to speak with her?”

“**Star Princess or Clem?**”

“Mainly Star Princess—”

“No—” Slug begun, voice rough, but he managed to clear his throat distinctly. He was nodding, goggled eyes closed in thought, “Star Princess is both telepathic and telekinetic. She’s probably peered into Clem’s mind, right?”

“**Err...**” Tom had said, the phone going static-like for half a second.

Slug popped open his eyes, staring hard at White Hat instead, “She was unconscious when she left the Manor. No doubt the short trip to New York she stayed that way. If Star Princess was there that night, I can imagine she had to personally make sure Clementia wasn’t mentally impaired from the attack on the Manor...”

“**Y-Yeah... Clem’s pretty pissed about it. She feels invaded—but like, Star Princess can’t physically talk so—it’s not—I just don’t understand why she’d feel betrayed anyway so—**” the Hero was rambling, clearly not having anyone at his Tower to vent with.

“No, I—I know why,” Slug interrupted, arms falling heavily to his side. He moved back over the cell phone to prop his hands on either side. “Remind Clementia she isn’t there as a guest. She is a colleague now. If she wants to be a Hero, she must understand her own mind and feelings. If something like this were to happen again and she’s emotionally unstable—more people than just her are going to get hurt...”

“**Whoa. That’s sort of harsh, doc.**”
“I’ve—” Slug starts, but shakes his head, “You can’t help people who don’t want it. She’s going to have to weigh what she wants more; to be a Hero or, live in fear of her own memories.”

The Hero paused on the other end of the line. Then, with a defeat sigh, added, “That’s still a harsh lesson for a kid to learn.”

“You can blame it on White Hat, if ya want,” Slug said, trying to affect an indifference in his tone. The Elder Being made a noise of surprise, but catching how controlled Slug was being, he realized the man wasn’t entirely serious.

“Well, those are what they call, ‘the doctor’s orders’ are they not?” White Hat offered. Slug glanced up, brows drawn in displeasure. He didn’t argue however.

Tom laughed, “Alright. We’ll blame it on White Hat.”

“Thank you, my friend. Please let Clementia know we only wish her a speedy recovery… in all senses of the word,” the Elder Being said. Tom gave him a quick, sing-songy ‘Goodbye’ and Slug hung up.

He stared at the phone, hard. White Hat sighed, sitting at his desk. He toyed with a quill pen gifted to him by someone on the hazmat team. Tommen had sent a few decorators over—though the interior did not differ much from before the Pollen Attack—and so far the Manor was lovingly crafted to each of the occupants personality. Clem’s room was magical and bright, White Hat’s office contained fanciful knick-knacks, and Slug’s lab remained pragmatic, scientifically ordered.

“Aren’t you upset?” the doctor asked.

White Hat gave a shrug, “I trust your judgement. If she needs counselling, I would like for her to have it.”

“No, not about Clem—well,” Slug cut off, rubbing along side of his mask in irritation, “Partially about Clem. I mean mostly about me.”

“Why would I be upset with you?” he inquired.
“Look what I did!” he shouted, throwing his hands around.

White Hat followed the movements, not seeing anything… except for some newly grown cobwebs. His office, for being so much farther from the lab, hadn’t experienced much besides very mild smoke damage. It just needed a good scrubbing and airing out. Although, the new flame-retardant and mold-resistant carpeting was a nice addition to the Manor. “Um… what did you do?”

“How about we start with the fact that I lost my damn mind?! I nearly killed Clementia—I burnt everything in lab! 0.5.0. was ready to maim me—his creator—and now…” the man deflated, turning around until he was facing away from White Hat. “It had to have been the Anti-Heroes… You have to be a target now because of me.”

White Hat shook his head, “No. You read those journal entries. The Anti-Hero was coming for me regardless. Black Hat was a bigger threat, but, they blame both of us equally, for the misery on this planet.”

Slug shrugged, but wouldn’t look at White Hat.

“Believe me, your presence here means very little,” he tried. The doctor froze, turning his head behind him to openly glare at White Hat. The Elder Being paused, replaying his words. He held up his hands, eye wide as he quickly retracted his statement, “To the Anti-Heroes! Not to me! You know that—”

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered, then started walking to the door, “I got it. You’re lost without me telling you how to do your own job!” He pointed at the corner White Hat had been inspecting earlier. “Clean up your office, too, dumbass. There’s dust and shit covering the brand new security cameras!” He slammed the door before his employer could say anything more to him.

White Hat sighed, plopping his chin into his hands as he watched the door close.

“Just when I thought he was warming up to me…”
I discovered Anti-Heroes by accident. Sitting at a cabana bar, drinking a fruity drink, she sauntered up to me. Lovely and smelling of coconut oil and hibiscus perfume. She smiled at me, and instantly, I knew this woman was dangerous.

“You look familiar,” she said to me, her accent thick and intoxicating. She ordered a local rum. Took a shot without flinching. It was impressive—and scary.

“D-Do I?” I stuttered. I am unashamed to admit this.

She winked at me. “If I were you, Miles, I would leave immediately. Bad things are probably going to happen tonight.”

“What’s gonna happen?”

“Same thing that happens every night, cher,” she said, spreading open her hands, all of them. “Someone tries to squash me.”

…”

Slug was rewiring the cameras, dismantling them remotely from his shiny new lab. Tommen was a nice kid, but no way in hell was the doctor letting him have easy access to White Hat Manor. What could he monitor better that Slug couldn’t? Granted, he had some nice features—but he was cocky. Brash. Let all his tech do the work for him. Dr. Slug wasn’t going to have any of that nonsense. Machines could be corruptible just like humans could.

Nothing was safe… only safer.

He clicked through a feed—before visibly starting at the sight of something fuzzy and large pressed into the lens. Zooming out slightly, he tilted his head, noting the odd fur pattern. “Is... Is that… *Phormictopus cancerides*?!?”

Dr. Slug popped out of his chair, quickly grabbing a Tupperware bowl from the kitchen and a lid. Then grabbed a steak knife in his hurry. He rushed to the front door, popping air-holes, before yanking on the knob. Just before he stepped out—he bumped into a figure on the doorstep. A quick yelp, and a tumble backwards, he looked up. His goggles opened wide and his brows shot up. Brandishing his knife, he pointed it at the sultry figure holding his *Phormictopus cancerides* specimen in the palm of her hand.

“*Bonjou doktè Bal,*” her thick Caribbean accent belied. Slug was stunned. Her sun-kissed deep brown skin shone healthy from her off the shoulder flowing dressing, and her hair was wrapped elegantly. She stepped forward on bright, flashy heels as she stepped into the Manor, “I am here to parley with your boss. I believe someone has been calling me from this… how you say… *Gwan*?”
“P-Parley…?” he asked, standing up, still holding out his knife.

She flashed him a fanged smile, lowering cat-eye sunglasses that revealed her doubled eyes. The tarantula in her palm crawled up to sit docile on her forearm as she folded her hands together in front of her. A ruffle of hidden appendages beneath her long dress revealed an extra set of arms already crossed on her stomach. “Wi. I heard you seek information on… Anti-Heroes? This is what they call themselves, non?”

“The contact in Haiti…” Slug slowly realized, “You never picked up your phone.”

“I call from more secure line, my safe-house had already been made… unsafe,” she explained. Slug walked around her, lowering his weapon. He closed the door, peering down at the creature sitting placidly on her arm.

“You…” he said, thinking before flicking his sight back to her face. She removed her glasses and he noted the gold shimmer on her many lids. Her dark eyes blinking in the low lighting. She hummed, and the tarantula moved up to her shoulder, seating itself more like a parrot. “… control arachnids…”

“Hmmm,” she lifted her other shoulder so as not to disturb her pet. Slug kept his knife in the beady sight of the thing tracking his movements. “The Araignée-crab is non-lethal. His bite will swell, but you not be in danger.”

Slug nodded, already knowing this. Still. There was a Villain in the Manor. A Villain who was not him. “I know you. You’re—Nancy. Nancy Kwaku, the Shi-Spider.”

“Guilty as charged,” Nancy said with a flourishing bow.

Slug shook his head, “You’re Hero is Lapin, though. How’d you’d have Anti-Heroes after you?”

“Psh! The damned bastard went and had a child—” she scoffed, and the tarantula ruffled in her ire, “An… uh, albino, named her Alice, and moved to Paris—ran away from the sun. Left the whole of Haiti and the Indies to mwen.”

“I see…” the doctor said. He watched as she calmed herself. She moved her pet back into her
cupped hands. Sighing, Slug tossed his Tupperware over his shoulder and nodded to the stairs. “Well. A parley is a parley. White Hat’s in his office. Up the stairs and to the right. I’ll follow behind.”

Nancy smiled, swaying voluptuous hips, and a third set of arms crossed at her back. “Mesi, dokte.”

He sighed, shaking his head. Well, at least it looks like not all Dr. Slug’s efforts had been in vain. They still had a lead on their Anti-Hero problem.

…

She saved me that night. The hotel had been bombed. They meant to frame her, but I stuck close to this mysterious woman, and I saw her, bleeding and broken as she threw herself between me and falling rubble. She had recognized me. She told me she had been a long time reader of my works. She loved all the things I had written about—even if I said them stupidly. And often times, I must admit, she shone light on things I hadn’t realized had been long kept in the dark.

What else could I do but smuggle her home?

From there, as I tended her wounds… we built a trust. She told me about how Villains were living large. How Heroes had finally crucified themselves trying to be Holier Than Thou. How often it back-fired. How she had spun herself a web of power deep and secure…

Until they came.

The New Heroes who set fire to her home—who smoked her out of one house, and then another, tried to trap her… suffocate her…

Of course, I am only speaking vaguely metaphorically. With the recent global scandal of the Golden Rule, the years of natural disasters, and tourist overflow, her ancestral home was quickly over run, flooded, and eventually taken from her. In fact, she thought of herself as a social warrior rather than a Villain.

Still, loyal readers, I attempted to remain unbiased. Brought up her numerous travesties and injustices. She told me something that struck a cord with me. She said, “You can blame me, if you want… but look at you. Look at me. When have you ever had to fight to stay alive? When have you ever fought for anything?”

Never I would come to realize. I thought I did, certainly, with my words… And told her so.

“Yes,” she said, triumph in her voice, “Because in stories, it’s always men like you who think they’ve taken up arms when, really, they do no more than stand on cold feet. Die like men, holding your ground, but you’ve been tricked by your own Heroism. You’re trapped in tar. You cannot move forward. Just because you stand for something does not mean you make strides toward that something.”
White Hat was listening to her story, nodding sagely. Dr. Slug hadn’t moved from his spot at the door, watching as the Villain(ess?) waved her hands hypnotically as she told her sad parley story. Not entirely too different from Slug’s either. Which was troubling more than anything.

“So, you’ve come to us for… help,” White Hat began to pose carefully, “Or because you are here to help us?”

“Both,” she answered.

White Hat glanced over at the doctor, who just shrugged. White Hat stood, holding out his hand. “Then I gladly welcome you to the Manor. Hopefully we can anticipate the next Anti-Hero attack.”

“Oh, they’re cowards,” she said, but nonetheless gracefully rose and shook his hand with most of her own. “I doubt they strike you again so soon.”

Slug hummed, partially derisive somewhere behind the pair. Nancy turned to him, lifting a carefully crafted brow. White Hat walked around his desk and ushered the woman out towards the door, but not quite in the same direction as Slug. “I will show you to a guest room. Please, allow me.”

“Mesi,” she said, but stared at the doctor as she walked toward the door. Slug opened one side, reclining against the doorjamb as he watched White Hat escort her to a room. The Elder Being would not really be in danger, so he didn’t bother following them.

Instead he left the door open to grab one of White Hat’s refurbished chairs and drag it to a dusty corner. A huntsman spider darted out of the web to swipe at him when he flicked at a flimsy string.

“Do. Not,” he warned, holding up a pin, “I will collect specimens.”

The arachnid let out a noise, skittering into the back of the web. He watched it climb up to the ceiling and enter an AC vent. He made a mental note to drastically lower the temperature from his lab. With wide eyes, he turned back to the open door and hopped off the chair.
Better get back to the lab, post haste.

He ran into White Hat in the hallway.

“Ah, my dear doctor can we please talk about—” he started, a bit nervous.

Slug shook his head fiercely, “Later.”

“Ah—Uh… okay,” White Hat started, reaching out, but the man was already darting down the staircase. Sighing, he let his hand drop. “It’s always one step forward, and several steps back with you.”

…

You know, readers… I am not doing an expose on Villains… or really on Heroes. What I am talking about is something less concrete. What I am taking about is what happens when people are pushed into categories we have no control over. We think we have control—and that’s the scary part. Yet, there are a lot of things bigger than us.

Not to date this paper but, less than a week ago, White Hat Manor had been attacked. The news covered the minor destruction. The Villain and I, we watched, and although the details were vague, we know several Heroes rushed to aid the Great White—a nickname given to the titular White Hat of the White Hat Company. White Hat, of course, is the face of the Hero faction. He’s… well, the first Hero. The best Hero. He does not often step in to help, but boy the stories history has told.

It was apparent that to us, at least, Anti-Heroes had to be behind this attack. White Hat had to know about them… and my new-found confidant told me, “He does.”

“How do you know?” I asked.

“His right-hand man is a Villain.”

“Who do you mean?”

“Everyone knows Dr. Slug. He’s… He is despicable. Also, his brother is Black Hat. I have no doubts in my mind that White Hat is aware of the situation.”

“Why has he done nothing, then? Why hasn’t he helped?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “And to be honest with you… I hesitate to speak with him.”
“Why?” I probably demanded this more than asked.

She waited a while, but eventually told me, “I sought Black Hat’s aide only once. For years, I had received catalogs. I subscribed to each video and commercial listing… but I met with that… thing… one time. I needed help. Sorely. He demanded something from me.”

I was afraid to ask what it was, and she never expanded much on this mysterious thing, so my mind can only imagine the worst scenario. Especially from such a beautiful woman…

“Black Hat is a monster, make no mistake,” she insisted, and there is something to be said about the chill you feel run down your spine when a Villain like her uses such phrasing, “But legend say that White Hat is cut from the same cloth. I fear the thing a creature who look like walking death would ask me when I turn to him for help.”

“Do we have another choice?” I asked her.

She said nothing. She looked at me with dark eyes. She shook her head to mean no.

…

White Hat went to Slug in the lab a little bit later. He had finished cleaning his dusty office, as requested, and hoped that would put him in good graces with the doctor. When he walked in, the man was sitting at his desk—a puffy parka on—and grumbling. White Hat took a moment to note that it was, indeed, chiller down in the lab than normal.

Peering over the extra-padding, he saw Slug was busy re-working Tommen’s gifted security system further. “Is that necessary?”

“Very,” he insisted. He didn’t glance up at the Elder Being. White Hat found himself pouting, despite his earlier determination to remain in the good doctor’s graces.

“We need to talk,” he said.

“Too dangerous at the moment.”

“Because of Miss Kwaku?” White Hat posed.

“Yes. She controls spiders. It’s possibly through scent secretions, or inaudible vocalizations,” he hypothesized, glancing around briefly before landing his eyes on White Hat with a nod, “Either way. It was well known she is a spy-master.”
“A she-spider, spy-master, spider-mistress!” White Hat strung together, beaming proudly at his tongue twister.

Slug gave a rough sigh, “Sure. We’ll go with that for today.”

“I’ll think of a better one later,” White Hat all but promised. Slug went back to his work. White Hat plopped his chin down on a well-insulated shoulder. The man remained steadfast in his work. White Hat sighed, moving his arms to encircle the human in a stubborn squeeze. Softly, he murmured, just enough so that he was sure only Slug could hear, “I would still like to talk to you about your unnecessary guilt…”

The human in his arms went rigid. His hackles rising instinctually. Still… he did not fight off White Hat’s arms. “Guilt is not unnecessary.”

“When it involves things you didn’t—”

“Guilt motivates humans, White Hat,” Slug argued, turning his head to glare at his employer, “It’s an emotional response to things that we are aware of as bad. It makes us be better. I thought you of all people could appreciate a little effort.”

“Is this what this is?” White Hat asked, nodding to the security camera feed and computer system Slug was ‘fixing.’

Slug sighed, “Look. I’m trying, I am. What happened to the Manor—”

“No one could have predicted it,” White Hat said. He let go of Slug to spin his work chair away from the man’s project. Slug shook his head as White Hat boxed him in. “We were barely away of the existence of Anti-Heroes before the attack. Why would we think they would so readily attack a Manor for Heroes?”

“Because I’m not a Hero—”

“I know!” White Hat nearly shouted in frustration. Slug actually jumped at the sudden outburst. With a wide eye, White Hat backed up. “No, I—Sorry. I do understand your point. You make it very
clear, but… You’re my—that is to say… I…” White Hat lost his steam, moving one hand to fiddle with the bandage over his eye. Slug stared at it, brows falling.

“You’ve become…” Slug started, slow and thoughtful, “… aggressive, lately. I haven’t seen you like this since—shit. I don’t know. It’s different from when I attacked you first.”

White Hat covered his mouth, taking a second before he nodded, “I’m sorry.”

“No, I…” Slug stopped, taking a breath. He tugged his parka lower to cover more of his shivering body. He tried to attribute it to the cold. “It’s probably my fault, too.”

“Stop that!” White Hat demanded, hand coming down into a fist. Slug burrowed further into his parka. “I mean it, Slug! It’s not—it’s really not your fault at all! I don’t understand why now you’re acting like—like every bad that ever happened has to be pinned on you! You’re not—” White Hat could feel even his form was agitated and flickering. He had to take a moment to calm himself, lower his voice into something less thunderous, more soothing... “You’re really not half as bad as you think you are…"

Slug gave a self-depreciating laugh, “So what… you’re not as good as you think you are either?”

White Hat paused. Slug blinked, glancing up.

“Oh my god. That’s it…” the doctor said, popping off his chair and poking White Hat in the chest, “Something’s got you questioning your own—” Slug dropped his accusatory hand, roughly sighing, “White Hat. You’re… you. You’re the good guy. You’re not—I don’t know. You’re not a monster or anything. Look at you. Who would think some as spotless as you could ever—”

“No, I…” White Hat’s throat nearly closed up on his words. Though he could not deny the warmth that blossomed in him at Slug’s praise… he felt he was betraying the man before him.

“You’re not trying to convince me of anything… You’re just… You’re projecting. It’s okay.”

It wasn’t. White Hat didn’t know how to articulate it. He tried to think like a human, tried to figure out what Dr. Slug would like to hear, would like projected back to him. All he could think about was himself though. All he thought, on repeat, was how far away Slug was trying to run. White Hat had barely had a taste of him—he didn’t want anyone to take that away from him. Not even Slug.
And how terrible was that?

If Slug didn’t want him...

“Will you—” White Hat took a dry gulp, licking the point of his fang, “Will you stay?”

“Huh...?” the doctor asked, goggles blinking up at him. All the triumph from his supposed discovery disappearing instantly at the seemingly tangent-like question.

“You keep saying you’re the problem but...” White Hat grasped the sleeve of Slug’s coat and dug his talons into the downy fabric, “Even if it is... I want you to stay.”

Slug didn’t even bother looking at the piercing of red pleather, just kept staring at White Hat. “I...” he managed, voice somewhere between confused and concerned, before simply nodding. “Sure, boss.”

White Hat couldn’t let go. He had to take a mile with every inch given, he knew it. Slug said he would stay.

He would make sure Slug would stay.

...

We sit in a café. It’s pretty and pink and very, very girly. Word on the street is that Clementia Habberdash, the ward of White Hat Manor, often comes to this place and orders the Unicorn Malt with extra sprinkles. She’s a delight to everyone who meets her. She was airlifted to the NY office of Tommen De Loin’s newest Hero Group. Currently unnamed and heavily restricted, but with numerous recruits. Her condition was stable, but unresponsive after the attack on her home.

I think about this with my laptop perched on a window recently replaced after a skirmish happened from evidence of security footage of Clementia and the Black Hat Company guard dog colluding in this very same café.

“By all accounts, she’s a good kid,” I say sadly.

“It’s suicide to even think about touching her,” my new Villain confidant informs me, “Not only is
she White Hat’s ward, but Dr. Slug’s… and as such, Dementia is a guard dog. Their friendship, confusing as it is, was well known. We all know how demented Black Hat’s associate is… but, even so, there is little reason for Anti-Heroes to harm her.”

“The thing about biological weapons is that they don’t discriminate.”

“Still, if they are willing to add civilian causalities…”

“As far as we know, Clementia has grown up with both a Hero and Villain to guide her. They could be thinking she is too much of a risk, anyways.”

The Villain nods, “I suppose so. These Anti-Heroes are dangerous. Too dangerous to go unchecked. I will offer my services to White Hat, as discussed… and you, my friend, no matter the consequences, must warn the public. You cannot allow the Anti-Hero story to fall into the hands of someone who sympathizes with them.”

“So, you agree? I will offer my help.”

“I suppose,” I say. We pause in our conversation as a hipster saunters over to the table and leaves a dark chocolate and mint milkshake for me, and a small mango-shaved ice for my friend. When he leaves, I seriously consider her. We’ll have a way to communicate… but who knows how long before I receive my messages? Let alone if the White Hat Manor intercepts them? “But are you certain? I know you terrifed of creatures like Black Hat and White Hat… if they are this dangerous, aren’t there other ways to help fight these extremists?”

She takes a scope of her ice, pops it in, savors it. I am dazed by how collected she is. How she enjoys each moment of life. She looks at me over her sunglasses. She wears them indoors and people scoff, but it gives her a such an iconic and chic vibe, and I am astounded by her.

“I have lived my life in a web of lies and deceit. I no longer wish to be seen as someone untrustworthy. What have I said to you? Horrid things… things that I cannot take back, and probably will not. I refuse to regret a single thing I have done. I have done everything with surety… nonetheless, I know what I have done. I suppose, I am more horrified by how I could not fault Anti-Heroism at first… but…”

Listening to this woman talk mesmerizes me. I could listen to every word. Recite it dutifully. I will not, of course. Many things were told to me in confidence, and even now, even with her permission, I will not break her trust. I will not tell a story not mine to tell. Hers is dark and heat and laughter and struggle and perhaps one day, one day, I’ll write a book or two about it. Now though, in the moment, I am bound by our shared moral obstacle.

“Miles,” she says, soft, tongue dyed by the sunset colors, “I do not want to be a wanted woman. I wish to live free. Walk in the daylight once again. Instead of fear… I want to be seen as a person. I think I would like to have a life one day. I think… perhaps… something that deals with the truth. In all its forms. If it means walking into White Hat’s den—I will face that. There are things we must do despite fear. That is the only way to grow. To move forward.”

“Not be stuck in tar?” I tease.

She smiled at me, “You listened.”

“Yeah,” I said, “And I’ll keep listening for you. Be careful.”

She finished her shaved ice. She left the café.

I open my laptop.
And now you’ve read, my dear and loyal readers, everything up until the present.

Are you listening?

…

Nancy was sitting on their kitchen counter. She was holding a package of recently purchased chorizo. Slug had walked into the kitchen, shedding his parka. She waved the open paper at him, picking at the food.

“Please, make yourself at home,” he deadpanned.

“You too kind, dokte,” she said. She tossed the food into the sink and let it sit there, “But it not bloody enough for my delicate palliate.”

“It wouldn’t be, no,” Slug responded. He opened the fridge, one eye still on the woman as he scanned their meat bin.

She crossed her many arms, one waving at him, “You have seafood, fruit, vegetable, cow milk. Nothing I can consume.”

“I can head to the Carnitas, see if they have some goat,” he offered. She gave a shrug. Slug took that to mean she didn’t give a damn, and pulled out some salmon and lemon slices. He went to the cabinets to procure a pot of organic honey. A banana spider crawled up the inside, and he hopped back. He whipped his head about to glare at the woman. “Your little spies may not harm White Hat—but anything vaguely venomous I find in this Manor, I will—”

“You’re earlier warning was noted,” she caustically cut off, “But you startled the poor baby. It won’t happen again.”

Slug growled, picking up the jar and moving far from the cabinets. He opened the honey and set it on the counter. He didn’t bother putting on his apron—too paranoid about any lingering guests that might be sitting amongst the folds. Taking the salmon, he went to work gutting and skinning it before tossing it in a pan with some oil.

He paused when he noticed the new stove wasn’t electric.
Nancy must have noticed his apprehension. She slipped off the counter to peer down at the food, counting all the ingredients. “Did you forget something?”

“Ah… no…” he said, snapping out of it. He shook his head and went into the drawers to find aluminum foil instead. It took him a few guesses to figure out where the decorators had placed the new kitchen ware. After a second, he fired up the oven instead. He was liberally coating the slabs of fish in honey, oil, and various spices before turning to Nancy. She was simply watching, eyes blinking in succession down her face. “What?”

“Nothing,” she said, then walked over to meat she had tossed away. She was rewrapping it, despite the sputters of protest Slug started at the unsanitary offer. The woman just tossed it into the garbage bin instead. Nancy spread her hands out, “I would like to help. I would.”

Slug pointed at the sink, “Wash.”

“Me hands?”

“Yes.”

“All of dem?”

“Yes. Wi. All of them,” he said.

She smiled, “Alright. What we be cookin’?”

“Mashed potatoes and steamed broccoli,” he said, “Those are the sides. Cows milk and the russet potatoes in the cabinets, please. If you would peel… I dunno, 8 or 10?”

“I t’ink, me can do,” she teased, her 30 fingers dancing. Slug snorted. He placed the fish in the oven, then brought out the bushel of broccoli. He went to cutting it up, washing them, while reminding Nancy to do the same with the potatoes she plopped on the opposite counter. “Ya know, sweet potatoes are far healthier.”

Slug hummed, “I’ll keep that in mind.”
“Thank you,” she said.

“No problem.”

“No… I mean,” the Villain paused, “For giving me a chance.”

Slug was placing his pot of water on the stove, hesitating. Nancy looked over, eyes sympathetic. “I had heard theories, you know.”

“What theories?” he asked. He was staring down at his reflection. Concealed behind a bag.

“You were ruthless. Brave. Determined. Everyone knew not to mess wit’ you… I admired you, as a young t’ing,” she confessed. She placed her peeled food into a large bowl. She approached softly, one hand on the stove top, another hovering above his shoulder. “And I heard, after your disappearance, that people died. Fires breaking out in Brazil…”

“Your point, Shi-Spider?” Dr. Slug questioned, stepping away.

The woman sighed, “You meant to contact me. When I heard I would be receiving a call from you—fires, suddenly. Then. Fire here.” She clicked the burner. The man tried not to flinch at the clicking sound. “It take not a genius to know. The Anti-Heroes mean ta smoke us out, my friend.”

“We’re not friends,” he said, watching the fire catch.

Nancy chuckled, placing half her hands on her chest and the other pointing at the doctor, “No? We’re both bugs to them. Spider you call me? When you go by slug…”

He stayed silent, breath catching as the little blue flame spurted under the pan. Heated the water below. Churned it. Convection—science. “I’m a scientist—”

“Call yourself what you will,” she practically hissed, “But I bear my name with pride!” She spread out her arms. “I am the predator! I am unafraid! I am going nowhere until I find the ones who’d
mean to rid us from this world!"

“You’re not the only one in this world!” Slug raised his voice, hand moving to his mask. He clutched it as he turned away from the fire. “Why does everyone act like only they are suffering?! How can’t you people understand there’s more than just—” He bit off his words, shaking his head, “There’s no point explaining it to a Villain. You’re all just worried about yourself. You’re all selfish. You aren’t here for help. You’re here for revenge.”

Nancy scoffed, “You speak as if you aren’t one of us.”

“I—” Slug thought about White Hat’s earlier words.


Slug stupidly shrugged.

She shook her head in response, “Did you switch sides?”

“No, but—” he started, “White Hat pardoned me. It was… part of the employment process.”

Nancy looked at him strangely. She fidgeted on her feet. The words seemed to stir something in her. “And…? What does that mean exactly?”

“Legally,” he explained, “I have a clean slate.”

“I mean…” she gulped, walking forward with her hand over her heart protectively, “What did he ask of you?”

“He’s never asked—” Slug began confused, but felt something wasn’t right. Her stance was familiar, and it took a second to figure out why. She was hunched over, protective. “Oh. Oh.” The doctor quickly raised his hands, stepping forward to automatically provide comfort or shielding, he wasn’t sure. “No, no, no! White Hat’s not like that. He doesn’t deal in souls. You being here—he won’t demand anything like that from you.”
She eyed him, wary, “I didn’t say… but you know?”

“Black Hat, right? I’m guessing you met him and he got… well, he offered you something in exchange for your soul. What did he say?”

“My soul… flips like a bloody hour glass,” she murmured, almost ashamed, “He would not take it.”

“He turned you down?” Slug asked, surprised.

She nodded, “I can’t be trusted. My soul tricksy. My allegiance… does not stay in one place.”

“I see…” Slug thought aloud, “So what does that mean while you stay here?”

Nancy let out a breath and rose to a straighter, proud position. She her sets of hands comfortably along her body, the top set moving to wrap high along her chest, the middle set over her stomach, and the third lying soft against her legs. “I do not know, for you. And White Hat will never hold my soul… but for me, I meant what I said. I will find those cowards who would rather kill us than learn to live with us. Spiders… slugs… they may be disgusting. They may scare the normal person… but they deserve to live, don’t they? For as scary as they are… they are needed? Aren’t they? We were born with purpose. It may not seem like it… but we can do good things if they looked hard enough.”

For a moment, Slug thought, maybe White Hat wasn’t the only one projecting after all.

…

What have I done?

Oh my god, what have I done?

How could I let her go into that fucking Manor?! How could I?! I just let her walk right in to this unstoppable, terrible cosmic force?! She’ll be all alone—again. Because, what?! I couldn’t let her live her past down?! I don’t care what she’s done—I don’t care what those idiot black and white bastards think she’s done! She’s just like me—she wants to be good—she’s just never been given a chance before! She’s not a monster! She’s not even really a spider!
You can’t just create a love for humanity in a void! What were we thinking—I have to get her out of there before they realize why she’s—

Exit Save File?

>>>yes

All unfinished drafts will be deleted

>>>okay

Exit Successful.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter, and the couple after it will be very, very shortly described because I have severe arachnophobia.

Why did I create a character based on Anansi the Trickster god?

Because, I hate myself but I love story-telling.

And Nancy is the best.

And I hate myself.

But I did it.

Thank you for reading. Please enjoy.
Chapter Twenty-Five: Let Us Reveal Some Terrible Themes

White Hat, at first, did not particularly mind the extra company in the Manor. Miss Nancy was a delight, if slightly… perturbing. Spiders were creatures that carried monstrous forms favored by the Old Ones, the Eldritch-types of beings… Several limbs and eyes… things that even the primitive minds of humans learned to fear and avoid. White Hat knew a writer, not that long passed away, who thought spiders were the perfect form of evil. Each leg a representation of deadly sins—with an extra sin, secretive and purely terrible.

He shuddered, trying to ignore the skittering in the vents and the new webs that appeared in the corners of the normally immaculate Manor. What was more upsetting, however, was despite Dr. Slug’s initial protest to having her, he seemed quite comfortable now as they all sat around the dinner table discussing her official business.

A raw slab of meat was balanced on a long fork as she pointed it at the doctor, saying, “The word on the street confirmed a pattern, dokte.”

“Heh,” Slug had just snuck his battered catfish under his mask and was chewing thoughtfully. White Hat pushed his own food around the plate, frowning.

“We don’t really talk business at dinner,” the Elder Being once again informed. Nancy held up a set of hands as she ate.
Slug must have finished his bite. He turned to White Hat and sighed, “With Clementia, yes. But Nancy can’t exactly help what time she receives information."

“And how does she receive this information?” he inquired, trying to be polite. Slug tilted his head as Nancy shrugged from the other side of the table. The large, brown tarantula was placidly sitting amidst a bowl of leaves and munching on crippled crickets. It was making White Hat uncomfortable as Slug pointedly shifted his eyes to it, making White Hat sigh, “… right.”

“Ah, you have no reason to fear,” she said. Though, graciously, picked up the bowl and settled the unsettling thing in her lap, away from sight.

Slug nodded, “I’ve run some of my own tests on Nancy. By all accounts, she’s more or less human.”

“More or less?” White Hat posed. Slug tossed his arms up in the air with a huff.

“She’s human. Genetic mutations, though. Unsurprising. It happens,” the doctor explained, poorly in White Hat’s opinion, “What her powers are, though, is much more difficult to discern. I’ve mapped her brain—and it’s especially sensitive. I believe she’s communicating through a combination of sound and scent triggers.”

“I simply know what the spider say, White Hat, sir,” Nancy said, waving an elegant hand.

White Hat nodded, but felt dissatisfied with the information. Slug rolled his eyes. “Statistically, there are more insects and arachnids on this earth than people. You know that, right? Ever heard the phrase, ‘if I were a fly on the wall’?”

“Vaguely,” White Hat mumbled. He thought spiders ate flies though. Also, he knew there had to be a human saying about spiders… Something about it being small? He couldn’t remember. He just recalled Slug playing with Clementia, singing, moving his hands upwards. It made him smile, but he still couldn’t quite shake the feeling something was wrong. Something was… off. It unnerved him.

“Well…” the Shi-Spider added in the awkwardness that rolled over the room, “I do mean to ask something of you, White Hat… if you have time.”

The Elder Being shook off the feeling, giving her a trying smile, “Of course. Anytime you wish to talk.”
Nancy went back to telling Slug all about the patterns and connections she discovered… Or perhaps more accurately, been told of. The doctor listened raptly. They went back to the lab together to map out trails of mayhem and destruction. White Hat continued to sit at the table, hollow feeling doubling in his chest. Trouble was bubbling out of where hearts normally sit.

What was this feeling…?

…I told you he was amiable,” Slug said. They were currently testing the endurance of her skin as she stood on the ceiling. His timer was still going after thirty minutes. Nancy gave him a laugh. Finally, she let go, shaking her feet to get the pins and needles sensation to go away.

Light headed, she sat, rolling all her eyes at the man, “He appears very friendly, wi.”

“There’s a but in there…” Slug prompted. He wrote down her time, noting she only came down because of the limitations of human blood flow, and not by the easily held grip on the surface of the lab’s ceiling.

“But,” she said, hugging one leg to her chest, and let one arm prop her head up as she studied the masked-doctor, “My little friends tell me he rarely smiles when alone.”

Slug blinked, stopping. Nancy was breathing softly, resting her head along the desk. He was unsurprised when a daddy long legs crawled out from under the surface and made it’s home in the center of her palm. The appearance of arachnids were becoming increasingly frequent the longer she stayed in the Manor.

“I… I guess I wouldn’t know,” Slug slowly said. The woman moved her fingers as the spider danced around it. Like a game a child might play with a coin to keep their digits light and flexible.

“I am unwelcomed,” she added.

Slug shook his head, “White Hat’s just—” He stopped. He didn’t quite have words. Closing his notebook, he moved to lean against his desk and cross his arms. “I guess I forget. I have worked with
him for so long… He’s really not… He’s not bad, ya know? He’s just not human.”

“More or less?” she mused, lifting a manicured brow. Slug gave a half-shrug.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to phrase it like that.”

“It is fine… I have been called worse,” she said.

Slug toyed with the edge of his mask. “Yeah… me too.”

“What a strange pair of Villains we make, non?”

“People question whether I’m still a Villain,” Dr. Slug said as he took a seat beside the woman. She hummed in agreement. “And you? What will happen when the public finds out about your plans?”

She let the daddy long legs go. “I find I do not care for public opinion.”

“That’s a good attitude for a Villain—” he started, folding his arms over his desk, “But a Hero? You gotta care for the public, Nance.”

…

White Hat was running through the few files that managed to survive the attack on the Manor. He was trying to cross reference Hero powers that normally equaled an unstable human mindscape. Elementals, mostly, and certain Magic Wielders… Those who used cybernetic enhancements sometimes also had a history of easy brainwashing… still.

Something wasn’t right. It tickled the back of his brain. There was something about Anti-Heroes that drained his ability to see through the cloudy human condition. How could people fight against evil with… a lesser evil? How could violence dissuade violence?

White Hat’s head was hurting. He let out a breath and sat back in his desk chair.
Humans.

How could they believe anything, anyone, was beyond help? At what point does a person turn away from upholding the law? From being a protector? How does a human… how does a person think that death solves anything? Why is there a need to destroy that which they find unacceptable? How can anyone… How can anyone decide to fix problems by burning them to the ground? That’s just… cutting and running from the real inequalities of the world.

An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind.

White Hat placed his hand over the void covered by a clean bandage.

Hate the sin, love the sinner, as the humans say. As they watch a man die for them. As White Hat watched them watch. As he wondered, later, why they praised a dead man’s unsaid words more than the living man’s good deeds. Dr. Slug, surprised him, once. By quoting passages from Catholic scriptures. Claimed it was hard not to, growing up on the streets of Rio, in the shadow of such a large religious figure.

White Hat didn’t tell him about his time in the Holy Land. He was comforted by the thought of Heaven… what it meant to those he lost.

It suddenly struck the Elder Being that the good doctor probably assumed he wouldn’t find his wife and daughter at the end of his life. That seemed a very Slug-like thing to think. As the saying goes, Hell is paved by the road with good intentions. But… what was Hell filled with again, according to that good book…?

Fire.

White Hat stood from his desk, trembling as he walked to his office doors. He needed to find Slug. However, as he tore open the door, the Manor’s newest house guest surprised him. Nancy was poised, double fist raised to knock.

They both jumped back, startled by the other.
“Miss Nancy?!”

“Uh—White Hat!”

“W-What brings you to my office?” the Elder Being questioned, a bit ruffled by her sudden presence. The woman opened and closed her mouth a few times. Then, slowly lowered her hands.

“You told me, ‘anytime,’ to talk,” she mentioned, awkward. White Hat cocked his head to the side, thinking, interrupting her smooth, buttery words.

Closing his eye, he nodded, “I did. Yes.”

Nancy shifted her weight, placing a few arms behind her. She looked human enough as she hid extra limbs—which was odd that White Hat, now of all times, was finding fault with a human’s appearance. Human physicality mattered little to him. Not with all the differing lifeforms he had made acquaintances with—or had shifted to in order to live among them.

“You said you had a question for me?” he asked.

Taking a breath, she said, “I—I wish to reform.”

“You said you had a question for me?” he asked.

Reform…?” he parroted. The woman gave him a sharp nod. “You mean to say… become a Hero?”

“There is… There has been certain things… people… who have made me rethink where I plan to stand in the world,” she said, certain, fierce. White Hat was blinking at her. Her arms reappeared at her side, and all her eyes were shining, wide and black. “I will become a Hero for him. I will do everything I can to help him. He is… I have always been fond of him, even before I met him and now—now I wish to do something for him that no one else has been able to do.”

White Hat, alert and on edge, harshly gripped the handle of his door. “H-Him? Of whom do you speak—”

“This I will not say. I will not endanger his life further,” Nancy hedged. White Hat raised his chin, looking down at her, but respecting her choice nonetheless.
“What means do you have to help this unsaid… him?”

“The only thing I can—” she gulped, “The truth… about Anti-Heroes…”

The door handle cracked in White Hat’s talons. “Of course. I see. So, this is why you came to my Manor?”

“Wi,” the Shi-Spider answered. White Hat breathed deep, letting go of the deep ache and hollowness that threatened to swallow him whole from the inside out. “And you have the means to help me get what I want.”

“Does this… he… feel the same? About your efforts, I mean, to reform?” White Hat asked.

Nancy glanced away, “I… have not said. He does not know my feelings… but I—I know only a Hero can aid him now. Someone needs to stand beside him. Keep him safe. He’s… fragile.”

“Say no more,” White Hat managed to choke out, and the woman released the tension raising in her shoulders, “I can help you reform.”

“Mesi,” she said, but hesitated to turn away. White Hat tried to smile, and she momentarily took a step back. Then, understanding that the Elder Being was not moving, and was offering no more words at the moment, she finally turned away. He knew she returned to Slug’s lab. Their daily conferences and conspiracies lasting longer and longer as she lingered in their home.

Another human idiom hit White Hat later—web of lies.

...

Slug gasped awake, clutching his head. His hand over his mouth at the nightmare of melting flesh and ash-ridden oceans drowned inside him. The deeds of his past locking him into the deep, deep dark. A strange, strangled noise escaped him and he scrambled at his nightstand. Tossing things like pens and tissues and burn cream around his darkened room as he searched and searched.
Then, the light.

It flicked on, and he tossed a blanket over his head to blot out the harsh day-light mimicking light of his bedroom. A quiet voice, “Oh! M’ regret!”

“Nancy…?” Slug asked, turning slightly at the voice.

She hummed. The weight on the bed dipped. “My little friends told me you were… ah, what is the English word?”

“I can understand Haitian Creole, it’s fine,” he said, and slowly, peeled the blanket lower. The woman was cautiously twiddling with something in her palms.

“They worry. You are kind to them—” she explained, “Mostly, of course. You trophies though…”

“It’s mostly butterflies and moths…” he nervously admitted. She nodded. With a small amount of trepidation, held out her hand. Between her fingers, a polaroid. His eyes widened. He let the blanket fall completely as he took it back.

Before he could ask, she sighed, “My pet may have stolen it for bedding.”

Slug opened it. Found a corner was ripped, a little over his face, but it was otherwise intact. He let out a sigh. Running his fingers over the face of his wife and daughter, he couldn’t look away. “It’s alright…”

“They will not touch it again.”

Slug managed a watery laugh, “It’s like… I’m not suppose to have them… I’ve lost so much of them —” He placed his hand over his eyes to hide the tears. He thought he was done crying. He thought his eyes had dried out long ago. Sometimes… it surprised him how much it still hurt. “I can’t—I can’t have this. I keep losing them.”

“Oh… my friend…” she sighed. Her many arms moved—one around his shoulder, another toward his back, and a few around his bunched-up knees. One last hand cradled his head to her shoulder.
“You have lost nothing… you have memories… deep in your heart. We hold on to that.”

Slug sniffled, “You say that like you lost someone, too.”

“Maybe,” she murmured, but Slug could not ask. It was none of his business. “Tell me about them. Tell me their story.”

Slug popped away, eyes wide. Nancy placed her hands into her lap, a small smile lingering. The doctor shook his head. He looked down at his photo. His heart skipped a beat. The nightmare still fresh in mind, the anxiety making it hard to breathe. “Why?”

“It will help.”

“How?” he scoffed, clenching tight to the photograph. He wouldn’t let it get away from him this time. “How can anything possibly help them now?”

“No,” she shook her head, “You. It will help you.”

Slug stiffened, confused, but glanced up to see Nancy, all in light yellow silk, waiting. She was undeniably beautiful. He briefly wondered if her power of influence, of secret-spilling, was just as effective on other humans. With a breath, he looked away. “I don’t… It’s not me who needs help.”

“In all this time you be with White Hat…” she wondered aloud, “You never ask for help?”

Slug tapped at the tear near his face. Slowly, he worked the edge. She watched him, strangely without an ounce of judgement, without stopping him. After a second, his old face was removed from the photo. Torn at the neck, with little left of him besides a dark smudge of a shirt. A stain on an otherwise colorful photo. “I’m not here for me… not really.”

“Well, then, tell me their stories,” she suggested, “If you never speak of them… no one will know. They will fade out, having only been remembered by one man… instead of more… people who can mourn after you’re gone.”

Slug gave her a shake of the head, with a somewhat impressed grin, “Way to guilt trip a guy…”
“What harm is there?” she tried again.

Slug flopped back in bed. Nancy lingered over him. He held the picture above him—much like how he took the camera and aimed it at him and his daughter. Pointing at Miranda, he started, “My wife. Her name—Miranda. She… was impossible. She was so beautiful. So… steadfast. Her strength was so quiet. Everything she went through—and still… she had this audacity. This bravery. Patience. God, I admired her so…”

“She sounds lovely,” Nancy said, leaning down on one arm and looking at the photo.

“Oh, and so smart,” he added, looking over with a smile, “I often thought I was so dumb, comparatively. She always had a knack for knowing things. Street and books smarts. We talked for hours about nothing and everything and I just—” Slug placed his hand over his heart, “I knew from the moment I saw her. I knew it. She would break me. She’d take everything from me… and I would let her. She deserved it. She could take whatever she wanted from me. I—I can’t even tell you…”

“Hmm,” Nancy laid her head on the pillow beside Slug’s, “Did she know you were a Villain?”

“Yeah…” Slug whispered. Nancy turned to look at him.

“She did not mind?”

“Well…” he said, fiddled with the puffed edge of the cellophane, “She came from a line of Villains herself. Mobsters. Gangsters. Crime families. She and her twin—er, brother. She…” Slug paused, voice scratchy, “She had sold herself to save him. I was tasked to kill him—he was trying to save her, and when he mentioned her, I grew curious… it’s really thanks to her that I made a bigger name than I meant to.”

Nancy hummed, “Ambitious?”

“Miranda?” he clarified, “Well… I didn’t think so. It just sort of happened…”

“I see… would you have given up being a Villain for her?”
Slug paused. The thought had never crossed his mind. Miranda had never asked him such a thing. Of course, whatever she wanted—he would have supplied for her at the time. But… “I… I don’t know. I didn’t know what else I could have done at the time. Her brother needed me, and she was always focused on family. Until Ama came. Then Ama was her world.”

The woman nodded, pointing at the little girl. Slug smiled brighter.

“Yup! That’s our baby. That’s Amarelle…” he reminisced, then sadly, found the tears welling faster, “And I—I hate so much that she was—She was six. She was so quick. So voracious.”

“She would have grown very beautiful as well,” Nancy noted.

Slug felt the laugh bubble out of him, “Luckily, she got that from her mother—her looks.”

“Brown eyes, like you…”

“Oh…” he gasped, tipping the photo, and seeing—indeed—a pair of earthy, wide eyes set in her tanned, cherubic face. “I… I never… I just always thought…”

“You’re sadness,” she mentioned, lightly touching his hand, “Don’t let it cloud your memories of them…”

He waited a few moments, silent, as he studied the picture with new eyes. Bright, shedding tears. After a breath, he closed the photo along the creased seam. He pressed it to his chest again. “They burned to death because of me. I—”


“W-What?” he asked, looking over.

She grasped his hand, squeezed it, “It’s the Anti-Heroes. Regardless of your crimes… these Anti-Heroes are at fault. The unfettered idea of justice harms the innocent and guilty alike. Do not confuse
“But—” he started.

“Did you not say this wasn’t about you…?” Nancy asked with a smug grin. The doctor stared at her, almost without breath. Then, with a shaky hand, squeezed back.

“Y-Yeah… thanks for reminding me.”

“Of course, bon zanmi.”

…

White Hat thought how quiet the Manor was—save for the skittering. Skittering everywhere. He had to leave his bed, leave his office. Every inch of him was… something felt like it was tearing, rippling along under his earthly form. He thought, maybe, a glass of milk might help. Sometimes, humans did that. Not that was human. Not that he had to follow those sorts of rules but—

He was standing in the hallway. Miss Nancy was softly shutting Slug’s door. He watched, eye wide. She seemed so peaceful, so light on her feet. A smile on her face. She looked up, then, with her multiple eyes blinking in succession, finally noting White Hat. Her hand slipped off Slug’s door. They stood, staring at one another.

“I—” White Hat started, then, turned more fully to the woman, “Good evening.”

“White Hat,” she greeted, curious.

White Hat watched her breathing, noted her loose silk shirt. He flicked his eye to her face, and she seemed unwilling to meet his eye—or the void of his other missing eye. He placed his hand over it, forgetting for a moment it was uncovered. “What are you doing awake at this hour?”

“My friends…” she gestured vaguely around them, “They woke me. The dokte was… He needed comfort.”
White Hat had nothing to say to this. Not that there wasn’t words tumbling inside his head, echoing and bouncing and demanding to be spoken, to be yelled, to be demanding answers… but nothing he could articulate that would make sense, he supposed. Nancy herself, seemed to lack words, and even strangely, suddenly unsure of herself. Finally—

“Is he alright?”

“For now,” she replied.

White Hat nodded, “Next time, I will see to him.”

“I mean no offense,” she started, slowly, walking away from the door, “But I do not see how you could help.”

“He’s mi—” White Hat cut himself off, startled by the venom in his own voice. In how quickly he responded to her as if she was a threat. As if she was the inhuman one. She halted, shoulders raised, looking back with large, dark eyes. White Hat calmed himself. “I—I apologize. I have simply… I have known him for a long time.”

“Wi,” she agreed, “I will… I will keep that in mind.”

White Hat shuddered, quickly turning back to his office doors and pushing them open. “Good night then, Miss.”

“Bòn nwí, White Hat…”

The night ended with White Hat rending his bed into tatters. He was uncertain exactly why. Looking down at his indestructible talons, feeling the tension tight and high in his chest. This unfathomable ache. A kind of… silent rage. He didn’t know how to contain it when Nancy was around. As the days passed, as Slug grew more encouraged by her presence…

The thought hit him as sunlight filtered through the curtains.
She was a *Villain*.

White Hat looked over at his desk, where his secret compartment sat. Waiting for him.

…

Slug wasn’t a *total* control freak—he had moments of impulses. One of them being dollar store candy. Where most items were only a *dollar*. It was practically a *steal*. It was criminal *not* to get candy when at those sorts of places.

Mostly, he had to purchase a pack of razor blades and mini-screw drivers for delicate work. There was no reason to splurge on those kinds of items since their shelf expectancy was so low with his finicky kind of work. It was better to purchase them at the nearest 99 Cent store. He was throwing a few other house necessities in his basket as well—vinegar, dish soap, sponges, some basic first aid things…

And then down the candy aisle. He stopped when he saw the carnival swirly pops. They were basically bite sized… but rainbow. Right next to a shoddy bag of unicorn-themed cotton candy. He laughed to himself, saying, “Aww… Clem would *love* these.”

He tossed the whole rack into his basket.

The woman at the register was grey but covering it up with some decent dye jobs. She eyed him the entire time she scanned the candy. Slug just waved a handful of twenties at her, and she let him off with a raspy, “Come again, sir.”

Carrying his totes on one arm, he checked his phone… No calls from Clem yet. She was probably severely pissed off at him, for taking the Tommen’s and Star Princess’s side instead of hers. He sighed. He wondered if he should call first—

*Blood. Yellow Carnations. In his hands instead of a phone.*

No.
He pocketed his phone with a shaky hand. Of course, he shouldn’t call. It wouldn’t be right. She needed to process—process what happened to her. What *he* did to her… what he told her before he did what he did…

“E-Excuse me, sir?” a meek voice asked, patting him on the back. Slug was suddenly looking up, not having realized he’d practically curled up into his legs on the sidewalk. Awkwardly looking around the parking lot, he was glad to note there were more cars, or families milling about.

“Ah, I’m fine—” Slug began, rising back to standing. He turned to face the person who spoke to him. A somewhat chubby male—chestnut brown hair and freckles. Obviously, a sort of desk-jockey. He looked a little pink in the face, either from the sun or embarrassment, standing about average height. There was a silver chain around his neck with the Star of David glinting lightly.

“No, that’s not why I stopped you,” the man said. He sighed, rubbing at stubble that had apparently been growing in for a while. Slug blinked at him as he moved forward into his personal space, “You’re the nefarious Dr. Slug right?!”

“Uhhhh—”

“You’re currently employed under the Great White Hat, right?!” he asked, leaning into him with a weird determination and bright eyes.

All Slug could do was nod, because, it wasn’t like he hid what and where he lived these days. “And you’re asking because?”

“My name is Miles! And I’m—” he seemed startled as he grew louder. Slowly, he huffed out and stood back. “Right. I’m here because I have been waiting for someone to come out of White Hat Manor and—”

“Okaaaay?” Slug intoned, moving his totes around in his hands as they increased in weight. He couldn’t just stand around all day talking to some crazy fan. “And?”

“Let me finish!” Miles demanded, holding up a hand. Slug snorted as the person squared his face to appear intimidating. What a fucking *dork*.

“Sure,” Slug teased.
Miles didn’t get it, as he smugly said, “Thank you!”

Slug was quite glad his mask was hiding his smirk. It really wasn’t fair. Miles breathed deeply, hands on his hips, as he stared down the doctor. Slug automatically held out one hand, and Miles, apparently on instinct, took a tote bag to help lighten the load. They began walking to the Manor, and Slug, trying to hold in laughter, asked, “So why exactly are you waiting for someone to come out of the Manor?”

“Right!” Miles seemed to visibly startle, then nodded, picking up the pace, “I need to get to Nancy.”

“Nancy Kwaku?” Slug asked.

Miles glanced behind him, glaring at Slug, “Yes. She went to help White Hat but—”

“But what?” Slug asked, confused.

“That’s not entirely true. She’s been working as my confidant. We’ve been working on uncovering the story of the underground Anti-Heroes for a while now. If White Hat finds out she’s not there to help him, but me, I— And, look—I know you probably feel a bit violated but Nancy’s safety is more important to me!”

“Well, a bit yeah, but—” Slug shook his head, confused, “She’s trying to reform to be a Hero so I doubt White Hat would get too mad…”

“That’s not the only problem though! I have a friend in the tabloid business. He sent me a photo a Black Hat skipping dimensions and popping into this neighborhood. He can’t know Nancy’s here,” Miles anxiously said, producing his phone to show a grainy image on the Eldritch Horror with his flaming eye raking through the fabric of reality.

Slug felt his blood freeze. He dropped the totes. “Then it’s time to run, kid.”

…
Black Hat sat in a comfy armchair, his claws steepled. He was smirking as his light-colored twin paced back and forth at the desk. “I don’t sense a problem. This is practically music to my senses.”

“To yours, yes,” White Hat snarled. He pressed his hands to the side of his head to blot out the incessant scratching and clicking in the walls. Breathing in a staccato pattern, he shook his head. “But I’m not—”

“If it bothers you so much, by all means…” Black Hat reached over, plucking something out from under the new coffee table. He dangled a thick, wiggling wolf spider by the leg. “Squash them.”

“They’re—” White Hat felt his words garbled, not English, falling into the old language, and shook it off. His form rippled. Black Hat rolled his eyes.

“Yes, yes. They mean no harm. They can do no harm to you,” Black Hat tossed the spider over his shoulder. It thunked solidly against the wall. Fell onto it’s back. Squirmed, then, found itself right side up and skittered under the door.

White Hat glared at his brother, “You are being vague.”

“Vague? No,” Black Hat insisted, sinister grin stretching. He stood, placing hands on the desk and raising one brow. “I am stating a fact. A mere earthly spider cannot hurt you… but, ah, what do they do to humans?”

“The Shi-Spider is human,” White Hat explained, almost bitter.

Black Hat gave him a shrug, watching as the pale being stood, trying to gather his form. It continued to expand. The extra appendages growing and brightening. He seemed to bubble and pop, forming strange patterns of light and gaseous smoke.

“I have seen her soul, you know…”

White Hat ticked his head to the side, waiting. Black Hat grinned, propping himself to sit on the desk, one leg crossed over the other. “And? You expect me to—”
“It formed like—” Black Hat looked down at his claws, wiggling them, “Oh yes. A Black Widow. That’s what the humans call a woman who kills their mate—you know this, yes?”

“No,” White Hat said, and the word slipped out, hollow. His eye was blazing blue. Black Hat relaxed against the desk, tilting his head to the ceiling, winking at figure frozen above them.

“Because the Black Widow spider eats her mate…” Black Hat explained, tsking. He began guiding his brother’s sight upward, claws wrapped around the light chin as he insidiously whispered, “Remind me again—what do spiders eat?”

White Hat’s eye fell onto the spy in his office.

Nancy was instantly seized by a sudden swing of dazzling tendrils. She was slammed onto the desk, struggling wildly as Black Hat lounged next to her. White Hat was huffing and puffing, stalking forward, growing upwards and outwards. Staring at her with a hollowed look.

“Dear brother,” Black Hat sweetly mocked, pushing Nancy’s hair from her eyes so she could get a better look at the Elder Being losing his mind, “Don’t spiders eat Slugs? Is this not a thing?”

The answer was unintelligible. Black Hat nodded like he understood. Nancy felt her heart stop as the tendrils around her grew tighter. White Hat’s arm grabbing a pair of hers and yanking them in twisting and turning directions. They cracked under the pressure.

She screamed.

“No, no, White,” Black Hat responded, and Nancy was gritting her teeth as the evil thing walked his digits down her body, “You pick off the legs. You pick off the right one—the spider cannot survive.”

“Non—” she breathed.

But it was already too late.

Something snapped, flesh and muscle torn like tissue paper. Her spine bowing and voice screeching
in near inaudible decibels. Gleaming white bone shone along spurts of deep, deep red blood. All her eyes rolled up into the back of her head—and in delirium, thought, maybe, just maybe… she could hear her beloved Miles voice calling out to her.

Chapter End Notes

How is everyone liking the series so far?

Is anyone confused?

Please let me know! All comments or questions are welcome! I am not getting much these days, so I have no idea how many people are still reading. I know the fic is really weird and heavy... Maybe? I honestly don't know. But, I am gonna finish it! I swear! Working on chapter 33 right now. So, if you're determined to reach the very end, you still have a bit to go!

Mostly though, if you made it this far, thank you so much for reading!

LOTS OF LOVE!

<3
Chapter Notes

HOLY MOLEY!! I AM SO SORRY THIS IS LATE.

Truth be told, I haven't slept in the last 48 hrs, and I forgot what day it was... a lot is happening.

BUT! HERE WE GO.

TRIGGER WARNINGS:

Mild Gore.

Lovecraftian horror.

Body horror.

Sexual Acts.

Just plain ol' weirdness and a hint of angsty stuff.

Oh, and violence and swearing are a given in this fic. So.

Please enjoy...?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Six: Let Us Face Our Fears

Slug had to keep Miles behind him. All the spiders were rushing away from White Hat’s office. Streams of those creepy-crawlies like a muddy river over-spilling, scurrying fast, escaping danger. The high-pitched screaming was what made them run up the stairs. A thin veil of smoke was flowing out from under the office’s doubled doors. Every hair on the back of Slug’s neck stood on end. Miles, though, must have lacked any survival instinct because he immediately smacked his shoulder against the center of the doors, tumbling into the office with a harsh wince.

Slug had to rear him back as they watched blood fly across the room. It soaked all across White Hat’s arms… and his body was a bubbling mass of what reminded Slug of gelatinous grey matter. Liquified and tremendous; It looked like a jelly fish—or perhaps more accurately, an angler fish. His upper body, hanging out of the blob-like mess, was dangling above Nancy’s unconscious form. White Hat’s fangs were dripping a vicious teal substance, with his tendrils and tentacles writhing and whipping about everywhere. The gas running along the ground choked the entire room.

Black Hat kept lazing on the desk next to the woman, a pleased smile lighting up his face.
“Look who’s here, brother,” he declared, then glanced over at White Hat to gather his attention. The Elder Being turned his face to Slug, dropping Nancy’s severed leg. Miles covered his mouth to keep from gagging. Slug couldn’t move, just gripped the other’s man’s sleeve, tugging him to hide behind the doctor.

“White Hat—” Slug gulped, and the upper body of his beloved boss sank slowly into the massive surfeit of whatever form this was, “What happened…?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Black Hat said, filing his claws casually, “It’s not a permanent thing. It just kind of happens when Elder Beings are…” The dark creature paused here, clearly thinking through his words, “Well. When their territory is threatened. It’s nothing more than a show. He’ll be back to normal when the threat is dealt with.”

Slug glared fiercely at Black Hat, who just carefully hopped off the desk. “What did you—”

“If I were you,” Black Hat advised walking closer and nodding at the human hiding behind Slug, “I’d make sure my twin doesn’t find someone else touching you… since this is your fault in the first place.”

White Hat had shifted at the words of his brother. Intently eying the Eldritch as he calmly breezed past the doctor, carefully keeping his hands to himself. Well, save for on the way out when he plucked a spider off the wall to pop it in his shark-like mouth. It wetly crunched… and then Black Hat was gone.

Slug tried to breath, pressing a hand to his throat, swallowing thickly.

Nancy was still lying on the table, twitching. Miles stayed behind him, edging ever closer. Slug put out his other hand to steady the trembling man. “W-Wait—”

“But she—!”

“We still have a little time,” Slug hissed, fighting off that clear edge of panic as the Elder Being was slithering around, intently watching them, “And White Hat can fix her. I promise—Just—Just give me a moment to get to him.”
“Are you kidding me?!”

Slug ignored him, moving closer with some jerky steps, attempting to work through his own instinct to run away. Miles went to reach for him. One of the tendrils hidden amongst the growing mist slammed against the adjacent wall, and both men jumped. Quickly the scientist threw up his gloved hands, fingers spread wide, “No, no! White Hat—”

The Elder Being cocked his head to the side, expression softening just a touch from the hard and horrid angles it had previously shifted into. Slug pressed one hand to his own chest, loudly saying, “Right. It’s fine. You’re—you’re known as White Hat here.”

The head nodded, body quivering lightly.

“Yeah—” Slug tossed a look over his shoulder. He pointedly moved his eyes to Miles and then back to the severed, dark leg still oozing blood along the plush carpeting and sinuous tentacles moving along the floor. “And whatever happened—” Slug sighed, moving his hand downward, soothing, like one would a frightened animal, “We’re going to fix it, right…?”

The Elder Being swayed to the side, eye roaming over to Miles, tiptoeing around Slug.

“Hey—No!” Slug loudly said, stepping closer so he was obscuring the other human’s movements, “Me—focus on me!”

White Hat went back to looking over at Slug. It seemed like… that’s all he wanted to focus on anyways.

“Listen to me. Look at me…” Slug was saying, as soothing as he could, and Miles grabbed Nancy’s leg with quaking hands, “Do you know who I am?”

White Hat nodded.

With honest relief, Slug sighed, “Good. Good. And do you know what I am…?”

“H-Human?” the Elder Being had a scrambled mass sounds for a voice. Something deep and
soothing—like dropping a stone into a well and listening to it echo back. Like shouting out a *Hello!* on a mountaintop during a lonely night to just to hear sound came back to you.

“Yeah, that,” Slug started, “But mostly very upset with you.”

The Elder Being then began to palpitate, like a bowl of jelly, apparently distressed by this news. Slug moved further forward by just a couple of inches, and the tendrils thumped the ground around him.

“Hey, no!” Slug started, trying to keep his voice stern but still calm.

“Doctor…” Miles whimpered somewhere in his peripheral.

Slug shushed him and stood straighter. Miles was exactly right, he is a *doctor*—he knew very well that Nancy was running out of time. But White Hat was… “Look at your hands, White Hat.”

The Elder Being went back to his swaying, but dutifully turned his blue fire eye back to his hand. The stark contrast of red on white jolted him. He seemed to soften further down into his gelatinous body.

“You—” Slug roughly cleared his own throat, “It’s okay. I know you’re confused and scared. I know you just want to protect your—protect your home…”

“Protect…” the talons curled in on the word and White Hat was back to staring at Slug.

He nodded, gesturing all around them at the strangeness, “But not like *this.* Okay?”

White Hat looked down at the woman on his desk.

“She’ll die if you don’t heal her.”

“*Protect*…” he intoned, more fiercely.
“I know,” Slug said. He walked to the table and ushered Miles silently to come forward, “But this isn’t—this isn’t protecting anyone…”

“Slug—” White Hat seemed to blink in and out of existence. His whole body, his presence was hinging on something very specific and… dammit, damn the human for not realizing sooner. It caused the doctor to grow more desperate.

In a last ditch effort, Slug quickly yanked off his mask.

“Please,” he practically begged, reaching out to grab the sticky talon and place it on Nancy’s shredded leg, “White Hat. Heal her. Let her go.”

His other talon curled around the burnt half of Slug’s face, voice slowly coming back, “She’ll take you.”

Slug shook his head, partially to assert that the statement was untrue, but also because that answer confused him. He began pressing more forcibly as Miles shoved Nancy’s severed leg into a mangled socket. The doctor squeezed… then sighed as a calming rush of something swept over the room. A dull hum. A light glowing from within the Elder Being. Slowly shifting back—and just as slowly, the woman was healed.

Her breathing returned to a steady rhythm, eyes fluttering open and closed as she came back to a steady state. Mostly conscious, she looked up at her reporter friend and gave him a watery smile. He returned it, nodding fiercely, both of them silently communing with one another. Miles pushed past both the doctor and White Hat, gathering Nancy into his arms. She was half-awake, closing two sets around the man, ruffling his hair, and patting his sides. Blinking dully, she stumbled as he hauled her away.

Slug turned, just to check on her further, but White Hat caught him, holding fast. Miles paused, and though Nancy was shivering, she too, fumbled to a stop along the office doors.

“It—it’s fine. Go. Get her to a hospital—use my name if you have to!” he urged as White Hat wrapped around him.

The pair heeded his words, hurrying out, waves of crawling spiders heralding their departure. The last things they see was the human swallowed hole by a white sea of writhing tendrils and a blue glow.
White Hat knew he was standing, tall and… well… human-ish looking. His mind dizzy, and eye clearing slowly. He came back to himself in shattered pieces. Mostly, he could sense Slug against him. Pressed close to his chest. His breath calming, long and deep. White Hat was mimicking the movement in tandem. He had no idea how long he had been doing so… but sensations were returning to him in patchy orders.

What was concerning was that his hands felt sticky… And when he looked down, knew immediately he was coated in human blood.

Instantly, he pulled back, searching the doctor’s face. Tentacles wildly crisscrossing every inch of his frail, human body. Something happened. He knew something must have happened. He never lost himself to instinct—which he was quickly coming to realize it why he felt out of sorts. And if a human got caught up in that?

Slug must have been hurt for him to lose his mind like that! And if Slug was hurt—

Well, he wasn’t actually… given Slug punched his employer. Quite squarely in the jaw. It sort of hurt. White Hat, in his defense, was surprised by the force. The punch had him falling back against his desk. The man clenched his fist against his chest, cracking his knuckles afterward. He was without his mask… and his brows were drawn up, expression pained… anguished.

“What the fuck…?”

“Slug, I—”

“Do you have idea what you—” he started, stepping forward, then seemed to deflate, “Are you back? Are you normal again…?”

“I—” White Hat looked down at his body… which still released a soft puff of gaseous release. It was toxic, dangerous for living things to be in for too long, and he quickly focused on refraining from expelling anymore. He’d no idea how long he had trapped his good doctor in his natural defense mechanism. “Yes—Yes, what did I—”
“You…” Slug stopped. He rubbed at his forehead with one hand. Tiredly, he plopped onto the armchair Black Hat had occupied.

**Black Hat.**

“I called Black Hat—” he realized, moving toward Slug. He hesitated to touch the man, “I… I was responding to—”

“Black Hat said you felt threatened,” Slug mumbled, moving to place both hands over his face.

White Hat knelt, pulling the man’s hands away. He was searching his face for any signs that the noxious explosion of gas was affecting him. So far, he seemed fine, if a little exhausted. “If in the presence of Eldritchies, sometimes. It’s—we can only co-exist side by side for so long… That’s why —”

“That’s why he’s a state away. You both have territories?” Slug guessed. White Hat took a breath, pulling in as much of the toxic air as he could. He nodded. Slug sat up straighter, away from his employer. “But—Black Hat didn’t cause this.” The doctor was waving his hand around the room, “Not entirely, am I right?”

White Hat looked about cautiously—seeing the blood splatter, the crunched desk, the broken door, the dented walls… His talons twitched and he glanced down with guilt. “Nancy… her form is… Eldritchies can use spiders. There’s… a natural fear to them. The old ones thrive on fear. It’s an… evil… physical thing.”

“Well,” Slug lowly shot back, “You weren’t exactly a beauty queen a few minutes ago.”

White Hat flinched.

“You—” Slug covered his mouth and looked away. White Hat felt something inside him shrink, shrivel, die at such an expression the human had, “You ripped her apart… White Hat… why didn’t you just tel—”

“I’m sorry!” White Hat startled, moving forward, stuttering out words.
Slug shook his head, standing up to put more distance between them. “White Hat, you…” the human struggled, unable to look at him, “You called Black Hat for help.”

“I—I wasn’t thinking,” he tried. Slug closed his eyes, scrunching them tight.

“How could you—”

“Slug, please, I just…” White Hat didn’t know what he was trying to stop the doctor from saying. He did not even particularly think he had a good enough explanation for his behavior. “I’m sorry…”

Slug opened his eyes, shoulders drooping. He was looking at the floor, “I know…”

“I—I—” White Hat wanted to fix this. He didn’t know how. He needed help. That much he knew.

“You should have told me,” Slug said, peeking over his fingers. White Hat nodded a copious amount of times. “If her form was going to trigger some kind of Elder Being Freak Out thing—” Slug pulled back a section of his hair, raggedly sighing, “She’s fine. I had you fix it. Somehow. But I—I don’t even know what happened. You were fine the other day—”

“She was in your room,” White Hat blurted out. Slug blinked.

He looked at White Hat’s tortured face, incredulously asking, “What?”

“I saw her leave your room—and she had been talking about leaving before—becoming a Hero for someone—and I thought—I…” White Hat looked away from Slug, “I thought she was… going to hurt you.”

“What?” Slug asked again, confused, and bordering on sharp, “Why would you even think—”

White Hat pressed his bloody hand to his chest, “If someone took you from me I—”

“From you…” Slug’s brows scrunched as he repeated the words slowly. White Hat looked at him with his imploring eye, no longer glowing…but still much too blue. Slug sighed, and he walked
forward, peeling the Elder Being’s hand away. He held it between his own. “I’ve told you before—”

“Slug… I can’t explain it…” White Hat dug his talons into Slug’s skin, gently piercing.

“It’s alright…” Slug sighed, “Tell me what you can.”

White Hat shook his head, but still moved closer. He laid his head onto Slug’s shoulder, bending his body, still clutching the human’s scarred hand. “I don’t want to… you’ll hate me…”

“No, I won’t,” Slug said, softly. White Hat shuddered against him.

“I’m—I can’t fight my nature… I can’t fight what I am…”

Slug leaned his cheek against White Hat’s, relaxing slightly. “Yeah… I know… it’s okay…”

“No it’s not—I’ll—” White Hat backed up, and Slug’s own eyes widened at the sight before him.

Elder Beings can cry, apparently. Their tears crystalline, shards of glowing, molten glass. Not quite clear, tinted with color—a pale blue. Slug wanted to touch. He raised his hand, moving his glove along the mess. Smeared it, the tears coating his gloves, slicing through.

“Look at you…” Slug murmured, he couldn’t stop the wonderous smile, “You big baby…”

White Hat sniffled, “Sorry…”

“Don’t be,” Slug said, taking off his gloves carefully to toss them on the desk, “Just tell me… tell me what about your nature is doing this to you… You don’t even have to say it in English.”

White Hat smiled back at him. Then, with a troubled sigh, knocked their foreheads together. A fresh wave of tears poured out from him. “You’re mine.”
Slug had listened to the sounds, couldn’t make it out. The Old Language—that’s what he and Black Hat called this music they could make. Black Hat’s was ominous. White Hat’s was…it was like a symphony of light more than sound. Feelings of…something much deeper than what the human heart could comprehend.

He nodded against White Hat’s forehead, placing his hands against the Elder Being’s chest. “Hm… Black Hat’s meddling… your, uh, heat… the attack on the Manor… Clem… and now Nancy. Her form, her abilities triggered something. You—”

White Hat gulped, unable to look Slug in the eye.

“White Hat,” he sighed for perhaps the millionth time this conversation, “I’m not blaming you for being overwhelmed.”

“I’m not…” White Hat softly argued. The doctor ran one hand down to White Hat’s stomach, pausing. The Elder Being barely moved. Slug moved his other hand to curl around the back of his neck, redirect his attention toward Slug’s face.

“Look at me, focus on me,” Slug demanded, voice just as soft.

White Hat met his gaze, shame bright and clear in his features.

“What can I do to show you that I’m not leaving?” he asked.

White Hat shook his head, “Not leaving… yet…?”

“No… not yet,” Slug agreed.

“You should… stay… here… with me,” he breathed. Though, the sort of thing White Hat was, he did not need breath. But it was a comfort. A comfort Slug had taught him.
“Well,” Slug said, and his hand finished moving down White Hat’s body. Slug stepped back with one foot, kneeling down. White Hat blinked at him, apparently confused. This was the only thing the man could think of. Perhaps this was something that the Elder Being needed. If Black Hat hinted earlier that touching could trigger instincts to attack, maybe touching could also calm White Hat… specifically Slug’s touch. “I am here… now. With you. And…” He glanced up, pausing to bite off his gloves and reveal his scarred hands. They returned to White Hat’s body, pressing more surely than he felt. “You’ll just have to make it count.”

“What—What are you doing…?” the Elder Being almost squawked, backing up slightly, but had no where to go. His ruined desk blocked the way, and his face was heating up, turning a glowing bluish hue.

The doctor gave a sort of shrug as he went to unbutton the pale slacks, explaining, “You’re nature… you need to have something to dominate, right? You were made to conquer evil… and, well, I’m evil. Or at least, on Team Evil. So, it makes sense.”

“What does?” White Hat asked, hands scrambling to bat Slug away. The human stubborn glared up at him, fingers coming to grip around White Hat’s hips.

“Look—” Slug roughly started, glancing away, “I’m trying, okay? I’ll work with whatever cosmic madness you got going on but… you can’t fight this. You fighting to control yourself is laughable at best so—”

White Hat frowned, “Mean.”

“But true,” Slug countered lifting his eyes up to his employer. The Elder Being was calmer, but still exceedingly embarrassed, strung out. Slug sighed, running a thumb along the indent of the imitation the protrusion caused by a sacral bone. “You’ve been… I hesitate to say possessive but—”

“Possessive?” White Hat echoed. His own talons were hovering awkwardly around Slug.

Slug cautiously continued, “And the only other source I have is Black Hat and—”

“Source? Black Hat?” he croaked out, hands finally finding purchase on Slug’s shoulders at the thought. “You’d go to—”
“Not for help,” Slug clarified quickly as the prick of sharped hands bit into him, “I meant as in… for whatever is happening in that stupid, white head of yours.”

White Hat’s grip loosened. “Oh…”

“He said not to let anyone but you touch me so—”

“I wouldn’t—I don’t—That doesn’t mean—” White Hat couldn’t seem to find the proper way to phrase his thoughts, sputtering here and there.

Slug shook his head, squeezing the pallid flesh under his palms. “It’s fine. You can—” he paused, but took a breath and quickly swallowed the last of his pride, “If you need to, you can use me. If this is what feels natural to you we can… we’ll figure it out.”

White Hat was staring at him. Unblinking, still. Marble-like.

God, it was unfair. He was so gorgeous. An Adonis sculpture… An angel… Some kind of mystical, beautiful thing. Covered in dried blood as he was, White Hat was still made of pure, perfect light… and he was staring, rapt, at a loss down at Slug. Slug, who rested on his knees. Wondering how many humans had done the same thing—certainly, he never looked at another like they were offering so much more than… whatever little Slug had to give.

“I don’t what exactly you want from me but…” Slug gulped, “Whatever it takes to help.”

White Hat looked wounded. “I don’t… I don’t know…”

“Part of you does, obviously,” Slug said trying to remain calm as tendrils lingered out of sight.

“I can—” White Hat tripped over his words, closing his eyes, “Whatever makes you more comfortable. I can—My shape doesn’t have to be—”

Slug waited a beat, realizing White Hat was trying to suggest. He was trying to listen to his body, to his needs, to the call to his nature… but still. He wanted Slug to… to be comfortable as well. To have a say into whatever they were adventuring into now. Smiling, mostly to himself, he shrugged,
“I’m too deep in it now to care about whatever it is you have. Just—be yourself, I guess. That’s always good advice, right?”

“Maybe for a human,” White Hat mumbled. Nervously, he placed his hands over his open pants. Slug ignored it, looking up at White Hat. He entwined their fingers.

“It’s fine. Really, you’ve already… uh,” Slug laughed a little, randomly, catching whatever nerves his boss had, “Well. We’ve done worse. If it makes you feel better—think of it as payback.”

White Hat moved his hand to his face, hiding from shame, muttering more apologies.

His awkwardness soothed Slug. It made him ignore the flustered Elder Being’s swaying. He went to inching down the hand-made fabric over sharp hipbones. At first, there was nothing but smoothness. A general pale lump—an approximation of genitals… but, slowly, surely… they emerged. How many tentacles, exactly, he was now face to face with he was unsure.

White Hat was nearly hypnotizing. Fascinating. Slug breathed out an interested, surprised little, “Oh!”

He was greeted with a coalescence of large, fatter lengthening tendrils. They bumped against his cheek as he sat back on his heels, growing interested at this strange display. White Hat made a noise—purely embarrassed as he pressed a hand over his mouth. Slug blinked, looking up at the mortified being. He smirked, leaning forward. He began petting White Hat pointedly.

“I think they like me,” he teased.

White Hat placed his face in both hands, “Please don’t—”

Slug hummed as a few wrapped around his wrist… they felt cool. No slime. Which he vaguely thought was odd. He clearly remembered some dripping appendages during the hazy aphrodisiac mess of memories from White Hat’s heat week. Still, they felt familiar. Felt real and cool. Calming. They radiated a certain kind of energy, urgently tangling smaller units along Slug’s fingers. Pent up, that was the only thing their movements told Slug.

“You don’t have to hide yourself,” Slug told him, “Not from me.”
White Hat peered over his fingers. His eye was conflicted. “W-Wouldn’t I normally be saying that to you…?”

Slug hummed, probably in agreement. Some tendrils were caressing his jaw. They followed the sound. His moist breath seemed to entice them. They knew what they wanted. They knew what to do. Slug lightly pressed his lips against one—and a tingling sensation flowed down his spine. “It’s bold of you to tease me when I’m being so nice.”

“I didn’t mean—!” White Hat began, warbling slightly.

Slug took the moment of insecurity to experiment. To taste and take in an Elder Being. Probably, the only human to ever do so. White Hat jolt, shooting straight up as Slug used his mouth, his tongue…letting his tastebuds collect the essence of whatever White Hat was made up of. His atoms, fizzy and electric, almost. Without a scent, he was only like dew on a morning glory. Fresh and clean and something so magical, but altogether natural. If you inspected too closely, maybe you’d find something deadly lingering beneath the petals…

It was nearly intoxicating. Slug felt the salvia dip down his tongue, leak out in thin streaks of his mouth. He was clenching his hands, one still gripping White Hat’s hip, the other tied up in ribbons of white, writhing flat-worm like appendages. The doctor nearly forgot to breathe, gasping in between tastes and licks.

White Hat’s body seemed to like that—and a pale tentacle looped around Slug’s throat, circling and chasing the sound. Others shot out behind White Hat as his back bowed, and he let out a broken cord of music for a moan. As a human—it nearly shattered Slug’s mind. He wanted to hear the sound again and redoubled his efforts.

The tendrils were wrapping around Slug’s arms. They stroked along the front of his body, binding and winding around him, limited his movements, cutting off sound and circulation in excitement. Quickly, Slug himself found he was thoroughly enjoying the moment.

He gasped, brain broken as he questioned whether or not he could be considered a masochist.

If this was something a sane, healthy person would do.

Who would so willingly give themselves to be used by a creature like White Hat…?
Slug tried to breathe, allowing the tendrils and tentacles and appendages and all other kinds of body horrors to abuse his mouth, to feel along his fragile human body… they vibrated with an intensity, and White Hat was struggling to hold back his own noises. The tentacles gorged themselves, sputtering, suddenly, swelling, bulging in anticipation.

Slug himself felt close to the edge.

Between moments of things slipping in and out of his, he tried to speak. Assuring the other, “It’s o—okay… just—” Slug was breathing too heavily, looking up, and would deny begging later, “Just let go.”

And White Hat, taken aback, was pressing his palm hard into the lovely plane of Slug’s cheekbone. His bright eye gazing longingly into Slug’s earth colored ones. His head snapped back, tone breaking, pitch cracking into some register humans couldn’t hear. He let go, fully, into Slug.

The taste of something overly sweet flooded his mouth. Poured into his throat, over his tongue. Could not be contained. Whatever White Hat’s seed was—it was thick, creamy. Little globules of something sticking to him, clinging to his shirt as it slipped out from between his mouth. Shakily, the tentacles around him loosened, and Slug shuddered, hands coming up to try to catch the stuff spilling out. White Hat, glowing with mortification pulled Slug’s hands away on instinct. He tilted his face. His long tongue delving between Slug’s lips and pulling out what he could.

Slug coughed, moving away and pushed at the Elder Being, “I—I can’t believe you’d—”

White Hat continued, though, pressing his mouth firmly against Slug… his talons cradling the overheated portions of Slug’s face. Breath stolen from him, Slug settled… feeling sticky, feeling bruised, but… there was a quietness. A shallow moment of reprieve.

White Hat was still glowing, but calm. Face serene. His mouth, soft, silky… tongue lapping along inside of Slug—no doubt naively trying to help. Unaware of how… indecent such aftercare was. The doctor could not still his heart. It was beating too rapidly. Surely… White Hat had to be listening…?

But White Hat did not stop his ministrations. Left no room for reflection… so, Slug closed his eyes, deciding to lean into for now. Hesitant, but gently, tipping his head and opening his lips. Coaxing and trying to subtly teach White Hat how humans kissed.
White Hat learned quickly.

He pulled away after a few moments. His breath was normal—Slug’s dragged, and his eyes fluttered open. White Hat was openly staring at him. “I… you…”

Slug huffed a breath, turning his face away. Stared at the ruined desk. “Yeah. You’re welcome…”

“No!” White Hat shook his head, then ducked his gaze away, “Well, yes but—”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind,” Slug said. He didn’t add how incredibly warm and wonderful he felt. He didn’t add that he liked it. He didn’t add that he didn’t know what else to do. He didn’t add that he had nothing else to give White Hat—that he was nothing else. He could be used. He could be abused. His reasons for being—he wasn’t here for himself.

But, White Hat still seemed to know, “You never… You never think of yourself, do you?”

“White Hat—”

“You have no idea what could have happened to—” White Hat choked on his own words, sniffing, brushing away the solidifying essence of whatever Elder Being’s produced, “When I was in my instinctual mode—or when I was in my time or need—or now. What if I’m just as toxic as Black Hat? What if—”


“I’m covered in human blood,” White Hat argued, “I can hurt people.”

“But…” Slug murmured, wiping away drying flakes on the pale hands, “You choose not to. Right? That’s what you’re always talking about. You make your choice, every day, to be better than that. Better than what you are… prove to me that’s not just bullshit. It’s not just talk.”
White Hat nodded, desperate, clinging on to the man, “How? What can I do to—”

“Go. Find Nancy. Beg forgiveness and finish healing her. You do whatever—”

“Yes, yes,” White Hat agreed. He stood, legs shaking. Slug grabbed his hands, stripping his bloody gloves off. Taking the hint, the Elder Being divested his jacket onto the floor. He paused, looking down at Slug, brows falling. “Will you—”

“I’ll be here when you get back,” he promised.

If White Hat knew better, he would have questioned why the doctor was so subdued.

He did no such thing. He rushed from the office, leaving the human behind, desperate to repair a pristine image of himself. Slug watched, catching his breath on the floor until he was certain White Hat was gone.

Then.

He was on his feet, leaning wobbly against the broken desk.

“A-Alright, Eldritch Asshole. No more Mr. Nice Doctor,” Slug growled to himself. There was no way he was letting Black Hat get away with this.

He shucked his ruined sweater, eying the curious substance, before putting it in a pile with his gloves. He’d analyze the DNA data from White Hat later.

Slug tore into White Hat’s adjoined bedroom, tossing clothes—picking up one of his boss’s shirts instead and redressing himself, ignoring the uncomfortable tension in his lower belly—and then wrapped himself in his lab coat. He went through all the drawers, the cabinets, hat boxes, shoe boxes. Anything. He knew only sort of he what he was looking for…

But White Hat wasn’t keeping it in his room.
He went back to the office, stalking around. Then, finally, sighed.

The desk. It had to be in the desk. White Hat never, ever let anyone replace his desk. He just always magically fixed it—though all the iterations of White Hat Manor’s copious redesigns… his desk remained.

Currently, it was fragmented, frame split and leaning shoddily on the side. Splattered in coagulated blood. He walked around to White Hat’s seat. Bent. He moved it aside. Started pulling at all the compartments.

One stayed welded shut.

“Apanhei-te, cabrão,” he whispered in triumph. He yanked at the drawer. When it rattled, but wouldn’t budge, Slug began kicking, cracking the ashen wood further. Finally, the lock clattered, broke, and popped out of the drawer. He pulled, and the cubby itself was empty. Sniffing around, he bent and rummaged inside until he found something—a hidden compartment.

Slug found a black box, tilting his chin up as he rose to stand. He dropped this dark thing onto White Hat’s desk. It was like an oil spot marring such an otherwise clean desk… not counting the browning blood. He was also staunchly ignoring the menacing aura this little box exuded. It was plain, more or less, and shoddily crafted. But, clearly, potent with some incredibly vile power. White Hat must have worried over it countless times.

Flipping open the lid, Slug peered inside, looking down his nose at the contents.

Disgustingly, Black Hat’s eye sat, bloated and lightly smoking. It did not move, seemed dull. Disconnected, almost.

The Elder Being said before that he and his brother could still feel missing parts.

Perhaps it slumbered in its dark prison.

Slug looked at a crooked drawer. Noted the contents to pull a letter opener out of the mess. He tapped the edge of the box, in warning perhaps. Then, gripping the silver handle, trust sharp instrument into Black Hat’s eye, spearing it through a milky pupil.
Immediately, it erupted into flames.

Slug stepped back as the eye—still attached to the letter opener—hovered above him… like a god damn demented marshmallow on a stick. He gave the putrid thing a second as it swiveled around, perhaps investigating what was hurting it, before landing on him. Heat waves wavered, and the letter opener began to turn yellowy orange as it was heated by Black Hat’s anger (again, presumably).

“I don’t know if you can hear me,” Slug said, fully aware Black Hat’s dismembered eye focused on his unmasked face, “So read my lips…” He placed his hands on either side of the black box and leaned in closer to the fiery eyeball, “You step foot into White Hat Manor one more time—” Slug enunciated each word clear, with as much venom and fervor as he could muster, “You fuck with White Hat’s mind again…” He grabbed the end of the heated letter opener before his courage died, drawing the sharp edge harsh. The eye rolled back, swiveling in the air, more than likely in pain. He waited until the thing quivered, dripping ocular fluids into the black box it floated above, staining the inside and creating a foul odor, “… and I will end this Game. One way or another, I will destroy you. Do you understand?”

The eye could not respond to him. Could only drip and crackle with flame. Slug would shiver and shudder later at his boldness, he knew… but at the moment, he was simply too pissed off at Black Hat. “Do not contact White Hat again. Until this Anti-Hero business is settled—” Slug said, straightening as he picked up the box’s lid, “Stay out of our lives.”

And he slammed the box shut, snuffing out Black Hat’s eye.

He waited a moment, harshly breathing.

All was still.

He wrapped it in copious amounts of rubber bands making sure the thing was sealed shut.

When White Hat returned hours later, Slug was repairing the desk. The Elder Being walked into the room, moving to the doctor. He eyed the secret drawer—now without a lock. Slug looked him square in the eye, “You ignore him. If he reaches out to you again—” the human warned, “I will kill him.”

“Slug, he’s—”
“Brother or not,” Slug said, fingertips tracing the ridge under White Hat’s own missing eye, “If he baits you again—if he tries to mess with your mind one more time…” White Hat was still, eye wide, skin glowing faintly, “Then I promise you, I will rid this world of him.”

“You said yourself that you don’t know what it would do to this world if—”

“Fuck what I said before,” Slug declared, staring hard at the uneasy Elder Being, “I don’t care. I never want to see you like that again. Do you hear me?”

“I—” White Hat started.

Slug leaned forward, placing his lips over White Hat’s. The Being calmed near instantly. He stepped back, looking at the dumbest, softest look he’d ever seen on his boss’s face. “Do you hear me?”

“Y-Yes…” White Hat gulped.

“You know I can do it.”

“I—” White Hat’s brows scrunches, but then, with a sigh, he nodded. “Yes. But we’ve never… I’ve never go very long without—”

“You don’t need him. Not to define you. Not to bully you,” Slug told him. He picked up his mask, tapping it lightly against the white chest. “You have me to remind you.”

“B-But, then you can’t leave,” White Hat said, following numbly as Slug walked around the desk.

“Well, you don’t want me to leave so…” Slug shrugged absently, “How is this an issue?”

“Err—well, but—it’s not really… but I still want you to choose to—” White Hat was thinking aloud, reaching out before noticing the doctor was wearing some of his clothes. He paused, all other thoughts leaving his head.
Slug turned, raising an eyebrow, “Choose what?”

“Uhhh…” White Hat was blinking. Letting out a sigh, Slug shook his head. Then, placed his mask back on.

“You don’t talk to Black Hat for a while, alright?” Slug said. He crossed his arms stubbornly, “Because I will kill him. I will damn the world. The universe. I don’t care—I’m not here for that. What I am here for—” he reminded White Hat, grabbing him by the tie and pulling him closer as he glared, “Is a goddamn Hero. And a Hero wouldn’t want the world to burn—right?”

“Right,” White Hat agreed, staring into the goggles warily.

“Villains damn the world, White Hat…” Slug said, soft but sure, “And you if you intend to keep any Villain in your sight—you keep me there. I am the biggest threat at the moment… do you understand?”

“I don—” White Hat began, unfollowing. Slug tugged him the tiniest bit closer, moving into his personal space.

“Not Black Hat,” Dr. Slug demanded, “Me. You owe me this, White Hat. You promised me something. If I do not get it—people will suffer. You cannot forget that. You cannot forget what I am… if even Black Hat is repulsed by my soul… you will regret dismissing me.”

White Hat gasped in a fresh breath of air as Slug let go of his tie roughly.

He walked out of the white walled office.

The Elder Being watched him go, shocked, stunned. Unmoving.

He believed in this human more than anything else in the cosmos… and that was perhaps more frightening than anything else he could ever imagine was to come.
I honestly have no idea what to say about this chapter.

And to be honest, I am in the midst of chapter 35... and the end is coming... and you'll look back on this chapter and be like, "Ah! The body horror! The weird, misplaced BJ scene...! I miss those chapters. Also. The timeline is way more linear now."

... I expected to write more sex and then I got more angst... which confused me, but I was like, yeah. Alright.

BUT.

Anyways, thank you for reading!

Comments, but more importantly, questions are always welcomed.

LOTS OF LOVE TO YOU ALL

<3
Let Us Find the Loosening Threads...

Chapter Notes

I AM VERY SORRY ABOUT MISSING MY UPDATE DAY.

I was out of state, driving to pick up my niece.

A lot has happened.

Only trigger warning for this chapter is violence. And vagueness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Let Us Find the Loosening Threads…

Clementia was packing her bag; angrily stuffing the clothes Tommen purchased at a very expensive, whimsical boutique into an equally and generously, personally stylized duffel bag that was mostly white with little pink explosions of unicorns and glitter. She hadn’t bothered with make-up today—just tossed up her hair in a pony-tail and grabbed her stained hoodie out of a box of trash and ordered Cero to find the least flashiest car so they could get the heck out of the Golden Spire—Tommen’s newly built Tower housing his rotating cast of Heroic friends still willing to fight the good fight with him.

She was more than fed up. For the last two weeks and some change, she’d been a very good girl. She met her therapist every other day, hashed out her childhood. Talked about her future. Cried. Learned the recovery techniques that best worked for her. She ate dinner with Tommen and Star Princess practically every night. Tom was super cool, allowing her to train in his fancy high-tech battle simulator room. And Star Princess? Equally accommodating. Patient. Truly sorry for having accidentally invaded her mind while her body was recovering.

But that was the thing—

She was recovered.

White Hat healed her. She was making leaps and bounds of progress that surprised the very best of mental professional personnel team that Tommen hired upon the Princess’s request. Yet, even so, Tommen hesitated to call or email White Hat Manor. Clem thought, at first, maybe her therapist had warned against it until they completed a suggested month’s worth of emotional work.
Until she saw the hoodie—her hoodie—being hauled out to the dumpster by the automaton maid. That was the last straw for her. She would not be held hostage by what she thought were her friends.

“Clementia,” Tom’s voice cut in over a speaker box located at her bedroom door. It sounded particularly wounded and worried.

She marched over and punched the mute button. It was a few seconds later that the shiny, chrome door slid open, yellow light glowing. Clementia was glaring right into the otherworldly and gorgeous face of Star Princess. Her eyes were pitch black, shining and wide—as if a whole galaxy was swirling inside of her. Her willowy body did not quite hover off the ground, but she always seemed to float more than walk. This was enhanced by the nearly sheer and floating garments she was adorned in. As per her heritage, she kept her head draped in silks to hide her head, neck, and even shoulders. Though, what little of could be seen of the Princess’s skin glowed with a peachy-purple hue, and Clem had a moment where she was honestly stunned by how enchanting the alien was.

Still, she was mad.

“I’m going home, Princess,” Clementia asserted. The alien shook her head, mouth coming down in a frown.

“Understand not I... Made up, haven’t we?” Star Princess asked without words, voice smooth but language jumbled even as she mastered perfect pronunciation of each English word inside Clem’s mind.

Clem breathed through her frustrations, “About the invasion of my privacy—yes. But you threw out my hoodie.”

“Covered in blood be it,” she mentioned, then paused, one hand lifted to inspect the damaged cloth, “Stained, yes? The word.”

“Stains can be fixed, Princess,” Clementia said, pushing her hand away. Her body was dense, surprisingly, and there came a crackle when her bare flesh encountered Clem’s. It always happened—the body chemistry between whatever Star Princess was made of clashed with a normal human being’s.

Star Princess moved into Clementia’s room, and the younger woman took a couple of steps backwards, crossing her arms defensively. “Easier to replace stain than save.”
“Then Tom’s being spoiling you,” Clementia snapped, “Or is it your fiancé that does?” Star Princess for a moment had a pained look. Clem decided to scoff than let herself be guilty over the barbs. She sharply turned to continue shoving clothes in her bag. Thinking better of it, though, she ended up pushing the bag off her bed and shook her head, “You know what? If this is what Tom’s about—buying my favor through clothes—he can just return these or something. I have other stuff at home.”

“Clementia…” the Princess nearly whimpered, following her as she moved past the bed and headed for the door. In a suddenly decisive move, Star Princess slammed the automated panels shut via telekinesis.

Clem jumped, startled, before pivoting and shouting out, “Hey!”

“Not Tommen…” she admitted, taking a brave gulp and strutting forward, “I.”

“What?” Clementia asked, rubbing at her forehead.

Just as aggravated, Star Princess pressed her hands against her chest, “I buy.”

“You buy? You bought the clothes?” Clementia clarified, not entirely surprised, but a little put off by how recklessly Star Princess had been lavishing Clem with gifts. Always neatly placed at the end of her childish, but admittedly adorable bedspread of hearts and rainbows. Even Cero had his own little plush corner of large dog pillows and other assortment of cushions as well as a netted canopy to scented to trap insects on the inside rather than outside. “Are you admitting to trying to—to bribe me to stay or something?”

A tense moment followed as the Princess was clearly processing the words. Eventually, she nodded, closing her unnerving, yet fascinating eyes in shame.

“Why?”

“I—” Star Princess started, then gestured to the bed. The Princess perched on the edge. She patted the spot beside her. Clem shifted her weight between her feet. Sighing, she uncrossed her arms and moved over to sit beside her long-time Hero friend. Clearly, the woman struggled with her words, or perhaps more accurately, translating them from whatever her cosmic language was into Earthly words.
Clem worried the straps of her hoodie. They were frayed. Brownish, now, and felt stiff despite years of wear and tear and patching. “You don’t want me to go home… Because of the attack… or because of… or because of Slug?”

“Slug—” Star Princess glanced over, surprised by Clementia’s words, “Doctor?”

“Yeah, he was…” she paused, gesturing to her supposedly ruined hoodie, “I know it looks bad—and I can only imagine what you experienced snooping in my memories but that wasn’t—”

Star Princess gave the girl a sort of strained smile, holding up her hand, “Memories, experienced, as are. Cannot behold emotions in other mind of mine.”

“You can’t… uh, you just,” Clem worked her way through the Princess’s confusing phrasing patterns, “Are you saying that you can only know what the experience was? You can’t pass judgement? Like—So you know I am not scared of Slug. Or mad. Or anything. He was trying to save me. What happened…”

“White Hat,” Star Princess emphasized.

Clem blinked, “Yeah? What about?”

“Know to why asked he of the taking care by me?” her words were jumbled, rushing to point, pouring out like a secret was close to the end. Clementia placed her hands behind her as she thought over her childhood—she had been interpreting Star Princess’s speech since she before she was a pre-teen. The Princess was the babysitter White Hat and Slug had taken to when they had the rare outside of the Manor meeting, committee hearing, or general disaster to avert and she was too young to go with.

“Um,” Clementia finally settled on saying, “Actually, no. I never questioned it…”

“Not first ward of White Hat, you.”

It took a second, but Clem sat straighter, brows pulling down as she flat out stared at Star Princess as she pointed at the lovely face. “Wait… what? You…?”
Star Princess pressed her fingertips to her mouth—and then—up to her mind. Clementia felt the slightest of pressure behind her sinuses… the sure sign that The Princess was knocking in order to enter her mind. Clem, more than curious, let the alien in.

Images flooded her mind—memories she realized—of a vast and beautiful planet. Sparkling waters, too blue, flowing out of spiraling monuments. They dazzled and shined in the fading light of a pinkish sun into a sparkling black night. An old, ancient city, peopled by various humanoids, roaming in similar robes designs the Princess wore. Some had violet marks across their eyes—the priests, the seers—and many entered and exited a vast hallway.

Little feet, running, and through clear crystal silhouettes, a tiny peach-purple child could be glimpsed, laughing. Following her siblings. They crouched behind pillars, listened to secrets when they shouldn’t, but, it was important to know. They would oversee the council one day. They Had To Know.

The language was familiar and old, and Clem, because in that moment the memories were not hers, knew exactly what was being talked about. A Great Darkness was coming. It was gobbling planets, left and right, hungry and greedy…

And through the months, as the city prepared, and the Princess was hidden in a great temple… the darkness did wash over the lands. Swallowed and shattered spires. The sky bled, and the horrid screams filled the air, and the Princess sat at the feet of the goddess Aletheia… She prayed and pleaded—

And she was heard. Dangling above a craggy-toothed maw, crying out, a shaft of light broken through the oil-slick mass of evil. The Princess fell, held aloft in feathery clouds of safety. Through the acrid smoke, the smell of decay, a figure towered tall—momentous—glowing eyes of pure, pure blue and talons. Pierced the darkness, rent it, tore it away. Both rumbled and tumbled. Shattering the library, the old throne, and finally, Aletheia’s temple…

Crying, the Princess screamed—and the darkness was briefly shattered—form changing. Becoming like her, taunting her as it walked forward, “You still live little mind-reader?”

“I am Princess Rae’gna of Z’lyeh!” she had corrected, raising, cords wrapped in her hands, “And I banish you, Dark Creature! I banish you!”

“I’d like to see you try. I love it when snacks fight back.”
These cords were the relics of truth, things that had not been used in centuries as the children of the Darkness and the demon Shub-Niggurath had all been sent to other planes, dimensions as barren and deathly and dank, as the legends had said. And the dark thing swiped at her, and she sent out the cords, circling him in the holy ring of truth. It pierced him and ripped and was then… swallowed. Imploding in a flash of unholy shrieks and writhing, bubbling tendrils.

The Princess fell into a beam of light, and was suffused in safety… as she remembered it… the White Light melted, shedding itself like a peeling flower petal… and soon a pale thing stood before her. Humaniod. Too tall. Eyes bright and staring at her with surprise, and perhaps uncertainty. This White Creature was brilliant, beautiful, the epitome of her people’s hopes and dreams. She knew instantly he was made by the Elder Gods. He was their angel—he’d been prophesied to save them…

But, here, alone, she stood. Her city and people, lost. The Great Darkness had eaten them.

And she cried. And this Angel watched her.

For many weeks, as he paced the ruined landscape, she followed. He let her. He did not speak her language, and she tried invading his head, as royal blood, it was her special birth that gave her the means to do so. Yet, he was much too powerful. Eventually, he began to teach her ever so subtly, how the mind worked… eventually, she began to run out of food. She grew weaker, and his power could only hold out for so long. He sensed the rippling of the air—and she could smell oncoming death on the horizon.

The sky was broken, and things slipped from the shorn remains of stars, and the White Light sighed. This angel walked to the edge of the world, and ushered the Princess toward him. Finally, his heavenly voice rang out, rifting across the void, a milky white trail to follow.

“Oh, Princess. Princess of the Stars... you will die and I cannot defend you and battle this Darkness. You must leave. Follow this path. Do not stray. It will take you far from here. Somewhere safe. Perhaps to your goddess...” he instructed, standing beside her, arm moving to the space, void, but safe. She cried more. She was a mere child. This Angel could not understand her fear. Offered no comfort. Just waited until she started her slow, uncertain trek into the unknown. As the curtains of the sky fell about her, he warned one last time, “Do not stray from this path, Star Princess.”

She was a mere child.

She strayed from the path and—
Clementia felt was a violence, a sudden harsh stop to the flood of the memories. Her face was drenched in tears, and while Star Princess was dewy eyed, she remained stoic. Clem’s stomach rolled and she quickly whipped around to find a waste basket. All of her breakfast, and maybe even the previous day’s dinner, was pushed out of her stomach with a harsh explosion.

It lasted a few moments, but, Clementia finally folded her legs under her, sitting dumb-founded on the floor.

“I…” Star Princess started, soft, “I am sorry. Story of mine… painful.”

“N-No,” Clementia said, wiping her mouth. She looked over at the woman, beautiful and broken, and shook her head. “I didn’t… It wasn’t you.”

“It was.”

“Er, well,” Clementia said, rephrasing, “I meant… I just… it’s hard to handle. The, um, mental stuff. White Hat tried before too but…”

“Yes, White Hat,” Star Princess seriously said.

Clementia blinked, understanding dawning on her. “That… That was White Hat…”

“Yes.”

Star Princess was looking at Clementia. Clementia had to look away, her hand over her mouth. The memories not quite hers swam in her head. Things she should have never been able to see… but apparently, needed to know. With a slight gasp she suddenly paled.

“And the dark thing—”

Clementia let out a breath she had realized she was tensely holding, “And you were how old…?”

“Hard to say,” she murmured, lost in thought, “Time… works not same. Years eight, younger perhaps.”

“Oh Gwad,” Clem thought aloud, pulling herself back up to the bed.

Star Princess nodded, “Earth accident to be found… realized not, until told to visit Manor…”

“… did he recognize you?” Clementia nearly whispered, afraid of what the answer might be.

“First, no… then touched minds,” she said, and Clem nodded to show she was listening. The Princess let out a great sigh, “Explain, cannot. Emotions, too many. Too great… And so, so hurt I. So terrified. See him, could not I…”

“Until me,” Clementia realized.

Star Princess nodded, “Until my dear Clementia.”

“Oh, Princess…” she breathed, taken aback by the depth of love and worry in her friend’s eyes, “All these years you’ve been… been protecting me? Haven’t you? From experiencing the same—his same coldness.”

“Confess must I…” she said with a strangely tilted smile, and Clementia found her pausing from reaching out to touch her, “Changed has he… Ways unpredicted. Gentle. Open—” The Princess placed her hand onto her own knees and clenched her fingers, “Never, never had been held…”

Clementia thought back to the first time she had met Star Princess, Slug had answered the door, and was handling all the bags and cases. He had greeted the woman, and Clementia remembers being very little, as this being floated inside in the Manor. A glowing gem of color and radiance. Clementia hadn’t cried, but she had clutched the still squirming and new Cero to her chest. Buried her face in his soft fur, and wanted to cry for Sluggy—and suddenly White Hat was in front of her. Brushed her bangs away and cupped her face. She’s a Hero. And an old friend. I trust her. And only then had Clementia started to weep. White Hat and Sluggy were leaving. Something was happening half-way across the world and the only person who was not going was this strange alien. White Hat, in a soft movement, had scooped her up and let her sob against his shoulder. He walked over to Star Princess
and they did not speak in words. Sluggy had walked over, and reframed from hugging Clementia, as he always did in the presence of others. She clung on to his legs, she remembers, as they left and she tried to stay up, playing with the baby Cero…

When she woke in the morning, she was wrapped in a warm blanket, and Star Princess was singing. She made her these wonderful, fluffy pancakes, and they ate strawberries with cream and then… by the evening, a dusty Slug came through the front door. White Hat had to peel her away, and then, together, they had thanked Star Princess.

She promised then and there to come to Clementia’s aide whenever White Hat called.

“I… never realized,” Clem muttered, then scrunched her brows, “But… you know White Hat was—no he is—I’m pretty sure he learned all of that watching Slug. You know this, right? White Hat didn’t find me… that was Slug. Slug made him keep me.”

Star Princess nodded, “Minds touched. I know.”

“Then why do you still want me here? I need to go home,” Clementia insisted.

“Dangerous still is he…” she answered, vague and halting, “Worshipped his creators did my people… Goodness lost in the face of evil. Trust no longer.”

The young girl shook her head. Though the stench of blood and pollen were scrubbed from the hoodie… it also robbed her of the soothing scent of Slug (burn cream, soap) and White Hat (very faintly of petrichor). Even of Cero, who slept nearby always (cloves and greenery). “He didn’t lose. As far as I know they—”

“Roots of evil sown, cannot be reaped in faith good.”

Clementia startled as Star Princess stood, fierce and sure.

“I need to go home,” Clementia said, shaking off the heaviness sitting on her chest, “Even if I had the luxury to agree—at the moment I… I need to go home.”

Clementia pressed her hands close to her stomach, “I—I can’t explain it in words. I just have a feeling. I need to go home… Sluggy and White Hat… they need me right now. Somehow…”

Star Princess hummed. She then opened the bedroom door with her mind. It snked open with a sudden force. Clementia stood, looking from the opened path to her friend, biting at elegant nails. “Go. Before mind changes.”

“Thank you, Princess. I’ll call and let you know I’m safe. I promise.”

“So do…” she said, and Clementia brushed past her, barely missing the old words of, “Little sister.”

...

White Hat received the call from a distraught Tommen an hour before 0.5.0. and Clementia screeched up to the gates in a… borrowed… silver Ferrari. Apparently, Star Princess had abandoned Earth to meet Sparrow Heart at the Observance (the space station ironically built by the Golden Rule’s Heroic competitor, Sky Fox, a man of enormous wealth who was also a brilliant tactician that utilized regulated system of Heroes joining forces against Evil-Doers). She had finally let Clementia leave Tommen’s tower, and was too worried about the consequences. The poor lad was drinking himself under the table, both with guilt for letting the Princess dictate every aspect of Clem’s stay as well as not being able to prevent the either woman from leaving without tension and heartache.

And now Clementia was striding inside the Manor, her guardian bear having a difficult time at her heels. He would not use his monstrous strength to stop her as she called out, banging open doors without care.

“White Hat! White Hat!” she tried at first, before taking a moment to sniffle, and try again with a pouting wail, “Sluuuuuuuuuuuuuuuggy…!”

White Hat was moving down the foyer, awkwardly holding the brim of his hat in both hands, “Clem —Clementia, darling—”

“Where?” she asked. White Hat’s brows fell and he guiltily looked downwards.
“The lab…”

“I have questions,” she said, rubbing at her nose as it ran.

White Hat shook his head, “I—He’s not—You know he didn’t—”

The girl took off past him, ignoring his flubbing. He followed, glancing over at the rumbling bear who was equally confused. She was repeatedly hitting the button for the lift, trying to rub away tracks of tears that kept resurfacing. White Hat was unsure exactly what questions she wanted answer—and didn’t quite know what would make it better, even as he guessed the various things she had a need to know.

They descended to the lift and White Hat tried, once again at calming her, “Are you sure you want to—to be back so soon? Things happened after and—”

“There’s something I need to know,” she said, clearing her throat, “I had a lot of time to think in the car and—and I can’t ignore it.”

The doors pinged open then. Slug was sitting at a configuration of computers, switching from screen to screen and scribbling calculations on things. He had just spun around and was loading a new cartridge of something into one of his many personally designed weapons. His goggles showed he was intensely focused until he saw Clementia’s dripping face.

“Clem…”

Slug paused as the young woman walked forward, arms stiff at her sides. She stopped as he stood from his chair, whether to move closer or away, White Hat was uncertain. They both seemed to freeze, not entirely confident by their body postures.

“White Hat,” Clementia spoke through a thick clump of mucus, “You need to leave. I have something to ask Slug… it would be awkward for you.”

He was just going to nod, push the elevator to level it upwards. Surprisingly, the purple creature beside him swatted at his hand. With a grunt, Cero pushed him forward. Clementia turned a bit to
stare at her guardian. She was shaking her head at him, but Slug sighed, pocketing his weapon.

“No. He can stay,” the doctor said.

Clementia shot him a surprised look, “You can’t be serious—”

“Ask me, Clementia.”

“Slug, it’s not about what happened—” Clem started, then looked down at her hoodie. She tried to hide the blood stains with her hands. It was unsubtle, even for White Hat. “You said—You—”

“I know what I said,” Slug said, and his tone was not familiar to her at all.

Clementia looked at White Hat, suddenly quiet. He stared back, blinking, feeling like he should go elsewhere. The bear was insistent and placed a meaty paw on his shoulder.

“Ask me.”

Clementia turned her face back to the unresponsive mask. Her hands fell to her sides, and she was standing straight. Slug mirrored her, standing opposite. “What did you do to him?”

“Do you want the whole truth?” he questioned.

“Yes. Tell me,” she said, determined.

“It’s gruesome.”

“I don’t care—I need to know. You…” she stopped, and White Hat could tell she was struggling, “You owe me that much. I need to know what you did to him.”

“To who?” White Hat asked.
Neither answered.

More insistent, White Hat broke away from 0.5.0.’s clutches and nearly marched into their moment. Bleached the tension with a sort of dread dawning on him. “Clementia—to who?”

“My father.”

White Hat froze—all of his atoms coming to a full stop. He turned to the stoic doctor. To the girl who was slowly building more tears along her lashes. “Her—Her father? You said that—”

“It was easy,” Dr. Slug said. He brought up one hand and began tugging at his latex covered thumb. Pulling at his glove one finger at a time as he started listing a series of identifying markers, “Your hair. Your regional accent. All the anecdotes you let slip of your previous life. You told me your birthday… but mostly, you think you didn’t leave DNA all over the Manor? I knew for a long while.”


Slug started to strip his other glove off, ignoring White Hat’s figure fully turning to him, growing more and more still, “I made sure he would never darken your doorway again.”

“Slug…” Clementia grew softer, smaller, “Did you—Did you kill him?”

White Hat started. Slug was placing his gloves in the trash. He reached for a new pair, but did not pull them on quite yet.

“There are some things… I believe… that are worse than death.”

He stared at his hands.

“Take me to him,” she demanded.
The gloves came on with a snap, “If that’s what you want, darling.”

“It’s what I need to know,” she said, pointedly not looking at him, “I assumed you’d understand.”

“C-Clementia!” White Hat exclaimed as Slug paused.

Then, he nodded, “I deserved that.”

“S-Slug,” White Hat started. Cero left in the lift to get the car. Slug breezed past him, and his goggles looked everywhere but Clementia. Clementia glanced up, swallowing.

“I’m scared,” she confessed.

The doctor’s look hardened, “I’ll prepare you. I’ll tell you what I did—you don’t have to be scared of what you’ll see.”

“That’s not—” she said, taking a shuddering breath, “I haven’t thought about him in so long… I don’t want the nightmares to come back.”

“Clementia,” Slug said, finally facing her. He placed his hands on her head, pulling up the unicorn hood, “I won’t let him hurt you—even in nightmares. You remember that. I will come back, be a bigger and scarier shadow than him… he’s the one who has nightmares now.”

Clementia stared at him, surprisingly unafraid, and White Hat couldn’t quite figure out why. All she did was ask him, once more, “What did you do?”

“My job. Be the Villain.”

Chapter End Notes

Again, so sorry for missing Sunday.
Thank you so much for reading.

SO MUCH LOVE FOR YOU GUYS/GALS/AND EVERYTHING IN BETWIXT OR OTHERWISE UNSTATED
Chapter Twenty-Eight: … And Let Us Pull Those Heart Strings

The White Hat Company pulled up at the edge of the city center, in the downtown district, right outside a complacent, unadorned Hospice. The building was a washed out blue-grey, with a bronze unobtrusive plaque that needed a good scrub and oiling. It read, in wind-battered letters, St. Marcene’s Hospice Care Center. The building was outlined in a moderately cut lawn, without sidewalks, and an undersized parking lot. A letterboard with mismatched colored letters pointed to an overflow parking at a local church down the street; Two-dollar donations suggested. Trees overhung a brick path leading to a separate entrance, more than likely for medical professionals than guests. Still, a middle-aged woman and a teenager of Hispanic decent morosely wandered out from the pathed area. They were so lost in their own stages of grief, they did not notice the foursome standing outside.

Clementia grabbed Slug’s hand, squeezing it, “Thank you for telling me… But I need to do this part on my own.”

“Are you sure?” White Hat asked, stomach still a bit queasy from Slug unemotive confessional on the drive over. Clementia nodded. Determined, she squared her shoulders and deftly moved forward.

Slug waited until she passed a set of sliding double doors. Her figure nervously stood on tip-toes as she addressed a bored nurse behind a counter. She was writing her name on a sheet of paper the woman tapped, and then pointed elsewhere. Then, he turned to the bear lingering in his peripheral. “Follow her. If he so much as twitches in her direction—you have my permission to tear out his throat.”
White Hat sputtered, “You do not!”

The bear ignored the Elder Being and trotted forward, stealthily sneaking into the building and after his ward. Slug crossed his arms over his chest and patiently waited. White Hat clenched his fists and turned to the doctor.

“You—”

“Don’t worry. Clem’s a good girl… she won’t let 0.5.0. kill anything,” the man interrupted.

“You did this while under my roof.”

“Technically,” Slug was not turning to him, staring instead at the doors with the utmost patience, “None of it happened at the Manor.”

“You found a man and brutalized him…” White Hat said.

“This surprises you?”

“This angers me—” he began.

Slug turned to him, barking rudely, “Good!”

“Dr. Slug—”

“Oh, so now we’re gonna be professional, White?” he asked, pointing between them, and White Hat grit his teeth. Knowing the man, he was sure to go on a rant any second, and was gifted with the words, “Did you conveniently forget when you hired me what I was capable of? This little episode was nothing to me.”

“How can you say that?” White Hat demanded, arms flailing toward the general direction the young
“Girl went. ‘That is her father!’”

“Was! Was her father!” Slug snapped back, “Because if you haven’t forgotten for the last thirteen years we’ve been there for her! Taking care of her! Protecting her!”

“How was any of this protection?!”

Slug pivoted to push against the Elder Being’s chest, “How isn’t it?! You think I would just let a monster like him walk around?! You think I would give him an ounce, one ounce of peace after everything—” The doctor gripped White Hat’s lapels, tense and shaking, “Do you not understand what he did to her…? How could I let him just… just get away with that? His own flesh and blood and he…”

“This wasn’t your call to make,” White Hat insisted, looking down at the doctor.

“Yeah, well,” Slug declared, roughly letting go, “If it makes you feel better… I gave him a choice. Either he confessed to the police—or he deal with me.” White Hat paused, mouth opening unsure. One of Slug’s brows came up and he continued, “And you know what the bastard said? Do you?”

“Obviously, I don’t,” the Elder Being lowered his voice, expression flattening.

Slug put his hands in his pockets, smugness radiating from him, “He said, I can’t go to prison—the kind of things they do to a guy like me there.”

White Hat looked away from Slug, stomach dropping.

“And so, I said, you mean the things you did to your own daughter?”

“You could have…” White Hat hesitated, with just enough pain.

Slug immediately scoffed, “What? You expected me to show a creep like that mercy?”

“No!” White Hat practically shouted, fed up with this conversation, with the low simmer of outrage
bubbling inside his normally hollow self, “But you could have come to me first!”

Slug stared at him, goggles widened. His stance slackened, and he moved a pace away from White Hat. “Is that—You’re mad that I didn’t involve you?”

“Yes! No—” White Hat startled, form rippling upwards. He settled and stared hard at the ground. “But—But you said so yourself. We—both of us—raised Clementia. She’s ours. If I had known that she had been hurt so I would have—”

“Stop,” Slug demanded. White Hat quickly bit off his words. The man took a few more steps backwards. The Elder Being did not attempt to follow him. Both of them were bristled and on edge.

“There were other ways…” White Hat mumbled, “But, you didn’t have to do anything by yourself.”

Slug placed his face in his hands, “White Hat…”

“Even back then, I would have—”

“Would you have gone Super Scary like with Nancy?” Slug asked. White Hat paused too long. The man tsked, but was no longer edging away. “Either way… he’s alive. He just can’t hurt her now. In any way. He made his choice. He has to live with the consequences. We all do.”

White Hat narrowed his eyes as the good doctor looked away, searching for Clementia’s silhouette in the Hospice entrance. She was still nowhere to be seen.

“You’re projecting.”

Slug rounded on White Hat, “No. I’m telling you the truth. Monsters don’t get happy endings. People who do bad things shouldn’t get to live comfortably. If you want to protect this world so bad —you can’t expect everything to be forgivable.”

“I’m not saying—”
“You get off your high horse and protect our daughter, White Hat!”

White Hat jumped, and Slug, too, looked shocked at the words that flew out of his mouth. He placed his hand over approximately where his mouth would be and just stared up at the Elder Being. White Hat grew a determined look and reached out for him. Slug took a step away, shaking his head.

“Don’t—”

“You said our,” White Hat softly replied.

With a sigh, Slug turned so that his back was facing his boss, “Listen. I did what you can’t do—”

“I am not judging I—”

“Well, you need to!” the doctor reminded him, tossing a glare over his shoulder, “You cannot be a Hero and expect me to let you in on every sordid thing I need to do to keep Clementia safe—or you!”

White Hat blinked, surprised, lowering his reach, “What do you mean?”

“I’m meeting Miles Namiag today,” he said. White Hat blankly kept staring. “Nancy’s reporter friend? The man she was giving up being a Villain for. He was there that day—remember?”

White Hat did, but only barely. When he finally found Nancy at a clinic, holding one of her many arms self-consciously, brokenly, there was a man talking to a nurse not far off. Still, White Hat only sparred a second, apologizing profusely. Explained himself as best he could. She was… surprisingly understanding. Looking at the unnoticeable human defending her physical abnormalities as the Hero healed them repentantly.

“In a cruel twist of irony,” Slug continued explaining, tiredly, “He’s planning to reveal what you did to her when you let your stupid Elder Instincts out instead of talking to me. So. There. If you wanna get into who needs to let who know the gritty little details of every little—”

“What are you gonna do to him?” White Hat asked.
Slug’s eyes narrowed at the question. He did not look away though. Kept a steady and focused gaze on White Hat’s expectant phase. “That depends on Miles.”

“Cut out his tongue too?”

“He’s not a television reporter,” Slug said, tilting his head to the side, partially unamused by the quick accusation.

“His fingers then,” White Hat thought aloud.

Slug wanted to laugh at the audacity, “I consider Nancy a good friend—he’d lose no limb…” Making sure White Hat understood the subtle jab, he paused there. The Elder Being calmly waited, not raising to the shallow challenge. So, Slug let out a snort, slightly disappointed… though, the whole point of this excursion was so White Hat could understand. Not to omit the doctor’s flaws. He loudly declared, “But, if he doesn’t meet my demands, I cannot say he will remain completely unharmed. A message needs to be sent, one way or another.”

“I won’t let you hurt someone else for me,” White Hat was quick to declare, determination making his tone sing through the clear air. Slug’s eyebrows shot up pointedly.

“Your hypocrisy is especially astounding today, boss.”

White Hat flinched, “I—”

“No,” Slug cut in, “You’ve done enough apologizing. I don’t want to hear it. I don’t want to hear any of it anymore. You wanna play Hero, you play it true.” Slug squared his shoulders, nodding at the somber figure speaking to a nurse at the counter. Slug lowly said, moving closer to White Hat in order for their conversation to remain private. White Hat allowed this, gladly, as Slug moved into very personal spaces, “You recognize what I am—you recognize that at the moment, we need to settle a bigger issue than one pedophile getting his just desserts and one holier-than-thou reporter with an axe to grind.”

“And that is?”
“There are Heroes. There are Villains…” he said, pointing at both of them, “And there can be no in-between. We find those Anti-Heroes…” His eyes slid over to Clem and Cero as they started to exit the building. Slug took a calming breath and refocused on White Hat, “And only afterwards can you do whatever you see fit with me.”

“What…” White Hat asked. Slug shook his head as Clementia was walking to them.

He looked like he was speaking mostly to the young girl, but White Hat just knew, the words weren’t directed to anyone other than universe. The doctor was quite calm, quite factual as he said, “I don’t expect forgiveness. I know what I did was terrible. I have no excuses for what happened… All I can tell you is that… this is what I can do. Still—” Slug’s eyes fluttered to his feet as Clementia’s reddened eyes were trained on him, “I am sorry. I never wanted you to be hurt because of the things I’ve done.”

“Sluggy…” she said, voice broken, and White Hat felt like he could die. It wasn’t really possible, not like this in this kind of scenario…but it’s what he wanted, “I—I can’t be mad at you. It was stupid of you to try but—” She opened her arms, inviting him, “If I am supposed to be scared, I can’t be. I must be as bad because I’m just…”

Slug startled as a fresh wave of tears were broken by a self-depreciating smile graced her naturally pretty features, “Clem—don’t—!”

“I feel so relieved!” she laughed a little, “He’s really never gonna hurt me again! It’s so terrible but I just feel so free—I’m not—He’s just a bad memory now—and I don’t ever want to see him and—I’m really bad, I don’t feel anything, I just wanna go home with you again and—please don’t ever leave me!”

Slug was quick to pull her into his arms as she sobbed into his chest, partially guiltily by some morbid happiness, but mostly mentally exhausted. Cero went to move her away, but she stubbornly clung onto the man. White Hat watched, more than surprised when Slug wilted under her constant wailing and sniffing.

“Oh… Clem…” he breathed, and unconsciously pressed a fatherly kiss to the top of her head. White Hat’s chest constricted for many reasons at the scene, and Slug murmured, “That’s all normal. It’s fine… you don’t have to feel anything other than what you feel… you’re only human.”

She started to calm down, and the bear, reluctantly, settled as well. It left to fetch the car, and White Hat watched as Clementia looked up at the good doctor, smile righting itself. Her eyes were clearing, and Slug’s goggles blinked measured. His head tilted to the side, and somehow, he knew a
reassuring, relieved smile was being hidden from view under the bag.

“You’re a good person, Clem… and even if this made you bad,” he said, speaking like this was an impossible task for her to accomplish, “I love you. And I’d love you still…” His voice broke a small bit, and White Hat knew an ugly green beast named envy that dug its way inside at how easily the young girl received his open affection, “But I am sorry this is how I’d have to show you… I couldn’t let him go. I couldn’t let him ever find you… not while I had to power to do something… I will protect you… in whatever ways I can, I suppose.”

She let out a great sigh, sniffing, “Well—weirdly—that makes me really happy…”

“Dunno what to say, kiddo,” he hedged, pulling out tissues from who knows where, “Guess that’s the only way a Villain knows how to love.”

She gratefully took them, fixing her eyes before blowing into them. Cero had just arrived, tossing open the door. She paused before stepping in. Turning to Slug, she hugged him again, “I still love you… even if you call yourself a Villain, you’ve always kind of been my personal hero, Sluggy.”

Stunned, he didn’t respond as she sat next to her bear, patting his arm. She closed her door to settle her head against the cool window. White Hat moved to the car next, placing a hand on a back handle and looking pointedly at Slug. Slug did not move at first.

“Doctor?” he posed, squashing all of the feelings he didn’t know how to name or contain.

“I still have business to attend to,” he said, with a quick shake of his head, “You go home and keep an eye on Clem.”

White Hat let go of the handle, voice carefully tuned to sound unaffected, soft as he said, “The reporter?”

“Don’t ask.”

“But… you will return to the Manor?”
Slug gave a decided nod, “Don’t wait up. Clementia is more important right now. Do not let that child have nightmares tonight, you hear me?”

“Of course,” White Hat said. He thought about Slug’s words before… our child. It seemed to soothe that beast thrashing inside. It preened instead, the idea easy to feed… almost too easy. Scarily sweet and bitter in his stomach all at once.

“Thank you,” the doctor said, and it was honest. He didn’t sound as mad, as defensive anymore.

Still, White Hat found himself swallowing, “Please, don’t—”

“I’ll do what I have to, White Hat.”

Cowled, the Elder Being opened the car door. He stopped, bandaged eye in plain sight as he thought aloud, “I don’t need a Villain to protect me… I know you can be better than this.”

He didn’t wait for a response. Simply ducked into the vehicle and slammed the door. Slug crossed his arms as 0.5.0. drove away, White Hat determined facing forward. The doctor tsked, “Idiot… how many times do I have to tell you—”

This wasn’t really about him.

…

Miles was smart. Chose a restaurant styled like a diner, somewhere in plain-sight, crowded, but open. Faced the entrance, a seat nestled close to an exit. A booth by a partition, though, so no one could casually peer over at the packet of information lying at Slug’s seat. Slug took his spot opposite the other man, sipping a to-go cup of coffee.

Nonchalant, without even bothering to greet the reporter, Slug started flipping through the files and drafts of what Miles was going to publish. Slug speed read, digesting some information, but flicking up his goggled eyes at the man. He was squirming, taking a gulp of a glass of water seasoned with a lemon wedge. “I’m only doing this because—because Nancy insisted. I couldn’t not tell her. But I—I need you to know it’s only because she said she considered you an ally.”
“Probably a wise choice,” Slug answered. He flipped the folder closed and took another sip of coffee, “Given the alternative is not a position anyone wants to find themselves in.”

“You were a great Villain once,” Miles said.

Slug placed his coffee down and folded his arms along the table, “I’m afraid it doesn’t quite work like that.”

“Most of the world has already considered you finished—” he went to point out.

“Yeah, I’ll fix that later,” the doctor said, swiping the files off the table before the reporter could fully take them back. He ignored the squeak of upset the young man let out, cruelly folding the papers up and dunking them in his coffee cup, “Because here’s the thing, Miles my good buddy…” Slug leaned back in his booth, one leg raising to rest on his knees. He motioned to a passing waitress for another coffee, shrugging at her confused look as soggy wads of rolled papers were crumbling over the side of the container.

Miles looked on in considerable unease as Slug turned his attention back to him fully.

“You seem to have forgotten that, ironically, the Villains are the victims here.”

“L-Like what White Hat did to Nance—”

“Well,” Slug said cheerfully, cutting off the reporter by accepting a new mug on a platter as the waitress came back around quickly. Miles grunted, as Slug then squashed the rest of the papers into the cup and handed them to the woman to toss in the trash. “White Hat is a Hero. What brought Nancy to the Manor is what brought me to the Manor—originally.”


“But do you?”

Shifting in his seat, Miles looked elsewhere, eying where the waitress trashed his files. Slug was blowing on his coffee as he waited for an answer. Finally, the reporter snapped into the silence,
hands placed on the table in a fit of frustration, “Of course! I have done my homework! The Anti-Heroes are radicals! Most of them believe that White Hat’s methods don’t root at the problems—that he spends more energy on mercy and diplomacy than the eradication of evil!”

“Mmhm,” Slug answered, licking away the foam from the corner of his mouth, “And they’re not wrong.”

“Are you kidding me?! Did you see what he did to Nance?! He’s a monster!”

“Well, he’s definitely not human,” Slug conceded. He set down his mug, raising a brow, “But I don’t see how that’s a bad thing. Or why you feel the need to expose him for it.”

Miles gave him an incredulous look, sharply curling his fingers into fists, “He just—He tore her apart like some kind of—”

“Like some kind of supernaturally powered entity with the IQ of a dead fish?”

“Oh please!” the man scoffed, now glaring at the doctor, “You can’t try and excuse his behavior just because you work for the guy. I know what you really want.”

Slug’s goggles were suspiciously lowering their animated lids. His stance moved from open to something... menacing. Both feet on the floor as he leaned closer to the table, angling his head downward as he inspected the petulant reporter. “Then I suggest you quit the theatrics and hand it over to me.”

“No. The world needs to know what White Hat is capable of.”

“Really, then?” Dr. Slug intoned, voice coloring with a deceptively curious and patronizing slant to his vowels. Miles turned his perturbed eyes back him. Slug’s hands folded into his lap as he moved over the table as if to whisper a secret, “Because the only reason you still have fingers is that White Hat asked me, very nicely, to leave you unharmed.”

Miles shivered, sliding his eyes over to the missing blanket of silverware on Slug’s side of the table.
“I have counted, no less, than five times I’ve could have made your chosen career rather difficult,” Slug said.

Miles gulped.

Slug slid back in the booth, stance reopening. One arm slung over the back of his seat. The other impatiently tapping his own knee under the table. “Rethink your priorities, Mr. Namiag. I haven’t got all day to play Intrepid Reporter with you.”

“What do you want, Doctor?”

“I thought you really knew?”

With a sigh, Miles moved his hands to under the table, staring hard at the scuffed linoleum top, “You want to know about the Anti-Heroes.”

“Everything you have. Everything you uncovered. Every map, every source, every possible Hero-member and Villain-victim…” Slug demanded. Miles breathed deeply. He seemed to be taking too long to respond. Unbelievably, he sat before Slug, without looking at the doctor, as he thought about what Slug wanted.

“Nancy has…” he started, unsure, “She found most of it. They actually tried to recruit her at first—”

“Unsurprising, she’s rather harmless,” Slug said. He nodded though, as if this was an apology, “Creepy, but nevertheless, not a very good Villain.”

Miles, threw a contrived look his way, “She’s decided to infiltrate their ranks. Going to them with her story about White Hat. She’s gonna spin it to make it look like—”

“Like he’s more like Black Hat,” Slug finished, tone tipping onto something dangerous.

“It’s not a far stretch of the imagination—” Miles argued, clearly haughty.
Slug scoffed, picking up his coffee and twirling it’s murky contents that settled at the bottom. He looked past his reflection to tilt his mask up slightly saying, “Having spent time in the company of both—trust me when I say it’s a farther than you’d ever imagine.”

“Trust the word of a Villain?” Miles shot off before he thought better of it. Slug just raised a brow as the reporter flinched backwards, probably expecting to be maimed in the event of mouthing off. The doctor, however, wasn’t some impatient rookie looking for a good time. He had important work that needed to be handled… but what was ten more minutes when it had taken over a decade just to discover that Anti-Heroes were the things he was searching for?

“As a Villain, yes,” Slug answered as he set his cup down and stopped his causal leaning to affect a more serious posture, “I can assure you, White Hat isn’t the threat you need to worry about. All I can say is that you are sorely lucky he’s on your side, Miles. I’ve already mutilated one man under his employ—he’s that trusting, that naïve enough to believe I could have a merciful bone in my body after the things that happened to me. Because of Anti-Heroes.”

Miles gulped, eying Slug as he tugged his mask back over his abused lips.

“So, I’ll ask once more, but only once, my new friend,” Slug said, one finger tapping the handle of his coffee, “Hand over every copy you have on the Anti-Hero research, and I swear to you, there will be justice. For Nancy, but mostly, yes, for me.”

“B-But White Hat and—”

“Nah, ah, ah!” Slug interrupted, voice pretending to raise in mild upset, “You don’t worry about White Hat. White Hat isn’t the one pointing a charged weapon at your vital organs under this table.”

Miles stiffened, and sure enough, the soft buzz of a pressurized pistol could be heard low and certain over the din of families and friends eating, clinking silverware, and sweet RB hits emanating from the juke box in the corner. The reporter’s eyes widened, and the distinct cock of a safety could be heard as Slug took another sip of coffee with his free hand. “Hand them over willingly.”

“Y-You kill me and you’ll never find—”

“You live across the street,” Slug cut off, nodding his head to a closed bookshop with a FOR RENT sign in the window. There was an apartment clearly attached, and though there were cobwebs in the window, Slug figured that didn’t mean much given who he was about to meet, “I saw you head out
of the building from that coffee shop at the corner.”

“H-How—”

“I had some time to kill,” Slug said, staring at the poor man with the palest hint of disappointment, “But, as you pointed out before, most of the world has forgotten I’m a Villain. I don’t play fair. I don’t play nice… and I definitely don’t leave without getting what I want.”

Miles lightly cleared his throat, “N-Nancy will—”

“What Nancy will be is dead within a week if she thinks her plan will fool these Anti-Heroes.”

“I—I have faith in her,” he bravely said, raising his chin and bravely bracing himself.

Slug cooed, one hand on his heart mockingly, “Aww, your devotion is so cute.”

The pistol fired with a silent puff! Miles barely flinched, eyes fluttering. It took him a second before he had to glance down. With a shaky, clearly shocked move, he pulled a small dart out of his stomach. He twirled a small, empty cylinder in his fingers. Slug stood swiftly, pocketing his pistol into the secret lining of his coat before plucking the dart out of Miles hold.

The reporter swayed, head lolling forward, and Slug stooped to grab him. He helped him up, leaving a generous tip at the table. Without many looks, Slug casually remarked in case someone paid too much attention, “Ahh, buddy, you got a problem, drinking so much. Let’s get you home so the missus don’t worry, yeah?”

He shouldered Miles, pulling the man along, who shuffled beside him groggy and whimpering. Slug calmly led him back to the apartment he saw him shiftily leaving. They stumbled and shambled up a fire-escape around the back, Slug kicking out the stick holding up a window. It disturbed some sparkling lines of spidersilk. Tsking as a few tiny arachnids tumbled down. Local little things that couldn’t do much harm.

He tossed Miles in first. Then, poked his head in before hopping in himself.
The apartment was despairingly threadbare, almost cliché as it was decked out in newspaper clippings and online blogging print-outs pinned to the walls. There were strings connecting things seemingly in a disjointed pattern. A white board with a messy timeline, and then a revised set of notes lying next to a cold laptop and internet hotspot with a flashing red light.

“Ah, buddy, c’mon…” Slug taunted, moving over and taking some pictures on a digital camera in his back pocket, “I expected better from you. Especially considering your girlfriend is the Shi-Spider…”

He turned around in time to a skittering a brown blob move over Mile’s jeans. It sat on it’s hip and raised legs, baring dripping fangs at Slug and making a disturbing rattle-hiss noise. Slug rolled his eyes, grabbing a broom and knocking the thing off the dazed reporter.

“Return to your mistress, Arenyan,” he said loud, stomping on the floor. A few dark things darted around the corners of the apartment, “I have no time for you. And you best hurry—Miles life depends on it.”

The tarantula flipped itself up. It looked between the groaning Miles and Slug who snapped the broom in half with a violent break over his knee. He shoved the sharp, barbed end at the reporter, with a deadly serious set of eyes. Quickly, it lifted it’s legs one by one to turn around and scuttle out of the open window, squeaking frantically.

Slug sighed, tossing the broken thing to the side and returning to his work. He tore down all the newspaper clippings. Tossed them in the sink and ran the garbage disposal. Opened the laptop and inserted a thumb drive hooked onto an external hard drive. Downloaded the entire contents of the computer and copied all the files. Broke the internet hotspot, and then tossed the laptop into the oven, turning it on broil. He found open notebooks and tossed it into a messenger bag sitting on a stool. He was shoving loose CDs and any other electronics into the bag as well. As he loitered through all the books, he found a hollowed one with a series of voice-recorders inside.

Slug dumped the contents out and into the bag as well. It startled him when a brown recluse fell from above the shelf and onto his forearm. It bit fiercely into the crook of his elbow and he yelped. He shook his arm and the spider went sailing—thudding against the fridge. It wiggled around before righting itself and slinking off under the dark, dank safety of the cold appliance.

“Yeah! Serves you right! Ya puta!” Slug said.

Miles rolled over on the floor. His unfocused eyes looked over at the bottom of the fridge in sympathy, “Ahhh… Bobart…”
“Bob—” Slug parroted, more than just astounded, “Bobart? What kind of name…?”

“I wrote a bunch on a paper…” Miles said, slurring a bit as he struggled to sit up, “And he—he sat on it. He liked it…”

Slug snorted, pulling out a folded velvet packet from his coat and started opening it up. He pulled out a sterile needle and then ran a pinkie over thin tubes, neatly labeled with various anti-venoms. It took a second to find the brown recluse one. He tugged it out, keeping the glass body of a sterile hypodermic needle in his mouth. Dunking it into the cap, he drew out the appropriate amount with the stopper. Then, folded up the supply and set it back into his back pocket of his pants, just in case there was more unfriendlies nearby.

“Must have found something good, then,” Slug said, unthinking as he stabbed the needle into his arm.

Miles nodded, “Nancy’s… Nance’s confessions… we… I recorded them.”

“Huh…” Slug mentioned. He stared down at the handful of little tapes, “Anything good on ‘em?”

“Mmmmm…” Miles flopped back onto his side and rolled half-way onto his back.

Slug kept leafing through various things, unconcerned about Miles. The man was pulling himself over to a sofa, flopping an arm on a cushion. He slid down between the front of it and a wobbly coffee table. The doctor walked over, more or less certain he’d found everything. He tapped at the curly head of the reporter, “Miiumles…”

“Y-Yeah?” he asked, totally out of it by now.

“Do you think I found everything?”

“Uhh…” he thought, blurry staring into the open messenger bag, “Yea—up!”
“Good,” Slug said. He then brought out what seemed to be a pencil case. He set it on the coffee table, flicking open the top. Another needle and vial were nestled into the foam-fitted interior. “Now, when Nancy gets here—” he tapped at the vial, “You tell her this is the antidote. You need ten CC’s, I marked it on the needle. She has to do the tappy thing you see in TV and movies. That’s to get air-bubbles out. She can squeeze a little, that’s fine.”

“Yeah! Just like TV!” Miles said, nodding, dumb but obedient.

“So, I will leave right here next to you—you’re gonna pass out eventually—but that’s fine,” Slug said, ruffling the curly hair, “Barring an extreme allergic reaction, you probably won’t die, even if she doesn’t give you the antidote before you lose consciousness. You just got a concentrated dose of my new knock-off, knock-out truth serum. I reversed engineered it… but, eh, I won’t bore you with that story.” Slug glanced down at his watch.

7:34 PM.

“Yeah, nah. I don’t have time,” he repeated, “I have to get home… speaking of—”

Slug made sure to tip Miles head back, and the man dully moaned.

“Whether or not you remember this is moot—but I’m sure some spider I can’t see ‘round here will remind her…” the doctor cruelly started, slapping at the man’s face until he focused on Slug, blinking determinedly at the Villain before him, “But what she needs to remember is that not only did I save her—I could easily have destroyed you, and still can—so she owes me… Owes me more than one, actually.”

Slug stood, dropping Miles head. His face smooshed into the couch cushions he clutched. The doctor readjusted the messenger bag strap and head for the front door. A wolf-spider burrowed into the eye-hole snapped it’s legs out at Slug’s approaching form. He just pulled out a can of bug spray until it crawled back inside, webbing trembling. Yanking open the door, he clicked his tongue in thought and said, “How about she owes me one for every limb she got to keep?”

Slug turned back to the tipsy Miles, a few creepy crawlies coming out of the woodworks to placidly sit atop the coffee table, watching him as if to comfort the confused human.

“And for your life—she can do me a favor and not be a dumbass,” Slug suggested.
Miles glared at him, face a bit green, “Y-Yeah… well…! I’m… Imma still everybody about White Hat! How about that?”

“No, you won’t,” Slug derisively said, “Because I’ll kill you.”

All the spiders in the room rose onto their back legs defensively.

“I knew it! Y-You are doing this for White Hat!” Miles declared, rising one hand, as if triumphant, “Y-You love him…!”

Slug blinked at the incapacitated human, hand on the doorknob as he shook his head.

“Y—You’re so—so tragic! Falling for a mon—monster like that…!” Miles barked, probably hoping to upset Dr. Slug. The man gave a shrug instead, causing the reporter to sit back, clutching his pillow, almost waiting for another underhanded attack.

With a sigh, Slug said, “I told you before… he’s not a monster.”

“T-Then what is he?”

“Well,” Slug thought, idling as a few spiders moved closer. Slug just stepped over them cautiously, “I don’t know. He’s just not human. But that’s okay. Look at what I as a human can do, I mean…”

Miles said nothing, shaking his head.

“As a writer, maybe you’ll know who said it but—isn’t the tragedy not when a human falls in love with a God, but when a God falls for a human?” Slug questioned.

“Oh…”

Slug left it at that.
Because, what more was there really to say?

“You’re protecting him from yourself…”

Slug ignored Miles, closing the door and shouldering the bulk of the Anti-Hero research. What could a strung out, overly romantic writer know about the relationship between him and White Hat anyways?

He went down the stairs, two steps at a time.

It was late, and he had to get home to the Manor.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

We'll be back to our regular schedule this weekend! Promise!

Hope you liked!! Remember, all questions and comments are welcome!!

LOTS OF LOVE!!

<3
Let Us Remember the Forgotten

Chapter Notes

I really like this chapter...

There was suppose to be sexy times in it... but it just didn't work out that way in the end. Which is fine.

Things are just getting dramatic is all.

Please, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Let Us Remember the Forgotten

Oh boy.

Oh boy.

Oh boy.

OH BOY—

What was he doing? Dreamwalking.

That’s what White Hat was up to. Which, in his defense, Dr. Slug had asked him to following, at least, the next two weeks after Clementia visited her incapacitated paternal unit. White Hat, of course, had the ability to easily do so. However, the dear doctor was under the impression that this ability was somehow... clear cut. Or even manageable. Dreamwalking was not as easy as stepping into someone’s mind and rummaging around.

Dreams are the stuff of other universes. Other planes.

They can connect minds to the… bigger… things.

White Hat was an Elder Being. Created by things not of this universe, per say, but acknowledged in
part, as creatures that can and often do use the Dreamscape to commune with followers or the chosen few who dare to venture deep, deep, deep into that filmy, gossamer veil that a sleeping mind can pierce.

Well, human minds were extremely adept at running amok in the Dreamscape. White Hat often wondered why—nonetheless, Dreamwalking was a pastime he quite enjoyed. He had met many people this way, learning languages, learning hopes and fears, but mostly, he sort of… people watched. Dreamwalking was his version of a normal person’s idea of sitting on a bench in a park—sometimes feeding the pigeons—but just sitting there and casually, ineptly looking around to relax. Humans, and their subconscious, were often loud and boisterous. He would easily slip into any number of minds and just sort of peek in. Sometimes wander about to talk to people.

That being said though, White Hat had been training Clementia for a while before the attack. Then, her time with Star Princess probably caused her to mentally shut any doors for White Hat to knock on.

Which, White Hat understood. The first time his mind had been breached by another presence was… not pleasant. And Dreamwalking? That power was slightly more… well, it wasn’t something a human could sometimes be aware was happening. So, White Hat was having difficulty finding a way to check in to see if Clem was having any nightmares—this being Dr. Slug’s main worry.

What White Hat did not anticipate, of (insert favorite curse word here) course, was accidentally falling into Slug’s Dreamscape.

Now, White Hat wasn’t certain which human’s dream he had stubbornly barged into. All he knew was, he was in a smoky between places and minds and then—suddenly—he was stepping his slick heeled, fancy shoes onto white and blue checkered tile. He paused long enough to realize it was… the interior of White Hat Manor… but not. As Dreamscapes often were, they could correlate to the real world, but something was always a little… as Slug might say, wonky. Though, there was nothing particularly wrong with this version of the Manor.

It was simply different.

Airy, perhaps, bright in ways the Manor was often dulled. Light spilled in, and there were blurry pictures hung along the walls. Splashes of color, but mostly, feelings. They looked as if they moved—dynamic and splashing rainbows, prisms arching from one memory into the next.

White Hat followed, before sound came to him. Joyous laughter. Young, equally as bright as the seemingly moving photographs dotted along the hallway to Slug’s dream-lab. White Hat blinked,
realizing he was watching two little, *little* humans giggling, shushing one another. They spoke their childish gibberish to one another, languages melting together as they smile—one dark and pretty, the other light and adorable. White Hat placed his hand over his mouth when he recognized the very, very *young* Clementia.

For a second, he thought, maybe he had found a way into her mind—but she was nothing more than a primeval memory. Accurate, yes, but smudgy. Nothing more than a soft shimmer of a childhood image. She took the hand of the darker girl—a shadow, small and just as soft—but her features still distinct enough that White Hat knew immediately from one photo exactly who the little human was supposed to be.

Slug’s lost daughter.

The two girls moved, not to an elevator shaft, but a *door*—and slowly opened it. It made no sound, and they tried, as well as their hearts could manage, to tip-toe down the steps. Of course, the real Manor had no steps leading to the underground lab. Dr. Slug claimed it a safety precaution. In the event of an attack or invasion, the elevator would automatically shut off and seal the technology and sensitive information down below. Villains could not access it…

And until the recent events, White Hat had thought that a clever idea.

He followed the little dream-girls down below, and, was struck by how much it hurt and scared him when he could not reach Slug and Clementia down in the lab during the pollen incident—realizing that if Slug had been alone in the lab during the events, he would have surely died. Dr. Slug, though, being the genius he was… well, he more than likely anticipated *that very scenario* as a possibility, leaving it unmentioned when informing White Hat of the decision to eliminate stairs leading to the lab when planning the foundation of the Manor.

White Hat paused, watching, as the girls rounded a corner and peered over one another’s heads. White Hat followed their lead. He only saw the back of a man, leaning dangerously in a work chair. One leg propped up, hugged to his chest, as the other toed the ground so he twisted lightly as he worked on something at his table.

Suddenly, the little dream girls exploded into action, launching themselves across the strange lab. It seemed warm, glowing, almost. The man was attacked mercilessly by little hands grabbing at his sweater, wrapping around his middle. It disrupted him enough to sit up straight and turn to the two little girls trying to climb atop him.

And… *oh boy*… White Hat knew, in that moment, who he was looking at.
It was the eyes, of course, earthy and so very brilliant. Mostly though, it was that soft smile. That look on his face that White Hat only caught every so-often. Unguarded, so unequivocally full of love. Adoration.

“Sluggy! Sluggy!”

“Papai!”

And Slug was pulled onto the floor as the girls assaulted him. He let them, being smothered by them as they shook him for attention. He put up his hands in surrender, crying out, “Alright! Alright! I’ll stop working—”

The little ones burst into hurrays’ and danced around him excitedly. They let him sit up, as he brought his knees up and rested his arms on top of them, coyly nodding his head to the table—and White Hat took a deep breath as the full view of his face was visible, unscarred. He was, undeniably, so normal looking. For a human. His face a mix of an oval, but with a clean jawline. His nose, originally, a little bigger and fleshy. Prominent brows that framed those lovely eyes, and a mouth not quite large, but certainly not as thin as it was now. A head, covered, in dark waves… clean shaven, and so young. His skin was not fair, no, but healthy. Tanned. Sunkissed. A single freckle—right there—on his cheek… one that would clearly not survive the fire.

White Hat was startled when Slug reached over and picked up something on the work table, showing the girls, “I was working on some special toys… but I can always stoooop…!”

He was teasing them, and they flurried closer, looking over the things he had been making for them. The pair of girls spoke to him, a garble of his native tongue, too-long spoken English, and perhaps snippets of anything else. Dream Language, perhaps.

They took their gifts and disappeared to a corner to play.

White Hat stood, at the entrance to the lab, and stared. Slug was… well. White Hat knew many humans before the man, and some after, but Dr. Slug had always been alluring in his own right… White Hat knew he should leave, turn around, find Clementia’s Dreamscape—any Dreamscape—but this was—

“Are you gonna stand there all day, or help me up?” Slug asked.
White Hat stood still, terrified, as Slug held out both his hands.

Spotless, if calloused. Strong. Sure. Unmarred by tragedy.

Slug sighed, gesturing with his fingers, “As comfy as the floor is—it’s not.”

“Uh—” White Hat startled, moving forward as Slug’s face frowned nearly. He hated that. Slug should never frown. “Sorry!”

He was touching Slug—Dream or no—and that always left White Hat feeling better. Slug grinned up at him as he was pulled to his feet. Slug continued to hold on to his hands—didn’t dust himself off, didn’t straighten his tugged sweater, he just… he held on.

“You should be working,” Slug mentioned. White Hat blinked at him.

“Um…”

“I get it. They’re demanding,” Slug said, squeezing the hands in his as if in understanding. The little girls were still giggling off in the dreamy distance, “And Ama is only here so often but—”

“I’m sorry,” White Hat blurted out, face glowing.

Slug was laughing at him.

Not meanly.

He was just… he was happy.

“Eh, it’s okay, love,” Slug murmured, glancing down at their entwined fingers, “You probably saw I wasn’t working much either…”
White Hat couldn’t speak. All of his words were gone. All of his breath was depleted. He could melt right now. He could cry right now. Slug was standing there, touching him, smiling, speaking soft, he was—

“Hey, hey now,” Slug said, moving his hands up to cup White Hat’s face, “What’s that look for?”

“I am sorry,” White Hat said, turning to bury whatever expression Slug was seeing into the man’s warm palms, “I didn’t mean to.”

Slug was staring at him, uncomprehending. Eventually he just shook his head, running fingers up to smooth out a worried brow, “You’re just so weird, White Hat. Don’t worry about it. It’s just one day. We’re fine.”

“No that’s not—”

Suddenly, a bell rang out. Slug looked up. The little shadow ran by, crying out, and Slug shouted after her, “Careful!”

Clementia was standing beside the man, mostly grown now, as she patted Slug’s shoulder. The man disentangled himself from White Hat. She motioned somewhere into the dark distance, somewhere between the Dreamscape and something else.

“I gotta go, Sluggy. Time for me to head out,” she said.

“I—” the man started, but stopped himself from reaching out, “Yeah. Okay. Will you—Will you be okay?”

“I mean, like, statistically speaking…?” she thought aloud without looking at him.

Slug waited. White Hat felt the Dreamscape grow colder, colors leeching from around them.

“No, you don’t have the best track record,” the grown Clementia pointed out. She walked away with
a cheery wave. White Hat was stunned. Slug turned back to him, eyes a bit wider than previously. A little more cloudy.

“Slug—”

“Uh—We should—We should see Ama out,” he suggested, walking after the shadow. White Hat sharply pivoted after the man. The hallway leading to the front door was stretched out, long and impossible. Slug’s dead daughter waited at a door too large for her to open. It loomed over her. Slug was calmly walking to her.

They would never reach her—

Well, normally, they wouldn’t. And as Slug liked to point out, White Hat was weird.

The Elder Being held onto Slug’s hand, and in no time, they were before the little girl. Slug didn’t even seem to notice the strange transition. He stood before the girl. She pointed at the handle. With an inhale, Slug reached over and opened the door. White Hat heard the sizzle of flesh, smelled the burned skin, but the man did not react. The handle now red hot—but opening.

White Hat gulped. On the other side she stood there—

“Miranda,” Slug said, pained, but not from the burns, “Not yet, please.”

“You did this to yourself, Lama,” she said, voice an echo, an imitation of something beautiful. A sound from another room—a love song playing in the distance. And certainly, her image was sharp and oh so lovely. It looked attractive, something so enticing. A rose, perhaps as the apt human might compare her to…but she had thorns. She was cutting. “You left us.”

Slug was digging his other hands into the charred flesh of his palms, and soft, quietly, “I know…”

“That’s not true!” White Hat found himself crying out. He grasped Slug’s wrist and pulled it away before he could injure himself, “Slug, that’s not what happened…”

“B-But I—” he began, not looking up. The little shadow tugged on his sleeve. Slug was pulled from
his fingers. The man knelt next to his daughter. She held open her arms. He gathered her up and held on. White Hat realized she was whispering something—and for a second he caught the barest of voices. It crackled and popped. Like dying embers.

Don’t let me die again.

That was when White Hat—to his eternal horror—realized she was not a shadow walking. She was ash and dust, burning from the inside out. And as Slug held her tighter, she crumbled and sparked, spreading and catching along his arms and up his body. White Hat stepped back, hand covered his mouth, as Slug burst into flames—Miranda melting before the man who screamed in so many kinds of agony. She told him, in no uncertain terms…

You deserved this, but we did not.

…

White Hat was shocked, eye opening as he stared at his canopy. Awake now. On the earthly plane.

“Slug—!” he nearly choked, throwing blankets off himself and rushing out to the hallway. He slipped along the carpet in his fuzzy bedtime socks but kept running to his dear doctor’s room. Without thinking, he shoulder-checked the door and tumbled in, shouting, “SLUG!”

Slug was sitting up in bed, knees clutched to his chest, having apparently been rubbing at his eyes. He startled just as abruptly as White Hat awakened in his room. Flailing, the man reached under his pillow to pull out a weapon. Before he could shoot, White Hat wobbled back up to standing, huffing and puffing.

“WHAT THE FU—”

“ARE YOU OKAY?!”

“No!” Slug threw down some kind of ray gun and went back to rubbing at his eyes with his forearm, “I ALMOST SHOT YOU, YOU BIG DUMBASS! WHY—”
“I’m sorry!”

Slug stilled… recognizing the tone.

He hid his face in his hands and lightly growled, “You fucking didn’t—”

“W-Well,” White Hat nervously answered, feeling awkwardness creep into his voice, “Dreamwalking isn’t… um, like, science… it’s more… nuanced?”

Immediately, he knew he was in trouble.

…

The doorbell rang. Dr. Slug didn’t flinch of course. White Hat jumped up, all points of him extremely wound up like a tightened coil toy. Slug ignored him, flipping the page in his book with one finger, still sitting at the breakfast nook casually, head propped in his hand. He was going to continue giving his boss the cold shoulder.

“I-I’ll just get that then. No need to worry! Just a doorbell!” he loudly, unsurely announced.

He waited, anxiously darting his eyes from the doctor toward the doors out to the hallway, and thus, toward the front door. The bell rang a second time. White Hat fidgeted but would not move from his spot. Internally heaving a sigh, Slug flicked up his eyes, “Yup.”

“So… I’ll be… right… back…” he muttered, slightly reassured, but slinking away.

Slug went back to his book, shaking his head once free from White Hat’s intense, concerned gaze. He wasn’t fragile, but the Elder Being probably hadn’t experienced many nightmares… or any, from the way he was acting. The doctor had no intentions to speak over anything White Hat had annoyingly trespassed into the previous night. Clementia’s own upset with Star Princess in mind, Slug found he couldn’t exactly blame anyone for feeling violated, or for feeling it was their duty to protect their friends from the things in their own mind but—

Slug didn’t want to talk about it.
It wasn’t going to change anything.

White Hat, bless his non-existent heart, was too dumb to understand that though.

“Dr. Slug!” White Hat called, not a moment later, voice somewhat wary. It was different enough from the way he had been sounding all morning that Slug sat straighter in his seat. He contemplated, very briefly, ignoring him still… but, well, better safe than sorry.

“What?” he caustically shouted back as he started toward the front of the Manor. White Hat had his back to him down the hall, but the main doors were open. Slug stomped over, about to tap him on the shoulder, but the Elder Being turned to him with confused brows.

“Uhhh, it’s… for you, technically?” he said with a gulp.

Slug scrunched his nose behind his mask, crossing his arm as he stood, a foot from the door. At the stoop, a figure stood, slightly bent with a black ribbed case held close to his chest. “Well… this is certainly an unexpected house call, *doctor.*”

Flug squeaked in response as he gripped the case tighter, taking in the defensive stance of Slug, looming to his full height so it shadowed the other man. White Hat stood off to the side, worrying his hands lightly. Slug stepped closer and looked over to his boss.

“Alright, use that second sight thing. Make sure *actually* it’s Dr. Flug,” he commanded.

White Hat startled at the words. Yet, he was eager to please after last night’s mishap. He nodded, adjusting the brim of his hat. His eye flared, nearly dangerous, and he looked over Flug’s jerky figure. After a few shakes, and White Hat frowning in concentration, he relaxed back. “Dr. Flug, a pleasure to see you again.”

“Uh, y-you too?”

Slug scoffed at the pleasantness, leveling the other doctor with a stern stare. “And what, *exactly,* are you here for? The fuck is Black Hat up to now?”
“D-Doctor,” White Hat gently admonished, Slug turned his irritate eyes to his boss instead. The Elder Being quickly quieted. When his gaze snapped back to Flug, the scientist lifted the case upwards as if to hide behind it.

“I don’t have all day to play—” Slug said, stepping forward and using two fingers to lower the case so Flug would have to look into his deadly serious eyes, “—And I am already in a sour mood. So out with it. Why. Did. Black Hat. Send. You.”

“H-He didn’t!” Flug confessed, eyes squeezing tight as he trembled under the weight of case.

Slug tilted his head, “Oh?”

“Yes! He—he doesn’t even know I left!” the scientist squeaked out. Slug rose his brows. White Hat started to smile, eye brightening.

“You left Black Hat Manor?” he excitedly asked.

Slug immediately placed his masked head in one hand to violently sigh, “Oh, great…”

“N-No! No!” Flug replied, quickly, vehemently. White Hat deflated a little. Slug peered up through his fingers, pinning an expectant look at the younger man. Flug gulped, holding out the case a little, “I—um—I have some new information for you.”

White Hat glanced at the mysterious black case and then to the doctors, “Do you mean Anti-Heroes?”

“No…” Flug answered, a little softer, but firm.

“Information, huh?” Slug repeated, eying the case.

“For you.”
Straightening himself out, Slug gave a nod. “Alright. Lab, you know the way.”

“That you…” Dr. Flug said in relief. He cautiously walked inside, case hanging innocently at his side as he wandered down the hall to the lift, curiously inspecting the re-decorated Manor. Slug watched a second, making sure the other man was well within in his sight before following. White Hat reached out, making him pause for half a second as he grabbed the sleeve of a labcoat.

 Slug…?”

“What?” he asked, syllables carefully crafted to be biting, but still calm.

“Not the lab—” White Hat began, and Slug jolted a bit, turning to stare incredulously at his boss, “The kitchen. My office. I don’t care… but not the lab.”

“What? Why not?” Slug asked, lowering his voice as Dr. Flug was pressing the button for the lift down the hallway. It dinged lightly.

White Hat’s talons tugged harder, “If—If something happens…”

“If anything happens,” Slug hissed, swiping his arm away and pointedly staring at the other man, “It’ll be to Flug.” The doctor started down the hallway, pointing up the stairs toward White Hat’s office, reminding him, “You have a meeting soon. Go on.”

He didn’t wait for White Hat to respond, nor did he particularly care what it might have been. He was ignoring the bastard. Slug just entered the lift with Flug and descended into the lab.

Flug wasted no time, walking right into the middle of the shiny, chrome lab to stand awkwardly. Slug huffed in behind, keeping a wary, be-speckled eye on the younger scientist. He moved past him, only to kick over an office chair. It nearly collided with Flug, but the anxious man jumped out of the way of it as the chair spun to a spot right beside him.

Slug casually placed his elbows onto the work desk behind him, leaning as unconcerned as possible as he lightly glared at the man. “Sit, doctor…” he offered.
Flug hesitated, clutching the case to his chest.

“While I’m still feeling generous, Flug.”

“R-Right!” he said, quickly taking the seat. He fidgeted just a moment before lying the black case along his knees. He looked up, seemingly unsure as Slug waited in silence. “Um… thank you?”

“No, no,” Slug quipped, voice flat, “My pleasure. Apologies for the mess. Wasn’t expecting company.”

Slug waved a hand about the spotless laboratory. Flug audibly gulped as he glanced around, clearly uncertain about what mess the other doctor was referring to. In the end, he went back to staring at the black case, knees bouncing lightly. “You seem to have recovered from your attack fairly well, though…”

“Well, the enemy of my enemy, yes?” Slug said loudly, not mentioning the fact that a majority of the damage was mostly contained to the lab.

“I—I meant it, before,” Dr. Flug clarified unhelpfully, “I’m not here with information for the Anti-Hero problem.”

“That’s good, as I only managed to save so much information before the attack,” Slug said, cautiously dropping a bit of his Villain act. The truth was this Anti-Hero problem became quickly confusing. The conflicting concept of Hero-ism through violent and destructive means turning every attack on any person of interest into a headspin. Every new thread, every lead, kept severing itself or knotting up before Slug had reached it’s end. It was quite maddening.

“Well… I have faith in you,” Dr. Flug said, and the frightening part of it was, he was earnest. Slug cursed his ability to be so innocently endearing… at least on the surface. The man sitting before him, quaking in his sneakers, but staring at him with such unearned adoration was actually capable of very, very heinous things. Things Slug was lucky enough to not recall his torment while at Black Hat Manor, he knew this intellectually. But instinctually? His whole body buzzed with a sense of jamais vu—despite knowing they had been in this sort of situation before, Slug could not fathom the idea of being at this particular man’s unmerciful knife.

“You’re an interesting case study, doctor,” Slug decided to say, in the end, turning to look almost anywhere else… but he could not fully trust Dr. Flug. This he knew now. “You seem afraid of
everything, yet, you work for a monster like Black Hat. Even more so—you’ve probably crossed some sort of personal boundary and left the safety of his territory to walk straight into White Hat Manor…”

Flug nodded, hands resting on his black case as he nervously waited for Slug’s thoughts to finish.

Which was good because Slug rose properly and walked a pace closer to the other doctor to emphasize his point, “But, not to White Hat—no—you have specifically come to see me. Which is bold, because I am the real threat here.”

“Y-You seem full of yourself,” Flug managed to quip back, but lost steam as he muttered, “Seeing as I was the one who did most of the damage to you during your stay at our Manor…”

“Oh, I figured,” Slug said, crossing his arms as he reaffixed his posture to something less threatening.

Flug glanced up, brows dancing as he tried to posit out Slug’s words. “How?”

“If it was Black Hat who spent his time torturing me,” Slug vaguely explained, “I’m sure I would have died—or lost several limbs. In the end, you left me whole.”

Flug waited a beat processing, “… that’s… not necessarily true.”

Slug tilted his head, waiting.

“I want your brain on a jar on my desk.”

Slug didn’t move, barely breathed.

Flug had spoken the words with no malice, no hatred. It was a fact—a dream, more accurately. A wish of his. Like a distant trophy or Christmas Present he set his highest hopes on. The man continued, more at ease than he should have been, “You’ve always been my favorite. You’re my idol. You’re exactly what I want to be—Brave. Smart. And god, your scars!”
Slug shifted, finally, voice dark as he looked down at the simpering man, “What about them?”

“They—they just look so painful…” Flug breathlessly said, and his knees came up, excited as he clenched the case to his chest, “It’s beautiful.”

Slug wanted to gag. He repressed the reflex, walking closer. Flug didn’t even flinch away, just stared up, waiting… Letting out a ragged breath with clenched fists Slug rapped a knuckle against the black case between the two of them.

“Is that what you brought then—your fantasy jar?”

“Oh—” Flug snapped out of his daze. He looked at the case, then sighed, holding it out properly to Slug, “No… nothing like that.”

Slug took the case with less trepidation, clicking open the locks as the bulk of it sat placidly in Flug’s open palms. The contents were, in fact, boring paperwork. Black Hat Company documents. Older ones it looked like, being slightly yellowed, and giving off a musty scent.

“The truth is…” Flug said voice warbling as Slug started to unpack the piles. Faded ink had been circled with a highlighter pen. It gave the good doctor pause. “While I was experimenting on you—and you told me all about your scars and your past, you mentioned someone.”

“Fer—Fernando?” Slug read out. He looked away from the papers to stare confused at Dr. Flug.

“He qualified for Black Hat’s secret Villain Retirement Camp. The program was started by an older employee—before I joined the company—but the name sounded familiar. I had overseen re-ordering projects when I joined on years ago and…” Flug pointed at the papers, “This is where I had seen his name. Your brother-in-law has been hiding since the fire. Maybe he knows which Hero went bad first.”

Dr. Slug nearly dropped all the papers. He went leafing through various documents, eyes scanning and darting crossed out information as he sped-read. “He—He entered into this home a month after I was still hospitalized?”

“Oh, yes, I suppose—”
“No, you don’t understand—” Slug cut off as Flug was answering a clearly rhetorical question, “Miranda—his own twin sister—meant the world to him. Everything he ever did was for her. And that fucker just fucked off and hid while I’ve been—”

Flug twitched, hiding behind the black case and spilling out the rest of the contents as Slug exploded expletives in various languages, stomping around and clenching onto documents while he furiously ranted. He turned to doctor, pointing at him saying, “And what’s worse is that we both agreed to stay away from Black Hat’s radar.”


“I, for one, wanted to stay alive,” Slug explained, “And your chances plummet when you deal with Black Hat.”

“I seem to be doing just fine…” Flug mumbled. He stooped down to collect the items that fell out of the case. He was twiddling with an envelope as Slug scoffed at him.

“Luckily, Black Hat has a thing for you,” Slug nastily pointed out.

Flug suddenly stopped messing with the envelope. He set a cold look on Slug as the man crossed his arms in an unspoken challenge. “N-Not that it’s any of your business, but he can’t help it.”

Slug hummed in response.

“Nor can White Hat,” he added.

“White Hat doesn’t—” Slug went to defend, then found himself biting off his words, “We weren’t even talking about that idiot.”

“You shouldn’t be so mean to him,” Dr. Flug calmly said as he slapped the envelope into Slug’s open chest. It had more force than one would assume a scrawny twerp like Flug could have, “To either of them. They can’t help it. I’m irresistible to their kind.”
Slug grabbed the envelope, rolling his eyes as he sniped out, “Now who’s full of themselves?”

“Not me, I assure you,” Flug continued, moving away from Slug and toward the elevator. He easily left his back open. All Slug could think was that it was ironic, given his words, but Flug did give him a haughty look over his shoulder, “It’s simple biology. Science, Dr. Slug. Because of my genetic condition—the reason I wear this bag—Black Hat, and probably White Hat, cannot help themselves. Like how I treasure your scars… they cannot hold themselves back when I am around.”

Slug only allowed himself to shiver in disgust when Flug turned around to punch the elevator button. He could say nothing, really, to that. His mind blanked at the horror. At whatever the sinister scientist could be hiding under that bag. Instead, Slug opened the envelope to find a flight itinerary and tickets. The end-destination was marked off however, but it was scheduled for early in the morning… for two people.

“You’re flying me somewhere,” Slug realized, he followed the other scientist into the elevator, “Tomorrow?”

“Yes. Fernando is still alive. I confirmed it with the Retirement Camp.”

Slug looked from the tickets to Flug’s determined stare, “… and you’re doing this for me?”

“Yes,” Flug replied, glancing up at the older man.

“Why?”

Flug was so relaxed, and Slug could hear the smile in his voice, “I told you. You’re my idol… and one day, I’m gonna have your brain on my desk. I’ll study what makes you tick. And so, I promised myself I would take good care of it—whether it’s still inside you or not.”

The elevator door dinged out. Flug flounced out, nearly running into the anxiously waiting White Hat. Slug couldn’t control his ability to stare wide-eyed at the pair of them. White Hat glowing, flowery, coming to sigh in relief as he offered the other doctor a place to stay for the night before he left for Black Hat Manor again.

“Thank you,” Flug said, then looked back at the stunned Slug, “Slug and I have business to attend to tomorrow.”
“Oh?” White Hat asked, brows scrunching as he looked over at Slug, concern growing again.

“Take the room across from mine,” Slug said ignoring his boss for a moment as he collected his wits, “I’ll show you where.”

“Ah, just like back at Black Hat Manor,” Flug mused.

Slug said nothing.

His much-wanted brain reeling at all the information given to him that day.

…

White Hat was sitting at his desk, staring at the empty compartment that used to hold the black box that was the black eye’s prison. He wanted to contact his brother. He wanted to ask what was happening. He couldn’t.

He felt oddly cut off. He supposed he could always try concentrating on his eye—but it felt distant and cold. Black Hat wasn’t even attempting to seek out his light twin… which was probably not bad. It meant that both Flug and Slug would be safe from his wrath. He more than likely had not noticed the absence of his doctor… perhaps he could try once more to save Flug from his dark fate? He would certainly talk to both of them once they returned from this mysterious business… he could offer a safe haven at White Hat Manor.

The creak of his door startled him. He stood up from his seat, eye zeroing in on Slug as he slipped into the room. With a sigh, his rigid posture smoothed itself, “Oh… it’s only you…”

“Well,” Slug caustically, quietly said, hand gripping the door knob, “I guess I can just go get Flug if you prefer—”

“Flug? Why?” White Hat asked, confusion leaking into his voice.
Slug was rolling his eyes, but he let go of the handle and properly locked the office doors. “Just—forget it…”

“Uh, Slug?”

Slug was walking toward him. Grabbed him roughly by the tie and started dragging him away from the desk. He kicked out the secret door that hid White Hat’s personal bedroom. White Hat choked a little bit, but didn’t struggle as Slug manhandled him into the bed. White Hat was blinking rapidly, staring as the man then climbed onto the mattress with him—sheets billowing as he flopped out. His eyes closed, head hitting the pillow next to White Hat’s at an odd angle.

“Uh—”

“Go to sleep.”

“But—”

“I SAID GO TO SLEEP.”

White Hat stiffened as Slug hit him with the nightcap on the bedside table. It landed on the Elder Being’s face. He let it lie there for a second. Slowly, he sat up on his elbows, swiping off the tophat to replace it with the nightcap. He went to take off his tie and coat as Slug settled into the covers, hiding half his face until only his tired eyes peeked over the top of the off-white silk set.

“I don’t sleep, really…” White Hat mentioned as he rested next to the man, “And being close or far away won’t stop me from accidentally Dreamwalking into your sleeping mind.”

Slug shrugged, “You being in my head is a better alternative than anything else.”

“What do you mean?”

“Trust me,” Slug said, rolling himself up like a comfortable burrito, “This is just because I can’t trust you to not be stupid while Flug’s in the vicinity.”
“Why does everyone assume I’m interested in Flug?” White Hat asked, frown appearing as he sought an edge of a blanket to pull over himself. Slug tugged it away rudely.

“You ogle.”

“I do not.”

“You do.”

“There’s nothing to even ogle!” White Hat pointed out, mimicking a box shape around his face.

Slug hid his grin as White Hat vogued without realizing, “Yeah, well, better be thankful of that I guess.”

“Did he show you or something?” White Hat asked, “His face?”

“No, but—” Slug went to explain, but then the words sort of just… ate themselves. Slug reshifted, lying on his more injured side as he toyed with the blanket that edged itself higher up his face, “It doesn’t matter. It’s stupid. You’re stupid… and I just don’t trust you to think straight while he’s down the hall tempting your stupid righteous self.”

White Hat frowned, “You’re so mean.”

Slug didn’t have a rebuttal. He stared with his earth colored eyes at White Hat’s face. The frown smoothed out as he tried to figure out what the good doctor was looking at him like that—why it looked like he was trying to hold on to something that wasn’t working right.

“I forgive you though… because you don’t really mean it…”

Slug snorted, “Whatever—”
“I’ve known you long enough to know…” White Hat said, his talons folding the edge of the blanket away from Slug’s face, “That you’re only mean when you’re scared. A defense mechanism, right?”

“I’m not scared,” he argued, and his hand stopped White Hat from uncovering more of his face.

“Worried then,” White Hat decided. He held onto Slug’s fingers gently. Brought them up to his lips and pressed softly, “As am I.”

“Because you’re dumb…”

White Hat smiled soft, “You say that like it’s bad.”

“Because it is—” Slug started, and White Hat leaned down, moving his hand to turn the doctor’s face to him, “White Hat!”

He kissed him—soundly, with soft lips and if Slug would argue, a bit of misplaced confidence. Slug grew silent under his searching mouth. White Hat pulled back, having uncovered the doctor’s face so that he was staring at the Elder Being, surprised. Which was a hard expression to elicit from him.

“I will protect you from whatever you’re worried about.”

Slug looked away from him suddenly. White Hat chased his gaze, lying down beside him. Slug roughly sighed, lightly pushing the pale face away from him as the Elder Being kept moving closer, “You wouldn’t make that promise if you knew what I am so worried about.”

“Hmm, I think I would,” he cheekily said.

“Well,” Slug stubbornly countered, finally letting the Elder Being under the sheets, “Let’s say—hypothetically… something happened to me—”

“It won’t. I won’t let it.”

“This is why I am the scientist here,” Slug continued, “Hypothetically. Whether it happens or not,
let’s say something goes wrong. Let’s say something happens to me, and Flug wants to stay here or whatever…”

White Hat blinked, settling into the bed, partly confused, “Uh, alright? But why would it matter if something happened to you—why can’t you both—”

“Fine, okay, maybe nothing happens to me!” Slug declared, voice growing louder in slight irritation. The sheets puffed out around him as he continued, turning to fully look at White Hat. “Let’s say… let’s say I find out what happened to my family. Let’s say I leave permanently to find this person… who would you want to stay? Who would you want more…?”

“Huh?”

“Jeez, see, you’re so dumb…” Slug sighed, then pointed at himself, “I am talking about me and Flug. If I left, and it looked like Flug was maybe gonna stay… would you want that?”

“Flug wants to stay?” White Hat asked, brightening.

Slug sighed, burying his face in his pillow, “Hypothetically, White Hat.”

“Wait…” White Hat started, words catching up slightly, “This business—it has to do with your family? Did Flug find the Hero who—”

“No…” the word was sad. Perhaps the saddest a word could ever be. No. White Hat felt like it had more power to hurt than it should have. “No… he—Dr. Flug found my brother-in-law. He’s taking me to him. Maybe Fernando knows who… who it is.”

“Oh, Slug…”

“But, I can’t entirely trust him, White Hat,” Slug said. White Hat was surprised when the man moved into his space. Placed himself into White Hat’s arms. The Elder Being went still. Slug seemed to realize, feeling the stiffness. He made the slightly move away. White Hat quickly rectified his earlier astonishment and wrapped his arms around the human and held on. “He’s—He’s a sadist. He’s crazy… I can’t—I can’t let my guard down around him again. He’s the one who—”
Slug choked on his words suddenly. White Hat held on tighter.

“H-Hey,” Slug murmured, tone falsely full of cheer, “When I die, can you promise me something?”

“Why do you have to talk like that? You’re not gonna—”

Slug laughed at him, but, it wasn’t as false as previously, “You and Clem can’t expect me to last forever, boss. I’m not getting younger. I don’t even quite know how I even survived the fire… Eventually, I mean… I will die.”

White Hat stubbornly shook his head. Slug grew comfortable in his arms, deciding it was better to close his eyes and breathe deeply.

“I’m fine with it, you know,” he said, but his words were slowly dying down. Unconsciousness was creeping in from the edges, “You can think of it like I’m sleeping, if it makes you feel better. Like, if you wanted to, you could Dreamwalk to me if you needed to…”

White Hat looked down at the relaxed Slug, and the emptiness inside him ached at the thought, “It— It wouldn’t work like that. I’ve never tried to venture into the realm of the dead…”

“Hmmm… well, when I die… you should cremate me. Don’t leave anything… let me be with… them…” he said, falling to sleep as if comforted by such a morbid thought.

White Hat couldn’t bear the idea. He stayed awake all night to make sure Slug continued to breathe, his sleep, apparently dreamless…

Chapter End Notes

As always, questions or comments are totally welcome! I know the story is weird and if anything confuses you, I am always happy to over-explain in ways that conventional (or my own brand of unconventional) story-telling does not always allow for.

So please!

Thank you for reading!

So close to our conclusion!
LOTS OF LOVE TO ALL OF YOU!!!

<3
Chapter Thirty: Let Us Reframe the Past

When Slug wakes up, it’s an hour before his alarm usually goes off. White Hat has his eye closed, and his breathing is even, but those physical responses are all for show. Slug says nothing as he extracts himself from the Elder Being’s arms. There is slight resistance.

Slug sighs and waits until the grip loosens. He slips out easy enough to return to his own room. He readies for this mysterious trip in silence. Decides to make chocolate chip waffles for breakfast. Clementia is carried downstairs by her bear, per the usual routine, and eventually Dr. Flug enters the kitchen. The scientist does not eat.

Slug does not know what to say to Clem as she stacks her plates high with carbs… but she saw the suitcase by the front door, no doubt. She just stares at Dr. Flug, who doesn’t cower, but still shifts nervously.

“When will he be back?” Clementia decides to ask, cool and calm, but the tone is undercut with an entirely different feel. Slug knows that once she’s finished training, she will a Hero well loved by the public, but feared by any Villains’ that might raise her ire.

“Tomorrow,” he manages without a stutter, “Outside latest.”

She nods, then looks over at Slug with a stern expression, “You’ll be careful?”
“Just going to meet an old friend,” Slug explains without truly explaining. White Hat chooses this terse moment to enter the kitchen. Slug’s goggled eyes dart up to his careful crafted expression of ease, “I’ll be back. More than likely unharmed.”

White Hat says nothing. He waits at the door, then looks over at Flug, who seems to be waiting on Slug, saying, “Whenever you are ready then, doctor.”

Slug just manages to nod. He doesn’t bother hiding his affectionate look at Clem as he swipes off crumbs from her cheek. She is surprised, blinking up at him, before concern colors her features. The girl turns as Slug walks by, murmuring, “Be good, while I’m gone, yeah?”

“Slu—”

“You have a conference call at noon, and then a meeting with the city’s mayor elect at about five. Take Clementia with you. She’ll need to learn diplomatic skills if you’re gonna train her to be a proper Hero,” Slug told White Hat as he handed over an itinerary sheet, “Mostly, make sure you send out the orders over the next two days. I left them categorized in the lab. 0.5.0. can do the manual stuff.”

“Understood, doctor,” White Hat said, voice hollow and floaty.

Slug bumped Dr. Flug’s shoulder lightly to move the other man past White Hat’s looming presence, “The sooner we leave, the sooner we solve several lingering questions…”

…

Fernando and Miranda were twins born to a South American Mafia family of great fortune. Their surname: Prospero. Their birth, originally, heralded as good luck as they were born to the Godfather and his legal wife at the time. The twins were to inherit the family business… but, alas, the key issue —as it always is—is succession to the throne. Their father having untimely left the world before they reached maturity. Their mother disappeared, presumably to save her own skin, and the family business went into an upheaval.

Slug—at the time—was only a few years older than both Fernando and Miranda. He heard about the tumultuous situation and wisely stayed out of it. Sided with the rival Mafia Boss in fact, so as to stay safely stable for the next few years… his future wife and brother-in-law would not be able to say the same. Fernando struggled to regain control of his father’s people, and subsequently, would have a
target on his back for a long while. Miranda, always so sure and strategic, offered herself up to the men making their moves to gain bigger and better cuts of the world in exchange for her brother’s life.

However, that could only last so long. By the time Slug had met Fernando, he was jaded and ruthless. He was quick to cut and never questioned any of his own actions. He always acted like a stray, rabid dog—ready to bite and to take out as much meat in one chunk. Fernando would sink his jowls into an enemy and shake them down until one of them was surely dead. It was the only way he knew how to survive.

As Slug sat in the back of a windowless plane Dr. Flug was flying, he thought about his brother-in-law. He tried to remember every interaction they had ever had. Fernando was a fierce man—arguably reckless—but mostly, he was the passion to his twin’s sister’s soothing presence. They were both beautiful—beautiful and terrible. Fernando had done many things, despicable things, in the name of family. In retrospect, Slug understood, but during their rocky alliance, eventual friendship, and finally, familial bond… he was always slightly paranoid that one day Fernando’s intensity would turn on him.

One wrong move, and Slug thought he might have to stare down the barrel of a gun at the man he called brother. The first man he had ever made a real connection with. Fernando, wild as he was, was instinctively protective. Over his family name, but mostly, his twin sister.

They were all the other had in the world, he and Miranda would often say.

Slug remembers his young daughter digging into the sand to find sea-shells, as Fernando created a fire pit, looking up every so often and commenting, “Good thing she looks like her mother, eh?”

“Bastard,” Slug would grumble around the rim of his beer bottle, but never dispute.

Fernando had looked up at him, laughing, and soon Miranda returned with freshly caught fish for them to roast. His daughter, his wife, his brother, sat around the fire. The warm glow casting such a beautiful spectacle as the sun set low on the shifting sea. A black and white diamond pattern on the water, with the three most beautiful and special people to him, content… and Slug thought about how he felt at peace. How this was his life. How lucky and grateful he was to have made it out of something awful… how he hoped to keep these three away from those terrible things in their past—

But.
That’s not how it happened.

Looking back, he could never have imagined what would occur.

Oh, he knew, in some odd way, that fate would have other plans for him. That this was only temporary. He just… never really thought it would end in such horrid, screaming ways. He thought, maybe, it would be quick. A shot to the head for him, if he was lucky. Maybe, even, for his dear wife. Hopefully, Ama would have grown up enough to run away. He had several caches he was ready to tell her to go to. He had plans for her. For Fernando? Fernando was a beast. Fernando, he assumed, would fight until his last breath—frothing at the mouth and ready for blood.

Slug never anticipated that his brother-in-law would turn tail and run. To Black Hat.

Slug remembers the letters, the convention invites, all those sorts of things. All the big-name families that participated in the Villain’s world received something from Black Hat eventually… Slug recalls holding a slick envelope in front of Fernando’s handsome face, frowning as he warned him, “Dealing with this thing will not help us.”

“He’s powerful. We need friends.”

“All we need, is each other,” Slug had said, the poetic justice to catch up many years later when he continued with, “Trust me when I say this, Fernando. Family is what will see us through. All that Black Hat can offer us is a faster death. He is dangerous. Do not keep company with that thing. He does not come here, understood?”

Fernando had growled at him, had barked that he was the head of the family, and Slug reminded him they were brothers now. It wasn’t just him alone. And, if he ever wanted family to keep the business going, he would have to be alive to do so… Fernando had nothing to say then, as it was before Ama had even been a thought…

Even so, Slug could never have imagined his daughter the head of the prominent crime family business… despite Miranda’s decision to keep hers and Ama’s surname as Prospero. Despite his worry, he caved when Miranda told him all she had to her was her name, and her brother.

Dr. Slug was shaken from his thoughts as the pilot turned on communications to say, “We’re here…”
Dr. Flug had landed the plane (quite expertly) in a small air-field. The plane (which Slug had no idea what type it was or why it was necessary to use this model despite the other doctor info-dumping and gushing nearly the entirety of the flight to the Villainous Retirement Camp) had been carefully shuttled into a dusty, tin hanger. Obviously the place was not used regularly. When Slug exited the craft, he noted the dry air, the simmering heat. His boots crunched harshly against the grit of sun-bleached earth. He hummed in thought. Dr. Flug nodded to a parked jeep with no plates, the canvas covers obscuring most of the interior.

Slug followed the man into the vehicle, wary, but determined. A phone was hooked up to the dash, a coded set of directions already pre-programmed into the GPS. They rode a twisty, winding expanse of backroads for a few hours. Dr. Flug fiercely focused on the task, spine straight, but fingers dancing on the fringed steering wheel. Slug, himself, was counting cacti and studying the colorful rock formations as they whizzed by, sweat beading along the back of his neck. The sun was still high in the sky, hazing the horizon…

Until, eventually, they rounded down into a small canyon… more a crevice. It was a shaded oasis in the midst of a baking desert. A small stream was cutting down along the rocks, and Slug sat up, peering out the window, ignoring the harsh blast of heated air batting at his masked face.

There was a sprawling adobe building—washed white and made of beautiful arches branching into a random triangular-like pattern. This building turned into a clear budding system of apartment-like complexes hidden along the cracked recesses of the earth. It was cooler the lower the pair of doctors traveled into the canyon, so much so, that gardens of wildflowers, palm trees, and natural springing fountains were flourishing in a clear center-scape of the building. It was a main courtyard, Slug realized, vaguely thinking it was too pretty and too peaceful for something the Black Hat Company could offer as a service.

“How much does it take to get into this place?” Slug asked, turning back to the other doctor.

Flug hummed, “With our salaries? Let’s say… a good couple of centuries of work.”

“Maybe your salary—” Slug snarked as he sat back and focused on the road leading down to the Center, “White Hat is disproportionately generous with his finances…”

“If you wish to go comparing bosses again—”

“Yeah, mine’s prettier. Nicer. Great at blow-jobs,” Slug said, settling back into his seat and resting his eyes. He felt the car swerve for the briefest of seconds. Smirking to himself, he pretended to muse aloud, “Black Hat seems like a Wham-Bam-Thank You, M’am kind of fucker.”
“Doctor!”

“Just sayin’.”

Flug stuttered and sputtered, steadfastly keeping his eyes on the road. Slug always figured the younger man for a prude—not that Slug himself was inclined to shout to the rooftops his own sexual history… but, in a pinch, Slug was willing to be openly ballsy every now and again, if only to keep his potential enemies from making the mistake they could ever humiliate or embarrass him over trivial matters.

Again, Slug thought of Fernando, the man they traveled all the way to see. Fernando, who was so brazen… who did things to officers of the law in order to blackmail them. In truth, Fernando was a monster of a man, a man someone like White Hat would intensely disapprove of. Fernando would take away another man’s choice, his idea of who he was, would make those he deemed lesser do things that ruined a person’s reputation in their very strict society. Slug knew he was lucky that Fernando never darkened his doorway to intimidate him. Slug was always ready to leave scars… the irony that he would now face this same twisted man—a man he naively thought to call brother—with much worse scars.

Slug remembers, with a dreadful sort of sick pit in his stomach, one particularly rough day when he caught Fernando, half-clothed and practically frothing at the mouth. He had beaten someone into submission, had called Slug to take care of it—it being a fragile youth still in a shiny new police uniform—and Slug remembers Fernando on the phone, talking to his twin sister as Slug pierced a needle full of morphine into the weeping youth. Fernando spoke honey-sweet words at some point to Ama as Slug was stitching wounds and replacing sheets. Slug later found this youth somewhere in a back alley on his knees with empty eyes, pristine uniform replaced with tear-away shorts and an open button-up.

It was his familial ties that made Slug so bold to ask, “Is this necessary?”

“Are you a tactician, Slug?” Fernando asked, lounging in his seat with his fly still open. He was leafing through reports… many from the various Commissioners in his pocket.

“Are you, Fernando?” he dared to shoot back.

Fernando, with his rakish good looks, leveled him with a glare. Slug did not back down. It took a moment, but the man thumbed the scar along the side of his temple, traveling down to his cheek.
“You were instrumental in saving Miranda,” he admitted sourly, “But now that the business is once again in our name—your input is only noted. I know what I am doing.”

“You’re leaving *trails*, Fernando—”

“I’m leaving *examples*!” Fernando argued, standing. The papers scattered.

Slug did not flinch, he continued stupidly, “And when someone does the same to you?”

Slug believes the only reason he survived was because Miranda held Slug in such high regard. Fernando would never risk his twin’s despair. Would never cause her any type of pain. Fernando left, stomping away, probably to do something destructive. He merely cursed Slug’s attitude, had told him stubbornly, “*That* I will worry about when I stand before God—but until then, I do what I was born to!”

They never spoke about it again. Slug worked extra hard so that Fernando could never be traced back to the atrocities he committed—worked doubly hard so that Miranda and Ama could live peacefully, tucked away from such dreadfulness.

How was it fair that Fernando escaped his comeuppance? Why did the innocents have to pay the price for his arrogance and pride? Slug was fuming, silently, simmering as the jeep came to a crooked park at the entrance of the facility. Various elders were loitering about—orderlies in faded red scrubs milled alongside, or briskly set about picking up or wheeling seemingly unthreatening men and women around the sunny corridors.

Dr. Flug and Slug were a sight to see, and all the cataract-riddled eyes were upon them. They stopped in a labyrinthine lobby. Flug was already speaking lowly with someone. A card was handed to him, and the doctor turned around gesturing to a staircase leading to a second floor. Slug followed him, without words for many reasons.

The walls were lined with intricate, bright folk art, but the heavily plastered space itself was nearly devoid of color. Slug felt strangely taken-aback. It seemed reminiscent of something. He couldn’t put his finger on it, and it unnerved him greatly. Then—Flug stopped at a door.

It was abrupt. Without much more than a soft thud of his converse on worn aqua carpet. Slug glanced up, noting the number, 61, but no name attached. No door handle either. Just… a card reader. He tapped the plastic card from the front desk onto the scuffed black box. A green light
flashed at the top of the reader. The door let out a puff of compressed air, but other than that, noiselessly, slowly, swung in. Dr. Flug held it open, gesturing inside the dim room.

It took a second, but Slug had specially crafted his goggles... and they adjusted. A figure was seated in a chair—blocking out the light of what little sun peered into the hidden canyon. The hair was nearly white as it glowed against the harsh brightness. Another person was standing at the window, turning on a bug-catcher. They wore the orderly uniform and turned to the now open door in surprise. The person seated did not move.

“Fernando,” Slug said, partially paralyzed, but mostly uncertain.

Still—no movement.

“Excuse me?” the orderly started, moving away from the window and further into the room, “Can I help you?”

“Yeah, I’m looking for Fernando Prospero—” Slug answered, quickly strutting into the room. He pushed past the orderly, eyes only on the figure before him, grabbing the arm of the chair and yanking. The figure tipped with the motion, but remained unphased, “Fernando—!”

“Hey, you can’t—!”

Dr. Flug was helpful in grasping the orderly by his scrub collar and halting him.

Slug just stared at the face before him in shock. He blinked a few times before turning back to the other doctor and the orderly. “This—” he said, trying to keep the rage from his voice, “This is not Fernando!”

Flug jumped as the older doctor raised a fist in a threatening manner.

“Yes, it—” the orderly stubbornly began.

“No! This man is not Fernando!” Slug declared, revealing the face—pale, unresponsive, unblemished, with haunted eyes. Slug pointed at the immaculate face, “Fernando Prospero has a scar
running from temple to chin—and I would *know* because I was the one who cut him!"

“I—I didn’t know!” Dr. Flug said, backing up as Slug rounded on the man in suspicion.

“What the fuck kind of game are you playing, Flug?!”

“Really!” Flug squeaked, quickly placing the orderly in the way of Slug’s mounting fury, “Doctor—I swear to you—I never had a picture, just the name—” he flailed as Slug reached past the confused third party, who did little to interfere with the escalating situation, even as Flug cried out, “P-Please, Dr. Slug!”

It was at the moment, a small sound echoed from behind the cluster of men shuffling about in equal parts terror, confusion, and anger. Then, with a soft, broken whisper the figure by the window shifted. The barest ruffle of clothes followed by a breath of, “Slug…?”

Slug paused, startled by the sound of his name. He turned his face to the unknown male currently using Fernando Prospero’s name as—as a *hide away* at Black Hat’s Secure Villain Retirement Center. Slug’s goggles narrowed as he focused back on this new character. Strangely, this man was desperately attractive. The way he slurred his vowels belied a history in the deep American South. His smooth face seemed unmarred by both sun and emotional response. Crystal blue eyes landed on Slug’s suddenly calming profile.

“Who the fuck *are* you?” he demanded as he turned to fully study the man before him. Weak and atrophied. Years of wasting away, bound in a wheelchair… yet, his waifish figure was alluring, beckoning. Like he was asking people to take care of him, to pamper him.

Shaking hands lifted and the man glanced down at them… as if he was finally seeing clearly for the first time in many years. Slug knew that look—had seen it enough times in the mirror to recognize it for what it was.

“I—I’m so sorry…”

Slug stalked forward. Yet again, the orderly moved and Dr. Flug, knowing when to stay quiet, held the red-garbed man back. Slug bent over the chair, gloved hands curled hard on the arm rest as he braced this stranger into his wheelchair. He forced eye contact and growled again, “*Who* are you?”
“Y-You’re Fernando’s brother,” this man had said, voice rusty from years of disuse. His eyes, so much like the clear sky, brimmed heavy with tears, “And I didn’t know.”

“How did you know Fernando?” Slug asked. That growing pit of dread gnawed at him as the man set him with haunted eyes.

“Carnaval,” the man whispered, as if it explained anything. Slug shook his head, raising to stand.

“What?” he caustically found himself asking, “You met him during the festival season? Are you fucking seri—”

“I was young, I didn’t know,” he insisted, pale hands reaching up and grabbing Slug’s labcoat. He was tugging and pulling to get Slug to lean down again. The man’s voice cracked. It sounded painful. Slug stepped back, tried to pry the suddenly forceful grip from his precious coat.

“Let go,” Slug warned, patience waning.

“Please, Slug, you—“ the man sniffled, pathetic as he hung his head, “I swear I didn’t know. I didn’t understand the language… I was just—I was just looking for a home.”

“I don’t have time for this—” Slug found himself saying, gripping the man’s un-calloused fingers and meaning to unhook them, “Look! I won’t tell you again! Let go—”

“I just heard Fernando talking to them all the time and I—”

Slug’s own fingers spasmed suddenly at the venom in such a pretty voice. He stared down at the bowed, pale man. His breath nearly left him as the man struggled to stand, to raise to a full height and look into Slug’s goggles. Suddenly, the room seemed unbearably warm. The heat, the intensity rising as this mysterious stranger did.

“I didn’t know Miranda was his sister.”

Slug found himself frozen, the bug-zapper sparking behind the blazing blue eyes.
“I—I thought…” the man mumbled, wisps of smoke rising from his fingertips. Slug stared at the man in horror, realization dawning, “I thought that… if… if he had no family… he could… we could finally be together.”

“You—what?” Slug’s tongue was too heavy in his mouth.

Behind them, the orderly finally broke free and rushed to the pale man. He was shushing him, trying to help the stranger back into his chair. Slug could not move from his spot, could not look at this ghost, this shell of a person.

“You… I found you…” Slug murmured, stunned, eyes strangely dry and body strangely light.

“They had the same last name—” the man spoke as if this was a long-awaited confessional. Perhaps it was, to this stranger… but to Slug? Slug felt like his insides were hollowing out as each word attempted to fill up his ears like kerosene-soaked cotton balls, “I thought—he called them, his used these words, and when I looked them up—he called them his love.”

“Meus amores…” Slug whispered, closing his eyes. He couldn’t stand all the colors suddenly. The red. The blue. The shadow. The light.

“It wasn’t until after,” the man said. Slug ignored the man’s tug on his sweater now. “Not his brother—but his brother-in-law! I—I didn’t know!”

Everything smelled like smoke as Slug tried to breathe, “You’re the fire-starter. You burned them alive… You murdered them.”

“I didn’t know!” the man wailed.

Slug grasped thinned arms, and with a renewed strength, bent them backwards. The orderly started forward—but the end of a ray gun was pointed at the back of the man’s amber head. Dr. Flug tsked the orderly, only doing his job. Slug ignored the other two as he focused on the crying man he was digging nails into. He barred his teeth, voicing raising as he barked, “BULLSHIT!”

“I—I’m so sorry!” the pallid man hiccuped. Slug grit his teeth as salty tears fell, splashed along his
“You knew exactly what you were doing you, stupid selfish fucking—”

“I know! I know—” the man babbled, looking at Slug with imploring eyes, “I was—I am a bad seed. I know this… I am full of so much—so much evil… I have the hellfire in me… I—I knew… I killed them… I had them burned… It’s all my fault—”

Disgusted with the sniveling man, Slug drew back, trying to take a calming breath, “What the fuck did you do to Fernando? Where is he—”

“He—” the words were choked, and pale arms wrapped around a slight, skeletal frame. Slug watched those blue eyes dull, “I told him what I did… I thought… he’d be proud of me…”

Slug remembered… remembered how vile Fernando could be… he looked at this pale man, this pale, lonely bastard and wondered what redeeming qualities he could have found in Fernando—perhaps his passion. A man who could control fire at will—yes, someone like that would be tempted to reel in a blazing tempest like Fernando Prospero.

“And… he thought you were lost—all of you.”

Slug thought about it—Fernando, impulsive and brash. Yes. He would be the kind of man to snuff out his own spark.

“I watched him—right until the moment he hit the ground.”

“And it was only then that you realized exactly what you’d done,” Slug finished, lame. The man nodded, defeated. Slug shook his head, gutted from the inside out. Unexpectedly, suddenly, faced with the very thing he had warned Fernando about… Slug found himself dazed, accusing this Firestarter, “You’re not—You’re not sorry about Miranda. Not about Ama. You’re sorry over the fact you were so fucking wrong you lost the one thing you really wanted…”

“N-No, I didn’t—I—!”
“Shut up,” Slug interrupted, and the man started anew his wretched sobbing.

Slug loomed at him, even as the orderly tried vainly to get between them, claiming, “Sir, this isn’t helping!”

“This is none of your business!” Slug snarled, but continued to glare down at the mess of a human before him, “You have no idea, do you? The ramifications of what you did? Of what it meant? Of what they meant to him? What you took from the world? You think you can just act without consequences?”

“I’m sorry! You’re right—I didn’t know!”

“No,” Slug decided, voice low, “You don’t get to claim ignorance now. Whether you knew it or not—you decided to do something terrible. You decided to hurt others for your own reward… you can’t—you can’t escape that.”

“Brother!” he cried, hands full of wisps as he clawed at his own face. The heat shimmered, but did nothing to mar his pristine features. He was untouched by the fire blooming along his palms, “I swear I didn’t know what he meant! I—I can’t take it!”

“You can’t take the truth?” Slug asked, stepping back, unconsciously moving away from the slow roasting of the other man.

“I know now!”

“You know they were my wife and child?” Slug shot back, “Or now you know what it’s like to live without the love of your life?”

“Please! Brother! Kill me! I can’t take what I’ve done!” the pale man begged.

Slug shook his head, “No. I told you—you can’t escape this.”

“P-Puh—leaseee!” he fell to his knees like a penitent man. Still the fire did nothing to him. The heat was so much, burned so bright and the orderly was grabbing blankets, towels, trying to pile it on top
of this pale, beautiful creature that used to be human.

“I have lived with years of guilt for something—” Slug said, losing his words, “God… none of this was because of me. I—I am done. It’s over. This isn’t—” Slug looked over at Dr. Flug, nodding, “Yeah. We’re done here. Let’s get back.”

“No! Please…!”

“No! It’s your turn!” Slug declared spinning back around to point at the man, “All this death, this pain—this is yours now. You live with it.”

The man crumpled, weeping tears that sizzled, still pleading, “I—I can’t… It’s too much…!”

Slug left as the man screeched at him, calling out to end his misery—Dr. Flug quickly followed on Slug’s heels. It was hard for either man to catch their breath—but for differing reasons. Flug was turning, looking back at the room as Slug rushed into the court yard, chest tight, head light. “W-Wow, doctor…” the Villainous man said, voice hushed in a sick awe, “That was… just amazing…”

“What?!” Slug reared on him.

Flug jumped, nearly bending backwards as Slug intimidatingly towered above him. “I—I just mean h-how you—you just left him to suffer like that… that was ingenious… a method of torture I could never conceive of.”

“What are you talking about?” Slug snapped, trying to collect himself. He pointed up at balcony with a sparking bug-zapper. Based on his knowledge of the limited layout, that should have been room 61, “That—that thing doesn’t deserve anything less? Death? Are you fucking kidding me! No—that’s—”

“A release he doesn’t deserve,” Flug said, staring up with starry eyes. Slug tsked, fixing his coat. He was glowering up at the glowing blue of the zapper. Little white specks fluttered in and out of the electric contraption.

“Who knows if the dead suffer enough?” Slug muttered. Something tickled the back of his brain, and he swatted at a fluttering thing that bounced off his mask. Flug ignored the winged insect—which Slug catalogued as a pale beauty specimen of moths native to New Mexico.
Which was strange that it was out here at this time of year—if in fact Slug was correct in assuming the other doctor had taken him somewhere in New Mexico… which also tickled another spot in the back of his brain. Still—seeing that kind of moth—

That was when the bug-zapper shorted… and room 61 exploded in a mushroom fire-ball of heat and clay. The blast enough to cause both doctors in the courtyard to sway with a concussive radius of the fiery detonation. Chunks of ceiling rained down, followed by wheelchair pieces and fluttering scraps of woolen blankets. Slug started, moving toward it for half a second thinking, Like moths to a flame but Flug was quicker.

“No!” the other doctor warned, looking at the destruction with wide lenses. Orderlies rushed past the pair, but the old Villains leaned out of the rooms, eyes glinting, “We need to leave. Now.”

“But—” Slug started, surprised, arms lifting to the intense and sudden destruction occurring just behind them.

Flug nodded backwards as the shadows elongated in the canyons, “I don’t think we have friends here… and Black Hat will know… soon. Time to go back.”

So Slug left, unable to look back… except for one out-of-place memory that haunted him. Fernando, smiling. It was a smile Slug had never truly seen before. Fernando had been on the phone. His brother-in-law hadn’t heard him come in from the office door—he spoke in stilted English, in a way that was so soft. Slug had never paid attention to the words, but vaguely thinks perhaps, there had been mentioned something like love and be home soon. At the time, Slug simply handed him documents without paying attention. Fernando quickly snapped his phone down, angrily asking in Portuguese, “Don’t you knock anymore?”

“What for, brother?” Slug had lightly teased.

His brother-in-law rolled his eyes, “You harp on me about being careful…”

“Well, when you settle down with a darling wife and have your own child, you’ll understand.”

Fernando had looked at him with eyes that held worlds of hurt in them, a whole cavalcade of emotions Slug would be unable to fully name, to fully understand for years… “I don’t think so, Slug… stories like mine… they don’t end like that.”
“Only if you aren’t careful,” Slug insisted, insensitive, not grasping the full picture.

“Oh Slug,” Fernando had sighed, rubbing his scar self-consciously, “You’re so brilliant, yet so blind…”

Slug never thought much of it, thinking this was simply a thing that family members perhaps did. Brothers often spoke harshly of one another—but what does that mean? In the end, family is what mattered, nice words or no. The family would survive. That was Slug’s only role in Fernando’s life—someone to watch over his sister, someone to help continue the line, the name. Someone had to inherit the fortune. Fortune favored not the bold, only the line most determined to survive.

Baking in the jeep—sweating in a tin hanger—and staring down at the scenery of the Eastern US coastline, Slug laid his scarred head against the cold window.

It was unfair.

There was no other word for it.

Blood or no, Miranda and Ama… they were gone. Lost. No one to was left to pay for their death, no one to really blame anymore. No where else to go. No one else to find. He hadn’t—He had no idea that on such a non-momentous day, the one thing that drove him, that broke him, would finally be settled. Put to rest…

It was strange… he was—there was no word for how empty it felt. For how he was feeling. There was this sad, creeping loneliness… like… footprints on the shore, swept out but a sudden wave. One second, a memory of a person who stood there—who was real, alive, proof they existed and then—the water washed away the mark. The sand swept out to sea, the tumbling of coarse grains, falling and rushing… and then… Nothing. The pull and push of time steadily eroding all fractures to the earth. Smoothing, soothing over the gaping place where someone you loved so wholly once stood, once took up space and breath. You look away for only a moment and with no warning, they are gone. If you are lucky, you leave just as quick, in the time it takes to call their name… perhaps the waters take you too… so you can rest alongside salt-ridden bones.

The gates at White Hat Manor reminded Slug of a giant’s bones. Of a statue that shadowed his old home in Rio. He touched his frayed gloved to the metal, reminding himself of where he was. He had to shake off the emotional shock before entering the Manor.
Dr. Flug nervously twitched beside him, asking, “What will you tell White Hat?”

“The truth,” Slug answered, turning to look at the scientist, “What else is there to tell?”

“I—I don’t know…”

“I guess the more pressing question is—” Slug started pushing open the gate until it creaked, “What’s Black Hat gonna do when he finds out what happened?”

The question was quickly answered when a purple blur rocketed out of the side of the large, white hat shaped Manor. Slug’s goggle’s deadpanned as Flug’s bugged out in shock. A manic cackle followed—then a plume of smoke and dust from smashing dry wall. 0.5.0. was stuck in the side gate, the metal warped around his enormous body from the force of Dementia hurling him.

“Of course. Destroy the Manor,” Slug noted. Flug was panicking on the spot. The doctor simply grabbed him and stomped down the paved curved entrance to the stoop. He kicked open the double doors, roaring at the top of his lungs, “HEY ASS-HATS! WE’RE HOME!”

Black Hat was curled up along the ceiling of the Manor, a many eye-fanged horror with shadowy tendrils whipping about. White Hat had managed to shield himself with a teal bubble, hovering in the air as he held out a long shaft of light like a saber. 5.0.5. was curled up in a corner rocking. Dementia was mid-slither along the (now open-aired) kitchen counter-top. Clementia was hiding in a cabinet, holding a metal sheet. Her bright eyes lit up at the sight of him, dragging a flailing Flug just behind him.

“Sluggy!” Clem called out.

Dem shot up, clearly excited to have found the girl’s hiding spot. At that moment, the Heroic teen took the opportunity to hit her opponent with the baking sheet. Dementia blinked out of sync, tongue stuck out, before she froze in place and slipped off the counter and into unconsciousness.

“Awww, you’re doing great, sweetie,” he praised as Clem came out of hiding (somewhat guiltily peering down at the lizard hybrid).
White Hat let out a relieved breath, popping his own bubble and carefully falling to the floor of the main hallway. “Dr. Slug! You’re okay—”

“Eh, debatable…” he mentioned, loosening his grip on Flug. The man went ramrod straight, practically cowering behind the older doctor. Black Hat was slinking off the ceiling, sliding down into a shadow puddle. He reformed into his regular shape, malevolently glaring at the pair moving into the Manor proper. Slug managed to fold his arms over his chest and firmly planted his feet on the checkered floor to return his own fierce glare, “Black Hat—I don’t remember inviting you into the Manor…”

“I do not require an invitation,” he hissed.

White Hat placed a placating hand out between the pair, “W-Wait, this is all a misunderstanding—”

“Stay out of it, White,” Black Hat warned.

“For once,” Slug said, moving White Hat’s arm farther from his dark twin’s reach, “I am in agreement with the demon.”

“You stole my scientist—”

“Eh, again, debatable,” Slug said, moving to stand on the balls of his feet to get into Black Hat’s darkly shadowed face.

“And then I receive a call that—” Black Hat sputtered for half a minute, gesturing vaguely, “That you set fire to my establishments?!”

“Arson is the least of your worries,” Slug taunted.

Black Hat let out a snarl, “Regardless of our understanding, Doctor—”

“Understanding?” Slug parroted with a derisive laugh. The other occupants of the Manor all sent confused looks back and forth, “There is no understanding. I believe I made very clear threats. Or, really, promises.”
“Stealing my employee to attack my clients while we’re in the middle of this Anti-Hero mess is—”

“Black Hat!” White Hat was quick to butt in as the Eldritch Horror’s body stretched and rippled and bloated to a size with clear predatory intent, “Please! Dr. Slug did no such thing! I told you—”

“FLUG DOES NOT LEAVE MY MANOR.”

“Well, clearly,” Slug taunted, “He did.”

“Jefécito…”

Black Hat huffed and puffed, only vaguely being soothed by Flug’s uncertain, self-conscious pet-name. Clearly, the demon was trying to control himself.

Dr. Slug smirked in victory, “Oh… I see. I know what this is about—”

“It’s about Dr. Flug being taken from me—”

“You know how he feels about me…” Slug murmured, leaning in too close. Close enough he could smell death on the creature’s foul breath. Black Hat lashed out, grabbing Slug by the lapels and raising him up off his feet to shake him. White Hat quickly wrapped his arms around Slug’s middle while Flug jumped onto the dark arms and held on tight. “C-Can’t handle a little bit of turn around, Black Hat?”

“YOU MADE HIM—”

“Enough, brother!” White Hat demanded, freeing the good doctor. He glared at his twin before inspecting Slug. Slug shoved him off, scoffing lightly to brush off dust. Black Hat fumed, even as his own scientist worriedly reached out. “Dr. Flug made the choice to come here—you have to accept that. You cannot control his every action.”

Black Hat’s wrath zero’d in on White Hat’s patronizing demeanor. With a sniff, Black Hat settled,
rustling into a modestly sized version of himself. He worked his neat tie back up in a neat Windsor as he raised his chin defiantly, “You seem to forget Flug and I have a contract—”

Flug nearly flinched as a fiery eye slid over to him.

“And whatever I say is *law.*”

“Y-Yes, sir…” Flug answered, eyes on the floor.

White Hat frowned deeply, “That’s not how the soul contracts work, and you *know* it.”

“Do you wish to test me, White?” Black Hat replied coolly. Slug was rolling his eyes, casually knocking his hand into White Hat’s chest to get him to shut up.

“Look,” Slug said, “If it makes you less pissy—”

Black Hat growled.

“I’m sure Flug can tell you all the details anyway but, it *actually* did start as a work thing.”

“And?” Black Hat impatiently asked.

Slug sighed, “I don’t even know… but, turns out, the Anti-Hero attacks did not start with me. We know the truth now—about my *family*. Been a bad day, a little, for me. Coming back here to a destroyed Manor—seeing your fucking face—*not* helping...”

Black Hat did smile cruelly at that.

White Hat frowned deeper. Slug waved him off without even looking.

“So, *happy*, Black Hat?” the good doctor inquired.
Black Hat settled.

White Hat certainly did not, “What do you mean—”

“I’ll explain later—when this asshole is gone.”

“Come now, doctor,” Black Hat intoned, looking over at Flug with a curious expression. He then ticked his head to White Hat’s ruffling profile. With a sly grin, he pressed the tips of his fingers together in thought. “I am not wholly unmoved by your plight…”

“Hmm, sure,” Slug answered as White Hat pestered him with a big blue eye. Slug didn’t bother looking at him until the major threat in the Manor was dealt with and long gone.

“Truly, living with mortals has been extremely enlightening…” Black Hat continued.

White Hat narrowed his eyes at the tone his twin crept into, “Brother…”

“And since White Hat believes so much in choice—” Black Hat said, spreading his palms out and up. Slug glanced at them, edging back just a bit at how easy the creature was placated by his misery, “Why don’t we put a few theories out to test…? Yes?”

“Theories?” White Hat asked, and Slug silently moved his hand to the weapon he’d carefully hidden in his coat pocket… just in case.

“Yes,” Black Hat added, “About whether I can choose to do a good deed—and about what you’ll choose.” Slug was startled as Black Hat offered his hand innocently. “As a good deed,” Black Hat emphasized staring directly into Slug’s goggles, “Why don’t I raise that dead family of yours?”

Everyone in the room held their breath.

Slug was the only one who managed a disbelieving, “W-What? You can do that…?”
“Theoretically…”

Slug’s eyes widened as Black Hat walked calmly into his space and stared down, tempting him.

“All I need… is your soul.”

Chapter End Notes

AH. WE HAVE COME TO AN IMPASSE MY FRIENDS!
WHAT WILL HAPPEN?
WHAT WILL SLUG DO?
WHAT WILL WH DO?
WHAT IS BLACK HAT UP TO?
FIND OUT NEXT THE CHAPTER!

Thank you so much for reading! Everyone is the best!

LOTS OF LOVE

<3
Chapter Thirty-One: Let Us Make A Choice

Slug was staring at the black hand in front of him. Poised and sharp, waiting. His eyes flicked up to Black Hat’s waiting smile. Slick and sinister. Just off to the side, White Hat was gazing with widening horror as the good doctor struggled with his words.

“W—What are you offering me?” he asked Black Hat.

The Eldritch Horror did not lower his hands, staring resolutely at Slug, who could only stare at his own immobile reflection in the Villain’s monocle, “I can cross into the realm of the dead easily. I can find the souls of your wife and child. I can bring them here, to this plane. I can transplant them back into their bodies—”

“They burned to ash.”

“That is fixable. Give my brother a little tooth, a strand of hair—anything—and he could easily reform the bodies,” Black Hat explained.

Slug made a breathy wheeze as he thought about the little balut egg. He looked over at White Hat, who minutely shook his head, turning to Black Hat with frightening speed, “Brother—”

“And all you want is my soul?” Dr. Slug asked, stepping forward hurriedly.
Black Hat’s smirk deepened.

“Doctor, don’t—” White Hat interrupted, catching the human before he could move closer. He glared at his dark twin, “If this is truly a good deed, Black Hat, you do not need payment for such services.”

“Oh, it won’t be payment,” Black Hat explained, “Simply fuel for the journey.”

“You’ve never had problems crossing dimensions before—”

“Bringing the dead back requires a bit more than dimension hopping,” Black Hat replied, tone dripping with an acidic bite.

White Hat scoffed under his breath, “This sounds like an excuse. We’ll hear no more—”

“No!” Slug shouted as Black Hat’s hand ticked downwards, “No! Wait—This—This is possible? You can bring them back? All it costs is my soul?” The doctor was thinking about the Necromonicon, about the horrid things it asked for, how the dead could return. Theoretically, it could be done with an Eldritch.

Clementia held her breath in the background, looking at White Hat as the Elder Being struggled to keep Slug from moving closer to Black Hat. She, in turn, was thinking about White Hat—about his unwillingness to take her soul when she first asked him about it.

“No—” White Hat said, firmly, “Black Hat. Enough of this charade. Leave. You take no souls today.”

“Of course not, White,” Black Hat too calmly agreed, “I will take nothing that your good doctor will not freely offer.”

Slug pushed past, exclaiming, “Yes! Fine! Take it! You can have my soul—”

“No!”
Before Slug could grasp the outstretched claw, White Hat grabbed Slug’s hand between the both of his own, harshly. Slug felt his bones grind together and he turned to White Hat, brows raised. Black Hat was smiling, and tilted his own head at the pair. Slowly, the claw came down, tucking itself into a pants pocket smugly.

“Of course, Dr. Slug, White Hat’s help will be instrumental. I need those reconstructed bodies. Otherwise…” he left his statement unfinished.

“White Hat,” Slug pleaded, “You don’t understand. I know what happened now—”

“No, you don’t understand,” White Hat insisted.

“They—They didn’t die because of the Anti-Heroes. They died because of a mistake. Miscommunication. We can—We can fix this now—” Slug started, voice rising in excitement. White Hat’s eye widened, and if his face could drain of blood, be any paler, it would now, “I can find something for you to heal—and then they can be alive—this wrong can be made right.”

White Hat shook his head, “No, Slug, he’s asking for your soul because—”

“Who cares about my soul!” he shouted, eyes screw tight in frustration, tugging away, “What’s a dirty thing like that compared to two innocent souls?!”

“We consume them!” White Hat confessed, voice echoing.

Black Hat could not smile any wider. Dr. Flug, behind him, placed his own hands against his chest. Dementia was slowly coming to, sitting up weakly. Clem covered her mouth as she gasped loudly. But Slug…? Slug was looking at the defeated White Hat, posture drooping. White Hat crossed his arms over his stomach, hollow inside, before offering his own pale hand.

“Our powers aren’t completely infinite…” he vaguely said, “We… Black Hat and I—”

“I—I know,” Slug finally sighed.
White Hat stared at the doctor, words dying on his tongue. The doctor stood straighter, shoulders squaring.

“You think I couldn’t figure that out? You think I didn’t know…? You’re—Nothing lasts forever. Not even the heart of a star can survive without something to consume, you idiot…” Slug nearly whispered, “But, I don’t care. White Hat—”

“You’d give up your—you would—” White Hat covered his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Yes,” Slug said, grabbing White Hat’s hand and pulling it downward, “Please. White Hat—I need your help. We can save Miranda and Ama. Please.”

“You don’t… care?” White Hat repeated. Slug shook his head in response. The Elder being was looking at him with an inscrutable expression. Trying to find something behind the mask, maybe…

“Brother,” Back Hat added, shattering the moment with a harsh finality, “If Dr. Slug will not hesitate—if he is willing—this choice is his. All he asks for is assistance. Will you refuse him?”

White Hat turned to Black Hat with a cold expression…and then, a regretful eye on Slug. The doctor knew what that meant, and he tightened his hold on the lax, pale, perfect hand in his. “White Hat—”

“I will take no part in this,” White Hat declared, slipping away. Black Hat gave a shrug as Slug stumbled after the Elder Being, desperate. The dark one turned to Flug, adjusting the brim of his hat and nodded toward the front doors. 5.0.5. was scooping up the concussed Dementia, following after the pair heading for the doors.

“Well then, I suppose we’ve overstayed our welcome,” Black Hat said, nodding at his doctor and the other occupants existed the ruined White Hat Manor.

Slug turned back, briefly, brows falling, “Wait—!”

“Oh, fear not dear doctor,” he began, smoothing out his ruffled jacket collar, “This remains an open, unconditional offer. If you ever manage to convince my brother to help you, you are welcome to return to me. I will gladly do this for you.”
And with that, the dark creature was gone.

...

White Hat was pacing his office, wondering if he was hyperventilating. His whole chest felt constricted. His brain felt melty. But—but bad melty. He sort of wanted to flip a table. He sort of wanted to do a whole bunch of stuff but could not settle on what. Everything inside him simmered just under his skin. His palms were clammy, and kept swiping at his eyes. Though he now knew he was capable of crying, he really did not want to do that. Especially not when Slug followed, bursting into the office with a desperate sort of energy.

“White Hat, you promised me—” he started.

“I promised to find the Hero who murdered your family—” the Elder Being snapped, not wanting to turn to the human, “Not to go against nature and wrest souls from a different dimension!”

Slug grabbed at his coat to stop the Elder Being from his manic dashing to and fro, “Well, I found him—White Hat, I found him.”

“So you barely mentioned,” White Hat said, shaking off the hands from his coat. Slug let go, and his boss slowed down, only a little, in his pacing.

“Fernando wasn’t at that retirement center—” Dr. Slug explained, hurriedly, “It was his lover. He—Fernando had been living a secret life, with a man, and believe me when I say in Brazil, you just don’t do that.”

“Ugh, human sensibilities—” White Hat added, crossing his arms as he stopped to look at Slug hard, “You had no problems coming to my bed.”

Slug stared at human, apparently shocked. No words came from him and White Hat walked closer, staring down at the doctor as if in challenge.

“Is that what this is about? Do you wish to return to your old life? To have a woman—a daughter of your own blood? You mean to abandon us—abandon me? This life you made here?” White Hat
Slug stared with wide-eyed goggles up at the coldness in White Hat’s face. His silence irritated White Hat to his nonexistent core.

“They are dead, Slug! Are you so selfish as to interrupt their peace—you would give up your soul—and what? Leave them? Leave the possibility to never meet on a different plane? You are so conceited as to think they would wish that for you? You don’t even know what would happen when Black Hat would consume your—” White Hat cut off his rant quickly, turning away, sick from just the thought of Black Hat’s sharp, slimy teeth sinking into his dear doctor’s soul.

Slug’s footsteps behind him sounded soft, “I’m… I’m a Villain, White Hat.”

“Yes, so you love to remind me—” White Hat started, refusing to turn around. He choked on his words when he felt a trembling hand touch his back.

“There’s… no saying that I would ever meet my wife and children in any afterlife…” he whispered, and White Hat closed his eye at such unfathomable sadness, at knowing that of course, Slug would think so lowly of himself, “I’m a Villain… the things I’ve done… The things I do—” White Hat felt the smooth press of Slug’s mask against his spine, “You’re right. I am—I am very selfish. I’m sorry.”

White Hat felt impossibly caught, trapped, even though the man was only barely touching him.

“I just…” Slug swallowed, his breath came out in a shaky puff, and White Hat found himself wanting to taste it, to devour him before Black Hat could come between them—before the ghosts of the dead could be awakened, “It’s not suppose to be about me anymore… We can… We can bring them back. They could be alive. I would give anything for that. They didn’t deserve such an end—please. White Hat…”

“Slug, what you are suggesting is—” White Hat began, shaking as he fought the urge to turn and shake some sense into the man, “You know we can’t trust my brother.”

“I know, I’m not dumb,” Slug murmured.

White Hat nearly laughed, nearly cried, “Yes, yes. And I am.”
“No…” Slug said, shaking his head, “No. I’m sorry. You’re not. You know Black Hat just wants to hurt you. He wants to toy with me but…” Slug sighed, pressed his face harder into White Hat, “Please, this is about saving two lives. Two lives that ended too early. Please.”

“I will not trade one soul for another—not even one for two. I won’t,” White Hat decided.

Slug took in a breath, hands clenching in the pristine fabric.

“I’ll stay.”

White Hat finally turned, startled. He looked at Slug, who was determined. He was steadfastly boring a hole into the carpeting. White Hat let out a breath, “What?”

“I will stay,” Slug enunciated, clearly, head tilting upwards to stare into White Hat’s shocked face, “Forever. If you want. When they are alive. I’ll set them up somewhere safe—and I will stay here. As long as they’re alive, they don’t even—they don’t even have to know I survived the fire, if you want. No one will look for me. I will… I will do whatever you want. Whenever you want. I’ll stay with you.”

White Hat couldn’t stop his hands, lifting the mask off of Slug, raking talons over his scars, staring with a glowing eye. Slug’s were closed, allowed the contact—he didn’t fight, only breathed evenly. “You’ll stay… You’ll stay…”

“Yes…”

White Hat felt something in him sing, hearing the words… but Slug remained unmoving… waiting… letting the Elder Being touch him…

“You will stay…” White Hat asked, and his voice was like cracking crystal with each carefully chosen words, “If I aid you in bringing your wife and child back to life?”

Slug nodded, opening those heartbroken, earth-toned eyes.
“Why...?” White Hat asked with a knot tying his vocal cords—his invisible heart stopping.

“I—I love them. More than anything.”

White Hat knocked their foreheads together, gripping the man’s face, “… of course you do.”

“White Hat?” Slug asked, confused as the Elder Being drew away from him.

“You truly are a Villain,” White Hat realized, and the tears were slipping out of him so easily, Slug staring with more than confusion, “You’ve known all along—You—You keep doing this to me… You keep pushing my boundaries… I cannot—”

“White Hat...?” Dr. Slug had reached out, and White Hat stepped back as if the human was some infectious thing. The look on his beautiful face enough to halt Slug in his tracks.

“You have to choose,” White Hat started, “You have to choose me.”

Slug let out a sigh, “You can’t choose who you love…”

...

It had been a long time, but Slug left the Manor without his mask—lying somewhere in White Hat’s office. His fury burned so low, it flickered and rose, and he kicked at trashcans. He over turned chairs and tables, or anything not bolted down. He ripped out flowers in gardens. From time to time, smashed in car windows and threw rocks into buildings. Eventually, the doctor found himself kicking into a bar way, way downtown.

A local Villain Pub. He scanned the stunned crowd through the haze of smoke and low lighting. He recognized no one terribly dangerous, and then stomped over to the bar. He plopped down on a stool and glared at nothing as the bartender tiredly wandered over, “Want anything?”

“Want a lot of things—” Slug grumbled, a little to himself, then slid his eyes over to the burly man in the tight black tee, “But I guess we’ll start with some whiskey.”
“Preference?”

“Whatever is the strongest.”

The bartender let out the most beleaguered sigh and wandered over to a corner, retrieving a glass and a bottle. He dumped a couple of chilled rocks into the stained glass and slapped the bottle on the counter, assuming the worst. Slug tossed a credit card at him and grabbed the bottle by the neck and slammed a large swig back. The bottom of the bottle hit the countertop, but the bartender ignored him to run the line of credit somewhere off to the side.

Slug proceeded to drink, stewing in relative silence. A low bass hum was in the background, followed by the murmur of gruff voices. He didn’t pay attention to any looks thrown his way. He tried not to pay attention to anything…

It was entirely surprising about two hours into his sourly drinking that an arm slid across the counter—faintly veiny and sunburned—and a well-muscled punk with a fanged smile slid into the seat next to him. A thump could be heard to the seat on the other side of him. Slug looked over to see a skinnier man, more wiry, leaning overly confident onto the bartop. The bartender didn’t even spare glance at the newly made trio.

“You seem new around here,” the first man said, his voice as thick and strained as his body. Slug hummed in acknowledgement. He took another sip from his bottle. The buddy beside him nervously snickered. With a noisy suck of teeth, the muscled man continued, “And I gotta tell ya—”

“Yeah, tell ’im, boss,” the skinny friend added on with weedy excitement. Slug sneered, shaking his head. He took another drink. Bottle half empty, burning in his stomach.

“Yeah, let me tell ya—” the muscled man added with only slight annoyance, “I don’t like seeing new faces. Makes me… nervous, ya know?”

Slug tapped his fingers impatiently against his bottle, “I’m sure.”

“So, we’re gonna have to ask for your credentials,” the skinny man explained, dancing long fingers toward Slug’s pockets. Slug scoffed, kicking out one foot and knocking the weedy man onto the grimy bar floor.
“Pass,” Slug too-loudly responded.

The muscle manned placed one hand on his face, disappointedly glowering at his partner, “Dammit, Elmer… You need to wait for my signal. We’ve been over this…”

Slug snorted, taking another swig of his drink. The muscled man turned his attention back to the doctor and hardened.

“Listen, beautiful—”

“Clever,” Slug said, amused and gesturing to his own face. He tipped back his bottle for a longer drink. The muscle man reached out and took the whiskey bottle from him. Slug narrowed his eyes, “Less clever.”

The muscled man smirked, wiggling the bottle, “Yeah? Whatcha gonna do about it? Unless I see some ID—”

He didn’t finish his sentence. Slug was too quick, too practiced. Grasped the man at a pressure point in his wrist and twisted until the hand holding the bottle spasmed. Fingers loosened, and it fell. The muscle man crumpled onto his knees in pain, holding his arm as Slug twisted his leg around the man’s forearm and snapped it to the side—cleanly splitting the bones of the radius and ulna. The muscled man let out a shriek, collapsing next to Elmer and started weeping openly.

“That’s how I do, fellas,” Slug said, raising the bottle and sitting down placidly, “Now if you’ll kindly leave me be—had a bit of a bad day.”

A new voice tsked at him, and when Slug glanced up, saw the swish of a deep red dress, a pair of crossed arms, another pair on buxom hips, and a third slow clapping. The muscled man sniffled as elegant legs stepped over him and sat down next to the doc, “S-Shi-Spider?”

“Run along, Drake,” the woman suggested, looking at him with faux sympathy, “Not a lot can say they lived through the notorious ire of Dr. Slug.”

The bar quickly cleared out after that. Slug smiled on one side of his face, cheeks flushed from the
alcohol as he marveled over how frightening his name could still be, even years after working with White Hat—

Oh. White Hat.

Right.

Slug took a sour sip of his whiskey, looking over at Nancy with suspicion.

“Got spies in the corner here, huh?”

“You know the saying—” she paused, thinking over the words in English, “One spider means 20 more unseen.”

“Thought it was 26?” Slug asked, nearly slurring.

She lifted one shoulder, “I was being kind.”

Slug hummed. He drank more. Nancy sat beside him. She folded her many arms over the bar. The bartender handed her a rum and cola without prompting. She raised it to him in thanks. With a sigh, she took a sip and looked at Dr. Slug. “What are you doing, dokte?”

“Oh ya know—” he said, whipping his too wet, yet too dry mouth, “Drowning sorrows.”

“You too smart a man to do such a t’ing,” she noticed carefully.

“You’re too smart a woman to be wandering into a Villain’s den when you got a civilian in your bed,” he mentioned, pointing one finger at her, but unwilling to let go of his bottle. She leveled him with a look.

“My civilian is perfectly safe—” she answered, unconcerned, “Even you left him unharmed.”
Slug giggled to himself, tipping to the side, “I know. I’m fucking terrible!”

“I would have murdered you, should you have actually hurt him,” she said.

“I just wanted to give you a taste of what ya were doin’,” Slug needlessly explained, “But nah, naaaaaah!” He continued, “He was perfectly safe. Just wanted to scare you—scare him. I mean, he wanted to drag White Hat’s name through the mud, ya know? Couldn’t let that happen.”

Nancy nodded, taking another sip as she watched Slug slouch onto the counter. “Oh, I know…”

“I mean… he is lucky…” Slug said, staring at nothing.

“Wi, I know what you can do,” she replied. The doctor sighed loudly, propping himself up on the counter.

“Nooo… not that—” he paused, popping up holding his chin in his other, unoccupied hand, “Well, no, yes that. Could have done a lot worse… but, I mean…”

Nancy blinked at him, eyes closing and reopening in a domino succession of confusion.

“You’re still alive… and… you… want to be with him…”

“I do,” Nancy said with a solemn nod.

Slug smiled at her, but his earthy eyes were swimming with unshed tears, “I’m so terrible—I’m so terrible—”

“You are,” she agreed.

“White Hat wants me.”
Slug smashed the bottle against the counter. The bartender didn’t even move. Nancy watched as the man slammed his hands down in the seeping liquid and glass shards. The pain sobered him slightly. “I am so terrible.”

Nancy did not answer this time.

“I just—” Slug’s elbows clicked hard against the wooded counter as he leaned his head into his bloody palms, “I just wanted too much—” He took in a shuddering breath, “And now I…”

“Now you’re drunk,” Nancy finished. Slug barked out a surprised laugh. His arms fell along the counter and he turned, nodding.

“Fucking—” and then slurred something in his native tongue. He shook his head and continued in English, “I fucked a good thing so badly… and the worst part—I saw it coming. I knew it was gonna end in heartbreak… I knew it. I always—” he sighed. She lifted one handed and patted his shoulder, “God… I’m terrible. I let all of this happen…”

“Eh,” she answered with a shrug, “I don’t know about that.”

“White Hat can’t give me what I want,” Slug muttered.

Nancy started to help the now alcohol-soaked Slug up from his stool, “And what do you want?”

“Hmm?” he asked, distracted and dizzy as she wheeled him around.

“What do you want from White Hat?”

“Gosh… what don’t I want?” he asked instead. Nancy just nodded, walking them out of the bar. The bartender following. He locked up behind them, helping to hail a cab as Slug swayed on his feet. “Do you know how fuck—like how beautiful he is?” A yellow taxi pulled up too slow, and Nancy was helpfully ducking Slug’s head into the car, he turned pointing at her, “And not just physically but—everything about him. He’s—”
Nancy hummed, sitting beside him. Gave the address to White Hat Manor, even as Slug protested. She redirected him back to the topic at hand, inquiring, “And what is White Hat?”

“Now *that* is the question!” he declared, too drunk and loud, “No one knows for sure! I’ve run all the tests but—but… all I know is… I don’t. I don’t know.”

“Confusing,” she commented, patronizing the drunk man as he rambled.

White Hat Manor came too quickly. Or maybe Slug passed out. Either way, he slouched against the white gates. Nancy held the car door aloft, sighing, “Why are you being difficult?”

“I’ve learned the hard way before,” Slug said, gazing up into the stars, “Men like me… we don’t have happy endings…”

…

White Hat heard the slam and crash from down the hall. He sighed, raising from his desk and peeking out from the double-doors of his room. It was Slug—of course it was—having fallen against the wall, knocking over a multitude of paintings and personal pictures. The human winced, sliding until he was face first into the carpet.

Which, of course, would probably irritate his delicate skin.

White Hat left his office and found himself scooping up the scientist. Slug protested, which was of no surprise, but what was slightly shocking was the smell of alcohol. Normally, the man refused to be without his faculties. Always cautious and ready—so to be inebriated was definitely not a good sign. Especially as his arms and hands were cut and bleeding in sluggish fashion.

“Ohoh! Put me down!” Slug demanded, words muddled as he confusingly clung onto the Elder Being’s shoulder. White Hat walked back to his office, taking the man into his own private room hidden there. *Why?* Well—Clem was sleeping. Of course. Slug would probably prefer the girl not see him like this—nor would the man even like the idea that he had caused a drunken disturbance for her so—
Right.

White Hat placed Slug into the big bed, and the man groaned into a pillow. He went to swat White Hat with it. He missed terribly. Only succeeding in staining the white bedding with smears of blood. Being White Hat’s presence however, he was slowly healing.

“Sleep it off, we can talk more in the morning,” White Hat suggested, voice cool.

Slug glared at him with red, watery eyes. With an uncoordinated effort, he roused himself enough to get up onto his elbows and swing his legs enough that one fell off the side of the bed. “No! No more talk—”

“Doctor, go to sleep.”

“Make me!” the human shouted, shakily raising, “Do whatever you need to but—”

White Hat sighed, simply pushing him back onto the bed with one hand firmly planted in the middle of his chest. Slug went down easily, splayed out on the bed, dizzy and blinking at the ceiling.

“… okay, I asked for that…” the man said, almost breathless and slurred.

“You need sleep,” White Hat repeated, suddenly tired himself. Slug did not exactly settle into the bed. He shifted enough so that he was staring at White Hat, rubbing at tears leaking from his eyes. Little spots of dried blood gaining a renewed color and sinking along the cracks and scars of Slug’s face.

“I don’t want to sleep—” he started, and his voice was raw. Slug immediately choked down his words, and then respoke them in his native tongue. White Hat roughly sighed, sitting beside him, but would not look into his eyes.

“I won’t let you have nightmares,” he promised, “If that’s what you’re concerned about.”

“N-No…” Slug said with a hiccup, and White Hat ignored the fingers curling into his sleeve.
“Please, sleep—”

“I won’t—” the man mumbled, and he was unsteady as he pulled himself up to sitting, “Not here. I’ll… I can go somewhere else since—”

White Hat grabbed the man again, swiftly lying him back out on to his back. Slug seemed to calm down, limbs going lax. He sighed, arms coming up to his face as White Hat started to remove the man’s boots at least. “You don’t have to leave, you know that.”

“I don’t belong here…” Slug drunkenly confessed, and White Hat shook his head, placing the boots at the foot of the bed.

“It’s fine. Use my room tonight—”

“No, I—” Slug cut off, groaning a little bit as he gathered blankets around him, “I mean I don’t belong with you.” White Hat startled. He looked at the human who started to cocoon himself in soft sheets, sighing loudly, “I always knew it. I did… I don’t deserve your kindness—”

“Stop, Slug, no,” White Hat said, reaching out and pulling a few slips of cloth away from Slug’s face.

Slug hid further in the blankets, muttering in different languages, and White Hat only caught the tail end of a few self-deprecating comments.

“Slug, please—”

“Black Hat can have my worthless soul,” Slug sighed, “What’s the point of me if I can’t even—if I can’t even do something for the people I care about? If it means that I can bring them back… if I can stay for you, for Clem, I—I’ll pay for it anyways. So—I don’t deserve good things. It’s fine—I—”

“Shut up,” White Hat demanded. He placed his hand over Slug’s mouth. Slug was looking up at him with eyes that were too far gone. White Hat closed his own, sighing harshly. His hand moved of it’s own accord, running over a scared cheek and resting at the back of the human’s neck. He squeezed lightly.
Slug kept talking, because of course he did, saying, “You’ll never catch me sayin’ this sober but—”

“Please, go to sleep,” White Hat begged, leaning down and resting his forehead along Slug’s. Those earth colored eyes stared at him, even uncomprehending, with a type of deep awe, with such affection…

“You mean too much to me. It’s not fair. I wasn’t suppose to feel this way again—”

“Slug…”

“Yeah?” he asked, tired, blinking into White Hat’s eye.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked, quiet, running fingers along scars… over eyelids and lashes… memorizing every detail, “Why are you asking the impossible of me?”

“It’s not impossible for you,” Slug said.

White Hat sighed, “Yes. This is. You can’t possibly understand what’s at stake—”

“You don’t get to choose who lives and who dies, White Hat,” Slug murmured, then laughed a little, “Well. Except when you do, I guess… so choose them. For me. No one even loses anything.”


Slug gave him a smile, “I lost my soul way before Black Hat wanted to take it.”

“Black Hat can’t have it,” White Hat decided.

“That’s not your choice to make,” Slug sighed.
“What—” White Hat started, then callously began again, “What would your family even think? When they found out what you had done? Done for them? How do you think they would even feel?”

Slug sighed, “Dunno… they’re dead. All I know is I don’t want them to be. It’s not fair. They didn’t even get a chance to live. All their choices, gone. What’s one more for them?”

“Oh, Doctor…” White Hat whispered. Slug squirmed away, reaching into his dirtied coat pockets before pulling out the folded photo. He held it up, waving it a second.

“You look at them and tell me what happened was fair. You tell me… tell me you wouldn’t do anything to fix it. Something—Something that was a mistake in the first place. White Hat—”

White Hat didn’t quite answer. He merely wound his fingers into Slug’s. He gently plucked the photo up, staring at the faces displayed. However… all he found was faces he didn’t know. Slug’s gone entirely. It seemed too cruel… everything Slug ever loved, and still, his own face was ripped away. Severed from the things he cared most about. White Hat didn’t want that—no, he knew, then and there… all he wanted was for Slug to smile… to be happy… just like in that dream. That dream that wasn’t meant for White Hat.

“White Hat,” Slug nearly groaned, leaning into the Elder Being’s chest, “I know I don’t—I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve them… and I won’t… I won’t ask for me… I don’t have to go—I really will stay. Or—if you want now… leave you alone but I—” His face pressed into the hollow of White Hat’s throat, leaving wet traces of so many new colors along a colorless shirt, and the man breathed out a shaky puff of air. White Hat closed his eye, leaving his unoccupied hand to curl along the back of Slug’s neck, twisting into dark hair as he listened to sounds of such despair, “I can’t do anything else besides ask. I need your help to help them. That’s it. That’s all I want. I’m sorry—I won’t—I don’t think I can leave them to have died like that…”

White Hat held him close, folding the polaroid in his talons, and asked, “What Black Hat is demanding of you—”

“I—I’m use to pain,” he murmured, but his hands shook as the clenched into the soft fabric White Hat wore. White Hat shook his head.

“You’re terrified. Desperate. I won’t allow him to take advantage of you…”
“Please…” Slug asked again, “I don’t want this to be about me… Please.”

White Hat thought, for a very long time, listening to Slug breathe, to the way sleep was crawling along the edges of his words, felt how his lashes fluttered slowly against snowy skin… *butterfly kisses*, he had called the feeling once. Had watched Slug show a tiny Clementia this sort of affection a few times in her youth. Long before the mask became a part of his wardrobe… it was unfair that he had to experience this lovely sensation as droplets of tears dewed and streaked his collar bone.

Slug had passed out, and White Hat lowered him carefully into a better sleeping position. He curled around the blankets, arms around a soft pillow. The Elder Being moved his dulled talons along the edges of the man’s eyes. He wiped away all traces of sadness. Healed every cut he could. Pressed his lips softly against the closed lids, trailed down slowly. Reached the partly open mouth… Waited a breath, and then, tasted him. *Bitter and burning.*

It wasn’t fair.

White Hat knew this.

He wanted to do right. He wanted, above all, this one human. To be the light for this one man.

It wasn’t fair.

White Hat looked at the photo, eyes sliding to the two faces.

“Maybe…” he thought, running his fingers along Slug’s jawline, “There is another choice.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you are all enjoying!

Very busy day, just letting you know we're close to end. Sorta.

Anyways!

THANK YOU ALL FOR READING! FEEL FREE TO COMMENT OR ASK ANY QUESTIONS!!
MUCH LOVE

<3
Let Us See The Ties That Bind

Chapter Notes

Sorry I am posting so late! I had a very busy day!

I edited this chapter as much as I could. While I have been planning it since the very beginning of the fic... I just didn't quite know how well it would be read? If that makes sense. It's very rare for me to get so far into a fic. Most of the time I am a one-shot kind of writer. Having a chapter fic like this just takes all my brain power. I am at a point where I sit down and just say to myself, "I just have to write and get this out of my head. I'll edit heavily later."

So, hopefully everything makes sense and reads well.

There's a little bit of time-scambled memories in there. Little bit of OCs too. Lol.

Please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Two: Let Us See the Ties That Bind

Mobu Takanobu was an unusual kid. This was clear. He was, by all accounts, unresponsive. Blank, stoic. He lived in the Saitama Prefecture with his mom—until she passed. It was sudden and unexpected, but... When Mobu boredly looked out a window during the passing period between classes, and saw his mom standing under the cherry blossom tree in a pure white yukata, he knew. His whole body was shocked like he had been ducked under icy water without warning.

He rushed home—finding the street blocked off by paramedics—and a neighbor had to keep him from ripping the caution tape down. It wasn’t long afterwards that he met his half-brother. His brother was easy to talk to, surprisingly, looking at him with kind and knowing eyes. Maybe it was because he was part American. Maybe it was because he understood the things Mobu could see...

Mobu found himself in trouble more often than not. Surprisingly, found he could do more than just see the dead. It was scary, but Ryo was there. They would figure it out together. That’s how Psy-Kid Services came into being. It wasn’t exactly a Hero-thing… but it was pretty darn close sometimes. His brother was insistent Mobu still go to school. Socializing, apparently, was important. Ryo pointed at their hearts, saying, “Look with more than your eyes… everyday our bond grows stronger. That’s a good thing, Mobu.”

Mobu could see the thickening cord shining. Strings weaving and twining, their brotherly love, the connection beautifully colored as they watched the cherries bloom the following spring… it was
scary. These strings connecting their hearts. “But what if… what if I lose you too, aniki?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Like… like—” Mobu turned silent again. The sakura petals fluttered around them. Ryo sighed and kneeled down to try and catch the youth’s eye. He didn’t force it though, just brushed away chopply fixed bangs.

“Well, one day, you probably might. You’re a lot younger than me but…” Ryo sighed, placing his hands on his brother’s shoulders, “Until that happens, kiddo, you gotta cherish the time you have now. If you don’t, you lose out on more than just the future… do you understand?”

Mobu finally looked up. Ryo gave him a smile.

“You might call yourself Psy-Kid, but… you never really know what’s in store for you, do you?”

Mobu shook his head. Ryo rose to his full height and looked back at all the petals dancing on the wind. Mobu watched him watching for a moment. Then, started to laugh. His brother startled, turning to him with a heavy blush, stuttering for a half a second.

“I like it when you pretend to be brave for me,” Mobu said, smiling cheekily at his older brother. He grabbed his arm and tugged him away from the blossoming trees. He was thirsty now, and maybe, just a little in the mood for some tiramisu.

“EH?! I’m not—”

“I wanna go to the cat café,” he decided, “And then we should plan for the summer festival, too. I want to wear a yukata—maybe, something blue. Or red. Do you have one? I bet you would look good in yellow.”

Mobu didn’t speak much. Except to Ryo. But he was trying.

He was making more connections with each day, and by now, their brother bond was strong enough to withhold most things.
Well—except when an otherworldly Elder Being popped into his homeroom. Excitement erupted, and the other middle-schoolers crowded around the white figure. Mobu blinked, looking up from his pudding cup his aniki packed specially for him today (he passed his social studies test with flying colors) and stared at White Hat from across the room.

“Ah… *Konichiwa,*” he addressed the child, bending slightly. Mobu nodded, popping the spoon out of his mouth. He stood up and calmly offered White Hat the last bit. The energy radiating out from this creature was clearly distressed. The rest of the class curiously backed away. White Hat held out his hands, and Mobu placed his treat in them. “Do you mind helping me with something?”

Mobu shook his head. The Elder Being gave him a smile.

In the next few moments, all the kids rushed in astonishment to the spot when the pair vanished as a bubble of light burst around them. A few of the pre-teens had recorded the encounter. When the teacher walked into the room, confusedly looking around at all the children bouncing with excitement, no one commented that Mobu’s unfinished snack was placidly lying on the floor.

…

They were kneeling on the dusty floor of a Shinto shrine, lost somewhere to time. One White Hat remembered from many centuries previous. It was hidden among a thicket of trees, wedged high up on a rocky plane that could grow nothing for substance. It was cloudy and cold, almost, which had nearly flash frozen the ancient shrine. The priests had abandoned it out of practicality than failing faith. Still, it held a distinct type of energy, one White Hat hoped the young boy would be able to use.

Mobu handed back the polaroid to the Elder Being.

“They do not… *rest*… here,” he finally said after a substantial pause.

White Hat sighed, looking down at the photo, “Well… no. They died somewhere far away.”

“Fire.”
"Yes," White Hat responded. Mobu sadly tilted his head. He looked over to the offering table along the back wall. It was still standing with an iron wrought bowl filled with decayed offerings and leftover ashes.

"We could use that," he suggested, pointing, "Light a fire. Incense."

White Hat hesitated. Mobu glanced over, face unemotive. For a brief second, White Hat wondered if he was finally understanding how other humans could become uncomfortable in his presence. He had yet to run across another creature as emotionally unresponsive—or perhaps as tightly controlled. The child was no doubt powerful…but, so young. His power not unwieldy, of course, but…he would have many years before he would discover it’s true strength.

"I worry that fire may be more…” White Hat struggled to find the right words, “Well. Insensitive. I know that the doctor—"

Mobu’s eyes lit up briefly.

"Oh? Did you…? Did he make a good impression on you?" White Hat asked curiously, leaning closer in curiosity. He always did enjoy talking about his dear doctor with anyone who would listen.

Mobu nodded. He moved from his formal position to sitting cross legged. White Hat copied him, allowing the child to grow comfortable and take his time. He began doodling in the dust, slowly explaining, "The doctor is… well, I saw him.

"Er, yes, I was there—"

"No," Mobu tried again, looking up. He was drawing hearts and eyes—swirling them together with his chubby fingers, "I do not have control, sometimes, when I look at people. I saw—" the boy paused, but decidedly shook his head, "Well. He is very nice to see."

White Hat had no words, unsure how to process what Mobu was trying to express. He felt it was more than language gaps between them. More than something a human could explain to a being from elsewhere.

"There are…” the boy scrunched his brow, "There are connections we make, White Hat-sama. We
are connected from our hearts.”

Mobu touched his chest, closing his eyes. White Hat felt the emptiness in his own chest echo—as if something tapped there, and all that followed was the hollow sound of a dead birch trunk. It hurt. The young boy looked at him again, not smiling, but not with pity either. Sadly, the Elder Being confessed, “I have no heart. No soul.”

“I know.”

“So… I can have no connections—” White Hat folded his hands into his lap, “What do you call them in your culture?”

“The red thread of fate,” Mobu said, “But there are others. Black for your nemesis.”

White Hat snorted, thinking harshly of the irony, “I am sure.”

Mobu did not continue. White Hat found himself shifting, glancing down at the photo. The people smiling up at him, frozen in their own ways. Some said pictures could capture the soul… that photographs, cameras, those sorts of things chipped away a piece of the soul. Stole it from the body… It wasn’t entirely untrue, but… what about these connections? What makes pictures of loved ones so important? Why did humans feel the need to capture and preserve memories—preserve the past? How funny, these people he swore to protect, hording and collecting candids of both the living and the dead…

The dead in the photo continued to smile at him, and if he didn’t know better, could even bet it was mocking his inability to understand what made them special to Dr. Slug.

“This does not help me,” White Hat said—voice near biting and bitter. The young boy leaned over and tapped at the picture.

“They came to me with this—” he said softly, “Connected. The connections one makes in life…” He sat back, rubbing at his heart in both a hopeful and sad way, “They are not always severed after death.”

White Hat sharply glanced from the picture to the boy. “What do you mean?”
“The love that sustains that connection… if you find the thread and pull it—” Mobu gestured then looked away, hesitant, “Maybe—Maybe you can follow it to them…”

“How?” White Hat asked. He picked up the polaroid, boring a hole into it once again. He could barely see the Psy-kid shrug in his peripherals. Taking a deep breath, White Hat closed his eye… and when it opened, it sparked into a sapphire flame and focused on those faces smiling up at him.

He continued to focus his gaze… piercing straight through the old image… until it was alight with a silver glow. In the middle, a fraying thread, and White Hat blinked in surprise. It appeared that the photo was indeed connected to something… something deeper. His other hand twitched, talon sharpening. He plucked at the end of the string—finding it unraveling in his fingers like one of Slug many knitted sweaters…

With a gasp, White Hat watched the picture open slowly.

“Oh… it’s… it’s like a pocket dimension,” he murmured. He bent forward… and crawled down into what did a human call this sort of situation?—the rabbit hole.

Mobu found himself alone, the polaroid fluttering to the floor.

He let out a deep sigh, flopping back onto the dusty floor and starring up into a hole in the roof. A few raccoons skittered over the rooftop. All he could do now was wait. Since, well, he didn’t exactly know where he was or how to get back to civilization.

“Well… Ryo’s not gonna be happy about this.”

Probably no pudding cups for a week.

…

White Hat found himself somewhere… somewhere else. It was fuzzy around the edges, hazy. He walked into it, rather than fell. It was soft and warm. There was the smell of salt water and sunshine. Everything seemed… golden. Kissed by some the rays of a faraway star. In awe, White Hat found himself walking up a hill, the grass shiny and thick, layered with dew. A small pathway of mosaic
decorated stones led to a house—sprawling and open. A very small fence, white and quaint, lined the outside of the modest property. It had Spanish curves, and a flat roof, with rain spouts that fell into barrels. Flowers grew along windowsills, and plants hung from the porch. He walked up the steps to the stain-glass door. Laughter resonated inside.

White Hat didn’t even have to knock. The door swung open, and a young face was tilted up to him. He immediately recognized it as the little girl in the photograph.

“Oh… you’re—”

“Hello, Mr. Angel,” Ama greeted, and her smile was wide, one of her side teeth missing. Her round, earth-colored eyes were so familiar and warm. White Hat couldn’t help himself. He kneeled to her level to return her smile.

“Hello, Ama,” he said, his voice quiet and careful, “Is your mother home?”

She nodded, grabbed the hand at his side and started tugging him into the house. He let the child lead him past a glass-bottle hallway—the brick and adobe walls filled with pictures—before he rounded an open space to a kitchen. The scent of spices and apples and bread filled the air. A woman’s back was turned to him. Her long hair was pulled to the side, tied in a fish-tail braid, and she looked very lovely, White Hat was sure.

Miranda barely peered over her shoulder as she let open a window. A cooling breeze and the sound of crashing waves entered the house. Finally, she looked properly at her child and the Elder Being. With a sigh, she gestured toward an open glass door into a backyard filled with toys and glittering clothes, “Go on and play, my love… me and the Angel have much to discuss.”

…

Clementia was very young, White Hat knew, when Slug found her. He often carried her on his hip in the beginning. He was always calling her by sweet names. He smiled. He was careful. He was… sometimes he would stare into her room at night, leaning on the doorjamb. White Hat watched him watch her. White Hat remembers, one day, the young girl came home sobbing into Slug’s sweater and Slug was attempting to breathe evenly.

He set her on the ground, where she lie like dead weight, wailing and throwing a fit. Slug left her there—and returned a few minutes later with a box of tissues. White Hat watched as he handed it to
her, and the child took them, crushing them to her chest unhappily.

“Are you finished throwing a temper tantrum?”

“No!”

“Alright, when you are done, we’re going to talk about what you did.”

Clementia had returned to screaming, lying on the floor in a dramatic heap. Fifteen minutes later, and White Hat’s patience wearing incredibly thin, Slug returned to the young girl and she made a motion for him to pick her up. He waited half a second before she said, “I—I’m done.”

“Okay,” he calmly responded and picked her up.

“I’m sorry…” she continued, tears still leaking from her eyes.

He kissed her forehead, “Me too, baby. You can’t run off like that again. What if something happened and I couldn't find you?”

White Hat never asked exactly what happened while they had been out… but he knew enough that it probably did not bring back pleasant memories for Slug. That night, Slug had spent a good portion of time checking on Clem. White Hat had walked behind him, peering into the dim room. A nightlight of stars twinkled on the ceiling, and the girl was holding a collection of stuffed animals to her chest. He placed a hand on the man’s shoulder.

“You know she is not your child,” White Hat said.

The man sighed, “Biologically no—”

“I mean,” he attempted to say, “What happened to her will not happen to Clementia.”

“You can’t promise me that,” Slug had turned to him, rough and angry, “You don’t even know what happened—”
“I will protect her,” he sincerely said.

Slug had just sighed, looking up at him, without the mask yet. His eyes were warm, White Hat thought that even then, but they looked so uncertain. “You can’t promise me that.”

He didn’t understand what it meant at the time.

Sitting across a sturdy oak table, staring into the emerald eyes of the man’s deceased wife, White Hat was starting to feel something similar to what Slug must have felt all those years ago. Miranda was… well, she was put together so very well. She glowed, almost, and her soft features belied her unruffled nature. She sipped a coffee, but White Hat resolutely remained without food or drink as he stared at her. He tried not to think of this person as Slug’s… as his love.

Despite telling her daughter they had to speak, the pair had been silent a long while. Eventually, White Hat could take the quiet no longer, and explained, “I have something to ask you.”

“You come all this way for a question?” she asked back.

White Hat gulped, nodding.

“What have you to ask me, White Hat?” she questioned. The Elder Being shifted uncomfortably. She knew his name. Which should not have been as intimidating as it was. Being who she was, she clearly would have known of his existence while alive… still… this was an unusual circumstance.

“I am unaware if you know but, Slug—”

“No doctor?” she asked, folding her arms over her cooling cup. She leaned a little over the table to study White Hat. He sat back, posture straight and proper like a catholic school boy about to be scolded by a teacher. “You call my husband by name so casually?”

White Hat glanced down at the table, feeling the weight of her almond-shaped eyes on him.
“Well… I suppose, not his name,” she answered, voice lightening at his reaction. White Hat barely glanced up to see her mouth quirked behind her mug. She took a sip, but did not continue.

“Do you know his real name?”

“No…” she said, quiet, contemplative.

White Hat nodded, hands sliding down his legs in thought, “He is insistent on being called Slug.”

“He likes bugs,” Miranda answered, her smile much less… sharp. Real, perhaps. Something fond as she seemed lost to her own memories, “He was in charge of taking spiders out, or bees, or really anything that crept or crawled into the house. We often put glasses over the critters and waited for him to return home.”

White Hat’s hand curled over his knees.

“He still does that, no?” she asked.

“Yes. He takes care of—”

“Of everything,” Miranda answered, finally putting down the mug. It was empty now. White Hat looked at it instead of her.

He could only nod.

The woman rose, taking the mug to the sink. She began washing it, looking out at the ocean, “He built me a house—I told him I loved the ocean. He made me this place, in life… and even now.”

“So then, this dimension is—”

“We cannot move on,” Miranda said, “Not without him, I believe. The love he holds… the care he had—he has…” she turned to White Hat, but remained at the sink, leaning against the counter, “It binds us here. In this place.”
“I—I’m sorry,” White Hat said, unsure as he sat at the table.

Miranda gave him a sort of odd smile. She looked out the window. The laughter of the young girl floated on the wind. “Oh, no. Do not misunderstand… I love the ocean. I love this house. My daughter and I…”

White Hat decided to wait for her this time. Her deep eyes fluttered close before coming back to rest on the Elder Being’s confused face. She shook her head, pushing a loose strand of hair behind an ear pierced with a silver pearl.

“Slug is the strangest man I had ever met…” she explained, and White Hat nodded in agreement. She gave him a smile as she crossed back to the table, rapping on it in thought, “I was not born into a kind family, into a kind world… and neither was he. I knew of him and his awful deeds… but, when I met him, do you know what he did?”

White Hat shook his head. Miranda sat beside him, looking over his shoulder.

“I had been chained to a bed—and he just… unlocked the handcuffs. He sat beside me, but did not touch, and he told me my brother was coming. They were going to keep me safe…” she said and White Hat smiled. That sounded exactly like the Slug he knew… but he was unprepared as Miranda continued her story, “I don’t think he knew I had already dislocated my wrist enough to slip in and out of the cuffs. I had a knife under my pillow. I was ready, waiting for my moment… but he sat beside me, would not touch me, and kept his eyes averted. He was so…”

“Wait, you—” White Hat said as she lost her train of thought. She looked back at him, unimpressed.

“I was the daughter of one of the cruelest men in the world. I have not hesitated to kill a man before—and even a supposed ally was no exception, but…” Miranda placed the back of her hand along the soft laugh escaping her mouth, “He was simply too cute. I could not find it in myself. A man with Slug’s reputation? And there he was, red in the face because I wore nothing but panties and thin tank top… I knew then he was strange. I would keep him.”

White Hat placed his hands on the table and stood, finding a bubble of anger welling up behind his teeth, “You mean to say that you—given the chance you would have just—”

“We were not born to a kind world, White Hat,” she said it matter of factly, and it irked him how
flippantly she seemed to find his indignation, “And knowing Slug, I am sure he would have understood. At the time, had I not instinctually trusted him… I am more than certain he would have blamed himself for being careless.”

This did nothing to calm the ugly, confused feelings inside… they only popped and burst in a sad realization the woman in front of him was correct. Slug was that sort of man. He would hold no grudge over a scared woman who attacked him, even if he meant her no harm intentionally. “But yet you still… you just… you speak as if you don’t—”

She waited expectantly for White Hat to finish his sentence. His mouth clicked shut. With a huff he sat down, trying not to glare at the table.

“He did so much for you. Is doing so much for you…” White Hat instead began, “Do you love him? Would you—Would you allow us to return you to the world of the living?”

Miranda looked at him with less surprise than he was expecting. Perhaps, though, she and her daughter sometimes peered into the realm of living. They did not seem unprepared to receive him. In fact, a timer rang on the counter. The woman rose, hips swaying. She reached into an oven and pulled out a baked desert. She called for Ama, and the little girl rushed in, a tiara sparkling atop her wily mop of hair. Twirling happily, she sat in the chair recently vacated by her mother.

Miranda went to cutting pieces of the desert, and the wafting presence of apples returned, accompanied by a heavy layer of cinnamon. He watched her pull out a small bowl from a modest refrigerator and dollop a good dose of custard atop the treat. She placed the plate on the table for the little girl, who happily dug into the desert.

“Mr. Angel, would you like to hear a story?” Ama asked.

He hummed in response, unconsciously reaching over and helping to clean her little cheeks free of the sweet smears of food. Gratefully, she smiled at him. “What kind of story, little one?”

“It’s about, ummmmmm…” the child said, lifting her arms to the sky, “A moon princess! My daddy told it to me a looooooon time ago to chase away the scary things in the dark.”
White Hat was speaking with Star Princess, arms crossed in thought as she shared a few memories quickly to convey how much Clementia had been difficult that night. It had been three days since he and Slug had to travel overseas to New Zealand to help with a magical item that already corrupted three people. Tracking the source of the malign energy lead to a volcano and the item in question, a cursed ring. It was almost an epic disaster. White Hat is unsure exactly how they managed to save the day, but they did.

Slug was currently with Clementia and her newly gifted guard-bear. White Hat had been surprised to learn the young girl was ignoring everyone and everything until they had returned home. She refused to go to bed and Star Princess had nearly been at her wits end until the girl crawled into her lap and demanded a story. It took several tries, but eventually, Clementia fell asleep after the second night.

White Hat thanked her and told her to get rest. He went to check on his two humans—and now a bear—finding the already exhausted Slug still awake and lying in Clem’s bed.

“And then what happened?” she demanded.

Slug, who had no storybook, was running an ungloved hand through knotted orange locks carefully. He glanced up at the ceiling in thought, “Hmm, what did happen…?”

“Oh no, my dear!” White Hat interrupted, “You’re not asking about—”

“Shhh! Sluggy’s trying to remember the Moon Princess!” Clem pressed her finger to her mouth and shushed White Hat. He paused, very confused as he just finished talking to a Princess—but not from the moon.

“The… what?” White Hat asked confused.

Slug gave him a smile, placing his forehead in his other hand, “Of course. That’s right. The White Knight came back.”

“A White Night?” Clementia repeated, “But it’s dark at night! It’s scary!”

The doctor gave a chuckled, settling comfortably in the bed as White Hat found himself leaning against the door, suddenly just as curious.
“Well, it’s not so much the night that is white, but a special kind of Hero,” Slug explained without hesitation, confidence hiding how tired he was (the Elder Being knowing just exactly how much he had done on their adventure), “That’s because the White Knight brought love to the lonely Moon Princess. She brightens up the night sky because…” Slug booped the little button nose, “When you love someone, it makes you glow.”

“Ohhhh,” Clementia’s eyes popped open wide with the action, “Like a full moon!”

“Exactly,” he said.

“That’s why the moon’s so pretty! She loves the Night guy? Is he on earth?”

“Yeah, he’s on earth,” Slug softly said, “And she’s somewhere far-far away. So, all she can do to show him she loves him is to shine her light in the darkness and hopes he sees. Hopes he knows he will always find her if he just looks up. You gotta keep looking up, darling.”

White Hat listened to Slug spin this tale… and he wondered why it sounded so much sadder than it ought to. Clementia was smiling, yawning, tucking herself into his side. Slug rambled on, sometimes glancing over at White Hat, before looking away. Eventually, he too was closing his eyes and White Hat found himself sitting beside the pair.

That was not the first night White Hat laid a calming hand on Slug’s cheek—but it was the first, and only time, the man’s eyes fluttered open, shock shining in them. He took White Hat’s hand and held it for a moment… but moved it away, moved the soothing sensation far from him.

“Thank you but…” he started.

“I just want to help,” White Hat said, “Let me?”

The man had stared at him, and it was an expression he would not have a name for until this very moment (helpless, hopeless). He thinks about Slug as the man’s dead daughter tells a story so much like the one he heard that night. White Hat is allowed to help the young child into her purple-pink bed. He fluffs her pillow and sits beside her, and wonders if she understands what happened to her… wonders if she remembers fire in the night.
Miranda waits outside the door. The child melts into sleep and White Hat walks back into the kitchen with her mother. He can’t help the question, “Does she know that you are—”

“I have never asked,” Miranda states, then glances at the Elder Being, “But I don’t think it matters. She’s happy. She’s… free. She does not have to worry about growing, about the world, about—about things that don’t have to be for her…” Miranda places a hand over her stomach and she stares hard into the ocean, “I never expected to be a mother—but more than that—to feel the love that I did when I had her… even through the pain I—”

White Hat sighs, and sees a pale moon rise across the horizon… large and lovely. It shines unnaturally bright and white winged things dance across the beams of pale light. He wonders how long he has lingered in this dimension. A dimension held together by the love of a very broken, very kind man. A man he would do anything for.

It’s still not fair.

“Will you return to Slug?” he asked again, voice hushed.

She looks at him, piercing and with unshed tears, “Why do you ask me this? What is at stake?”

“Slug would lose his soul,” White Hat answered, eye finding hers. She blinked away her tears, neat, trimmed nails rubbing along her unblemished skin.

“Of course, he would…”

“It is his choice—” White Hat started, frustrated. Then with a sigh, “But, I—I cannot convince him how foolish it is. And so—”

She gave a wet laugh, eyes clear as she remarked, “So you hoped I might sacrifice myself for him? Are you testing me? My love? Do you mean to destroy us if I answer wrong?”

It was startling how quickly the edge of the world crackled. The moon was absconded by a swirling, dark cloud. The sky lit with an electric light, and the house grew cold. White Hat took a step back, as Miranda walked past him. She moved to the sliding back door. The Elder Being followed her briskly, shaking his head, “That’s not what I—”
“No, you did not come here for something so petty,” Miranda answered for him. She looked out at
the rolling ocean, mouth thinning. She flicked her eyes up White Hat’s reflection in the glass, and
they narrowed. “No… you are too… Heroic. You could never do that.”

The wind settled, chimes hanging from the patio rafters whirling, clinking, until they only swayed
lazily… though the sky was still dark, and the moon hidden from view… stars peaked out behind the
hidden clouds.

“I’m sorry, I did not mean to upset you—to cause your… this place… pain,” he apologized, sincere.

She sighed, closing her eyes, “You asked me before… if I loved—love—him.”

“Y—Yes,” White Hat replied, voice high and tight as he forced the response. Miranda placed her
hand on the cold glass, turning to White Hat and smiled.

“I do,” she said.

The words… the seemed to sink deep into White Hat, and he lost the ability to think for a moment. It
was entirely ridiculous. Staring at this woman—this spirit, or soul, or lingering life energy. So lovely
and far, far away from Slug. The moon silver and shining behind her in another world. But…

Gods, it wasn’t fair.

“So, you’ll… you will allow me to—I…” White Hat couldn’t look at her, couldn’t speak.

She left no handprint on the glass. She had no sound as she walked toward him. The touch on his
hand was a whisper from the past. Miranda shook her head, “In my own way, I do. I love him…
but…”

White Hat’s hand twitched and he found himself staring at her, a mysterious smile tilted as she
catched his eye. “But? But what?”
“But I love the ocean. I love my house. I love my daughter he gave me…” she said, as if that explained anything, “She knows no pain… and I only wait for him to join me. Then, maybe, we can all move on to somewhere else.”

“I—I don’t understand,” he said, “You don’t want to—I—I… what are you saying?”

“That’s alright,” she hummed, squeezing his hand.

White Hat shook his head, confused, as the moon began to sink into the sea. The light casting white diamonds all across the waves.

“Time for you to return, White Hat,” she said, leading him toward the door. He let her, despite the urge to pull away from her hand, to scream and demand an answer.

“But—Slug—He—”

“He can keep his soul,” Miranda told him, “It would be a waste… We’ll see him soon enough.”

“What do you mean?” White Hat demanded.

“Goodbye, and…” the woman opened the front door, and this time, White Hat did fall—down, down, down into a deep, dark hole. The moon shrinking tiny, as Miranda stood in the doorway, whispering, “Good luck.”

…

White Hat hit the shrine floor, cracking the foundations. The floor crumbled beneath him and he gasped. Sitting upright in the wreckage, he saw two human heads pop in from outside the entrance way. Mobu gestured to the surprised Elder Being.

“I told you,” he said.

His older brother, Ryo, gave a ragged sigh. Then, shaking it off, fumbled with a bulky phone in his
pockets. He carefully picked his way across broken wood floors and held out the satellite phone urgently.

“White Hat-sama,” he said a little too loud and fast, “Your doctor has been trying to reach you for—well, I dunno, maybe days at this point! Something terrible has happened!”

“What? What happened?” he asked, rising up quickly and grabbing the phone.

Ryo shook his head helplessly. Mobu gave him the saddest eyes.

He called Slug’s emergency cell.

No one answered.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, I loved every comment last chapter. Everyone who was like, "NO! WHAT’S THIS OTHER OPTION GONNA BE! IS IT GONNA BE WHAT I THINK IT IS??"

... and then no one told me what they thought it was gonna be, and I was seriously confused. I was like, "Wait... what did I accidentally hint at? Do people know that WH is gonna jump into a little after-life dimension that Miranda and Ama are just chillin' in?? Do they know really know that?? Why is this bad?? What are they thinking is about to happen????"

So please, let me know what you think. I would love to hear everyone’s thoughts, interpretations, and the like. And of course! Ask any clarifying questions too! I will totally answer!

LOTS OF LOVE TO YOU ALL!

THANKS FOR READING!!!

<3
Let Us Talk About the Devil You Know

Chapter Notes

So I must apologize for being a couple of days late with the next chapter.

For whatever reason, AO3 just would not load on my laptop.

I have also been running around crazy because I am moving in a month (cross your fingers because it involves a lot of paperwork ready in a short amount of time!).

I'll also be uploading the next chapter too!

Only triggers are heavy dialogue/world-building
... And a tiny bit of blood.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Three: Let Us Talk About the Devil You Know

Slug woke with a pounding headache. The kind where every tiny breath and movement made his whole skull throb with an unheard-of violence. Actually, no, he could kind of, sort of hear the violence happening inside his mushy brain matter.

Blearily, he chanced opening his crusty eyes—and found that he wasn’t in his bed. It took him a good few minutes to figure out he was lying on his back, in a very soft bed void of color and smell. Which meant, out of all the beds in the world he could have tumbled into in a drunken stupor, he apparently found his way into White Hat’s.

“Well…” he mumbled through his cotton mouth to himself, hating the sourness lingering on his tongue, “I have done fucked up, once again…” With a strength that felt more Herculean than sitting up in bed should be,Slug eventually came to an upright position. He hesitantly pulled back the bed’s canopy curtains, hoarsely calling out, “Uh… White Hat?”

No answer.

Wincing, Slug poked his head out, blinking through the pain as he scanned the bedroom. The door to the office was closed. So, maybe the bossman just went to work…?
Slug slowly crawled out of the dark safety of White Hat’s very nice bed, head feeling more wobbly than stable. Though, he did drink down most of his emotions the previous night, so on that note, he was feeling a bit more mentally stable. Stable enough that the shock of many unprocessed emotions rapid-fire raining down on him left Slug feeling more in control this particular morning. He was pattering around White Hat’s bedroom, unsure exactly what he could recall from the previous night and what might have just be alcohol-induced dreams. Before he left the bedroom and meet White Hat in the office, he better be more presentable.

What the fuck made him come see White Hat?

He was fairly certain after his boss refused to bring his dead family back to life (which that was the Herculean task, if there was ever one), Slug got a little depressed. And then a little more angry. He smashed his mask into a wall. Went off on a walk to calm down. Could not calm down. Found a bar… and that’s where it got fuzzy. He knows there was whiskey. Wait, was it whiskey? What the fuck did he even drink?

Whatever.

Somewhere… someone picked him up?

Multiple peoples?

Slug was staring at the office door, very perplexed. With a sigh, he opened it. Might as well get this reprimand over with. Apologize for being an asshole. And then—

Well, shit. They probably needed to talk… about a lot of things.

White Hat probably didn’t even want him around anymore. Not that Slug would blame him. The doctor was pretty fucked up. Ridiculously fucked up. Which spilled over onto the one being in the universe who probably should not be around such a fuck up…

Dr. Slug was standing alone in White Hat’s office. It was just as empty as the bedroom. The only thing changed from last night was the broken mask sitting on the bleached desk. Pursing his lips in thought, Slug walked over. He studied the crack in the bag-shaped head-gear. White Hat had placed scotch tape over it. Slug managed a snicker. He picked up the mask and placed it on. He flicked on the special goggles—which still worked, thankfully.
However, when he left the sound-proof office, he realized the other specialized feature of his mask—insulated frequency reduction technology—had probably been affected when he tossed it in anger. There was a cacophony of sounds from the kitchen area downstairs. Mostly jackhammers and saw-blades.

Clutching his head, Slug made his way downstairs, ignoring the staleness of his clothes and how badly he wanted to brush his teeth. Instead, he just went straight to the racket and loudly made his presence known. “Hey—**HEY**!” Slug groaned, however, nerves on fire from his own voice adding to the din. He was lucky though when a shadow loomed over him.

“LUNCH TIME, BOYS!” The sounds of the work immediately quieted, and Slug glanced up miserably to see Heavy Hitter, dressed in his foreman attire and being accompanied by a bemused Clementia.

“Thanks, Heavs,” Slug said in a slight wince. He walked over to the sink as a group of dust-covered men vacated the area. He went to turn it on, but the main line had apparently been shut off. He sighed, turning in time as Clem handed him a water bottle from the fridge and a tiny box of pain relievers.

“Well, I can in good conscious say I honestly don’t recall,” Slug muttered, swallowing a swig of water. Happily, he leaned down into the sink and remembered to breath through a fresh wave of nausea, “Who invented whiskey anyways?”

Clementia pulled out her phone and, Slug, without looking, rose a finger into the air to halt her extremely loud clicking. Heavy Hitter was laughing, nodding, “Been there, my man.”

“Sorry, Sluggy…” Clem added. Slug groaned, leaning over the sink and hating his past self. “The medicine should kick in about twenty minutes from now, I think?”

“I give my guys an hour lunch, so,” Heavy Hitter gestured to the fridge, and Clementia helpfully pulled out an old-fashioned metal box to toss onto the rebuilt counter, “You can hide in your lab or White Hat’s office or something when they get back.”

“Speaking of—” Slug said, popping his head up to peer at the other two, “Have you seen that
“Bastard anywhere?”

Heavy Hitter and Clementia exchanged a confused glanced before looking back at Slug. “Uh, Sluggy, I called Mike to come in with his crew. I’m just charging it to White Hat’s card because I haven’t been able to find him or you all morning.”

“Ohhhhh…” Slug slowly rose to standing.

“She insisted on using the card,” Mike—as this was Heavy Hitter’s civilian name—explained as if the stupefied reaction was to Clem having access to White Hat’s financials.

“Please,” she said in a curt tone she could have only learned from the doctor as a way to effectively end an argument, “With as much damage as this Manor goes through, always serving as our Pro-Bono contractor will just tank your business.”

“No, that’s fine,” Slug said, crossing over to take a seat beside Heavy Hitter, “I’m mostly confused because I’ve been in White Hats office this whole time. Again, don’t remember how I got there but —”

“I checked White Hat’s office,” Clementia said.

Mike tilted his head in thought, “Clem… you know White Hat has a secret door to a bedroom in his office, right?”

“White Hat has what now?” was all a flabbergasted Clem could ask. Slug sighed and turned to Heavy Hitter, opening up his lunch and pulling out a wrap of some kind. It smelled divine but caused Slug’s stomach to turn at the same time. Stupid hang-over…

“So, how’s Kam?” the doctor asked to distract himself from the queasiness. Mike gave him a thumbs up and chewed down a big bite of food. Clementia folded her arms on the counter on the other side of the Hero and waited for him to continue.

“He was really worried about you,” he explained, placing down his food to point at the young girl, “After the last-last attack. He wants you to come over sometime and see the new cat.”
“Oh! You guys got another one?!” she squealed.

Mike pulled out his phone and started swiping through pictures, “It was either a new furbaby or we adopt a kid so—”

“Kam wants kids?” Slug asked, smiling beside himself at the idea.

“Yeah…” Mike sighed, obviously uneasy about the topic. Slug put up his hands in surrender, nearly splashing his water bottle all over himself. He decided to just drink his water and not put his foot in his mouth.

“Wha? You don’t want one, Mike?” Clem asked, young and dumb still.

The Hero gave a shrug.

“Well, a kid is a big decision,” Slug added, hoping to change the topic.

“And pets aren’t?” she continued.

“Speaking of—” Mike mimicked Slug’s confused glancing about from earlier, swiveling around, “Where’s that purple menace?”

“Uhhh, excuse you, sir;” Clem huffily crossed her arms, which caused Slug to worry that she was spending too much time with him because that stance and voice seemed awfully like looking into a mirror, “But Cero is not a pet. He is a fully functioning member of this house hold and—”

“He’s still stuck in the fence, isn’t he?” Slug asked.

Clementia remained silent for a moment before, “No?”

Mike was laughing at them as he went back to eating his food. Slug checked out the window—and there, snoring under the bent lapses of the white gate was 0.5.0. He shook his head and turned back Clementia who rolled her eyes. “Well… I need bolt cutters, and I think the only pair we have are
locked in your lab.”

“Grab one of my guys’ pair, baby girl,” Mike said through a stuffed mouth and motioned to a blocked off opening in the side of the Manor. Clem smiled and quickly bounced away to rummage through tool boxes and other equipment. Slug watched to make sure she didn’t grab a saw-blade or anything similar, but Heavy Hitter gently knocked against his shoulder, “Hey… so, how’d that Anti-Hero shit get fixed?”

Slug sighed in response, turning cautiously to the other man, “Hasn’t yet…”

“Yeah, I heard the salvage to your lab was, uh…”

“Un-salvageable?” Slug finished. Mike gave him a half shrug, taking a bite of his food instead. “I lost a lot of information after that… I don’t even know what to categorize it as. A flower attack, maybe?”

Mike shrugged as he ate.

“Well, it was pretty bad. But, my own doing. Assuming that Anti-Heroes targeted the Manor because we’d been making inquiries and warning people…” the doctor sighed, trying his hardest not to chew on his thumbnails in anxiety.

“Yeah… met Shi-Spider while on patrol the other night,” Heavy Hitter said.

Slug didn’t answer right away, “So, she’s staying in the city?”

“A bit. I guess she’s just been watching…”

“Well, that’s smart. She’s already on some pretty thin ice considering her past—and considering she wants to reform and be a Hero,” Slug said. Mike nodded, chewing thoughtfully. The doctor glanced over at him, “You know she has some incredible webs out there. Through just watching, I found a whole network of Anti-Hero suspects.”

“No shit?”
“So far, I’ve been able to track teams and possible hits,” Slug said, tapping on the counter.

Mike gulped down the last of his lunch, “You’ve been going to the authorities or...?”

“Well, rounding them up is harder than identifying,” Slug sadly explained, “Most of the civilian authorities—police and such—they don’t like getting involved with Hero and Villain matters. As long as most civies are unharmed, no one cares that Villains are being murdered...”

“Yeah... yeah, I get that,” the Hero murmured. He patted Slug’s shoulder in sympathy, “Anyone you ever knew? You can talk to me about it, man.”

Slug shook his head, “I really only knew other Villains by monikers... so...”

“Well, again, you ever need a shoulder,” the man offered.

“Thanks, Mike.”

...

Slug had been in White Hat’s office for a while now, resting mostly. Partially hiding from the work sounds of the Manor being rebuilt (again) below him. He was scrolling through emails on White Hat’s tablet. A bit of a junk—a few Hero requests—two orders for the time dilation device—and of course, various messages that were in-house. White Hat never deleted anything...

Wait. He never deletes anything.

Slug opened all of the emails to and from himself that his boss meticulously saved and started scouring through all the information he had broken down over the course of the whole Anti-Hero incidents. That’s when he saw the footnote—

New Mexico.
The very first Anti-Hero to make himself known was the Lt. with the robotic arm. He popped up in New Mexico. Dr. Flug had just taken him to New Mexico—where Fernando was supposed to be. He found the fire-starter instead, the man who killed his family… the man Slug had thought would be a possible Anti-Hero, not a heartbroken lover.

New Mexico isn’t where the Lt had gotten the tech though—only when he had been spotted with it. Still… that was too much of a coincidence for Slug’s liking.

He sent off an email to Dr. Flug.

Flug responded with in the hour:

RE: Fire-Starter ME Report

Dear Dr. Slug,

No body was found in the room belonging to the alleged Fernando Prospero. It is believed that the explosion was caused by the agitated state of the Fire-Starter, as Fire-Starter Elemental Powers are often exploited through extreme emotional responses. Investigation of the explosion site has been conducted and the results are as follows:

Fire damage significant to over 3000 degrees F, which is sufficient to cause full cremation of a human body. The force of combustion shattered and melted surrounding support of the building which is suspected equivalent to the drop of an atomic bomb. These are only preliminary results and as such are subject to further explanation and experimentation.

However, as suspicious as a missing Fire-Starter’s body in explosive fire would be, what is more interesting is that documentation of survivors revealed at least two paying residents of the care facility remained unaccounted for. Supplementary investigation led to the discovery of residents in adjacent building’s basement. Though burned, ME suggests this is post-mortem to cover homicide. One resident still being identified. The other is Knightly, Shay D.

Black Hat will be informed when the second resident has been properly ID’d. It is with the utmost respect that I suggest you prepare for an unannounced visit as this incident is indicative of possible Anti-Hero cover-up.

Sincerely,
Slug read and reread the letter several times to make sure he properly understood everything the other man had sent him. With a sigh he simply sent back,

\[ K \]

—S.

He left White Hat’s office, pleasantly surprised to find that the work noise had quieted down. He glanced around, noting that the interior of the house was getting dimmer as the sun was dipping below the surrounding buildings. Cradling White Hat’s tablet, Slug entered the kitchen, seeing Clementia picking out burrs and scrubbing away questionable gunk in Cero’s fur. Mike was signing off some time cards at the fixed counter while his men left the Manor the proper way. No more holes in the side of the house for now.

“Hey Sluggy!” Clementia greeted, tugging a caterpillar off the leaves of the fly trap. She dropped it into the mouth with an apologetic shake of her head. Then, smiling, nodded over to Heavy Hitter, “Mike said he was gonna take us out to dinner since that water and gas won’t be back on until morning.”

“Oh, that’s nice of you,” Slug said, blinking. The last of the construction crew left and Mike tossed his clip board on the counter with a triumphant grunt, “But really, if we have electricity, we can always just use the microwave. We have left overs and stuff.”

“Nah, man, it’s cool. Plus, your electric is gonna come and go anyways—there’s a frayed wire somewhere we haven’t found,” he said.

“That doesn’t sound safe,” Clem worried, “Ya know, maybe I’ll call Tom and he can set us up at a Hotel or something…”

“Well, it’s likely not exposed wiring—hence we haven’t found it and our electricity guy is on vacation so,” Mike clapped his hands together and pointed toward the front door, “For now, let me take you guys out somewhere. Your pick.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” Slug said, placing the tablet down on the counter by the clip board.
Clementia was back on her phone, scrolling through an app that listed nearby eateries. Slug turned to Mike and gestured vaguely at his lab, “Let me grab my coat…”

“Lab coat or a jacket?” Mike teased. Slug started to head for the kitchen doors but stopped short.

“Hey, Heavs… did you mean what you said before?” Slug asked before his shot nerves got the best of him. Mike blinked down at him.

“About listening? Yeah, man,” he said seriously, “Are you okay? Did something happen?”

“Happen?” Slug parroted, arms coming up to cross over his chest, “No. Not… happen, exactly.”

“Sluggy?” Clem asked, placing her phone in her pocket unsure. Cero rumbled where he was lying on the dirty floor.

Slug shook his head, “It’s not a big deal—I’m fine. But…”

“But?” Mike posed.

“Do you know of a Villain by the name of Knightly? First name Shay?” he asked. Mike’s eyes popped open wide in surprise and Slug tapped at his forehead frustratedly, “The name isn’t familiar to me but I feel like it should be.”

“Shay Knightly?” Mike repeated, and Slug nodded. The Hero worriedly continued with, “Uh, yeah. That’s—That’s The Mad Dame, doc.”

Slug started, looking back at Heavy Hitter with wide eyes as well, “Wait—The Mad Dame?”

“Uhhhh, why are we saying The Mad Dame over and over again?” Clem asked, looking between the two. Slug shook his head, almost at a loss for words. Mike wasn’t doing much better, but he glanced away and up to the ceiling.
“Well, there’s a lot of Hero-History… and… uhhhhhhhh,” Heavy Hitter trailed off.

Slug sighed, putting his hands in his pockets and found himself staring at the floor, “Her body was found at a secret Villain care facility. She’d been killed there and it looks like her death has been covered up… Dr. Flug emailed me some stuff. It’s probably Anti-Hero work and… yeah. Black Hat’s not gonna be happy when he hears.”

“Wow,” Mike breathed out and Clem continued to be confused.

“Sounds bad, yeah, but you still haven’t even told me who this Mad Dame was…?”

Mike turned to her and awkwardly gestured, “Shay Knightly, originally, worked with the Sky Fox family. She was… uh, well, a child psychologist.”

“Cool…?” Clementia posed, waiting for more.

“The Mad Dame was way before Clem’s time. She’s not really gonna understand,” Slug sadly walked over to his tablet and started pulling up wikileaks articles and handing the device to the girl, “But, the Sky Fox family you know today isn’t quite… full.”

Clementia gasped as she skimmed through pages of really depressing stuff.

“Oh, no, the Sky Fox family is full—” Mike corrected with a bite easily slipping into his tone, “But mostly whackos. SparrowHeart, though, arguably the best of the bunch. Good kid.”

“SparrowHeart isn’t… He’s not the only kid Sky Fox adopted?” Clem questioned, looking through the posted articles with more and more surprise.

“Yeah. People—”

“Heroes,” again Mike corrected Slug quickly.

“Okay, fine, Heroes don’t talk about it,” the doctor explained as he swiped over to some images of
happier times and pointed at a small boy with black hair wedged between a sinuous blonde and the silhouette of the mysterious Sky Fox, “But just after SparrowHeart, he took in another kid—Foxglove was his sidekick name.”

“Heroes don’t… don’t have sidekicks though,” Clementia weakly said.

Mike rose a brow, “They don’t? Then where did the phrase come from?”

“Comics?” she hopefully asked.

“No, Clem,” Slug sadly said and swiped to the next picture. Foxglove’s obituary. “Heroes don’t have sidekicks anymore. Things happened between Shay Knightly, Sky Fox, and Foxglove…”

“What happened?” Clementia asked after a heavy pause. Cero lumbered up beside her to give her a hug as the unhappiness crept into her voice. Slug glanced over at Mike for help. He had been in the Hero game longer than the good doctor.

“No one really knows, kiddo,” Heavy Hitter (unhelpfully) supplied, “Sky Fox never officially said. All the public knows is that a mission went wrong… Shay Knightly was there, and Foxglove got in the middle. He never returned. Knightly and Sky Fox did not stay together long after that. It took a while for him to even take on another protégé…”

“Wow… they definitely never covered this in Hero studies while I was at the university,” Clementia said, quickly scanning through more pages.

“Yeah, I don’t doubt it,” Slug snorted.

Mike glanced over, “The University of Valiant?”

“That’s the one,” Slug said, “And that’s because Sky Fox is the main founder of the University. It went up right after Foxglove’s supposed death.”

“Awww—” Clem started, then yanked her vision up to Slug crossing his arms over his chest again, “Wait, supposed?”
“Yeah, just after White Hat hired me there was this huge scandal with the Mad Dame and her lackey —” Slug began.

Clementia bounced on her feet, quickly catching on, “The Mad Dame being Shay Knightly!”

“Err, well,” Mike tilted his head, “Not that no one knew who the Mad Dame was. Everyone just thought the loss of Foxglove and then Sky Fox’s relationship caused her to seek his attention through Villainy… ya know, grade school shit.”

“Oh,” Clem tsked in disappoint.

“Yeah, the scandal came in the form of a new…” Slug suddenly stopped here thinking of his words, “Well, I guess everyone called him a Villain at the time.”

“What else do you call a dude parading around in a Gas Mask fucking shit up?” Heavy Hitter asked.

Slug turned to him, raising a brow, pointing out, “You run around downtown dressed up like a baseball player and beat up people with a bat?”

“Eh, semantics,” Mike said, waving it off, “Plus, I beat thugs and other C-List Villains.”

“Right, so…” Slug ignored the comment, flicking up a whole new series of articles, “Gas Mask comes on the scene. He goes after big time crime bosses by tossing poison canisters around. Fucking shit up, as Heavs so eloquently put it.”

“I don’t get how all this is related…?” Clem says in more an inquiry with wrinkled brows.

“I’m getting there, be patient,” Slug continued, this time exiting browsers and pulling up videos to mute, “Gas Mask gets caught on tape, eventually, and after analyzing the data… People start putting things together. Height, age, agility—but especially the poison bit. Do you know what is Foxglove is?”
“A flower,” Clementia answers, blinking.

“A poisonous flower!” Mike once more corrects.

Slug nods, leaning back, “The use of poisons and venoms was Foxglove’s specialty. And, well, long angsty story shortened because this took well over a decade to orchestrate—The Mad Dame was in play long before Sky Fox even met her. He’d broken her heart before I guess, or some other bullshit. I don’t know—”

“Again, no one knows for sure,” Mike repeated.

“But, Shay Knightly, the Mad Dame, kidnapped Foxglove and tortured him for years. Turned him into a mercenary type… and eventually he got out from under her thumb and brought hell down upon Sky Fox’s life… it was pretty bad,” Slug sighed. He remembered daily, sometimes hourly requests from SparrowHeart to meet with White Hat. While White Hat was amiable, Sky Fox was not. Somehow, he found out about it and SparrowHeart eventually sent an email that just said, Don’t worry. We’re dealing with it.

“Dang…” Clementia whispered. She placed the tablet down, looking a little shaken, “I wonder if Star Princess knows? She’s engaged to SparrowHeart so…”

Slug shook his head, “Probably not… SparrowHeart is—well, he’s got heart but, he is just as controlled by Sky Fox as the Mad Dame controlled Foxglove—”

“Gas Mask now,” Heavy Hitter said, “That’s what he goes by.”


“You wouldn’t,” Slug mentioned as he cleaned his browsing history, “Sky Fox controls a lot of media—and especially Hero media at that… Always at the forefront of big news and big changes…”

“Not White Hat?” the girl questioned.

Mike gave a shrug, “White Hat is hands-off on principle. A lot of Heroes seek help when they can’t
do much else anymore. Sky Fox? You join his team and poof! All responsibilities are shared. Missions feted out to Heroes of an acceptable range. It’s all pretty strict.”

“Ohhh… like the opposite of the Golden Rule group,” Clementia said. Slug nodded.

“Too messy,” Slug went to thinking aloud, comparing the two Hero groups, “Which made it transparent… Which is why is collapsed as quick as it did…”

“Sluggy?”

“Doc?”

“Shit,” Slug slammed his hands on the counter in realization, “Sky Fox knew.”

“Knew?” Mike questioned.

Cero rumbled beside the doc, uncertain, as Clem added, “Knew what, Sluggy?”

“He knew about Anti-Heroes from the beginning!” Slug roughly sighed, “Think about it! Gas Mask never took out innocents—he only killed crime lords. Drug rings. Weapon smugglers! Everyone looked past that because Sky Fox had the media paint him in such a light that the general public was terrified to step out of their doors. Everyone thought a biochemical attack was on the horizon for months and—that fucking son of a bitch!”

Clem tried to calm Slug as he shook on the spot. Mike looked very tired suddenly, rubbing his face. It took everyone a second to collect themselves when the tablet sitting on the counter chimed merrily. Being the closest, the girl looked down at the caller and read, “Tom? What’s he calling for?”

“Video chat?” Slug asked with a little less confusion to swipe the call open without even thinking about it. Mike peered over the pair to catch a view of Tommen De Loin’s face lighting up the screen as he jovially waved a box at the camera.

“Doc! Where’s White Hat?” he greeted, but didn’t sit down. He was rummaging through desk drawers, “Can you put him on? I just got his package.”
“Package? You weren’t on my waiting list for any products,” the doctor said, ignoring the part about White Hat.

Tom rolled his eyes, “Yeah, because I don’t need ‘em. Got my own R&D…”

Mike huffed in the background, as he was a frequent buyer of specialty products (especially those on sale), but Slug was not particularly bothered by the comment. Clementia leaned into the view and waved. Tom waved back, now holding an exact-o brand knife.

“But White Hat sent you a package?” Slug continued, pushing the girl out of the way of the camera. Tom blinked, stabbing at the box unaffected.

“Well, that’s what return address on this thing said. Along with the note—”

“What note?” Slug demanded, feeling something dreadful slide it’s way down into his suddenly very empty stomach.

Tom snatched up a tiny cardstock note—a thick, bone-bleached square with a heavy inked message scrawled on it. “Says, Anti-Hero Info. Call whilst opening… and ya know, you got your little white top hat symbol so—”

“No, no, no!” Slug startled, leaning closer to the camera, “Whatever you do, don’t open that!”

“Huh, but why—”

Tommens’s words were cut off by sickening screech. It burst through the speakers of the little tablet, shaking it with such a high frequency of sound. Even the three people watching the experience had to hold their hands over their ears for fear of popped eardrums. The poor Hero on the other end immediately fell to his knees and out of the camera shot.

Mike was the first to recollect himself, pulling back Slug’s horrified face from the tablet and looking over him, and then, Clementia, “You two okay?”
“Yeah, but Tom—” Clem started, moving the tablet toward her, “Tom! Can you hear us?!”

His head wobbly appeared back from under his desk. He cracked his neck, rubbing at the sides of his head. His hand came away partially pink. “O-Okay… just a bit of ringing…” The lights above him flickered and he stood fully, examining the package on the table, “And I am guessing this isn’t from White Hat at all…”

Slug went to caution the kid again, but Tom yanked open the cut flap, blinking down at something. He lifted it in view of the camera… and it seemed like an ordinary speaker—save for a green, red, and then a black switch sitting on it’s base. There was a string tied to the switch, and it seemed that when he cut open the package, released the switch. The green and red buttons were flashing in tandem. “What the fuck is that…?” was all Slug could manage.

“Greetings!” came from the speaker, shrilly pumped out, the green and red lights dancing, “Am I speaking to Tommen De Loin?”

“Yeah…?” Tom answered, looking up into the video chat unsurely. Slug started shaking his head and Mike had to pull Clem away from the camera entirely as she was now trying to crawl into the screen as if she could protect Tom somehow.

“Oh! Vundabar!” the voice on the other end exclaimed. Slug’s eyebrows shot down at the words. That wasn’t proper German. That was a corruption of the word wonderbar, which meant wonderful…and, obviously, there was nothing wonderful about this situation. “And, do you have an audience…?”

“Ye—” he went to say, but again, Slug shook his head harshly.

The speaker tsked at the hesitation, “Please don’t lie, Mr. De Loin…”

Another burst from the speaker caused Tommen to grip the sides of head and curl up into a ball in pain. The connection flickered briefly. It returned, lagging, as Tom was panting over the strange device with eyes begging for instruction.

Growling low, Slug slammed his hands on either side of the tablet and spoke loudly, “Alright fuck-o! Tommen has Dr. Slug on video conference. I have another Hero and a Hero-In-Training pair also viewing you’re fucked up torture of the Golden Child. Whatever you are planning—”
“Ohohohohoho!” the voice continued, “Why Hello Dr. Slug! A most unusual appearance, but nonetheless, very welcoming.”

“The feeling is not mutual, buddy,” Slug shot back.

Tom groaned, eying the flashing lights on the box, “Please don’t antagonize the voice, doc.”

“A great point made by our contestant today—”

“Contestant?” Slug repeated.

“Perhaps you were prefer the term... test subject? Or, volunteer?”

“I would not,” Tom probably thought him mumbled. It caused Slug to feel a bubble of relief. If the kid could quip, he was doing alright. It meant he was staying sharp—which could save his life if this whole event went sideways. And, it very likely was already. Slug shot his eyes over to Clem and signed for pen and paper. If he could get Tom to show him the device, he could silently instruct him on how to disable it’s speaker system. It would probably be booby-trapped but—

“Who exactly am I speaking with?” Slug demanded as Clem starting rummaging in drawers with intense concentration. Heavy Hitter placed a hand on Slug’s shoulder, lifting an eyebrow.

“Oh, of course! Introductions are the most important part of the show—”

“The voice isn’t familiar to me, doc…” the other man whispered. Clementia quickly came back with a sharpie and yellow pad. Slug went to writing a message in clear script before holding it up to the camera so Tommen could read with uncertain eyes:

show me the box. carefully. we need to find a control panel.

Tommen lifted the box—and it appeared smooth. Slug mimed the act of scratching. Tom, with shaking fingers, felt along the box, looking for anything that could catch and open. The voice was continuing to speak, either not knowing what was happening, or was uncaring.
“I call myself Professor It—or, Prof. It, for short!”

“Profit, eh?” Slug slurred as he racked his brain for any connection… “Or, prophet?”

“Ding, ding, ding!” the voice sang out happily. Tom placed the box down, a panel finally knocked loose and swinging open. He showed Slug quickly. The doctor’s eyes ran over the colorless tubing with a growing pit of dread in his stomach. He went back to scratching out another message:

**we have to find where the wire connects to the speaker. or to a remote control device. we have to cut it out.**

Tom hung his head after he read the words, he gave Slug a defeated shrug. Slug, in turn, growled at him, then the voice coming from the box, “You mean to play a game with us, don’t you?”

“*In so many words,*” Prof. It said, “*I hope you’re up to date on your religious pop culture history!*”

“Yeah, that doesn’t sound promising,” Heavy Hitter muttered beside Slug.

Tom nodded, closing the panel on the box. Slug pointed at it more forcefully. Tom shook his head, instead asking the dumb device, “Okay. What are your rules? What do you want me to do?”

“You idiot!” Dr. Slug shouted at him, “We *do not* give into Villain games!”

“Villain? Oh, no, no, no! I *am* no Villain,” Prof. It said.

“No? Then *what* are you?!” Slug snarled, fed up.

Prof. It laughed, “*Obviously… I’m an Anti-Hero.*”
Thank you so much for reading! I hope you liked the story so far!

If you have any comments or concerns, questions or just general theories, please go ahead and let me know! Share your headcannons and I'll share mine if you want! Believe it or not, there's a ton of stuff I cut from this chapter because it interrupted the flow of the story!

Anyways! LOTS OF LOVE!
If this were one of Clementia’s comics, now would be the time the Heroes would come back from a cliff-hanger and defeat the odds. In shows, obviously, they would recap the plot points of how the Heroes got into this perilous situation, before concluding with some grand sweeping or exciting battle…

Except, Dr. Slug was not a Hero. He was not up against a Villain. Clementia wasn’t reading or watching some cartoonish fantasy of how Heroes and Villains interact… no, this was real life. For them, of course, and it was not so much a battle as…
Well, a psycho playing a game with them.

“Alright… what’s an Anti-Hero doing terrorizing the Golden Child?” Slug asked.

“Yeah, far as the rumors are concerned, Tommen should be like… the spokesperson for you whack-os,” Mike, the Heavy Hitter hero, piped up. Tom scoffed at him. The other hero shrugged, “No offence meant, of course.”

Tom faked laughed, “I like how you wanna comment about my Hero style when I heard about your brutish tactics, my man.”

A vein visibly pulsed on Mike’s bald head and Slug quickly spoke up, “Look. Heroic deeds aside—Tom’s not a Villain. Anything his parents might have done could be considered Anti-Heroism, maybe, but… oh.”

“Right again!” the voice crowed, “You are as smart as they say, Dr. Slug. I am so glad I got to play with you today!”

“Sluggy? What’s going on?” Clem asked, looking between Slug and Tom’s slightly guilty face.

“Tommens dissolved Golden Rule months ago—” Slug closed his eyes and took a step away from the tablet, “Which meant that when the whole of that Hero company was disbanded… this would have included several on-going international projects with heavy funding. That’s how Anti-Hero work started to make itself known.”

“I swear, Dr. Slug, I had no idea Anti-Heroes were being bank-rolled by my parents!” Tom exclaimed, “And I didn’t start looking into it until after White Hat came to me for help but—”

“But you still knowingly dissolved your parents company…” Prof. It tsked.

Clem looked over at Mike, who also shrugged, but Slug leaned back over the tablet, “Look. Tommen’s a good kid with a strong conscious. If you mean to threaten him for security, I will personally track you down and—”
“Ah, ah, ah!” the mad man sang out. “We’re done with audience questions for now! It’s showtime people!”

“Showtime?” Mike parroted. He leaned over Slug’s shoulder as Slug went back to writing more notes on the notepad:

**stay calm. he has to be remotely transmitting his voice. we can trace it.**

Tom nodded, rummaging through his desk drawers as kitschy music pumped out of the speakers. Luckily, none of it was the horrid screeching from earlier. “So… Tommen De Loin… We’re gonna test your knowledge about a very special topic today.”

“Oh yeah?” he answered back, way too bold from someone frantically pulling out electronic devices and scanning the area, “And what topic is that?”

“Well, it’s a little something we all wrestle with…”

“Let me guess,” Tom grumbled, before holding up a tracing device for Slug to see, “Personal demons.”

“Close!” Prof. It said, impressed.

Mike shook his head, looking over at Clem, who was now worryingly biting her nails to the quick. He grabbed her hand in a show of comfort, whispering, “Doc… I don’t like this. We can’t just stand here—”

“I know, Mike,” Slug said under his breath. He glanced over to 0.5.0. who was hovering over the frustrated young girl as well, but clearly more at a loss. “But we have little choice. We’re too far removed to do anything, and we have no idea where this Prof. It guy is so… all we can do is support Tom the only way we can.”

“Which is just letting some crazy asshole quiz the Golden Child?”
Slug fisted his hands as Tom showed him multiple towers pinging interference from the speaker box. He shakily placed it down and looked helplessly at the box still spilling music into his office. Slug looked over at Mike with worried eyes, “We can at least bare witness…”

“In association with my dear partner…” Prof. It said, and the music took on a humming, human quality that was startling, “We’re going to see how many Devils you can identify through song.”

“What?” Tom asked, nearly stupefied.

Slug also tilted his head to the side, listening closely, “Holy shit… Prof. It’s not alone.”

“If you can correctly identify this tune…” the mad voice in the box declared, followed by a high lilting that appeared to mimic a violin, “Then you won’t be punished…”

“Punished?” Clementia asked.

The sound cut off into an ear-drum shattering scream. Tommen dropped out of view again, and the congregation of people watching backed away from the tablet. The screen flickered once again. Slug focused on it intensely...

If the image was distorting, that meant radio frequencies were crisscrossing the video feed. Prof. It and who ever he was working with had to be in Tommen’s local area. He quickly went to scribbling that on the pad before showing it to Tom, who re-emerged from under his desk with a head shake to clear his poor ears.

“Do we understand the rules?”

“Well, after you nearly deafened the poor kid!” Mike shot back.

Prof. It just laughed and the second voice returned to it’s unearthly noise. It sounded like an instrument… but at the same time, now that the Anti-Hero had pointed out he wasn’t alone in talking to Tommen… Slug could hear the pitch had a distinctly… organic sound. Whoever was vocalizing had an interesting set of cords.
Tommen stilled, and Slug watched him as he closed his eyes. The kid scrunched his brows and just… listened. The music coming from the speaker was high. Fast. Tight… then it flowed somber and macabre. Suddenly it returned to a skipping and dizzying pace that caused a spike of anxiety in the listener. Tom sighed, shaking his head… the music, or well, the voice that sounded more like an instrument than human at times, simply continued, growing impossibly louder. The song almost suffocated the room, creeping into White Hat Manor.

Tom nodded, “Yeah… yeah, I remember this. Mom use to…”

“Did your mom play, Mr. De Loin?”

“No. Or, at least,” Tom shook his head, “Not after me. Not after the things that made her become a Hero happened.”

“Tom—” Slug started.

“You’re playing the Devil’s Trill. G Minor. I’d know that piece anywhere.”

“Ding! Ding! Ding!” Prof. It declared. Suddenly, the song lifted, rescinding dramatically before suddenly dropping. All noise gone… except for the echo of clapping from the Anti-Hero. “Let’s ready question two…”

The music started up again, low and ominous. Slug grabbed the tablet, hauling it up to his face shaking his head, “Tom, seriously rethink this—”

“Did you know my mom didn’t… she was really not the motherly type,” Tom said, and he sat down heavily in a desk chair behind him. The music played on.

“Tom, focus—”

“I’ll give you time to think this piece over as well,” Prof. It said. Slug wanted to snap at him. Mike caught the doctor’s attention again, pulling down the tablet.
Mike was pointing at the mute button. Slug quickly muted their side of the video conference before rounding on Heavy Hitter. Operatic strains in a Germanic language started to filter through their sound system. Clementia was shuddering.

“That’s a voice I do recognize, doc,” Mike started, urgently, and Slug looked up at him confused, “Prof. It’s working with Swan Song.”

“Swan Song? Who’s that?” Clementia asked, edging away from the tablet as Tom listened to the opera with tears in his eyes.

“She’s… uh, well… She used to be a dancer in Russia. She never spoke, and many assumed it was because she was mute but…” Mike scratched the back of his neck, “Kam told me about her. Back when he was in dance, she was a big deal. Then, it was revealed she was using, like, a siren power to get all her parts… she was immediately pulled and black listed from all the dance companies.”

“Is she a Villain?” Slug asked.

Mike shook his head, “Not so much. As far as I know, she just hires herself out. Whoever pays the most, she works for.”

“She might have been a retainer for the Golden Rule then,” Slug hypothesized. Mike shrugged.

“I just know her from the stuff Kam’s showed me…” Heavy Hitter sighed, “She’s dangerous, doc.”

Slug looked over at the glassy-eyed Tommen listening raptly to operatic strains from the now named Swan Song, “Yeah. I can tell. Looks like she put him under a spell or something…” The doctor unmuted the tablet and called out to the young tech Hero, “Tom! You have to come to your senses! Whatever you’re feeling—it’s not real.”

Tom flinched minutely.

“Here’s the question Tommen De Loin…” Prof. It started, as if waiting for the audience to catch up, “What is this famous opera about?”
“Dr. Faust… a man, a law scholar, who sells his soul to gain… knowledge… life eternal… love…” Tom gulped. Slug looked at him with growing dread as Tom raised his head, “I’m sorry… I—”

“Yes! Vundabar! You are two for two!”

“You’re not after Tom—” Dr. Slug realized.

There was a snap of fingers and suddenly, the tune Swan Song was singing changed again. There was more twang. Tom startled, standing up, “Yes they are! These are songs all about me!”

“No, they aren’t!” Slug shouted, frustration raising, “The Devil’s Trill was written by a man who sold his soul, right? That’s the lore behind it, isn’t it? And Faust wasn’t an opera, originally! It was a morality novel—”

“You are so smart, Dr. Slug. Almost too smart…” Prof. It murmured, “But I am afraid we’re not playing with you right now. Tom—this next song—tell me if you know it.”

The tune continued at a swinging pace, and the young Hero looked confused, especially considering the in-time clapping and thumping of something hollow. It was definitely more modern than the classical theme and the opera vocals that came before. Mike tilted his head, mouth open, unsure.

“Maybe it’s too… low-brow for you, at least without the words—” Prof. It taunted, the lights on the boxes started to flash, almost menacing, “So let me give you a hint…”

“I know that tune,” Mike muttered, leaning down to listen closer.

“The story is about the Devil… who goes to in the South and meets a young man… They have a bet about who can fiddle better—”

“Yes! The Devil Went Down to Georgia!” Mike exclaimed. The music halted menacingly.

“What the fuck…?” Tom asked, “How the hell do you—”
“Look, I went through a cowboy phase, alright?” the man admitted, embarrassment evident as he stepped away from tablet and out of Tommen’s sight.

“I’m afraid audience help is not permitted—”

Before anyone could protest, the screech occurred again—longer, with a duration that caused the window behind Tommen to crack. The box nearly vibrated off screen and Tom was gone, crouched low again, more than likely twisting in agony. Clem cried out, holding her own ears as she watched her friend tortured. Only Slug called out for the mad-man to stop his assault.

“It won’t happen again!” Slug promised, and the noise faded, “Don’t—Don’t take it out on the Golden Child. Please…?”

“Well… this is an exciting game, so I understand.”

“Tom—Tom!” Slug asked, “You okay?”

“Y-Yeah…” he said with a laugh and another head shake. Blood was leaking out of both his ears now, “But, to be honest, I wouldn’t have gotten that question anyways so—punishment was coming anyways, I guess.”

“How honest of you!”

“Thanks?”

“Then let me tell you the story: The Devil was in a bind, because he was way behind, but he was willing to make a deal. Then, he came upon a young man sowing a fiddle and playing it hot. He jumped up on a hickory stump and said,” here is where Prof. It lowered his voice dramatically, “I bet you didn’t know it, but I’m a fiddle player too. If you care to take a dare, I’ll make a bet with you. I will weigh this fiddle of gold against your soul so as to say I am better than you…”

Mike tilted his head, whispering to Slug, “That’s only pieces of the song.”
“And what did this boy do? The one the Devil found?” the Golden Child asked, almost afraid.

Slug felt something wrong slither into the pit of his stomach as Prof. It laughed, continuing with, “The boy said, Well Devil, my name’s Tommy and it might be a sin… but I’ll take that bet, you’re gonna regret, ‘cause I’m the best there’s ever been.”

“No, that’s not the boy’s name,” Mike said, more forcefully and a slight bit louder. Slug nodded in return, muting their side of the video conference.

“Tommen’s gonna lose this game. It’s rigged. Their purposefully remaking the questions about him. It’s clouding his judgement. He needs help. I am willing to say Prof. It and Swan Song are trying to use him to get to their real target,” Slug deduced, crossing his arms as he glared at the pixilated image of the black box toying with such a good-natured, but guilt-stricken man.

Clementia looked down at the floor, “The card that came with the speaker box had a white hat symbol on it… And that’s why Tom called White Hat’s personal tablet.”

“But White Hat’s not here,” Mike pointed out with a gulp.

Slug unmuted the call once more and spoke clearly, “Tom, you gotta listen to me—this is a trap.”

“What’s your question, Prof. It?” Tommen asks, ignoring Slug’s pleas to run.

“What’s Tommy’s sin?”

“Don’t answer!” Slug warned.

Tom closed his eyes, sighing in the defeat, “Like the violist… like Faust… He covets what he can’t have—I want what I can’t have… who I can’t have…”

“You idiot…” Slug hisses, he looks over at 0.5.0. and points toward the garage. The bear gives him a nod and gallops off. Clementia starts, but Slug grabs her arms and quickly mimes for her to wait.
Prof. It starts laughing obnoxiously, nasally, “Nice interpretation but… Sorry, Tommen De Loin, your sin is pride. You can’t dance with the devil and not expect to get burned.”

The screech sounds once more—and this time at full force. It breaks whatever device Tom was calling from. The video feed goes black just as the speaker box lights up in hellish Christmas colors. Clementia stares wide eyes at the video. A few seconds later emergency signals blink on the tablet—in coming broadcasts of an attack on the Golden Spire are buzzing in on flagged news sources.

“Oh my god…” Clementia breathes, she looks at Slug with widening eyes, “Is Tom—Is he—”

“We won’t know until we get there,” Dr. Slug responded.

Clem took a deep breath, “Right—and I’m coming with you!”

“Excuse me? No. You’re staying here,” Slug said with raised brows, pointedly ignoring as she dug her nails into his arm as he began to walk away. He only stopped when her new strength managed to claw a hole into his sweater.

“But Tom’s my friend!” she argued, then, with a set glare, squared her shoulders and calmed herself, “Plus, you told those Anti-Heroes I was a Hero-in-Training. I need to go. I have to learn how to deal with these sorts of things.”

“Yeah, but I’m not a Hero. I can’t train you do shit,” Slug shot back, continuing to his lab as if that solved any other argument she might come up with.

“Sluggy!” she shouted after him, and even the heavy workboots of Mike echoed as Slug waited by the lift stubbornly, staunchly ignoring the growing tenseness in the Manor.

“Someone needs to wait for White Hat—” Slug continued, “He’s training you so—”

“Mike can train me! As a first responder! I don’t have to do anything other than make sure Tom is alive!” she declared. Slug turned, raising a brow. Mike looked cool, lifting one shoulder in a gesture that was indifferent.
“Mike’s about to retire. He’s also not part of Tommen’s new group so—”

Slug was startled when Clementia slammed her arm onto the door of the lift, holding it open just as Slug was about to enter. She didn’t let go of it and Slug was staring at her desperate face. Such a fierce look made him unsure.

“Sluggy… I am begging you…” she tried again, “Please. I need to go.”

Mike stepped into the elevator with Slug, nudging his shoulder conspiratorially, “You said it yourself, doc. You’re not a Hero. I’ll watch out for her, teach her the ropes.”

Slug looked over at Clem, holding both the door and her breath.

He knew immediately he’s been spoiling her rotten for too long.

“Get in the fucking elevator,” he grumbled, “If you’re gonna go, you’ll need equipment…”

Clementia hopped in, and they rode the short distance down to the lab in a mounting silence. Once the doors opened, Slug shot out and cross over to a corner of his lab where he kept personal and secret projects hidden. He opened a wall panel, and a compartment slid out with an armored suit strung up on mounted pegs. Clementia followed after the doctor, curious.

Slug pulled the suit off the rack and spun back around, holding out his arms.

“Surprise…” he mumbled, looking off to the side, embarrassed.

Clementia blinked down at a bundle of colorless fabric, “What?”

“Since you’ve been training with White Hat… I’ve been working on this,” he explained as she took the suit and held it up. It didn’t quite shine, but it was clearly embedded with something that shimmered softly, “It’s, uh, made of specialized… well, we’ll call it spider-silk, but it’s more complicated than that. It’s stronger than steel but light than a feather. I’ve plated the vital parts of where it will rest on your body pretty heavily. You can move freely, but you’ll be protected better than a tank.”
“Sluggy…” Clem said, holding the suit to her chest.

“I hadn’t dyed it yet. So… uh, be careful out there. You’re gonna stand out,” he warned. Clementia threw her arms around him and squeezed hard. He quickly pushed her off, “Wait—you’ll also need this—” Slug dug back into the compartment and pulled out a helmet like what a person on a motorbike might wear, “This is just a prototype of course—”

Clementia laughed, placing her hands over Slug’s as he held out the helmet, “Thank you. I love it.”

“I haven’t even shown you the best bit yet,” he said. She blinked as he pressed a button the side and a sudden hiss of compress air startled the girl. A horn cork-screwed out of the forehead of the helmet… like a unicorn.

“Awesome…!” she breathed.

Slug pressed the button on the opposite side and it collapsed back into the helmet, hidden. He looked down at the invisible seems, cautioning, “If you ever get in trouble… You use this. You use your head. In every way you can think of.”

“Whoa, doc,” Mike rudely cut through the tension, “You actually telling Clemmy to just headbutt a man to death?”

“If it’s between her and some righteous ass Anti-Hero?” Slug barked, fingers entwining with the young girl’s, “Yes! Absolutely!”

“Sluggy…” Clementia started.

“No! You listen here—” he said forcefully, “You do whatever it is you have to. You survive, Clementia. Come Hell or high water, you live? Okay? You come back to me, you got that?”

Clementia gulped, but after a second, nodded. Then with wide eyes, asked, “Wait… aren’t you coming too?”
“If you and Mike are going,” Slug sourly explained, “Then I have to stay at the Manor. I need to find out where White Hat went—he’s been gone way too long without letting anyone know.”

“You don’t think the Anti-Heroes already got him… do you?” Clementia asked, concern dripping in her voice.

Slug sighed, “I don’t think so. This attack on Tom was planned. And if White Hat is missing for personal reasons… the Anti-Heroes are gonna get desperate. Someone is going to have to coordinate Heroes at home base before it gets worse.”

“Slug-Bug’s right, kiddo,” Heavy Hitter said nodding at her new suit, “You go get ready. We leave for Tommen’s in five.”

Clementia grunted, hugging Slug tightly in thanks one last time. She dashed over to the lift and pressed the button. Both men watched her leave in silence. Slug glanced over at the Hero, shoulders slumping.

“I’m sorry, Heavs… You don’t have to do this for her—” he started.

“Nah, man,” Mike waved off, and then he grinned at the doctor briefly, “I can’t help it. I say I wanna retire… but I see shit like this and I just—my conscious can’t let me just sit back and do nothing. I might not know this Tommen punk but… We Heroes stick together. You think he’s a good egg, we’ll go save him.”

“I don’t know how to thank you,” Slug murmured.

Mike snorted, “You don’t gotta thank me. Clem’s sorta like, all the Heros’ baby. And lord… I can’t imagine what would I would do if Clementia let herself get in over her head. I promise you, doc, I’ll look out for her. I’d rather die than take my eye off her.”

“Yeah…” Slug said.

“You’re brave,” Mike mentioned, slapping Slug on the back, “I wouldn’t be able to keep a straight head in this kind of situation.”
“Well, someone’s got to—” Slug grumbled, cracking his aching back from where the Hero was just hitting him in sympathy, “What with you Hero-types listening to things like your heart and your conscious and other bullshit…”

Mike laughed, just as Clementia descended back into the elevator, fully armored. She held open the door for Mike and called him over. He nodded down at Slug once and then strut over to the lift calling out, “Okay, Clemmy! Baptism by fire! Let’s go!”

And then the Heroes ascended to do only what Heroes can do.

Slug was left, alone, in a cold lab with nothing more to do besides look for White Hat.

He was their only hope at the moment.

Slug’s only hope.

…

Slug started his search for White Hat in the US papers. Nothing, no sightings. He next hopped over to South America, but found nothing. Then, looked up reports in Canada. Nada. That was about when he starting scouring fan-sites for White Hat—but the bigger ones happened to be on UK servers, so most remained behind by a few hours. It was easier to switch to social media.

After a couple of key word searches, and then, finally looking at non-English-alphabet languages, found a retweet of a YouTube clip from a teenager in Japan. Originally it looked like someone was just making a silly video of friends engaging in the Pockey Game, when White Hat popped up. The whole room of students going crazy. White Hat merely walked over to a young boy eating a snack and began talking. They popped out of existence and then the video cut out.

The time stamp was… early this morning, technically.

So, White Hat light-traveled to Japan and then took a kid and disappeared again?

Slug rewatched the video, this time focusing on the young boy.
He sighed when he recognized the Hero.

Slug dug into his contact wheel and picked out Ryo Canova. He dialed the international number and waited patiently. Ryo answered urgently, apparently looking for his brother just as frantically as Slug was looking for White Hat. After a few minutes of back and forth, they both realized that White Hat and Ryo’s younger brother had left for some impromptu… *something*.

“Can you guess what your boss would have wanted?” he asked for the millionth time.

“From a pre-teen psychic?” Slug shot back, “No. And we’re about to be in *big* trouble. White Hat needs to get back to the Manor *now*. People could die—probably are dying.”

Ryo was silent on the other end for a moment, “There use to be this tale I heard as a kid… only people with psychic powers ever really hear these stories… but there use to be this *oni*—Er, that’s a ___”

“I know some Japanese,” Slug sighed, “A demon, right? White or black?”

“Ah, I see you guessed where this was headed,” Ryo nervously hedged.

Slug remained silent.

“He’s been here a long time, hasn’t he?”

Slug hummed, “If you have an idea where he’s gone, please. I have to get a hold of him immediately.”

“Alright. It might take a while, I’ll have to do some research, but I’ll make sure to phone you as soon as I know,” Ryo promised.

“Arigato,” Slug mumbled, and Ryo wished him good luck as they hung up. Slug placed his head in his hands and sighed. It was best to get in contact with other Heroes then. Prepare them for the
upcoming shitstorm that was no doubt about to hit everyone.

He went to contacting the people he needed to, awaiting Ryo to get back to him.

…

Slug sat back, stomach growling. He had no idea what time it was—his watch left upstairs on White Hat’s desk. It took him a moment to realize he could easily check his personal computer, his tablet, or even his phone… which was seriously running low on battery. He was using it non-stop and his vision was nearly starting to double.

He sat back and rubbed underneath his cracked mask. It wouldn’t necessarily help his eyesight, he knew this. Still. He was tired. He was hungry. That hang-over headache was going to return if he did not rest soon… Deciding to check up on Mike and Clem, he checked the vehicle locator installed on the company car—just outside Tommen’s block in NY. Slug finally looked at the time—12:47 AM.

“Damn…” he breathed.

No word on White Hat—all notable Heroes on standby—rudely worded email sent via an annoying hack to Sky Fox… but still. There was so much work to be done. Slug recalled Dr. Flug’s previous emails… Black Hat would also be knocking on the Manor’s door soon. Which wasn’t going to be fun but—

Well, Slug did have the upper hand somewhat. He could contact Black Hat first. When Slug confiscated the black box holding the damned monster’s eye, he hid it in the safe with the Necronomicon. He should at least warn the creature that the Anti-Heroes had started seeking big time vengeance…

Slug was kneeling at the safe when he noted how… quiet… it was in the lab. Save for his breathing, the lab was eerie. Which was not how it normally felt. Slug did not feel like he was alone anymore.

Growing tense, Slug stopped fussing with the combination and stood, turning. He swept his gaze over the room, his honed survival instinct screaming at him that something wasn’t right. He was in grave, terrible danger. He breathed out, and kept looking around… but there was nothing he could particularly see…
Except… he did hear a tiny drip, drip… Slug turned on his heel, eyes narrowing. There was… a puddle forming in front of the safe. A drip fell and splattered against the clean tile. Slowly, Slug raised his head, following the drips back to their point of origin.

Something clung on the ceiling.

“What the fuck—!”

Slug darted away as a blob of greenish sludge splattered onto the floor. It twisted itself upwards, turning humanoid. It opened one blood-shot eye and blinked at him. A fanged mouth opened and dripped a vaguely slick jade colored oil, walked toward him in stuttering motions. It was almost moving like a puppet might. The head cracked back, and Slug shuddered when he saw a gash across the neck. It stood out, a dark black-burgundy like dried blood. That’s where all the green ooze was suffusing out of.

“What the hell are you?!” Slug demanded, arm raising defensively as the thing moved closer.

“Ta—TOP u--uhF tHe mo-moRNiNg ta Ya!”

“What the shi—” Slug started, but the thing lashed out an arm, and the man barely dodged it’s attack. Slug glanced back to see the sludge coating his desk and chair. The air sizzled above as the whatever green stuff it was made of ate through his steel-framed equipment. He carefully noted aloud, “Alright… not a friendly.”

“OOOoooHOhOhoohooohhhhooohhhhhHHHHOHOhohHoHOh…” it cooed in a distinct dialect, voice cracking oddly, before turning to the safe. It splashed the green stuff onto the metal… and Slug gulped as it slowly, but surely, went to work opening the Necronomicon’s container. “W-wE c-c-cAn bE y-Ya fRIEND-end…”

“Seriously,” Slug said, creeping behind cover as he eyed the twitching, sludgy humanoid, “What are you?”

“Nuh-NaMe’s is—is SEPTIC,” it hissed.

It sounded like a broken, glitchy recording rather than a voice. It was disturbing, given that it
couldn’t move fluidly, yet curiously made of some kind of viscous substance. Dr. Slug thought about the name, concern growing as he asked, “Septic… so you’re an infection?”

It laughed, body rolling as it moved closer to Slug. Slug made sure to keep his eye on it, wondering exactly how this thing managed to creep its way deep down into his lab. Septic clearly wasn’t a natural creature… but… it seemed organic enough that it needed to trip at least some of his security protocols.

“Eh—EehhHhHh,” came the answer, “We’re…” Septic paused as it’s head tilted—cracking almost—to a complete 90 degree angle as it thought. It sprang to the other side, rolling along until it stopped and stared dead ahead at Slug, “Suh—SOMeth-Hìng like t’At…”

“Definitely not human,” Slug noted.

Septic gave a rickety head shake, “N-NoT aNyMooRe…”

“Well… fuck me then,” Slug thought aloud—then took off like a shot. Septic followed the sudden movement, rising and splashing over anything the doctor had been using as cover. Slug slipped along some of the sludge, the smell of burning rubber in his wake. He skidded to a halt in front of his safe—mostly eaten away—and kicked it over. The sludge ran off in rivets, clinging to the side of the safe… leaving the inside mostly untouched.

Slug pulled his sleeve arm over his hand for extra protection as he quickly rummaged into the contents. As soon as his hand clasped the item he was looking for, Slug was flung away from the safe by his midsection. His coat—though heavy duty—had taken the burnt of the sludge, but was rapidly slicking through the tough fabric. He had to shake off his coat and back away. Septic, meanwhile, was reaching into the safe, singing, “Fuh-FInder’s keep—keePErs…!”

“Septic!” a voice called from behind Slug, “Stop fucking around!”

The doctor spun, crouching low as a figure stepped out from the shadow of the lift, irritated. The voice had been muffled, gruff, and when Slug saw who it was, he stood back up. Very surprised, he found he was looking at Gas Mask… the same kid Slug had been educating Clementia about not that many hours earlier. Gas Mask stalked forward, grabbed in a deep burgundy overcoat and sterile black gloves. A utility belt displayed several vials of liquid at his hips.

“No way…” Slug said, mostly to himself of course.
“Evening, doctor,” Gas Mask nodded at him, but Slug shook his head in disbelief, “Apologies… but, I fully expected you to be dead by now.”

“Yeah, you and half the world, I’m sure,” Slug quipped.

Enigmatically looking over at Septic, Gas Mask tilted his head upward, asking, “Do you have it yet? We don’t have all day.”

“B-BossSSy…”

“I hope you realize you’re not leaving this lab with anything, Gas Mask,” Slug glowered as he straightened to a full height to be intimidating.

The Anti-Hero tsked and walked past him, unperturbed, “You know what the boss wanted, Septic. You fool around again, I have the right to dissolve you.”

“Hey!” Slug demanded, tailing after him, “Don’t ignore me!” He grabbed Gas Mask’s arm, twisting. The Anti-Hero responded by flipping Slug over his shoulder and slamming him into the ground. The doctor’s back collided harshly with the floor and Slug wheezed, head slightly spinning, “R-Right… nevermind me…”

Gas Mask stood up right, sneering down at Slug’s prone form, “You Villains… all the same. Cowardly. Self-serving. You want all the attention.”


“The Necro—NecroNomicooon… it’s n-NoT h-heRe!”

“Evidently…” Gas Mask started carefully, “If you give us the Necronomicon, you’ll live.”
“Will I now?” Dr. Slug posed.

“You won’t live through a second of my attacks.”

“O-Our aTTacks…”

Slug tried to breath calmly, “Of course… the flowers. The infection that broke minds. My security system. A Sky Brat like you would know ways around things like that…”

“Call me that one more time—!” Gas Mask’s rage was cooled by the click of a safety. Slug stared at him, holding the Necronomicon to his chest and then flicking his eyes toward Septic.

“What is it exactly? You’re friend?”

“Not my friend,” Gas Mask grit out, “Partner. Not my choice either.”

“You got a boss, who wants the Necronomicon and who partners you with an insidious sludge creature… I’m guessing there’s a reason…”

“We—We can R-Read iiiiit!”


Gas Mask let out a frustrated growl, “Shut. Up.”

“Rude,” Slug mentioned, still staring up at the Anti-Hero, but the grip on the Necronomicon increased slightly. He definitely wasn’t going to let the thing get its literal slimy paws on the book now. “We’re trying to have a polite information gathering talk and here you are—”

“I’m done with this!” Gas Mask tsked, then, with quick reflexes, removed a pressurized tranq gun from behind his cloak. He aimed it at Septic, and Slug watched the dart zoom past his face and embed itself in the stomach of the sickly green creature. Gasping, Slug squeezed the trigger of his
Gas Mask was fast, but not fast enough to dodge a bullet a foot away from his face. However, making that risky move to rid his partner of life before it could spill any more secrets, the barrel of Slug’s revolver was positioned at the man’s neck. The Anti-Hero jerked backwards by the projectile of the shot, stumbling, gripping at his throat… which sported a dime sized hole in front, but a rather large exist wound in the back. Blood splattered onto Slug’s mask, and he watched Gas Mask tip backwards.

Scrambling to sit up, he spun around, cursing his itchy finger, “No, no, no!”

Slug slid next to Gas Mask, holding his hand over the wound and fumbling with his pockets for something, anything, to keep the Anti-Hero alive. The sputtering of the green creature caught his attention, and Gas Mask wheezed a triumphant laugh as they watched Septic bubble, twisting in on it’s self… and the slick ooze melting away to reveal a human host… already decaying.

“Seriously…? What the fuck…?” Slug questioned.

Gas Mask coughed, turning to look up at Slug, “Y-You’ll lose—lose.”

“This isn’t a game, you fucking—” Slug started, but Gas Mask weakly choked in his arms… the pathetic sight took the anger right out of him. There was no way to save this Anti-Hero now. His shaking hands lifted, and he sighed, “I’m sorry, kid… Your dad wouldn’t have wanted this for you.”

“G-Go to h-hell…” was Gas Mask last words.

Slug waited a few minutes as the Anti-Hero formerly known as Gas Mask, as Foxglove, let out a sad death rattle. Slug was looking over at the black box he had dropped to grab the Necronomicon and specially made revolver. He contemplated his next action before nodding to himself.

“Yeah, I probably will go to Hell for this…”

He would have to call Black Hat for help.
He was going to have to leave the lab.

And, eventually, when people would return, there would be no bodies.

Gas Mask had a private jet—fancy and futuristic. It hovered over White Hat Manor in stealth mode. Slug found it easily after he had taken the remote off of the Anti-Hero’s body. Sighing, he hopped inside, looking at the complicated dash with trepidation. Most of it was touch screen. Which wasn’t too bad…

Still. What the fuck did all those gauges mean?

“Fuck it. I’m not a pilot.”

The jet zoomed off into the sky and Slug screamed practically the whole time as he flew the hundreds of miles toward NY to help his friends.

To say he crashed would be to say that Tommen’s Golden Tower wasn’t already in rubbles by the time Slug arrived on scene. Most of the area had been sectioned off and there was so much debris that first responders still hadn’t picked their way into the center yet. Slug hopped out of the smoking jet that flickered from visible to invisible and tumbled into concrete, dust, and lord knows what else.

He was searching for anything.

He found a blood trail.

Sirens wailed in the distance.

It was dark, but the semi-damaged night vision goggles only helped so much. He wished he knew what time it was… Probably sometime around two in the morning… but light pollution of the city
made it impossible to accurately predict anything. The only thing that shined brighter than the moon was the Sky Fox Hero Station—*Observance*—circling the globe.

Slug was pulling a slab of something out of the way at the very start of the bloodpool, and found a pair of ripped baseball leggings. “Oh no…” he breathed, slipping onto his own knees as he started digging out boulders and mounds of other stuff, “*Heavs*, no—no, no, no—!”

A cough answered him, and Slug moved another boulder until Heavy Hitter’s head was cleared. The man was still partially buried, and scarily pale for how dark he normally was. He was lucky that his catcher’s mask saved his head from major brain damage. Slug carefully removed it so the man could breathe easier.


“A-Ambush…”

“Tell me about it,” Slug weakly laughed.

Mike glanced around, one eye completely filled with blood. His shoulders wiggled… and suddenly Slug saw his right arm completely tore from the socket. Shocked, but unwilling to bring attention such an injury, just incase it sent the Hero in a panic, Slug started to place his hands against him, feeling for more broken parts.

“You gotta lie still. I’ll get help—” he began.

“Cl-Clementia…” Mike coughed.

Slug went incredibly still, “Where?”

“Don—Don’t know…” Heavy Hitter gave a wracking cough, before sighing and leaning his head back, “*H-Headbutt that prof guy and just…*”

“Yeah, that’s my girl,” Slug said wetly.
Mike laughed with him. His eyes were fluttering shut. Slug went to tapping his chest urgently. He had to keep the Hero conscious otherwise… otherwise he might not wake back up.

“Heavs, keep talking. Stay awake. What happened?”

“took Cero… took her… Then—boom.”

“Who took Cero and Clem? Prof. It?” Slug demanded. Mike’s head lolled to the side… he started to stare off into the distance, losing focus.

“H-hey doc…” he quietly muttered, teeth stained pink, “Can you… tell Kam something for me?”

“What?” Slug asked, not to continue the conversation, but only because a kind of emotional shock was once more seeping into his bones. He felt like there was a buzzing in his head.

“Can you… can you tell Kam he was right…? We should—We should have had a kid.”

Slug shook his own head, grabbing Heavy Hitter by the face and turning him to that he stared straight into his goggled eyes, “I won’t tell him jack shit! You’re not dying out here like this! I’m gonna get you help and then—and then you’re gonna go home to him and adopt, just, a fucking truck load of little inner-city orphans, okay? Okay?!"

Mike was smiling at him, “T-Thanks, doc… that’s… nice of ya… tell him… I loved him with all of my heart…”

“Heavs! Hey, Heav—” Slug hiccupped suddenly, the man in his arms fluttering his eyes closed, “No… no… don’t…” Slug released his hands from the man’s face, fingers curling as he closed them around his ears. That buzzing in his head was growing ever louder.

It was cut by a clear whistle, and Slug shot his up to see a dark figure sitting on a crumbling support beam.
“Oh… that’s a shame… perhaps, we sing his Swan Song, yes?”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

Please feel free to talk to me or ask any questions about the fic! I am always happy to respond!

LOTS OF LOVE TO YOU!

<3
Let's Sing We Altogether

Chapter Notes

I am so very sorry that my updating has been inconsistent these last few times!

Truth be told, most Sundays were days when I knew I would be at home relaxing...

Not so when you've been babysitting for several weeks!! Ah, oh well...

TRIGGER WARNINGS:

Mild and Implied Gore, mostly.

Language is awful as always :P

Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Five: Let’s Sing We Altogether

A swan never sings… unless it’s about to die. That’s why they call the last great thing a person does their *swan song*. A beautiful and glorious moment, triumphant, but somber.

Slug, for his part, has had enough of swan songs for the day.

Nonetheless, a very pretty woman was perched on a burnt-out pillar, waiting for Slug to notice her. She was thin, in a ballet uniform, with a white painted face and dark feathered make-up around her eyes that crowned across her forehead. Her lips were painted grey… and her shoes were steel spikes that kept her on-pointe as she glided toward him. Every part of her looked sharp and ready to strike.

But *her voice*…

Her voice was a soothing melody, a promise, and she hummed too deep for him to truly hear. He could only tell because the closer she got to him, the harder he felt a bass reverb around the area. It caused dust and pebbles to skitter along her path. Her melody lightened as she crouched into a pirouette beside him. Slug was oddly transfixed by her presence.
“I can help him… and maybe…” she said, her eastern European accent heavy on the tongue, reaching out her hand and feeling along Slug’s sweater, “You help me. *Hm*?”

Slug would have nodded—would have given this woman anything as long as she kept talking to him. Luckily, he didn’t have to. She was jerked back from his sight. The trance broken as a dark creature hissed and slithered into the scene, setting upon her. Slug was shocked to awareness as a masked head swam into his vision.

“D-Doctor,” Flug greeted. He held out ear plugs in his palms. Slug blinked down at the yellow foam, woodenly accepting them. Both humans winced as a scream pierced the air somewhere amidst the chaos of Tommen’s rubble. Slug quickly twisted the plugs into his vulnerable ears. “Normally you’re more prepared than this…”

“Extenuating circumstances,” Slug muttered, but didn’t raise from his spot beside Heavy Hitter.

“The blood looks lovely on your mask,” Dr. Flug commented.

Slug let out a long sigh, dropping his face to shake it at the ground, “Now is not the time.”

“Black Hat said the Anti-Heroes are looking for the Necronomicon,” Flug replied instead. Slug nodded, tapping at his chest where he duck-taped the book securely.

“Two Anti-Heroes, dead, at White Hat Manor. White Hat is missing—” he supplied.

Black Hat appeared over the horizon, snarling and wiping away blood from his vest. He flatly glanced over at the pair of doctors, “One Anti-Hero dealt with… but I suspect more are on their way.”

“What makes you say that?” Dr. Flug questioned, offering a hand to help Black Hat more gracefully scale the wreckage of Tommen’s tower. A distant explosion sounded off in the sky above them as if in answer.

Slug glanced up, realizing it was the Sky Fox station. A small fleck of pink-purple-blue streaked through the sky before falling into the atmosphere. Blinking stupidly at it, he could only say, “Well. Shit’s hitting the fan now.”
Hissing, Black Hat pressed a claw to the side of his head.

“Jefe?”

“It’s the damn Star Princess. She found out about Tommen—”

“Is he alive?” Slug said, rising to one knee, but pausing. Black Hat shook off whatever mental barrages the Princess was sending. He was scanning the area with his dark eye, nearly glaring.

“Yes. He lives… for now. We won’t though—” he said, continuing to dust off his coat as he righted himself, “She’s in pure rage mode. Best move this meeting somewhere else.”

“Wait!” Slug called, standing fully. Black Hat looked at him, claw raised as he clearly meant to rend space and time to take them somewhere else entirely. Slug pointed behind him to Mike’s slowly dying body, “Heal him and I’ll give you the Necronomicon now.”

Dr. Flug almost jumped out of his skin. Black Hat lowered his arm and tilted the brim of his hat down to hide whatever smirk was rising out of him, “You never cease to surprise me, Slug.”

“He doesn’t have much time—” Slug continued, attempting to remain calm but he was toeing the line into desperateness, “And neither will you if Star Princess gets here and you’re too close to the injured body of the man she loves.”

“I’m not like White Hat,” Black Hat explained emotionless as he sauntered over, only slightly interested in the scene as he peered down at the heavily injured human like he was no more than a smudge, “I can’t regrow limbs… only reattach or stitch up wounds. He’s lost more blood than he’s kept.”

Slug stared at Black Hat, hard. The Eldritch turned his face toward Slug, who was raising a brow in waiting, “I made my offer, Black Hat. Heal this man, I’ll finally give over the Necronomicon.”

“You made it clear before that no one could be trusted with Alhazred’s book…” Black Hat mused.
“We both know the only reason this book exists is because of you,” Slug said.

Black Hat smiled his shark-mouthed smile. He held out his claw for the book, saying, “Deal.”

“Healing first,” Slug demanded, reaching into his sweater to begin tearing at the tape (carefully, of course), “Then you get the book.”

Black Hat knelt beside Heavy Hitter… working his strange, dark magic and Dr. Slug had to look away. Flug, however, was entranced by the entire exchange, sitting down to watch the whole process like a kid seeing a Disney movie for the first time. The entire atmosphere seemed to ripple, and that tangy smell of fresh blood was simmering in the air…

After more moments than Slug was comfortable with, Black Hat rose to standing, looking a little gray around the gills. He flexed his claws, and they popped and shifted beneath his thick hide. With a sigh, he looked over at Slug, waiting a few yards away as he eyed the streak falling ever closer from the sky.

“He’ll live,” Black Hat declared.

Slug nodded in response, walking over, holding out the Necronomicon. Greedily, Black Hat went to snatch it. Slug was quick to pull his hand back, along with the cursed book. “And the other thing we agreed on?”

“Ughhh,” Black Hat groaned, “Dealing with you is always so vexing…”

“My lab, the Manor, was attacked,” Slug said, tone taking on a harsh edge.

“Yes, yes, we’re all in dire straits…” Black Hat started, close to mocking. Nonetheless, he tapped a claw at his monocle, “I have it. It remains cold, however. Where White Hat is… well, he is more than likely not on this plane.”

Slug kept the book close to his chest, confused, “Where would he go…?”

Black Hat shrugged, then held out his hand again, waiting for the book. Unfortunately, after dealing
with the Villain for years, he knew this was the only answer he was going to receive. So, Slug rolled his eyes, but still plopped the disgusting thing into the creature’s claw. He didn’t let go just yet as he stared at Black Hat with intent. “You can find him, right?”

“Oh for the love of—” the Eldritch began, haughtily. He was cut off by the sound of metal slicing through the air. Slug glanced up in surprise to see a knife sticking out of the side of Black Hat’s face. With a guttural noise, more like an ancient sea-creature growling rather than a noise of pain, Black Hat turned to where the weapon had been thrown. He let go of the book to grasp the knife handle and yank it from his face. No blood escaped, and the cut closed like a wet clay mold resealing itself.

Slug looked from that fascinating scene over to a faceless team of humans dressed in drab-colored SWAT gear. There was no emblem, no words, or even names stitched onto the clothes of the people hesitating to crawl forward. They were all disposable, and as such, unidentifiable.

“Anti-Hero lackeys, I am guessing…” Slug stated, hiding the Necronomicon from view.

“Ohhh, I am really becoming annoyed by these guys,” Black Hat mentioned. He looked over at Dr. Flug, who was now drawing a weapon from behind his lab coat. Slug stayed stationary, eying the team inching closer.

“Black Hat!” someone called out, but there was no way to tell for sure who of the ten people moving closer was really speaking. Each helmet was awash in dark tint, and from the green glow inside the visor, probably outfitted with specialized night-vision goggles, or even infra-red tech.

“I am quite busy at the moment,” Black Hat responded, feigning elegance as he moved to an upright position. He dropped the knife to instead clasp his hands behind his back rigidly, “So, I am afraid you’ll have to reschedule your appointments.”

A sizable black hole opened beneath the feet at the center of the people clambering down the rubble. It cleanly sucked about seven of the members of the SWAT unit screaming into a sickly lime tinged abyss. Slug grimaced, and Black Hat’s left hand moved out from behind his back, as he inspected his claws nonchalantly (no doubt they could do more damage than a mere throwing knife).

Dr. Flug shot at one man furiously scrambling to get out of the putrid hole. The poor soul tumbled down with an agonized shout, green flames bursting obnoxiously from deep within it’s depths. Unfortunately, that shot caught the attention of the closest soldier right next to the unaware Dr. Flug. Throwing caution to the wind, this soldier jumped into action and grabbed Flug’s wrist. His smoking weapon was ripped out of his grip, and then the soldier painfully bent the doctor’s arm behind his back.
“Stop it or your doctor dies!” the soldier shouted through his fear, pointing a glock at Dr. Flug’s head.

With an immediate growl the dark worm hole swirled itself shut, cutting one of the soldier’s bodies completely in half. Someone—a medic more than likely—slid down to inject the screaming man with something. Slug flicked his gaze from that horrific distraction back to Black Hat’s twitching eye… which zeroed in on the soldier holding Flug hostage… much like a predator deciding it’s method of attack.

Against his better judgement, Slug called out, “I’m offended—really, I am!”

“Huh?” the soldier questioned, grip loosening the tiniest bit that Flug wiggled nearly out of the gun barrel’s range. Black Hat turned to him, just as confused.

“Him? Black Hat’s doctor?” Slug went on, stepping forward to show this soldier his bloodied mask.

“Isn’t… Isn’t this Dr. Flug?” he asked, shaking said doctor’s arm.

Slug snorted theatrically, “Hardly. That’s Slug. The coward who works for White Hat.”

Black Hat was blinking stupidly at him. The soldier was looking back and forth between Flug and Slug, uncertainty making him hesitant and lowering his guard.

“B-But… the bag—”

“I know, right? He started ripping off my style because he’s also unoriginal!” Slug continued loudly, walking closer to stand just in front of Black Hat. He had his sweater lifted, tucked into jeans to show the revolver jutting out of his back pocket. Slug was creating a false sense of security for this unfortunate soldier, “Common mistake, really. Mixing up the two of us.”

“So… you’re Dr. Flug?” the Anti-Hero lackey questioned, letting go enough of Flug so that Black Hat had a clean shot.
“Like I said,” Slug drew out, “Common mistake.”

Black Hat was inhumanely fast. The soldier’s body fell as soon as the last syllable left Slug’s mouth. Slug shook his head free from the ringing sound since the shot sounded a little too close to his ear. However, Flug was now free, skittering his way down into the smoke and rubble. Unfortunately, all the commotion brought forth a new squad of back-up soldier’s cresting the hill. The revolver dropped, and Black Hat was shaking his hand as it bubbled black smoke (this being the specially designed gun Dr. Slug made before he met White Hat).

“Sorry, sir,” Slug said, glancing back with an actually apologetic look as these new soldiers rounded them, “Don’t think we’re gonna get out of this one…” Slug was raising his hands as the soldiers took their time securing the slightly damaged, power-drained Black Hat and the human doctor. They were thrown into the back of a black van—Slug losing consciousness when someone pistol whipped him from behind.

…

Slug was not having the best time waking up these days. First with a hang-over. Now, with a splitting head coupled by nausea of a bumpy, no-belt ride in a black-out kidnapper van. He was also a might bit peckish—and in definite need of a shower. Also. Black Hat was looking over him. Which was always an unnerving experience.

“Oh, finally awake,” the dark thing said, sitting back against a tire wheel. He was languidly draped over it, hands clasped in front of him, encased in some kind of special metal device. They looked like iron-maidens, but obviously miniaturized for hands. Slug groaned, rolling up, arms somewhat asleep after having been handcuffed behind him.

“How long?”

“How long have we been in this poor excuse of a motor vehicle or how long you have been lying like a lump in it?” Black Hat asked.

Slug licked his chapped lips in thought, clarifying, “Sleep, I guess.”

“Don’t know for sure. Don’t keep time the way humans do,” he said. Slug glared at him, wiggling and looking about the back of the van. Only him and Black Hat. No windows. Metal grate and divider, so driver (or passenger) probably could not hear them if they kept quiet enough. He could
almost detect the faintest of radio noise from the front of the vehicle.

“Then why ask me to clarify my own damn question?”

“Mostly to annoy you.”

“You are the absolute worse,” Slug grumbled. Then closed his eyes and tried to breathe deeply through a wave of pain and grumbling stomach, “And I keep falling for it… every damn time.”

“You’ve spent too much time with my brother,” Black Hat said, smirk only half there. The creature shifted uncomfortably, rising a shoulder to swipe at his monocle.

Slug looked at him, because he didn’t have much else to do. “Anything from him?”

“No… not yet…” Black Hat muttered, somewhat distracted. Slug was eying those bracers locked around his hands.

“You powers tamped by those things?”

Black Hat hummed in confirmation.

“They took the Necronomicon?” Slug whispered.

Black Hat nodded, then lifted his shackles, “But they had these before they even got the book…”

“Statistically speaking, there is bound to be a grimoire that might have guessed some of your weaknesses somewhere,” Slug said, though the hypothesis was inelegant as his head was still shaking off the headaches.

Black Hat snorted in response. His unusual stillness, instead of rage that Slug would normally expect, was… discomforting. Either, Black Hat did not feel threatened… or he was busying plotting something. Whether the good doctor should be worried or not—
Slug was too tired to think. Too hungry. Too sore. No doubt he had been stuck too long in this van, being transported somewhere. Perhaps he—or well, “Dr. Flug”—and Black Hat were always meant to be transported to this mysterious Anti-Hero boss that Gas Mask mentioned just before Slug…

Slug killed another man in less than 48 hours. In White Hat Manor no less. Another terrible thing he managed to do while working with White Hat somehow… though, this time it was partially self-defense. He sighed, much too lost in his own guilt.


“I do not care for her life one way or another. She paid me proper…” he responded, cryptic to anyone who wasn’t as intelligent as someone like the human across from him.

Slug was looking at the ceiling, thinking, “Does… Does Dementia know?”

“No,” Black Hat said, tone halting, “And I decided long ago she would never.”

“Does anyone know?” Dr. Slug asked.

“I am unsure how you figured it out—” Black Hat tapped shackles against the floor in thought, “Even Flug hadn’t guessed… and he’s hacked away at her DNA for years.”

Slug gave the creature a shrug, “Blonde and brunette can create a redhead. Her height. Her mental instability. Her obsessive nature with the people she cares about… It wasn’t hard to figure out—hybrid experimentation aside…”

“The Mad Dame was a good client,” Black Hat admitted with a strange resignation, “And her soul was wretched. You couldn’t have expected her to be a proper mother anyway. She practically threw the child at me after she failed to properly corrupt Foxglove…”

“I killed Gas Mask—” Slug said, and Black Hat stared at him, brows raised in surprise, “Self-defense. He had a partner, Septic. Some toxic creature. Symbiotic in nature… feasting off a dead host, I think… told me it could read the Necronomicon aloud.”
Black Hat shook his head in slight astonishment, “Must be from another plane… like me and my brother…”

They were silent for a long while. Finally, Slug turned back to stare fully at the dark thing brooding across from him. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what?” Black Hat uncertainly asked, shifting to sit more comfortably against the wheel well.

“You call White Hat brother,” Slug pointed out, shuffling to get his aching knees out from under him. He attempted to imitate Black Hat and use the opposite wheel well for a comfortable resting position.

Black Hat scoffed, glancing around, though to be honest… there was nothing to look at besides each other. “He called me that first—”

“I’ve only heard you use it when you want to be cruel to him—” Slug started, thinking back, “Or when you want something from him.”

“Does it matter to you?” Black Hat shot at him. Slug shrugged ineffectively with his hands still forced behind his back. He thought about wriggling to get them to his front somehow… but he was much too stiff to do so without pulling or injuring himself in a debilitating way. Best to wait out how far these Anti-Hero soldiers were taking them.

“Do you care if it matters to me?” the doctor asked back.

Black Hat was rolling his eye at the human.

“You call him brother… but when he calls you brother…” Slug mused, “You get mad. You toy with him when you get bored… You torture me to torture him—”

“Yes, yes, we get it—” Black Hat barked out, “You’re so smart and observant!”
“If I was smart…” Slug muttered, quickly eyeing the small grate that kept the two separated from their captors, then glowered low at Black Hat as the thing huffed and growled more subdued, “I wouldn’t be in this position. Putting myself at not only your mercy… but these crazy Anti-Heroes…!”

Black Hat gave a pause at that, but then, nodded, “It was dumb of you to pretend to be Flug.”

“Only because now you have to play nice with me—”

“I don’t even play nice with Flug,” Black Hat warned, kicking out his long legs and shaking his shackles. He was certainly testing them. They held up well enough. Sighing, the creature leaned back, also waiting for his moment to strike.

“If Flug was here, you wouldn’t offer him comfort?” Slug questioned.

Black Hat stuck out his forked tongue, “I would demand he get these stupid things off of me.”

Slug eyed them from his spot… then shrugged. It was too difficult to see how they were designed in such dim light—even with his special goggles, his mask was cracked, covered in blood, and now, damaged by a swift butt of a gun to the back of it. Which is probably why he only passed out for a few hours and didn’t receive a full concussion.

“Some Hero you are…” Black Hat grumbled.

“I’m not a Hero,” Slug repeated, “I’m a Villain.”

Black Hat let out a wheeze, breath a foul smell of dankness and death, “No… in all this time with White Hat—I cannot believe you. You are no Villain.”

“I have done very bad things, Black Hat,” Slug reminded him.

“We’ve all done bad things…” Black Hat said, eye closing as he relaxed, “But action does not define character.”
“Of course it does!” Slug argued. He did wiggle closer, if only to glare at the monster. Black Hat remained unphased.

“You can choose the right answers every time…” Black Hat said, and his eye opened, staring down into Slug’s unhappy masked face, “But if your heart isn’t in it…”

Slug sat back, sighing raggedly, “Fine. Whatever… those bad things I did was because I didn’t have a choice—or I felt like I didn’t at the time. I just… survived. Is that what you want me to admit? You think *I care*? I still *did* them—I have been an awful person. My soul is—”

“Yeah. It’s filthy,” Black Hat said with a secret smile. Slug narrowed his eyes.

“Did you mean it?” he asked, and as Black Hat hesitated, the doctor weakly continued, “If you took my soul, you could save them? My family?”

Black Hat deflated, looking away from the sad man, “Yes… I can do that.”

“But you wouldn’t… you just want to create an impossible hurdle for White Hat…” Slug said in a gulp.

This time, Black Hat managed to surprise Slug, whispering, “No, *I* can’t do that.”

Slug looked up at the dark creature, lifting one brow in incredulity.

“White Hat does this to himself…” Black Hat explained, “He doesn’t—He doesn’t have what we have, doctor.”

“What?” Slug asked, partially confused, partially curious. What could he and this awful thing have in common… save for their work-life, or their stance as the ultimate Villains in their world.

Black Hat tilted his head, thinking aloud apparently, “My brother… he lacks *resolve*. He lacks… a *purpose*. A reason. He does what is right because it is commanded of him. He does not understand *why* something is right or wrong—only that he instinctually knows *how* to be just…”
“You’re just telling me he’s an idiot?” Slug asked, thoroughly unimpressed, “I already know this.”

“No, no…” Black Hat said, scrunching his brows, “It’s deeper than that.”

“Alright… explain it to me then.”

“I—” Black Hat shook his head, “I use to think of him like… my other half. He was something that was made to fill the parts of myself that I lack. Ohhhh… and I hated that…” Black Hat shakes his head and looks at Slug with his sharp, dark eye, “Until I understood what it meant.”

Slug waited half a beat, before prompting, “And that is?”

“Neither of us are incomplete…” he said, “We just have different purposes. It comes across as lacking but—” the creature pauses here, “As I have come to understand it—opposites are not repellant. Magnets only work when you have a south and north, do they not?”

Slug nodded cautiously. Black Hat gave a shark smile.

“We are constantly circling one another,” he seemed to reminisce almost fondly, “He’s a great opponent… and, truth be told…” Black Hat looks down at his hands, uncomfortably serious, “I think he is stronger than me. It irritates me. The only reason I am not dead is because—”

“He loves you?” Slug asked, quiet.

Black Hat hissed, eye flaming almost, “No!”


“He doesn’t care enough to win…”

“In the Great Game?” Slug inquired, nearly bored. It always came back to that idea with the two of
them. That dichotomous battle of Good and Evil. How they were always pitted and mirrored against one or the other. It was seriously starting to get on Slug’s nerves. Surely there were better things to focus on?

“Yes, but…” Black Hat sighed, “It’s more than that.”

Slug blinked at the forlorn tone.

“I think White Hat was designed without that drive to survive. He merely does his duty… in the yawning expanse of time, all I would have is his damn, uncaring face… and it occurred to me… how cruel the Elder Gods are… to leave a void inside my brother. He doesn’t… He can’t care,” the Eldritch whispered this as if it was a terrible secret, “They left something out of him. They left that feeling of… of belonging to something. Of knowing, even if you do something bad, you have something to return to. I—”

Slug watched Black Hat struggle with his words, becoming even more frustrated.

“White Hat is so powerful—” he finally settled with, “But I do not think he knows what to use his power for… not really.”

Slug slowly nodded, “I see… wasted potential. That’s what upsets you about him.”

“Sometimes,” Black Hat confessed.

“And the other times?”

“I want him to make up his mind,” Black Hat said, “Either we’re brothers… or we are enemies.”

…

They spent a good portion of time in silence, Black Hat having closed his eyes and gone to brooding. Slug did his best to meditate—good breathes in, bad breathes out. As long as he could keep control of his breath, he would be able to stay calm. To slowly heal. He could only work with so frazzled a mind. If he could just keep his head straight, he could figure out a way out of this mess.
And what a mess it was.

Anti-Heroes came in teams? There was a boss? What did they need a Necronomicon for? If there were already shackles made for Black Hat—what was the point? And, where on God’s Green Earth were they being transported to…?

The van came to jolting halt. Slug felt bounced around, back hitting the wheel well until he tipped onto his side. Black Hat snorted at first, but then, a crack of light filtered in from the back doors. He hissed, back away from the bright light. Slug was grabbed under his armpits and hauled out of the van. His ass met with wet gravel unforgivingly. He was blinking up into a grey-cloud sky and barren tree tops. Combat boots crunched around him and he was hefted to standing by armed guards. Black Hat had to be wrangled out with a wire-pole contraption normally used for rabid animals.

“Where are we?” Slug demanded, shivering despite his thick sweater.

“Shut up and move,” a voice demanded somewhere to his left. He was pushed forward by an electric prodder. The armed men wasted no time in warning Black Hat. The Villain was shocked violently. The creature let out a cry and convulsed where it collapsed.

“Hey!” Slug protested, trying to jerk out of the hold. The guard reared him back. Slug let him—only to then slam the top of his head under the guard’s chin. He was let go of, and Slug tackled the other guard shocking Black Hat. Unfortunately, this move was more instinctual than practical.

Slug was rolling off the confused guard, scrambling to get back to an upright position. He was on his knees when the first guard—now dripping blood from under his tinted helmet—was shoving the cattle prod directly between Slug’s goggled eyes. “I told you to—”

The guard was interrupted by Black Hat digging his jagged teeth into the meat of his pathetically armored calf. The guard crumbled, effectively dropping the prod as well. Slug widened his eyes, diving for it—but the other guard he tackled caught him by the scruff of his sweater and pulled him backwards. Since Slug didn’t have his arms free, this was a doubly stupid move (he realized a second too late), but Black Hat was on his feet, stalking forward with those iron shackles raised high.

The dark thing swung at the unsuspecting guard—and a sickening crunch could be heard when the shackles hit the man’s sternum. Bone and cartilage had been set ironically flying into the poor human’s heart it was meant to protect. He dropped like a stone, twitching, but Slug knew death when it occurred. He was panting, staring up at Black Hat expectantly.
“No thank you?” the creature rasped, mouth still dripping blood and possible sinew.

“I think I saved you first,” Slug replied, voice broken as he shakily tried to stand.

Black Hat shook his head, looking around, “We’re not saved yet…”

Before Slug could answer, the ground beneath them shifted. Once more, Slug was slipping on the ice, falling as the whole area shifted. He watched the snow and sludge become neatly dissected and both he and Black Hat went tumbling as the whole ten-foot area stretched out before them tilted. Steadily, the ground was moving, drawing them in like an escalator to hell. The pair found themselves sliding down into an underground hanger. Dizzy and certainly cursing, Slug looked up to find a mass of those same unidentifiable uniformed soldiers waiting.

“That seemed unnecessary…” he snarked, breath somewhat leaving him.

The soldiers stood silently. Black Hat was already on his feet, throwing his hands about as a few dared to get closer. None truly approached him, but it seemed like some of these people had never seen an Eldritch before… not that they were particularly pleasing to the eye… but, they were something else to see, Slug had to admit.

“Well, well,” a voice sung out, and Slug immediately recognized it as Prof. It, “It is a pleasure.”

The man came into view, and Slug would now have a face to put with the gaudy, taunting tone. White male, early thirties, hair ashen, dressed smartly in slacks and a tweed vest with a blazer that had those elbow patches. Earth tones. 5’7”—no, 5’8” Slug realized as the man grew closer. He had a new black eye patch over his right eye. Slug smirked when he saw it, knowing Clem got the guy good…

And if he got Clementia at Tommen’s tower… maybe she was in this facility too.

Again, all of this was messy. Why take Clem?

“Stand back boys,” Prof. It declared, “This one’s dangerous.”
“Shackled, but won’t hold for much longer,” someone reported.

The Prof just waved him off, “Then we hold his doctor hostage.”

“I could not care less about that waste of human filth!” Black Hat snarled.

“You know,” Prof. It tsked as he walked up and drug Slug to standing by his sweater collar, “I noticed people only say that when it’s about someone they really do care about—”

Slug decided at that moment to headbutt him in his obvious new injury, connecting his temple to the thin eye patch that looked like a Halloween costume for pirates. Prof. It howled, releasing Slug and stepping back a few paces. Slug was already breathing heavy, biting his tongue to keep from jeering at the last moment. Everyone at this secret snowy facility probably thought he was Dr. Flug—and Prof. It would surely recognize his voice if he even made a peep.

The soldiers were rounding on Slug as Black Hat growled low in warning. The tension was high, only to be cut by the harsh steps of slick soles into the hanger. All soldiers snapped to attention, falling in formation and turning to the sound. Both Black Hat and Slug exchanged uneasy looks.

“Someone take Prof. It back to medical—” a voice instructed, flat and unaccented… and strangely, not so much with authority as with factual decision making. It sounded vaguely familiar to Slug, but he couldn’t place it.

Soldiers went to rousing the Prof up and out of the darkened area, while another silhouette was standing just outside of the light spilling in from the opened ground turned run-way.

“Bring in our guests. They have rooms waiting,” the voice declared.

Slug was swarmed again, held aloft by several hands, and once more hauled down into the dark depths.

…
The entire facility, as far as Dr. Slug could tell, was several feet underground. It must have been built and then repurposed several years prior to this new boss coming in to the scene. The whole area was chrome and smelled faintly of industrial cleaners. Looking around at every opportunity through the winding hallways, Slug could only assume the place he and Black Hat had been taken to was originally made to withstand nuclear attacks during the Cold War Age. The walls were yellowed faintly over time, but the tiles that boots clacked on were certainly newer. Large portions of the facility had been scooped out and reorganized for more… militant… purposes.

Slug was doing his best not to stare at too many of these soldier types… not that they seemed trigger happy—just dedicated. It was eerie… all these faceless troops, without name or number, but somehow working cohesively for some kind of end. Slug went to focusing on the back of the head of this boss.

Glancing beside him where Black Hat was also being unceremoniously tugged along by his chains, the Eldritch was also flitting his eye about. He seemed to be muttering under his breath, arms tensed as he was trying to break the shackles around his hands.

“You doing okay?” he whispered, only sort of sure no one was paying too close of attention to him.

Black Hat quickly snapped his head to Slug. He paused for half a second, but eventually nodded, “I am obligated to ask you how you feel…”

“How?” Slug responded.

Black Hat tapped at his monocle.

Slug felt a wave of relief hit him when he realized what Black Hat was hinting at, “I’m—I’m fine.”

“Yeah, well…” Black Hat muttered, not looking at him now, almost purposefully, “I would argue you, but we don’t have the time…”

Black Hat and Slug came to a shuffling halt as the soldier unit around them disbanded. They were staring at the boss, who stood in front of white doubled-doors at the end of their long, confusing hallway trek. It didn’t particularly look menacing… but something felt entirely off. Like the inside was emanating a certain kind of aura. One Slug was not familiar with.
The Boss turned, and Slug got a better look at his face. Plain. Adorned only by the smattering of
dark freckles and age lines across the man’s forehead. His eyes were a piercing blue—haunting
almost. His hair was a rusty red suffused with gray… and Slug blinked, trying to remember why the
face seemed familiar to him.

“Black Hat,” the man greeted, tone flat but… flavored with a distinctly American accent.

“Do I know you?” Black Hat asked, stepping forward enough so that he was obscuring the man’s
view of Slug. Slug looked at the back of his top hat curiously.

The man took a moment, then shook his head, “I suppose you wouldn’t.”

“Then what do you have against me?” Black Hat growled, shoulders raising as he grew more
menacing.

“As someone with a conscious?” the man asked, “There’s much you need to account for—” And
here is where the man opened the double door… and the smell of something tangy and old hit Slug
full-force. It took a second for his unaided eyes to recognize… but there was a large room covered in
circling sigils and a pair of chains attached the center of the room. “So, if you would kindly wait for
me in the next room… I will accompany the doctor to his own.”

“No,” Black Hat declared, shielding Slug fully, legs spread wide and hands raised again for another
bashing if anyone even inched closer, “I don’t think so. You’re not taking my employee.”

The man walked forward, smiling congenially, “You can drop the act—” A rush of soldiers filed in,
one after the other, shocking and grabbing Black Hat. The Eldritch fought against them wildly but
was subdued by their sheer numbers and wrested into the strange room. Unintentionally Slug was
backing up, staring at the man with a dawning sort of horror. “I would know Dr. Slug anywhere.”

“SLUG!” Black Hat called out, turning his face to the man with a glowing monocle, “RUN!”

The man took off his mask reverently, and Slug was shaking as one rough gloved hand caught along
his scars, murmuring, “Look at what we did to you…”

“You’re…” Slug breathed hard, brows drawing upwards, “You’re that orderly… the one that was
there when—when I found that man—”
The Firestarter with the piercing blue eyes… the same eyes he was staring into now.

The eyes smiled at him as he lost consciousness.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you, lovely readers, for getting this far in the story!

You are all amazing, and if ever confused about the fic, please! Ask or comment and I will gladly respond! (Ahhh, and I realize how inconsistent I am with replying as well, but don't let that stop you)

Anyways!

LOTS OF LOVE
<3
Let Us Re-Establish Our Priorities

Chapter Notes

Sigh.

I know. Late again. I was not home at all on Sunday—and I have been waiting on important papers to arrive. Not an excuse, I know.

Still!!

You guys don't have long to wait before the end of this fic!! :D

... or, maybe D: ??

Anyways!

TRIGGER WARNING:

Slight... unwanted touching.

Not Beta'd.

Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Six: Let Us Re-Establish Our Priorities

White Hat popped back into the Manor with his light travel power. His leather soles hit the ground with a resounding smack. Glancing around the kitchen, he was certainly confused. The area had been re-outfitted, more than likely from Heavy Hitter’s construction company. The painters had not been in however… and, judging by the barely swept tiles… no one had resolved to immediately finish the Manor.

He left to head down to the lab—because if Slug was anywhere in the Manor, it had to be there. That was the man’s personal sanctuary, his favored workspace… and, sadly White Hat tried not to think of it as a possible tomb should tragedy strike. And as he briefly heard from Ryo and Mobu, that the world was currently in a bit of an uproar in the last twelve hours alone. Hopefully he wasn’t too late to reach the dear doctor.

The lab was certainly ruined—sizzling and smelling foul—and there was blood splattered across the floor, with a large, solid pool of coagulating in the midst of the area. The smell of human decay was thick and cloying and White Hat briefly feared the worst… but there were no bodies to be seen. In fact, the only thing more terrifying than the lack of reason for the stench was the melted metal safe in
which Dr. Slug kept the Necronomicon, his special Anti-Eldritch/Elder Being pistol, and presumably, Black Hat’s eye. None of the items were left in the safe, or even seemingly destroyed along with the smoking alloy.

White Hat next went to his own office… and was unnerved to see the black box sitting in the middle of his emptied desk, all other contents tossed on the floor. It was eerie. This one solid thing standing out as a stain in a whirlwind of chaos. Cautious, he found himself walking over, seeing a note folded over the lid of the black box.

anti-hero attack. hiding with BH. please help.

—S

p.s. I’m sorry

White Hat was more than confused by the hastily scribbled post script… but, he was sure Slug had a reason for feeling guilty over something the man could not help in the first place. The Elder Being shook off his sinking thoughts and quickly folded the paper up to stick in his front shirt pocket. He was lifting off the lid and inspecting inside the box.

The eye was sitting placid… and dare White Hat inscribe a feeling to it… very angry.

White Hat lifted the eye, focusing on the radiating energy that pulsed out in searching waves, as if searching for a response. He hadn’t a moment to open his mouth before he was hit with a dizzy feeling of being dragged about. Closing his lid and opening his mind to his disconnected eye, he realized that—strangely—his other eye was moving about.

“Black Hat—” he started, and instantly, a quiet whisper echoed about him.

“And where the hell have you been?”

White Hat sighed, eye blurrily glancing around a new environment, not recognizing any of it. Clean, industrial, dotted with humans in what looked like heavy military gear. “I should be asking you this. What happened while I was away?”

“are held captive by... someone...” Black Hat spoke quickly, and White Hat wondered where exactly he was, but his own disconnected eye was slowly being turned around... and then from the corner, noticed Slug.

“So Slug is with you!” White Hat breathed in relief, feeling all tension leave him, “Let me see him! Please?”

“I believe it’s more important for you to see where we are—”

“Black Hat—” White Hat went to argue. That was about when he heard, faintly, as if through glass, Slug’s voice... just a soft, worried question.

Are you doing okay?

Suddenly, White Hat’s eye was focused on Slug’s mask... browned by blood, goggles cracked faintly. No coat, only a frayed sweater. Hands pulled tight behind his back. The eye was jerked up and then back down. White Hat felt a little sick at the motion, asking, “What happened to him? Who —Where—Tell me, Black Hat!”

“I’m obligated to ask how you feel,” Black Hat didn’t respond to him, but sounded louder. Slug’s goggles focused unevenly, confused, the emotive capabilities clearly damaged in some past struggle.

“Huh?”

A metal object obscured White Hat’s sight for a second, the clinking of thick glass reverberating low. It occurred to White Hat at that exact moment, Black Hat had placed the blue eye in his own empty socket and covered it with his signature monocle. No doubt painful and draining as White Hat was in control of the disconnected orb...

The release of Slug’s tension thankfully brought White Hat back into the moment.

“I’m—I’m fine,” he had said.

“Yeah, well...” Black Hat began and suddenly White Hat was no longer looking at the doctor, but
instead at an approach set of doubled white doors, “I would argue you, but we don’t have the time…”

Black Hat came to a shuffling halt, and the humans in their military apparel were backing away to reveal a new silhouette. An unimposing man, taller, definitely than most humans… perhaps six foot, but nothing compared to Black Hat or White Hat. What was truly disconcerting was the power shivering behind those doors… It didn’t particularly look menacing… but White Hat could see snaking lines of old words bleeding through. It was *distracting*.

“Black Hat,” the man greeted, obviously unaware of the third party watching from far away.

“I do not like him, brother. You keep him away from my employee, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Do I know you?” Black Hat asked, perhaps more for White Hat than himself. Clearly, the Eldritch was more up to speed about the people who kidnapped them… but, White Hat was grateful to notice his twin stepping forward enough so that he was obscuring the man’s view of Slug.

The man took a moment, then shook his head, “I suppose you wouldn’t.”

“I can’t see this man’s heart from this distance… but I suspect he has ill intentions from his vague answers. Get him to keep talking.”

“Then what do you have against me?” Black Hat growled at the human. White Hat tried to focus harder, but the energy behind him was blending all around. It was likely what was behind that door was going to damage Black Hat—and possibly his own floating eye. They had to use this time wisely to understand their new enemy.

“As someone with a conscious?” the man asked, “There’s much you need to account for—” And here is where the man opened the double doors… and indeed, a large room was shown covered in circling sigils with a pair of menacing chains attached the center of the room. “So, if you would kindly wait for me in the next room… I will accompany the doctor to his own.”

“*Under no circumstances will you separate from Slug!*” White Hat found himself demanding, his physical body responding as if was there in that corridor with the pair of them, “This man is dangerous, and I have no doubt he will execute both of you. Stay together!”
“No,” Black Hat declared, readying himself for a battle, “I don’t think so. You’re not taking my employee.”

It was disturbing when this odd human walked forward, smiling.

“You can drop the act—” A rush of soldiers filed in, filling up White Hat’s line of sight. It was even more unnerving when courses of electricity ran through the Eldritch. Black Hat roared, fought against the soldiers wildly… White Hat himself falling to his knees at the shocks, eye spasming, loosing the ability to see for flashes of moments…

Black Hat, however, was getting the brunt of these attacks… while White Hat was nauseous from distantly feeling the weightlessness of his twin being manipulated and moved by the swarms of soldiers. He heard, through the crackle of energy, “I would know Dr. Slug anywhere.”

“No. Not good…” White Hat found himself whispering, pulling himself up his desk, “Flee. Do something. I will find you, but you have to do something.”

“SLUG!” Black Hat called out, and White Hat was experiencing vertigo until he saw the shocked Slug back away from danger, “RUN!”

The man took off the beaten mask with slow, reverent, moves… Slug’s scarred, scared face on full display. It was a look White Hat hated—felt with a burning kind of urgency to hide, to fix immediately. This other human was touching Slug, whispering into his ears, “Look at what we did to you…”

“You’re…” Slug breathed hard, shattering White Hat’s heart, brows drawn in recognition, “You’re that orderly… the one that was there when—when I found that man—”

The man injected something into Slug, and the good doctor was so shocked, he hadn’t noticed… fainting into this man’s arms. White Hat was watching him scoop up his doctor, turning to Black Hat and nodding at the doors behind. Black Hat was being thrown into this mysterious room, reshackled to the chains along the floor and White Hat felt himself screaming intensely, “NO!”

“Whoever you are, wherever we are,” Black Hat was spitting, trained on this strange human in the doorway, cradling Slug, “White Hat is going to find out. And I promise you… he’s not pleased. You won’t like my brother when he’s displeased.”
“White Hat is welcomed to join you,” the man commented, sweeping his gaze down to Slug.

Black Hat struggled, and White Hat himself was placing the dark eye in own empty socket. It burned. He racked talons across the air violently, almost on autopilot. “You let him know I am on my way… and I will not be alone.”

“Well…” Black Hat was laughing, echoing inside White Hat’s own head, “You’re certainly going to regret those words, mortal. Because I assure you…” The man listened to Black Hat’s panting, tilting his head curiously as he stared straight at the glowing monocle, “An Elder Being won’t be as talkative…”

The man turned, and the soldiers filed suit as Black Hat kept laughing, closing the doors on him, “Good night Black Hat, I will return.”

White Hat transported himself to Black Hat Manor, mission clear.

He was going to kill that man if it was the last thing he did.

…

Slug was, if one allows the pun, sluggish. It was hard to open his eyes, and he felt only partially rested… but luckily, his head didn’t hurt. His arms felt overly heavy, while the rest of his body felt as if it was sinking into a hard bed… Between his lashes, he could blearily make out light. His breath was coming out slow, much like his thought process. The only thing he could think was of the color blue.

Something borrowed—something blue?

No, that wasn’t right.

Slug blinked, tilting his head to the side. It took a few second for him to recognize a face floating before him. A plain man. A new man. He had the bluest eyes. Sighing, Slug turned away to close his eyes. “He was talking about brothers.”
“You are a very clever man,” this person said, his voice deep and soft, like he was used to comforting others, “Even with sedatives in your systems, your brain is processing things so quickly…”

“He was—wasn’t calling me Fernando’s brother…” Slug thought back to that pale man, that Firestarter, wailing at the end of his life, “He was calling for you. He wanted you to end his life…”

The man was smiling at Slug, leaning over him. Slug wanted to hit him. It was impulsive. He raised a fist to do so—which was slow of course—but his wrist was jerked back. The clank of metal rattling together. Slug was handcuffed to a bed. He glanced down, seeing a heart monitor attached to his chest and an IV in the hand he tried to lift. His heavy head fell back against a fluffy pillow. Currently, he was trapped.

“Would you like to know our story, Dr. Slug?” the man asked.

Slug blinked at his face, settling for the moment, “I don’t have much of a choice, do I?”

“Oh, of course you do,” the man answered, his hands naked as he lifted a finger and traced a scar across Slug’s face and down his neck, “I have taken so much from you… so I will offer you no words you would not want to hear. I leave the decision up to you. I will go away if you want me to.”

Slug wanted to believe these words… but the man had apparently drugged him when he wasn’t expecting it. He was strapped to a bed—just now recognizing that his legs were bound with Velcro-straps at the ankles that disappeared beneath the mattress. If this Anti-Hero Boss wanted, he could do anything to Slug—conscious or otherwise. He might as well get some answers to occupy his mind. It might help him figure a way out of this situation. Talking couldn’t hurt. The more information he could get, the better.

Well, theoretically.

“Who are you? How the fuck did—” Slug winced, growing louder and jerking against a hand that planted itself on his sternum, “Just—what the fuck do you mean you took so much from me?”

“Well… my name is—” the man stopped, then shook his head, “I suppose it doesn’t matter what my real name is. Or was. I go by another now…”
“And that is?” Slug prompted, ignoring the tug of sheets being lowered from his naked body.

The man was tracing the scars with light fingertips, “Adust…”

“Adust…?”

“Yes,” he said, eyes lifting from scars to Slug’s confused face, “It means… burned. Scorched. It’s an old word. I thought it appropriate.”

Slug felt his breath catch, noting just how warm this man’s fingers were. They felt near boiling, caressing his skin with curious abandon. For the first time in his life, he felt as if he was the butterfly being pinned down and studied. He probably wasn’t going to ever collect specimens again if he made it out of this scenario alive…

“My brother and I were born in a backwater town in the South—in the swamps of Georgia. My mother wasn’t… a chaste woman. Her family was part of this… well, they called it a religion…” Adust was humming as he thought, eyes going back to the patchwork of Slug’s flesh and continuing his examination of the damage, “And do you know in some cultures, twins are a bad omen? You have to kill one. The bad one, I assume. Though I don’t know how you can tell a bad babe from a good one.”

“Well, I guess… I have a face only a mother could love. She couldn’t do it—she couldn’t just leave us to die. She kept us secret. For a while… my brother was her favorite… until he could start fires. Little things. Birthday candles always relit… any electronics would overheat… winters were never a problem… But that’s all he could do. He could start the flame—but I?” Adust curled his hands into a fist, nails scratching Slug’s too sensitive skin, “I can control them.”

“Firestarter and a Firewielder…” Slug breathed. It made sense, in a weird way. Firestarters could
only create flames, normally with an accelerant present. A Firewielder though—they could move and fan the flames. It was the more mystical power to an Elemental type. Normally, a Firestarter could be a wielder as well. It was rarer when they were not, but certainly not unheard of. That’s why most people associated any fire-Elemental the catch-all term of Firestarter… still, it’s no wonder Slug had been baffled for years about how his family died. There was more than one person responsible—and moreover, not targeting him specifically.

“Mother found out eventually… and she didn’t like it. Not with the way she grew up… she was already worried that we were demons, you know? So, being young, we ran away. Thought we could find a circus…” Adust laughed at his naivety, tilting his head at Slug, purposefully finding his gaze, “We wanted to be a duo—two brothers against the world—two little devils playing human…”

“You are human,” Slug told him in no uncertain terms.

Adust looked at him, blankly. Then, with a sigh, returned to petting Slug… down his leg, thumb tracing a line of melted skin sewn back together. “My brother use to say that… and I believed him… for a long, long time… I believed in only him. He was—to me—an angel.”

“What—” Slug gulped, flinching as the man moved to his other leg, “What was his name?”

“Cain…” Adust said, brows drawn together in difficult memory, “My mother named him Cain.”

Slug didn’t comment. He didn’t know what words to say. Or well, perhaps it was his brain overloading as Adust now laid a second hand on him and felt along the back of his thighs and calves. His palms were dry, too warm, and his eyes so blue.

“He was beautiful…” the man reminded him, “And so brave… Asked every stranger where to find a circus—but, you know, in America… travelling circuses are a thing of the past. Eventually though… we heard about Carnaval…”

“It sounds like—like carnival…” Slug realized, closing his eyes. It only heightened the too hot sensations moving across his skin. He had to reopen them.

Adust sounded cheerful, “You are very quick. So smart…”

“That’s how you ended up in Rio. That’s how you—”
“That’s how my beautiful brother found Fernando,” Adust finished, decidedly less cheerful. His nails bit into Slug’s skin and the man readjusted so he was leaning over Slug, “And that’s why we stayed. For a loooong while… I had… theories… I thought maybe my brother—” Adust let go of his aching grip on Slug, smoothing out indents he had made into dark, patchy flesh, “I knew my own sins… and I hoped my brother would not fall into his…”

“Oh—” Slug gulped, wincing as the man ran a sharp nail along a seam of broken flesh, “You’re only human! You can’t help what happened when you were a kid—you can’t—you don’t choice who you can fall in love with—!”

“My brother’s sins, Dr. Slug,” Adust interrupted, nearly suffocating Slug’s clumsy attempt to soothe the man with a broad palm over the doctor’s trembling mouth, “Were nothing compared to my own. At least… he wasn’t lusting after his own blood.”

“Mmmph!”

“I know, I know…” Adust whispered, a hand brushing the dark hair behind the shell of Slug’s remade ear, “I am sick. But… I would never. I loved my brother. And I wanted him happy… And you sacrifice everything for the ones you love… even at the cost of your soul.”

Slug was breathing too harsh, and faintly heard the heart monitor softly rocketing upwards.

“When he came to me…” Adust began like a confessional, “And asked—no begged me—to make a small spark grow… to help him burn his beloved’s wife to ashes… I could not resist. He thought, if perhaps he gave into his devils, Fernando might become as enraptured as he was… and I thought Fernando a fool to pass up such an opportunity—” Adust was clutching Slug’s face, forcing him to keep eye contact as he crawled over him, “My beautiful brother was willing to dirty his own soul and I? What else could I do? He was my twin. If he wanted the wife and child to burn—they would burn…!”

Slug felt the tears leave him in a silent wave. The blue eyes boring into his were unhinged… flickering only at the sight of the doctor’s heartbreaking anew.

“We really didn’t understand, of course,” the man let go of Slug’s mouth, waiting perhaps, for Slug to spit venom at him. Nothing came up. Slug was too busy trying to keep the horror at bay. It wasn’t fair. His wife and child were innocent—but how you could explain that to someone with such a warped view of those kind of things? Adust continued, softly as he stroked Slug absenty, “And I
know you cannot forgive me—or even my brother. I can only explain that I wanted nothing more than his security… I wanted him to have whatever, whoever he wanted… I wanted him happy more than I wanted anything in else in life. We hadn’t had much and—and he truly deserved happiness.”

“My—” Slug tried but the words were choked. His daughter was only six years old. His wife rarely left the house. She grew up with a horrid childhood as well. How could someone justify themselves like that…?

“We knew Fernando had a twin—” and here Adust drew his hand down, digits circling Slug’s throat as the doctor kept trying to force words out, “But we thought… we thought brother. We assumed, because… well, as twins, we thought maybe you were like us. Fernando and Slug… He did call you brother. I knew that…” Slug shook his head, the fingers forcibly held his head straight, “And that’s the only reason you lived. I made sure. I stood and watched. The fire had to hurt—but you were never in true danger. I just wanted to leave my mark on you. I wanted Fernando to know. If he were to hurt my brother… I would finish you off. One brother for another. If Fernando got to have him—I would have you. That was the trade. I planned to tell him so, to show him what I did to you…”

Slug’s arms rose of their own accord, instantly coming up to try to push the man off. The handcuffs clanked. Adust slid those blues eyes to them. Then back up to Slug’s uncomfortable face, “E-Enou—ff—!”

“I liked the way you screamed,” he admitted. Slug tried to kick out his legs. They were tied too tight. Adust did not release his grip, asking, “Has anyone ever told you that? You are not much to look at now, I made sure of that—I made us match—but you sound nice. I thought I could get use to it… I didn’t realize I wanted to hear it again until I didn’t get to hear much anymore. My brother didn’t talk. He didn’t even bother to move after Fernando jumped…”

“Ah—” Slug tried to speak, his shoulders raising with the effort to escape the madman’s grip, “Adust—Plea—Please…!”

“Even dead…” Adust licked his lips, watching the struggle, “He had my brother’s heart… and I… I decided to hide him where he’d always hear that Villain’s name…”

Slug closed his eyes, deciding the best move was to force his body to relax. If it looked like he passed out—maybe, just maybe, Adust would settle down. Maybe he would leave. All Slug could focus on was surviving. His best bet…? A show of submission.

Slug’s mental calculations paid off… the Anti-Hero boss relinquished his grip on Slug… but his shadow still loomed over him, “Ohhh, doctor…”
“I don’t—” Slug breathed in raspy croaks, eyes squeezed shut, “I don’t think I want to hear anymore…”

“I understand… it’s been a lot to take in,” Adust responded, shadow drawing away.

Slug heard a beeping and his eyes snapped back open, looking around. Adust was just out of sight, somewhere by where the heart-monitor and IV bag were hidden from Slug’s immediate view. “Wait —”

“Shhhhh,” the man soothed, and that same scratchy glove from earlier was replaced, placed over Slug’s wide eyes, “I’ll wake you later, then. When you’re calm enough to hear the rest of the story.”

His wet eyes grew dim, heavy, and the faint feeling of those too warm hands returned to stroking his cheek along old, aching scars. Darkness wasn’t welcome, but it came swiftly enough.

…

Dr. Flug was helpful—not so much as Slug would have been—but White Hat was running thin on his own personal staff. The man was currently showing him found footage from Tommen’s destroyed tower and nervously displaying screens with a jumble of different explanations. Dementia stood behind White Hat, swinging a mace in practice.

“So… can you find them, or not?” White Hat tried again, pinning the man with an important stare. Dr. Flug flinched, slinking back into the protective blue fur of the large bear worrying it’s pair of talons together.

“I was kind to your employee, brother mine…” Black Hat growled in warning, “You frighten my scientist again and we’ll—”

“Time is of the essence, doctor,” White Hat interrupted taking a forced breath and clutching the non-existent bridge of his nose, “I apologize for my abruptness. Black Hat is being held somewhere far underground apparently, and somewhere cold. Snowy. Does this help?”

“Uh…” Dr. Flug shook off his nerves, looking over tracking devices he was sorting through on a
computer screen, “Yes, actually… When Black Hat and Dr. Slug were taken I planted a bug on the van—however, their signal stopped, and I was able to send a drone to investigate. The van had been abandoned near the Canadian border. That was when I lost their approximate whereabouts.”

White Hat hummed in thought, “Canadian border?”

“Yes, does that sound—is that helpful?” Flug asked, looking up.

“In Slug’s research… he discovered that your first encounter with an Anti-Hero was outfitted with tech from a Canadian R&D Center…? Did you ever follow up with that lead?” White Hat posed. Dr. Flug nearly jolted, moving over to another work desk and pulling out papers from a drawer.

“Indeed I did!” he excitedly exclaimed, “I sent a formal request pretending to be a hopeful patient! They denied me, obviously, but—” the scientist yanked out a crumpled envelope with a shout, “But I have an address!”

“Ahhh, that’s my Flug…” Black Hat purred.

“Wait a moment longer, brother. We’ll be there shortly…”

…

The building was stark, blending in with the snowy, mountainous structure in a clear effort to camouflage it. White Hat was unimpressed. Then again—white had been a color he felt a personal connection with. To see it being used for ill purposes… He was growing more irritated by the second.

“This scenery is unfamiliar to me…” Black Hat muttered, and White Hat felt a wave of unease as the dark-eye in his socket swiveled around. To have an alien body-part move and act without his say-so was less than comforting. “I do not know exactly where they took us… but there were more trees. A flat plane…”

White Hat hummed, glancing around himself. There seemed to a heli-pad station, and dots of dark-clothed humans were walking about in squares of sequenced pacing. He looked over at Flug, who nodded, “Those look like the Anti-Hero teams that showed up at the Golden Spire wreckage.”
“That don’t make sense…” Dementia complained, her mace balanced delicately on her shoulder.

“Well, being as the De Lion family was probably funding Anti-Hero groups before Tommen shut down the Golden Rule,” the doctor proposed slowly, “I can only assume they meant to steal tech… or even hoped to brainwash an injured Tommen for their side?”

“You think Anti-Heroes would be so underhanded?” White Hat asked.

Flug gave him a shrug, “When Black Hat and I met up with Dr. Slug, Swan Song was on the scene. Black Hat took her out.”

“He’s right…” Black Hat chimed in, “I did save your doctor, brother.”

White Hat’s physical form rippled in displeasure. He stared hard at the ground. So far, he knew both major Hero factions—Tommen’s and Sky Fox—had been targeted by Anti-Heroes. Star Princess had to be placed in a stasis chamber as her uncontrollable emotions had already caused great destruction on Earth… White Hat couldn’t blame her. He wanted to rip out this hidden facility and crush every life form that happened to cross his path.

“I believe he was looking for the girl,” Black Hat continued. How he remained calm in such a situation was not helping White Hat’s own bloodlust.

“Swan Song?” the Elder Being responded, ignoring the shivers from the Villainous employees still inspecting the area as he made no effort to hide the fact he was communicating in their ancient language aloud, “Why would Slug seek out that mercenary?”

Black Hat paused, and White Hat felt the dark eye flicking over to the lizard hybrid before focusing on the ground, “No. Your girl.”

“Clementia?” White Hat realized. He stiffened at the idea. Dementia glanced up from her bored examination of a pile of dirty, yellow snow.

“White Hat?”
Shaking his head, he quieted, “Tom is her friend… she went to help, didn’t she? That’s why the Manor was empty. Slug let her—or she ran off to—”

“White Hat—” Dementia demanded, moving closer and grabbing his lapels, “Why did you mention Clementine? What happened? What are you talking about—”

“Clementia is missing as well,” White Hat said, even as the echo of Black Hat’s groan sounded.

Dementia narrowed her eyes, “You only said that the bug doctor was—”

“If I were you, White,” Black Hat sighed, “I wouldn’t tell her.”

“I won’t lie to her,” White Hat snapped, then softened his features to stare at the hybrid, “I do not know where Clementia is… but, I would guess Dr. Slug was kidnapped in an effort to find her.”

Dementia gulped at the words, letting go of the Elder Being slowly. She seemed to be choking slightly, “The… The Anti-Heroes… they would… do you think—”

“I do not know, dear.”

“Well. Now you’ve done it.”

Without warning, save for Black Hat’s tired remark, Dementia immediately leapt into action. She let out a fierce cry and started galloping across the snowy dunes and into the facility. The blue bear let out a squeak and Dr. Flug flinched. White Hat watched her tear across a courtyard and begin crushing the soldiers turning to her sudden attack.

“Should we—” Flug started, wincing as cries rouse from below them, “Should we stop her…?”

White Hat folded his arms across his chest to watch the unfair battle, “I suppose…”
“Brother…”

“Or, we could use this to our advantage.”

“White Hat…”

Flug stared blankly at White Hat, goggles too round, “H-How so?”

“When they capture her,” White Hat began, eying the reinforcements raining down upon the enraged Dementia, “We follow them to the real facility.”

“WHITE.”

“That is… smart…” Dr. Flug noted, worriedly wringing his hands. The bear cooed beside him.

White Hat stood watching.

“If you use my employees this way—”

“You’ll find more.”

Black Hat was silent for a moment, his harsh panting returned with a faint, “I don’t want more.”

“We don’t always get what we want, Black Hat.”

…

Slug was breathing. That’s what he was aware of. It was difficult to open his eyes. He didn’t bother. Whatever sedative was in his system would wear off. As long as he didn’t fight it, he would not tire himself out. He ignored the hands moving his body…”
He felt warmed, something soft sliding over his skin. He blinked blurrily.

Clothes.

He stared up into those blue eyes.

“More story time?” Slug huffed out.

The man swept out his arm, displaying a wheelchair behind him, “Mm. Sort of.”

Slug didn’t fight him as the man lowered him into the wheelchair… but it did make his stomach turn at the smell of faint traces of smoke within the worn, warm wood. There was a Black Hat logo printed into the smoothed over handles of the chair. Quickly, he was ziptied into it.

“We have company,” Adust explained, wheeling Slug down a hallway, “And I still have things to do. I was hoping you might help me.”

“K-Keep hoping, pal,” Slug muttered, tensing his limbs to feel the tightness of the ties.

“You know what they say about hope?”

“N-No,” Slug gulped, realizing he was utterly fucked.

“I heard Pandora kept it in a box—” Adust said, before looking down on Slug’s captured form, “After she let out all the evils of the world, you know.”

Slug breathed slow, eying the doubled white doors before him, “That’s… not a Christian story, as far as I know.”

“No, it’s not,” Adust agreed.
“Then why—”

“I guess I always felt sorry for Prometheus,” Adust continued, “He brought fire to man, you see. So the gods punished him. Made him the most beautiful partner… and gave him a box. Told him not to let Pandora open it… but he did. He gave her the box. He loved her so much… and she opened it. Let allllll the evil in the world run free…”

Slug heard the muffled noises behind the door.

“So…” Adust said, “For the sake of love… let’s see what kind of evils get to run free.”

Chapter End Notes

Just to let you know, the non-linear time-line thing is gonna get slightly confusing next chapter because the story and POV will jump around between people and hours. That sort of thing.

But! Again! If you have any comments or questions! Please lay them on me!

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING!!

<3

All the love!!
Let Us Remind Ourselves of Who We Are

Chapter Notes

AGAAAAAAAAAIN I MISSED SUNDAY BECAUSE I WAS LITERALLY GONE ALL DAY WITH FAMILY
AND THERE WAS NO WIFI
I HAVE NO LIFE, FAM, EXCEPT FOR FANFIC
AND THEY MADE ME GO OUT INTO THE SUN???
LIKE WHAT???

So, brief triggers:

Little bit of violence and creepiness and weapons. And language.

Please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Let Us Remind Ourselves of Who We Are

White Hat’s plan didn’t work.

He stood by, and watched, Dementia’s capture. Dr. Flug looked up at him, questioning. Though he didn’t argue, he did send the blue bear after the hybrid. Together they strode through destruction and broken ranks into the facility, following Dementia’s enraged screams. Blood misted the air, and White Hat walked between drops with a singular focus.

At some point, he separated from his brother’s employees, feeling the pull of his disconnected eye and listening for Black Hat’s own low thrumming growls.

“You don’t get to use people like this, White—” Black Hat was saying.

“Do you wish to be rescued or not?”
White Hat had a headache. Whether it was from the burning orb in his empty socket or from roiling rage he was feeling… he was uncertain. Perhaps it came from Black Hat’s eye, and not from himself. Perhaps it was all his brother’s fault—infesting him by default.

He hoped it was as he stood before double white doors.

“Here?” White Hat questioned.

Black Hat sighed, but the Elder Being had a good memory. He knew these were the doors hiding the blood-painted room. White Hat twisted the knobs with excessive strength and flung them open. He lifted his eye and scanned the twirling sigils along the room. Black Hat was not quite in the center of room—held captive by chains and graying further by the second. Not seriously injured…but clearly weakening.

“You need something to stabilize you—” White Hat found himself saying, but did not enter the room. Black Hat shrugged heavily in response, “The next human we find, have their soul, and then we’ll—”

“White,” Black Hat hissed low, rattling his chains, “Did you leave anyone alive?”

White Hat blinked unevenly. He swiped at the dark eye still lodge in his socket. He plucked it out to keep it pocketed instead. It was his turn to shrug, thinking hard, “I have harmed no humans.”

“Sticking to technicalities, then?” Black Hat panted, finally collapsing within his chains, “You need a human to enter this room. I’ll worry about energy later…”

White Hat leaned against the door jamb, brows shifting as he studied the old markings. They were mixed symbols. Both for Eldritch and Elder Being capture. Humming, he glanced across Black Hat to see a second pair of chains. “I assume those are for me…”

“Only thing I can think of as well—” Black Hat started, then jerked upwards, nodding behind White Hat.

The Elder Being turned in time to see a group of soldiers hustling down the hallway.
“Ah, perfect—”

Except that it wasn’t.

White Hat had forgotten these Anti-Heroes had a verified Necronomicon in their possession for several hours.

…

“Of course—” Black Hat was still spitting mad even more hours later, “OF COURSE.”

“Brother…” White Hat sighed across from him, his own chains rattling, shining with teal blood.

“No! No—” the demon was struggling to drag himself over to White Hat, angry and shaking his bound fists at the pale being, “FIRST, you disappear. SECOND, you come back—”

“I don’t understand how you can be mad about both,” White Hat grumbled.

“BECAUSE YOU SHOULD HAVE PICKED ONE.”

“If one leaves, obviously one will return—”

“White Hat,” the dark one growled, “Every time I have to deal with you, I lose something.”

White Hat blinked at him, shifting his tired shoulders around as the chains clinked, “Well… as far as I know, Dr. Flug is still roaming the building. Dementia is strong enough to take out whole armies… and that bear is indestructible, yes?”

“You’re not listening, White,” Black Hat sighed, giving up briefly to slump on the ground.
“I am,” he insisted.

Black Hat shook his head, “I don’t think you realize the situation we’re in…”

“I believe I do—” White Hat muttered.

“You’re an idiot!” Black Hat spat, grasping his chains and trying to uproot them. Unfortunately, the room they were in was effectively cutting off their otherworldly abilities. As far as White Hat could guess, they were as vulnerable as any mortal creature. Black Hat seemed especially drained… but he had been held longer and was constantly fighting against his imprisonment.

White Hat… he decided to wait. Clearly, if the Anti-Heroes wanted he and his brother destroyed, they would be by now. These confusing humans had the means. No, something else was at play in this strange facility…

“I’m trying, brother!” White Hat shot back, “What else would you have me do? We’re both stuck—”

“BECAUSE YOU CHARGED IN LIKE AN IDIOT AND USED MY PEOPLE AND—”

“LIKE YOU EVEN CARE!”

“I MIGHT!”

White Hat didn’t respond as Black Hat’s confession bellowed around the room. The Eldritch didn’t react right away, just stared strangely at his light twin. Once more, he deflated into his chains. He was glaring at scratched, dull metal.

“I might be a monster…” he said quietly, “But I… I have things I want to keep safe…”

White Hat rose to stand, shaking his head, “Your employees aren’t things—”

“You don’t get to talk to me after what you did—” Black Hat snapped, glowering at the towering figure.
“I came to save you,” White Hat pointed out, offended.

“What’s the point of that if the things I need to stay alive for are—”

“You’re not going to die—”

“Well, someone is!” Black Hat said those words like he knew, not like he was threatening or promising. Like it was an inevitability.

White Hat huffed, crossing his arms, “These Anti-Heroes are nothing more than human. They’ll slip up, we’ll escape, and then we’ll eradicate them.”

“Are you really this dense?!” Black Hat rose, shaking in his fury, but any otherworldly flames that would normally be present were missing and White Hat found himself unimpressed, “Why won’t you acknowledge this?! You failed! You couldn’t save me! You led my people into a den of wolves! And you certainly can’t save your own employees while stuck here!”

White Hat tsked, looking away and choosing to ignore his brother.

Black Hat screamed in an unearthly tongue in frustration...

And that was when the double doors opened a crack.

Black Hat quieted, looking over. White Hat slid his eye to the illuminated hallway. A figure was padding forward unhurriedly. The squeak of wheels accompanying the shadows. White Hat felt his entire body slacken when the bound body of Dr. Slug was pushed into the bloody room. The figure stopped the chair and stood beside Slug—unmasked and clearly uneasy.

“Nice to meet you White Hat,” this new figure beside his doctor said.

White Hat’s eye darted from this plain human back to Slug, “Are you alright?”
“Peachy keen,” Slug answered, wit quick where his voice sounded slower than normal. The scarred hands twitched and White Hat found himself glaring hard at the other human.

“What are you planning?” he demanded.

“My, uh, name,” the man started, “Is Adust.”

“That sounds foolish,” Black Hat arrogantly added. Adust gave the barest of nods.

“Black Hat,” he addressed, “Are you and your twin getting along?”

Black Hat shrugged.

“My twin and I fought as well,” Adust said, as if this was a pleasant catching up between friends.

“There’s more of you?” Black Hat asked, disgust clear in his voice. The chains rattled as he and White Hat shared an uncomfortable look.

Adust smiled, shaking his head. He placed a hand on Slug’s shoulder and squeezed lightly, “Dr. Slug caused quite a ruckus and I had to kill him.”

White Hat stared uncertainly at his employee. Slug breathed deeply, clearly ignoring the hand on his shoulder.

“That’s over simplifying—” he unsteadily quipped, then looked up to White Hat’s gaze, “He’s—His brother and him… they…”

Adust snapped his fingers—the sound rough, catching—and then there was a small flame in the man’s hand. He smiled down at Slug, as if they were sharing a secret. White Hat felt his entire body tense and he moved forward instinctually—before being jerked back by his chains, “You’re the Firestarter!”

“Oh, I can’t start fires—” Adust corrected, “That was my twin.”
Black Hat hummed behind the growing scene, “Shared powers. Similar but… not the same.”

“Remind you of anyone?” Adust asked, snuffing out the fire in his palm. Black Hat remained quiet, instead, glancing up to White Hat’s struggling form.

“Adust was working at your Retirement Center, Black Hat,” Slug said, “His twin was… uh, they were hiding there… after what happened…” The doctor was growing silent, not so much tired as uncertain how to explain how they had all gotten to this point. “I don’t—I don’t know what this all has to do with Anti-Heroes though. I’m sorry…”

“There’s no need to apologize,” Adust said, moving his hand to touch a scar running along Slug’s face. White Hat’s chains rattled in his ire. “That’s why I woke you again. We’re going to finish story time—”

“I demand you release us!” White Hat roared, eye flaring.

Black Hat sighed, “Yeah. Like that’s gonna work.”

“Actually,” Adust said, “If by the end of my story, you decide to listen to my terms… I might just let you leave unharmed.”

White Hat and Black Hat both leapt up, confusion evident in their features.

…

Clementia groaned, clutching her forehead as a throbbing grew, then disappeared, then grew again. She tried to hold her whole skull to keep the thump-thumping of her brain from rattling her further. Slowly, the girl sat up, trying to figure out what she remembered and what she had been dreaming about not two minutes prior.

With as much inner resolve as she could muster, she peered open her eyes… and found she was in a very dank room. On a metal gurney, but no sheet or padding accompanying it. Clementia looked down at herself, making a slight questionable noise at the pure white uniform she was wearing… before she remembered that Slug had given it to her, insisting she be protected if she was going to go
rescue Tom…

Right. Tom—his tower was attacked. She and Heavy Hitter had barely made it to the wreckage before any other personal. It didn’t take long to find the Anti-Heroes. They were clearly waiting for reinforcements. Heavy Hitter and Cero—they stood between her and the threat. What little she remembers of the battle kept going and coming.

Clem definitely recalled Swan Song. Pretty—but not a fighter. She was like a siren… and Clementia put on her helmet faster than Heavy Hitter fell. She figured, Slug being the overly protective man he is, there would be noise cancelling features to her gear. There was. She knocked out Swan Song at some point—getting the jump on her from behind and bashing her with a retractable metal shield installed in a pair of bracers Slug designed for her.

Unfortunately, since Slug had kept her battle suit a secret, she had no idea what half of her stuff did. The helmet was helpful—of course—with an AI system built in, currently unnamed and patchy. Slug’s voice cut in and out, much like her smartphone’s might, as she flailed to help Heavy Hitter deal with the other Anti-Hero…

Heavy Hitter… Clementia’s brain stuttered, almost, as she looked around her make-shift prison cell. It reminded her of a hospital room… but, reinforced with a Faraday cage and given a gaudy make-over by someone imitating an emo-kid’s ideal dungeon. She sighed and rubbed her forehead, thankful, somewhat, for the dimness.

Her Sluggy’s word’s came to her, as they always seemed to when she felt entirely too stupid and scatterbrained:

> Just breathe, my darling, he would say when she was frustrated, If you slow down for just a minute… it’ll help. Deep breathes. Count them. Trust me.

Clementia kept her eyes focused on the grimy floor, taking in deep breathes. She let it fill her like a balloon—deep in the belly—and then paused… and then let out the breath. She did this for a while, letting her brain tumble about… but didn’t focus on that. She focused on just… breathing.

She was calm enough when she remembered that odd self-claimed professor. He grabbed her by the throat and lifted her. Whether he was strong, or she was just too light, she was uncertain. But he tranqed Cero as the bear charged. Clementia remembers grabbed his fingers to trying to pry them from off her neck—and that’s when he cackled, bringing her helmeted face closer to hers. And she thought about Slug then too.
She promised to make it back to him.

She smashed the button on the side of the helmet.

It pierced straight through the madman’s face and he dropped her. It yanked off her helmet too—being half-way embedded his ugly mug… and she must have cracked her head on the rubble when she was dropped.

Clementia breathed deeply. Cautiously, she felt along her head… but only found a bump. No blood. Which… well, wasn’t ideal. It was possible she had a mild concussion. She breathed, standing from the gurney…

“Not strapped down,” she whispered to herself, pleased to find sound didn’t cause her head to pound. There weren’t visible cameras… but, that didn’t mean much in this day and age. Who knows who could be watching… but clearly, these Anti-Hero jerk-faces didn’t think she was too much of a threat.

She walked over to the door, feeling better the more she moved and breathed steadily. There was a slot cut into the middle of the metal barrier and pressed her hands against either side to glance out. The metal was very cool, and the hallway looked dull and gray. Clem peered as far as she could to either side. There was one man seated outside the door—dark helmet of his own obscuring his facial features.

Clementia stepped back, humming to herself.

What would White Hat do in this situation?

Well, he could probably teleport out of this holding room. So… not helpful in this situation.

That left Sluggy. What would the nefarious Dr. Slug do to escape?

Well, probably craft something in the room and attack the guard… Maybe? (She tried not to think about the fact she had no idea how Slug would operate in this situation. He never talked about his Villain days until really recently… and even so, all she heard were mysterious, untenable anecdotes
since the man’s record was stricken of previous crimes when he became employed by White Hat…)

Clementia frowned glancing around her sparse holding cell. Gurney. Sink and counter. No toilet… she frowned harder at the implications of her holding. The walls had clearly been stripped of cabinetry, then painted with a dark, depressing coats of lead paint by the odd smell the room gave off.

She didn’t sit down, but walked about the room, feeling the walls and catching dust along her perfectly fitted, padded fighting gloves. Rubbing the fingers thoughtfully, she went back to the door and peered out of the slot. The man sitting in the chair had her helmet in his lab. He wasn’t messing with it—which was both great for her, but a testament to the stupidity of the general Anti-Heroes. Slug’s tech was impressive, and if she were in their shoes, she would definitely be tearing it apart to use for her own needs…

She coughed once. The guard startled. His covered face turned to the slot and he crouched awkwardly as Clementia slumped against the door. “O-Oh? You’re awake…”

“S-Sir?” she asked, forcing a meekness in her voice.

“Are you really Clementia Habberdasher?” he asked, sounding slightly… awestruck. Which was weird—but Clem wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“W-Where am I? What happened? Who—Who are you?” she asked, coughing every know and again as she lowered herself against the door.

The guard stood fully, holding her white helmet stained red against his stomach. “Uh—Do you really not remember? I—Uh, that is—I was there with Prof. It. I saved you. Y-You’re suppose to be a Hero, right?”

“I’m…” Clementia almost choked, not entirely pretending to cough as she answered, “I’m trying to be… yeah… Yes.”

The guard seemed to breath a full body sigh of relief. He kneeled beside the slot hole and tilted his head to get a better look at Clem. She skittered back a little on instinct.

“Why am I—What happened? Why am I here?” she asked, rounding her shoulders and forcing a few
more coughs and wheezes into her speech pattern.

“Oh! I—I brought you here, just in case you were too badly injured. You’re not a Villain, so you won’t be executed! I’ll make sure of that!” he proudly declared, hand over his heart.

Clementia nearly shivered at the misplaced passion, she ducked her head, thinking as quick as she could, “Did—Did I do something bad?”

“Oh, no, no, no!” the man continued, rubbing at her helmet as if to erase the blood, “You were just protecting yourself! You have a good heart! I follow all of your exploits in the media! So I know you’d never do anything intentionally bad…!”

Clementia smiled at him, somewhat weaker than she meant to… then decidedly made sure to throw a coughing fit and hide from his eyes. The guard nearly smashed his face into the door to keep watching her.

“S—Sorry,” she said, “I—I have… asthma.”

“You do?” he asked, confused and quickly growing concerned.

She gave him her best version of puppy eyes, “Y-Yeah… it’s a secret… if Villains ever found out—”

“Oh!”

“Of course! Say no more!” the guard declared, almost standing.

“W-Wait—” she said, scrambling forward, “My—My helmet…” The man stopped, kneeling back down. He eyed the helmet and Clementia threw in another cough for good measure, “Er… when I decided to become a Hero… the helmet was made to help me breathe. It’s—it’s like my oxygen mask—""

“Oh!”

“P-Please? Can I have it back? There’s so much dust in here and—” she tried.
The guard squirmed under her intense, pleading stare. He looked down at the helmet, groaning, “I—I don’t know. The doc on duty hasn’t gotten around to the cells yet… and I insisted on bringing you back and—”

Clementia let the crocodile tears fall, coughing in her arm and shuddering.

“Ohhhh,” the guard breathed, then quickly began messing with the door, babbling encouragingly, “Hold on! I know you! You’re a good, honest girl! You’ve never done a Villainous thing in your life!”

The metal door swung inwards and the guard stumbled in, holding out the helmet. Clementia stayed crouched on the floor as man moved forward. She made sure to hold perfectly still. The guard bowed, like a prince might, and slowly placed the helmet over her head.

“Awww, this—it’s just like Cinderella!”

The white helmet was placed over her head—the interior instantly lighting up. Clementia grinned behind it as it powered the rest of her suit to life. She felt the bracer on her arm charge up and in a decisive move—opened the shield. The guard didn’t have the time to react as the side exploded outward and knocked him in the vulnerable Adam’s apple. He went down, gargling and coughing in a way that was totally not fake.

Excellent idea, Clementine the AI voice over of Slug robotically praised, Pretending to be helpless. It was a good trick. How can I be of service?

“Well… is there a scanning system in this prototype thingy?” Clementia asked her helmet, glancing around at the specs floating along the visor screen. She noticed the guard trying to crawl away. She grabbed him by the ankle and dragged him back inside the room. She pressed a button on the side of her helmet so she could be heard clearly, “Sorry, but, you really don’t know me.”

She stood over the guard and grabbed the front of his vest. Then, quickly pulled off his helmet, not taking the time to look at his features, and punched him across the face until he went slack. Clementia dropped him with a heavy sigh.

“I don’t think I liked that,” she muttered, partially to herself.
This has been anticipated by the creator, the AI-Slug voice said, almost sounding sad, And the note has been made to seek Dr. Slug’s guidance and comfort in the future.

“Aww,” Clem cooed to herself as stepped out of the room and locked the door, “Thanks, Robo-Sluggy.”

That is not my designated—

“Yeah, I’ll think of a better name later,” the young Hero interrupted, glancing around the strangely quiet hallway. It winded around, several metal doors dotting the whole of this particular section of… well, wherever she was being held. “Seriously, though. Can you do any biometric scans? Heat? Infra-Red? EMF?”

First—

“Any and all of it, Robo-Sluggy. I’m sticking out like a sore thumb and am probably, definitely injured already,” she emphasized this by knocking on the side of the helmet.

The AI went quiet. Then, her visor lit up red—exclamation point entering her vision for a second. Scans indicate the life-form designated 5.0.5. pacing in another cell three doors to your left.

“Uh? 5.0.5.? Don’t you mean 0.5.0.?”

No, you have already rewritten coding to designated creature 0.5.0. to be further referred to as ‘Cero.’

Clementia crossed her arms as her memory slowly clattered into place. When she first put the helmet on in the car, she messed with some of the configurations… she vaguely remembers that before the battle… but it had been a long tense trip and she couldn’t focus for very long. Which, in hindsight, would have been the perfect time to study the suit and helmet that Slug had given her—even though it was still in the testing phase. But, extenuating circumstances and everything…

Clementia started walking down to the door the AI indicated, “So… you’re telling me 5.0.5. is here?”
Yes. All information of previously known lifeforms as studied by Dr. Slug have been catalogued extensively and—

Clem tuned out the voice and peered through the slot in another holding cell door. There was the blue bear, biting his claws and pacing the floor, little yellow flower sadly wilted. Clementia tsked. She knocked on the door. The bear startled, backing up when he spotted the dark visor. Clementia pressed the speaker button on her helmet again, “Hiya, Fives! It’s me! Clem!”

“Aroo? Aroo!”

The blue thing excitedly bounced, moving toward the door and bending over. It waved happily. Clementia stepped back, hands on her hips while her helmet scanned the metal door. Locked, clearly.

“Oh, ho, ho! Do tell!” Clementia said, rubbing her hands together in preparation.

_Better. Dr. Slug has equipped you with a new schematic._

“Designated, Thought Bot, the AI smugly continued, You think it, I will mold your contractible shield from the left bracer into any weapon so desired.

“That is better,” Clementia said, then cracked her neck. She held out her left arm.

_Although we have the delta wave scan uploaded into the system—and here the AI seemed to sigh, or perhaps went static, This feature has not yet been pragmatically or physically tested. We would need a complete trail run with brain electrodes hooked up to a—_

“What if I just tell you what I want?” Clementia stopped the AI from overloading.

The helmet blinked, going dark before coming back up. _Excellent suggestion, Clementine. Precede_
with physical descriptor of weapons. Examples include but are not limited to: Saber, Hack saw, Dremel, Rotary Blade, Screw Driv—

“Uh, Robo-Sluggy?” Clem interrupted again, “Why don’t we keep it simple and just do a skeleton key?”

There was another pause. The helmet dinged, and from her left bracer, instead of a shield, a funky looking long piece of metal was redesigned into a key-like shape. *Once more, Clementine, your ideas are superbly excellent.*

Clementia snorted as she awkwardly worked the lock—and then the cell door swung open inwards. Immediately, the blue bear engulfed her in a blubbering hug. She pushed him off gently, tapping at her speaker button as she looked at the creature, *“What are you doing here, Fives?”*

5.0.5. went to over-exaggerating in his pseudo-sign language in explaining how he got into this strange Anti-Hero facility. She nodded to show she was following along. She nearly jolted when she realized exactly what the blue creature was implying.

“Where’s Sluggy and White Hat now?! When did you loose Dr. Flug?!”

The blue bear nodded down the corridor, and Clementia quickly darted the direction the bear mentioned. It cooed and hummed at her—and Clem, being fluent in bear speak—narrowed her eyes and switching between her helmet AI and 5.0.5.’s guiding presence.

“Okay, Fives—” she panted as she threw herself into the thick of things, *“Time for a team up, then! You cool with that?”*

“Aroo!” came the determined roar.

And off into battle they went.

…

“Your childhood does sound horrid,” White Hat acknowledged, glaring at the man placidly petting
the back of Slug’s neck. Slug himself was sitting stiff and unwilling to bring his gaze anywhere near
this Adust character, “But this does not excuse your actions. Toward Slug, nor my brother and I.”

Black Hat scoffed, “I dunno. I heard worse—or perhaps better backstories.”

“For Villains, yes,” Adust continued, finally moving his hand away from Slug and into his pockets,
“But I am just getting to that.”

White Hat remained silent. The man pulled a familiar pistol from a deep pocket and inspected the
chamber. Black Hat eyed it with a growing unease.

“You see… fleeing Brazil, was no easy task… it took a number of connections…”

“I don’t follow,” White Hat said, narrowing his eye.

Adust, seemingly content with the interior chamber of the pistol, closed it and clicked back the
safety, “Mostly Villains… but I was surprised by how easily Heroes could be swayed. One sad story
or two and…BAM!” Slug flinched as the man waved the weapon in emphasis, “And before I knew
it—we were in New Mexico. Checked into a Villainous retirement camp. It was a few quiet years,
there in the beginning… Got a job as an orderly to stay beside my twin, just as Slug said.”

White Hat looked over at Black Hat. His twin shook his dark head subtly.

“I took very good care of my brother—” Adust continued, uncaring where he was pointing the
weapon, “A glimmer of beauty and hope in such a den of evil!”

“Your brother who ordered a hit on an innocent woman and child?” the formally silent scientist
snapped, clearly having a difficult time with the other man’s recollections.

White Hat let out a surprised shout when Adust pistol-whipped Slug for that comment. Slug moaned,
blood leaking from the corner of his mouth as he huffed and puffed through the pain. Adust looked
unperturbed.

“You’ll pay for that…” the Elder Being lowly promised. Black Hat remained silent, watching the
exchange with an unreadable face.

Adust rechecked the weapon for damages, replying with no real malice, “I did my due diligence, Dr. Slug. Your wife was as deplorable as you. She was stranger to no man, nor to violence. Given the opportunity, I am certain she would have eventually craved you up as well.”

“After the fact—” Slug hissed, “You probably only knew about her after you killed her.”

“I thought it would ease my brother’s guilt,” Adust agreed.

Slug shook his head, spitting out blood at the Anti-Hero’s feet, “But even so—my daughter was child. What was her crime?”

“Family,” Adust said, as if that made it any excuse, “Bad blood. You know she would have grown to be as ruthless and as terrible as the rest of you.”

“You. Don’t. Know. Shit.” Slug punched out between ragged breathes, “You can’t argue me that. We’ll never know now because you fucking murdered—”

Adust turned the gun on Slug and White Hat rattled his chains to try to move closer.

“As fascinating as this squabbling is—” Black Hat loudly interrupted. He was now sitting, legs splayed wide and elbows resting on his knees as he stared at the Anti-Hero, “None of this seems to involve me.”

Adust settled himself, smoothing back his hair and loosening his grip on the gun. He turned to Black Hat and White Hat, eying them with a sort of soberness, saying, “Of course… That’s because it doesn’t—not directly.”

Black Hat hummed, ticking his eye over to the Elder Being briefly before it returned to the human.

“You see… I spent a lot of time in contemplation,” Adust explained, placing his unoccupied hand on his heart, “I read so often to Cain… I did so much for him. I tried to help him—I read him all the philosophies, all the scriptures, everything I could to alleviate his guilt… and do you know what I
“No, I don’t,” Black Hat said bored, as if this was his cue to respond.

Adust smiled, “I found nothing.”

White Hat was watching Slug, whose hands were shaking against the handlebars of the wheelchair. He was trying, in vain, to fight his restraints. White Hat was feeling more than helpless as those brown eyes lifted to him, filled with more uncertainty than he’d ever seen before… and then Adust returned to Slug’s side, brushing away too-long bangs.

“You see…” the crazed man continued, “Good and Evil mean nothing. They’re just words. We only ascribe these silly adjectives like good or bad to actions we personally find offendable… but we, as a species, have never agreed what was right or wrong, have we?”

White Hat looked up at the human, shaking his head, “No—that’s not true—”

“I found this man—Gas Mask, he went by—loitering about the Retirement place…” Adust seemed to chew his words here, “And he was a strange fella, but I thought, Oh no, just be kind, he’s here to find his mom… I talked to him a lot, because his mom sure did hurt him—and I sure did know that sort of feeling.”

“The Mad Dame…” Slug whispered. Adust tapped his nose.

“And so I let them talk… he was very grateful… He started bringing me more and more lost souls… we all talked a lot about the nature of what is right and what is wrong…” Adust grew agitated, absentely scratching his cheek with the pistol.

Black Hat tossed a look to White Hat before focusing on the man again, “The Mad Dame is dead now…”

“Oh!” Adust stopped his itching and tilted his head at Black Hat, “I know that. I let Gas Mask have her. He found out some interesting stuff about his own siblings… I guess he has a sister somewhere.”
Black Hat just growled, but Adust didn’t seem to notice.

“You see, as me and others continued to talk… we realize it didn’t really have anything to do with Good or Evil—it’s about what we can get away with,” Adust let out a breath.

“No!” White Hat declared, “No. Morality does not work that way. You cannot—”

“Oh, shut up!” Adust demanded and fired the gun recklessly. The bullet missed White Hat by a mile, embedding itself into the wall behind his white head. But the Elder Being remained unphased. Only Black Hat backed away, eying the gun with a renewed caution. Slug was breathing measuredly, clearly trying to keep himself calm. The smoking gun fell, and Adust shook his head, “It’s righteous idiots like you that are causing more problems than solutions.”

“What problems?” White Hat demanded back.

Adust grit his teeth, “You come to this place… and you made a home here… you decided to dictate the lives of mortals based on what, White Hat?”

“I’m here to protect you!” he started.

“No, no you’re not—” Adust started, pointing at Black Hat with the sizzling barrel, “At least with this dark thing, we know what it whats! Power! Money! Blood!”

“Maybe a soul snack or two…” the Eldritch muttered to himself.

Adust was glaring at White Hat, “But you. Your kind—”

“I’m here to help,” White Hat insisted, glaring at the man. Slug shook his head, trying to catch his boss’ intention.

“Help?” Adust parroted with a grating laugh, “Where was help when my momma beat me with a swatch that she made my brother stick sewing needles in? Where was help when we had to sleep in the back of a big rig with a man twice our size that kept sniffing at us? Where was help when a sick, sick Villain took my brother into his bedroom—gave us all the booze and drugs we wanted and had
Adust jerked his head to Slug, icy and wild stare focused on the doctor. He turned it back to White Hat with a satisfied little smirk.

“Where was help when I had to stand outside Dr. Slug’s pretty little house and listen to him scream? Where was help then? You haven’t done anything to help anyone. Not a single person…” Adust taunted, walking over to White Hat. He tipped the white top hat up with the barrel of the pistol, “You get away with calling yourself a Hero… with calling yourself the good guy… because you look the part, don’t you?”

“I am the Hero,” White Hat managed to choke out.

“You stand there… all clothed in white, all lovely and spouting these wise words but…” Adust patted a smooth cheek with his rough glove, “They don’t mean anything. These words. These good things you go on about… Morals! Help!”

Slug rattled his wheelchair, “Enough, Adust!”

White Hat was staring up at those blue eyes glaring down at him.

“No, Dr. Slug!” the man exclaimed, standing up right without breaking eye contact with the Elder Being, “It will never be enough… I don’t think White Hat understands… Good and Evil… These things don’t exist. There are two kinds here. The selfish creatures and then the people who get burned by them…”

“No, that’s not how it works—” White Hat started.

“White,” Black Hat harshly cut in, “You can’t argue with a mad man…!”

Adust nodded fairly Black Hat, “Oh yes, I am quite mad.”

“Adust…” Slug shook his head, “Please, White Hat is not your enemy…”
“Oh… no, no,” Adust agreed, glancing over his shoulder at the bound doctor with pity. White Hat struggled in his own chains, “But the problem does lie with those who think there is any room for their own preferences…”

White Hat scrunched his brows, confusion giving way, “I really don’t understand. Your philosophies make no sense—what are you trying to tell us?”

“I’m telling you that must make an unselfish choice…”

“And that is?!”

Adust sighed, clicking back the safety in the special pistol once more, “You can either have a brother… or a lover. You cannot have both. You must choose. One or the other.”

He pointed the pistol at Black Hat—and then at Slug.

Chapter End Notes

Yeaaaaaah, I love cliffhangers.
Love 'em.
Well! If you have any questions, go ahead and ask! I'll definitely answer!
THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR READING!!
<3
Let Us Peer Into the Hearts of Men

Chapter Notes

... Monday. Again...?

Yes. I am very sorry.

HOWEVER. The good news is, I just finished the last chapter (though I do have a little epilogue planned).

So, the next update should be the whole kit and caboodle because I leave for a new life in a little over a week. YAY.

Without further ado: TRIGGER WARNINGS.

Mostly GORE and SADNESS.

Heavily implied themes of passive/active suicide and suicide assistance.

Please stay safe, and enjoy the story if you are alright with that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Let Us Peer into the Hearts of Men

White Hat was bound, chained to a floor, in a room filled with blood-let inscriptions of the old language. This was a type of special blood-magic, a mystic system of being bound by superseding ancient laws that the Old Ones and the Elder Gods created. He had a vague knowledge of the writ language—Black Hat knew more. Black Hat was insatiable in his lust for freedom, and he ate whole worlds in his chaotic youth trying to understand how to defeat the Old Ones and Elder Gods... just to be free.

Before he found himself trapped, staring at a mad human pointing a weapon that could easily kill a mortal or an unfathomable creature like himself, White Hat thought he understood what Black Hat wanted. He thought freedom sounded... unrestrained. Black Hat did not want to be controlled—that was his idea of freedom. That was White Hat's fear. Without someone to check his violent, hungry urges... Black Hat could swallow universes in ravenous gulps. White Hat worried, imagining his brother lounging in a hollow turtle shell, sucking the bones of every creature dry...

But now, at this moment... White Hat was trapped, well aware the inscriptions on the wall were keeping him from healing anything, from teleporting, from manipulating his shape... keeping him from doing anything but standing in a room with a loaded gun. Defenseless and powerless...
Trapped.

Adust was aiming at Dr. Slug, but looking solely at the Elder Being, as he inquired so calmly, “Do you understand what I am asking you?”

White Hat shook his head slowly.

“I want you to decide who will live and who will die, White Hat,” the human said, without hurry, seemingly without pressure. Slug didn’t look down the barrel. His earth colored eyes were trained on White Hat’s wide blue orb. He projected a serene feeling… all of his features softening… trying to communicate something to his employer without speaking.

“Why?” White Hat asked, uncomprehending, tearing his eye away, “Why are you doing this?”

Adust wiped his mouth with his free hand, clicking his tongue, “I told before, didn’t I? I’d let you go if you listened to my story.”

“Story,” White Hat repeated, “You said to listen to your story. You mentioned nothing about choosing between my brother and—” The Elder Being’s words caught in his throat. Just before, Adust said… he implied Slug was his… his lover…

White Hat knew that word.

Knew it’s context, it’s history, it’s weight.

To say that Dr. Slug was… could ever be—

“I saw the mark,” Adust explained, watching as White Hat fumbled with his words and thoughts. The man tapped lightly at the area where shoulder meets neck… where the bitemark from White Hat had no doubt added a new scar to Slug’s body. “I’ve read many a Necronomicon…”

White Hat remained silent, glaring at the mad man. The pistol never wavered away from Slug.
“You think I don’t know what you’re capable of, White Hat? You really think… That after all my
time to think… I wouldn’t figure your game out?” Adust asked.

Black Hat slid his eye over to his pale twin, watching as the Elder Being twitched closer. He was
bound however. Stuck to whatever minute few feet the chains allowed him to moved forward… and
he was already at the limit, several yards from the tied doctor and the crazed human.

“You make everyone choose, right? Choose the good side.”

“You want me to pick who walks out of this place alive,” White Hat’s words were less a statement
than an echoing sound.

Adust tilted his head, unperturbed and almost as if White Hat said nothing at all, “And I think you
know what the right choice is, isn’t it?”

White Hat shook his head.

“It’s really funny, isn’t it?” Adust continued, turning the weapon to Black Hat for a moment,
“Because you’ve probably never been on the receiving end of a difficult decision, have you? You’ve
never, ever had to make such a clear choice before, huh?”

White Hat jerked in response, moving closer toward his brother as if to shield him from an errant
bullet he had no way of stopping. He froze when Black Hat hissed at him in warning. The human
could only laugh, twirling the gun back to Slug. White Hat twitched again as he shouted, “Wait!”

“Decide, White Hat!” the man demanded, “Brother or lover! You can’t have both!”

“Y-You—You can’t make me choose!” White Hat shot back, frantic as he pulled his chains.

“And why not?” Adust sneered. He pushed the pistol’s still warm muzzle into the side of Slug’s
head, patience wearing thin. White Hat felt his legs nearly turn to jelly. He was fixed on the spot.

Slug breathed slow, eyes forgiving as he spoke softly, “It’s okay. It’s fine… just breathe.”
White Hat started hiccupping, looking between the doctor and his dark twin… Black Hat silent, immobile, just watching. The Elder Being shook his head back and forth, unable to untwist his tongue into a semblance of a decision. The human scoffed, roughly replacing the pistol’s safety and then pocketing the gun in a side leg holster.

“I—I’m sorry, Slug!” White Hat found himself saying. His knees did give way then, and he collapsed, much like he was begging for mercy. “I—I didn’t know! Before—I didn’t understand until now—I—I—!” Those crystalline tears were back. Black Hat let out a slight gasp, wobbly standing to get a better look. “I—I can’t choose between you—I—”

“I know… I know. It’s okay,” Slug said, voice soothing and sounding too human. White Hat sobbed harder, shoulders shuttering inwards as he stared into the ground.

Adust tsked, “And you call yourself a Hero…”

“It’s not a simple choice,” Slug defended, glaring up at their captor.

“Of course it is…” Adust sighed, moving behind the wheelchair to grip the handles. His rough gloves left a grating scratching sound that burrowed into Slug’s eardrums. It caused him to shudder. “This is the reason I have gone to these lengths. Because, if White Hat were a true Hero—if he were to stand for all those good things… He would eradicate that dark being he calls brother. I would let him leave without hesitation.”

Surprising it was Black Hat who spoke next, asking hoarsely, “And Dr. Slug?”

“Dr. Slug?” the mad human parroted, glancing down at said-man, “Well… I wouldn’t be able to call myself an Anti-Hero if I just let him go unaccounted for, now would I?”

“N-No,” White Hat choked, trying to move forward in an awkward, stiff manner as he recollected himself, “No, wait! Please!”

Adust was wheeling Slug away, the man turning fruitlessly to try to catch White Hat’s struggling figure from the corner of this eye. “It’s okay! It’ll be okay!”
“Please! Wait!”

“Good night, White Hat. I will return to do what you can’t.”

... Slug was watching the corridors more closely. He was more awake, attempting to keep his mind cool as he memorized the path wheeling him away from White Hat. Soldiers were stopping to salute Adust as he carried on back toward Slug’s private room.

“You…” Slug started, without thought as his brain was actively trying to figure a way out of this mess. Adust hummed in response and Slug shook his head. Still waiting for some kind of opening, but his hands and legs were too secure for any old escape attempt. “You didn’t have to be so cruel to him… He doesn’t understand.”

“You mean White Hat?”

Slug nodded sharply, “He’s not like us—”

“No,” Adust agreed quickly, “He’s supposed to be better.”

Snapping his jaw closed, he shook his head. He was twisting his wrist, testing the strength of the zipties.

“White Hat is suppose to be the light and the good things… he’s suppose to beat back the darkness, isn’t he? Good does not barter with Evil…” Adust nearly whispered.

“I thought you didn’t believe those concepts were even real?” Slug shot back.

The man grinned, opening the door to the room where he was holding Slug. He leant over the doctor, pushing back his hair to catch Slug’s eyes. “Well… I’m making them real.”

Slug winced as the man cut the zipties and blood rushed back to his extremities. In such a tense few
moments reuniting with White Hat and learning this awful man’s story… he hadn’t noticed the purply color of his skin or the tingles associated with his limbs falling asleep. When he tried to stand, his legs nearly gave out.

“Y-You really think things through, huh?” Slug asked as Adust grabbed him around the middle and hauled him back onto the medical bed. He was trying to arrange Slug back into his previous restraints. As Slug tensed in an attempt for future freedom, the man went to massaging the blood back into Slug’s limbs—effectively keeping his already sedated body loose and relaxed.

“I still have plans for you,” Adust calmly said.

With a ragged breath, Slug asked, “And those are?”

“Oh, no, no. Let’s keep it a surprise…”

“I’m not afraid of death,” Slug said. He was stubborn, glaring up at the ceiling as the man locked the handcuffs to his wrist, and then the bed. Velco straps were back around his ankles. Luckily, he was still clothed, and Adust did not cover him with a blanket.

“A man like you?” the Anti-Hero replied, “I am not surprised. Of course, you would not fear death… What about after death?”

Slug didn’t say a word. Adust was laughing at him, deep and from somewhere down in the belly… as if this was a real treat to experience.

“I won’t be cruel to you. I’m just trying to help you, if you’d believe,” he said as he gently brushed scars across Slug’s face.

“I—” Slug started to quip. Then bit his tongue. He sighed turning to the blue eyes staring curiously at him, “I don’t care what you’ll do to me… but…”

“Yes, doctor?”

“If you let White Hat go free, I won’t fight you.”
Adust smiled, “You couldn’t fight me anyways.”

“Maybe,” Slug agreed, “But I will not lose anyone else I love to you. Let White Hat go, let Clementia go—if you have her… and I’ll do whatever you say.”

“You’re gonna do what I say, regardless,” Adust said. He was rehooking an IV up to Slug’s wrist, who hissed when the sting of the needle flooded his system. Morphine, if the doctor had to guess.

“B-Biggest mistake of your life, pal,” Slug slurred as he had a hard time keeping his eyes open.

The mad-man gave a shrug and watched him fall into a deep slumber.

…

White Hat was trying to catch his breath—which was weird because he did not necessarily need to breathe… but he was trying. Everything felt very hard to grasp. His mind shut down and he was just gasping for breath, unable to explain this stricken feeling in his chest. It hurt. His wounds from being captured earlier were still leaking blood, and given his nature, he was more or less fine but he felt. So. Much. Bad.

“White!” Black Hat shouted, and finally, growling and slithering closer to his twin, harshly invading his space as much as allowed given their restraints, “White.”

“He—” White Hat choked, finally looking over at his brother imploring, “He took him.”

Black Hat sighed, nodding. He knelt, now on the same level as White Hat. He was staring directly into the wet blue eye and empty socket. “I know… I know.”

“Is he—Will he kill Slug?” White Hat whispered.

Black Hat didn’t answer him. He was just gray and silent.
“I asked Slug before—” the Elder being felt his face contort in a strange agony as he tried not to sob hysterically, “I told him he had to choose between his family and me and—” White Hat swallowed his words, staring down at the floor, unable to meet his brother’s eye now, “I didn’t know… I didn’t know what I was asking him… I couldn’t… I don’t want to decide who—”

“White…” Black Hat said, sitting down now, comfortably crossing his legs as he rested on the floor.

“He wanted me to—” White Hat couldn’t even finish the words.

The Eldritch Horror gave a slight shrug, “I know what he wanted. Even if you told him to kill me… I don’t think he would have given you Slug anyways… Slug was a Villain… and he’s already hurt him before, and… You just can’t reason with someone that far gone, brother.”

“I don’t want you dead,” White Hat confessed.

“I know.”

“I know that if our roles were switched,” the pale creature laughed a little, swiping as his moist face, “You wouldn’t have hesitated, would you? You would have let him kill me… you would take your employees and this would all be over with.”

Once more, Black Hat remained silent.

“You were so right,” White Hat felt like the words were gutting him as he admitted it, “Every time I… I never really decided what I wanted. From you. From Slug… and now… I’m going to get all of us killed.”

“Shut up.”

“Why?! It’s true! I—”

Black Hat sighed, as if he had the biggest headache of his life, “We won’t die.”
“But you said—!”

“You choose, now, of all times to listen to me?” the dark twin sourly inquired. He shook his hatted head and looked over to the doors, brows falling. “I don’t expect to die anytime soon. And, knowing my employees, they don’t either… And as much as many people have tried, Slug’s survived. He should really call himself Roach or something. Those things can live without heads, you know.”

White Hat blinked at him, confusion evident.

“That was a joke, idiot. You’re suppose to laugh,” Black Hat informed him. White Hat startled, sitting up as he inspected his brother.

“You’re… You’re trying to make me feel better…” White Hat realized. Black Hat stuck out his forked tongue as if disgusted. With a smile lighting up his face, the Elder Being stood back up, tugging at his chains, “You do care!”

“I care only that the second most powerful being in this existence isn’t a fucking blubbering mess when I need him to be ready to fight our way out of this situation—” Black Hat was quick to coolly correct.

White Hat just sort of swayed on the spot as he continued to mess with his chains as he happily pointed out, “You care! You care! You’re not so heartless after all! I knew you’d eventually come around!”

“I hate you so much…” the Eldritch muttered to himself, trying to face-palm his manacled claws, “You’re so annoying…”

“You loooove meee!” White Hat found himself crowing as he tugged at the chains.

He then face-planted against the floors. Vainly, he struggled with them there, strangely content as he tried to figure out how to escape. Black Hat just watched him wrestle the chains, taking the time to rest as he waited for rescue. After all, the day wasn’t over yet and he could always be pleasantly surprised. But—

Black Hat wasn’t an idiot. No one was safe in this Anti-Hero nightmare. Everyone might perish, and… well. As long as White Hat wasn’t crying, there could be some peace before the end.
Strangely, that was all that Black Hat wanted at the moment. He thought their death would be more glorious… and not so… so wrought in helplessness. He hadn’t wanted White Hat broken—not really—he realizes now he’s seen his twin so close to that edge, the edge of an unforgivably dismal abyss.

Perhaps it was cruel to offer hope… but…

No. He was a Villain.

When White Hat finally came to their end—he would look his brother in the eye, he would not apologize for dangling that bit of hope before him… hopefully White Hat would go first. He’d see the destruction of the light, swallow it within him, and remember it…

It would be better that way.

There was no need to hurt his idiot twin further.

Black Hat was the Villain. It should stand to reason that only he would be the one to destroy White Hat in the end… he wouldn’t let this no good Anti-Hero scum come between them. In the end it would be what it was always about—

Black Hat was dark, and heartless, and without mercy…

While White Hat would harbor hope, and light, and… Gods help them… White Hat was full of second and third and a million different choices. Even now, after just a tiny silver of hope, White Hat was smiling at him, determined, “We’ll get out of this. You’ll see. Adust is human—he’ll make a mistake and we’ll get out of this. I will save us, don’t worry.”

“Of course, brother,” Black Hat replied, watching the pale thing unrewardingly try.

Black Hat is a Villain, and a liar. Though this one time, he could be honest, if only inside his own head. Honestly, he does hate the familial term White Hat uses between them… he merely uses brother when he wants something from the Elder being.
White Hat never catches on.

Black Hat thinks his brother is stupid to never notice… but as always, he’s grateful.

Now would be the worst time for White Hat to realize.

He keeps smiling. It’s beautiful and Black Hat wants to gag… but its surprisingly better than the tears. In so many millennia he’d never seen White Hat like that before. Maybe if he wrested it out of his brother before this desperate time but—

No.

How could he?

It’s strange. They have been alive for so long, but, right now, all Black Hat could think was that death loomed too soon. He felt so old, he knew he was old, but looking at his brother… that dumb smile… his oddest thought echoed too young.

White Hat was too young, in his mind, smiling unabashed at his shadowy twin.

*We’re going to die*, Black Hat thought honestly to only himself, and didn’t smile back, just stuck out his tongue again. White Hat was huffing a little laugh, renewed by hope as he fought against their chains. *At least… he’ll be—*

Black Hat wasn’t going anywhere anytime soon.

He would make sure to be there at the end of all things.

This was the one promise he wouldn’t break.

…
“Well, well, well…” Dementia giggled to herself, slinking along the ceiling. The guards above her scattered when she dropped down. She wasted no time in ripping most of them to shreds. The hybrid swung one man, bodily, into the group of another outfit of soldiers.

She was standing in a pool of entrails and offal, sopping with blood.

Dementia shook her arms free of the last sticky drops, crunching broken bones underfoot as she stalked toward one man skittering backwards. Most of his leg was dislocated from the knee, and his armored helmet cracked, showing a terrified, blood shot eye focused on her approach. She squatted down and grabbed his vest, hauling him upwards and baring her teeth. “Where?”

“I—I don’t know!” the soldier cried out.

She scoffed, rising her sharp hands and cracking fingers as they curled into a fist, “You didn’t even ask me what I meant by where? Like, where who? Where what? Where when?”

“P-Please! D-D-D-Don’t kill me!” the soldier stuttered.

“Well, if you don’t know anything,” Dementia said, arm reeling backwards before she started mercilessly pummeling, “What’s the point of keeping you alive?”

She stood up only when her back started aching from her stooped position. Sourly, she glanced around at her carnage. She sighed, massaging her bruised knuckles as she picked her way down the halls. The hybrid was peering into every room and cage, generally checking for Flug or the bears, but mostly, of course, for her girl.

“Where are ya, Clementine?” she asked after the seventeenth door she busted down.

“Halt!” a voice sounded behind her as she wandered the facility.

Dem rolled her eyes, only half-turning to look at a new group of soldiers to ask, “Just how many of you Anti-Hero suckers are there?”

“Dementia of the Black Hat Company—” the soldier shouted out, easing slowly down the narrow
path to the young woman with extreme caution, “You have been caught. Come willingly. No one needs to get hurt.”

“Nah, no one needs to,” she agreed, finally facing them fully. She crouched low as the soldiers mistook her stance for surrender. They all circled round her, pointing automatic rifles and other deadly force weapons. She attacked the first one to flinch, happily exclaiming, “But where’s the fun in that?!”

She made quick work of these Anti-Heroes as well. Breathing harshly, as she had been at this for several hours already, when she finally located the first soldier who called out to her. Dem managed to impale him into the wall with a rebar she gutted from the foundation of the hallway. He gurgled and she yanked the helmet off of him, tossing it from hand to hand like one would a baseball.

“Y-You’ll never reach your baw—boss in time,” he said, spitting blood in a forced show of bravery.

“Black Hat is indestructible,” she replied. She embedded the helmet in the wall beside the soldier’s face. He shuddered, possibly in fear, but also because the shock against the wall probably aggravated his stabby wound. Psh. Baby.

“You’ll nev—never stop Adust!”

She scrunched her nose in confusion, “Who?”

The man grit his teeth, blood leaking out of the corners of his mouth. Dementia shrugged.

“Whatevs, not important—” she leaned closer, one hand planted beside the free space on the other side of the soldier’s head. Her other hand coming up as she showed him the red-stained set of sharpened nails. “So. You gonna tell me where?”

“Never! I won’t say where Black Hat is—” he coughed, hacking up more than blood now.

Dementia ignored whatever gruesome thing splattered against her cheek as her hand encircled the man’s throat. The bones bobbed encouragingly when she gave a little squeeze, “Told you. Not worried about Black Hat. I’m looking for a human.”
“You’ll get nothing—from me!” he wheezed out. His eyes looked determined. Dem smiled, flashing fangs.

“Oh, I see…” she whispered playfully as she leaned in, “You think you’re dying anyways, huh?”

It was at these words that the man’s eyes started to fill with uncertainty. No doubt he was in pain, and while pain is, uh, painful… that didn’t mean that what she put him through wasn’t survivable. The hybrid knew from personal experience just how much a human body could endure.

“Because, you see…” Dementia started, stepping closer and drumming her fingers around the man’s neck as if impatient, “I’ve just nicked one of your lungs. It’s gonna fill… slowly. So… while we’re waiting—and we will—you might as well tell me a couple of things.”

The man finally whimpered.

The Villain laughed as she played with her new best friend.

…

“Well, if this isn’t a curious sight…” Dr. Flug muttered.

A large purple monster was wrapped in a straight jacket and roaring at the top of it’s lungs as it rammed itself repeatedly into a barred door. Clearly a bear, but topped with a Venus Fly Trap that snapped harder than the bear’s own jaws. Flug tilted his head at the impressive aggressive display. Several soldiers were already felled at it’s feet.

Dr. Flug quickly looked down at his costume—he’d stolen the soldier’s uniform to blend in—and decided if he approached the great beast, it would be best if he were recognizable. So, he replaced the interesting helmet with one of his extra paper bags he kept at all times. He was securing his goggles as he walked forward toward 0.5.0.

The bear was headbutting the bars, ignoring the splitting of it’s forehead in its urgency to become free. Flug smiled, speaking mostly to himself, “Oh yes, this is perfect.”
0.5.0. growled low, backing away from the cage’s bars.

“I don’t mean you any harm, 0.5.0.,” he said cheerfully. He began searching corpses for a key to use to free the beast, “In fact, I would like your help.”

It only growled.

“Your creator is somewhere within this facility,” Dr. Flug stood back up, triumphantly raising a stained key attached to a dog tag.

0.5.0. made no noise, just stared at the doctor with large, beady eyes. It was definitely not a pleasant sight. If Flug were any less of a man, he might just run away—but after so long with Black Hat constantly asserting himself in Flug’s life… well, his anxieties were well honed for other terrors. Bears did not compare.

“No worry for Dr. Slug?” he posed. When the purple monster gave no response, he hummed, remembering, “Oh, yes! Your priority is the girl…”

0.5.0. stood up straight, lumbering over to the cage door and growled low.

“And I am sure if we worked together, we can find her, yes?” Flug asked, dangling the key before the restrained animal.

0.5.0. eyed the strange doctor. Then, with a heaving sigh, nodded.

“Excellent!” he chirped. He went to unlocking the cage… but stopped just before the cage door would click open. Lifting glinting goggles up, he posed, “It would be much easier to find her… if we found Black Hat first.”

The bear’s nose twitched behind it’s muzzle, letting out a steady stream of hot breath. Then, with a jerky acknowledgement, the bear agreed.

Flug finished unlocking the cage, stepping away as the door swung out. He unfurled his arm down the hallway. “After you, if you don’t mind.”
0.5.0. charged down the corridors, roaring. Dr. Flug sprinted after him, quite pleased with his own discovery.

No doubt… they were nearing the end of the charade.

He would find Black Hat.

They would find the leader of the Anti-Heroes.

They would kill the leader…

And then, time permitting, they would return home after a reddened dawn for a nice nap.

Chapter End Notes

Not quite a cliffhanger... sometimes I just stop writing at a certain point.

Anyways, thank you all for reading. If you have any questions, or just feel like leaving a comment, it's always welcome! Have a nice week everyone!!

<3
Let Us Now Cut to the Climax

Chapter Notes

..... did I miss a chapter???

Ya'll--is there a part of the series that seems weirder than normal???

HRM.

WELL--

MILD GORE WARNING

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Let Us Now Cut to the Climax

Slug didn’t know what caused him to wake-up… only that he did. He was blinking up at the boring ceiling, trying to gather his thoughts. They were jumbled, and his memories were taking their sweet time coalescing in his head. Vaguely, he felt aware, like he was distant from himself. It irked him, and he tried to remember why.

Then, at some point, he turned his head. Slug moved around, trying to get comfortable. He felt very restrained… only to glance down and see he that was, in fact, restrained.

“Huh…” he said aloud. He clucked his tongue to himself, staring back up at the ceiling. There was now a face staring back down at him. Slug waved at it.

The redhead grinned, dropping to the floor beside him. He faced her, slightly curious. “Where am I?”

“Yes, you don’t know, doc?” the girl asked. She propped her chin in her hands as she sat beside him, staring with mismatched eyes. He shrugged… and then looked down to see there was a dry IV stuck in his hand. Something inside him was screaming about it.

“Take that out,” he said, nodding at it.

“Sure thing,” the girl—ah! Dementia! That’s who it was!—said. Untrained and very uncouth, she
just grabbed a fistful and ripped it out. Luckily, Slug didn’t register the pain right away. They just watched the blood spurt out, almost like a surprise sprinkler system.

“Bandages?”

The girl dashed over to a counter somewhere behind Slug and rummaged around. After comedic clinking and breaking noises, she was back with stacks of perturbed gaze. She smashed it against his hand without preamble and held it there. Slug went to looking back up at the ceiling.

“Anti-Heroes,” he suddenly remembered.

“Yeah, you and Black Hat got taken,” Dementia confirmed.

Slug nodded. He kicked out against the itchy, strange feeling of coming down from his blissful, stupid state. Still, his legs were tied to the bed. Keeping his breath steady, he looked over at Dementia, “How did you get here?”

“Dr. Flug came back—all bent out of shape—” Dem explained, gesticulating and letting go of the bandages. Slug winced, but it seemed the IV puncture was mostly slowing down in its gushing of blood. It definitely would not clot for a few hours longer… But, he would worry about that in a second as the hybrid continued, “And then, WHAM, White Hat!”

“Oh…” he breathed, clanking his restraints to get Dementia’s attention back on him, “That’s good.”

Dem grabbed the handcuffs and yanked, effectively breaking the chain and freeing Slug. She moved over to the Velcro restraints at his legs and started to undo them, muttering, “Well… I mean… everyone thinks he’s good but—”

“But what?” Slug asked, not entirely patient, holding down his wrist to continue to stem the blood flow. He was feeling more up to speed and less drugged out of his wits.

“I-dunno…” Dementia hedged. She handed him the gauze without looking him in the eye.

As Slug was placing the bandages back on his hand he recalled—briefly—the sight of White Hat
sobbing as Adust wheeled him away.

“Wait! I know where they are—” he started.

“You do?!” Dementia asked, hopping between either foot, “Then why are we still here?!”

Slug whipped his head about, pointing at the door, “You make sure no one is guarding—”

Dementia, never one to listen, simply bolted right out of the door. The shocked yells of the soldiers stationed outside echoing clearly. Slug sighed heavily. With a cursory look about the renovated hospital room, he grabbed some scalpels and what looked to be a case of sedatives. He followed the screams of pain and ran after the hybrid.

No time to waste.

…

White Hat was scratching at the symbols on the floor. Strangely, they didn’t even flake… “This looks like dried blood…”

“I’m sure it is,” Black Hat said. He sniffed the air for good measure. “Human, if I had to guess.”

“What spells are in the Necronomicon?” White Hat asked.

Black Hat shrugged.

“Brother…” the Elder being started, whining a little.

“Fine, fine…” his twin grumbled. Black Hat rose and inspected the odd markings once again… White Hat patiently waited. He did not mind, and his dark twin paused, concern leaking into his voice, “It’s… a binding circle.”
“What’s that mean?”

Black Hat looked over at his brother with a sigh, “In this room, we’re bound to the laws of this world. We’re subject to one form, no magic, or any other gifts given to us by the Old Ones… we’ll grow old and die if not given food and water—”

“We’re…” White Hat blinked, only slightly comprehending what his twin was trying to explain, “We’re mortal in here?”

“Basically,” Black Hat confirmed.

“I don’t think I like that…”

“Me either,” Black Hat muttered. He was glancing down at the chains, obviously thinking hard, “But, if I remember correctly… there is a way to fix this.”

White Hat stood up tall, excitement building, “Yes?! What is it?!”

“We—” he began, then flicked his eye around the room, “The person who wrote the binding must die.”

“Ohhhh…” White Hat breathed out. It didn’t exactly squash his enthusiasm, but he did droop a little.

“Yeah, and… we don’t know who wrote the spell…”

“We can find out?” the Elder Being suggested.

Black Hat just sighed, “We can only try.”

...
“Okay!” Clementia was murmuring to herself. 5.0.5. was huffing behind her, keeping the door shut in their current hidey-hole of an abandoned kitchenette. “Okay, okay, okay! Think! Where would these assholes be keeping the escape hatch?!”

"Clem, scans indicate several lifeforms scouting the hallways," The AI interrupted.

“Ugh! That isn’t helpful! I know this! The whole place is on red alert!” she cried. Without thinking, she punched at a wall. Of course, with her awesome suit, it did not hurt her in the slightest. It did however, pop off a panel on the wall. Inside were copious amounts of wires.

“Aroo?”

Clementia turned to the bear, tapping her helmet as she apologized, “I’m fine, Fives. Just… frustrated.”

“Aroo…” it sadly replied.

“Don’t worry. We’ll find Dr. Flug eventually,” she soothed. Turning back to the open panel, she hummed in thought. Nodding to herself, she asked the AI, “Are you equipped to hack a multi-level secret Anti-Hero facility?"

"Miss Clementine! I am equipped with many resources for all your Hero needs!" the robo-Slug voice haughtily replied. It paused for a second, However, a Hero is not a Hacker and—

“Ah, I see,” Clementia started, interrupting with a pretend pitiful voice.

Dr. Slug would not appreciate your liberal use of his tech for nefarious purposes.

“Yeah, I know,” she mock sighed, “I guess it was too much to ask of you…”

The AI paused, then, started up again, I am only a prototype. Any assistance in this hacking matter could fry my entire system-structure. The firewalls in this place would surely have protocols for dismantling my code...
“Don’t worry about it then,” Clem said at the AI’s uncertainty. She wouldn’t risk the only help she had so far. It was an impulsive idea anyways, and, frankly, a shot in the dark.

However, the next response from her helmet was a deep sigh. *But, I suppose this is not a typical Hero assignment. I’ll see what I can do.*

“Nah, Robo-Sluggy, don’t worry about it—” Clementia started.

*Please, Clem,* the AI said, *It is in my programming to aide you in your missions. Think of me as an extra protector… and though I am meant to support and guide you in lieu of your physical guardians… I only hesitated prior as a means to prolong assistance to you.*

“Awwww,” she cooed, slightly to herself.

*That being said, I can hack the system. I might be dismantled in the process… the AI stopped, and her helmet lit up in new specs, explaining, Just grab as many wires as you can—I have enabled the touch receptors in the finger pads. I will infiltrate the security system and find you the fastest route to your guardians if I am able.*

Clementia hesitated for a moment, hands out stretched to the wires, “If this doesn’t work… what’ll I do without you?”

*You are a smart and resourceful young woman. I have the utmost faith in you.*

It was nice to hear those words in her Sluggy’s voice. With a nod, she grabbed a handful of wires and waited. Lines of green code flew up her helmet screen and she widened her eyes, trying to catch all, or well, *any* of it. After an anxiety inducing amount of time, the screen came back with a flashing route and two rooms lit up in red.

*Data suggests—Dr. Slug and White Hat—captured and held here.* The AI voice was sliced with a static displacement. It was frightening for a half a moment, making the girl jump in her suit.

“Are you—” she began.
You have ten minutes before my system shuts down. After that, I am unable to help.

Renewed with a sense of growing trepidation, she turned back to 5.0.5. and barked out, “Come on! I know where to go!”

…

Dr. Flug plopped down heavily at the newly vacated seat of a guard who use to be on screen monitoring duty. 0.5.0. was roughly breathing in a corner, his new white coat liberally splattered with gore. Flug adjusted his goggles as he swiveled the chair from screen to screen. Without looking at the keyboards, he messed with buttons, switching to different feeds to find any clues as to the whereabouts of the other occupants in the facility.

Several hallways were littered with corpses. Humming, he read the corridor number and flicked through different channels, following the carnage and chaos. He paused only when he saw a white and blue blur darting up a flight of stairs. The doctor sighed in relief when the next camera showed Clementia (he assumed at least, given the height and build of the human in such an obviously gaudy Hero garb) and 5.0.5. sneaking around.

“What a good boy,” he said mostly to himself. He looked behind him, watching as the purple monster wrested the straight jacket off its enormous body. “Seems your charge is doing quite well. She found 5.0.5.”

The bear growled in acknowledgement, eyes scanning the sight of the suited girl.

“It looks like she’s following something…?” Flug noted as the young girl pointed down a hallway and made a gesture similar to go right.

Dr. Flug flicked through some more cameras—and was delighted to see Slug slumped against a wall as Dementia laughingly tore at a pair of guards. The lizard girl dumped them to the side… and the merciful doctor stabbed them with a hypodermic needle. All movement from their mangled bodies ceased. When Slug stood, he made a few motions, and then the pair darted off out of frame.

Flug continued his search… before he settled on a pair of doors… and strangely, this one room had no video feed. He looked up at 0.5.0. and nodded at the only doubled doors of the facility. “I am willing to bet that’s where our respective bosses are being held…”
The great beast snorted. It’s massive paw fell off the back of the desk chair. Then, it lumbered almost unhurriedly out of the monitoring room. Flug took a second to note the location of the room before standing. Then, almost like it was an afterthought, he grabbed the chair he was previously seated in. With as much strength as he scrawny body could muster, lifted it high above his head and proceeded to smash in the computer controls. Sparks flew all around and he grinned. Red lights flashed manically above him, alarms sounding more like a bomb scare.

“There. Now everyone’s on the same playing field.”

He left after the bear without aplomb.

Luckily, they were rather close to the room.

…

Slug was slower than normal. Still a little shaky, given his treatment since arriving at the facility, so he was left with few choices other than letting Dementia take the reigns of wiping out any of the Anti-Hero soldiers. Often, it was with extreme prejudice. The doctor was actually feeling bad for her victims… he had to remind himself, several times, that there weren’t other options however.

“Just around this corner,” Slug nodded as Dem stood amongst her growing pile of bodies, “We’ll find the room where Black Hat and White Hat are in.”

“Bueno,” she replied with a smirk.

Slug followed her, though she was not careful inspecting their route forward. The entire facility was awash in flashing red lights and sirens. It was utter chaos… though, he suspected, Dementia worked well in such an atmosphere.

The double white doors were eerily darkened, a muted blood color with every flicker of emergency lights. When the hybrid looked back at him, Slug just closed his eyes and nodded. That was all it took before she kicked out the doors. One broke off it’s hinges, the other slammed awkward against the wall before bouncing back the other way. She was rushing inside before Slug could call out to her.
Her legs gave out at the sound of gunfire. Slug startled, watching as she tumbled, feet flying out from under her as she skid across the ground. Her blood painted over whatever runes and symbols were magically wiggling along the entirety of the room. It didn’t seem to depower the room, however. Dementia hissed, pupils slitting as her face turn to whoever shot her. The hybrid was scrambling backwards as a shadow loomed tall over her.

“Adust!” Slug called out, shouldering his weak body against the ruined doorway.

The Anti-Hero raised his head, eyes cold as he took in Slug, “This is unexpected…”

Black Hat was growling low as Dementia skittered away from the gun pointed at her forehead. White Hat, though, was pushing himself against his own chains, as if he could reach Dr. Slug by will alone.

“Let the girl live,” Slug said. The Anti-Hero scoffed, not lowering his weapon an inch.

“Will you tell me she’s done nothing wrong?”

“Oh, no,” Slug said, shaking his head and entering the room. He took a breath and resolutely walked between the gun and Dem. He glared daringly at the Anti-Hero, “She’s atrocious and I practically hate her…” Slug paused to breathe, pressing his chest against the cooling muzzle… barely touching the metal with each intake, “But I am not going to let you kill anyone here. You don’t get to decide that.”

“How preachy,” Adust sneered, cocking the safety.

White Hat struggled, but was just out of range to help. All he could do was call out, “Don’t!”

“I’ve learned from the best,” Slug said with his own little smirk. He sent White Hat an apologetic look (only confusing the poor being more) before returning to focus on the threat, “If you let them go, we’ll forget this whole mess.”

“Forget…?” the man asked, almost amused. He dropped the gun just a little. Slug didn’t flinch. “Ohh… Oh, I see. You think—You think you’re somehow going to win, aren’t you?”
Slug didn’t have the chance to respond. Adust quickly raised his weapon and backhanded the good doctor with it. It sent Slug into a bit of tizzy spell—and he found himself swaying on the spot, going so far as to hunch over, nearly taking a knee. Adust was kind enough to step forward and yank him up by the collar of his borrowed sweater.

“Let me remind you—” he practically spit in Slug’s face, “But this isn’t about you. It’s about justice.”

“R-Revenge…” Slug managed to grunt out, blood spilling from between his teeth.

“What?”

Slug grabbed to the straining forearm of the man gripping his sweater. He dug in with his nails pettily, explaining, “This has never been about justice. You wouldn’t know justice if stabbed you in the ass… You want revenge! You want to get back at the universe for your crappy fucking life…? Well, get in line shit-for-brains…! We’ve all had a bad time—”

Adust clocked him again and Slug’s hand slipped from the man’s arm. White Hat let out a shout—and Adust awkwardly gestured to the Elder Being with his weapon, “Enough from you!”

“I—I’m fine,” Slug managed to cough out, searching White Hat’s horrified face, the tips of his toes slipping along the bloody concrete as he struggled in the other man’s hold. “But I’m quickly losing my patience…”

“You?!”

“I would quite agree—” a new voice answered. Adust spun around just in time to see a blurry mass of purple charging at him. Slug was dropped in order for Adust to dodge out of the way of the slobbering 0.5.0. Dr. Flug walked into the scene, raising his own weapon carefully. He pointed it at the Anti-Hero. Meanwhile, Cero collected his bearings after the missed charged sent him crashing into the far wall. It shook the foundations of the room the smallest bit. A thin layer of dust from the ceiling sparkled around the glowing red room.

“No!” Adust managed to whine and shriek at the same time, clutching his head as he stared with wide eyes at the Villainous cavalry coming in.
“I would drop the gun, please,” Flug suggested. He looked over to Black Hat, who was letting out his own long sigh at the appearance of the other doctor. Dem groaned low, and suddenly, Flug was focused on her injured person. His goggles narrowed to a deadlier expression, “Or, I suppose I could claim self-defense.”

“Not necessary, doctor,” Slug said as he rose, checking his temples for fractures. He felt like the whole world was rocking to and fro like a boat on stormy seas.

“Slug—Slug! Are you—?!” White Hat tried. Slug limped over to him, pulling out a scalpel. He jammed it into the chains around the wrist shackles and fiddled with the lock. White Hat grabbed the doctor’s shaking fingers, imploringly looking into his eyes, tongue too twisted up to find words.

“I told you…” he murmured, slightly tired, but feeling exponentially better as White Hat looked unharmed (mostly), “Everything is alright.”

“No, no, no!” Adust screamed from his corner. He stood, pointing his gun wildly at each occupant in the room.

Dr. Flug had very little time, but he rolled out of the way of a haphazard firing. Cero growled, ignoring a bullet digging deep into his shoulder blade. Black Hat backed up in his spot. Dementia bled. But White Hat, he grabbed Slug around the shoulders and pulled him in close to shield him.

It was then that a large metal shield was tossed like a Frisbee into the room. It knocked the gun from Adust’s hand. The resounding clang was accompanied by another scream of frustration and agony. The man clutched his hand in his chest as, yet again, another person slid into the room. This person—suited in a dusty white Hero armor—took off a helmet. Cotton candy colored hair was shaken out, as a big blue bear worriedly padded up behind her.

“Clementia!”

“5.0.5.!”

Clementia basically ran up to White Hat and Slug, scooping up her shield. White Hat was the first one to bounce excitedly, exclaiming, “That was amazing, darling! Truly Heroic!”

“Well, I was aiming for his head, but, ya know,” she said with a laugh, “I’ll take the compliment.”
She reached out briefly for Slug, concern on her features. He shook his head a little.

“Good job, but, put your first aid to work—” he suggested, looking over at the bleeding Dementia. Clem followed his look, startling at the sight of her wounded friend on the ground. She practically rushed over. 0.5.0. lumber closer to the girl, but Slug called out to the bear, “Restrain Adust first! We need to get White Hat and Black Hat out of here.”

Cero, huffing, left Clementia to tend to her friend. Dem was grinning almost manically at the other girl as her wounds were being held in a typical compression. 5.0.5., though, was clinging to Dr. Flug, nearly blubbering. Black Hat sighed, gratefully, if one would be so bold to assume.

If only it were that simple.

Adust was panting hard, staring at his hand. The fingers bent and broken. Blood was leaking through his unusual gloves. It dripped in the silence with a frightening clarity. Cero was just barely within reach when the man lashed out. He scraped his palms together—the rough grating sound similar to the strike of a matchbox.

The air around him exploded, swirling with light and flame. Cero was blown back, sailing up and over everyone’s heads. Again, the foundations were shaking, debris beginning to rain down. Adust was screeching. He looked over at the open doors and walls of flames erupted, leaping and licking at the ceiling, “No one’s leaving!”

Slug gasped, finally managing to crack open the lock on White Hat’s chains. White Hat pulled the man low, under the smoke starting to rise around them.

“For something!” Black Hat yelled over the crackling of flames.

“Like what?!” White Hat shouted back, hands pressing the doctor into his chest for safety.

Slug grabbed the Elder Being’s lapels and pointed at the ground, uncaring of whatever the twins were barking at each other in their ancient tongues, “Uh, is this supposed to be happening?”

“Huh? Wha—” White Hat followed were Slug’s fingers were tracing the suddenly obnoxious red glow of sigils lighting up the floor. His blue eye followed the letters blazing bright—realizing it was because they were soaking up blood from the Anti-Hero’s leaking glove. He jerked his gaze up to
his brother, “Black Hat! It’s him!”

Black Hat was crouched low, ignoring the waving air and bellows of smoke filling the room. His own eye tracing the swirling runes before gasping.

“What do we do?!” White Hat demanded.

“Kill him!”

White Hat didn’t move. He just held on to Slug, the slightest bit tighter. Slug looked up at him, breathing in the heat, and stared at that pale face.

“Why are you hesitating?!” Black Hat demanded, “Eliminate him!”

“But…” White Hat whispered. Unsure, he glanced down at Slug… as if seeking guidance.

Slug, of course, is a genius—but he didn’t need to be one to understand what was happening. Ajust was at the root of the hellish room. He was the one who was causing misery and pain, masquerading it as a form of untethered justice.

Anti-Heroes.

It sounded like a good thing—some Villains could not be dealt with by traditional means. Some evil existed outside of the realm of laws… so, shouldn’t there be some Heroes with a little less reservations? Pain begets pain. Best to root out the pain that was spreading like wildfire.

White Hat was trying so hard.

But this was too much to ask of him, Slug knew.

Even in a room, surrounded by friends and family, he still thought of himself as a Hero. As someone who had to do better. Who was too powerful to simply snuff out a flame—though he was probably more vulnerable in this one room than anywhere else in the world.
In the flickering firelight, Slug saw it, the pistol.

The one he made all those years ago in case White Hat wasn’t what he thought he was. And…

White Hat really wasn’t.

He was better. Much better than the world deserved.

At least, in Slug’s opinion.

Slug knew what he had to do.
Let Us Conclude this Tale

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNINGS:

Fire.
Guns.
Blood.
Death.
Sadness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Final Chapter: Let Us Conclude This Tale

The thing about Good and Evil—the truth of it, if you believe in truth—is that not one particular thing is wholly good or wholly evil. There is too much in this world to consider when one talks about something being good or something being bad.

Is a soldier good? Perhaps if they fight for freedom. What if that soldier is employed in the eradication of an entire civilization? Perhaps not so good. But then again, a soldier does have a family at home. Mouths to feed. In the heat of battle, who knows what one is capable of doing to survive…?

Of course, dear readers, this is not to patronize or shove philosophies into your head and demand you pay attention to them. These are simply things Slug doesn’t often think about. He can’t afford to think about them. He cannot evaluate, in the moment, which is the right or wrong choice. How best to live his life unconditionally, how to live unproblematic.

He has a very real problem, a very real fear… and a very sad situation to deal with.

White Hat is holding him close, unable to move, thinking faster than ever what the right and good choice is. Black Hat is gray and shouting. Cero is buried in cement debris. Clementia is holding the wounds closes on Dementia’s legs. Dr. Flug is comforting the scared 5.0.5.
Then, there is the Anti-Hero, stalking through the flames toward them all.

Because, of course, it had to be fire and flames. It had to be.

“Okay,” Slug breathes quietly. White Hat is looking down at him, eye wide. Slug brings his scarred hands up and holds the immaculate face for a moment, “It’s okay. You don’t have to worry. I got this. *Meu amor, eu vou te salvar dessa vez*...”

He pulls away from White Hat—quick and sure. He ignores the blur of the thin air, the pungent smoke, the sting of the heat. Slug scoops up the pistol and aims true. The shot whizzes through the air, smacks hard into the center of Adust’s body. The man stumbles backwards. He glances down at his chest. The blood blooms like a rose. The Anti-Hero shakes his head.

Adust charges at Slug with the ferocity of a man knowing death is at hand. Slug takes the impact—because the bullet must have just missed the heart—he needs the next shot to land true. They grapple along the burning ground. Everything is so fast. The next moment happens in flashes of action:

Another shot goes off.

Slug has to elbow the man in the face.

Adust is on top of him.

The barrel of the gun burns.

But—

He forces his hand around it, twisting it into the center of the Anti-Hero’s chest.

He pulls the trigger...

Adust chokes—body jerking backwards—and then...
The flames licking the edges of the room simmer down… just the slightest bit… The Anti-Hero doesn’t stumble so much as flop to the ground. Blood continues to soak his clothes. The glow of the ancient sigils are dimming. The red is fading and Slug just breathes out. He stands, a little lightheaded by all the fire and fighting and what he had to do. Again.

“Everyone alright?” he asks, glancing around the room.

Clem has moved to the rubble hiding Cero from sight. Flug and 5.0.5. are now supporting the wobbly Dementia. Black Hat, finally, has managed to rip his chains from the floor—the shackles breaking as his claws crack through the metal. White Hat was kneeling, looking at Slug with such a devastated expression.

“What’s with that look?” he says, with almost a tease, because he doesn’t want to think about the fire. The blood. All the red in the room.

Slug’s side twinges when reaches for White Hat. It makes him pause with a slight gasp. He lowers his hand to his side. It feels… wet. He looks down and all that red he hates so much has gotten on him somehow.

“Slug!”

In the next few seconds, Slug collapses into white arms, the smoggy room spinning about him. It takes a minute, but he catches on, thinking aloud, “Oh. I’ve been… shot?”

“Slug! Don’t move!” White Hat demands. He glances around, wrapping his arm around Slug’s shoulder blades and propping the man up in his lap. The Elder Being moves his other hand to the gunshot wound, the blood seeping between talons and staining the ground, “Just wait a minute! I’ll heal you—”

“You can’t yet,” Black Hat rumbles, glancing over to the dead body of the Anti-Hero.

“What do you mean—” White Hat hisses.

“The room gains energy from blood sigils—” the Eldritch tried to explain, “But until the body is
drained of blood, the sigils still remain powerful enough to only allow the most basic of our powers. Shifting, strength, soul collections it feels like but—”

“Then we get out of this room,” White Hat started, lifting Slug slightly. The man made a pained noise, and the Elder Being hesitated. He glanced over to the entrance to their unholy prison. A wall of fire and crumbled ceiling were still blocking the exist.

“You need to wait—” Black Hat went to say, but the light twin snarled at him.

Clementia managed to pull the purple bear out of the debris. The room around them shivered. Though the fire was flicking low, it was still enough to cause the occupants pause. Black Hat flicked his hand over to the blue bear, and it blubbered along the edges of the room, patting out flames. Clementia dashed forward and Black Hat warningly shook his head. Dr. Flug placed a hand on the girl’s shoulder to stopped her. Cero growled, but, could only plop on the floor tiredly. She gripped it’s claws as she watched White Hat stem the flow of blood from Slug’s side.

“It’ll be okay—just hold on,” White Hat managed to say. Slug was breathing shallow, staring at him, a little less confused.

“Yeah…”

“Slug?” White Hat asked, holding on tight.

“D-Don’t worry about that…” Slug sighed, moving his hand up to White Hat’s arm with such softness, “It’s okay… I’m not hurt.”

White Hat shook his head, “What? No—You’re—”

“I’m sorry—” Slug quietly says, and he cracks the tiniest smile, staring up at the Elder Being with a strange little expression. White Hat doesn’t know what to make of it. He holds on tighter—but the flow of blood is much, much slower now. It was pumping out so quick before and now… “I didn’t think it was gonna end like this.”

“Slug…?” White Hat says like it’s the only thing he can say. Maybe it is. All of other types of communication are leaving him. All of his focus zeroes in on Slug’s tragically, lovely, sad face. There is such an odd, fading look in his earthy eyes.
“I kept saying it was going to end in heartbreak…” Slug breathes out unhurriedly, moves his hand up to White Hat’s eye to catch those gorgeous tears. They slice into the pads of fingers, but he doesn’t seem to notice, “I didn’t want you to be hurt, ya know? I could take it but…”

White Hat brings his bloody hand up to Slug’s and presses it against his cheek with force, “Stay with me for a while longer. Just—”

“I don’t think I get a choice,” Slug whispers, and it’s hard to keep his eyes open.

“Nonononononononono!” White Hat begins, pulling the lithe body closer, cradling Slug to his chest, “Just a second, okay?! Just a moment longer and I’ll—I’ll fix you, I promise—Just—”

“You know… that… I love you… don’t you?”

White Hat doesn’t know why, but something inside him breaks at the words. They are pitched low, soft, a secret between the two of them. All White Hat can do is shake his head yes, can’t catch a breath to make sure Slug knows. His eyes are closed, and his hands are against the pale face. He can probably feel it, can feel the desperate answer. White Hat clutches the scarred hand to his cheek, but the blood isn’t flowing anymore.

“No…” he begs, “No… wait… please… Stay with me…”

Clementia falls to her knees, head in her hands. Dementia watches, but Dr. Flug is holding her aloft. 5.0.5. cries, but Cero doesn’t do more than let out a very low rumble as he brings the girl in, hiccupping into the aborigine fur, “No… no, he—he promised me he’d live forever!”

And Black Hat?

Black Hat stands behind his brother, tall and dark, like an ever-stretching shadow.

“I’m… I’m sorry,” Black Hat says.
White Hat pulls his face away, glaring at the dark thing, “No! It’s not over—”

The Elder Being’s blue eye flares and he raises a talon. It lengthens, and he takes a steadying breath to rear up. He means to plunge it into Slug’s chest. Black Hat is quicker though—catches the white wrist in his own inky grip.

“What are you doing?!” White Hat spits out, trying to free his glowing hand, “He’s about to die—I need to—”

“You cannot take his soul!” Black Hat exclaims.

“And why not?!”

“Because you promised him!”

White Hat startles, eye losing it’s flare. He looks back down at Slug—who looks asleep. Who looks paler by the second. Who he made many promises to and… and suddenly White Hat can’t remember if he ever kept a single one to him.

“But he’s…” the Elder being chokes, tries to think of an excuse.

“I know you… you said… you wouldn’t look at his soul,” Black Hat’s voice doesn’t have a bite to it, and White Hat hates how careful his brother sounds in this moment, “Am I right? You wouldn’t put him through any more pain… right? Don’t do this to him.”

“Am I just supposed to let him—” White Hat’s voice breaks, “Let him go?"

Black Hat grip tightens on his wrist, “You have to.”

“Why?! What good does that do?!”

“White…” his twin mutters, “You have to. You can’t take this from him.”
White Hat shook his head furiously, “No. No, you just want to see me in pain—you don’t—you do not get to confuse me! I’m not taking anything from him! I have to save him—”

“White Hat…”

“I—I can’t—” White Hat stuttered, pleading up at the shadow leaning over him.

“You need to let him be at peace…” Black Hat murmured, and White Hat’s arm was shaking in his claws, “You need to let him go… let him be with the people he loved most.”

“But—But I love him!” White Hat broke, realization hitting him. That emptiness inside filling and draining all at once. His hand stopped its own glowing as he looked at the dying man in his lap. He couldn’t stop sobbing, pulling up Slug to hug closer, trying to hold on for the littlest bit longer.

Black Hat was still holding his wrist… but slowly loosening.

“No… I didn’t know…”

“I’m sorry…”

“No,” White Hat sniffled, pushing his forehead against Slug’s, “I don’t want this… I don’t want him to leave… not now… not yet. I’m not ready…”

Black Hat sighed, “I know, I know…”

“Black Hat?” the Elder Being asked, still staring at Slug’s closed eyes, “Will you do me a favor…?” Black Hat made no sound, no movement, at hearing such calm in the quiet voice. White Hat twisted his wrist around—twisting talons into claws in a mockery of a hand-hold. “When he’s… When Slug is gone. When Clementia is safe… can you kill me?”

Black Hat slowly closed his claws around White Hat’s.
“I don’t think—” he took in a shuddering breath, “I don’t think I can go on without him. He was the only one who… I… I can’t stand this hole inside of me anymore… You’re right. There’s no point to life if the people you care about are—”

“Say no more,” Black Hat agreed, lifting his gaze to the stoic Dr. Flug.

White Hat let out a grateful breath… and decided to wait as he held on to the warm body of his love.

…

Slug felt warm. He felt weightless. He felt like he was waking up after a long, pleasant dream. Golden light spilled from between his fluttering lashes. He rose his tanned hand to block out the glowing sun. The sound of the ocean crashed inside his ears. It took a minute, but as he sat up ina lush grass-bed slick with dew and sea-mist, he recognized he was at his gazing hill. He turned around, rubbing at his eyes with the heel of his palms.

The house.

He stood up on strong legs—nothing ached—and made the climb past the gates and into the yard still littered with toys and glittery child’s art. The chimes spun, and rainbows danced across the sun-bleached adobe. The smell of cinnamon wafted through a hallway filled with laughing pictures.

He reached the kitchen… only to clasp a hand over his mouth in order to stifle the cry about to leave him. Miranda looked up just in time to catch the brimming of tears. She gave him a pleased little grin, “Ah… there’s my handsome husband.”

“Daddy!” Ama spun in her seat, seeing him and lighting up. She knocked over the chair as she ran at him. He quickly knelt and swept her up, peppering her chubby face with a thousand kisses. Miranda walked up, dusting her hands on an apron. She carelessly untied it so that it fell to the floor. Slug took her into his arms and held on tight. She laid her dark head on his shoulder and swayed with him as he finally slid to the ground in a heap.

Slug rocked them back and forth, unable to help the happy laugh that left him, “You’re alright…! You’re here!”

“Of course, dear,” Miranda said, her own laugh answering his, “Though we have been waiting a
“I’m sorry,” he shook his head as tears kept dripping out of him. His little daughter wiped it away with her soft, cotton sleeve.

“Did you miss us, daddy?” Ama asked.

Slug nodded too many times to count, “Oh my Lord, every day.”

“Every day?!?”

“Every single second you were gone,” he added, bumping her nose with his. She giggled and kissed it. Miranda just gazed up at them, playing with his hair.

“Are you gonna ask me if I missed you?” the little girl questioned. Slug just nodded. Ama hummed happily, “Because, I did sometimes.”

“Only sometimes?” he teased. She stuck out her tongue, wiggling from his hold. He let her go. She ran over to the backdoor he had left open, excitedly pointing out to the sea. Slug turned to Miranda, confused. She was standing now, grabbing his hand with assuredness.

“Come, love…”

Slug let her tug him away from the kitchen, toward the slowly softening colors of the setting sun. A white moth was fluttering against a half-used clothes line. It stood out against his favorite red-sweater turtleneck. He paused, finger’s slipping from Miranda’s to stare at it.

An omen.

Someone was about to die.

“Husband?”
Slug startled, looking over at his beautiful wife, his adorable daughter… silhouetted against the fading gold of the sun. They glowed, otherworldly. He walked toward them, taking their hands, all smiles as they led him to the edge of the cliff at the sea. Together, they watched the sun spill rays of sunshine and weave bridges of light across the rolling sea.

“It’s…” Slug found he didn’t even have words for the beauty before him, “Is this heaven?”

Miranda shook her head, smile sly and face flushed, “No… not yet.”

“There’s more?” he asked, incredulous.

Ama bounced once on her toes. She took off, feet leaping off the ground and splashing into the sunshine. Her little body faded into a piercing light—growing wings—until she became a giggling butterfly, flap-flapping across the rainbow speckled sky. He gasped, wanting to reach out. Miranda squeezed his hand, taking a step herself into the brilliant light. The glow from within her spilling out as dazzling kaleidoscope of colors.

“Are you coming?”

Slug could feel the ghost of her hand in his… the little butterfly kisses of the light sparkling along his own lashes… and beneath the crash of the ocean… his name.

Slug.

He looked up at the rippling sun, descending past the ocean. So many butterflies, dancing, migrating toward the warmth. Stars—too white and too bright—cutting and shining behind him. It was all too lovely. Too dreamy. It was something more… something peaceful. And though his heart had ached and longed to see his wife and child—

“No…” he said, soft, more than sorry as he lifted Miranda’s hand to kiss one last time, because, honestly, that was all he needed, “No, I don’t think so. You go on ahead. You deserve it.”

“Oh? And you don’t?” her voice asked, playful, sounding like wind.
Slug gave a one-shoulder shrug. “Dunno, but… I still have a few things to take care of.”

Miranda laughed and Ama flew close by. Landed on his cheek.

“Love you, daddy! You be good!”

“Bye, baby…” he whispered, watching her trail glitter as she flew up into the sky… becoming a twinkling star far, far in the distance. Miranda twirled with her, and all Slug did was wave at them, wishing them well with all of his heart.

Once they faded from his sight, he turned around, staring out into the darkness behind him.

He ran headlong into the shadowy abyss, grunting out, “Wait for me, White—Before you do something stupid.”

You see, the thing is, slugs don’t turn into butterflies.

They are grounded, stuck to life in dirt, on Earth.

That’s where they belonged… the little pests, very hard to kill off you know.

…

The room wasn’t smoking, wasn’t glowing. White Hat had stopped his sobbing. Black Hat still stood beside him. Dr. Flug had managed to find a hole in the rubble, dragging Dementia out, mostly. Cero was cradling Clem’s head to his chest as he ushered her after the other doctor. 5.0.5. was sniffing, paws full of soot.

And, suddenly, with a great gasp—Slug’s eyes sprang open. White Hat startled backwards, dropping Black Hat’s hand. The man gave a cry, holding onto his side.
“Shitfuck, OW!”

“Slug?!” the Elder being exclaimed.

“You dropped me! Ass-hat!”

Slug was gearing up for a full rant, holding on to his very sore injury, but then White Hat cut him off with a desperate hug. He settled as he was squished into a sturdy chest that gave off healing vibes in great gushes of waves. “You came back!”

“Yeah…” Slug sighed, blinking up past White Hat’s shoulder and into an equally surprised dark face.

“I—I thought you—” the words stuttered and quieted. White Hat pulled back a little, cupping his face and letting out a relieved breath, “How did you manage to…?”

“I…” Slug started. Then, he closed his mouth. It took him a few tries. Then, sighing, held on and pressed butterfly kisses against White Hat’s cheek, “I decided to stay. Plain and simple…”

White Hat wound his arms tight around Slug, nearly falling backwards by the sudden realization, “You chose me?”

“How many times do I have to tell you, dumbass,” Slug muttered, pressing lips against White Hat’s unmarred shoulder, “You can’t choose who you love.”

…

White Hat stood before his brother, staring around at the desolate plain they found themselves in. His pocket burned, and Black Hat was bored, slouching against ancient bones… it was the place this had all started. How long had it been since they were last in this dimension?

“How’s Slug?” Black Hat inquired when his light twin grew close enough to hear the gruff words.
“Very well,” the Elder being responded. The Eldritch Horror roused himself up enough to begin searching through his own pockets. “And I hoping after this, even more so.”

Black Hat found what he was looking for and pulled it from his pocket, “Just do as I told you, and he’ll do fine.”

“Hm, I’m tempted to believe you,” White Hat said as he drew his brother’s eye out into the open. Black Hat grinned with razors as he also presented the flaming blue orb in his own palm out. Before they could exchange their own eyes, the Elder being paused, one foot sliding back. “Are you sure?”

“You know…” Black Hat slowly replied, pinching the blue eye between his claws, “I don’t know. I’m surprised you want to do this so soon. I thought I would have another millennia at least… though, after everything, that Anti-Hero was right.”

White Hat nodded, “I nearly lost my most precious person. I can’t be that careless again.”

“Blah, don’t be nasty, brother mine.”

White Hat laughed, but felt no animosity toward his shadow. They exchanged eyes and stepped away from one another. Black Hat happily rolled the flaming thing over his palms and around the back of his hand. He spun it on the tip of his fingers before closing his fist around it. It seemed to absorb back into his body—wisps of smoke lingering in the putrid air.

“I suppose we’re enemies again,” the dark twin said.

“I suppose…” White Hat said, carefully holding the blue eye. He squashed it between his hands until it crystalized into a thin ring.

Black Hat peeled the edge of reality away, toying with it for a second, “It was… fun, you know. While it lasted.”

“What was?” White Hat asked, curious.

“Being… not-enemies.”
White Hat smiled at him.

“Ew,” Black Hat mocked, turning his eyes away from the beautiful sight of his beaming brother, “Way to ruin the moment…”

“Take care, Black Hat.”

“Pft. Of course. Same to you—” the Eldritch said, pointing menacingly, “And remember. Only I get to kill you.” He left with a ripple of reality.

White Hat pocketed the pure white ring, saying to nothing in particular, “I love you too, brother.”

…

Slug was waiting for him, perched on the pure, pristine desk. The man was a bundle of nervous energy, masquerading cool and aloof. It made White Hat smile wide.

“So, how’d it go?” the doctor asked.

White Hat produced the ring from his pocket. Slug stared at it, not yet hopping off the desk. Then, walking over, he gestured for the man’s hand. Slug hesitantly held out his gloved hands. White Hat went to stripping them off carefully, “I transfigured it.”

“Uh… cool, so—” Slug hiccupped in surprise when the ring was slid onto his finger. A bright blue gem shined in the intricate, delicate white lining, “Did—Did you just—”

“I would like you to keep a piece of me with you, wherever you are,” White Hat said.

“Sure, sure, but I thought we established I am not leaving…?” Slug asked, somewhat in awe as he stared at the eye-turned-ring.
White Hat gave him a shrug, explaining, “Well. If I am going to keep your soul, I figured it was only fair that you keep—well… my eye…” He paused here, tilting his head and self-consciously scratching at his bandage, “Actually. I imagined the gesture a whole lot more romantic than this is turning out to be… I mean, who wants someone with only one eye, right?”

“White,” Slug said, flicking his gaze up to White Hat’s nervous face. Then, the man removed his mask and placed it behind him. He gestured to his own fire-revenged face with the hand that held that pretty ring, “Two can play this game.”

“Slug…”

“Just saying, boss,” Slug slyly said, lounging back on the desk.

White Hat shook his head, walking forward and in-between the man’s semi-opened legs. He leaned down, one hand cautiously taking a scarred cheek. He looked so softly at the human. Slug could feel his heart stutter a little in his chest. But, just a little bit…

“Are you sure about this?” White Hat asked, “About me? About… staying?”

Slug nodded against the talons curling against his jawline, “Are you sure?”

“I’ve never been more sure of anything else,” he murmured, smiling.

“Well. That says a lot,” Slug muttered, feeling his face heat, “Considering you are literally older than dirt.” White Hat was chuckling to himself. He offered his hand to Slug, helping him hop off the desk. They stood very close together, chests brushing with every breath. Slug staring up at the Elder being, partly curious. “Okay… so… how does this contract thing work?”

“It depends… but,” White Hat started, palm lightly resting on Slug’s sternum, “Mostly, you tell me what you desire in place of your soul. As long as I hold it in my possession… my power will work towards whatever you want.”

“Hmmm, no wonder you need souls to consume,” he said, looking at that beautiful face.
White Hat nodded, “It’s… never an overly pleasant exchange. Sometimes… a being cannot handle the loss… sometimes they cannot handle the limitless power.”

“I see…” Slug said. It didn’t make much sense to him—and *that* was a lot to admit given his own genius—but he supposed it didn’t have to. It was simply the way things were for whatever White Hat was. Which… well… now, he supposed, White Hat was Slug’s. “You’re willing to risk a lot just to have me around.”

“For you? I am willing to do anything. I will risk everything,” White Hat admitted.

“You don’t have to,” the doctor said, placing his hand over White Hat’s on his chest.

White Hat must have learned a new expression somewhere. It was quite an interesting little smirk that was growing. A grin that just couldn’t hide the fact he was well aware he wasn’t being entirely careful at all, “Eh, I *want* to.”

“Oh no,” Slug all but whispered to himself when White Hat leaned down to rest his forehead on Slug’s. It was hard to look away from that sparkling blue eye, “I have been the *worst* influence on you…”

“I disagree.”

“Stop being cheeky,” Slug warned without bite, a little bit of nervousness creeping in. White Hat settled, pulling the man in closer with another arm around his waist.

“Tell me what you want now…” his words were softer.

Slug squeezed his eyes shut, readying himself internally, “I thought it was obvious by now…? I just want to be with you… for as long as you’ll have me.”

“Is forever acceptable?”

“More than…’
Slug took in a breath—feeling as if something reached deep, deep... deeper inside him than anything else had ever been before. It made him a little dizzy, a little bit lighter. He was terribly afraid for a second that he might drift up and away. Without thought, he grabbed onto White Hat, a gasp just barely there behind his lips. Strangely it was White Hat that spoke—

“Oh...”

“I’m—I warned you that—” Slug couldn’t quite grasp language for a second... feeling bereft for the briefest of seconds... until he realized, he only felt lighter. Freer. He felt less like he was being drowned, strangled for every little breath. There was so much room. It was like—like a brand-new space opened up inside of him. Something that was ready for more.

“No,” White Hat managed to choke out, and Slug found himself dazedly looking up at White Hat. His hand had moved to his own chest, where they’d agreed to keep Slug’s soul safe, inside of White Hat. “It wasn’t what you—Your soul is so warm... and so big... It’s—it’s golden, Slug! You have a heart of gold...”

Slug was staring amazed at White Hat, who face was splitting into the biggest smile.

“What?”

“Is this what it feels like?” White Hat asked, holding on just as tight to Slug.

“I—I don’t know? What does what feel like...?” Slug asked.

White Hat kissed him... and it was strange... to feel White Hat full of warmth. Full of something that was once inside of Slug. All those good things and all those awful things and all those very human things. He kissed as if he could pour everything that beautiful and terrible and oh, so very much worth living right back into Slug...

And Slug found himself opening up to receive it all—to relive it, to regift it back, letting it build and grow. His eyes fluttered open and White Hat seemed to glow with a little something else. Not quite so blue... not quite so unsure.
“Oh!” White Hat nearly giggled, holding onto the scarred face, and all Slug could do was stare up in bewildered wonder, “I think—I quite nearly forgot to tell you I love you.”

Slug felt it echoed back, resonating inside him, like an overflowing well, “I, uh… I think I figured it out… but you could always remind me again.”

White Hat leaned down, whispering those words over and over and over again. Slug had to hold, feeling all this lightness going to his head. White Hat held onto him… and Slug rested his head on his shoulder, arms wrapping around the Elder Being. Quietly, he pressed his lips against the cool ring settled on his finger, that blue gem twinkling…

“I love you too…”

Because, really… what more is there to say?

Chapter End Notes

... did I get ya?

'Cause I am hoping I have.
The Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Yes, dear readers. We have come to the end.
All of us, together.
I want to thank you, from the very bottom of my little, dark heart...
Thank you for sticking with this weird (amazing?) story.
I welcome any and all questions, comments, concerns, or just general whatever. I always love answering--and it's been a long journey writing this fic. Writing again, in general. I am glad, so very glad. Hopefully life is looking up for everyone else as well.
Thank you so much. I wish you all the best.
<3 <3 <3

Please enjoy.

The Epilogue

Slug was a little more than sleepy… a little bit sore… but the good kind. The kind he associated with White Hat—specifically a White Hat heat, as he dared to call them. Not that a heat had occurred. White Hat was an unsurprisingly needy lover… Or, er… Husband?

Slug hadn’t moved very much, eyes still closed, and White Hat hands were caressing his legs… and if he dared to count them, definitely more than two pair were travelling from his calves, hooking up high on his thighs… dragging him away from his very plush pillows in a romantic parody of something more appropriate to a horror movie.

“Whiiiiiiite...” he whined, “Nooo… I’m tired…”

“But, beloved…” his mouth murmured as it traced a path down from his exposed neck to his collar bone, “Darling. Beautiful. My sweet… My dear doctor…” with each word, each proclamation being kissed into his skin, “I’ll be gentle… Slow…”
Slug wanted to huff. It took a lot of his will power, but he closed his legs, wiggling lightly out of White Hat’s hold. And of course, White Hat was a gentleman and let him burrow back into the copious number of pillows... “You always say that but—”

“It’s very hard,” White Hat whined this time, his body settling across Slug’s.

“White Hat—” the doctor did huff this time, feeling the blush rise to his face, “Phrasing.”

“I know what I said.”

With a gasp as he was ground down upon, Slug rose his arms to entangle them around White Hat’s shoulders, “A-Alright… I suppose one more time…”

…”

Slug hummed, feeling the healing radiating out from White Hat as the Elder being was sitting on the bed, softly running fingers over the legs across his lap. The doctor was staring at him, overly sated, and a little bit less tired, “You don’t need to… I wasn’t actually harmed…”

“No, but it helps, doesn’t it?” White Hat asked. He leaned over the human briefly, planting the sweetest kiss, a chaste thing, before he sat back up.

Slug went to chase it, sitting up on his elbows. White Hat leaned back, blue eye twinkling. The human had to shake his head at the cheekiness. He flopped back onto the bed, refusing to play. White Hat, of course, never seemed to mind. He continued to run his hand along Slug’s leg. The flesh that was so torn by grafts, the skin shiny and smooth… though the wounds didn’t hurt anymore, White Hat still liked to place his cool palms there to help.

“I think you’re trying to distract me…” Slug finally said.

White Hat shrugged, but would not stop touching, not stop his methodical stroking of Slug’s skin.
“Really… White Hat,” Slug started… and the Elder being sighed, hugging onto the legs and turning his face to the man—even though he wanted to hide from the words he knew were coming, “It was necessary. You can’t be mad at Clem… I made her put me in cryo… My soul hasn’t been in my body for well over—”

“I’m not mad,” he explained.

Slug rose up, just a little, thumb running along the edge of White Hat’s eye socket. The ring of his finger shined. “Then why can’t we leave the bedroom? My body isn’t breaking down—and the soul is right back where it belongs. No one’s going to steal it a second time.”

“I just…” White Hat mumbled, burying his face in embarrassment, “I’m not ready to share you yet…”

Slug placed his face in his hand as he watched this great, powerful being pout. Of all things… he was acting so selfish and childish… and Lord help him—it was highly unbecoming—but he supposed he could understand.

Definitely wasn’t going to give in to it though.

“Sharing is caring, you know,” Slug teased, letting White Hat hug his legs tighter. The doctor sat up a little higher and attempted to wrap around the pale body holding him, “And Clementia doesn’t even live at the Manor properly anymore. I bet she misses me too—”

“She should move back, then!” White Hat was grumbling.

Slug couldn’t help it, he was laughing, “She has Estella. She wanted to do the adult thing without us. Raise her without all the complications she had as a kid.”

“Estella is still becoming a Hero though so…” White Hat continued with the grumbling.

“Well, following in the line of her grandparents, parents, and all…” Slug mused, trying to annoy White Hat by pressing his face into the Elder being’s space. Though, it didn’t bother either of them much. White Hat responded by letting go of Slug’s legs to instead clasp his face and bring him in for a deep, long searing sort of kiss.
He was pressing the human back into the bed. Slug, for the moment, was content. White Hat, mostly humanoid now, in a regular form, had crawled over Slug and was still kissing, as he didn’t need breath. The doctor, though, had to break away and draw in a lungful. Almost reproachfully, he was staring into that blue eye.

“Really… let’s go downstairs. Make breakfast—” he began. White Hat languidly kissed him. Slug shook his head, grabbing the perfect face between his fingers, trying not to grin, but it was very hard with such an imploring look, “White. White Hat. Love of my life. Holder of my soul…”

“Yes?”

“It’s time to get up now,” he gently admonished as White Hat swooped in for one more kiss, “Our daughter is home. And grand-daughter.”

White Hat blinked down at him, “Grand-daughter?”

“Clem has raised Estella for over ten years now. That’s our grandbaby.”

“Oh…”

“Who else did you think I was talking about?” Slug questioned.

White Hat sat up, a little dazed. The human breathed out a goodnatured sigh as the Elder being seemed to re-evaluate his world once more. Sometimes—well, more than sometimes—he was little bit slow on the uptake.

…

Breakfast was simple, just some Belgium waffles with assorted toppings. White Hat had taken forever to let Slug get up—let alone to let him get dressed for the day. Both were in casual attire—Slug in a signature sweater, sans the lab-coat and gloves—and White Hat had simply worn slacks and a button up (though his top hat was still a must). He was placing a tiny lipped cup of home-made sauce on the table when Cero burst through the kitchen doors. Estella sat on his shoulder, and Clementia followed behind, hair slightly askew from sleep.
“Good morning, Heroes,” White Hat greeted. Slug walked up to the table and placed down the large assortment of waffles. Estella floated down, grabbing at the darkly colored wheat one and happily shimmed her shoulders as she started eating.

“Thank you, Sug-Bug!” her happy mind-voice chirped out.

The doctor smiled at the girl, as she was quite use to his face without the mask, “You’re welcome, baby-star.”

“You know, I never understood how even though you cannot physically speak,” Clementia began, loading her plate with carbs, “You still never managed to use the L sound until you were seven…”

Estella shrugged in response, munching on her waffle in thought. White Hat sat across from her, offering syrup, but she waved it off. He took more for his own plate and looked over at Clementia instead, “Well… Just because her powers are mental doesn’t mean they don’t need practice.”

“She called me Chemshaw for the first three months she lived with me,” Clem reminisced, “And do you know how weird that is to explain to a building supervisor? Like, he got it, aliens are a thing and Heroes and whatnot but—three months. Three months of trying every other name I could think of to cause panic to the neighbors!”

“Ironic that you’re Hero name is the White Lady,” Slug taunted.

“Pffft, she didn’t even know that for a year,” she waved off.

Estella huffed in her seat, hoovering off the cushion a little, “I was four!”

“But not dumb!” Clementia continued, stuffing her mouth fully of delish bready breakfast, “I’m fairly certain you did it on purpose…”

White Hat eased the telekinetic girl with a soft tap at her mental door. Instantly, she let him in and he assuaged her with memories from when Clementia was a little girl. Mostly, with all the trouble she got into—especially when dealing with Heroes or with White Hat in general. Not to say Clem was a bad kid growing up… just that she had plenty of her own youthful mishaps she’d rather like to
In fact, as the two otherworldly beings smiled mischievously at one another, Clementia narrowed her eyes, pointing a fork at White Hat. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing…”

“You were so cute as a kid, Clemmy!” she nearly squealed. Both Slug and Clementia twitched in their seats at her accidentally barrage of noise in their minds. “Ahh… sorry…”

“Don’t worry,” Slug waved off, then shook his head.

“Actually, she’s been doing that a lot recently,” Clementia explained, rubbing her temples. Cero rumbled somewhere under the table in acknowledgement.

White Hat nearly vibrated out of his seat in excitement, “I can help!”

“Uhhh… I dunno, White Hat…” she muttered. Slug lightly placed a hand over Estella’s, looking over at Clem with understanding eyes.

“I’ve told you before,” he reminded, “We’re not going anywhere. Any time you need help, either of you.” He punctuated this by giving Estella a little hand-squeeze. It was almost like static cling, the feeling of her soft glowing hand. “But no pressure.”

“Clemmy…” Estella looked at her, less like a Hero in training, and more like a kid. Which is what she was… but, she was also born from Heroes. She wasn’t quite human. These were things Estella was going to have to learn, and while Clementia, herself, was an exceptional human—the fact remains—still human.

“Well,” she gulped, “That mission did put us off planet for a while… and, uh, I never did tell my landlord about it… well… I am going to have to sort out the apartment problem… so, alright. I guess we can stay at the Manor for a while longer.”

“YAY!”

Clementia hissed, but Slug seemed to take the effervescent response in stride. He stood up, offering
the girl another waffle without syrup (but loaded with carob), “Come on, Estel—I’ll show you so pictures I have of your Clemmy.”

“Wait, what…?” Clem asked, twisting her cotton-candy head around as Estella soared out of her seat after the retreating Dr. Slug. Cero sat up, hurriedly following the pair.

As Clementia looked at him with a slightly unsure face, White Hat shrugged, “He’s missed you, you know. And now with Estella training, you two are hardly over.”

“Well…” she sighed, pushing her food away from her to lean on her elbows closer to White Hat, “I missed you guys too.”

“Thank you,” White Hat said, seemingly out of the blue.

“What for?”

White Hat placed his hand over the soul flaring bright and warm in his chest.

“Ah… well, what else was I going to do?” she asked, smiling, “It’s Sluggy.”

“I would like a complete detail of everything that happened, though,” he said seriously.

Clementia sighed, nodding, “It’s sort of a strange story. I got tossed into a pocket dimension at some point… so I don’t recall much… it messed with me. I had all these memories from—well… I dunno. I guess from the first time I ever learned about the soul thing.”

“I am glad you made you made it back… Estella went after you, you know.”

“I know…” Clementia stuck her finger out at White Hat with her narrowed eyes, “And we’ll have a serious talk about that later.”

White Hat grimaced, “Well… in my defense, I was somewhat Soul-less at the time.”
“No excuses, White Hat,” she said.

“No, no. I was wrong. I know… but, she did want to help. Slug is also her, uh… well, grandparent, correct?”

“God-grandparent?” Clementia offered.

White Hat shrugged, “All’s well that ends well, I suppose.” Clementia remained silent for a moment. White Hat tilted his head. “Darling…?”

“Dem was there…”

“Oh…”

“She saved me,” Clementia basically whispered.

“I see… but—”

“I know, I know—” Clem raised a hand, standing. White Hat gave her a comforting smile that she had a hard time returning, explaining, “I told myself that as long as I had Estella to take care of, I was going to give up on the whole Dementia Thing…” She looked at her adoptive father figure to shake her head, “It doesn’t matter. I just don’t know how to explain it to Estella. And I’m not very good at the whole memory thing you guys can do… Maybe it is better if we just stay here… I don’t know.”

White Hat blinked, “Is that why you left with her? Left with Estella? Because of Black Hat and Dementia and, just… everything?”

“Maybe?” she hedged.

“You know, I don’t blame you—for your friendship with Dementia. I don’t think you trying to save her is naïve. I quite encourage it,” he said.
Clem laughed, crossing her arms, “Something I am sure Slug just loves.”

“Well, we don’t really discuss…” White Hat paused for a moment, “What do you call it? Just, the Dementia Thing?”

Both her shoulders rose and dropped with minimal movement.

“Well, whatever it is, darling… maybe you should ask your Sluggy’s opinion on it.”

“Oh gosh, no,” Clem managed through wide eyes, “That thought terrifies me.”

“Whatever for?” White Hat asked.

Clementia wasn’t a little girl anymore. Nor even, a young woman. She had been alive a very long time now—mostly thanks to her over-exposure from living with White Hat through the majority of her lifespan—as his aura, his presence was a life-preserver. It was only when she left with Estella did little wrinkles finally start to appear around her eyes—laugh lines, Slug had called them when he noticed. Still, to White Hat, she would always be this small, this bright little spot of humanity. A child he helped to nurture… who helped nurture him in return in her own ways.

“I expect him to tell me I need to move on. That I have to give up that particular ghost, you know?” Clementia said, raising one hand to her mouth. Her eyes were watery.

“I think I’ve seen you let go of Dementia more times than I can count…” White Hat said.

Clementia looked over at him, placing her hand from her mouth to her heart, “It’s ridiculous, I know… but she’s never… she is capable of good, I think. If someone were to give her the patience for it. I feel like I failed her, sometimes. But then—”

“Estella. I know,” White Hat sadly interrupted.

“How do I explain to her that—that the monster she’s always feared that took her parents… that same monster literally cannot harm me? That’s the biggest irony there is, isn’t there? Dem won’t hurt Estella because, hey, Estella’s mine now!”
White Hat stood and gave the girl a fierce hug. She returned it with a shuddering breath. White Hat stroked the candy colored hair, whispering, “Don’t worry, my dear. I have faith this will all work out in the end.”

“Thanks, White Hat…” she murmured.

“Anything for you, darling.”

...

Slug and White Hat were lying in bed again, not quite in the dark. There was a soft glow coming from within the Elder Being… and another from the ring on Slug’s finger. It was the strangest of comforts.

“Hey…” Slug said, settling his head on a pale, immobile chest. Though there was no heartbeat… no need for air, it was warm, rising with breath, “Guess what Clementia told me today.”

“Hmm?”

Slug pillowed his arms over the very nice pectorals and stared at White Hat’s resting face, “She told me that you let Estella go on that mission.”

“Oh. Uh—”

“Umm-hmmm,” Slug intoned, tapping at White Hat’s sternum. He could almost feel his soul sing back to him. He briefly wondered what that would be like to have it back in his body after it resting for so long somewhere else. But… nah. He was better off without. It was good in White Hat’s hands.

“I for sure thought she would have brought up Dementia—”

“No, Estella told me about Dem,” Slug said, navigating the dodge in the awkward conversation with
ease, “I didn’t realize we still had photos from before she went all… lizardy.”

“Ah… what did you say?” White Hat asked, more than curious.

Slug shook his head, “I’ve always dreaded that conversation… And, plus, I know Clementia would rather the girl hear it from her.”

“You didn’t lie though?”

“No,” Slug said, rubbing his fingers over the make-shift planes of pallid bone-structure, “I didn’t lie. I told her that she use to be Clem’s friend…”

“She saved Clementia—and by default Estella, you know,” White Hat explained.

“Ya know, I love that you defend that hybrid…”

“Clem thought you might.”

Slug snorted. He sat up on his haunches. He went to tracing White Hat’s face almost reverently. “I mean it, though… I’m glad you believe in multiple chances… worked out for me, didn’t it? So, why not for Dementia?”

“Oh my,” White Hat breathed into Slug’s palm before giving it a slow kiss, “Seems I am bad influence on you…!”

“Bad?” Slug asked, amusement growing as he tried to pull his hand away. White Hat caught it, rubbing the ring around his finger with a grin.

“Why yes,” he said, “You’ll lose face, won’t you?”

Slug rolled his eyes, stooping low to kiss White Hat—just a brush of lips, a lingering taste of mint—before pulling back, “Do you know how many jokes I could make about losing my own face? Both literally and figuratively. Just. You are setting me up for—umph!”
White Hat interrupted him by sitting up, Slug straddled in his lap, and winding his arms all the way around the human’s back. He kissed him deeply, thoroughly. Slug cupped the lovely white face in his hands, returning the kiss, settling still. That glowing grew brighter, gold and pleasant in their dim room, curtains drawn, and bed so soft.

“Talk about a bad influence…” he said, near breathless.

White Hat gave him the soft smile, one reserved for only his dear doctor, “No, that one was a good influence.”

“You just wanna argue…”

“Says the man still talking. Not kiss—hmmm…”

Slug took his revenge, ducking his head after a moment, lashes fluttering against colorless skin, “So… that thing… about being gentle and slow? Let me influence you about that…”

“Now you’re just saying words to say words…”

“Shut up, dumbass. I’m trying to seduce you,” Slug growled, pulling White Hat’s face back down to his, “You don’t always have to have the last word—”

“Oh,” White Hat gasped, then, as Slug continued with his very unneeded seduction, lost all previous thoughts about what they were talking about, “Ohh…!”

Well, not all thoughts or words were gone.

Through Slug’s breath, and deep in the man’s soul he could feel it, could practically hear it as it filled him up… finally having a heart for himself… he could feel them. He cherished them, each and everything that connected to the man in his arms… those golden, good things.

“I love you…”
“I love you too.”

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