Dome

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Dome

by hanktalkin

Summary

Although it’s meant to provide safety, Kelvin and Infernus only find themself trapped within the Frozen Shelter while something stalks them from just outside its icy walls.



commission by @neflil

They flee from the fight with their lives, but not much else, intact.

Infernus fades in and out of consciousness. If it weren't for the scrape of crampons, he could almost believe he's floating on clouds, the city splayed below him in a rhythmic, dreamlike way as Kelvin's feet slide across the ice. Though, despite their distance from streetlevel, they never rise above the tops of the highrises, balancing the speed of their escape with the cover darting between buildings provides.

Something hunts them.

His cheek presses into the coat, downy, still cloudlike, and occasionally forgets to be terrified as lucidity comes and goes. His leg is broken. Something seeps through his body, dense and ichorous, and when he tries to close his fist it only sporadically agrees. His eyes cast upward to catch a glimpse of either Kelvin's face or an indication of how deep of a mess they're in. The former betrays the later. A line of blood runs from sliced cheek into white-touched beard. Seven, behind them, is gaining ground rather than losing it, despite evasive maneuvers. The man in his arms hampers Kelvin's pace, while their pursuer has no such problems. He only needs his kill.

Kelvin's stronger than you'd think, for his size. Though, that misjudgment could only be made before you noticed the half-ton shard of bone he keeps strapped to his back with no apparent detriment to his mobility. He is resilient, he is near-immortal, but he will not abandon his charge, which means Infernus is about to drag another friend down with him. Distantly, he's jostled by a resolve that belongs to a more coherent version of himself, one who thinks about more than how soft Kelvin is or the needles that seem to have replaced the blood in his veins. They could make some sort of last stand, turn and face death instead of letting it close the distance they'll never make to base. Surely he's got one more fireball in him, one more facet of his being that wants to go down swinging.

However, the opportunity to go out in a blaze refuses him, firstly because thought is no longer moving at the speed of thought. A large chunk of time passes from when the idea of fighting formulates and when there is actual impetus to open a mouth, to flex a hand. His slowness is a blessing though; for then his last desperate attempt doesn't end up interfering with Kelvin's last desperate attempt.

With the footsteps on the ice behind them closing, Kelvin turns on a heel. Infernus can't see it, face buried in parka, but he knows Kelvin does something with his pellet launcher by the distinctive *thunk thunk* of its windup. That's the only warning, that sound, and then the pressure change falls on them hard.

An entire blizzard's worth of pressure. A bubble of ice so pristine it looks like blown glass, encasing them in a force-field distorted by the ground and the Florist's they've shied too close to. The return path is guillotine-sliced. The sounds of the city cease. Seven comes careening to a stop, throwing up a wave of snow from his shoes, and Infernus pictures a wonderful alternate reality where Kelvin timed it just a little later to cut the sick bastard in half. Instead, that is how the chase ends: Seven, just outside, Kelvin and Infernus within, the wight's knees suddenly giving out. In relief, or because he's simply reached his limit, the same limit that forced him to resort to the dome in the first place. He only barely manages to keep from dropping Infernus as he collapses, panting.

Vision swimming, Infernus cranes to get a better view of their pursuer, but Kelvin's arms tighten when he does, afraid the movement is his own failing grip.

Seven pauses, contemplating, though it's difficult to tell if his nonchalance is feigned or if he's enraged at all at being denied his satisfaction. The veil, as always, only displays the incongruous, and perpetual, Jack-o-lantern's grin.

He extends a finger, scraping it against the foot-thick curve of ice, chuckling, "A coward 'til then end, Kelvin. How very predictable."

"Cowardice?" Kelvin asks. "When you abandon the fight to hunt down a man hardly a threat to you? Execute him in cold blood?"

Infernus can hear the glare in his voice, feel him subtly shifting Infernus away from the danger. His leg protests.

“That’s called strategy, Kelvin,” Seven says, “something you’ve never fully grasped.”

The fingers drags down, a long, ragged claw leaving a ghoulish half-smile to grin at the pair shivering within. The cold sets in. Infernus already felt like a side of tenderized beef before it came down, but now it drains him until his hands shake, the idea summoning any fire at all a faint dream. Penned in, they watch as Seven paces, slowly elongating his gash in the ice until it becomes a cane-shape.

“How long do you think you can hold that?” Seven muses.

“Longer than your patience,” Kelvin says. “You seem a man all too feverish for his ambitions.”

“*Seem*?” Seven seethes, the pacing coming to a chilling stop. “You’re half a man Kelvin, still grubbing for an empty spot in your mind that’s not worth filling. I don’t waste my time *because* my patience is infinite. I know I’ll get to kill you. As unavoidably as a meteor crashing to earth.”

His hand leaves the ice, lingering for a moment, before withdrawing with its master. Seven makes to dissapear back into the city. He glides on unhurried steps, the last of their escape path blowing away as crystal dust under his feet.

When he is gone, Kelvin’s shoulders sag. “I have no doubt he is not far, waiting for us to make a break for it. I think we will be here some time.”

“How long will it hold?” Infernus’s voice is gravel and sour milk. It’s been hours since he’s used it.

“A while,” Kelvin says, “but it will weaken, eventually.” He shifts Infernus off knees, onto ground. “So, let's work on keeping you alive until help arrives, yes?”

“You think anyone’s coming?”

“Others survived. They will search for us.” Quieter, he adds, “They always do.”

“Must be nice to be certain you’ll be missed.”

“Infernus! Don’t say such a thing. I happen to know a great many people would be distraught if anything were to happen to their favorite gin-slinger. Which is why you should show me that bite.”

Infernus grimaces. It appears he can’t put it off any longer.

Irrationality reigns, for he feels if he peels away the shirt, exposes the bite to air, it will be emboldened, throbbing with new life. As long as the seal of dried blood holds to him, no fresh agony will come, or so he’s convinced himself.

Unwanted vindication is his when the hem is actually lifted, and the crust breaks on the wound. The venom’s ice sinks deeper, elbowing around, and a shameful murmur of pain forces its way out of his throat so the toxin can muscle into its place. Exposed, two massive lagoons of green reflection prick his skin, just above his hip. Within his veins, the venom spreads, turning black into an even darker, verdant green. Physocarpus growing under his skin.

The punctures wink evilly in the Maelstrom’s twilight, like emerald eyes.

“*Ógeðsleg stelpa*,” Kelvin shakes his head with distaste.

Infernus whimpers again when Kelvin’s canteen baptizes the wound, getting away the worst of the gore. The water fizzles, and not just from Infernus himself; the serum simmers with something vile.

“Pressure,” Kelvin warns. “A compress may draw some of the poison out.”

The cloth kisses Infernus’ skin, the hand holding it gloveless and bare, and Infernus’ mind swims with so much pain it takes him several seconds to even notice the danger.

“Wait,” he says, but can’t shout, because his voice is still betraying him.

Kelvin freezes, eyes locking to Infernus’, filled with concern. With concern, but not pain.

Infernus’ warning has come too late — Kelvin’s skin is already touching him — but Kelvin isn’t burning, isn’t jerking away from him in surprise. His knuckles brush Infernus’ ribs, and Infernus has not hurt him.

“You’re… alright,” Infernus says.

“I am.” Kelvin raises his eyebrows. “*You* are not. Hence the compress.”

“Usually I gotta worry about. You know. Turning any humans I touch into barbecue.”

Kelvin’s bemusement softens. “Ah.”

A hand, full palm, comes to rest on Infernus’ side, steadying as the wet cloth wicks away more detritus. It is the most contact Infernus has had in a very long time. The unnatural coldness of Kelvin’s skin should be disquieting, but it doesn’t evoke the chill of death or the stagnation of the far-away Arctic. Instead, it calls to mind a half-dozen memories mashed together. An old tramp lingering in Jezebel's doorway as he puffs feeling back into his hands. The outside of a whiskey glass, sweating from the cubes within.

“My burden has its uses.” Kelvin tilts his head to the artifact on his back. Stone, bone, what have you. The only thing certain is the unprecedented power of its aura. “It keeps me exactly as cold as I need to be in order to remain eh… fresh. It appears we balance each other out.”

The smile he grants Infernus is warm and uncomplicated, unknotting something in Infernus’s chest even the open palm hadn’t managed. He’d like to let his concerns go, fully hand himself over to that smile, but the physics still trouble him. He’s borderline molten, Kelvin’s a walking cold-snap; maybe Infernus is the one that will break if their magics stop repelling each other for even one instant. He imagines cold water filling a white-hot glass, freezing it so fast it shatters.

But the artifact continues to hold. Kelvin’s body is against his. Normalized.

“That rock’s really something,” Infernus says.

“Most certainly. Though,” Kelvin says, “I can stand to be a little ways from it, I think. Let me get you something more comfortable to lay down on.”

It takes watching Kelvin unstrap from the runestone to realize he means the coat. Infernus watches, but doesn’t warn him against it, even though he worries any moment Kelvin will stiffen and

suddenly becomes a true corpse once again. But Kelvin's right. The runestone has enough slack to let him remove his coat and make a pile of his supplies.

While Infernus waits, he looks at where they've landed themselves; the dome has half-consumed the building, digesting what it can of brickwork and leaving a wall that may collapse after the melt. Infernus would worry for whoever's inside, but from what he's seen, it seems everybody smart took the warning to stay home today. Probably the only thing a shoddy wall is threatening is the two of them. It's certainly a forlorn section of the district, street ill-used and lined with trash. When Kelvin returns and spreads his parka for Infernus to lie on, he's grateful to be separated from the grime.

"Now," Kelvin says, rolling up Infernus' pant leg, "let's take a look at that break, shall we?"

Despite the limited supplies, Kelvin's first aid knowledge hasn't been diminished with the rest of his memories. There are certainly worse people to be trapped with.

When the splint is set, Kelvin opens one of his grenades by cracking it on an elevated portion of sidewalk.

"Whoa! Kelvin! Aren't those *bombs*?"

"Well, yes," Kelvin says, setting a shattered rim aside. "But the primer is a standard magical base, combined with other reagents. It still has its healing properties."

"Weird. And uh, concerning."

"Science, my friend! Everything has many uses."

"Still." Infernus tries to distance himself, but his leg gives him no leeway. "Open explosives and I don't really mix. Maybe keep 'em a few extra feet from Mister Hot 'n' Bothered?"

"Ha! Hot and bothered? I've never known a man more buttoned-up in my life."

The irony is heavy. As he says it, focus down, his hands are removing Infernus' shirt in preparation for another examination. The joke combined with the motion muddle into a surprisingly intimate cocktail.

Infernus swallows. There's a new tightness in his throat that has nothing to do with his disused voice or swelling brought on by venom, and everything to do with being teased while he's shirtless. Not something he's ever been shy about before. Being half-dying has left him susceptible.

Vest and shirt are both ruined, but Kelvin folds them neatly anyway. A seed of gratitude buds inside Infernus' ribcage.

Under his parka, Kelvin's been wearing another layer of clothing he doesn't need. Grey cotton covers both his chest and the arm that temporarily supports Infernus to a sitting position, holding him practically against Kelvin's chest as he readies the tonic. When it drips on, it feels like the frost is finding new, worse pathways within him. The only silver lining is that it chases out the other substance, so he does his best not to fight it, distracting himself with other sensations. Kelvin's shirt. It's not as fluffy as the coat, but comfortable. He's close enough he could hear Kelvin's heartbeat, if there was one to hear.

Leaned against Kelvin's breastbone, the healing making him hazy, he notes, "When we were getting the hell out of there, I kept thinking how soft you were. Like lying on a cloud."

“…Oh?” Kelvin asks.

“Yeah.”

The tonic’s been applied. There’s no reason for Kelvin to let him keep resting here, that which was only a moment’s convenient position. He thinks, now is when Kelvin pushes him off, sets him back on the coat with the hard asphalt beneath, and resents it.

It doesn’t happen. Kelvin allows him to stay, holding him almost tenderly.

“...Thanks,” he says, embarrassed at how relieved he is. Embarrassed, too, about how easy he was to read.

“Of course,” Kelvin says. “But back to your supernatural heat: I’m curious. May I?”

Infernus has to tilt his head a bit to see what he’s up to. A hand is lingering over his hat. When he nods his assent, Kelvin whisks the fedora away.

“Fascinating,” Kelvin says, as the flames lick his hand.

“Huh,” Infernus says, just as surprised.

All of this is unprecedented. He’s sitting here, not hurting a buddy of his, and some instinctual part of him tilts his head in invitation, welcoming Kelvin’s touch. If he knew more Ixians, this wouldn’t be novel, but he’s spent more than half his life among human clientele, and running with human gangs before that. It’s hard for him to imagine folks doing this all the time, casually, among friends.

When fingers touch his crown, he melts, letting the pain be dulled by a single good sensation, softly voicing encouragement as they gently massage his scalp.

Kelvin makes another hum of inquiry, this time indicating Infernus’ forearms. The glyphs there are different from the runes on Kelvin’s stone, though similar in purpose, regulating their bearers. The hand that touches his glyphs are cool, but not unpleasant, and Infernus lets forth a whole-body shiver. Between that and having his head rubbed, he swears he might just start to purr.

The glyphs ripple orange-red, but don’t hurt Kelvin either. He hums a noise that is nonvocally equivalent to *Fascinating*.

“The Shelter doesn’t seem to have as bad an effect on you as I worried,” Kelvin observes. “Have courage! Certainly not the worst scrape I’ve been in. Once, Ettrick and I fell in a hole and were stuck underground for four days.”

“Fell in a hole? Didn’t that happen to Yuri Bancroft too?” Infernus asks. “Do all you explorers have crazy bad luck or do ice caverns just start stalking you when you become an adventurer?”

“Not an ice cavern,” Kelvin says. “This was in south Ixia, foliage on the forest floor covering a ravine.”

He clears his throat, cutting the story to silence.

“You know,” Infernus advises, “‘Ixia’ itself isn’t a sensitive topic, Kelv.”

“I understand that,” Kelvin says. “I am merely trying not to put my foot in my mouth again.”

“Fair. You got a habit of that.”

A blush touches the tip of Kelvin’s nose, impressively fighting against the ice in his skin. He turns his head, but Infernus reaches out a hand, patting Kelvin’s in assurance.

“Relax, you don’t bother me none.” Although he’d only meant it as a brief aside, his hand doesn’t depart after. His thumb winds under Kelvin's palm. “Tell me ‘bout this hole you fell in.”

“Ah,” Kelvin says, rousing a little, glad to be distracted. “It was during the monsoon season, where there were barely any days to make distance. Sightlines, you see. So we took what we could, making the most of a good day, going long past when we should have made camp. Of course, as soon as we fell, we were punished with days of straight rainfall, flooding the bottom of the cavern. Ettrick had broken his arm on the way down, and he was a *terror* about the whole thing.”

Infernus, drowsily, lets his head fall sideways, resting against Kelvin’s chest. “I could whine a bit more, if it’ll make you nostalgic.”

Kelvin snorts, but backtracks, “No, no he never whined. But he was a brute, then and always. Said whatever came to his mind when he was angry. And he was angry at me quite a lot in those days.”

“‘Those days’ meaning time in the hole?”

Kelvin grunts, neither confirming nor denying, continuing to stroke Infernus’ hair. “The rescue party went out when the weather was clear. We were at each other's throats by then. I did the best I could for his injuries, but I worried he was genuinely going to kill me.” He caps this off with a chuckle Infernus finds gauche.

“Sounds like an ass.”

“Eh, any two people will wear on each after four days in isolation.”

“And how many days did it take for him to start laying into you?”

This time, Kelvin admits it with a sigh, “Long, long before any of it.”

Infernus shivers in the cold. The dome is getting to him.

“Ah, I’m sorry Infernus,” Kelvin says. He’s already adjusting, pulling out the parka to wrap it over them both. “Getting caught up in stories when I have a companion in need.”

Kelvin always says Infernus’ full name. Which isn’t too strange, most people do, those that call him ‘Fern numbering in the single digits. Yet from Kelvin’s mouth, it feels closer than even those, feels the way the parka wrapped warmly around them does. It should go without saying, but Infernus is not used to the cold, has never had his body fail to provide the heat it needed. The effect of the coat surprises him, seems entirely disproportionate for a single piece of clothing to make. He relaxes into the share of body heat, now only troubled by the wounded side he has to keep off.

He feels Kelvin relax too. Feels it in his whole body, the massive sigh escaping out underneath him. He chuckles.

“Do you ever need to breathe?” he asks.

Kelvin stops. Simply stops breathing at the censure. “Ah, no,” he says. “But sometimes I forget that.”

“Mm. Heard you say you think you’re revenant, not a wight?”

“Do I not seem particularly vengeful to you?”

“Honestly?” Infernus asks. “After meeting Vindicta, I don’t think I’m going to run into a more revenant-y revenant in my goddamn life. ‘Dicta’s got a thought-out plan to murder half the bigots in New York, while here you are, playing field medic and acting mama bear. You’re missing the…”

“Bloodlust?” Kelvin supplies.

“Not a drop.”

Kelvin lifts his chin, fixating on the eclipse through the ripple of the ice. Melt has begun to pool on the inside. Help still hasn’t come.

“A thirst for knowledge is not as romantic a reason to return?” Kelvin eventually asks. “Don’t answer, I’m only joking. I know it does not quite fit, but it is so difficult to make sense of my own existence without the context my mind keeps denying me. Our friend Vindicta has something I lack: she knows why she died, and that she was wronged.”

“Not you?” Infernus asks.

“I am not so sure. Ettrick always said I had an ego. He even accused me of it right before I left, said I couldn’t imagine what an eighth astral gate would involve. Did I have enough of one that what happened to me, what happened to the team that *trusted* me, cannot be blamed on outside forces?”

Infernus doesn’t have an answer. He squeezes Kelvin’s hand, still indulging in the novelty of bare skin against him.

“That the time Geist was talking about?” Infernus asks. “At that fundraiser?”

“Yes. He berated me quite viciously. Broke my jaw. The expedition had to be delayed another year while I recovered.”

“He *what*?” Infernus lifts his head, even though the sudden motion makes him dizzy. “Way you always talk about this guy, I thought he was your friend. And he was beating the shit out of you in public?”

Kelvin won’t look at him. In fact, he even gets up, under pretense of grabbing another grenade. Infernus wraps the coat around himself when he goes, staring at Kelvin’s back and the blue that the runestone casts across it, even at a distance.

The stretching silence disquiets him. Being pushy… it doesn’t come naturally to him, even though he’s just as curious as everyone else. He reminds himself: even though he’s in uniform, he’s not Kelvin’s bartender right now, doesn’t have to be perfectly toeing the line between friendly and respectful. Especially when his concern is almost overwhelming.

“Kelv,” he says, propped against the wall, not taking his eyes off the other man. “Kelvin,” again when Kelvin refuses. “That shit’s not normal, man.”

“Please Infernus. I am an adult. I can handle a few bruises and a disagreement with a friend.” Kelvin approaches before Infernus can rebuke him, pressing a fresh mixture to the wound. “There. That should last for another half hour.”

“Why’d you keep talking about him like he’s the greatest thing that ever happened?”

“I have led a venturesome life. Ettrick hardly counts among its greatest dangers.”

Infernus is a different kind of hot and bothered now. “What’s wrong with you? This guy was going to murder you in some cave and you’re going to *look* for him?”

“You’d understand if you-” He cuts himself off.

“What? ‘Hell do I gotta *understand*, Kelvin?”

“-Understand if you’ve ever loved somebody.” His head jerks unnaturally on the last words, as though trying to prevent them from coming out of his mouth.

Infernus is struck silent.

Kelvin’s motions have become stiff, mechanical, the escaped confession already regretted. Something crackles deep in the building behind him. The melt on the shelter’s inner walls comes down in drips.

Kelvin’s face is schooled so carefully, yet somehow this makes sadness around his eyes all the more plain. He looks at the wound, but not Infernus. “I suppose that changes your opinion of me, doesn’t it?”

Infernus gains control of his emotions. Says, “Something like that’s none of my business,” and instantly feels the door close between them. The bartender returning. The proverbial — literal — man, buttoning back up.

Kelvin takes the indignity stoically. His shoulders do not bunch, but much like the failure of his composure, his nonchalance highlights that Infernus’ response has left him shamefaced.

This doesn’t kept him from performing his self-set task well and methodically, the duty he had picked up not because it was his job but because Infernus was his comrade and it needed to be done. Now his movements are restrained, intentionally touching Infernus as little as possible. All those little contacts don’t seem so innocent now, though that thought guilts Infernus the moment he has it. He’s thinking the worst of someone who’s basically been saving his sorry ass nonstop for an hour now. It’s not right to make Kelvin out to be some sort of…opportunist. Especially with how much Infernus indulged it.

The fresh compress disappears, Kelvin rising and taking the comfort of his presence with him. Infernus knows he won’t sit back down next to him. He busies himself with the packs on the other side of the shelter, failing to drown out the ominous groaning from the building’s failing wall, playing at any normalcy.

“We’ll certainly have a few boons waiting for us when we return,” he says, the cheer false. “Plans to spend them on anything in particular?”

Changing the subject. The only way out of this really. Infernus doesn’t begrudge him for it, but he still can’t reply, can’t move on yet. His mouth is open, forming on something that will fix this,

when the brickwork beside Kelvin that's been complaining for minutes now shifts ominously. Then, it bursts inward, showering the bubble with dust.

"Gentlemen," Seven says.

The distance is wrong. Too far away to do anything, yet close enough to see Kelvin's eye widen a fraction of a second before Seven grabs him by the hair and slams his head against the ice.

"No!" Infernus screams, yanks himself toward them, but his leg won't allow it. If he could move, he would have when he'd needed to flee for his life, instead of collapsing in a back alley until Kelvin had risked his own to charge through the fight and save him.

The slam leaves Kelvin stunned. Seven doesn't care. He chases it with a thousand-volt jolt, sending Kelvin spasming, first aid supplies falling from his twitching hands. Before he's even stopped convulsing, Seven slams his face into the wall again.

And again.

And again.

And again.

There's a red spot forming along the blue ice, spiderwebbed with cracking white. Seven's laughing all the while.

Infernus blasts flames from his fingers, but it only leaves a black scorch on the wall, three feet above Seven's head. Even that nearly sends him into unconsciousness. The venom and the dome have sapped everything from him, reducing to a shivering mass that can only watch as his companion is brutalized. For entertainment. The gap from which Seven had entered gapes like an open wound, framing it all in perfect blackness.

Seven's dedicated to enlarging the red spot. His new purpose in life. Gore and the remains of Kelvin's face splatter his prisoner's uniform, and he takes a certain pleasure in gripping Kelvin's entire weight by his hair, takes pleasure in the motion of his arm as he beats him against the wall. He only ever stops to deliver another shock, cackling as the wight's hands claw helplessly for a gun that is far, far out of reach, discarded in the pile of his supplies. The smell of frying flesh permeates the air.

Slam. Slam. Slam. Slam. Infernus loses count. Sadistic *zap*s punctuate each blow, and they don't stop until Seven lets go, letting Kelvin's remains fall to the floor. One side of his face is nothing but blood and bone, a lone, cerulean eye staring lidlessly out of a mass of red. The spot on the wall is the size of a serving tray. There's a tooth embedded in it.

Seven crouches next to the corpse. "Still with us, Kelvin?"

The eyeball twitches.

"Good," Seven says. He ruffles Kelvin's hair. "We'll save you for last. You can enjoy the show in the meantime."

He turns. When he stalks toward Infernus, Infernus jettisons flame directly into his chest.

It does nothing. The Patron's gifts have swollen within Seven like a tumor, looming, his new powers far outstripping any of Infernus' talents. He closes the distance and strikes Infernus in the temple with the butt of his rifle.

Infernus gasps with the pain, and that intake of breath is his last free one. Seven climbs on top of him, crushing his chest, gripping his face with one hand to bring it closer to his own.

"I know you," he observes. "They spoke of you in the tunnels. You were something, once. Before you *muzzled* yourself."

His fingers force their way inside Infernus' mouth, turning his chin this way and that, a child observing a shiny beetle right before he smashes it. A new muzzle for him. Infernus bites. Seven sends a thousand volts straight through his soft palate.

The scream warps around current-proof gloves, echoing in the small chamber that has become prison rather than sanctuary. Against his will, his body kicks, back arching, sending new waves of agony through his leg as the splint threatens to split. Helplessly, he tries burning the monster off him. So close, directly above him, it should be easy.

Ironic. He was so worried about hurting Kelvin, but when he needs the flames most, he can't call them anymore.

Kelvin. For whose benefit this all is.

Tears kaleidoscope the corner of his eye, but even so, he still sees the movement when it happens.

Another zap, another strangled scream. "Ah," Seven says. "The sound of progress."

The hand withdraws from Infernus' mouth. It infiltrates the coat keeping his modesty, locating the bitemark with ease. Only a few more seconds. Only a few more seconds that Infernus has to hold his attention.

Seven's fingers ghost across — then land just below — the wound, resting their threat against his hip. "Let's see what else can make you scream, eh?"

Kelvin, standing directly behind him with both arms raised, caves in Seven's head with the rock.

The disk that makes up his head folds inwards, body following the swing. He falls to the side, off Infernus. There is one moment where it's possible Seven might be alive, might lash out from his damaged state with the tendrils of power he seems to have endless amounts of. But that opportunity closes when Kelvin brings the runestone point-down a second time, and turns his head to paste.

Infernus gags. Kelvin, hands resting on top of his instrument of death, stands for one perilous moment. His knees quaver. Then, give way.

"Kelvin!" Infernus manages to call through every fried nerve-ending in his throat.

He drags himself toward the wight, trying to keep from succumbing to the same collapse. Kelvin's managed to pull himself seated by the time Infernus reaches him, back against the dome's wall.

The eye — the one on the side of the face that still has skin — focuses on Infernus. His throat moves, vowels coming up, but the words he's desperate for Infernus to hear don't escape from his shattered jaw.

“Hey, hey, I’m with you brother,” he promises, grabbing Kelvin’s good shoulder. “It’s alright, you got him. You got him.”

The grenades are all the way on the other side of the dome. A galaxy away. Infernus rolls to his side, panic threatening to overpower him, wondering how long the rock can be convinced to hold together a body that’s falling apart at the seams. He’s about to start his arduous crawl when Kelvin grips his forearm, a moaned warning forming deep in his chest.

“I gotta go get them, you’re falling to pieces,” Infernus says. Kelvin stirs, meaning to rise. “No. No, listen Kelv. You did this for me, I do this for you, that’s how it works, alright?”

Both eyes, maimed and not, stare. Kelvin can’t do more. A tear forms, cradles itself in the socket, then spills down his cheek. Infernus claps his shoulder before he goes.

The grenades, so hard fought for, are impossible to open. Infernus doesn’t have the strength to crack them, *Kelvin* sure doesn’t, and he’s left prying helplessly at their rims like they’re particularly feisty pickle jars.

“Fuck,” Infernus says, his shaky, current-damaged arms slipping loose on the lid for the dozenth time. “*Fuck*.” It drops to his side.

He rubs the heel of his palm against his eyes. They come away wet.

It’s hard to tell if Kelvin’s dying or not. He’s sustained injuries no non-undead could survive, but Infernus doesn’t know how close he’s butting up against the runestone’s limit. He’s certainly not getting *better*. The dome is punctured, any healing properties escaping out into greater New York. He’s slowing down, and Infernus’ is too broken to help.

“Fuck,” he repeats. He lifts his head.

Kelvin doesn’t move. He still sits, and stares, eyes pleading for something as wet continues to roll down his remaining cheek.

Infernus has never been good with the physical, the casual. Trained himself out of it young, recoiling every time he left someone he cared for with a fresh burn. Even now, the thought leaves him unsettled in his stomach, but dammit. Kelvin’s done right by him.

Dragging himself forward, he brings himself to Kelvin’s side, grabbing his hand pressing it to his chest.

“I got you,” he says. “I’m…I’m here. Hold on to me.”

A rumble, a maybe-laugh-maybe-sob, inspires one in Infernus too. He places his other hand over their grip and then — because he’s sorry, because he actually *does* want to — presses his forehead against Kelvin’s cheek.

What to do now, Infernus hasn’t the faintest. If the others haven’t found them by now, they’re probably dead; rounded up by Seven’s friends, or scattered and in just as bad of shape as the pair of them are. Geist is tough to kill, but also the least likely to search despite her supposed soft spot for him. ‘Affectionate’ from Geist just means she’ll feel bad when she discards you. Mo and Krill would notice Infernus’ absence, but last he saw them, Mo had a knife between his ribs and the pair were burrowing to safety. He can hope they’re better off, but they might just as well be hunkering

down waiting for their own rescue. Though, Kelvin's their team's only medic. They might have to wait hours. The toughest are out of the picture, but Vindicta could scout the skies, locating the conspicuous dome dominating a good portion of the street… He ticks them off one by one in his mind, each one an imperfect option, a faint hope. Friends and teammates, vividly imagined, so distinct he swears he can see them moving just beyond the shelter's now dirtied walls.

Because there is someone there. Right outside. Their muddied forms move like shadows on the cave wall, and Infernus tenses, remembering how Seven tracked them, remembering that no amount of wishful thinking can guarantee it's friendlies that have found them.

Kelvin hears them too, tensing beside him.

Seven had breached their defenses. Someone's breaching their defenses now, burrowing through the hole Seven made, dislodging bricks until they happen upon the victims inside.

It's Victor who pushes out into the watery twilight, blinking.

"Vic." Infernus slumps against the wall in relief.

"'Fern?" Noticing Kelvin's state, Victor rushes over. "Shit, is he dead?"

"Much as he ever was."

Kelvin flexes his hand to indicate his relative animation. Then, shakily, forms it into an O.K. symbol.

"Don't listen to that," Infernus says. "He needs to get out of here. Now."

But Kelvin is shaking his head, which must be excruciating. His hand is on Infernus' back weakly pushing him forward as he implores Victor with his half-ruptured eyes.

"Oh hell no," Infernus tells Kelvin. "*Hell* no, no goddamn way he's taking me out of here before you." Frustration and fear bite each other's tails, Kelvin finding new ways to exasperate him.

"Guys, guys calm down," Victor says. "Vin's outside, she can signal the others." He grips both of their shoulders. "We're not leaving anyone behind."

The relief comes on stronger this time, and Infernus fully gives into it as Victor withdraws to share word of what he's found, that they're safe. Unbidden, his hand finds Kelvin's and squeezes. The squeeze is returned. Which feels more right than anything he's ever felt before.

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