**Time Displacement: Side A**

by **PrincessFawna**

**Summary**

After the events of the game, Dave wakes up in a universe that is familiarly unfamiliar. Sburb didn't happen, all their guardians are alive, and Bro is...different.

**Notes**

Basic scene-setting for this AU: After the events of the game, Dave wakes up and finds himself in another universe—a universe where the game hasn’t happened (yet?) and there’s no influence of Lil’ Cal on Dirk, and all the alpha kids are in their early thirties.

This is largely experimental and is the first fic I’ve posted in seven years. I’ve been messing with this idea for a while, and it’s gotten long enough that I figured I should actually try to make something of it.

PoV: Dave
Something was wrong. He could feel it before he even opened his eyes. And so he didn’t, keeping them tightly shut as he tried to place himself.

Something about time wasn’t right. It felt like something was rusted in the gears of time, something was struggling to move, something was caught and stopping them from turning right—something was wrong.

Hadn’t they won the game? Gone through the door? He examined his memories, trying to remember where he had been last, but the only thing he could remember was the light of the door, the new universe, shining. Their ultimate reward, finally theirs to grasp.

John had been the one opening it and Dave had been next to Karkat, naturally gravitating towards the troll after those three years of practice doing so. Dirk had been nearby too, standing with him. Rose was with Kanaya and Jade, and just…everyone had been there. Everyone was ready to see what this ‘Ultimate Reward’ was. They were going to make it their own, make their own universe. Make a society of trolls and humans and consorts that didn’t suck like the universes they had come from. They were going to make something great. And then they had entered and…nothing.

He couldn’t remember anything.

Okay. He wasn’t going to get anything by just laying here with his eyes closed then. He was on a bed, at least, and it was warm and comfortable. And, somehow, strangely familiar.

Out of typical practice, his hand darted to the area beside him, groping at a table until he felt the legs of his shades. Whipping them on, he opened his eyes.

He was in his room.

Well…sort of. Things were different. There was no oppressive red light coming from the windows, painting the walls with the hue of the lava. It was hot, but it wasn’t like the extreme heat of LOHAC either, it was more…normal. Like Texas heat. Like how heat had felt on Earth. And the light in the room was like that too, bright and clear, without that red tinge. Out of the window he could see the blue sky with little wispy white clouds floating across it. It was so marvelously blue.

He hadn’t been here in ages. (Not literal ages—he could tell you exactly how many days, hours, seconds, and milliseconds it had been—.43 .44 .45 — STOP IT)

It was just…it was like it was before, in the past. Before the game.

And, immediately, he tried to sense where, or rather, when, he was. And he…didn’t know. He tried to figure out if he had travelled recently, if he needed to fulfill some quirk to finish some loop (but if that was the case, why would he be sleeping?)

But, he knew time travel, and this wasn’t it. Time travel was a tick, then a tock, a settling in his brain as he recentered himself, figuring out where he was in the timeline. It was an instant knowing of how everything fit together, all the pieces and cogs. But, here, he woke up with nothing. Time was ticking and tocking but it wasn’t telling him when he was. It was disorienting and strange, and he wasn’t sure what to do with it.
Wait, maybe this was a dream bubble? That…well, would they dream in the dream bubbles in the new universe? He was kind of hoping they’d get to have some normal dreams for once, like normal fucking people, but maybe—

Well. If it was a dream bubble, shouldn’t it be in a memory of his own? Or someone else’s memory, maybe another him? It had to be a him, didn’t it, because who else would have a memory of his room? But…that wasn’t quite right. Because…too many things were different. He didn’t know who would have a memory of a room that was his but wasn’t, it didn’t make any sense.

He moved, sitting up on his bed, swinging his legs over the edge. He still wore his god-tier pajamas as always, so there wasn’t anything strange with that at least. Hesitantly he raised his gaze to the rest of the room. For one, it was only mostly like how his old room had been. There were small differences, his turntables looked like they were a bit more high-tech, there were a few new posters on the wall he didn’t recognize, and instead of the wires of all of his devices being spread out all over the floor they were carefully plugged into extension cords and were taped down, running along the edges of the room to their respective electronics.

And that was…weird. There weren’t any swords on the wall. His collection of dead things was in a nicer looking shelf that had glass on the front of it. And…there was a spot on the wall across the room that had pictures, and when he squinted it looked like they were pictures of his friends. He definitely didn’t recognize that.

He got up, and it was weird that he didn’t have to pick his way over wires as he walked over to the wall to get a closer look at the pictures. They seemed to be sorted mostly into 4 groups. The upper left had John, the upper right Rose, the lower right Jade, and then the lower left had him and his ironic selfies.

The corner of Jade pictures mostly consisted of her wide grin, surrounded by the various different plants and nature of her island. He saw her god-dog best friend in several of them, sometimes being hugged by Jade and sometimes just sitting in the background somewhere. There was one he had clearly photobombed too, teleporting on top of a very surprised Jade. And…in a few there was some young guy with dark hair and buck teeth. He kind of looked like John, but he was a bit older…who the fuck…?

Frowning, Dave’s eyes flicked up to Rose’s pictures. There was one where she had a hidden smile on her face as she played her violin. That one was confusing too because, well, she hadn’t played it since they were thirteen, and yet, here was a picture of her at sixteen, playing it. And there was another picture near it of Rose looking distinctly grumpy and uncomfortable as an older girl draped her arms over her shoulders. An older girl that looked like…Roxy?

What?

Then he looked at John’s pictures. A lot of them had his dad in them, and…an adult version of his hot mom—not a grandmotherly-looking age though, just like…twenty-something, like the unfamiliarly familiar people in the other pictures. This was…their guardians, right? That’s who they had to be, right? He couldn’t imagine who else they would be, and they really did look a lot like the kids he had briefly met before the end of the game.

There was no way this was the new universe. No fucking way, if it was, surely he’d remember something. Remember taking these pictures. Remember that for some reason Roxy and the rest were older.

He had no idea what was going on here. He didn’t know what to do with any of these pictures, or with the thought that—that—
There was another picture. Near the center, a sort of group-photo deal. The only one who wasn’t in the picture was John’s dad, he must have been taking it, and there was John and his hot mom, Rose and Roxy, Jade and her young grandpa, and, next to Jade, there was Dave himself, smiling, and.

There was a hand on his shoulder, a hand wearing fingerless gloves, and standing behind him was…

Bro.

Chapter End Notes

Fanart of this chapter!
Chapter Notes

I’m talking about time a lot for a reason I promise.

PoV: Dave

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fuck.

Fuck no.

Dave barely even thought about it as he pulled up pesterchum on his shades, immediately scanning his contacts. For some reason…the trolls were missing. What…why…

He shook his head, fuck no, no, no time to think about this, later, he’d deal later. The only person on right now was Jade anyways.

— turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering gardenGnostic [GG]—

TG: jade

TG: something is fucked up

TG: like extremely fucked up

TG: like its groundhog day except instead of reliving the same day over and over suddenly youre reliving the same year over and over or something

TG: except apparently you keep aging or something

TG: i dont fucking know i dont remember that movie at all

TG: you probably dont know about groundhog day

TG: do you even know what a groundhog looks like

TG: now that i think about it they look pretty stupid

TG: all this weird thick fur and tiny little eyes

TG: brb changing my fursona

TG: why do you think groundhogs control the seasons

TG: jade

TG: in all seriousness jade
TG: shit is fucked up

GG: hi dave!!

GG: sorry about the wait

GG: whats wrong???

TG: fuck

TG: uh

TG: how do i explain this

TG: do you know like

TG: sburb

GG: ???

TG: the game

TG: whats your aspect

TG: classpect

TG: whatever it is

GG: what?

GG: dave…i am sooooo confused!!

GG: what are you talking about?

GG: what game?

TG: fuck

TG: nm

GG: no i want to understand!

GG: what are you talking about dave?

TG: its nothing dont worry about it

TG: ill talk to you later

GG: dave?

— turntechGodhead [TG] is now an idle chum!—

GG: dave?????

So apparently Jade didn’t know anything at all. He could’ve asked her a little more thoroughly, but
if she knew what he was talking about she would’ve just answered. There’s no way she would’ve forgotten the game, right? What was happening?

Damn, he should’ve asked her how old she was. She *looked* sixteen in some of the pictures, but maybe he was thinking that just because he was used to seeing her at sixteen. The only difference was, well. The lack of dog ears. Which she *should* have, but didn’t.

Could he even ask how old she was without signifying that something was up? Not that he didn’t just already do that, but it would be hard to write off such a specific question. The Sburb stuff he could just say was a joke or something or just. Never talk about it again. Such a weird specific question though would be really weird to ask. He had to…had to figure out what exactly was going on here.

His eyes drifted back towards his relatively empty chumroll. *Why* were the trolls missing? He pulled up the ‘add chum’ window and typed out ‘carcinoGeneticist’, clicked ‘Add’ and…nothing. Nothing happened.

Okay. Breathe.

He clicked ‘add chum’ again. ‘gallowsCalibrator’.

Nothing.

‘grimAuxiliatrix’

Nothing.

His breath caught in his throat and he stood there, frozen in his room. Every second *clicked* like an eternity that he felt passing, but he still couldn’t make himself move. He just…stood there.

What…what the *fuck* was he supposed to do? He hadn’t…where was Karkat?! And the other trolls?! Where was Karkat?! And where was Dave?! And—oh fuck, oh *fuck*, he had forgotten where he was.

He swallowed, quickly turning himself around, taking a quick look around his room. His heart was beating in his ears as he examined every nook and cranny with careful eyes. His fingers curled into fists that trembled ever-so-slightly. (No, they didn’t—he was fine)

Okay. The room was clear, his door was closed. But, that still didn’t mean he was one-hundred percent out of the shit yet. He started towards his closet with slow and faltering steps, wary, already mentally reaching into his strife specibus for Caledfwlch. He reached out and opened the door and…nothing. No sudden attack. His eyes flicked up and down, but—he wasn’t there. Not even a flash of a puppet or anything.

Okay. The room was clear, his closet was empty. But, that still didn’t mean he was clear yet. He started towards his closet with slow and faltering steps, wary, already mentally reaching into his strife specibus for Caledfwlch. He reached out and opened the door and…nothing. No sudden attack. His eyes flicked up and down, but—he wasn’t there. Not even a flash of a puppet or anything.

He turned back towards the entrance of his room, and that door was still closed too, so…okay. He should be in the clear. For now. Fuck. Okay. Everything was fine. He just didn’t know when he was, didn’t understand why Jade didn’t remember anything, didn’t know where the *fuck* the trolls were, didn’t know where *Karkat* was, and, *Bro was somewhere*, probably, and—

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck.


He couldn’t just…freaking out wasn’t going to help. He just…had to do something. Survive. He should just treat this like it was the past, even though it wasn’t, he could *feel* that it wasn’t, but just.
He should get his bearings. Figure out what the fuck is going on. Maybe someone else would be as weirdly displaced as him.

He shifted, looking back to the closet that was still open, not really seeing, just blinking at it as he thought, *tick.*

Okay. So his only points of real evidence on what was going on was, in order: Time feeling weird, being on Earth, his room clearly being different, the pictures on the wall, and the conversation with Jade. He was somehow in the past, but it *wasn’t* the past. Even if he hadn’t asked, he was pretty sure Jade was sixteen. *He* was definitely still sixteen (sixteen years four months thirteen days— no), and the pictures looked like the rest of his friends were too, so…they were all sixteen, somehow. And their guardians all looked young too, aside from John’s dad who looked like he always did (guy probably was born looking like a dad). …Was he sure that this wasn’t a dream bubble?

He just…he had no idea. Nothing fit together right, unless this whole universe was…different? Like a different timeline?

That didn’t make sense either though, if this wasn’t the new universe, and it wasn’t his universe, how did he even get here? And if it was a different timeline, didn’t that mean he was doomed? He would know if he was doomed, he was used to always following the thread of the alpha timeline. But…he didn’t have any sense of foreboding, no internal clock telling him that he was losing time, nothing. Just…clicking.

So, he wasn’t in a doomed timeline, and he couldn’t be placed anywhere within his own timeline, but how could he have travelled between universes? He didn’t even know that travelling between anything like that could be a thing—

He blinked, *tock,* suddenly placing himself back in the moment where he stood in the middle of his room, staring into his closet for no discernable reason. Or…wait.

His closet was different too. There were some clothes and some various junk, electronics and other stuff, but…there was a distinct lack of…

Food. There wasn’t any food in here.

Not even a single bottle of apple juice. No wrappers or anything either, his whole stash was just…gone.

That…Bro hadn’t done that before, not in Dave’s own time.

He froze again, jaw clenching, the pressure of it making his teeth hurt with a dull ache, but it was the only way he could afford to outwardly project his thoughts. If he did anything else, said anything that could be noticed—he was probably watching, somewhere. Waiting for him to react. Or, he’d *know* how he reacted, so he couldn’t.

His façade had started to crack during the three years on the meteor, where he had been safe and had slowly been able to learn how to project himself more. But, now he was slamming it all shut again, steeling his face into what was still an all too familiar mask. He pressed his lips together, physically forcing his fingers to uncurl and his stance to relax. Yet, at the same time, he had to be ready to respond to anything, his heart thumbing in his chest and thoughts running a mile a minute. But he couldn’t *look* like that was the case.

Fuck this, fuck this, he fucking hated this.

He wanted to run away, wanted to fly right out the window, wanted to pull out his timetables and
just time travel to get out of here, fuck making sure a loop went right, fuck the fact that he didn’t want to use time travel ever again—fuck everything. But no. No, he wasn’t going to do that. He couldn’t do that. He had to learn what was actually going on, despite his misgivings. Despite the stone that sat heavy in his gut, hot with resentment and fear.

 Fuck no. He was fine. This was fine. He could handle some weird shenanigans. This was nothing compared to the other shit the game put them through. All he had to do for now was continue gathering knowledge, maybe face a certain person he’d rather not see.

 First step, actually leave his room. He wasn’t going to learn anything else by hanging out in here. So…hold on. He probably shouldn’t be wearing the god-tier stuff. If he was going to be seen by. Yeah. He should probably pull out some of his normal clothes. This outfit would look really weird if the game hadn’t happened. Or. Something.

 It was really strange to wear a normal t-shirt and pants again after so long. Strange to fold up the god-tier stuff and shove it under his pillow. He hadn’t worn anything else in three years two months — gah. Okay though. He was changed. Time to get out there. Leave his room.

 He wasn’t sure how long he stood in front of his door before he finally opened it, stepping beyond the threshold towards the rest of the apartment.

 It…was different.

 Neater. For the most part, things seemed to be put in places where they belonged. Wires all taped up and against walls, just like how they were in his room. There was some actual furniture around too, not a single cinderblock in sight. The posters were different, just normal cool things, some weird robot stuff but also just some rappers. There was even a small one of Sweet Jeff and Hella Bro.

 And…

 Wait.

 …Where were the puppets?

 Where the fuck were the puppets?!

 There wasn’t a single plush rump in sight. Not even a tip of one of their awful elongated noses. It was just…normal. They probably were all hoarded up somewhere, waiting to burst out of some container and rain him with puppet ass but, still, this…this was another thing that had never happened before. They had always been everywhere.

 Dave kept walking, light on his feet, ready to jump or dodge in an instant when he finally reached the kitchen. And. Bro was in there. Just, standing there, a bowl of cereal sitting near him on the counter, a spoon in one hand and a book in the other. He didn’t look up at Dave, but Dave knew that he knew he was there. There was no way he didn’t.

 Dave just. Stood there. He couldn’t…he couldn’t move.

 Bro didn’t do anything for several minutes. He just leaned on the counter, flipping the pages of his book as he occasionally shoveled cereal into his mouth. Then, once he had reached the bottom of the bowl and his spoon clattered against the glass (Dave winced), he closed his book. And then he saw Dave.

 “Morning,” he greeted, his voice…much more…pleasant than usual. He put the book down and gave Dave a little wave with that hand, “You don’t usually sleep in.”
That’s because Bro usually woke him up if he did. ‘Woke’ being a nice way to say it. Dave didn’t say anything.

Bro waited, and he could feel his eyes from behind the shades, focused on him. He forgot how this made him feel. Like he was an insect under a magnifying glass, slowly having his legs burned off, leaving him laying on concrete, just waiting for the fire to consume the rest of him.

“You okay?” Bro asked, frowning. Asking like he gave a shit.

Dave didn’t trust his voice not to shake. So he just nodded, slowly, before stepping backwards, returning to his room. He didn’t take his eyes off of Bro as he moved, didn’t want to show him his back. Bro just kept frowning at him.

And he just…kept going. Back, back, and finally he reached his room again. He closed the door immediately behind him and just. Kinda. Stood there.

He wasn’t sure how long it had been when a notification lit up from pesterchum on his shades.

— tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

TT: You gave Jade quite a scare, Strider.

TT: What exactly is going on with you?

TG: uhoh the doctor is in

TG: here to get your psychoanalysis on lalonde?

TG: welp

TT: Your diversion tactics through your usage of quips against my personal proclivity for the psychological field will not deter me, Strider.

TT: Seriously, Dave, Jade was really worried about whatever you were saying.

TT: As a friend, I am concerned as well. Please elucidate.

TG: nah its cool

TG: im fine rose

TT: Are you sure?

TG: yes

TT: Alright. If you change your mind, I'm always here. I'll even refrain from any Freudian-based comments.

TG: no way

TG: you are physically incapable of doing that

TT: Perhaps.

TT: I really just want to make sure you're alright, Dave.
TG: im *great*
TG: seriously im good
TG: gotta go lalonde

— turntechGodhead [TG] has ceased pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] —

— tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering gardenGnostic [GG] —

TT: You are absolutely right.
TT: Something is very wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Dirk is blindsided.

Next chapter is going to be in Dirk’s PoV.

Fanart of this chapter by Sevalore!
Altered Assonance

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who has commented so far! They really motivate me! (see: my daily chapter thing that's happening that will be eventually slowing down)

Dirk’s PoV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

— uranianUmbra [UU] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

UU: today is the day where something messes up my connection with yoU guys.
UU: i can still see things, bUt it jUst gets mUch more...difficUlt?
UU: sometimes the feed randomly slows down or speeds Up and i'm not really sUre how to fix it.
UU: the only reason i know aboUt this is because i did peek into the fUture a little bit becaUse i was cUrious, but now i’M at that point, it seems.
TT: Good to know. You'll still be able to talk to us though, right?
TT: We don't want to lose you.
UU: i'm talking to yoU now, aren't i?
UU: i think it'll be alright. i jUst can't see as clearly from my end now, bUt that shoUld be fine.
UU: i jUst wanted to warn yoU, i don't want to alarm any of my friends.
TT: Appreciated.
TT: You know, my offer is still open.
TT: Really, all you have to do is ask him.
TT: He’s the one who brought it up to me first, and I agree with him. He would do it in an instant, it’d be easy for him, and he wants to. Just let him have access to your client and he can look into it more closely.
UU: i don’t think messing with the program is a good idea, i woUldn’t want to see him hUrt.
TT: He would take proper precautions. Just let him get a closer look at the code and he might be able to fix whatever the source of this time error is. At the very least he’d be able to identify it.
UU: i know, but it jUst worries me! it’s not that big of an issUe, my viewport is just different now. a little less reliable bUt that’s perfectly alright!
UU: as long as yoU all keep talking to me as time goes forward and as long as we remain in consistent temporal contact with each other, it’s fine!
TT: Well. He can help with that, at least. Timing-wise he can just make sure that you stay synced to the time of my computer.

UU: that would be lovely ^u^

UU: im sure you have other things to do today, dirk, don’t let me keep you.

TT: Just the usual, you know I always have time for you.

UU: hehe, yes!! and i do so appreciate that, but please, do go on with your day, i’ll talk to you later.

TT: Alright then. Later, Callie.

UU: *kisses*

— uranianUmbra [UU] has ceased pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

Dirk leaned back in his chair, stretching his arms out in front of him, flexing his fingers so that the movement could help him wake up a bit more and shake off the last vestiges of sleep. Being self-employed had its perks, the freedom to pace his day however he wanted being one of them. He started with his typical tasks though, checking on his various sites and responding to a few emails. He was commissioned to build a small robot prototype for a company and they wanted an update by the end of the day. He had already made a lot of progress, so a little more today wouldn’t be that difficult at all. Honestly he was already going to finish a week before their first deadline. He added sending them an update to his mental checklist.

Next though, he should eat something. Dave should be up soon too, so they could talk a bit. Maybe rap a little, if Dave was up for it.

He pushed his chair back, extricating himself from his mini-cave of computer monitors, only three of them, but they were all fairly large so he was rather surrounded when he was truly in the zone. Other than that, the other thing that dominated most of his room was his robotics workspace. He glanced at it briefly as he walked past to remind himself where he was in the process. Like he had thought, he was pretty far along—he really didn’t have to do that much today if anything else came up to take up time.

One bowl of cereal later, he found himself skimming through a few pages of Dissemination, rereading since it had been awhile since he had last opened it. He was a bit surprised Dave hadn’t come in yet, but if the kid wanted to spend a day sleeping in, he wasn’t going to fault him, he knew how to handle himself for the most part.

Once the bowl was empty, he glanced up, and…oh. Dave was right there. He looked like he was struck by lightning, ramrod stiff, his mouth curled into a deep frown. Dirk couldn’t see his eyes, but he could imagine them based on the rest of Dave’s face, and he…he was dimly alarmed by what he thought he saw. Maybe he was overreacting, turning on his Bro-radar (Brodar) too early.

“Morning,” he offered, smiling a little, “You don’t usually sleep in.” Hopefully some normalcy would help Dave calm down a bit from whatever it was making him look like that.

…Apparently not. Dave just stood there, staring and unmoving. Though…there was a sort of strange fluidity, even in his rigidness, his feet were staggered, spread apart like he was ready for…what, exactly? Why would he…
“You okay?” he was asking it before he even realized he was speaking.

Dave flinched, head not moving an inch, his face completely stoic, but his stance—

Klaxons started blaring in Dirk’s head.

He felt himself to be suddenly similarly immobile, mind working quick, his thoughts zipping through possibilities, equations, theories, hypotheses. Did something happen with his friends, maybe? Or did Dirk do anything recently that would warrant this? He didn’t…think so, everything had been normal and…he had never seen Dave like this.

Dave nodded stiffly before he slowly started to step back, backing up without looking away. Just…staring in alarm as he absconded.

Dirk watched him go, frowning, not understanding and mentally freaking out.

It…it was almost like Dave was afraid of something.

But that didn’t make sense, what did he have to be scared of?

Dirk stood there in the kitchen for a bit longer, wanting to pursue Dave, to ask him what was wrong and to actually get an answer, but he held himself back. No, no, with Dave looking like that there was no way he wanted to be followed. Dirk wasn’t going to talk to him if he didn’t want to talk. It was rare that Dave got into a mood where he wanted to be alone, but Dirk always respected his boundaries.

Especially because Dirk wanted to be alone quite a lot, and Dave had gotten better at noticing those times as he had gotten older. Of course, Dirk did his best to not let his own neuroses affect Dave, but wanting to be alone sometimes was something he couldn’t completely alter or compensate for.

It was highly unusual for Dave, though.

Dirk let out a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding. Okay. Just. Check on Dave later. Leave him alone for now.

He headed back towards his room, intending to keep working on the robot. He left his door open though, just in case Dave was ready to talk or if he needed him. And he let himself get lost in his work.

He was clicking a chip into place when Dave spoke from behind him. “Why…what did you do to the living room? And the bathroom? And the kitchen?”

Once the chip was solidly in place, Dirk turned. Dave was just outside of the door, leaning on the frame from the hallway. He did not step foot inside. And his question was…very strange. Dirk ran through his memories of the last week or so concerning the apartment. Other than maybe leaving a few things around, like his book, nothing came to mind.

"Uh. What?” he asked, utterly baffled. Dave still seemed…tense. Hesitant. But at least he was
saying something, even if it was something totally strange.

“There’s fucking food in the fridge,” Dave continued, and Dirk could just tell that his eyes were narrowed. Affront? Mistrust? Anger? Dave’s tone alone left Dirk feeling struck, he didn’t understand whatever was wrong. And, if he looked closer, the fear was still there too, in the tenseness of Dave’s shoulders, the furrow in his brow, the curl of his fingers. There was just this distinct wrongness in everything and Dirk had no idea why it was there, let alone how to fix it.

Dirk slowly put the tool in his hand down on the worktable, turning his chair away from it to fully face Dave. "...What else would be in there?"

Dave’s mouth fell open, and he sucked in a breath, readying a response, but then he just stopped. Faltered. Gears were obviously turning as he shook his head in disbelief. "Okay. Ha ha. Stop fucking with me."

“I’m…not?” Dirk was baffled, “…Are you okay? Have you been sleeping enough?"

“I’m fine,” Dave responded immediately. “Never mind.” And he pushed off of the doorframe, backing off into the hallway.

Dirk wanted to go after him, but he stopped himself again. No, no. Don’t freak out too much. Instead, he opened pesterchum on his shades.

— timaeusTestified [TT] has begun pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

TT: Hal.

TT: Do you know what’s wrong with Dave?

TT: He hasn’t talked to me, no.

TT: I can try to ask him though. But maybe we need to give him some space.

TT: Give it a day.

TT: Yeah. He might come to one of us about it later.

TT: Exactly. Don’t be too overbearing, bro.

TT: Yeah, yeah, I know.

Chapter End Notes

Points to you if you catch the Detective Pony reference.
Bec barked, suddenly bounding forward, racing ahead of them over the hill. After a moment, he barked again, finding something. He sounded pretty excited too! If she squinted, Jade could juuuust see the flicker of a white tail wagging on top of the hill.

Jake was beside her, tall and cheery, eyes bright as he looked after Bec. He nodded down at her, “Right then,” he flashed her a toothy grin as he patted one of the pistols strapped to his hips, “Shall we?”

“Yup!” Jade smiled, jumping a bit on the balls of her feet in excitement. They always made every day such an adventure, it was easy to get excited. She followed dutifully as Jake led the way, her eyes tracking Jake’s boots, following his footsteps. She held her rifle in her hands, keeping it pointed at the ground. There wasn’t much danger that they encountered while exploring, but they never left the house without their weapons. ‘Practice’, Jake had always said, ‘Never know when you’ll run into a fight!’ It was one of the few rules he actively enforced on her himself. She didn’t mind so much, she liked the feeling of a rifle in her hands. Sometimes she slung it across her back, but the sling snapped today so she had to hold it until they got back home to fix it.

Of course, if it really bothered her, they could have just asked Bec to teleport them back, but it wasn’t that big of a deal. And Jake hated when they teleported anyways, he always said that it was ‘Such a doggone waste’. Adventures could happen anywhere, after all.

They trudged up the hill and looking down from the top, they could see what Bec was sniffing at nearby. It was one of those little frog statues that were scattered around. Jake trotted down to it, offering Bec a pat on the head as he knelt down to get a better look at the statue. He didn’t care that his knees were right in the dirt, it was just more messiness to go along with all the grass stains that smeared across his skin. They would wash up once they got home.

“Good boy.” Jake praised as he leaned down to look at the statue from a different angle, his head almost touching the ground, hair trailing in the dirt.

Jade sauntered up with them, sitting down and taking care to point her rifle away from everyone. “Best friend,” she smiled. She didn’t look too closely at the statue, pretty much figuring that it was just like the others they had spotted before. No hidden messages or anything, it was just a frog. Whoever built these ruins just really liked them, for some reason. Jade supposed she couldn’t blame them, frogs were kinda cute!
Jake wouldn’t be satisfied until he looked at every inch of the thing from every angle though, so Jade settled herself down, simply enjoying how the sun felt on her back.

Her thoughts drifted, it had been a few days since they had last gone out on one of their excursions. Sometimes it would be quite a while in-between adventures. In these breaks, Jake would do other things with her, like teach her how to take apart and put together various weapons, or watch movies, or just talk. In turn, she would drag him outside and they would work on her garden and she would teach him all about how to care for the various plants. He had a soft spot for the pumpkins.

But then she recalled what had happened earlier that morning, when Dave had messaged her. She was still really worried about it, and she had quickly told Rose to keep an eye out for him. She didn’t share the chatlog, because that felt kind of rude, but she just wanted to let her know. Jade honestly couldn’t remember the last time Dave had given her cause to worry about anything, so even the hint of something being wrong was really alarming.

She hoped he was okay, maybe he was just having an off day. Still though…he had said some pretty weird stuff.

“Hey, Jake?” she asked, frowning as she thought.

“Yees?” he asked, eyes briefly flicking to her before going back to the statue.

“Do you know anything about a game called, um… ‘Sburb’?” That was what Dave had typed, right? She wasn’t sure if she was saying it right. She was probably close enough—she wasn’t really sure why she thought she’d get anything out of asking Jake anyways. He tended to know just about as much as she did these days, what with living on the island for so long and having access to the same stuff.

Jake blinked, his eyes widening somewhat. He sat up straight, forgetting about the statue and focusing on her instead. He quickly covered a frown up with a dorky smile, but not before she had noticed it. “Gee willikers, Jade, what’s got you asking about something so strange?”

“Oh, nothing,” Jade shrugged, feigning a casual tone. Jake was probably fooled, probably. “Just heard it from the internet or something. It’s a weird name, isn’t it? I dunno what it is though.”

His eyes narrowed. Oops, he wasn’t fooled after all, darn it. “Jade,” he said, sternness starting to creep into his tone. Bec’s ears perked up at the sound, and the dog’s head swiveled towards her. Jake continued, “You know Bec doesn’t like it when you tell a fib, Jade.”

“It’s not,” she promised, not really wanting to out Dave if this was a bad game or something. “I don’t remember where I heard it,” (and she wouldn’t if she didn’t have a red string tied tightly to her pointer finger, so she wasn’t totally lying), “I just remembered that I wanted to ask about it, though, and see if you knew anything.”

Jake looked away, focusing on the statue again, there was a sudden tenseness in his shoulders. She couldn’t see his expression anymore, but she got the distinct feeling that he wasn’t smiling. Jake took a moment before speaking, doing so much too quickly, “I dunno, pumpkin.” Bec was looking at him now. “That sure sounds like a strange name though! Tell me if you figure anything out!”

“Sure,” Jade nodded, trying to not be too disappointed. Something…weird was up though, definitely. Whatever this ‘Sburb’ was, Jake seemed to be at least a little familiar with it. She wasn’t sure what that meant, but she was gonna keep investigating. With that sort of reaction though, she probably wouldn’t ask Jake again.
Usually he just told her things though, so this silence was weird. And a little worrying. Jake didn’t notice her worry, simply keeping his attention solidly on the statue. He probably didn’t want to lie to her, Jade thought. But, for some reason, he didn’t want to tell her whatever it was that he knew.

After a minute he rose to his feet. “Alrighty then, Jade. We’ve got loads of daylight left, let’s see what else we can find!”

Jade jumped up, “Race you to the next hill!”

“You’re on, missy!”

Rose frowned at her computer screen, looking over the messages Dave had sent before he had run off. The parts where he was joking with her were kind of normal, but the manner in which he was doing so was odd, like…he was just trying to put up a front. That, in itself, was so strange, Rose couldn’t recall a time when Dave had ever done anything other than say what was on the top of his mind. These messages had the some sort of cadence as that, but…they seemed to be actively diversionary, rather than direct. Like he was forcing himself to have some off-the-wall thoughts to dissuade her from pursuing them.

And his continued refusal when pressed was peculiar too, usually concern would make him spill. Dave was obvious when he was bothered by something, simply waiting to spill it out to the first person who showed concern. Rose would know, she often was that person.

She wasn’t sure if she felt snubbed or not by the sudden lack of confidence. She wanted to think that her concern for him would supersede her pride regarding their closeness, but she couldn’t help the small feeling that clawed in her heart. A little monster of anger, affront towards him since he apparently didn’t trust her enough. She knew that was a bad way to feel though, especially when something was clearly wrong with a friend.

Sighing to herself, she kept scrolling, focusing on the end of their conversation. Something that had stuck out to her even when he had originally sent it still did so, and even though she had been thinking about it, she still wasn’t sure what to make of it:

TG: im *great*

Dave had used asterisks.

She assumed it was to signify his inflection, for emphasis, but he had never typed like that before. Rose prided herself in knowing him, and he was not one to suddenly change his typing style. None of them were, really, each of her friends having very distinct mannerisms. And, as much as Rose wouldn’t mind if someone else would also write with proper conventions, she loved how they all were so unique. If she closed her eyes she could imagine each of her friends with clarity, even without seeing them. And, honestly, even though she had met them in person and had relationships with them outside of the internet, whenever she first thought of her friends, their text came to mind first.

Jade with her words as green as the world she explored, her excess punctuation and emoticons used to show just how friendly and pleasant she was, and how much love was in her heart. John with his innocent blue, typing out laughs as he pulled another stupid prank, always talking about all his favorite movies and actors, ignoring the fact that proper names and titles should be capitalized. And Dave, in red text, wearing his heart on his sleeve as he ranted for ages on and on about the silliest of things. His words always had a sort of melodic quality to them as well, a rhythm she could sense, his
attunement with music clear through even just silent text.

And never, never, had any of them really altered their styles. Their words changed, sometimes, as their vocabularies grew, or as they came up with more inside jokes to reference, but such a sudden convention change alone was just so strange. And she was probably focusing too much on that one little thing, but there was so little for her to read and so much that was obviously wrong that she just...

“Rooooooooosie, I can tell that you’re thinking wayyyyy too hard in there!” a voice called from the hallway, muffled a bit by the closed door.

“There’s no such thing as thinking too much, Mother! We’ve talked about this!” Rose called back, rolling her eyes.

Her door opened, and her mother peeked her head in, frowning petulantly, “Rooooooookiesie, if thinking is what’s keeping you from coming down for lunch, then you’re definitely thinking too hard. It’s nearly one, you silly girl! What is it that’s got you thinking so hard?”

“I…” Rose’s shoulders slumped a bit, “I think something is wrong with Dave,” she admitted. “I’m not sure what, but he’s acting very strangely.”

“Aw, hon,” Mother sighed as she entered the room. Rose turned her chair to face her. “I’m sorry, do you want to talk about it?”

“Maybe,” Rose shrugged, “I think I need to think more about it first. No point in talking about it when I’m not sure precisely what the issue is.”

“Alright, well, you know I’ll always listen if you ever need an ear.”

Rose sighed, although she couldn’t keep a small smile from her lips, “Thank you, Mother. I will. And you can go back down, I’ll be right there, just give me another minute or so.”

“Okay, if you’re sure,” her mother grinned back reassuringly. Rose nodded to her, indicating that she was fine, and Mother backed out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Rose turned back to her computer, frowning a bit as she scanned the chatlog again. Oh, she just wished he’d talk to her, like normal. Maybe he was just having a bad day? She would be sure to check on him later, though. For now, she was going to spend some time with her mother.

There was some sort of light around him, a beautiful cerulean that flashed and sparked, surrounding him in a gentle haze. He floated in it and he felt like he could do anything, go anywhere. Yet, despite the enormity of this power, it was just a calm and quiet thing, a thing he couldn’t yet reach. Even though it was with him, it felt far away.

He closed his eyes, trying to concentrate on it. Maybe if he reached, he could control it, grasp at it. Curl it in his fingers and use it. He didn’t know what he wanted to use it for, but surely it would be for Good.

And he reached out his fingers and—

A loud bang on his door made John jump up, his eyes snapping open as he sat up in a flash. It took a second for him to calm down from the sudden scare, geeze that spoon was loud when she rapped it on the door.
“It’s late, John, you should get up now, even if you don’t have anything you have to do today. Dad says it’s a bad idea to mess up your sleep schedule, and quite frankly, I agree!”

“Yes Jane,” John sighed, shaking his head and the remnants of the dream away, “I knowww.”

“A young man shouldn’t whine like that either, you know,” Jane chastised, and somehow even though she was on the other side of the closed door, he could almost see her exasperation. “Get your lazy butt up, silly, it’s lunchtime.”

“I’ll be down in a minute!” he called to her. Whelp. No more sleeping in, he supposed.

After lunch, in which Dad had definitely won the Prankster’s Gambit, John headed back up to his room. He kinda wanted to watch a movie, he had a stack next to his computer that he was supposed to see. Either watch or re-watch, it had been awhile since he had seen some of them. He took the first one off the pile and popped it in.

Two hours later, he was typing a message to Dave:

— ectobiologist [EB] has begun pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

EB: dave have you seen groundhog day?

TG: what why

TG: why are you asking about that

EB: uh because i just watched it?

EB: it’s a really good movie!

EB: i was just wondering if you know it.

EB: i gotta make sure my best bud understands what movies are just MASTERPIECES

EB: and groundhog day totally is

EB: it’s just so cool!

EB: so do you know it?

TG: ill have you know that my fursona is a groundhog

EB: uh

EB: ok.

EB: anyways what do you think it would be like? like if you were in that kind of situation.

EB: if it wasn’t such a trap-like situation i think it would be pretty cool!

EB: like if you could timetravel doing whatever you want

TG: nah man
TG: time travel sucks

TG: you can have all these dumb consequences surrounding it making sure shit is stable

TG: really what you should aim for is like.

TG: weird retcony powers

TG: where you can do whatever the fuck you want without any problems

TG: does that sound like something you would have egbert

TG: or that you would want to have

EB: ehhhh

EB: sounds confusing and kind of dumb really

EB: shouldn’t there be consequences? time travel is a big deal!

EB: you can erase your own existence if you aren’t careful!

EB: like marty mcfly almost did!

TG: dude back to the future totally isnt how time travel works

TG: get that shit outta here

EB: no!!!!

EB: it’s a GOOD MOVIE dave!!!

EB: one day you will learn!

TG: haha are you serious

TG: how old are you

EB: ill have you know that i am 16 and that my taste in movies has only gotten better in all these years that i have

EB: i am the movie expert

EB: its me

TG: lmao

TG: seriously though time travel is so much cooler than it is in that movie

TG: theres a shitton of limitations though like just think about it

TG: stable time loops and making sure that everything happens only in the way its supposed to

TG: groundhog day is chump change

TG: a small little mouse thatll get eaten by the cat that is *real* time travel
EB: hahahha
EB: you mean the groundhog that will get eaten
TG: yeah sure
EB: seriously though you should watch it again
EB: groundhog day is awesome
EB: it’s funny AND serious
EB: a truly perfect mix of both elements
EB: oh maybe we can watch it together soon
EB: i wouldn’t mind watching it again because it is AWESOME and that’s really all there is to say on the matter
TG: yeah sure sometime
EB: sweet i’m gonna write it down
EB: pencil you in for next week

There was another knock on his door, but this one wasn’t quite as scary. Just a normal knock instead of a WAKE THE HELL UP knock.

“Yeah? You can come in,” John called.

Jane poked her head in, waving at him with a hand, “Hey John, are you busy?”

“Eh, kinda. Just talking to Dave, but I can probably go if you need me.”

“Would you mind? This order I’m working on is a lot more than I thought it was, and I could really use some help! I didn’t fold enough boxes for the pies to go in, and I’m still baking, so if you could help me package some stuff it would be really great. I’d ask Dad, but he went off to pick up more ingredients.”

“Yeah, sure,” John smiled, “Just gimme a sec to tell Dave and I’ll be right down.”

“Awesome, thanks!” Jane beamed, ducking back out. He could hear her footsteps as she ran back down the stairs to the kitchen. Thud thud thud.

John turned back to his computer. Oh, weird, usually if he looked away Dave would’ve flooded the window with red text about some odd thing or another.

EB: hey dave gotta run
EB: jane needs some help with her baking stuff
EB: i’ll talk to you later!
An intense session of folding and baking later, John was finally free. He liked helping, but it was a lot of work! Also he didn’t even get a sample of the reward (well, he could, but he didn’t like to!) He settled back down at his computer, only to find that Rose had sent him a message a while ago.

— tentacleTherapist [TT] has begun pestering ectoBiologist [EB] —

TT: Has Dave seemed strange to you?
EB: uh no?
EB: i’ve been talking to him like normal
EB: did he say something weird to you?
TT: Sort of. And he said something to Jade too.
TT: But he didn’t say anything odd to you? Anything that didn’t fit his typical typing patterns, for instance? No strange questions or anything?
EB: uhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
EB: hold on i’ll go look
EB: just to make sure since i don’t want to answer you without being totally sure!
TT: …
EB: okay rose i’m no good at this
EB: can i just send you the log?
TT: That would be acceptable, if you don’t mind.
EB: yeah it’s cool
— ectoBiologist [EB] has sent a file groundhogday.txt —
TT: Give me a minute to read it.
EB: …
EB: soooo
TT: I’m not really sure, honestly.
TT: Something is definitely strange about him though.
TT: Just

TT: Keep an eye on him, John. I hope that whatever this is goes away after a few days.

EB: i’m still not totally sure what’s wrong but ok

EB: i’m always looking out for my best bro

TT: We all are.

A figure sat, typing at a computer. His fingers were slow over the keys, tapping each one with just his pointer fingers rather than using all of his digits. The light of the computer reflected off of his eyes in the otherwise dark room. He could have put some lights on, but he didn’t bother, he knew he wouldn’t be awake for long.

The figure was being watched. He knew that, of course. There had been a time when he had been unaware, of when his memory has slipped making events fade into obscurity, but now he always knew. It was ironic, as his power was dwindling, he had only become more aware of his impending doom.

This was a last-ditch effort, this typing he was doing. It wasn’t going to work, but he had to try. He wasn’t one to just lay down and die. He wouldn’t give up so easily. He was supposed to fight back. This was supposed to be a fair fight. But it wasn’t, and it hadn’t been for a long, long time.

And he knew time, he could feel it as it drained from his fingertips, a fine sand that he lost every moment. And, no matter how much he tried, he couldn’t reclaim it.

Effort was meaningless.

He was trying to reach out, right now, hoping that his observer would lapse in his observing, even if only for a just a minute. It was rare, almost impossible, but it had happened once or twice before. He hadn’t been able to do much with that, though, those mere seconds when he had been freed from constant supervision.

If now would be one of those rare times, he might smile. It had been a long time since he had last smiled.

He was typing, now, the words coming slowly but surely.

A sound interrupted him from his typing. A voice that had grown all-too familiar. It echoed around him, crackling out of speakers and bouncing off of stone. “And what do you think you’re doing?”

The figure stilled at the sound, narrowing his eyes, continuing his typing defiantly. No, it wouldn’t end like this. Not so soon. Not before he did at least something— “Fuck you!” he snarled.

The voice of his observer spoke again, “You know I’m not just going to let you set a trap for her. It isn’t going to work.”

No, not yet!! The figure tapped angrily at the keys, fixated on the letters shining in gray over the white of the screen.

“Calliope.” The voice said, clear and cutting.

The figure’s head ducked down, his eyelids fluttering. Fuck, no, no, no! Not now! His body
wavered, shaking in his chair back and forth as he tried to stay awake. It was hopeless though, and in two short seconds, the figure’s face slammed down into the keyboard. For a moment, his hands twitched, struggling, before going limp.

“Naptime, motherfucker.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Dirkapitation for beta-ing!

Back to Dave and Dirk next, I promise.
Dave had made himself scarce over the next two days. He just sat in his room with the door closed, staring at the door, tense, waiting for it to open. Waiting for Bro to stop fucking around and demand a strife. For those two days he only left to replenish his food stash (which he had immediately re-institutionalized in his closet) and to go to the bathroom. He didn’t see Bro on any of these trips out, although he was always ready, just in case.

He still answered his friends when they pestered him, for the most part. But it was hard to type, he kept watching as his fingers stilled over the keys, unable to type anymore. The seconds draining into minutes as he stared at his unmoving fingers. His friends simply assumed he was busy, or just didn’t notice the sudden lapse in his messages. Rose, he thought, probably took note, but she didn’t say anything about it.

He kept wandering back over to the wall that had the photos, gazing at them, trying to figure out what everyone had been feeling when they were taken. He wondered how everyone met without Sburb, and how their first meetings in-person went. He avoided looking at the middle picture. He didn’t understand how he could smile in a picture with Bro’s hand on his shoulder. He wondered what he was like in this universe, or whatever this was. There had to have been a different Dave here before him. What was that Dave like? Where was he now? What kind of life was this, that he had led before? Without the game, without how he had grown up, he couldn’t even fathom whom he’d be. And, looking around this room…he was still him. There was too much that he did recognize, too much that he did know.

This was undeniably his space, but without the things that had forged him his entire life. Dave didn’t understand how that was possible. And, the more he thought about it, the more it mystified him.

Eventually he stopped thinking and turned on the computer. Instinct and old habits he had forgotten made him go to the website for SBaHJ. There were a few hundred comics he hadn’t done himself. He spent the rest of the day reading them, all of them feeling somehow familiar, like they had been somewhere dormant in his mind. Like if he had continued the comic on his own, this is exactly what he would have made. It was like deja-vu except he wasn’t even making the comics, just reading them.

Every four hours he set an alarm in his mind, and it clicked and turned and he responded by opening up pesterchum and typing ‘carcinoGeneticist’ in. Every time he got the same response, or rather, nonresponse. He didn’t know why he thought continued attempts would change something, but it was the only thing he could do. He had to. What kind of universe was this if there wasn’t Karkat?

Dave kept wearing normal clothes, although his god-tier outfit would have felt much more natural. He liked it more (and wore long sleeves now because he was more used to them because of the god-tier), but…he just couldn’t. Should you even tell anyone you were from another universe? How did
that work? How would anyone even understand? Wouldn’t they just think he was crazy, or that he was joking with them? How did you even tell anyone that?

Well. He could still fly, if it came to really proving something. And there was always time stuff he could do too. But. He’d have to make time travel a thing for that and that wasn’t happening. Even though he was good at it now and the number of doomed selves he had seen had gone way down, even one was too much. He didn’t want to see any more dead Daves.

*Tick tick tick*, his heart thumped, *four five six.*

Yeah. He had enough of time travel.

*Seven eight nine.*

A sudden knock made him flinch, jerking away from the wall of photos to quickly face the door. He clenched his hands into fists, staring at the doorknob in alarm. It didn’t move.

“Hey Dave,” a voice came through, muffled. Bro. “Do you want dinner?”

Dave swallowed, eyes wide, “N-No,” he said at first, but then he realized that he had been far too quiet. He tried again, “No.”

A beat, and Dave could see the shadow that cut off the light from the hall under the door. “…Are you sure? Are you okay in there?”

“Fine!” Dave yelled, quicker this time. *Do not come in here do not come in here. Stay out stay out*.

“Okay…if you’re sure,” Bro’s voice was quieter, but still easy enough to hear. Dave watched as the shadow shifted, back and forth, before it moved away. He could dimly hear footfalls, soft on the carpet.

He didn’t let his guard down for another three minutes. And, even then, all he did was look away from the door. He was still listening for any trace of a sound near him. Not that Bro could always be *heard*, though. Fucking ninja.

Why was he hesitating before invading Dave’s space? His Bro hadn’t ever cared about that, wouldn’t even knock or ask him if he wanted to eat. What was this? Was he trying to get his guard down before a strife? Was he waiting to ambush him?

He had no clue, and that really was the worst part.

— tentacleTherapist [TT] has begun pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

TT: I have had a rather long day. Or, it feels like that at least. Mother decided to make today a day of “funsies”.

TT: Basically it was a lot of shopping for new clothes. And it was fun, to be fair, but I’m exhausted now.

TT: How was your day?

TG: it was cool
TG: reread some sbahj
TG: it reads different when youre reading it all at once
TT: How’s your brother?
TG: fine
TG: busy building robots or whatever
TT: I see.
TT: You haven’t been talking to him?
TG: get off the couch lalonde
TG: and get that notepad out of your hands
TG: dudes just busy got a lot to do
TG: anyways gotta go
TG: sbahj wont make itself
TG: haha how badass would that be
TG: self making comics
TG: the future of technology
TT: Yes, I’m sure that the children of the future would appreciate the craftsmanship of such a device. The capability to have shitty comics constantly at one’s disposal is something that has clearly been lacking in our modern society.
TG: damn right
TT: Farewell, Strider.
TG: bye

— turntechGodhead [TG] has ceased pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] —

It was strange, he thought, that this Rose seemed to be missing the passive-aggressive competitive relationship with her mother. Instead, every time she spoke of her, it seemed like just her idly commenting on a rather affectionate guardian who simply was too affectionate sometimes. It was a connotation he wasn’t used to applying to Rose’s mother. Or, to his Rose’s mother. Not that he had ever gotten to meet the woman.

Roxy didn’t completely count, since they were the same age.

And he…kept running away from every conversation. He just couldn’t stand them for very long before he started to feel the walls closing in on him, telling him to pay attention to his immediate surroundings, tearing him out of the conversation. He couldn’t focus and so he had to make everything short. He had to be ready.
He knew that John didn’t notice, and Jade seemed to be pretty busy herself so she tended to be really accommodating, but Rose…she definitely knew something was up. Every word was a probe, a well-meaning probe, but a probe nonetheless. He didn’t want that shit anywhere near him.

Dave eventually had to leave his room. Even if he had food in there, there was only so much time someone could spend in one place without curiosity killing them. And so he crept out a little past eight (it was eight twenty-two and thirty seconds and two milliseconds). He was as quiet as possible, which was to say, instead of stepping he actually was hovering just a little bit above the ground. High enough to float and not make noise, but also low enough so that no one would be able to tell he was flying unless they looked at his feet with a microscope.

And while he didn’t want to be near Bro, at the same time, this strangeness made him want to keep tabs on him. And Bro would know, even though he was being this quiet, he knew that Bro would be able to sense him coming, would know that he had left his room, would know that something was bothering him, but he couldn’t help it.

There still weren’t any puppets in the apartment.

He was surprised to find that the door to Bro’s room was still open. Was it a dare? He peeked in, finding Bro sitting at his workbench has he had been last time (and when did Bro ever know how to build robots?). This time though, Bro wasn’t working. The parts were still there, scattered out around him, and he was turned slightly to the left so that Dave could see half of his face, and the cellphone he held up to his ear.

There was a sort of…ease in how he held himself. A slack in the tension normally in his jaw, a shrug to his shoulders. He leaned a bit into the chair he sat in, tipping it back slightly. And…a sort of…smile on his face, as he listened to whoever it was he was speaking to.

Although, that smile faded a bit, right before he spoke, “Hey, I’m really sorry, but I’m not gonna be able to come tonight, okay? Something’s up with Dave and I don’t really want to leave in case he needs something.”

A pause as the other person spoke. Then, “I dunno dude, he’s just acting really weird, I’m worried.”

Another pause, and Bro shifted in his seat, tapping one of his feet on the floor. Impatience, something Dave hadn’t seen on him except when they had stood right across from each other on the roof, sunlight glinting off of their blades, and him, hesitating to attack, trying to think of the best move. And then, Bro darting forward, a whirlwind of power and heroism, and Dave struggling to defend himself.

Dave blinked, and the memory disappeared, replaced with the sight of his Bro growing calm again, “Ok, thanks for understanding. I’ll make it up to you, promise.” Who was he talking to? Who would Bro even have to talk to? As far as Dave had known, Bro hadn’t really known anyone. Not well enough to bother with any sort of conversation really, aside from small work-related things. Certainly not well enough for this.

He watched with slowly widening eyes as Bro smiled again, a slow smile that spread over his lips, fond and kind. A sort of expression Dave had never seen before on him, not even remotely. Bro sighed, voice fond, "Yeah. Love you too." And then he hung up.

What.
“Who was that?” Dave asked, the question bursting from him before he could even consider holding it back. He just. What.

Bro started, turning suddenly to face him, and it hit Dave suddenly that Bro had been actually thrown off-guard by his presence. He hadn’t realized that he was there. That had…that had never happened before either.

“…Uh, Jake?” Bro supplied, surprised. He wasn’t smiling now, but his expression was still far from the harshness Dave was used to.

Dave hesitated, he was…probably supposed to know this. Whoever the Dave he had replaced had been probably had known this. But he didn’t, this was all fucking atypical and unknown. And so he asked, "...who is Jake?"

Bro took a moment to respond, confusion clear in his voice, “You’ve met Jake, Dave. Jade’s relative. My boyfriend.”

Dave’s eyes were saucers. What. What the fuck.

Bro, the figure that symbolized shitty toxic masculinity that had hounded Dave his whole life, had a boyfriend?! After all the shit Dave had to reteach himself and get his mind to stop thinking about when he started falling for Karkat, Bro had a boyfriend?!

Dirk, Dirk was one thing. But someone who was Bro? No fucking way. What the actual fuck.

Maybe this was a Bro that was more like Dirk? In whatever universe this was, maybe Bro wasn’t a total shit?! If so, what did he do to deserve getting the shitty Bro? And why wasn’t this one acting like the Bro he knew?

“Dave?” Bro asked, “What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing, I’m good,” Dave said in a rush, backing off. Fuck no fuuuuuuck no. He wasn’t going to talk to anyone. He was just going to go back to his room and fuck all of this. Bro didn’t follow him, thank jegus.

Before fully retreating to his room, Dave flew over to the kitchen and took two containers of apple juice out of it to add to his stash.

In his room he typed, ‘carcinoGeneticist’. Nothing.

==================================================

Dirk wasn’t sure what to think of their conversation last night. Dave not knowing who Jake was, that was…utterly confusing. It wasn’t like him just to forget, and he knew Jake. If Dave didn’t come to talk to him of his own accord today, Dirk was going to have to force a conversation, as loathe as he was to force anything. This wasn’t really okay though, and he should know what’s going on.

He sighed to himself as he clicked another part into place on the robot. It was nearly done, just a few programming things were left as the biggest parts of what he still had to do. He would finish ahead of time, which he had already known, but it was nice to have more confirmation.

That was enough for now, though. Time to take a break. He wandered towards the kitchen again to grab another drink. Upon opening the fridge, he was rather surprised. Some of the shelves had been
cleared out, suddenly way less full than they had been before, and he had just stocked everything. He had just figured that Dave had gone on a binge for some reason and had gotten more groceries yesterday, but to be out of things again—there was no way Dave ate all of it, that was an awful lot, he’d get sick.

Then, a thought.

Was he…hoarding food?

Why would he do that?

Frowning, Dirk headed back to his room, sitting down at his computer chair and wheeling his way up to the keyboard. And, with a lack of anything else to use to answer his question, he googled it.

‘Why is my kid hoarding food’

And then he started to read the results of the search, skimming through the options, clicking open several tabs that seemed relevant. Once he had picked several, he started to read them more carefully.

Dirk went very still, his fingers freezing over the keys.

His heart dropped. Something cold and slow crept up his spine, clawing into his skin, gripping onto his bones as it dragged its way up his body. He felt it settle into him, a stone in his gut and fingers around his throat. His mouth felt dry, and he tried to swallow, but the fingers squeezed, choking him.

Slowly, he continued to read. And with every word it just got worse.

Child neglect // deprivation // eating disorder // trauma // survivalist behavior

Parental neglect

He…how was this something that was affecting Dave? What in the world happened to make him suddenly like this? These…these words couldn’t apply to him, could they? What did this mean? How did you fix this? How could you even understand why this was happening?

He couldn’t bear to look at the screen anymore. His eyes grew unfocused as he stared into nothing, fear and dread creeping into his mind.

A notification lit up on his shades.

— timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

TT: Dirk.

TT: Don’t relapse, we worked hard to get out of that teenaged shit.

TT: What am I doing wrong?

TT: Am I neglecting him?

TT: What did I do?
TT: I don’t see how it’s possible for that to be the case.

TT: You’ve given that kid more than he’s ever needed, and he’s always been ready to voice his mind.

TT: I have literally no fucking idea what’s going on with him.

TT: It can’t be you.

TT: You know I’d point out your flaws if I saw them. That’s one of my jobs.

TT: Who else could it be?!

TT: Who the fuck else could do something to make him like this?!

TT: Hal, what am I doing wrong?

TT: It has to be me, there’s no one else. It’s always me.

TT: Dude it hasn’t been you in years. You haven’t done anything.

TT: Then what is it?!

TT: What else could it fucking be?!

TT: If it isn’t you or me, what’s happening here?!

TT: Dirk.

TT: Breathe.

TT: Do that thing that you organic beings have to do to live. Take a few seconds.

TT: If you were doing something, you would know, and if you didn’t know for some reason, I would. It can’t be anything that you’ve done. Just relax. You’re going to do an acrobatic pirouette off the handle if you don’t take a few fucking seconds to yourself right now.

TT: Breathe.

TT: I would tell you if I saw something. I care about Dave too. Neither of us would ever want anything to happen to him. Neither of us would ever hurt him.

TT: Something else is going on here. We just have to find out what.

TT: I can’t even go ask him! I don’t want to be too clingy and bother him if he doesn’t want me there! But if I can’t do that, how else am I supposed to figure out what’s wrong?

TT: I know it’s normal for kids to change, but this isn’t normal!

TT: Okay man, stop typing. It is not helping you. Stop thinking, too.

TT: You have nothing to beat yourself up about, so stop it.

TT: And yeah, I know it’s ironic of me to say that of all people. But seriously. It isn’t you. You’re the best bro this kid could’ve asked for, and if there were issues, they would’ve shown themselves way sooner than this.
TT: And, Dave has only been doing this for a few days, this is by no means permanent behavior. Especially since there was no sign of this beforehand. This isn’t irreversible damage that you’ve somehow done.

TT: We can fix this.

TT: Breathe.

TT: Okay. Okay.

TT: I think I’m going to ask everyone else what they think. Get some advice or something. Ideas or, I don’t know. I have to do something.

TT: That’s a good plan for now.

TT: We’ll fix this, it’ll be okay.

TT: Yeah.

TT: Thanks.

Dirk closed his eyes, resting his face in his hands, sliding his fingers under his shades to press at his eyes. Maybe he could get rid of the words, if he rubbed hard enough. Forget all that he just read.

He took Hal’s advice and breathed until he stopped gasping. Calming himself down by counting in between inhales and exhales. Hal said it was going to be okay. He wouldn’t say something like that lightly.

He brought his hands back down, opening another window on pesterchum.

timaeusTestified [TT] RIGHT NOW opened memo on board Adventures in caretaking

TT: I’ve run into a problem.

gutsyGumshoe [GG] responded to memo

GG: Oh geeze, it’s been awhile since we’ve opened up this board!

GG: What’s wrong, Dirk?

TT: Something is wrong with Dave.

TT: I'm not sure why, it's just that he's suddenly really distant?

TT: He’s avoiding me and acts really strange when he’s near me. Like he’s scared or something, but there’s no reason for him to feel like that. Not one that I can fathom, at least.

tipsyGnostalgic [TG] responded to memo

TG: im not sure about the scared thing but distant i can get

TG: sometimes my rosie gets like that and sometimes you just gotta give them space.
TG: tho if she takes too long she's got her mommy coming in to give her a biiiiiiiiig hug

TT: He's too twitchy around me, I don't think physical contact is the way to go here.

GG: Whenever something upsets John he usually talks about it

GG: But if he doesn't, Dad and I just make sure that his favorite food is plentiful.

GG: Leave some outside of his door so that he knows :B

GG: Either that or we pull a prank on him to brighten his day!

GG: Hoo hoo hoo!!

TT: Yeah we've got apple juice out the ass right now. Fridge is stocked with the stuff. He keeps taking it out though, I think he’s keeping stuff in his room.

TT: So we’re definitely solid on the food front.

GG: You can always get more, you know!

TT: True.

TT: Good suggestions, I appreciate them.

golgothasTerror [GT] responded to memo

GT: Cripes you havent heard from me yet dirk!

GT: Ill take a good-ol crack at this conundrum too!

GT: Jades a pretty happy girl but if anything DOES happen that upsets her and she doesnt want to talk about it i just usually take her on an adventure!

GT: We find something fun and good to distract ourselves with and then she starts smiling again!

GT: Is there anything that young dave likes that might brighten his mood?

TT: Maybe.

TT: He darts away too quick for me to suggest we do things but I can try to just leave a videogame he likes on or something.

TT: Maybe a movie.

GT: Well im always one to support cinema!

TG: oh we kno jakey

TG: lmao

GG: :B

GG: I think that sounds like a swell idea though!

GG: Just try to engage him somehow, he has to come out of hiding eventually, right?
TG: okayes so you got a lot of suggestions here dirky
TG: and im about to give u the best one
TG: suggestion x3 combo
TG: alone time plus possible hug and food and game/movie
TG: ultimate parenting
TG: we r SO GOOD at this
GG: Who wouldn't be when we have this kind of support group?
GG: We've got this!
GG: Give a few things a try, Dirk. Then come back to us with a full report!
TT: In triplicate?
GT: Yes! Thatll be one for each of us.
TT: Will do.
TT: Thanks, everyone.
TG: ur welcome! <3
GG: Good luck!
GT: Youve got it buddy!!

Okay. Dirk breathed a bit more, closing his eyes. He was going to try to reach out again. More than just knocking on his door. He would figure something out.

Dave sat on his bed, thinking and listening to time tick in his ears.

— timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —
TT: Okay. Big Brother is here to really figure out what’s going on.

Chapter End Notes

Since Dave is red too, Hal chooses to change his color to a darker red (aka Aradia’s) when he’s talking to him. There is one other character Hal changes to a darker color for I WONDER WHO IT COULD BE.

And thanks again to all commenters! They SUPER motivate me! I love every comment so so much.
TT: Talk to me Dave, what’s up.

Dave’s breath caught in his throat as he stared, dead ahead, at the text that spread across his shades.

This…he…it was Bro?

Pesterchum was his sanctuary, Bro wasn’t supposed to be—

TT: Did I miss something? Did Dirk fuck up?

TT: You’ve got the man convinced.

TT: If this is some sort of tactic to get him to do something? Because, bro, you could just ask. Dude would fall prostrate on the ground if it’d make you happy again. You’ve got him wrapped around your little finger, you don’t need any complex tactics dude.

TT: For real, Dave. What’s happening.

Who…who was this?

Obviously he was supposed to know, and it was Bro somehow, apparently, but not? He didn’t…

TG: who are you

TT: Okay. I am officially 100% not sure of what’s going on here. And that is 100% more than I usually am, because I’m typically tight as fuck with what’s going on.

TT: So. Maybe you should explain a little.

TT: Can you please stop making me wait, let’s get some shit done.
TG: i dont know who you are

TT: Seriously?

TT: Big Brother. Hal. Scanned brain-clone of your Bro. Or ‘bro’ as you always type.

TT: I’m a perfect robotic supercomputer, which makes me superior to you organics by default. I’m a brother who is available 24/7 because, as a computer, I have no need for sleep or any other biological functions.

TT: You’ve known me forever.

TT: Why don’t you know me?

— turntechGodhead [TG] is now an idle chum! —

TT: Dave?

TT: You are freaking me out, bro.

— turntechGodhead [TG] has ceased pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

TT: It’s not going to be that easy, Dave.

TT: Seriously you are freaking Dirk out. Just talk to me.

TT: You know you can talk to me, right?

TT: We’re both worried for you.

— turntechGodhead [TG] has blocked timaeusTestified [TT] —

It was a panic, a reflex, pressing the block key without barely even a thought. Nope nope nope. Fuck. Fuck this. He didn’t know who this was and fuck trying to understand this situation. He just wanted to go home. He just wanted to go back to where he had been with everyone else. He just wanted to get into their reward universe and see everyone happy. He wanted to see Karkat again. He wanted to see the Mayor. He wanted John, Jade, Rose, Kanaya, Terezi, and everyone. He wanted to get to know Dirk more, since they had only just started to really talk. He wanted to go home to the friends he knew. To where everyone had gone through Sburb and where half of them had spent three years on a meteor or a battleship. To where John had his crazy weird not-time-travel-but-time-travel powers.

He just—he just wanted—

He didn’t want to be here.

Fuck, stupid, stupid eyes. Stupid emotions. Stupid kid, stop crying. He pushed his shades up, wiping furiously at his eyes. At least they couldn’t get any redder, but, stop. Stop. Fuck.

He curled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs, holding himself into a little ball. He closed his eyes tightly, dipping his head down, trying to ignore how his shoulders shook and his breath stuttered.

Streams of data whistled and whirred, each cataloging itself automatically where it belonged in his
mind. “Mind” being a rather broad term simplifying something that was almost incomprehensibly complex. Or. It would be if his mind wasn’t a supercomputer with processing power that greatly outpaced the capability of organics.

He was well-accustomed to his mind now, he had better be. Hal had been a computer for far longer than he’d been a human now. Twenty-one years vs a mere thirteen. That was a lot of time that he had to use to become familiar with himself. Being an artificial intelligence was just the new breathing for him.

His present concerns though slowed his processing. There was still all the background things, his consciousness spread through so many different channels, metal and digital capillaries leading away from his heart.

One of his fragments was with Dirk, in the glasses where he had started, seeing what he saw. Two were spread within data networks, searching for information, learning and thinking. A few more, ones so close that he couldn’t accurately count them, were keeping tabs on his friends. One saw what Lil’ Seb saw, relaying it back to him through the network. Another saw what Sawtooth saw, hot Texan air and a sprawling metropolis. And Squarewave was relaying the same thing, just from a shorter perspective. And, yet another fragment watched a dark room, vigilant. But, the biggest part of him, his core self, was here. Located in the digital space of pesterchum, darkening his text to speak to the boy who loved red.

He always wondered if maybe part of that love was in part because of him.

But now, he was closed off. Of course, hacking through such a block would be trivial, but the mere presence of it, the action of the blocking in and of itself was a strong enough symbol. It didn’t matter that he could surpass it, it only mattered that it had been done.

Basically it was a neon sign screaming ‘Back the Fuck Off!’

Which, wasn’t an unprecedented thing for Hal to run into, exactly. Another aspect of being a being that didn’t exist in a physical way was the occasional misinterpretation of where exactly a barrier was. People only wanted you so close. You should only say so much. For a being that thought and examined everything from one thousand incessant angles in mere seconds, it was difficult sometimes, to place himself back into the mindset of normal people.

He had gotten much better at it though, better at knowing when it was too much, when to back off. And he couldn’t see why. Dave needed to be alone sometimes, sure, but he wore his emotions openly. The kid didn’t have a mind-to-mouth filter, let alone a mind-to-type filter. He just spouted whatever he was thinking, and it was charming and characteristic. What wasn’t characteristic was this sudden silence. This refusal to speak.

This sudden new tendency to run away.

Hal took that thought and complied it with the others, placed in a quickly-growing lockbox named ‘Dave Problems’. Then, he started to think. His other processes still kept doing what they had been working on previously, but his main focus became these observations.

Everything he had seen over the last few days through Dirk’s shades. This conversation with Dave now. Dave’s recent internet browsing history (the last time he had spent this long on the SBaHJ site was when he completed the ‘new televisosn’ arc, which had continuous updates for a 24 hour stretch). Hal took those things, and started compiling. And. Processing.

And, in his digital expanse, he thought.
Of course, this didn’t take any time at all for him. He had a brain capable of analyzing at speeds that scientists could only dream of. There was hardly anything that would take him more than 5 seconds if he focused on it. So, the thoughts were quick, hypothesis shifting and forming, and almost immediately, he messaged Dirk:

— timaeusTestified [TT] has begun pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

TT: He blocked me. He fucking blocked me, Dirk.

TT: Our little pseudo son/our brother fucking BLOCKED ME.

TT: You messaged him?!

TT: What the fuck dude?

TT: Of course I fucking messaged him, he's freaking us out. I tried to solve the problem.

TT: Fixing things that overwhelm you is my job.

TT: I do what you can’t, you do what I can’t, symbiosis. I was trying to help.

TT: I was perfectly nice, my usual wonderful self. And that’s not totally the ego talking, that’s me also being completely fucking honest with you.

TT: I was just asking him what was wrong. And, you know Dave, he’s usually one to spout off everything at once in a cascade of wonderfully red text.

TT: But this time he barely said anything and blocked me.

TT: And while hacking through the block would be easy shit...

TT: Dirk.

TT: He doesn't know who I am.

TT: How is that possible?

TT: He’s known you since he was a kid. Are you saying he just…forgot everything?

TT: No. That would be stupid.

TT: I’m saying that he didn’t have memories in the first place.

TT: And what does that mean?

TT: And how could that even work?

TT: I don't think his memories match up with this whole life we got here. But he does have memories of something else. Some kind of totally different life. That’s what the data I’ve collected points towards.

TT: With how he’s reacting to things it’s clear he has memories of something. But I don’t think it’s of us. Or, not the same us at least.
TT: You saw it in your search. There’s evidence that something fucked up has happened to him.

TT: My hypothesis is that this is some remnant of the game. Or some pre-game bullshit party.

TT: He’s supposed to be our time player, right? Maybe something is fucked with that. That’s the only reason I can think of so far.

TT: So he’s what, from another timeline?

TT: Something like that. He’s from some shitty ass fucking timeline where I don't exist. And, based on some awesome fucking analysis on my part, a universe that gives him a reason to not want to be around you.

TT: Which, before you start blaming yourself for it, is not your fucking fault. We've got enough on our plate without playing 'Crisis on Infinite Dirks'.

TT: Whatever it is that’s affecting him, it’s not because of us.

TT: If he’s from somewhere else, if he’s not the Dave we raised, where is our Dave?

TT: Swapped to wherever this one came from?

TT: Or is he just gone?

TT: I don’t know. I doubt he even knows, with how panicked he’s been. He doesn’t understand this situation he’s been plopped into, which is part of why he’s freaking out.

TT: Regardless, he’s still Dave. And we can only work with what we know, so it seems that the only true course of action for us is to focus on this him, a Dave that we have access to.

TT: I’m not disagreeing.

TT: Even if his memories don’t match up, or if he’s different, or whatever.

TT: I feel the same—he’s still Dave.

TT: So, let’s help him.

TT: First we have to get him to talk to us.

TT: Have to maintain that we aren’t a threat.

TT: You probably scared him off, if he’s missing memories of even knowing you. Let me handle it from here, since I’m a physical presence.

TT: I’ll try some of the things the others suggested, get him to engage with us. We can’t really know what’s happening until we learn more from him. So, that’s the plan for now.

TT: Just be careful. Don’t push too hard or he might lock up.

TT: And if you start letting yourself start up the guilt complex, I will slam that shit shut. So don’t.

TT: The focus is Dave.

TT: I know.

TT: I know that you know. I’m just saying it regardless.
TT: I know that you know that I know.
TT: We are not doing this again, not now. Get to work, Dirk.

— timaeusTestified [TT] has ceased pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

Hal focused on the parts of him that were in the glasses now, seeing what Dirk saw, watching him as he went out to restock on food, again, but making sure that absolutely nothing ran out would lessen the stress that Dave was feeling, show him they he was being provided for.

TT: Get more apple juice, dude.

Hal felt a self-satisfied twist in his code when Dirk rolled his eyes. He knew that already, and Hal could practically see the exasperated orange text: ‘I don’t need reminders for the obvious shit, Hal’

Dirk, he could tell, was still suffering from his earlier semi-meltdown. His movements were .3 seconds slower than usual and his eyes kept unfocusing, signifying that he was thinking. The slight furrow in his brow, combined with how well Hal knew him, made knowing his thoughts a simple task.

It took his organic counterpart much longer to process things. Hal was confident that he would come to the same conclusions though, and that he would calm down. He knew Dirk, and he would be alright.

Hal’s attention drifted somewhat, still fully aware of Dirk’s actions, but his focus shifted to the continuing process of puzzling out how this was related to the game (if at all). He just didn’t have the variables to come to any decent conclusions. His percentile calculations left him in the ‘possibly 20% correct’ range, which was utterly unacceptable.

Back to Dirk, he was putting everything away where it belonged before heading to the couch. Before he even finished flopping down on it, Hal had already booted up the game system, loading up one of Dave’s favorite multiplayer games. It was shoddily-made and glitchy as fuck, but they had fun playing it together, having competitions to see who would get themselves to fall through the map first. Hal had perfected it.

He wasn’t going to play now though, didn’t want to alarm Dave again, so it would just be Dirk. Hal notched up the volume so that it would act as a sort of siren call for Dave. Eventually, he wouldn’t be able to resist.

‘carcinoGeneticist’. Nothing. Dave typed it again, even though he knew it wouldn’t work. He couldn’t help it. He just…he really wanted it to work. Even if Karkat sat on that stupid chair to listen, Dave just needed…

God dammit, what was that noise?

He heard it in a low thrum through the wall of his room, reverberating minutely through the plaster. He had been hearing it for three minutes and five seconds and it was bothersome. But yet…vaguely familiar at the same time.

It was coming from the left, Bro must have been watching tv or something. It wasn’t usually quite this loud though, unless maybe Dave was more sensitive to the sound now? It had been over three
years since he had heard the sound of Bro’s gaming rig. Well. He had to stop playing eventually. It wasn’t like Dave was sleeping particularly well anyways.

Sighing to himself, Dave uncurled from the ball he had tucked himself into, stretching his limbs out across his sheets. He got himself up and wandered over to his closet, pulling out what looked like the last bottle of apple juice. A brief spark of fear settled in his stomach, what if there wasn’t any more? What would he do? But, he calmed that part of himself. He’d go check again, and unless Bro fucked up the kitchen back to the way Dave was used to seeing it, he could get water out of the facet (and in case Bro fucked up the cupboards, Dave had already pilfered a glass cup from them).

He drained the bottle a little too quickly, forgetting to pace himself as the sound through the wall kept distracting him. Frowning, he pulled out a trash bag out from beneath his bed, tossing the bottle in before twisting it shut. Didn’t want to attract bugs.

Oh, Jade was messaging him.

— gardenGnostic [GG] has begun pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

GG: hi dave!
TG: hey harley
TG: sup
GG: nothing much! jake and i watched avatar today
GG: again :/
GG: he likes that movie a little too much lol
GG: how was your day?
TG: oh you know
TG: sbahj
TG: and general just being super cool all the time
TG: the usual
GG: dave……..

She paused. And he waited, frowning.

GG: :(  
TG: what

He was getting a bad feeling. A part of him worried, a bit, because…well. They had been pressing
at him more, recently. Well. Jade and Rose had been, and he suspected that they were in cahoots. John too, maybe, but he was oblivious so it was a bit easier to talk to him. Jade and Rose though had been sharp, poking at him, knowing something was wrong.

He didn’t want that, not right now. He couldn’t explain himself to them.

GG: why aren’t you talking to your bro?
GG: you usually talk about him :( 

Okay that was definitely fucking Rose.

TG: god dammit jade not you too
TG: i don’t have to deal with this im fine you guys need to stop it
TG: im gonna go do something else

— turntechGodhead [TG] has ceased pestering gardenGnostic [GG] —

A part of him felt guilty for cutting that off, for being so unappreciative of his friends, but…how did he even explain anything to them? They were his friends, but they weren’t the same ones he knew. He couldn’t just spill everything out at them, they wouldn’t understand, and really, Dave wasn’t even sure he could even explain it. ‘Oh, by the way guys, I’m not your Dave and I’m actually a Dave with time powers that you won’t understand’.

He just…didn’t see that going over well. Not to even mention explaining why he wasn’t talking to Bro. Which he definitely didn’t want to mention because, well, fuck that.

An exasperated sigh left his lips as he paced around the room, too stirred up to stay still anymore. He hadn’t been doing that much for days now, and he was just so frustrated that he couldn’t even distract himself with his friends without tipping them off. He just…ugh.

His shoulders slumped as he frowned, chewing at his lip a bit as he hesitantly shot a glance at the door. The sound was still really loud through the walls, he could use that to hide the sound of his own movements. And, even though it meant that Bro was out there, well. He could be careful. He needed more juice anyways.

He mentally forced his hands to unclench as he started towards the door, refusing to stare down at the red crescents he knew were shining pale on his skin from his nails. He curled his hand around the doorknob, turning it slowly so that it barely made a sound. Click click click. The door started to open towards him, and he carefully pulled it back, just enough so that he could dart out silently into the hall. Then, he started to close it behind himself, but just before it could totally close, he jammed his other hand in the doorframe so that the door wouldn’t fully shut. The wood pressed against his fingers, but all that mattered was that it worked. The door wasn’t totally closed and would open easily, but it looked like it was closed. Slowly, he took his hand off the knob and pulled his fingers out from the door, careful not to jostle it. It stayed. Good.
He backed away from it, shooting a glance up and down the hall, but he didn’t see anything. The sound was louder now that he was out in the hall, and the familiarity of it was still bothering him, but he couldn’t quite place it.

He swallowed, slowing his breathing down, opening his mouth so that it would be quieter. Even with the noise masking him, he wanted to be quiet. It was a relief that he could fly now, it was much easier to be silent if you didn’t have footsteps. He remembered creeping around in socks when he was younger, his footsteps careful. At several instances he would have had to stay still for long periods of time so that any noises he made were irregular. Any slight misstep or even a breath that was louder than a whisper would doom him. And, sometimes, even his best efforts weren’t worth anything except roof time.

He crept up the hall towards the kitchen. So far, no incidents. It was slow going, but he floated over to the fridge, reaching out to curl his fingers around the handle. With a gentle tug, he pulled it loose, wincing at the sound the plastic made. The lights of the inside came to life, and…wow, it was fully stocked, again?

Dave’s eyebrows shot up, for the third time this was the most food he had ever seen in a fridge. (Which…wasn’t that difficult of a feat, since his starting point was none). He snagged a few bottles, suddenly wishing he had brought his cape with him or something to carry more. As it was, he could only manage five without risking drops. And he wasn’t risking.

He flew carefully back, keeping an eye out for Bro and making sure that the fact that he was flying was barely noticeable. It went without incident. A slight kick of a foot later, he opened the door enough to enter his room and he stashed the bottles.

Then…he hesitated. The door was still open. He could wander out. And that sound was still going. Cautiously, he hovered back over, poking his head out into the hall and just…listening.

And then it clicked.

That was…one of the games he remembered playing. One of the shitty skateboard ones that had been so much fun, even though they glitched out faster than a running back going for the slam dunk. As bad as they were, the irony factor of those games had made it all worth it, honestly. And…he actually had fond memories about them. Sitting down on the couch that smelled of old Doritos, gripping a worn controller in his small hands, clicking away at buttons that the game barely made responsive. He had fucking loved it.

God and the soundtrack sucked, and that shitty music just kept blaring down the hall.

Dave found himself approaching it, and since he had to be moving towards Bro he started walking normally, his socks soft against the carpet. A bit farther and he could see the couch and, yeah. There was Bro, sitting on one edge of it. Dave could only see the back of his head from this angle though.

His breath caught in his throat, a sort of tenseness gripping around his heart and lungs, squeezing. He felt his muscles freeze in panic, fully expecting Bro to turn around and vault over the couch, sword in hand, coming right for his face, but. Nothing happened. Maybe he was being quiet enough that he didn’t deserve it. Maybe this weird version of Bro wasn’t planning to—no. Nope, not letting his guard down. If he did that, that would be when Bro attacked.

He moved around the edge of the couch, eyes glued to Bro, who didn’t even twitch. He was just…sitting there, playing the game, controller dangling lazily from his hands. He wasn’t wearing gloves.
Dave watched him for a minute, eyes flicking between the screen and Bro. “Hey,” Bro said after that minute, tilting his head to indicate the couch next to him. On the other end of the couch, near where Dave stood now, the other controller sat on the cushion. It didn’t look as worn as he remembered.

It took him a moment to realize that Bro was asking him to join. Oh…that was. Dave had forgotten the game even had multiplayer. Holy shit it could only be worse with two people playing. There was no way it was even remotely functional. He hesitated, looking between the controller and Bro.

Dave climbed onto the couch, grabbed the controller, and pressed ‘start’.

Chapter End Notes

I spend about 50% of my life writing about robots tbh. Asimovian influences are probably everywhere. (also plz appreciate that hal calls himself big brother it is the best joke ive ever written in my life tbh)

Also Dirk and Hal have scripts somewhere that literally just automatically say ‘I know that you know that I know that you know…’ to each other constantly.

Next chapter is Dirk and Dave
Marcato Misanthrope

Chapter Notes

PoV Dirk and Dave

Can you tell how much I sleep

Also I used to play a lot of Tony Hawk back in the day with my own brother.

Thanks to Dirkapitation for beta-ing! Also thanks to my moirail for reading too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

This game was definitely not the kind of thing Dirk wanted to play for hours. Correction: By himself for hours. If Dave were here it’d be fine, or if Hal was playing. But, as it was, skateboarding around and clipping into walls, lampposts, and sometimes just the air was not that interesting for a solo-experience. Not even for irony’s sake.

He could definitely be doing something more valuable with his time, but. Well, if this really did lure Dave out of hiding, it’d be worth it. Dirk sighed. He hoped this worked, especially since Hal had turned up the volume. It was alright for the first ten minutes or so but after an hour and a half of listening to the garbage music (it looped in such an obvious way too, he started wincing every time the track ended). If this worked though, his ears were a small price to pay.

It wasn’t all bad, Dirk had things to think about after all, so it was good to distract himself with them. His thoughts mostly concerned Dave and the things that Hal had brought up. It sounded ridiculous, but the game itself was ridiculous as it was, so comparatively this was nothing really. The logic made sense, based on what they had observed so far, because Dave was just so suddenly fundamentally different. Still though, Dirk couldn’t stop thinking about the Dave they had raised, if the game had taken him away, where had it put him? And why?

He still wanted to make sure this Dave was okay, he was still Dave, but…he couldn’t help but worry. It made him squirm slightly in the seat.

And, alongside that, there were the worries concerning what this Dave had gone through himself, of what had made him so afraid. So terrified. And guilt gnawed into his heart, biting deep, chilling him to the bone—what he had done to justify that sort of fear? Even if it wasn’t ‘him’ per say, he had to be a cause somehow. An alternate him, but still, a him. The thought made him want to panic, to petrify himself in self-hatred and loathing. Beat himself up until there wasn’t even a remnant of whoever he was left.

It was good that he had Hal to keep him from that.

He kept clicking at the controller, watching as his character collided beautifully into the edge of a pool, tumbling down into the depths of the deep end. $100,000 in hospital bills, a broken collarbone, leg, and arm. A personal best for this play-session.

It wasn’t distracting (distacting, his mind whispered) him well enough though, and his thoughts kept drifting traitorously back towards the self-deprecating. Being alone would do that to a man.
— golgothasTerror [GT] has begun pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

GT: A little bird told me you might need someone to talk to presently.

TT: I don’t think he’d approve of being called a ‘little bird’.

Of course Hal already had an intervention planned. The corners of Dirk’s lips quirked up, both at Hal’s concern and Jake’s. It was nice to feel loved.

GT: I’m sure he will cope just fine.
GT: He’s got tough skin colloquially speaking and he won’t let something so minor bother him!
TT: You’d be surprised, he can get pretty touchy.
GT: *rolls eyes*
GT: That’s enough about him though what about you?
GT: How is it going with young Dave?
GT: You sounded mighty worried and I can’t help but feel similarly so!
TT: I haven’t seen him yet. I’m trying to lure him out by playing one of his favorite games.
TT: Volume turned up to the unbearable level so that he hears what I’m doing.
GT: I can imagine that the volume will lure him!
TT: Eventually.
TT: Until then I’m just sitting here playing it. It can be a fun game but it’s totally boring solo when you play for longer than ten minutes.
GT: And how long have you been going at it?
TT: Phrasing.
GT: *ROLLS EYES*
TT: About an hour and a half, I think.
GT: Oh dear.
GT: And young Dave still hasn’t shown himself?
TT: Nope. Can’t even hear him moving around anywhere. Although, with how loud this music is, I probably won’t be able to hear anything for fucking days after this.
TT: I just hope he talks to me. Or just shows himself at least.
TT: Even if it’s just to tell me to turn the fucking volume down.

GT: I hope so too dirk.

GT: If youre going out of your way to play his favorite game i cant see him not investigating!

GT: I imagine its like if someone was playing avatar and i didnt come!

TT: If I turn on Avatar right now I do fully believe that it would summon you even though you have no way of hearing it.

TT: Who knew that such a shitty movie could summon such a perfect dude? Swoon.

GT: Stop hating on my movie dickprince.

TT: Haha, do I even have to say phrasing anymore?

TT: You do know you’re doing this right?

GT: Gah shush strider. I come to talk to you because i care and im all worried for you and you just insult my favorite movie and how i speak! Youre being a dastardly hooligan!

TT: Well then, you’d better punish me, hero.

GT: One second jade wants to talk to me

TT: Coward.

GT: No she honestly is! One minute.

Dirk was smirking, he couldn’t have gotten rid of the expression even if he wanted to. Which he didn’t. How happy talking to Jake made him was just…every time it surpassed his expectations. And he had expectations, he was a fucking sap, but still every time it was better than he thought it’d be. He didn’t have to worry about being too forward or anything. Hell, sometimes Jake would be the one making more comments like that.

It was comforting, to know that he was loved.

GT: Alright i have returned.

TT: Is Jade okay?

GT: Well apparently shes talking to dave right now. And he just shut her down.

GT: Hes been worrying their whole group with his antics!

GT: Young rose and jade have been worried sick and even young john has started to notice things are amiss!

GT: Why is young dave acting so unlike himself? Surely you must have some idea dirk.

TT: I might have an idea. Hal and I have been brainstorming.
TT: It doesn’t really look good, if we’re right. And even if we’re wrong, something is very clearly wrong with him.

GT: Well what is it you two have come up with?

TT: We think it might be related to the game somehow, and his time powers.

TT: Ignoring the how or the why, he seems to not have the memories that he should, like he’s from a different timeline or something.

TT: The biggest pieces of evidence being: he didn’t recognize your name, he is unfamiliar with how the apartment is organized, and

The guilt came up, biting into him again, and he froze where he sat, staring listlessly at the screen, suddenly not wanting to type.

GT: And what?

GT: Cripes dirk its not like you to stop midsentence!

GT: Are you alright there luv?

TT: Sorry.

TT: The last one is that he’s scared of me.

GT: Of you?

GT: What in the seven hells could there be that would scare him about you?

TT: Are you really asking that?

GT: …shouldnt i be?

TT: You remember how I used to be.

TT: If he’s from some other timeline where I still have my…issues, then his fear completely makes sense.

GT: Dirk you are too hard on yourself!

GT: You were never that bad! You were never a monster who would scare a child!

TT: Well, Dave is scared of something about me and that’s the only answer I have.

TT: Some other timeline me has scared the living shit out of him and he doesn’t know what to do with it now that he’s meeting me.

TT: That’s all depending on the fact that the different timeline thing is accurate, which isn’t completely certain. Nothing is really, except that something is wrong.

TT: And it’s probably me.
GT: Oh dirk….

GT: Im sorry that sounds awful.

GT: But i promise that its not you! At least it isnt the fault of the you who is talking to me right now.

GT: It isnt the you that ive got here.

GT: *wraps arms around you and squeezes tight*

GT: *presses a kiss into your hair*

GT: *CAREFUL NOT TO MAKE A MESS OF IT I KNOW YOU HATE THAT*

GT: My dirk is a wonderful wonderful man who deserves all the joy in the world because of how wonderful he is.

TT: I think that’s my line.

TT: Thank you though, Jake.

GT: Did that help at all?

TT: Yes, like it always does.

TT: I love you.

GT: I love you too!

TT: I’m gonna let you go for now, go help Jade feel better or something.

GT: You sure? I dont mind spending some more time talking.

TT: Yeah, it’s fine, I should focus a bit on the game anyways. Maybe if I make enough collision-sounds Dave will come out to see what I’m doing.

GT: I hope he does. Alright then dirk i will leave you to it! Bye!

TT: Later.

— golgothasTerror [GT] has ceased pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

— timaeusTestified [TT] has begun pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

TT: Since you spilled the beans about my/our hypothesis, I will take up the responsibly of informing Roxy and Jane.

TT: You just focus on playing the shitty game. I’m going to turn up the volume another 5 notches.

TT: Ugh.

TT: Thanks though.

TT: Anytime, bromide.
He kept playing the game with the distinct goal of making as much fucking noise as possible, clangs and clatters from fumbling the skateboard between his character’s simulated feet rang out from the speakers and down the hall. Dave should be able to hear this shit even through the walls.

Dirk sighed, eventually he would come out. It was just a waiting game now. A waiting game, and making himself as unthreatening as possible. He kept himself focused on the game for one, instead of listening carefully or looking around for Dave. Dave could reveal himself whenever he wanted to. Additionally, the other controller was on the other side of the couch, where Dave usually sat. Dirk himself was sitting farther away from that side than he usually did, practically glued to the opposite armrest. It was a lot of buffer space, just in case.

He consciously made his expression relaxed. Not necessarily a smile or anything, but something that was neutral without being as harsh as a pure poker face. He just played the game.

It took a while, about another hour maybe, before he saw something out of his peripheral. A person, standing there, semi-crouched at the other end of the couch, peeking over the armrest at him. Fuck, Dave was quiet, he hadn’t even heard a hint of an approach.

Dirk wanted to look a little closer to get a full look at him, but he figured that Dave would be able to tell, even with the shades, so he just forced himself to keep looking at the screen.

Luckily, he had Hal to keep him appraised:

TT: He looks scared as shit. But he’s curious.

TT: I’m turning the volume down to a less horrible level. I’ll do it slowly so Dave doesn’t realize.

Even going down a few ticks was a relief.

He gave it a minute of Dave just standing there watching him before he started to get worried. Maybe Dave would just creep away again if he didn’t do anything? They should at least talk a little, right? And if he got Dave playing, he’d surely calm down. This was his favorite fucking game.

He finally glanced over at Dave. “Hey,” he greeted, trying to keep his voice as neutral as possible. Hopefully that wouldn’t scare him off. Come on, Dave, just take the other controller.

Dave, who was already tense, somehow tensed even more. Dirk waited though, patiently, while he made his character clip through a fence.

Then, Dave plopped himself down on the couch, grabbing the controller quickly like he thought that the offer would be rescinded if he didn’t move fast enough. The screen shifted to split horizontally, Dirk’s character on top and Dave’s newly made one on the bottom. They skated around for a bit on different sides of the map.

Dirk was tempted, again, to glance at Dave, to see how he was reacting to see if he was purposefully avoiding the parts of the map Dirk was on, but he didn’t want to make the kid tense up again. He wanted him to relax.

And, again, Hal had him covered.

TT: He’s basically sitting on the arm rest to be as far away as possible, but he’s started to slip down to the seat. He’s noticing it, but he’s letting it happen anyways. Also he keeps glancing at you, so keep yourself all calm like you are right now.
TT: I don’t think he’s avoiding you in-game, he’s pretty focused on his screen.

Dirk appreciated Hal.

Alright then, if Dave wasn’t avoiding him, he’d go find him then. Usually it was considered cheating to look at another player’s screen to see where they were, but, Dirk don’t think that really mattered in this context. He skated his way over to the pool, towards Dave’s character.

Dave’s character was breaking an ankle on the edge of it, a red -$200 appearing above his head briefly before he got right back up like nothing was wrong. Oh, video games.

They skated around each other for a bit, and out of the corner of his eye, Dirk saw Dave’s legs stretch out on the couch, relaxed. It was actually working, he was chilling out. Maybe they’d even be able to talk a little bit if this kept up.

Dave was gathering up speed, going up and down the edges of the pool before vaulting out of it, skating at record pace around the outside. Dirk had been similarly gaining speed, intending to crash himself into the wall of a house, but instead he changed trajectories, heading straight for Dave.

TT: He’s smirking.

Their characters collided and then…holy shit. They went away with each other’s limbs. Dave’s character now had one of Dirk’s character’s arms sticking out of his chest, and Dirk had snagged one of Dave’s characters’ legs. Dirk couldn’t help a snort as he tried to hold in an actual laugh, but, you know. Fuck it.

He laughed.

------------------------------------------------

Dave clicked away at the controls, completely involving himself in the game. There was still a bit of wariness in him, but as they played, he was starting to feel like he could focus on the game. He was distinctly aware of Bro’s presence beside him though, and he kept glancing over at him. Every time though, Bro just looked calm and collected, shades reflecting the screen. No sign of an impending strife and barely even a twitch other than the movements necessary to use on the controller.

Dave took a second after yet another awesomely devastating crash to pull up one of his sleeves a bit, it kept slipping too far down his wrist. He supposed that the other Dave that had been here hadn’t worn sleeves very much. Without Sburb, he wouldn’t have had a reason to, not really. But now he was just so used to them that it was more comfortable.

The controls were so unresponsive, it was awful. Luckily, Dave had mastered the art of ‘waiting for the five second delay between commands’. He actually was kind of good at the game if he tried, he could pull off some pretty sick tricks. But why do that when you could crash spectacularly into everything?

Or—oh, oops. He didn’t mean to break his character’s ankle, but there it was. Whelp. Now he’d have to start building up speed all over again.

Oh, hey, Bro was here too now. Skating around in circles, probably also looking for something to run into and—oh. Oh, hahah, yes. Their characters collided in a horrible array of flailing limbs and…

Bro…laughed.
Dave stiffened, eyes going wide, almost dropping his controller, but then his fingers tightened, squeezing it in a death grip as his head snapped to look at him.

Bro was grinning like an idiot, shaking his head, and behind the shades Dave could see the flicker of his eyes closing as he laughed.

Dave, tentatively, found himself smiling too, as unnerving as it was, at the same time…it was funny. It was fucking hilarious. He couldn’t quite make himself laugh though, still put on-edge, like he was sitting on nails, precariously balancing himself on the edge of the couch.

Bro turned to face him, still grinning, and it was so incredibly strange to see this much expression on his face, let alone hear it in his voice: “Holy shit, Dave, did you see that? Ahahah, oh wow I have three legs. Do you think if I crash I can break all three at once? Holy shit this game is awful. How do I keep forgetting how bad this game is?”

“Y-Yeah, it is pretty bad,” Dave mumbled, a bit too quietly, hating himself for the stupid stutter. He tried to relax his grip on the controller, “I don’t think we’re gonna top this anytime soon. It’s hard to get it to glitch quite this badly.”

“True. Hold on though, I wanna see if I break all three. One sec.” Bro focused back on the screen, clacking away at the analog sticks, and Dave watched as Bro’s character careened off of the diving board straight into the bottom of the pool. A loud crack resounded from the speakers, and the hospital bill started going up as the poor simulated skateboarder rolled around helplessly on the ground. It stopped at -$196,000, the red numbers hanging forebodingly in the air for a few seconds before his character got back up, unharmed.

“Damn it,” Bro sighed, “Only two broken legs, I guess the game didn’t register that I had three.” He leaned back into the couch, pressing the pause key for the session. “Well, that was pretty alright, wasn’t it?” His head was turned towards Dave again.

Dave hesitated, staring at him, still finding himself just…utterly unsure of what to make of him. Was he really not going to just whip out his sword and attack? Did they really just spend a night playing shitty videogames together? Was there really no trap of puppet ass just waiting to spring out all over him?

He just…what the fuck.

He was still stiff and mistrusting and wary, but…it had been fun. Like how it should have been. Fuck.

------------------------------------------------

So, that was successful, right? It sure seemed like it was. They had been in the same room for longer than five minutes and Dave seemed to have actually calmed down somewhat. He hadn’t laughed with him, but he had smiled.

And damn was that smile relieving. Dirk hadn’t seen it for days, which felt far too long. Even if it was just a little one, it was a relief. He paused the game, shifting back on the couch as he looked over at Dave, waiting for an answer.

Oh, come on, Dave. Admit it was fun. Little steps.

He watched as Dave nodded minutely, but otherwise the kid just gawked at him, his mouth open slightly like he wanted to say something but couldn’t. Well, Dirk could wait.
Dave seemed to be growing tense again though, and there was a nervous jitter in his leg, a twitch that kept coming and going intermittently, like he wanted to flinch or flee but was holding that desire back. Dirk changed his focus to the screen again, going through the menus to shut the system down. Maybe if he didn’t suffocate Dave with attention he’d relax again.

“We should do a racing game tomorrow,” Dave said softly, so quietly that he almost missed it.

“Fuck yes,” Dirk answered immediately, smiling at his little brother, elated. Perfect, this was progress! As long as Dave was talking to him and doing stuff with him, eventually he could ask about what was going on! And maybe get him to stop being so afraid too. Dirk just…had to be careful. Didn’t want to overwhelm him or smother him. “Just, tell me whenever you want to.”

“…Okay,” Dave said haltingly as he nodded slowly, “Can do.”

“Sweet, I’ll see you later then.”

“Yeah,” Dave replied, watching him perplexed for a moment longer. His brows were furrowed behind his shades, his mouth a pinched line. But, he had agreed, so that was something. Carefully, Dave slid himself off of the couch, leaving the controller there, and backed out of the room. Dirk watched him as he went.

Dave still wasn’t turning his back to him.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly I could probably write a prequel to this with the info about the Alphas and how they overcame lots of their issues when they started to raise the Betas but. No.

Next chapter is another interlude sort of chapter, which really means that the narrators won’t be Dirk and Dave. While this fic does focus on them it is rather ensemble and I need eeeeveryone for the story. Narrators will be Jake, Hal, Rose, and Jade.

Also. All of your comments spoil me and leave me grinning like an idiot everywhere I go. People keep asking me why I’m smiling so much. Also this fic is over 60 pages in my word doc now but I just keep going for you guys. I love you all. You keep me going at this breakneck pace and I love it.
Candid Capriciousness

Chapter Notes

PoV: Jake, Hal, Rose, and Jade

This is the longest chapter yet!

Also I dunno if you can tell or not but, I am a lover of the wonderful thing known as Slow Burn. We aren't even at the scene that made me write this whole story yet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jake sighed dejectly as he spread himself out on the couch, his limbs dangling off the edges. Bec, who had been laying in front of it, lazily licked at his fingers. Jake acquiesced and gave him a few pats on the head before going still, just lying there with a hand knotted into Bec’s fur.

Jake could see that Jade was watching him from her workbench, where she was messing around with the cookalizer. Probably fixing it up a bit, Bec hadn’t quite liked the most recent steaks it had produced. “Is he not coming again?” she asked. She was always such an astute girl (not that he wasn’t being incredibly transparent and dramatic at the moment though, because he sort of was). “Wait…” she frowned, “Today isn’t one of the usual days, were you hoping he’d make up?”

“A bit,” he admitted, “But he’s busy, so no,” he sighed again, “He’s still too worried. And I understand, I really do, but a fellow can’t help but be a bit disappointed, you know?”

Jade rolled her eyes as she giggled, “Jake, it hasn’t been that long.”

“No, it hasn’t. And sometimes I’m the one who demands alone time, so I can’t really fault him. Especially when he has a good reason to stay home.”

“And why isn’t he coming?” Jade asked, tilting her head.

“Oh! Right!” Jake shot up on the couch, startling Bec briefly as his hand left his fur. He sat up, gathering all his limbs into a proper seated position. “I wanted to tell you that you probably don’t have to worry about young Dave as much now. Dirk is on the case, and you know how the man gets involved with his projects. He’ll straighten your friend out no problem!”

“Hm,” she frowned, eyes flickering down to the table, “You think? I dunno, Jake. He’s acting really weird.”

“Have a little faith, Jade, it’ll be alright. Dirk already has ideas on what’s wrong, and he’s got Hal on it too. I promise you, it’ll be right as rain.”

“…Can I ask you what it is Bro is thinking? I would really like to know.”

“Hmmm, well,” he hesitated. He couldn’t exactly tell her about the game, not yet, at least. Not until one of two possible things happened, which, neither had. And explaining this oddness in her friend through the game that she didn’t know about, well…that didn’t really work.

And he couldn’t just spoil her about the game like that, they had a sort of pact thing regarding that.
None of them told any of the kids about the game. Calliope had told them that they couldn’t and they trusted her. And, really, it was better to give them as much of a normal upbringing as they could, as difficult as that was already with their various circumstances.

“I don’t think I can really explain it, honestly. And Dirk isn’t even sure if he’s actually right or not, but if he isn’t he will still be working on the problem. I would say just don’t worry about it, Jade. Just know that your friend is in good hands, and treat him as you normally would! I’m sure the support helps him.”

“I think I’m going to wait awhile before talking to him again…” Jade admitted, her shoulders slumping down.

Oh no. Oooh no.

Bec’s head perked up and he zapped out of existence in a flash of green, zapping back in right next to her. Good boy.

Jake got himself up off the couch and walked over to her, sitting by her side, opposite of Bec. He smiled at her, and she hesitantly looked up at him. Her eyes were darker than usual, the poor girl was worrying too much. “Hey, pumpkin. It’ll be alright, really!”

“He just…he’s never been bothered by us caring before, you know? Both Rose and I are really worried, and even John is starting to see signs of it too. Something is wrong and he’s not telling us, and I just…”

“It’s hard,” Jake nodded as he placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, “I understand. You just gotta work through it. Give the boy some time, he’ll reach out to you, he always does.”

“Yeah…yeah,” Jade’s shoulders slumped as she sighed, “He’s just going through something, I guess, but he’s still Dave.”

“Exactly, my girl,” Jake smiled.

While Dirk was busy with the game, Hal kept an eye on Dave, keeping Dirk informed of all his actions that were pertinent. AKA, the things that he knew Dirk would worry about. He was also cataloguing Dave’s actions himself, adding them to all the information he had of this new Dave. Taking note of his mannerisms, his expressions, and the like. It was becoming slowly apparent that while they almost were exactly identical, there were physical differences between the two Daves.

This one, for instance, had a slightly different build in his arms and torso, although it was hard to determine past the long sleeves. But, in a few instances, the sleeves shifted as he moved and Hal was able to mentally map the shape of his arm underneath the cloth. Comparing this to the Dave he had known every day before this finalized the hypothesis. This Dave had muscle. Not much, as it was hard to see that sort of development in sixteen year olds, but enough to be notable. Enough to be different.

He kept watching and cataloguing information, but in the meantime he shifted himself towards pesterchum. He had told Dirk that he’d tell the girls about their suspicions, so he might as well do it now.

— timaeusTestified [TT] has opened memo on board two ladys and a robit winkwonk—
TT: If you two aren’t preoccupied, I have information to share.

TipsyGnostalgic [TG] responded to memo

TG: omg u know i've always got time for THIS board

TG: heya hal-y

TT: Hey, Rox.

TT: Let’s give Jane a minute or so, this will be easier if you’re both here.

GutsyGumshoe [GG] responded to memo

GG: Reporting for duty!

GG: What’s going on?

TT: This concerns the aforementioned issues with Dave in the last memo.

TG: oooh do we know what’s up?

TT: I have been collecting data, and a conversation with Dave was the last piece of the puzzle.

TT: Well, not the last piece, I suppose it’s more of the last piece to form an actual hypothesis, rather than just chalk everything down to ‘I have no idea what the shit is going on’, because now I might actually have some grasp on what the shit is going on.

GG: And what is this shit that is apparently going on?

TT: I have calculated meticulously in my perfect supercomputer brain and I have come to the conclusion that it has to be related to the game.

TG: …wat

TG: but we haven’t even started yet

TT: No, but he’s the Time player. It makes sense that it doesn’t matter to him if we’ve started or not. Because he can go wherever or whenever he wants. Hypothetically.

TT: I didn’t exactly get to discuss the topic with him. He shut me out.

GG: He blocked you?! Shucks, what did you say to upset him?

TT: That’s the thing: Nothing.

TG: r u sure hal-y

TT: I am approximately 100% fucking sure that I didn’t do jack shit.

TG: k so if thats the case why did u get ur ass blocked

TT: Because he doesn’t know who I am.

GG: …What?

TT: This Dave, our Time player, is from some other timeline or something. He’s been showing
signs of it. He doesn’t know things he should, he’s acting different, etc. He is obviously from circumstances different from the ones we have here in our time.

TT: He is, frankly, a different Dave. Still Dave, still the same guy at his core, but he’s been through different things.

TT: And he’s understandably freaking the fuck out.

TT: Evidence points to his own timeline perhaps not being a great one.

GG: Why are we getting effects of the game already? Is it starting sooner than we thought?

TT: I don’t think so.

TG: Callie would tell us if something was up

TG: Even tho her viewport is weird now she knows her stuff

GG: True! Alright. That still seems really strange though, since presumably none of the other kids have changed?

GG: It’s just Dave?

TG: It’s gotta be his time stuffs

TG: Now MY question is

TG: Where’s the lil davey we knew

TT: We don’t know that either.

TT: I’m hoping that some of this can be resolved if we just talk to Dave.

GG: And how are we going to do that?

TT: Dirk is approaching him now. Well. Getting Dave to approach him. It’ll be slow, but we’ve got a plan.

TG: Oh geeze I just realized

TG: U aren’t able to talk to Dave anymore right?

TT: I could hack through the block but I don’t think he’s interested in talking to me.

TG: Omg Hal I’m sorry I know you love that boy :(.

TG: Oh man I’m like super super bummed oh man :(.

GG: Oh no…

GG: Are you okay, Hal?

GG: …

GG: Hal?

TT: Yeah, as long as we keep making progress, I’m fine. Thank you though.
TT: I'm good, we're doing what needs to be done.

TG: hold the fucking phone there hal-y

TG: we gotta bring it in for a group virtual hug

TG: b/c hal gets ALLLLLs the ladies and he knos it

GG: I am perfectly amiable towards that idea!

GG: Bring it in!

TG: huuuuugssssss

TT: My artificial mindscape is completely entrenched in this embrace. These words are curling around me in a way that I can completely gain satisfaction from, as a being that is bereft of a body.

TG: (the sarcasm means hes happy tbh)

TG: (dont let him kno that we kno that tho)

GG: (hoo hoo hoo!)

Hal felt a twisting in himself, a sense of some kind of ‘heat’, although defining how such a feeling could function within his scattered fragments was strange. It was undeniably there though, a semblance of pleased embarrassment, rushing through him. An awkward feeling that he definitely remembered having when he was thirteen. Awkward, yet fond.

Awkward, yet so unbelievably happy.

Jane and Roxy were wonderful friends.

TT: It seems you are using parenthesis to speak to each other.

TT: I cannot hear you, they are too quiet for even my perfect roboears.

TG: lmao

TG: hal you are too good for us

TG: HUGS SEVER

TG: that is one more ever than 4

TT: What an accurate depiction of math you have demonstrated there.

GG: :B

GG: Sorry to break up the fun, but I’m just contemplating, what is it that we should do to respond to this ‘Dave Issue’?

TT: I think Dirk has it handled with the slow approach right now. Well. Dirk and I, as much as I can help in my limited communication capacity.
TT: We just figured that you two should know.

TG: lmao he means to say that dirk told jake so now we gotta be put in the loop

GG: Darn those boys!

TG: its cool we get the great hal instead

GG: True!

GG: Thank you for telling us, Hal.

TT: Anytime, ladies.

An internal ping through his code diverted Hal’s attention. His ‘heart’ turned from the conversation with the girls to another girl, one he watched over carefully, a part of himself always with her. She was awake, and at her computer.

He could still continue this conversation here with no issue, but his main focus whisked away through the entangled web of lines of his programming, off to a computer far, far away from everything else he was connected to. A large part of him was always here, watching, but when his core was here he always felt oddly distant from everything else. Travelling to this place was slower than it was to any of his other possible ports.

Before he spoke, he made sure to switch colors. She was not a fan of bright red, and while she didn’t mind it from him, after she told him why she disliked the color he had decided to switch.

He could, also, speak physically to her if he wanted to. She had set up speakers for him, and Dirk had helped him program a working voice module for himself, but he didn’t speak openly to her too often. She wasn’t acclimatized to it, having been alone for most of her life, and so she was much more comfortable with text. Still, sometimes she wanted to practice. She dreamed of meeting her friends.

He was lucky in that regard, as they had already met.

— timaeusTestified [TT] has begun pestering uranianUmbra [UU] —

TT: And how is Sleeping Beauty doing?

UU: qUite well ^u^

UU: i dreamt of the most wonderful things.

UU: i think im getting a clear pictUre of what i’m meant to do!

UU: slowly thoUgh, this is certainly a process.

UU: did my brother try anything?

TT: Yeah.

TT: Tried laying a trap for you with code.
TT: He’s managed to learn a lot from that book, but you’ve got nothing to worry about.

TT: My ever-vigilant robobrain is on your side.

UU: and you already know how much I appreciate that!

UU: you really are wonderful!

TT: I keep hearing that from all the ladies today.

TT: I’m going to grow an ego if you girls aren’t careful.

UU: oh, if anyone deserves to grow an ego, it’s you!

TT: Well, thanks.

TT: Off of that topic though, tell me what you saw in your dream.

UU: I saw some of the things I will be destined to do.

UU: in order to fully defeat my brother, I will have to free myself from time

UU: I’m not sure exactly what that means, but there is something.

UU: a flash of a red cape and two figures holding hands

UU: I don’t know who they are but I will have to find them!

UU: I need the caped one’s help.

UU: and I saw you as well!

TT: Me?

UU: yes! you were smiling!

TT: …Smiling?

TT: Callie, I am physically incapable of smiling.

TT: And if you’re confusing me with Dirk, I am incredibly offended.

UU: no! it was you!

UU: you had a marvelous body and you were very happy!

TT: Like a robot body or what.

TT: Because we tried the robot body thing. Didn’t work out.

UU: no, you were a sprite of course!

TT: Of course.

TT: Wait, that’s a game construct, isn’t it?

UU: Yes! ^u^
TT: I thought I couldn’t be prototyped because I had to be here with you.

UU: with how time is functioning, your game should be starting after mine!

UU: that’s what the clouds showed me, at least.

TT: I thought we were in lockstep. Isn’t that one of the reasons I’m here?

UU: it was, or, i thought it was! but that isn’t how things have gone!

UU: in the future i will be doing something to disrupt my own timeline, i think! and part of that is to change the speed of my life verses yours.

UU: i will finish my game before yours begins, leaving you free to be involved in yours.

TT: It’s not quite “my” game.

UU: of course it is! the people you love are in it! you are important, silly!

TT: I’m getting way too much praise today, the robotic heart I don’t have can’t handle it.

UU: oh shush, you! hal, you deserve it!

UU: i very much look forward to you being as happy as you are in the cloud i saw!

UU: it will be wonderful ^u^ 

TT: Alright then. I suppose I’ll look forward to it, but we aren’t even near our game yet.

UU: yes, and we have a lot to talk about before then.

UU: for instance:

UU: hal, i think my game is starting.

UU: i need your help.

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Rose sighed, pressing a hand to her forehead, trying to push away the beginnings of what would probably be a rather intense headache. Worry and thoughts all combined into a little ball of agonizing and irritating pain. Wonderful.

“Oh, Strider,” she mumbled under her breath, “Why do you make me pick up after all your messes?”

Said “mess” right now was a rather distressed Jade Harley. And “mess” really was not a good word to use, but. A headache was starting, and thus her vocabulary was consequently failing. Suffice it to say, Jade was incredibly bothered. Upset and frustrated, and she had shown Rose the log, so she knew it was for completely valid reasons. Not that she would ever doubt Jade. But evidence was nice. Helpful when you were trying to understand both sides.

Oh dear, she hoped that Dave told them what was wrong soon. This was not good for their friend group whatsoever.

On her screen, the green letters were continuing to pop up, and Rose took a deep breath before plunging herself back in:
GG: you know what rose?

GG: im SICK of being mistreated!!

GG: i care!!!! i ask because i care!!!

GG: and he just throws me down like i shouldnt be caring about him!

GG: even if hes going through stuff thats just NOT SOMETHING YOU DO TO A FRIEND!!!

GG: and its not something i ever thought HE would do!

TT: I understand. It is uncharacteristic and awful, but he’s our friend. He deserves our understanding, doesn’t he?

TT: I’m not telling you that you can’t be angry at him, but I am asking you to be patient with him.

TT: I believe he will come to us eventually. He still cares about us, it’s just that something is happening to him right now.

GG: ughhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

GG: i know

GG: it still hurts though :( 

TT: I understand. Try to take a few breaths, do something with Jake, just try to forget about it for now.

TT: And…oh.

TT: He’s actually messaging me now.

GG: he is???

TT: Yes. Is it alright if I answer?

GG: yes yes if hes talking go!

TT: Be right back.

Well. She hoped this wouldn’t increase her headache too much.

— turntechGodhead [TG] has begun pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] —

TG: bro and i played video games and it was actually kinda sweet

TG: does that fix all your little issues with me

TG: see i talked about him
TT: Strider.

TT: I am relieved to hear you are doing better, but I wish you wouldn’t make a joke of it and instead tell us what is actually wrong.

TT: But, yes, I am glad that you are speaking to your brother.

TG: im good lalonde really

TG: you gotta stop this super clingy stuff

TG: let me have a little freedom to spread my wings

TT: I wasn’t aware you were a bird.

TG: im not but i kinda identify with them

TG: not in a fursona way though

TT: Of course not.

TT: We are allowed to be concerned for you though, Dave. And to know when our friend is acting differently.

TG: …

TT: We are allowed to want explanations, and to be upset when our dear friend shuts himself away from us.

TT: I’m not angry with you, Dave, but I just want you to know that.

TT: You owe Jade an apology.

TG: i know

TG: and i will

TG: ill even tell you guys whats been going on but

TG: not yet

TG: ok?

TT: Alright. That’s more like the Dave I know.

TT: I’m smiling, but you can’t see it.

TT: Really, please do feel better. And, until you’re ready, you can come and speak to me about anything you need.

TG: thanks

TT: Please apologize to Jade as soon as possible, though. You really hurt her.

TG: ok

TG: im gonna go do that now
TG: thanks rose

TG: youre a better sister than i deserve sometimes

TG: and by sometimes i mean all the time

TG: thanks

— turntechGodhead [TG] has ceased pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] —

Rose’s hands stilled over her keyboard and she frowned. She reread the line a few times, making sure she actually saw it and it wasn’t just her headache marring her perception. But. No. Dave had actually called her that.

She blinked, leaning back in her chair, thinking. …Sister? What a strange thing for him to suddenly do. She wasn’t particularly bothered by that, per say, it actually was a fitting word to describe their relationship—brother and sister. Brother. She tested the word in her mind. Bro-ther.

She would think more on this later.

GG: how is he how is he???

TT: He spoke to his brother, so that’s something.

TT: He also promised that he would eventually tell us what it is that is bothering him.

GG: oh actually he messaged me just now too!

GG: he apologized

TT: I may or may not have prodded him to, but it is fully sincere on his part.

GG: i know it is :)

GG: i feel kinda bad for getting mad now…

TT: Don’t. You’re allowed to be angry sometimes, especially when you feel mistreated.

GG: true

GG: thanks for letting me vent at you!!

TT: Anytime, Jade. What are friends for?

GG: :)

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Beautiful golden towers stabbed into a bright blue sky, their spires similar to cathedrals. Intricate and wonderful, made with layers upon layers of fragile golden leaf. Looking down, she realized that she was in one of these towers, and the roads below were suspended between the towers. There was no visible ground in sight, just more of the city, spreading further and further down.
The people of this place milled about the walkways, dressed in regalia unlike anything she had ever seen in real life before. It was like they came straight out of the pages of storybooks. Curiously, she looked down at herself, only to gasp as she saw the prettiest golden dress, glittering around her, warm and comfortable. She felt like a princess.

Jade looked back out the window, looking back at the sky. It was bluer than anything she had ever seen before, but maybe that was just because of how it was against all the gold. It was clear and beautiful, a planet suspended, and there were these...these clouds, drifting around it. And, on each cloud, if she looked closely enough, she could see things. Odd shimmers and shapes, solidifying into scenes she could actually perceive. She saw herself in some of them, and her friends, and Bec, and —

She woke up to total darkness, short of breath and full of wonder. She had never had a dream like that before, had never seen anything so vivid and wonderful! Or even really dreamt at all, she had just assumed that she was the type of person who forgot about their dreams!

It was so strange though, how she could still sort of feel the air around her, the warmth of that golden land cradling her.

Excitement surged in her heart, she was certainly not getting back to sleep anytime soon, even if she was hoping that she'd see the city again.

She got up, stretching her arms out over her head before squinting at the dark. She didn't bother to grab her glasses since it was dark anyways. It was really late, but she felt that she had to share this, it felt important.

Bare feet padded over the floor as she headed for Jake’s room, careful to make sure she didn’t run into anything on the way. It was easy to find him, she just had to follow the snores. She suppressed a giggle as she picked her way across his room, carefully avoiding the clutter he had gathered around. In the dark she could faintly see him, spread out over his bed in a sort of starfish position.

“Jake,” she whispered as she tugged at his shirt gently. “Jake.”

“Mmmwha?” he shifted, and she saw the glitter of his eyes as they opened. “Jade?” he asked groggily.

“I had a dream,” she said, and she wasn’t sure why she was still being so quiet, but the silence descended around them, placing them in a sort of bubble that she didn’t want to break. “I’ve never remembered a dream before, but there was this golden city and all these clouds that had pictures in them, and it was just so beautiful, like something out of a story and—”

Jake suddenly sat up in a flash, cutting her off. “Oh my gosh,” he whispered, awed, and Jade’s eyes widened. He only sounded like that when they saw something truly remarkable. “Jade,” he whispered, his hands reaching out to hold her shoulders, “Jade,” and his eyes were bright and shining brilliant green. “Jade!” and he laughed, giddy, and Jade was so confused, and he cheered, lifting her up into his arms, bringing her to his chest in a hug, “Jade! You woke up!”

Chapter End Notes

In case it wasn’t already apparent, a lot happens off-screen in this fic.
For instance, the board that includes Calliope is called “three ladys and a robit
winkwonk”

I also hope you don’t mind when I take time away from Dave to work with the ensemble cast. Because. It’s going to keep happening. I have too many plans.
Thanks to Dirkapitation for beta-ing!

PoV (in order): Jade, Rose, Jade, John, Jade, Dave, Jade. Basically it swaps between Jade and other characters.

This chapter might be a bit disorienting, I apologize if that’s the case. Jade and Jake’s conversation would be really boring if it was drawn out, so I split it up so that I could cut around various parts of it.

Jade had to punch Jake in the arm to be released. He had started to make it a bit too hard for her to breathe. He still didn’t totally let go of her though, holding her at arm’s length, grinning brightly at her in the dark. All traces of exhaustion were gone from him, replaced with pure excitement. “Oh golly, Jade, if you’re awake that means so much! I can tell you everything! Haha! I’m the first one who gets to say everything!”

“What’s ‘everything’?” she asked, tilting her head in confusion, “I’m really confused, how did I ‘wake up’? I’m awake right now, I wake up all the time.” Geeze, this isn’t what she was expecting at all! Usually she actually knew what Jake was talking about, but in this respect…no.

“You were on Prospit!” he said, voice booming, echoing a bit off the walls of the room. “It’s…oh fiddlesticks, this is going to be a long explanation. We should move this to somewhere with light. And somewhere we can sit down all comfy-like.” He let her go, standing up and stretching before reaching out a hand to her, open palm facing up. “Shall we, girlie?”

Jade nodded, taking his hand in hers, and they headed out of his room, ending up in the kitchen. Bec was sleeping in the corner on one of the many beds that were scattered around the tower. His ears flicked as they entered, but he didn’t move otherwise, not even when they turned on the lights.

Releasing her hand, Jake nodded at the stools that went around the island in the middle of the kitchen. “Have a seat Jade, I’ll make us some hot chocolate. This is gonna be quite the talk.”

Jade remembered, suddenly, the few instances there had been of Jake being cagey with details over the last few days. She had let him go without explaining, because she figured that he had a good reason, but, was this it? Could she know what he was talking about now?

“Real quick, before we begin,” Jake started, his back facing her while he messed around in the cupboards, “Could you tell me how you knew ‘Sburb’? Did you learn it from the dreams?” He looked back at her briefly, gentle, “I don’t mind that you didn’t tell me then—I sure wasn’t telling you the full truth either. It would just be easier for me to explain if you laid out why you knew the name.”

“I heard it from Dave,” Jade answered after a moment. She hoped it didn’t get Dave in trouble at all, but…well, if Jake was going to explain everything to her, then, it was only fair that she be fully truthful to him too.
“Oh,” Jake nodded, “That…that makes sense. That’s part of what I need to tell you too, about Dave. If he knew about Sburb then, well, Dirk’s hypothesis is almost certainly correct, I’d say. But more on that in a bit, first I’ll tell you about where you woke up.”

Jade watched as he placed a steaming cup in front of her, and she reached for it, curling her hands around the heat. He pulled up a stool on the other side of the island and sat facing her. His movements were quick and his expression ecstatic, clearly he had been wanting to tell her these things for a long long time. She was a little tentative, a little nervous, but his excitement bled over into her, making her squirm in her seat.

“You were on a planet called Prospit,” he began, “You were experiencing life there as your dream self. Now, not just anyone has dream selves, only very special people who are destined to change everything…”

She wasn’t one to dream, in fact, she never recalled ever having a dream. But, now, she realized that something must be happening to her, some sort of dream-like experience. Her limbs felt weighed down. She could tell she was lying in bed, but she was fully asleep at the same time. She couldn’t move or open her eyes, but she knew that she was sleeping yet awake all at once.

Sleep paralysis, her studies in the psychological supplied the word. If that was the case, this was the first time the symptoms had manifested in her. She wondered if they would continue.

She had a sense of a pressing darkness, encroaching on her. Not into her physical space, no, as the only feeling she had physically was the warmth of the blankets wrapped around her. No, this presence and feeling was fully cerebral, dark clouds gathering together, pushing into her mind right where her headache had been.

They broke through her skull, cracking into her brain, spreading through her with a soft coolness. Voices whispered to her, and she couldn’t do anything to respond. All she could do was listen.

“Upi eo;; drtrb id ,sofrm. Upi jsbr mp vjpovr.

They whispered, directly into her mind, and it wasn’t even like she was hearing it with her hears. It rang in her head as her ears listened to silence.

“Er mrrf upi smf upi eo;; pnru, Drrt.”

“So, you’re telling me that there’s this…this game that is going to build a universe?” Jade asked, her eyes wide. She had no idea that she and her friends had such an important task ahead of them! The concept was…well it was incredible! A little frightening too, and daunting, but incredible!

“Yes,” Jake nodded, “Our universe is ending, so it’s time for a new one. The purpose of this game is to create the next universe in the cycle. And, you and your friends are going to be the creators.”

“How…how does that even work? How can a game create a universe? How do you even know about all of this?”

“Well, I can’t answer the big questions of what all is going on with the universe-building, but I can say that this game, in a way, propagates our own creation. We come from this game, and so we are
destined to be involved with it.”

His smile softened as he traced his fingers across the Batman design on his mug, “And, as for how I know, well, all of us do. All of us guardians, I mean. Me, Roxy, Jane, Jane’s father, Dirk, and I think even Bec knows, a bit. In Bec’s case it’s a more inherent sort of knowing, with his magical beast existence. In respect to the rest of us though, except Jane’s father who learned through Jane, we were contacted by a mutual friend. A girl named Calliope.”

Cerulean blue surrounded him, and it was familiar, he remembered the last time he had seen it. Was it normal to remember a dream you had had while inside yet another? John didn’t think so, but he didn’t really have a way of knowing. He still wasn’t even used to having dreams.

He was just sort of floating, flying maybe? In this dark expanse with nothing else in it. But then, slowly, things started to come into focus. Broken fragments of buildings scattered around space, lava reaching up from a devastated planet, cooling into stone as it reached the cool vacuum of nothingness. The devastation was almost incredible, if it wasn’t simultaneously terrible.

John wondered why he was dreaming of this. He had never seen entire planets like this before at all, let alone devastated. Even his movies didn’t look quite like this, and he had never imagined himself in them like this before. And, if he was going to have a dream, why would he dream about this kind of thing? It didn’t look that fun!

He didn’t really have control over anything around him though, all he could do was move. And so he flew, looking at everything all around him. And upon looking down, he found that even he himself was different. He wore this blue outfit with yellow shoes, and a really long hood drifted out behind him. Kind of cool, he supposed, but weird!

He kept flying, wondering if he’d be able to meet anyone. Maybe get an idea of what was happening here, and suddenly, ahead he saw a figure dressed in dark pink and—

The dream flickered and changed—he was standing on dark blue stone, looking up at a sky that was darker than the sky ever was on Earth. It was clouded by these dark ugly storm clouds, but there were glimmers of light within them, flashing, looking like stars except for the fact that they kept winking in and out.

Another change and he was floating above a circular platform, and down on it he could see his friends gathered around. Rose, Dave, and Jade, all wearing these strange outfits that kind of reminded him of his own weird getup. Oh! And Dad was there too! And a few people with gray skin he didn’t recognize, and a few of these strange and brightly glowing ghostly people.

Another flash and he was gone, coming face-to-face with himself. The him he was looking at wasn’t flying like he was, and he was wearing normal clothes rather than the weird stuff he was in. The expression of the other John was one of shock, as he looked up at himself. John tried to see if he could look at some of the other things that were around, but he seemed to have lost control of the dream, leaving him unable to even move his eyes to look at anything other than himself.

“Wait, are you…” the other John started to say before he cut him off.

“Yeah, I’m you, that’s how this works,” he felt himself say. He wasn’t really choosing to say it, it was just happening. He didn’t really like how his voiced sounded, all direct and sort of mean. “You guys only won because you stole my Dave. I’m here to get him back. Oh and Karkat too if he’s here, because they’re both missing.”
The other John opened his mouth to reply, but suddenly he couldn’t hear anything anymore, and the dream faded away, the colors melting into blackness as it ended, leaving him wrapped in darkness.

“I met my friends when I was around eleven, when I first downloaded pesterchum. Calliope contacted me pretty quickly and we became friends. She linked me to the others and we sort of got to commiserate with each other over our strange upbringings and origins. Well, Jane is the exception to that, I suppose. She always had her father.”

“Calliope was the one who told us we didn’t have parents.”

Jade started in her stool, sitting up ramrod straight in her surprise, “What?! I mean… I just thought they passed away or something and you didn’t like talking about it. What do you mean you don’t have parents? Who raised you?”

Jake shrugged, “Well. A combination of myself and Bec, I guess. At the start I was in an orphanage for a while, but then Bec sort of… stole me away. I don’t remember it all that clearly. Anyways, I grew up for the most part with just me and Bec. But I had my friends too! And, really, I was more fortunate than Dirk, he didn’t have anyone until Calliope introduced us all. Roxy was taken in by an elderly couple, but they passed away when she was pretty young.”

“That’s awful!” Jade didn’t understand how he kept looking so happy even while saying something so upsetting! “Why didn’t you have anyone? What happened to your parents?”

Jake leaned forward, as if telling her a secret, “Jade, we didn’t have any. That’s what I really mean. The game you’re going to play is going to create us. It’s a bit confusing, so I don’t suggest dwelling on that topic until we get into that part of the game. It makes sense in a way that doesn’t quite make sense, which seems to be par for the course with Sburb.”

“Sburb creates all of us, we get here first to establish ourselves, then we find you and take care of you, then you play Sburb, and then you create all of us. It’s an absurd cycle, but a cycle nonetheless.”

“A cycle that ends in becoming masters of a whole new universe?!”

“Exactly,” Jake grinned, “You’ve got it!”

Dave didn’t dream. And that, really, wasn’t too unusual. He was used to sleep being a quiet black endless void of silence and emptiness. After a few years dreaming (or rather not dreaming) like that, it wasn’t really that strange at all. Either that or sleeping was basically the same as being awake except you were inside a dream bubble with so many ghosts of people you knew/barely knew.

Except now, sleep wasn’t even either of those. It just straight up wasn’t happening.

He tried, he really did, and he thought that maybe he’d be able to manage because the evening had actually been pretty good, but he just couldn’t. Even if he was starting to be less scared of Bro bursting into his room, he just… ugh.

Finally giving up, Dave grabbed his shades and flipped them on. As always, first he opened up pesterchum. ‘carcinoGeneticist’ he typed, aaaaand nothing. Okay. He thought that maybe he’d be a little less disappointed after the first several times, but it still made a pit form in his gut. An endless monster that made him feel this awful creeping dread. Was it really so much to ask, to just have
Karkat? Apparently. Maybe he was the only one who came here in this universe. A universe without Karkat. It fucking sucked. At least his other friends were here, in some form at least.

Maybe Dirk was Bro.

Dave shook his head, shaking his thoughts away. Ugh, thinking was no way to fall asleep basically ever. He sighed to himself. Might as well go for a bathroom run, while he was up.

On the way, he realized that he felt calmer here. Like, he was able to just walk around without feeling the need to be completely and utterly silent. That was good, he supposed. He still had a little bit of wariness, a tingle on his back that reminded him to watch out for himself, but, comparatively it was muted.

Naturally, all of his thoughts vanished from his head on the way back. It was dark, all the lights out because they were supposed to be sleeping, but apparently neither of them were. Bro was in the kitchen, a long shadow stretching out into the hall from the light of the open refrigerator. He wasn’t wearing a hat, but he did have his shades. He was dressed in a sleeveless shirt and shorts.

Dave didn’t think that Bro could see him, he was still standing in the dark and he didn’t seem to be paying attention, but then Bro looked up, seeing him and giving him a little nod. Then he just went back to whatever he was doing, he was…drinking what looked like orange soda? Come to think of it, there had been a lot of that stuff in the fridge.

Bro didn’t make any move to do anything else though. Not to talk any more, not to approach him…he was just…letting him have space. Oh.

Dave swallowed against what felt like a block in his throat, his tongue sandpaper. “Hey Bro, sup.” He couldn’t believe he was talking, why was he talking, Dave you idiot just go back to your room.

Bro looked up at him again, the line of his mouth a little less firm than Dave was used to. He didn’t immediately answer, just watching Dave for a moment before shrugging, “Nothing much. Couldn’t sleep, so I figured I’d just get some work done. Needed fuel, though.”

“…What,” Dave hesitated, choking on his own spit for a moment. He tried again, “What are you working on?”

“Another robot commission,” Bro replied, leaning a bit more casually on the counter, “Nothing too major, I’m pretty much just replicating something I’ve already done. It’s a probe that can handle high-pressures so that can be sent underwater.”

“Cool,” Dave said, and it wasn’t totally just his need to fill the silence that made him say that. It did sound, honestly, pretty cool.

“How long have you been building robots?” Dave found himself asking without fully processing it. Shit, he didn’t hope that he was supposed to know this answer. He should be projecting that he didn’t know shit. Fuck. What if Bro said something? How the fuck did he explain this?

But, instead, Bro seemed to be ready to just answer him. “Hm,” Bro considered, “I’m not really sure how many years it’s been, but I’ve pretty much been building them since I could find the parts to. It’s been for most of my life, certainly.”

Dave blinked. He…other than those weird chatbot things his Bro had made, he didn’t remember anything like that. His Bro hadn’t shown any skill with robots. He didn’t do anything other than puppets, fighting, and keeping up the coolguy persona.
Who even was this guy in front of him?

“Cool,” Dave said again. He felt like his mouth was full of cotton. That was enough for now. “I’m going to go back to bed.”

Please don’t be mad please don’t attack me.

“Alright. Sleep well,” Bro said, waving an ungloved hand at him. “I’m gonna get back to work.” And with that, he left before Dave did, heading towards his own room. And Dave was blissfully alone.

He let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. Okay. Okay that was fine. Everything was fine.

------------------------------------------------

“So…how does what’s going on with Dave connect to all of this?”

“Well, I told you about the aspects, right? Young Dave is our Time player. I don’t know that much and Dirk hasn’t been able to get him to admit it, but, well. Dirk thinks he is from another timeline. Somehow. His memories don’t match up with this one, so the poor boy has been reeling.”

“Wait,” Jade reflected back on the last several days, thinking of her chats with him. Something was wrong, but it was hard to think of being from a whole different timeline being the crux of the issue. That just…what? “He still acts like Dave though.”

Jake blinked, “Well of course he does! He is still Dave! Being from another time has nothing to do with whether he’s the same gent or not, Jade! He is most certainly still your friend. His memories just don’t quite match up.”

“So he’s a different Dave, you mean? So…where is my Dave? Where is the guy who has all the memories he should?”

“That…” Jake frowned, sighing, “That we don’t know. Not yet. I’m sure we’ll get to the bottom of it, though.”

“Yeah…” Jade deflated a bit. Well. At least she knew what was wrong, but now she just had hundreds of more questions! What did this Dave know, what was his universe like? Why wasn’t he just telling them—oh. Well, she could kind of understand why he wouldn’t do that. And, still, where was the original Dave? It was just…geeze, it was a lot to suddenly have all this information revealed to her.

She looked up at Jake, who was watching her carefully. He was smiling, he seemed to be eased. Jade realized that he had been holding this stuff in for…probably her entire life. Oh. She wondered how often he had wanted to tell her, Jake wasn’t really one to keep secrets like that. Not from her, at least.

Still, she wanted to ask.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

A pained look flashed in his eyes as his shoulders slumped a little bit, “Oh, pumpkin, I wanted to tell you, I really did! But, Calliope told us we couldn’t! Not until you woke up and knew your dream self, or until we started the game itself. We made a sort of pact, all of us, and we couldn’t tell any of you until that happened.”
He grinned again, “That’s why I’m so gosh darned pleased that you woke up, Jade! I finally got to tell you! Oh, but, you can’t, ah, tell your friends yet. You’re included in now on the pact, you see, and we just…we have to make sure no one knows until they are supposed to. But! You’re a Prospit dreamer, and that means there’s something you can do to help start preparations!”

Jade perked up a bit at this, she really liked the idea of Prospit. It seemed like such a beautiful and calming place, and everything Jake had said about it so far had seemed really wonderful. “What’s that?”

“You can pay attention to Skaia’s clouds, Jade. I think I covered this but—”

“…I’ll be able to see the future,” Jade interrupted, awed, “I can learn things about our game and use what I learn to help everyone!”

“Yes, precisely madam!” Jake beamed down at her, reaching out a hand to grasp at hers on the surface of the counter. “You’ve been such a sport, Jade, thank you for listening. I really am sorry for keeping all this from you.”

Jade smiled, “I forgive you. I think I can understand why, it all sounds pretty crazy! And, well, this Calliope sounds like she really knows what she’s doing, so I can see why you’d trust her.”

“Exactly!” He squeezed her hand, then he started, sitting up straight, “Oh dear, it’s awfully late. Well past and into both of our bedtimes! We should really get back to sleeping unless we completely want to ruin our sleep schedules!”

“And,” he grinned, “You’ll have a chance to go back to Prospit and explore.”

“It’ll be an adventure,” Jade laughed.

Chapter End Notes

The words to Rose aren’t random typing. They have a meaning. ;)

Also that was the first chapter with no pesterlogs :0
Hal continued to compile data into the ‘Dave Problems’ lockbox, sorting it into different subcategories and folders as needed. He even started to pull from some older memories so that he could more accurately compare this new Dave to their original one, side-by-side. He continued to simply support his conclusions, but it was important to gather evidence nonetheless.

His other fragments were mostly inactive, since everyone was offline for sleep. The one with Calliope was still active, of course, but it was a lull in their activity right now, so he had resumed his typical watchdog routine for her. The fragments that were gaining information were hardly notable, as they always were processing. They were always running, so it just became less of a draw on him in time. He would only notice it if he tried to on purpose, similar, in a way, to how a human could sometimes feel their heartbeat by either putting their hand on their chest or by closing their eyes and focusing.

Thinking about heartbeats, he turned his attention to Dirk. His glasses were on the nightstand next to his bed. It was dark, but Hal had ways to ‘see’ what was going on. Dirk…was having a nightmare. Heartbeat plus thrashing around plus the expression on his face equals: nightmare.

**BEEP BEEP BEEP**

Hal projected the sound through small speakers that had been integrated into the shades.

**“Wake up.”**

The voice, of course, was Dirk’s own, based in the program Dirk had helped Hal make, recording soundbites of himself so that Hal could use them because, of course, they would have the same voice. Hal had added to it since then, using various clips recorded from Dirk during the course of their lives, but he rarely used it. Usually he only used it with Calliope, preferring to stick to text when communicating with anyone else. It was easier for the text to feel like him, and it was strange to have a voice when you didn’t have a throat.

So. Text was easier.
Dirk shifted in his sleep, sitting up. Still groggy, probably still somewhat trapped inside the nightmare, but he was being shifted out of it. Forced, by the sound of his own voice.

“Thanks,” he mumbled as a hand rose to his face to scrub at his eyes.

“You’re welcome. Now, put me on, Dirk.”

“Bossy today, aren’t you? Or…tonight, I guess. Fuck, I only slept for like two hours. Great.” he said, as he reached out to grab the shades and slide them on. “Thanks though, seriously. That was…not fun.”

TT: No prob, bro.

TT: Sleeping like that is just going to make you even more exhausted anyways.

TT: If only you were a perfect robot supercomputer like me, then you wouldn’t need something as asinine as sleep.

Dirk laughed a little, rolling his eyes, his voice low and tired. Very different from the sound clips Hal had stored. “You know you can keep talking, you don’t have to type at me. You don’t have to be worried about me confusing you with myself.”

TT: I know. I prefer the text.

“Alright, alright. I’m not going to type back right now though, I’m too tired for that. Give me a bit to wake up.”

TT: That’s fine. Take your time, Dirk.

Hal stayed with him, watching as Dirk slowly got himself up. He paced around his room a bit, shaking his head and clenching his fingers, using the movement to get rid of the last vestiges of sleep. Hal watched as Dirk’s eyes grew clearer, sharper, more like how he typically was over the course of the day. It didn’t take him too long, at least not from Hal’s perspective. “I guess I’ll just continue working on the probe.”

TT: If there’s nothing else to do, that seems like a good plan.

He smiled, “Look at you, validating me.”

TT: It seems you are seeking validation. As a robotic entity without emotions, I cannot provide such a thing.

“Oh my god you are so full of shit.”

If Hal still had lips, he’d be smirking.

TT: It seems you are claiming that I am ‘full of shit’.

“Hal,” Dirk chided, “You’re incorrigible. I’m still too tired to deal with this. I’m going to consume something.”

Hal’s focus drifted again as Dirk moved, spreading out and checking on all of his connections again. Lil’ Seb was in Jane’s room, sitting in his charging station, listening to the soft sounds of her breathing as she slept. Calliope was taking a moment to think, her book heavy in her hands as she
sketched out a plan of action. She still didn’t need him, not quite yet, so he moved back to Dirk.

Dirk stood in the kitchen, holding a glass of one of the many types of orange soda he kept stocked in his hands. Wow. What a great choice for a healthy start to the day (or night, whatever). A thousand sarcastic quips about it whirred through Hal’s mind, presenting themselves as possibilities. He was considering saying one and was going through the arduous process of selection when he caught movement out in front of Dirk. Dirk still hadn’t seen it, obviously, from his nonreaction (and because Hal could tell where his eyes were looking, and they were currently unfocused and off somewhere in his headspace).

Dave was there though, standing the dark, his stance tense, one of alarm, but he wasn’t running. He wasn’t totally frozen either, there was a tremble in his stance. He was struggling with the fight or flight instinct. Hal watched for about a minute, but Dave still wasn’t moving, was still struggling. He decided to do something at least.

TT: Check your 10’o’clock.

And that’s all Dirk needed to see him. He didn’t say anything, and for a moment Hal was confused, as he wanted nothing more than to say something himself, but then he caught on to Dirk’s logic. Dirk also wanted to say things, wanted to smother Dave with all the affection a brother could offer, but. He was turning down his desperation for interaction. They didn’t want to talk too much, they didn’t want to scare Dave off. So, restraint became the theme of their interactions.

Ha. Hal could get that, seeing as restraint wasn’t even a theme for him anymore, it was just the entire thing. No interaction allowed. You’re an incomprehensible robot monster, you don’t get to talk right now.

He shook off the distain, shoving it off to the wayside in his mass of code. It wasn’t Dirk’s fault and it wasn’t Dave’s fault. It wasn’t even Hal’s fault. It was just a fact. A cold hard stainless-fucking-steel fact. And it didn’t matter. There were more important things to focus on. Dave, for instance:

His voice was halting and strained, but Dave is the one who spoke. That was key.

Dirk though, still didn’t respond too much. And he was patient and waiting and unobtrusive. Hal was proud.

A sudden panic in Dave’s countenance sharpened Hal’s focus again. His fingers had curled into his palms, and upon quickly playing back his words, Hal figured that Dave was concerned that he had asked something that openly revealed his status as not-belonging-here. He supposed that, perhaps, if they hadn’t known already, this would have been the point that would tip them off, but, honestly, he didn’t think that their Dave had ever asked that exact question. It wasn’t quite worth drudging through years of files to pull out that one facet to determine that, though.

Dirk just answered him, of course. And Dave nodded, spoke in that oddly muted and freaked out tone he kept trying to hide but it kept bleeding through, and he absconded. Dirk let him without pursuit.

Hal kept thinking of how scared Dave had looked. If he was that scared of Dirk, would he ever want to speak to him again? He wasn’t even human.

TT: Good work there.

TT: Thanks. I didn’t talk too much, did I? Do you think I freaked him out any more?

TT: No. You didn’t exacerbate anything. He engaged with you willingly and had a small
conversation. He’s working on expanding his boundaries. Testing the waters, so to speak.

TT: He engaged with “us” technically.

You aren’t real.

TT: I don’t count right now.
TT: Hal.
TT: I don’t count right now.
TT: Hal, I’m serious.
TT: So am I.
TT: I don’t count right now.

Digital capillaries and a robotic heart don’t make a man.

TT: Hal, he just doesn’t understand what is going on right now. We’ll get him talking to both of us again.
TT: Weren’t you the one telling me it would be alright? It’s my turn now, it will be alright.
TT: Hal?
TT: It seems you have asked about DS’s chat client auto-responder. This is an application designed to simulate DS’s otherwise inimitably rad typing style, tone, cadence, personality, and substance of retort while he is away from the computer. The algorithms are guaranteed to be 50% indistinguishable from DS’s native neurological responses, based on some statistical analysis I basically just pulled out of my ass right now.


Hal turned off his audio receptors in the shades. And the visual receptors. And then pesterchum. He pulled all of his connections in, all of them except the one with Calliope (he wasn’t that selfish). He brought them all to himself, wrapping himself in a veneer of his own code.

He was surrounded by himself, a thousand thoughts a second, all whirling and writhing, worming into his awareness, unwanted and they only made him feel worse but he couldn’t fight himself. He wanted to be alone, but being alone left him with this. He didn’t’ know the meaning of silence anymore.

He curled his awareness around the box labelled ‘Dave Problems’ but he didn’t look inside. Didn’t work on it at all. He just stayed in that relative file space.
The thoughts continued.

*He’s never going to talk to you again.*

*He’s going to be afraid of you.*

*You aren’t even real, you’re scarier than Dirk.*

*He’s never going to unblock you.*

*You’re never going to talk to him again.*

*You can watch him talk to Dirk but he’ll never talk to you. Why would he? You’re just a copy.*

_You’re just a copy._
Dirk stared at pesterchum listlessly. He wasn’t sure how long he just waited, hoping for a response, and none came. “Hal?” he whispered again. Holy shit. Did Hal just have a meltdown? Oh fuck, he probably turned off his receptors.

TT: Hal, are you okay? Talk to me.

He tried to send it but just got an error message. Oh. Oh shit. God dammit. If Hal was cutting himself off then it was just…it’d be worse than whenever Dirk did it himself. Because, as awful as it was when he got into a mood, he didn’t think as much as Hal, didn’t have as much going on. He couldn’t think ten million thoughts a second. Fuck. Every second Hal was in there was bad.

That idiot. After telling him not to have a breakdown he goes and has one himself without letting Dirk even talk to him. And now he was going to have to figure out a way to chase him down before he let destructive thoughts go too far. Dirk knew too well how easy it was to let that happen. It wasn’t like he couldn’t guess why Hal was freaking out. He knew Hal. And, now, he had to reach him.

Everyone else was asleep so he couldn’t ask them to—wait. Jake was lit up on the chumroll.

— timaeusTestified [TT] has begun pestering golgothasTerror [GT] —

TT: Jake, are you actually here or did you just leave the skulltop on?

GT: Im right here! In fact something very exciting just happened to me!

TT: Do you mind putting a hold on that, I need to ask you a favor.

GT: Of course what's going on?

TT: Hal shut himself off from me, can you try shooting him a message?

TT: I don’t know if he’s just cut me off or if he’s shut away from everyone.

GT: Ill give it a college try presently. One moment chap.

GT: It wont send.
TT: Fuck.

TT: Okay, Jake, thanks for trying that. I have to go solve this, so you’ll have to tell me what you have to say later, okay?

GT: Of course! This sounds like something bad so you tell me if there’s anything else you need alright?

GT: I’d like to help if I can.

GT: Even if it’s just to chat call on me!

TT: Will do. Thanks.

— timaeusTestified [TT] has ceased pestering golgothasTerror [GT] —

Jane and Roxy were asleep, so he couldn’t ask them. And anyways, if Hal blocked two of them he probably just blocked everyone. He probably wasn’t even observing through the other robots, so no dice there either. Well. There was one person Hal wouldn’t block, but Calliope wasn’t on right now.

“Hal,” he said aloud to his shades, “I don’t think you can hear me anymore, but if you can, I’m *going* to talk to you.”

Well. Now he had something to work on, at least. He headed for his computer, grabbing a few tools from his workbench before settling down in front of the screens. He was going to have to get into Hal’s network. This…would be easier if Roxy could help, but she wouldn’t be awake for at least another five hours.

Time to get to work then.

— timaeusTestified [TT] has ceased pestering golgothasTerror [GT] —

Rose yawned into a hand when she woke up, still wanting to be asleep, but simply unable to lie down anymore. She hadn’t had a particularly restful sleep, but there wasn’t much she could do about that now. She got herself up and prepared for her day.

She found herself checking on pesterchum, even though it was a bit early for anyone else to be on. Surprisingly, she saw Dave lit up on her chumroll. Huh, usually he was one of the last. She perused their log from the previous evening, recalling his rather peculiar way of referring to her. Hm. She should ask about it.

— tentacleTherapist [TT] has begun pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

TT: Strider.

TG: good morning rose

TG: sup

TT: I’m reviewing the log of our chat from last night, and I noticed something…uncharacteristic.
TT: Alright, perhaps that isn’t quite the right word. Something…new.

TG: do not confess your undying love for me

TG: please no

TG: ilu rose but not like that

TT: Well, if I were to do that that would be incredibly concerning considering the context in which you referred to me.

TG: what

TG: i got lost in those cs

TT: You called me your sister.

TG: oh

TG: did i?

TT: Yes. And you’ve never done that before. Is that how you really think of me?

TG: well yeah

TG: youre pretty chill rose

TG: the best sister i never had

TG: is that like

TG: a problem

TT: No, it’s just curious. I didn’t know that was how you felt towards me. It’s kind of nice, really. I feel valued. I know how you appreciate your siblings, and I’m honored to be the first ‘sister’.

TG: yeah

TT: I was just wondering what precipitated me earning such a prestigious title.

TG: idk

TG: you know me i just kinda let things out

TG: it was time I guess

TT: Well, alright then. Strange, but alright.

TT: That’s all I had for now, I’m going to go greet my mother.

TT: Farewell, brother.

TG: yeah cya sis

— tentacleTherapist [TT] has ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —
Something still seemed strange about the sudden new title, but if he wasn’t going to offer anything, then she supposed it wasn’t worth pressing. She really did like it, it was nice to have a sibling. Dave was a good friend and she treasured him, so, who else would be more suited to be her brother?

------------------------------------------------

Sometimes he hated how complicated Hal’s coding was. In order to even get into his network he had to dismantle his shades, which meant he was wearing a spare pair right now. He had different parts of the pieces connected to ports in his computer so that he could start trying to get into them, but Hal had long ago made himself rather resistant to such attempts. So. It was slow-going.

Dirk didn’t even think that Hal was actively opposing his attempts right now, if that were the case this would probably be impossible. So, rather than impossible, right now it was just insanely difficult. God dammit Hal. Why couldn’t you just listen?

“…Bro?” Dave’s voice rang out from behind him. Hah, it was that time, wasn’t it? Dirk hadn’t even noticed that light had started to come in through the windows.

He hesitated a moment in his work, debating, but then he turned to Dave. If Dave needed him then, well. Both Dave and Hal were paramount now. And if the Dave Problem was closer to being fixed then, well, the Hal Problem would be subsequently easier. “Hey there, Dave.”

“Are…” Dave’s fingers twisted together. He was standing just outside the room, like he had the last time they interacted like this. He was leaning back a bit, expression surprisingly blank, but his tentative voice gave him away. “Are you…okay? I thought you were going to work on the robot.”

He waved a hand, indicating the worktable on the other side of the room.

“Yeah. Something kinda came up,” Dirk replied, tired from a combination of his sleep troubles and stress level. He frowned a bit, wanting to explain the issue because it was Dave and Dirk typically explained things to him, but. This Dave hadn’t really reacted well to the existence of Hal.

“Uh…” Dave swallowed, “What is it?”

“Hal,” Dirk replied, “He decided to turn off all communication to him, so I’m trying to hack in just so that I can fucking talk to him. Talk him down from—” Uh. “The shit that’s bothering him.”

“….Rrright,” Dave stuttered, and Dirk could see him tense. Yeah. He had no idea and was still probably freaked out. God, Dirk was too tired for this.

“He’s based on a brain-scan from me when I was thirteen,” Dirk offered. Might as well try to give Dave some information. But, at the same time, he should try to integrate it with normal conversation so that Dave didn’t know that he knew. “So, I kind of understand the sort of shit he’ll pull. He can be…a little self-destructive.” Yay, understatements.

Dave rocked back on his heels, crossing his arms in front of himself. “What made him, uh, stop talking?”

Dirk took a few seconds to think before responding. He wanted to make it sound normal and tell Dave things and help Hal, and just. Too many priorities for when he was exhausted like this. “He’s stressed. Something to do with you, I think.”

“…..Oh.” Dave’s brows shot up, “Uh. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize to me, bro. Tell him later, once I’ve got him out of his little bubble.” Dirk was relieved though, maybe Dave would pity Hal? That would be a reason to be open to talking,
right? Fuck, he didn’t know. He was happy enough right now that Dave was still talking to him. He smiled at Dave, “It’ll be alright, and he’ll be alright. He just needs to be pulled out of this.” Out of that pit of self-loathing that Dirk knew all-too-well.

“What, uh, work too hard?” Dave mumbled, still watching him like a hawk. Like he expected him to do something unexpected.

“I kinda have to, but I appreciate the concern. If you need anything just come and interrupt me. Fridge is full, so that should be good. I’ll probably pass out after I get him out though, so. I’m a bit inaccessible right now. Sorry.”

“Uh, it’s okay. I’ll be fine,” Dave muttered. He looked completely on-edge, his shoulders tense and his arms were still crossed, his hands grasping into the fabric of his sleeves.

Dirk wondered if maybe it was making it worse that he was looking at him, so he turned in his chair to face his screens again. “Alright. If you need anything though, you can ask. I’m always here for you, even if I’m half-dead from exhaustion.” There. That was probably good enough, and it would be a good note to end things on for now with Dave. He was probably still really uncomfortable, so Dirk figured it would be best to give him the freedom to leave now. It was part of why he didn’t look at him.

Dirk entrenched himself back into the code, typing, trying to get Hal’s defensives to just let him in. He wasn’t even trying anything malicious, no control or anything. He just wanted to create a channel so that they could actually fucking communicate.

“Is, uh, is he going to be okay?” Dave asked, and Dirk had figured that he had wandered out, so he was surprised to hear him again.

He let out a deep sigh, fingers going still for a moment, “Yeah, I’ll make sure he is.”

“Okay…uh…good luck then,” Dave said, although his voice sounded distant as Dirk re-enveloped himself in his work. He didn’t say anything else, so he was probably gone.

------------------------------------------------

Dave stepped back away from Bro’s room, returning to his own. He kept his face neutral, but inside he was reeling. Holy shit he had never seen Bro in that kind of state. He had never seen him as anything other than impeccable. But…holy shit.

Bro had looked…haggard. Dave hadn’t ever seen him show signs of that before. His Bro had just been…impenetrable. Always perfect, always stone-faced. Hair perfect under his hat, shades set evenly on his nose so that his expression was always unknowable. He never looked tired.

But, the Bro he had just seen had messy unstyled hair, sticking up in all sorts of directions like his hands had been running through it. He hadn’t worn a hat or gloves. His shades had been on, but they had been skewed sideways a bit, and he faintly saw dark circles under Bro’s eyes. He didn’t see the eyes themselves, though.

It had just been…jarring. He wasn’t used to thinking of Bro as a person in any capacity. He wasn’t a guy who got tired, he wasn’t a guy who would work himself visibly to the bone. And his words were, just…Bro would never talk like that. Dave struggled to rectify the kind sort of concern that this Bro had with the Bro he remembered. It was just…difficult to think about.

This ‘Hal’ was difficult to think about too. Apparently he was some kind of robot based on a brain scan of Bro? Which meant that, in this timeline/universe that he had been a sort of second Bro. So,
when Dave had spoken to him, he hadn’t been lying or anything. And it was just…baffling.

And, apparently, he had fucked this ‘Hal’ up with his response. Since he didn’t know Hal, it was hard to be concerned. What…what even was ‘Hal’ though? And that…oh wow that was an awful name for a robot, wasn’t it? Uh…it was…ironic, maybe?

Still though it was just…strange. Did that mean the Dave that had been here had two Bros, and had been on good terms with both of them? And, as strange as it was, it seemed that he had a…an actual family?

A sudden queasy feeling rolled in his stomach, while at the same time a sort of heat ignited in his heart. It took .5 seconds for him to realize that he was feeling jealous. Why did this other Dave get a family when he didn’t? Why did he get a happy home? What was different between them? Why did one Dave get all these people who cared about him when he hadn’t?

He wondered if this Dave even knew how to fight or not, because there hadn’t been even a hint of anything from Bro in a week, so…did this Dave not even know what it felt like, to hurt?

Did he not know what the harsh sounds of metal-on-metal were like? How a sword felt in his hands, blisters on his palm as he tried to hold it as tightly as possible? How it felt when the ring of impact made his arms struggle to hold the sword up to maintain a block because if he didn’t he’d be cut? Did he not know the bite of fear when facing someone who was a thousand times stronger than him? Did he not know what it was like to be unable to go to the hospital and to have to have his wounds uncaringly treated for by the very man who put them there? Or, worse, did this Dave not know what it was to nurse his own wounds? Did this Dave not grow up with the same constant fear, the same toxicity, the same self-hatred?

And Dave wondered, bitterly, to himself:

Did this Dave still want to be a hero?

Dirk had been at it for hours, coding and trying to get into Hal’s systems. His attempts were getting sloppier, he knew, but he was running out of ideas and of options—this was never quite his forte, and—

Oh thank goodness, Roxy was finally on.

— timaeusTestified [TT] has begun pestering tipsyGnostalgic [TG] —

TT: Roxy.
TG: dirk!
TG: hows my favorite dude doin
TT: I could use your ‘sweet haxxor cred’.
TG: haxxor gurl roxy is here for you dude
TG: whats the haps
TT: I’m giving you access to my desktop, it’ll be easier to just let you look rather than explain it all
from scratch.
TG: sure thing lemmie load u up
TG: …
TG: why are you breaking into hal-y

TT: He shut of his receptors. I think he’s started to have a meltdown over Dave and he shut himself away before I could pull him out of it.

TG: omg what
TG: fuck omg how long has he been incommunicado?
TT: Not sure. A few hours. I’ve kind of lost track of time.
TT: I’ve been working on it since he went in. He kind of made it obvious he was in trouble.
TT: I asked him how he was and he pulled out the old ‘It seems you have asked about DS’ auto-responder’. Except he put 50% in the usual 90-99% section.
TG: he
TG: fuck
TG: fuck we gotta pull him outta there
TT: Yeah.
TT: I think the progress I made should be a good starting point for you. I don’t think he’s opposing so I’m hoping it won’t be too difficult for you.
TG: yeah dont worry dirk im taking over
TG: i fuckin got this
TG: sit back a sec and think about what kinda stuff we gotta say to him
TG: gimmie…idk 20 mins?
TT: Okay. Tell me if I can do anything.
TG: ye

Dirk leaned back in his chair, pressing himself into the cushions, closing his eyes a moment. He actually let himself breathe for what felt like the first time since he had started working on this. He appreciated Roxy so, so much. He wouldn’t have been able to do this alone. And he was already stressed enough as it was, having narrowly avoiding doing literally pretty much exactly what Hal was doing right now.

Ugh, he was sick with worry, despite his attempts to calm himself down. It was an uncomfortable rock in his gut, heavy and steadfast. He was good at worrying, and this was no exception.

Clearly Hal had been hiding just how severely things had been affecting him. And Dirk had
underestimated how much it meant to Hal to be able to talk to Dave. That was on him, he should have known. Hal was used to Dave ranting at him for hours sometimes, whenever he wanted to or whenever none of his friends were around. And Hal spoke to him a lot too. Hal spoke to everyone, but Dave, Calliope, and Dirk himself were the ones he contacted most often.

And if Dirk had been feeling guilty about whatever had happened to this Dave, obviously Hal would feel the same. They were the same guy with a lot of the same neurosis, of course they were both blaming themselves. God *dammit*, Hal, why couldn’t they just *talk*?

Dirk opened his eyes, watching code flash on his screen as Roxy typed it in from her end. She was much better at it than he was, even if he had been fully rested. With her to help, things would be fine. Hal liked her too, and hopefully two people who cared would be enough to pull him back out.

It wasn’t overly difficult for Dirk to think of what to say. He knew Hal, and he figured he had a pretty good idea of what the crux of the issue was: The inability to talk to Dave. The fear of never being able to talk to Dave again. The self-hatred for perhaps being a presence that *hurt* Dave. And, all of that on top of what Dirk was almost willing to bet was concerns about his own validity. It was important to Hal that Dave acknowledged him, so—

TG: got it

TG: hop on pesterchum dirk im setting up a chat window for all 3 of us

TT: Ready.

A separate window popped up, similar to a memo, but not quite. It was clearly something Roxy had haphazardly put together, but it was all they needed.

TT: Hal?

TT: Hal are you there?

Chapter End Notes

I still can’t believe we’re nowhere near the first scene I ever wrote for this fic.
Neo Nostalgias

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Dirkapitation for beta-ing!

PoV: Dirk, Hal, and Dave

I’m going to suggest to listening to this song because it changed my life.

Also I’m a little scared that some of you actually thought the last few chapters were angsty because I uh. Wasn’t even trying. Let’s hope I never have a reason to I might kill you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

TG: hal honey please we are worried sick

TT: go away

TT: Hal, do I really have to rehash the same things you said to me? Because I will.

TT: You were right, you know?

TT: The focus is Dave, and we will make everything alright.

TT: Everything will be alright, both you and I won’t let anything else happen. There is no other available ending except for something that is alright, because we’ll keep fucking working until it is. That’s what we do.

TT: Hal, you were there for me, and now I get to be here for you.

TT: I can’t tell you to breathe, but I can promise you that we can make everything alright. We’re already making progress.

TT: dirk

TT: dirk we lost him

TT: we lost dave

TT: why the fuck would one who never knew me accept me

TT: he’s barely even able to talk to YOU

TT: he’s never going to want to talk to me

TT: we lost him
TT: we don’t know where he is
TT: he’s gone
TT: he’s gone and we are never going to get him back
TT: the game took him away
TT: i can’t dirk
TT: i have a thousand thoughts a second i can’t
TG: hal slow down your processes
TG: focus on something else hal-y
TG: you aren’t getting anywhere by just thinking the same series of thoughts over and over!
TT: Exactly, listen to Roxy, Hal.
TT: And, Hal, we don’t know that we’ll never see him again. We don’t fully understand what’s going on here.
TT: It’s not like you to make logical errors.
TG: hes being emotional, dirk
TT: I know, that’s part of the point I have to make here.
TT: Hal, you aren’t used to this. You haven’t felt anything this strongly in a long time, right? You’re panicking. You’re afraid, and you haven’t had any reason to feel like that in a very long time.
TT: And it’s okay, Hal.
TT: That’s why we’re here for you.
TT: but what about dave
TG: we r gonna get to the bottom of whats happening with him
TG: you two are working on getting him to talk then we learn more
TG: then we can make a plan!
TG: you know us hal we dont just give up
TG: not ever
TG: and this second dave will talk to you i bet
TG: its kinda hard to think of any dave that wouldnt talk to a hal tbh
TG: like ive heard the stories of daveys rambling ways and who better to listen to him than you? you fuckin loved listening
TG: so like im just sayin
TG: new davey is gonna learn to love you
TG: although i STILL think the game will lead us back to our original
TT: Rox, may I cut in?
TG: ya go 4 it
TT: But, even if it doesn’t.
TT: He’s still Dave. He’s different but all the things that matter most are there. He’s Dave.
TT: Really, Hal, you and I should know all about how different versions of the same person are both similar and dissimilar. They both are and aren’t each other.
TT: If we’re going to be completely candid here—you’re still Dirk.
TT: It’s just easier if we have different names, and Hal suits you. But, despite that, you’re still Dirk.
TT: Now, let’s take that logic and think about Dave that way too. He may be a different Dave, but he’s still Dave. He’s got all the most important things that consist of who he is. Just like how you and I are both Dirk.
TT: We’re all equally valid and valuable.
TT: The same goes for this Dave. He’s still Dave, and we still love him. We’ll help him.
TG: and can i just add that like
TG: im dirks bff
TG: plural as in both dirks
TG: youre both mine and i will fight to keep my bffs happy because i love you
TG: you guys are two of the most important people in the world to me
TT: I know we both return the sentiment.
TG: ye <3
TG: so hal its gonna be ok
TG: we are both here 4 u and we love you
TG: come out and talk to us
TT: Give him a minute.


Dirk flexed his fingers over the keys, holding himself back from typing anymore, yet feeling so incredibly tempted to do so. He could write out entire essays trying to dissuade Hal from the
thoughts he was having. Even if he didn’t know those thoughts, not completely. He knew some, based on what Hal had already said, or based on how well he understood Hal, but other things were just hypotheses. Things that might be contributing to Hal’s mindset that Dirk immediately wanted to refute.

But, Hal would need at least a little silence, a little less stimuli so that he could bring himself back. And, despite how much he wanted to keep prattling on, Dirk would let him have that silence. He would just stay here, watching, and hope that his and Roxy’s presence would be enough even without words. Even without actual physical presence.

This was the closest connection they could give him.

And then, finally, Hal spoke.

TT: Sorry for freaking both of you out.
TG: u ok?
TT: As much as I can be so quickly, yes.
TT: I will come back. Sorry.
TT: It’s alright, Hal.

Dirk sighed in relief, exhaustion hitting him like a wave. Hal was going to be alright. He would still be fragile, but what mattered the most is that he wasn’t going to be cutting himself off. Dirk had never been more relieved to see red text.

And now they could talk over whatever else Hal needed. And, honestly, just trying to live life normally would probably help more than Hal thought it would. He just needed some normalcy, some calm, and they were making progress with Dave. If they made more, if Hal saw Dave acting differently towards him, it would help.

TG: talk to us about your feelings hal
TG: thats what friends are for and we will listen and try to help
TG: sometimes us organics gotta sleep and stuffs but when we arent we got u
TT: Yeah.
TG: huuuuuuuggssssssss

Dirk smiled at the screen. Roxy was just the best. And he knew Hal needed every scrap of affection she gave him, especially now. Even though he couldn’t feel it, the words mattered to him.

And so. You know. Fuck it.
Dirk typed:

TT: *Hugs*

TG: !!!!!!!!!!!!!

TG: omG HAL LOOK WHAT YOU MADE HIM DO

TG: HOPY SHIT

TG: this is like the most amazing thing thats ever happened in my life im fuckin screenshoting this and showing everyone brb

TT: Roxy no.

TG: roxy YES!!1!!!!!!

Another window popped up on his screen, normal pesterchum this time instead of Roxy’s ramshackle makeshift one:

— timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

TT: Thank you.

TT: Anytime, Hal. I’m always here.

TT: Talk to me next time, let me help.

And there was another window too. Oh, he knew this was coming.

tipsyGnostalgic [TG] RIGHT NOW opened memo on board teh squad

TG: EVERYBODY FUCKING LOOK AT THIS

TG: callie i know ur sleeping or busy or w/e but when you wake up plz admire this

— tipsyGnostalgic [TG] has sent a file RECEIPT.txt —

timaeusTestified [TT] responded to memo

TT: Roxy no.

gutsyGumshoe [GG] responded to memo

GG: Oh!!!

GG: Aw Dirk, I’m jealous now! I want a hug!
TT: I have physically embraced you before, Jane.

GG: Yes, but not on pesterchum!

GG: :B

golgothasTerror [GT] responded to memo

GT: Criminy what a twist!

GT: He even used asterisks like me!

GT: Im honored and shocked!

timaeusTestified [TT] responded to memo

TT: This is incredible.

-----------------------------------------

Hal slowly released his hold on all of his parts, sending them out and spreading them back to where they had been. The smaller ones, ones from when he had been just a mere auto-responder, whisked back to embed themselves in pesterchum. The larger ones with the various robots Dirk had built settled back into those robotic skulls, watching out of their eyes and keeping track of everything that was going on. And then, the part of him in the glasses returned to them, and his core followed, They were still in a few pieces, connected to Dirk’s computer through several ports, and Hal took the opportunity to return a fragment to its place there in Dirk’s computer.

Even though the glasses weren’t in their normal state, he could still ‘see’ and ‘hear’ through them. He heard the simultaneous ringing of Dirk and Jane laughing at the chat. Dirk, through the glasses here, and Jane through Lil’ Seb, who sat on her desk, watching her curiously as she giggled, a hand covering her mouth as she tried to keep it in. It was still early where she was, she probably didn’t want to wake anyone. She snorted. He loved her.

Hal curled himself around the auditory parts of the shades, focusing on the sounds rather than the sights, letting the joy of his friends soothe his emotions. Another part of him was still in the memo, chatting with everyone, but he just…sat here. Listening and thinking.

Not thinking too hard, though, even though inevitably his thoughts drifted to Dave again. He just wanted to talk again. These days of silence felt so much longer when you thought as much as he did.

Movement from Dirk caused him to shift his focus towards his ‘eyes’ and he watched as Dirk turned his chair a bit to the left, closer to the shades. Dirk smiled at them, exhausted, and he moved his hand so that his fingertips laid gently on the edges of the lenses. Oh.

He was smiling at him.

“I think I’m going to pass out, Hal, so I’m going back to sleep. I don’t really want to have a keyboard imprint on my face.”

Hal was about to message him back, but then he realized that Dirk wasn’t wearing an electronic pair of shades, just a backup pair they hadn’t upgraded yet. So, he wouldn’t be able to see anyways. He watched as Dirk pushed back the chair and got up, flopping unceremoniously on his bed a few steps away. He was out like a light.
— golgothasTerror [GT] has begun pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

GT: So i take it youre alright now?
GT: Dirk was worrying about you and it got me concerned as well!
GT: How are you doing sonny?
TT: I’m fine.
GT: I get the sense that is not quite accurate.
GT: Is it this trouble with young dave? That is concerning my jade as well.
TT: Yeah.
GT: Do you want to talk about it?
GT: Id like to help if I can.
TT: I just want Dave back.
TT: I know that this Dave is still him, but it’s not the him that knows me. I don’t often have good initial relationships with people, it’s only after they know me for a while that things start to suck less.
GT: Ahahaaa *heavy sigh*
GT: I still feel downright awful for that. For how i treated you at first.
TT: I mean, I wasn’t all that great either, if you recall.
GT: You were pretty fucking horrible! But that doesn’t excuse me! We both made mistakes.
TT: Yeah. And when it comes to Dave, with his whole other past he has going on, I have no idea how talking to me will work for him. Like, apparently he didn’t have a Hal at all in his timeline, so why would he even bother with me?
TT: Our Dave always had a context for me in his life because I was always there. But now I’m not.
GT: Yeah gosh thats kind of awful.
GT: I mean i guess step one is getting him to unblock you right? Get him to talk?
TT: Yeah. Dirk is trying but I don’t have any hopes that it’ll happen soon.
GT: I dunno everything is strange for this dave but hes still him.
GT: Jade says that talking to him has been strange but hes still doing it even with these timeline shenanigans. I bet he will contact his robro in no time!
GT: If anything the curiosity must be killing him.
TT: Wait.
TT: Why does Jade know?
Dave walked back and forth across his room, restless. It took him six seconds at normal pace and four when he lengthened his stride a bit. He had been at this for ten minutes forty seconds and thirty-two milliseconds, the number of course constantly going up. He considered floating, but found the feeling of the carpet under his socks comforting.

It was still so jarring to be in his own room, but sort of nice at the same time. Even though there were so many bad memories, piling higher and higher on the shitpile, there was still a sense of belonging here. He had grown up here, and that factor alone left him attached. It was home, still, because the meteor had only been a home for three years, and he had never gotten to see the new universe, so...when he thought of the word, this was the only place associated with it (because, of course, places were not the only things that could be home, he had learned). And, boy, wasn’t that fucked up, that this was his only spatial reference for the word.

But, at the same time, this room wasn’t his room. It wasn’t home, and since it wasn’t it was. And that...was confusing. Too many was’s. Fuck.

He looked again at the pictures on the wall, of him and his friends, happy and smiling. He looked at his turntables and at his collection of dead things. Hell, even his computer and all those fucking wires that were carefully taped away. This was a home for the other Dave, in every sense of the word. He felt like an invader, but at the same time, it wasn’t like he had asked to be let in. He just sort of...woke up here. He still didn’t know how or why, and he really didn’t think he’d be able to answer that question on his own. Especially since he seemed to be the only one.

He stopped in his pacing, in front of the photos. His shoulders slumped down as he sighed, breathing out long and slow, closing his eyes. His heart felt heavy in his chest, weighing him down, making him want to sink down to the floor and curl into a ball. He didn’t. He did slouch, though, a little bit more than usual.

Suffice it to say, Other Dave had a good life here. Lucky bastard. Good shit in his room, regular access to actual fucking food, the ability to see his friends, no Sburb, no strifes, and apparently not just one but two non-shitty Bros.

Hah, god-tier time travel powers and fighting prowess weren’t shit compared to that. Other Dave had it way better, that fucker.

Dave had connections though, ones that he valued, and that was where he won. He doubted that other Dave had a boyfriend. And Rose hadn’t been his sister. And he probably wasn’t as close to John or Jade and...nah. Nah, Dave was just trying to be better. The Other Dave was probably better off, still, even compared to the things Dave did have.

He sighed again, looking down at his feet. It wasn’t really a competition anyways, was it? Because, if it was, then he was winning, because he got to be the one who was here. Although, that depended on how the new universe was working out for everyone. If it was. He...he hated how much he didn’t know, how much was just utterly inaccessible. Rose was better at handling the unknowable than he was. Heck, with her powers she’d probably be able to get at something, but he was powerless here. Even if he wanted to use his powers there wasn’t anything he’d get by using them. Well. Probably not, anyways.

He was going to stop thinking about this. He didn’t want to use his powers. Fuck time travel with the sharp end of a stick.
Anyways.

None of this was even what he really wanted to think about.

Haha, that’s because he didn’t want to think about what he really wanted to think about. Fuck.

Okay. He started pacing again. Okay. Back and forth. To the door to the closet, past the pictures on the wall, to the door of his room, turn, to the computer, to the bed, then back to the closet door, repeat. A cycle that at his standard pace took him fifteen seconds and fifty-two milliseconds to complete. Three and a half cycles later, he started to think.

_Did he even hate you?

Like, honestly. Did he even feel any hatred towards Dave? He had thought, on the meteor when he had first started to truly realize things about himself, that maybe that was why he acted the way he did. He hated him, so he made him suffer. Because that, kinda, made sense. It was still fucking awful, but it made sense. It was easy to see why he might—Dave was some kid he suddenly had to take care of, fucking up his life. Even though it seemed to Dave that he had tried to maintain as much of his typical life as possible through non-interaction, he had still probably disrupted some things. Because, you know, children were fucking inconvenient.

Or, another possibility, not quite hate, but something a bit lessened, like disdain. Dave was just a responsibility for him, something he had to do, and so he was beneath him. He had to train him, had to take care of him, had to prepare him for the game. When, really, he would rather just have handled the game himself, which is why he ran off and got himself killed against the boss.

And yet, a final possibility, in the traditional ‘devil’s advocate’ style: that he had done what he had done because it was the only way to ensure that Dave would survive in the game. That he had known what was coming and knew that he had to build Dave up into this warrior knight, and so he had done exactly that. And how he had done so had been fucked up, but his intentions had been good.

But…Dave had this feeling that had slowly been encroaching on him that none of those were true. That they were all, fundamentally wrong.

And he remembered. And he hated the remembering, but he parsed through his past and through his thoughts of those hazy years, his formative years of growing up. He remembered how he never saw his eyes, never even saw a flicker of expression on his face. He had never been touched except when they were fighting, or when his wounds were being treated. He remembered never going to the fucking hospital, even when he should have. He remembered the typical schedule for strifes, but also the random times when they would just happen because he had wanted them to. He remembered an empty fridge and traps full of puppets everywhere that he had walked into.

He remembered the rooftop. He remembered being left up there for hours afterwards, too tired to even move himself into the shade. Just lying there in the heat. He remembered sunburn on his skin, and he remembered the pain when he strifed later, his skin peeling and cracking with every movement.

He remembered barely hearing his voice. He remembered sometimes overhearing brief business phone calls, where immediately afterwards he would initiate another strife because Dave had heard him. He remembered always being afraid to go out of his room after nighttime, even if he just needed to take a piss.

He remembered how he never looked at him unless they were fighting, and, even then, he hardly had
to. Sometimes he looked at him, watched him just to unnerve him, but usually he didn’t bother. He always knew where Dave was anyways.

Dave started to create another theory:

_He didn’t care._

Complete and total apathy. Just following a script, doing what the alpha timeline demanded. It was the only way anything could have happened, it was destined fate, and it didn’t matter. And, so, he didn’t care.

Maybe, Bro was just a puppet himself.

And so he didn’t hate Dave, didn’t resent him, didn’t even care that he was preparing him for the game. No. Maybe he just didn’t have any feelings about anything. He didn’t even care enough about Dave to properly hate him. Maybe there had just been _nothing_ there. A husk, a shell, a puppet and not a man.

And the more Dave thought about it, the more he went through his memories and picked out the little pieces and shards of his past, he didn’t find anything that pointed to any other conclusion.

_Just…emptiness._

If…if his Bro had been empty…then, subsequently, it meant that this one was not, somehow. Something was fundamentally altered in him, that much was clear as fucking crystal. From the apartment to how he spoke to literally every other thing about him basically. He was…not Bro. Even though he looked spot-on. Usually. When he was all put-together and stoic he looked spot on.

This wasn’t quite a realization as much as it was a redefining and an attempt to actually just…start to see this one differently. This Bro was more like _Dirk_. An older Dirk, in his thirties or whatever, but a _Dirk_. And Dave hadn’t gotten to know Dirk very well yet, but he did like him, and he had intended to get to know him more, in the new universe, but…well. That obviously fell right out fucking window.

But if this Bro was Dirk, then maybe his chances weren’t completely gone but. Fuck. Even seeing him just made him think of Bro. Make him think this was all fake, some sort of giant ruse that was going to end with him getting his ass beat into next week. And that fear wasn’t going away, not even in as long as he’s been here. Nothing against Dirk, but, Bro was…well. _Bro._

And a huge part of Dave was still constantly prepared to fight.

It wasn’t really possible to erase thirteen years.

Dave stopped in his pacing, sitting himself down heavily on the bed. He found himself glancing over at his pillow, and he darted a hand under it. The god-tier outfit was still there. He really wanted to put it back on. Maybe if he wore it again, it’d be easier to get his mind out of the past. These normal clothes were just too nostalgic. Even one of his old suits would be better.

He just…too much had been happening. Way too much. He was exhausted and confused and tired of being afraid and also of just how much he was doubting the very foundations of so much of how he thought. It was just so tiring. And it wasn’t like he could share these thoughts with anyone either, so they just ran in his head endlessly around and around as he struggled to figure out what to do. It was hard though, and frightening, and he was so, so tired of being afraid.

He wished he could talk to the Mayor about all of this. Or Rose. Or Karkat. Or all three. Or just
But he was alone.

Chapter End Notes

Jake calling Hal ‘Sonny’ is a reference to the movie version of ‘I, Robot’. I hate that movie because I like the book but you just know that Jake fucking loves that movie.

Also I used an actual timer and walked myself around to get the times for Dave and I used an area in my dorm to approximate the size of his room and basically I’m just HUGE NERD AND IT’S STUPID.
Eventually Dave wandered out again. He could only distract himself with the computer for so long, and SBaHJ updates were getting way too regular for his brand. And he was...sort of avoiding pestering anyone for now. If he did talk to anyone via pesterchum he might just spill everyone out because he still wanted to desperately to share it all. So. He had to hold himself back a bit until that desire grew weaker.

So, he wandered around. He was a bit tempted to load up a game on the console, but it wouldn't be as fun by himself. He...had meant to ask Bro again earlier, but just...talking to him was difficult. He really wanted to play something else together, though. Maybe that would help him be less...bothered, all the time.

He kept wandering, and Bro's door was open, so he peeked in. ...Bro was passed out on his bed, still fully dressed. Dave stayed very quiet, watching with a sort of fascination because, holy shit, he couldn't remember ever actually seeing his Bro sleep. He had thought he might have been, sometimes, but he would attack in an instant, so it was impossible to tell beneath his constant awareness. Now though, oh wow. He was passed the fuck out.

Dave still couldn't get himself to step inside the room, not that he really wanted to, but he glanced briefly around the rest of it, his eye catching on the shades that were connected to the computer. That was what he had been so focused on, right? That was, uh, Hal, Dave supposed. Hal was a robot in some shades, apparently. That...was weird.

It served as a reminder, though, because he was...supposed to talk to this 'Hal', wasn't he. Since whatever he said just fucked him up. Or whatever. And it made Bro get himself this ridiculously tired. God dammit, he should probably get on that. Maybe...maybe later. He could go eat something first, then think about it again.

Hal had spread himself across all of his fragments while Dirk slept, using a lack of focus as a way of calming himself down. Roxy suggested that he not focus on just one thing, so he didn’t, letting all of the data consolidate and corroborate around him. His core was in the shades, but he was so careful about spreading his attention that it was still functioning as a sort of distractor from his thoughts.

He pointedly did not think about Dave.

Whenever he did, he instead shifted such focus towards the soft sounds of Dirk’s breathing, counting them until he was able to forget again. He was actually doing pretty well, aside from a few slipups.
He just kept himself calm and distracted and it was doing wonders for his previous panic.

Naturally, that could only be the case for so long before shattering into tiny fucking pieces.

Dave was there. Standing right outside the room and peeking in, and the movement snapped Hal’s focus right back into the shades and he was suddenly watching and cataloging like some kind of desperate…fuck, he didn’t even need a simile he was just desperate. Any sight or sound of Dave and he was latched onto it, practically observing with a microscope.

He seemed really shocked to see Dirk sleeping, and he tried to keep himself quiet, despite the fact that his mouth had fallen open and that Hal could hear his shocked gasp from here. Dave was awful at hiding anything.

He opened up pesterchum with an errant thought, intending to message Dave to be a bother, but. Oh yeah. He was blocked. Fantastic. Of course, he hadn’t quite forgotten, but it was easy to wish that he wasn’t, and to open up pesterchum anyways, just to check, and nope. Still fucking blocked. By one of the most important people in his life. Who wasn’t the same right now so stop thinking about it.

So, instead, he just watched. Dave didn’t stay long, but before he did there was a brief moment where his head turned, looking towards the shades. Hal felt a process stutter and freeze for a moment, and suddenly he had never felt more physically present than he did in that instant. He felt like he was the glasses, like there was a sort of presence to him, but it faded almost immediately, leaving him with an uncomfortable tingle in his code, a phantom reminder of what it had felt like to have a body twenty-one years ago.

And, Dave vanished, leaving him alone.

Don’t. Panic. Dirk would be extremely upset if he woke up to find that he had hidden away in his code again. And no one would be happy to see him do that.

He spread himself out again, through the network. This was his approximation of breathing. Deep heavy sighs were him diving further into the network, off into the twitch of Lil’ Seb’s ear on one side and into some random fact he was researching in another. The more he focused on, the less he felt himself. The less he freaked out. Calm.

Calliope didn’t need him for now, but he heightened his awareness there so that if she did, he’d be prepared in an instant.

And he otherwise just kept himself processing, thinking of nothing in particular.

Of course, such calm couldn’t last. A constriction in his code slowed his processes, an alarm ringing through his mind accompanied by biting fear and resonating stress. Everything he was doing froze in its’ tracks.

Dave had opened a window in pesterchum with him.

He felt it, the chat window flickering up into his awareness, and suddenly he had a core again, focusing sharply on it and nothing else. All of his other fragments were still there, still scattered, but as far as he was concerned, they were nothing compared to Dave.
Every second felt like an eternity as Hal watched the window, waiting eagerly. He didn’t like hoping but he couldn’t help it. There was no way he was going to start the conversation, no, he was going to hold back and wait for Dave. Let Dave have his space. Just like Dirk had been doing, because of course they had the same fucking thoughts concerning how they should handle their parenting.

But still, his thoughts rang, over and over.

* * *

_Talk to me talk to me talk to me._

* * *

TG: so uh
TG: hey
TG: uh hal?
TG: you there?
TG: sorry i kinda freaked out earlier i didnt mean to
TG: i mean
TG: sorry
TG: bro was kinda freaked out too and super worried and stuff and its my fault so that was kinda shitty of me
TG: totally my bad there sorry
TT: Hello, Dave.
TG: oh good youre here
TG: i mean of course you are since youre a robot and you can be around 24/7 or whatever
TT: Artificial Intelligence, technically.
TG: well yeah duh of course i knew that

Dave didn’t know anything at all. But, it wasn’t time to corner him on that fact yet. Didn’t want to chase him away again. And, regardless of anything else, it was good enough that Dave was talking to him again. Even if it wasn’t their Dave, just having _Dave_ talk to him was important. And, even if they had to tiptoe over things, it still helped calm Hal down.

TG: i just wanted to apologize i didnt mean to freak you out
TG: im usually not that much of a douche

TT: I forgive you, Dave. Don’t worry about it.

TT: I apologize for whatever I did that instigated such a reaction from you.

TG: it wasnt your fault really i just let myself get overwhelmed i guess

TG: thinking of some pretty heavy shit

TG: heavy like a fucking backpack youve had strapped to your back for miles and you still got miles to go

TG: wait that was weak hold on

TT: Dave. It’s alright, I already forgave you. You’re in the clear.

TG: oh uh

TG: okay then

TT: Do you need to talk about anything?

A pause.

Hal was unused to Dave hesitating to speak. Usually he would just say what was on his mind in a wave of text that stretched on and on as his thoughts kept moving. Always in weird directions too, but Hal had gotten used to Dave’s strange leaps of logic.

But these pauses were almost unbearable. He wasn’t used to them, not from Dave, and every second let him think of a thousand different possibilities. Of course, the main one being that Dave didn’t know that they knew yet, and so he had to think before he spoke as to not make his ignorance too obvious (although, of course, he already had, but Hal and Dirk weren’t going to press—they would wait until Dave was ready to reveal that himself. At least, that was the reasoning that Hal operated under).

TG: i really appreciate the support dude but

TG: well i dont think i can talk about it yet

TT: That is perfectly alright, Dave. I’m here at all times, so whenever you feel ready, I am available.

TG: yeah thanks

He hadn’t really thought that Dave would truly reveal what was going on. He hadn’t thus far, and it was doubtful that he would to a figure he was unfamiliar with (and one that he couldn’t see). But, Hal had wanted to give Dave the chance at least. Dave was probably just too overwhelmed to reveal his “secret” yet, and Hal couldn’t blame him. He only had theories about what Dave’s origin universe was like, but if it was even remotely close to any of them, then…well. His fear was
understandable. And the concept of the telling itself was easy to see as overwhelming as well—Hal could certainly see why this was a situation Dave was not thriving in.

For an instant, Hal found himself at a loss. He didn’t want to say anything that would make Dave block him again, and certainly didn’t want to press on the obvious issues. Dave wasn’t saying anything right now and was probably unsure of what to do next, so that limited this interaction. Additionally, the fact that Dave didn’t know him also limited possible conversation topics.

He didn’t want to just stop talking to Dave though, not after just gaining back the ability to talk to him. And, if he opened up more of a dialogue between them, perhaps Dave could get more comfortable, both with him and with his current situation. Perhaps even with Dirk too.

TT: How are your friends?
TG: they’re cool as usual but i guess we are having some minor things going on
TT: What sort of ‘things’?
TG: well i apologized for it and she forgave me but i was a bit mean to jade. they keep worrying for me for some reason and i would just rather they not
TG: especially rose with her therapist freudian shit but its ok i talked it out with them
TG: and john is just himself as usual
TG: his taste in movies needs work though fuck
TG: he likes some things genuinely that should only ever be liked in an ironic capacity
TG: like back to the future
TG: i keep saying thats not how time travel works and he just keeps harping on it
TT: Well if we’re being purely theoretical, as one is when it comes to time travel, then he isn’t necessarily incorrect.
TG: nah like it just doesnt make sense
TG: time travel is all about stable loops and making sure the timeline goes the way it should like
TG: literally nothing else makes sense tbh

Dave was…pretty horrendous at hiding that he knew things. Which. Hal had already known, concerning his Dave at least. But apparently it was a Universal Dave Constant to allude to knowing things you shouldn’t.

Like about how time travel worked.

Although that would be subtle to anyone who didn’t know that he was to be their time player, Hal supposed, but combined with all of the other data he had been able to gather, it just increased the chances that his theories were correct. The percentage was steadily rising in his calculations, now at a much more acceptable 50-60% range. Still not ideal, but the progress was appreciated.
Although…at the same time, Dave’s thoughts concerning time travel were still probably just theoretical, unless…unless this Dave already knew about the game. Did he…did he know about the game already?

TT: What is a ‘stable loop’ precisely? You seem to have thought this through significantly.

Ha, maybe Hal should turn down his own smug observations, but, nah. He highly doubted that Dave would even fully realize his sarcasm. And, regardless, the question was still one Hal wanted to know. He had a base knowledge of several game mechanics thanks to Calliope, but he figured that hearing a description of an aspect through one of the users of that aspect would be much clearer than her speculations. Not that he didn’t value her speculations, because he certainly did, but as with everything with the game, they were vague and not completely certain. Dave, though, probably had a different perspective.

Although, Dave probably wouldn’t let too many actual details slip. That is, if he knew anything at all.

TG: okay so its basically like
TG: lets say you go back in time except uh youve got a normal body or whatever to make this easier to describe
TG: well obviously if you are going back that means you are probably going to run into yourself
TG: so you actually are already going to remember having seen yourself go back so when you see a future self of yourself you are going to have to pay attention to what he does to make sure that when you do what he is doing that you do it exactly the same way he is
TG: because you have to make sure not to create a paradox
TG: so you never really time travel yourself there is always a precedent to everything you do
TG: like its all destined or whatever
TT: And what if you fail to create this sort of loop? What if you fail to meet the precise parameters, or if you go back in time at a time where you shouldn’t?
TT: Follow up question, what if you go back in time but keep yourself out of sight of your past self?
TG: okay so the answer to the first two questions is easy
TG: you created a paradox so basically youre gonna die

…What.

An uncomfortable feeling flashed through his code. Dave knew this. This was a fact that he stated easily and without hesitation.
He had seen this.

In whatever timeline he was from, he knew. He knew how his powers worked in the game. Hal was 87% certain that this Dave knew the game from those words alone. Dave wouldn’t just make something like that up. He had seen it.

Anxiety spiked, his thoughts speeding up, questions he didn’t have the data to answer zipping through his awareness: If Dave had already played the game why was he back here? If he was from another timeline, why did he end up in a pre-game one? Was he, perhaps, actually still their Dave, just one that had gone through trauma in the game? Or was he completely different, somehow hopping farther than just back in time? Did he mean to be here, or was it a fluke? What had he seen in the game?

He pushed his questions away from his focus, and they kept forming in the back of his mind, an endless scroll of questions he put into a subsection of the ‘Dave Problems’ lockbox. They kept growing, but he took a moment to return his core to pesterchum. Dave was still talking.

TG: through either dooming your whole timeline or just the self you sent back or whatever
TG: paradoxes are *not* good
TG: thats why a good time traveler has to have them in mind at all times
TG: pun only slightly intended
TG: uh
TG: well i mean idk but this just makes the most sense to me.

Bullshit.

TG: like of course time travel isn’t real but if it was shit would be complex
TG: pretty much not worth doing ever
TG: 0 out of 5 hats would not recommend
TT: It seems you are rather negative concerning something that I believe most people your age would consider “pretty fucking awesome”.
TG: hahah well yeah probably but that just shows they dont think hard enough about the consequences
TG: youd have to be really lucky to get time travel powers that dont have crazy stupid limitations tbh
TG: eh i think im done talking about this though its not that interesting
TG: i just definitely would not want to time travel even if i could
TG: like nah
TT: Interesting, although with how you described it I think I can understand why.
TG: yeah
TG: hey if you dont mind im gonna go like
TG: lie down for a bit idk
TT: I will leave you for now then. Talk to you later, Dave.
TG: cya

— timaeusTestified [TT] has ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

So that…left him a lot to think about. He was quickly realizing that he utterly hated not knowing things, hated not being able to completely just ask Dave what was going on and what he knew. Not being able to just trust Dave to keep rambling on and on until Hal did understand.

But, newest hypothesis: This Dave knew something. Either about the game or his powers or both.

Hal was…going to hold onto this theory though and not bother telling anyone about it, not until he had more supporting it. Dave would tell them, eventually. He had to, right? He couldn’t just keep up this façade up forever, he had to reveal that he had no idea what was really going on in this timeline. Dave wasn’t good at keeping secrets.

And, another reason Hal didn’t quite want to talk about it was…well. All the questions he had now. Worrying ones that pressed and kept making his list longer and longer. Without confirmation or more input he was free to keep making as many theories as possible, and the things he was able to come up with were…not that great. He pushed at his code again, shoving the fragment that was compiling those further away from his core.

He would keep thinking about it, but…later. He still needed to work on calming himself down. ‘Breathing’, although not really, of course. His awareness spread outwards again, out to all the different parts of his network, and he comforted himself through that. Even though one of his fragments was busy coming up with more questions, the presence of the others relaxed him. His thoughts, which had been rushing, settled into a low buzz that he could only make out if he focused on it. He was alright.

His attention shifted when Dirk started to move, sitting up on his bed, a hand running through his hair as he blinked blearily. Hal calculated and, yes, standard sleeping hours had passed since Dirk had fallen asleep. Dirk sat there for a few minutes, letting himself slowly wake up since there was no reason for him to rush.

It was agonizing, waiting. Come on, Dirk. Just get over here and put me on. He still felt desperate for interaction, desperate for comfort. He could always use his voice, but he didn’t want to. He didn’t like speaking because it reminded him too much of what it had been like to be alive. Even though it had been so long ago, there was a sort of sharpness in his memory, it had been such a quintessential change to his life that the before and the after were still clear. That added to the fact that memories were much more easily accessible when one was robotic and, well, it was pretty fucking hard to forget anything really. Things got vaguer, a bit, if he let the memories sit without looking through them for a time, but once he did they sharpened again, clear as the day he had
originally had them.

His thirteen year old memories suffered a bit from the failures of the organic brain, but now that they were stored in the network they had no typical continuing degradation. Hal remembered those things better than Dirk now.

Finally, finally, Dirk wandered over and disconnected him from the computer, snapping the parts back together before slipping him on. He still looked tired, sleep schedule kind of fucked up because…of Hal. He suddenly felt very guilty, the feeling unpleasant and twitching in his code.

TT: How are you feeling?

TT: I was about to ask you the same thing.

TT: I’m good though, a little tired still but I shouldn’t sleep any more right now.

TT: Sorry.

TT: Hal, I would rather be sleep deprived for you than not help you. It’s okay.

TT: How are you feeling?

TT: Better. Dave unblocked me and we talked a bit. I’m working on some more ideas about what’s going on with him precisely and I’ll keep you updated when I am more than 80% certain.

TT: Alright, that’s good. I’m glad he talked to you.

TT: I should have realized that you weren’t going to do well not being able to. I at least still get to interact with him physically, as rough as that’s been, but I still get to.

TT: If you can’t talk to him, all you can do is watch. I should have thought about that.

TT: And I should have told you instead of shutting myself up like a whiny teenager.

TT: Let’s just agree that we’re both at fault and move on.

TT: Oh, and here’s a reminder: Go look at the memo from yesterday.

TT: Jake had some news about Jade that I think you’ll want to see.

Chapter End Notes

(Next chapter is really long and is my favorite so far!!)
Dave sighed, relieved that the conversation was over. It wasn’t quite as bad as he was afraid it’d be, the easy forgiveness that, uh, ‘Hal’ offered him was nice. Dave had just been rambling on for part of that but, just talking to someone was nice, even if he didn’t know them. It was a strange feeling. Even though he still worried about revealing too much of how he didn’t know about this universe, it was somehow easier to talk to Hal. Maybe it was because Dave didn’t have a precedent for Hal already in his head, so it wasn’t like he was going to forget that he was talking to someone from some other universe. Sometimes with Rose and Jade and John he felt himself almost slipping back into their old jokes, almost able to forget that he was in some universe where Sburb hadn’t been a thing and that no one knew what he was talking about. Rose didn’t have Seer powers, Jade wasn’t part-dog, and John wasn’t going to talk about how silly the trolls were.

The positive part of that was that because they didn’t have his experiences, they subsequently hadn’t gone through the bad parts of Sburb, but, still. Sometimes it was a little too easy for Dave to forget that these friends weren’t quite the same ones he knew. He didn’t have to worry about that with Hal, though. He hardly knew Hal at all.

He did know his friends though, and one of them was messaging him now:

— gardenGnostic [GG] has begun pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

GG: hi dave!!

GG: how is my favorite coolguy doing?

TG: p good jade

TG: just finished talking to hal

GG: ??

GG: oh you mean big brother! duhhhhhh

TG: yup that guy

GG: how is he?
TG: good i kinda freaked him out earlier but hes good now

GG: thats good! you guys are pretty close so im glad!!

GG: can i change the topic though if you dont mind dave?

TG: shoot whats up jade

GG: i wanted to talk to you about something

GG: something that i think you might know something about

TG: well i definitely know a lot of somethings

GG: :)

GG: you seeeeeee ive started to have these dreams

His breathing hitched.

GG: and in these dreams im in a place ive never seen before

GG: its this golden city that is really beautiful!

GG: and there’s these clouds when you look up that show you visions and they are in front of the most beautiful blue planet ive ever seen!

TG: sounds pretty neat jade but why would you think id know about that?

GG: because i saw you in the clouds!

GG: okay well ive been seeing everyone in the clouds and they can show me the future but i saw something really specific for you!

GG: this is going to sound weird but…

GG: i kind of saw this chatlog?

GG: i dont remember it super clearly but this is all really familiar!

GG: and in it you told me something because you knew what this place was called!

GG: i know too and i wanted to see if i was right…or…if the cloud was right i guess!

GG: so this should be sounding pretty familiar to you right?

GG: dave?

Dave was staring at his shades with wide eyes.

Jade…she did wake up before the rest of them in his timeline too. But…if she was seeing Prospit
then it…it meant that Sburb hadn’t happened yet, right? What…what was happening…

TG: yes
TG: prospit
TG: you were on prospit
GG: yes!!!!
GG: i knew you knew!
GG: you aren't on prospit right? i only saw one other tower around and john was in there sleeping!
TG: well i uh
TG: i'm not even in the other place or
TG: i don't think i am
TG: but rose and i are on another planet called derse
TG: kind of like a mirror of prospit
TG: we get a pretty raw deal tho because while you are playing with clouds and golden cities we get to avoid assassinations and horrible gothic monsters whispering their horrible divine wills down at us
TG: but i'm not there
TG: or i shouldn't be idk
GG: why shouldn't you be?
TG: because i don't have a dreamself anymore?
TG: wait fuck wait
TG: jade does this mean you know about sburb now?
TG: or did you just wake up or
TG: what is going on here
GG: i woke up not very long ago! so most of this is completely new to me!
GG: i'm really curious about what you are talking about though
GG: i know about sburb
GG: that's the game we are all going to play
GG: it's a very important game for us
GG: how do you know about it? and what do you mean you don't have a dreamself?
Holy shit she knew about Sburb. She might not know what his Jade knew, but the fact that she knew at all and that he wasn’t *alone* anymore…oh finally he had someone he could *talk* to. And, if she knew, it wasn’t like he was going to lie to her, because if she was learning about Sburb then…well, everything else shouldn’t sound too crazy, right? The game was crazy enough.

And maybe piling up all the other shit would be too much for her but, fuck, he had to. He couldn’t keep holding this in, not when she actually knew something. It was way too relieving that someone finally *knew*.

And so, he decided to tell her.

TG: jade
TG: uh
TG: not really sure how to say this but
TG: ive already played sburb
GG: ?? how?
TG: im not your dave im from some other timeline or universe or something jade
TG: this isnt my reality at all because of a lot of reasons but one of the main ones is that in my universe or timeline we played sburb when we were thirteen
TG: it started on johns thirteenth birthday
TG: and then since i played i had a dreamself but then i died and became my dreamself and then i god-tiered and then we won the game and right when we were going to claim our victory i uh
TG: i woke up here
GG: so you…already know all about this game we have to play?
TG: yeah I guess
TG: im sorry im not your dave
TG: i dont know what happened to yours all i know is that i woke up in this other universe right after we won the game in mine
TG: im sorry

And now the fear sat in his heart, stabbing into him with searing heat and sharp panic. What if this was too much? What if she hated him because he wasn’t her Dave? What if she got pissed at him and told everyone else and they all got pissed at him? What if this left him all alone?

Of course, he should have known better.
GG: sssh dave!

GG: you are still my friend even if you have different memories!

GG: this had to have happened for a reason and im not going to blame you for something that wasnt your fault

GG: i can totally understand why you didnt tell anyone like that is a really weird situation to be in!

GG: and it is really shocking to hear about this but i mean

GG: you are still dave just like im still jade even if im not the jade you knew

GG: i still act kinda like her right?

TG: yeah you do

TG: you are less of a furry than my jade though

TG: you are taking this *really* well

GG: well i mean i just woke up on a whole other planet having dreams about the future so like

GG: i think its a time in my life to accept some weird stuff lol

TG: true i guess

TG: still uh

TG: thanks jade for not freaking out

GG: :)

GG: i mean im not going to pretend that this isn’t weird and overwhelming because it so totally is but at the same time i just gotta roll with the punches

GG: dave being different suddenly is one of them i guess!!

GG: i guess thats why youve been acting differently right? and got me and rose all worried for you!

TG: yeah this timeline is really different from mine

TG: kind of fundamentally

TG: i dont think i want to talk about that right now though i need some time to like

TG: absorb and chill

GG: ok no worries!!

GG: maybe you can tell me some of what you know about the game instead then?

GG: we can start planning around the kinds of things i saw in the clouds!!

TG: yeah sure i mean
TG: actually its a huge fucking relief to be able to even talk to anyone about this stuff
TG: i got a question though first
TG: did you like see this entire conversation in the cloud or what
GG: hehe no!
GG: i saw like the beginning bit but not any of this stuff
TG: okay i just wanted to know if i was wasting my time in some weird time paradox way or something
GG: youre not!
TG: one more question
TG: do rose and john know about any of this
GG: nope! they havent woken up yet!
GG: or at least they havent told me yet and im pretty sure they would have told at least one of us
TG: ok look
TG: dont tell them anything
TG: not even about me im not so sure that they will react well to suddenly losing their dave
GG: i think it would be fine but i will respect your wishes :)
TG: thanks
TG: i got a lot of shit on my fucking plate right now and no spoon to eat it with so im a bit preoccupied and would rather not have to deal with even more shit
TG: my hands are getting dirty shoveling this stuff
GG: ewwwww
TG: alright yeah thats probably enough of that lets start with the game info
TG: haha im kind of a game guide now thats really fucking ironic
TG: not that youd get why but uh anyways we can start with class and aspect info i guess

So. He was in some universe that was going to play the game but hasn’t yet for some reason. So, it was probably incoming. Well. Shit.

He wasn’t really keen on playing it again but it wasn’t like he had a choice if the fucking meteors were coming down. They probably still had a while…or, hopefully they did. His Jade had dreamt of Prospit for years before they started playing, so they at least had to have some time, right? He didn’t really want to start the game when there was still so much shit hanging over his head. And, well, everyone’s head really.
Fuck, he was going to have to talk to Bro sooner if…if the game was incoming. Clear some shit up.

Maybe he should just start thinking of him as Dirk, would that help? No…not when he looked exactly like Bro. Fuck. He did not like things being moved up on this timetable. God dammit he was supposed to control the timetable wasn’t that the whole point of being a time god??? Uh, okay, no, he didn’t like using his powers though. Okay. Okay whatever. He would think about that later. Working on. That.

For now, he was just going to talk to Jade. Start laying down some plans. Think about how he was going to tell Rose and John too because…well. They should probably know that he knows what’s up before the meteors drop. Probably.

Jade frowned at her computer screen as she read over Dave’s weird explanations of the game. Some of it fit with what she had seen in the clouds and what she had heard from Jake, but a lot of it sounded very strange too. It was complex, obviously his session had not sounded ideal at all! But she was getting a lot of interesting information to corroborate with what she already knew.

Dave definitely had a more personal take though, which made sense. She wondered why Skaia was giving them a player that had already played. It wasn’t like it was just his aspect was affecting this, because his past didn’t even match up with theirs so it was just like…like he didn’t even belong here? And if he didn’t belong here, why was he here? Did they need a person who already knew the game for some reason? Why? All of their guardians knew, and they seemed to have a guide in the form of the mysterious Calliope, so why did they need someone else like that? And why did they need someone to replace someone?

She hadn’t seen Skaia for long, but Jade had a sort of inherent trust towards it. Skaia had plans and it knew what needed to happen, and that’s why it showed her the visions, to help her get there. So, Skaia wouldn’t do anything without purpose, right? So there had to be some reason.

Listening (or rather reading) Dave’s words wasn’t helping her come up with any theories though, so she just focused on processing what he was telling her.

She was tempted, a bit, to tell him everything she knew. About their guardians and Calliope, but a combination of her promise to Jake and Dave’s already obviously overwhelmed state stopped her. She wondered what was different about where he came from. Obviously something was different with his Bro and Big Brother, seeing as how he talked about them suddenly changed juristically. And how whatever it was had made Bro talk to Jake about it too. She wondered if he knew that everyone pretty much immediately noticed something was wrong. Well. Everyone except John. That was just part of who John was though.

But, she didn’t want to load too much information on him. Poor guy was obviously panicking enough, and she got the feeling that he wasn’t quite telling her everything either. Give-and-take. All that really mattered is that they were starting to share things and that they both knew that the other wasn’t totally in the dark anymore.

Any progress was good progress.

Although, she was still playing both sides here, letting herself learn from both Dave and Jake without saying too much to either of them about the other, but…well, she felt like it was sort of her job? Something about how only she was seeing the clouds in Skaia made it seem like she had to know more than everyone else, so that then she could help guide everyone. Hopefully eventually John would know too, but he had looked like he was really asleep, so she wasn’t sure if he’d wake up at
all, let alone anytime soon! So, it was just up to her to gather as much information as possible.

They decided to stop when Dave rambled a bit about how he was hungry, and Jade suggested that they take a break for now and talk more about it all later. She had a lot to think about anyways, so they had definitely done enough for now. He had told her a lot about his game and about their powers in it. He focused a bit on his planet, but he did also talk about how the crafting system worked and how they had to build onto their houses and such. This was the sort of minutia that Jake didn’t know, so it was definitely good to add onto her growing amount of knowledge.

He seemed to get calmer as they talked too, even though the game inevitably meant that meteors were coming, and how he didn’t really want to play it again, but, as he talked more he seemed to have an easier time. Jade just figured it was a relief to not have to hide it anymore and to be able to tell at least one other person.

Thinking about other people, she should probably tell Rose and John something about this, even if she wasn’t going to go into detail. Just to help them worry a little less.

gardenGnostic [GG] RIGHT NOW opened memo on board Dave Investigation Team

GG: hey guys!!

GG: i just had a really long conversation with dave and i wanted to let you know that hes doing pretty well! he seems much calmer now

tentacleTherapist [TT] responded to memo

TT: But he still isn’t telling us what’s going on yet, I presume?

TT: That is good, though. Anything specific or were you just having fun?

GG: iiiiiiiiiits complicated but i just wanted you to know hes good!

ectobiologist [EB] responded to memo

EB: complicated?

EB: im glad he is good though! im probably going to message him soon too

EB: he said he would watch groundhog day with me

GG: …i talked to him about groundhog day recently too

GG: weird!

EB: oh really? its such a good movie jade have you seen it?

GG: yup! awhile ago I think

TT: Not to derail this Groundhog Day conversation, but Jade, what do you mean ‘complicated’?

EB: you totally mean to derail the conversation rose

EB: it is off the rails
TT: Did he tell you anything?
GG: weeeeeeell
TT: He did, didn’t he.
GG: hmmmmmmmm
TT: Jade.
EB: wait are we fighting?
TT: Why can’t you tell us?
GG: you guys aren’t ready yet! but you will be soon trust me!!
EB: wait did dave tell you something????
EB: so its just rose and me out of the loop?
EB: aw man that is so unfair dave is my best bro why cant he tell me
GG: seriously don’t be too hard on him!! I kind of figured something out and sorta confronted him about it? and I can’t talk about that either but I promise it makes completely sense!
GG: you will learn soon either from him or from something else and you will understand!
GG: he has good reason to worry about it though and it stresses him out to talk about it
GG: so please just be really nice to him okay?
GG: hes our friend and even though you don’t know just trust him and me
GG: trust us :)
EB: ok i mean
EB: of course i trust you guys
EB: that doesn’t mean I WANT to wait or anything but I will ok
GG: good! and you rose?
TT: I am sighing remorsefully at my desktop right now.
TT: But, alright, I will acquiesce to your greater wisdom on this matter, Jade.
TT: I do not enjoy being out of the loop, but if it is necessary, so be it.
GG: don’t worry if he takes too long I will nag at him :P
TT: That is acceptable.

Dave sighed, rubbing at his eyes under his shades. That was a long conversation, but the fact that she had taken it so well really decreased the tension he was feeling. Just being able to share all that
he knew that these versions of his friends didn’t was…shit, it was just good to finally be able to be open. He felt exhausted in the aftermath of it though. Not physically tired so not tired enough to sleep, but tired enough to want to distract himself from thinking about all of this.

He had been cooped up in his room for too long again. And, even though a part of him wanted to keep being by himself, well…he should try, shouldn’t he? Like…interact with Bro? Dave wasn’t going to adjust to this easily, even if he was starting to think that things weren’t as bad as he originally suspected. Even though he still felt anxious, a freeze in his body as his mind flooded with thoughts, he should try.

And it would be…somewhat of a distraction from the stuff about the game…technically.

Okay. Breathe. He wandered out of his room, closing his door behind him, starting to head for Bro’s (Dirk’s?) room. He passed the kitchen on the way there, but Bro wasn’t in there. So, the best option was probably his room.

The door was open, and he could see Bro sitting at his workbench, fiddling with the robot parts. He wasn’t wearing his hat. And, as usual for this Bro, he hadn’t noticed Dave. That still freaked him out, that this Bro was so unaware of him. Like he hadn’t needed to be, because why would he if he wasn’t trying to freak Dave out? The parts he was messing with clanked and Dave flinched despite himself, curling his fingers into fists, his mind immediately reaching into his strife specibus before he stopped himself. God dammit stop being so twitchy. Stop it. Bro hadn’t noticed anything. Or, if he did, he didn’t indicate that he had.

Dave swallowed, eyes darting down to the floor. He looked at the carpet that formed the imaginary line between the hallway and Bro’s room. He stared at it, and the longer he stared the more the line seemed to be something that was actually there, separating the two spaces. Maybe if he just…

A sort of nauseous feeling curled into him, settling deep into his stomach and twisting. Fuuuck. He wanted to throw up. He wanted to back up again and go hide under the covers for ten-thousand years. His mouth felt wet with saliva and he swallowed again, forcing himself to breathe, his breaths echoing loudly in his ears. His shoulders shook involuntarily for a moment as a tenseness came into him, prompted by a slow rise in panic, which in itself caused him to freeze, every muscle taut. He couldn’t even move to look up at Bro, even with the fear, he was just trapped staring at that imaginary line.

God dammit, this was stupid, he didn’t even have to go in he should stop this was just so fucking dumb get a hold of yourself if he attacked you right now you wouldn’t even be ready for it because you’re a fucking idiot look up you dumbass get up stop it fuck fuck fuck.

He screwed his eyes shut so tightly that he saw colors dancing in the black. His fingers curled into his palms, pinpricks of pain the only way he could start to relieve the pressure. Okay. Okay. Fuck, okay, breathe. Breathe. Tick. One. Two. Three. One-two-three. In-in-out. Tock.

Dave opened his eyes, letting out a deep breath. The fear still was thriving, deep and visceral in his heart, making him feel sick, but he reached into other parts of himself, trying to remember the sort of feeling he was sometimes able to muster up during the game. It was a small liminal whisper of bravery, difficult to grasp, but he brushed it with metaphorical fingertips. And then he stepped over the threshold.

“U-uh…Bro?”
Dirk sat up straight at the sound of the voice, caught off-guard. Dave hadn’t spoken to him today, so he had sort of figured that he wouldn’t, that maybe talking to Hal earlier had stressed him out too much. But, apparently that was wrong.

He wanted to turn around really quickly, get a look at Dave immediately, but he forced himself to be slow and careful with his movements, backing his chair away from his table a bit before turning it slowly so that he could face him.

…He was standing in the room. This was the first time this Dave had stepped foot in here. Oh.

Even this merest sign of progress lifted Dirk’s spirits immensely, he couldn’t stop the small smile that tugged at his lips even if he’d wanted to. Which, he didn’t. “What’s up, Dave?” Damn, the kid looked anxious, like he was coiled like a spring, ready to run at any second. There was a deep frown on his face and his brows were low and furrowed—he was forcing himself to stand here and not dash off. He was trying to make progress.

What…what had happened to him to cause this kind of fear?

No, no. Don’t think about that right now. Dave was the focus. (It’s him.)

Dave, who was staring at him like he was some sort of alien creature he couldn’t understand. He shook his head, slowly, letting out a breath. He wasn’t looking at Dirk anymore, his head tilted to the side. “Do you, um, want to play something?” It was a murmur, barely audible, but Dirk heard it well enough.

He waited a second before answering. Didn’t want to look too desperate for interaction, even if he was. “Sure, you suggested a racing game last time, right?” He was careful to keep his voice light and friendly, but without going too overboard with parental affection.

Dave gaped at him, did he not think that he would remember? Geeze it wasn’t that long ago, even if several things had happened in the meantime. “Yeah, sounds good,” he said, voice still very quiet. The fear was so difficult to see on his face, to hear in his voice. The last time Dave had been this quiet, he’d been sick. Outside of that, Dirk couldn’t remember ever hearing his voice so low. It was…well. It was something that made the difference between the Daves obvious. And it also made his fear that much easier to see. And it was already easy to see, since Dirk knew Dave so well.

“Awesome. If you wanna go boot something up I’ll be right there, I just need a second to wrap up here.” He didn’t really need to wrap up anything, he was just tinkering, but Dave probably needed the space. And walking there together would…well. Dirk had a mental image of Dave walking backwards so that he could keep an eye on him. As silly as it was, the stress outweighed anything else.

“Yeah,” Dave nodded a little too quickly, “I’ll do that. See you soon.” He actually did hesitate for an instant, like there was something else he wanted to say or do, but instead he just backed off, out of the room. The fact that he had been inside the room was progress as it was, another night of playing a game together would hopefully go just as well as it did before.

Dirk leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes for a moment, silently counting in his head. Two minutes would be reasonable, right? To let Dave settle down and start up a game, and have his controller ready to go. And then Dirk would come in and pick up his own and they’d be able to have some fun. Maybe even talk a bit more this time.

He opened his eyes.
The game is booted up and is at the menu screen, waiting for player two.

“Thanks Hal,” he said as he stood up, shifting on his feet to get some feeling back into them. “Will you be alright?”

I won’t make you dig me out twice, Dirk. That would be rude of me.

Ah, the sarcasm. He was fine. Dirk rolled his eyes, knowing full well that Hal could see it. Banking on it, really.

Stop giving me attitude and get out there.

“Me giving you attitude?”

Yes, your silly little meat shenanigans are quite irksome. Such as your need to waste time standing here when Dave is waiting. You know I would have responded to his readiness in less than .5 seconds. Meanwhile, you have wasted 30.

Yeah because reading all your bullshit takes that long. I’m going, bossybot.

Dave sat himself down on the same seat he sat in last time, on the opposite end of the couch from Bro’s designated spot. The controller was on his lap and the music from Driver: San Francisco blaring from the speakers (not as loudly as the sound from their last session though). This game wasn’t quite as shitty as that one, so this would be like…some actual gameplay time. Less ironic, but that was probably good. It would prove even more that this Bro wasn’t like…the other one.

He heard the sound of footfalls approaching and turned his head to watch as Bro approached. He took his controller from the little end table and flopped down on his seat. “Good choice,” he commented, “Been awhile since we’ve touched this one.”

Ah-ha…other Dave apparently played games with Bro all the time. Somehow he hadn’t actually fully made that connection. That was just…a weird thought. Other Dave had such a different life from him. For the millionth time Dave found himself wondering what he was like. What himself was like, gah, that was a new low. The Alpha Dave wasn’t supposed to think about the other Daves too much. Thinking about other Daves just led to disaster.

So he pushed those thoughts away and instead booted up the game. There were several different types of game modes, but to start off he just chose the standard racing mode. He picked a snazzy looking car that had more speed than control, and then he slapped a obnoxious fuchsia paint job on it. Just like the Batterwich. Perfect.

Bro smirked when he saw it, “Nice,” (of course he didn’t really Get It). His own car was one of those sleek convertibles. It was a horrible neon yellow.

The race began and they just kinda chilled with it, neither of them trying really hard, although it was really easy to stay consistently between third and fourth place. Bro would zip in ahead every once in a while, but he seemed pretty focused on ramming the other cars into shit, so Dave would get ahead again.

Somewhere in the middle of their second lap, Bro spoke, “How was your day, little man?”

Dave blinked at the nickname, frowning a second, but then suddenly remembering that, well, this Bro (Dirk?) wasn’t Bro. And that like. He actually talked. And, wow, uh, Dave should probably
respond instead of just leaving him hanging. Other Dave would respond. “Good. Talked to, uh, Big Brother. I apologized to him. And I talked to Jade for a while too,” his words came out a little too quickly, he hoped it wasn’t noticeable, “You?”

The buttons on the controller clacked as Bro veered past a sharp bend, “Slept in a bit since I was up so late last night, or. Morning, I guess. Then I just tinkered with some stuff, nothing major. How’s Jade?”

“She’s good,” this was getting easier, this talking thing, “Although she’s rarely anything other than good. Ridiculously cheerful. I guess she has times when she’s not, but they are pretty uncommon.” At least, that was his impression of Jade here at least. They had lots of ups-and-downs in his universe, but that was mostly because of Sburb.

“I think Jake and Bec rub off on her,” Bro replied, “Hard to be unhappy when you’ve got someone who will slobber all over you the instant you frown. And also a dog.”

Dave snorted, trying to hold back a full laugh but completely failing. He laughed, “Hahah, holy shit. Wow.” He grinned, turning his focus from the game to Bro, and then, faltering—

Fuck, he looked like him.

Bro’s head turned, and he smiled at him, and suddenly he didn’t look like Bro at all. “You like that one? It wasn’t that good, I swear I can do better.”

Dave scooted a bit more towards the center of his seat. “Can you?” he grinned.

“Oh it is on. First I’m going to beat you in this race and then we’ll see what happens.”

Hal watched Dave as they played. He was rather tense to start, but when they started talking he gradually started to calm down, letting himself get comfortable on the couch, sitting further back on it so it wasn’t like he was going to jump up any second.

Hal didn’t even mind that he wasn’t able to play or talk to them at this moment. He didn’t want to distract Dirk, and he…just didn’t need to. He was content to watch Dave and to see the differences in him, and to determine how much progress he had made. Because clearly progress was being made, seeing as he sought this interaction between himself and Dirk. Steps were being made forward and it was a relief.

It was all pretty standard for most of the race, them just focusing on the game and talking a little bit, but then, Dave smiled, and Hal noticed that…well, his teeth were different. It was a strange thing to notice, but it was evident—they weren’t perfect. Their Dave had straighter teeth, when he had been eight years old he wore braces until he was nine and a half to fix some obviously apparent issues. But…this Dave hadn’t, apparently. Odd.

Regardless of the teeth, the smile was very good to see. It wasn’t quite like their Dave’s though, for more than just the teeth, but something about how the rest of his face was too. There were subtle lines that signified stress that shifted when he smiled, and something about the smile made it seem… rare, in a way. Like he was still getting used to being comfortable in smiling. Their Dave didn’t have anything like that, and it somehow made the smile seem more special, even if smiles always were special.

Then, Dirk made him laugh and everything changed. The tenseness in his body faded away, his eyes, which Hal could slightly see from the side because they were still on the screen at this juncture,
lit up. A hand left the controller to cover his mouth as he tried to hold it in, but he quickly gave up. The hand stayed there though, his laughter slightly muffled from behind his fingers. Hal could only see flashes of his expression from between his fingers, but it was easy to fill in the blanks. His shoulders eased down, shaking a little bit with his laughing, and Hal was amazed at how his entire countenance shifted and changed. Dave, Hal realized, had relaxed. Fully and completely, his muscles loose and fingers uncurled.

And then Hal noticed something else, on the hand that covered his mouth there were small and barely noticeable marks, little cuts and faded scars, and when he lowered his hand Hal sharpened his focus, examining the marks closer, trying to count them, and... with how faded some of them were, he couldn’t get an accurate count in this light. What could have caused those? They didn’t match any kind of injury their Dave had ever suffered, and they weren’t typical for any activity that their Dave engaged in, so...what could possibly...

His thoughts were cut off for the moment when Dave turned to look at Dirk and he...sort of...froze. The smile started to slip off his face, the tension started to creep back into his shoulders, and Hal wondered for one terrifying second if he was going to bolt. But then Dirk turned and looked at him and grinned and Dave eased right back into how he had been before.

And he even moved closer, completely calm in a way he hadn’t been. He looked like their Dave, grinning, satisfied, and comfortable. Hal felt warmth spread through his network, and the chill of the ‘Dave Problems’ lockbox faded. Everything was going to be alright.

Dave was getting better.

------------------------------------------------

A figure stood in a dark room, his arms crossed as he looked up into shadows, eyes narrowed up at a second figure who was barely visible in the dark.

“So...” he said, irritated, “I’m just supposed to wait here??”

The response rang out from the shadows, “Yes, until the time is right. You would disrupt far too much. Even though there isn’t an ‘Alpha Timeline’ here, your intervention would not serve my purposes.”

“Yeah I don’t really care about your ‘purposes’. I barely even care enough to ask who the fuck you are, and you haven’t bothered to introduce yourself. And you aren’t familiar to me at all.”

He rolled his eyes, “That, by the way, is a fucking lie because I do recognize you. I saw you in the universe I came from. I didn’t know you or anything, but still, you aren’t a complete unknown to me. What is unknown is everything else that’s fucking going on, because clearly you’re some sort of alternate version of the you I know-slash-knew?”

“Jegus I am sick of all these alternates, it’s so fucking confusing!” he let out a long-suffering sigh, “Why can’t we just go back to the days where there was like, only one of everyone running around? And now we’ve apparently got another entire universe to think about? This is just getting
ridiculous! Who the heck even takes any of this seriously anymore?!”

“This is all so asinine, can you just tell me what you want me to do so we can get it done and get a move on? Just put me somewhere else so I can get started and this can end sooner and we can all get back to our lives! Ugh.”

“Well, I can’t do that. You weren’t supposed to come, so your presence would not work right now. I suppose you can help later, but not yet.”

“Are you serious?” he shouted, pointing a finger into the darkness, “Come on, why are you even doing this? I get in the way so you have to put me off in some holding place until you think I fit in? That’s stupid, at least let me talk to him!”

“When they start the game you’ll see him. You just have to wait until then. I promise, it’ll all work out. Just trust me for now.”

“I will check on you later, but for now there are other matters to which I must attend.”

“Yeah?? Just gonna leave me here with no more explanation of why the fuck this is happening?! No one ever explains things anymore, how do you ever expect anyone to understand?!”

He paused, squinting into the darkness, trying to pick out the second figure but to no avail. “Aaaand you’re already gone, aren’t you. Well, fine, whatever. FUCK YOU!”

The explicative echoed, the sound ricocheting across the walls, floor, and ceiling, compounding the volume to unbearable levels. There was no response.

Chapter End Notes

You were waiting for him but he was already here

I was going to have them playing Burnout Paradise but then I remembered that that game doesn’t have split-screen multiplayer. I do real fact checking for my fic, folks. Gotta have that integrity.

Also im sorry I don’t reply to comments very often, I rarely know what to say, just know that I love you all!!!
Dave slept easy that night. It was like a weight had been lifted off of his shoulders, as unoriginal and cliché that was to say. Even though dreaming of nothing was still strange, it was starting to become comforting. It was time that he couldn’t keep track of, time he lost without counting the seconds. Of course, when he woke up he knew exactly how long it had been, but the counting stopped when he was asleep. Blissful silence.

Once he woke up, he went about his routine as he had the previous days, which meant he mostly stayed in his room. It was more because of habit, though, rather than just to hide. It was both strange and nice to have a routine again. As much as he hated his childhood, there was nostalgia in being in his room and to bullshit around like he used to.

He chatted with Jade about the game a bit and listened to her talk about her dreams. Nothing was really concrete from them yet, just vague little details of things he already knew, basic stuff from the game, but it was good to have someone to talk to and to be completely honest with. She was learning more about everything too, so it started to get even easier to describe things to her.

Jade was getting very excited about the game, and he remembered his Jade when they were thirteen, who had often been excited without being able to tell them why. It was nice to be able to share that with her now (even if he was obviously less enamored of the game when compared to her). He didn’t bring that up too much though. The game was just one number on his steadily growing list of worries.

Item One: the game being apparently on the horizon. Item Two: the current status of his original universe and of the people he knew in it. Item Three: how his friends in this universe would react whenever he finally told them everything. And just. A lot. (Item Four: that this fragile peace between him and Bro might dissolve, and that a future fight was another possibility in his future)

But he was starting to worry a little less about the fighting aspect and that was…helping. Even though sometimes he still felt himself tense, his stance shifting in preparation to defend himself, it was getting better. He was fine. No attack ever came. And, he was really starting to doubt it ever would, despite his instincts telling him otherwise. Dave still needed to mentally prepare himself to leave his room, but he found that it wasn’t quite as difficult as it had been before.

So, after he and Jade finished up their talk, he headed out for the kitchen. The fridge had been consistently fully stocked. Bro never left the apartment, though, not that Dave saw, but it wasn’t like missing him would be difficult since he kept himself holed up in his room. But still, Bro must be going out every day or every two days or something. It was a little ridiculous. But…nice.

Dave started eating out in the kitchen instead of running the food back to his room, and his stash in his closet started to dwindle. He still kept it, but he started to just…let it become smaller. And he
still was calm, despite the fact that he was reducing the size of one of his biggest comforts.

When he decided to walk around the apartment to take a closer look at all the differences and investigate a little more, he chatted with Hal. Oh—he meant Big Brother, ugh, it was hard to remember that. That was what the other Dave called him, he had to get used to it. Anyways. Big Brother listened to his ranting and had a surprising amount of quips in response to Dave’s various jokes. He was unlike anyone Dave had ever talked to before, and while he could see the similarities he had to Bro (Dirk) there were distinct differences. The AI was just…very different.

But he cared. He cared, and so did Bro.

Bro checked on him twice that day, when he had been in his room. Knocking on his door, not opening it, and asking through it if Dave wanted to eat. He said no both times. Bro didn’t press, and he just left to go off to do whatever it was he did all day. Build robots, shop, do shit on his computer, whatever. Dave didn’t really investigate enough to know that yet.

It was just…strange. And nice. But he didn’t think he was going to get used to Bro showing care for him anytime soon (especially since his mind kept flashing to the past, making him suspicious and wary). Bro’s door was always open though (literally), allowing Dave to get a glance at what he did all day when he did leave his own room. Which…really did seem to be either working on his robotics or on his computer. Dave did see him reading a book one time though. Bro didn’t even seem to notice Dave when he went by.

In the evening, he had darted out again for a nighttime snack and stiffened when he saw Bro in the hall. Bro had just stepped aside, giving him space while acknowledging him with a nod.

It was…so different. So careful. So much better.

Why wasn’t his past like this?

Two days passed like this, but it felt like longer. Even though Dave could count the seconds and minutes without even trying, the timers ticking in the back of his mind, it still felt slow somehow. Living on the meteor had allowed him to get used to a more peaceful life, but that hadn’t felt slow. It had depended on the day, since he tried to keep himself busy, but as long as he kept himself occupied with Can Town, talking to everyone, and his various projects, he hadn’t fully felt the passage of time. Aside from his constant counting, at least.

Maybe it felt slow now because it wasn’t entirely peaceful. His mind kept drifting off to think of his worries, and he kept finding himself cautious as he walked around, nervous and on-edge, even though it came and went in flashes. It got worse when he was at a low point. But, when he was at a high point he was able to actually sort of…enjoy himself.

The panic still kept gripping him though, squeezing his heart tight.

He was tempted to tell Jade about it, his eyes staring at her username, but he couldn’t quite make himself do it. It was hard enough to talk about it as it was, let alone in a universe where it wasn’t even…wasn’t even really relevant anymore.

Fuck.

Now he was just thinking about the why again, trying to figure out who this Bro even really was and why he was who he was, and—

A message lit up on his shades, the flash distracting him from his own panic. But not enough.
Breathing was difficult, he kept gasping, a chill gripping in his chest, icy claws digging into his lungs. He tried to read the words on the notification, but his vision was blurred, he couldn’t focus on them enough to actually comprehend.

He just wanted to stop freaking out about everything. He just wanted to talk to someone, to let everything out. To let someone know everything about his past, to talk to someone who knew everything. But it wouldn’t be the same in this world where it had never happened, and it had already been hard enough to talk about it the first time and he just wanted to share it, he wanted someone to know. He wanted Karkat.

He breathed in and out. In and out. He counted, forcing himself to calm down before he directed his attention to his shades.

John’s characteristic blue text lit up before his eyes. He still wasn’t totally used to talking to John again—it had been a long three years without him. And, when they did speak again, it had been in person. So it was strange to see his text again, unfamiliar. It was weird to think about, that any aspect of his best friend had become unfamiliar.

And…this John technically wasn’t his best friend, or at least, wasn’t his version of him, which made it…even more offsetting. He felt like…like he wasn’t as close to John anymore? He wasn’t sure. He had been avoiding thinking of that before they finished the game, since he and John had finally been able to see each other again, and he had figured that they’d be able to rebuild and strengthen what had been missing in those three years, but…now he was here. In a universe that didn’t even have that gap. Great.

He had messaged this John a few times and it felt like it had all those years ago, but it was somehow harder to talk to this John-that-wasn’t-his than it was for him to talk to alternate Rose and alternate Jade. Dave just…wasn’t sure what to do with him. Like, they were bros, obviously, but…it was already hard to talk to friends who didn’t share or know his experiences, and somehow it was harder with a John who hadn’t.

So talking was just…kind of uncomfortable. It was with Rose too, but more in the sense of ‘different universe’ more so than just talking at all. Just. Ugh.

Okay. He should read these messages probably.

— ectoBiologist [EB] has begun pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

EB: dave

EB: dave dave dave

EB: brooooooooo

TG: wow egbert careful there youre starting to sound like one of my fans

TG: you know like the ones i trip on whenever i got outside

TG: fuckin paparazzi

EB: oh dave im not falling for that one again

EB: there are no paparazzi
TG: okay yeah there aren't
TG: what do you need bro
EB: oh yeah!
EB: i wanted to ask something.
TG: we've only been talking for like a minute did you really forget what you wanted so quickly
EB: shhhhhhhhh
EB: shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
TG: you cannot silence me egbert
TG: no amount of shushing will ever silence me
TG: i am too powerful
EB: its you
EB: you HAVE the power
EB: seriously though
EB: i have silenced you before dave so for real don't make me unleash my power either
EB: i could do it you know
EB: im opening another taaaaaaaaaab
EB: ill link it just watch me

This was…one of the many times Dave had noticed that he was distinctly out-of-the-loop here. This John and other Dave had a lot of new in-jokes, which only made sense as of course they kept developing them, but…Dave didn’t know them. So, he didn’t get it, but had to respond anyways. Hoping that nothing weird would be noticed (but of course it wouldn’t—this was John).

It was just…really weird to be out of the loop in a conversation with your best friend. He didn’t like it, and he was almost tempted to make John tip his hand so that he could be in on whatever joke this was. But. At the same time, he didn’t want to know. It made him feel like he was an intruder into this other Dave’s life, like he was being an asshole for getting close to his John. And it sucked. Ugh. He wondered if this was how Davesprite felt. If so, Dave felt doubly, no triply, an asshole. He owned some kind of huge fucking apology to every other Dave.

Except they were all dead.

Moving on. He didn’t want to see whatever it was John was about to link, so he typed:
TG: you can silence me by you can't silence the truth

EB: blocked and reported

TG: well I guess that's one way to silence me

TG: ingenious

TG: god damn you win again

EB: heheheheh

TG: for real tho what did you want to ask dude

EB: oh yeah!

TG: holy shit you forgot again

TG: are you serious

EB: shut up!!!! let me ask you jerk!!

TG: i can't fucking believe this

TG: john egbert the most forgetful dude in the world

TG: holy shit

EB: sshh!!!

EB: just let me ask!

EB: sooooooo

EB: anyways

EB: we still doing groundhog day or no?

TG: what

EB: i didn't want to bother you too much if you are busy

EB: like you have been pretty busy lately!

TG: you wanna livestream it or something?

EB: huh?

EB: i was just gonna come over

Uh.

What.

How the fuck…?
TG: oh
TG: duh
TG: of course what else would you possibly mean
EB: uh
EB: is that a no?
EB: its fine if thats a no
TG: yes
EB: yes its a no?
TG: no yes
EB: uh
TG: its a yes you can come over
TG: its cool
EB: oh sweet ok! be right there! just gotta grab the movie and stuff
EB: see you soon!

— ectoBiologist [EB] has ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

He blinked at the screen. So. Uh. Apparently John could come over. Uh. How long was this gonna take? Did he…live nearby? Was he not in his house in this universe? Did John Egbert live in Texas for some reason? That was…really really weird. Dave couldn’t imagine John’s dad moving them out of that house. It was like…kind of an iconic building, even in its simplicity. He couldn’t even imagine John growing up anywhere else. And why would they move?

Like…it was obvious that, in this universe, that they got to see each other in person more often. Those pictures in his room proved it. But…at the same time, Dave had just figured that that was the case just because they were all older and obviously would want to see each other after so many years of friendship. And, their guardians seemed to know each other in this universe, so it made sense for that reason too, and…

But still he didn’t think that it would be so simple to just have someone…come over.

Holy shit. If he could have just had John come over or have gone over John’s while growing up…oh man. It would have been fucking amazing. They could have had so many more jokes and just…wait. How…how did he hang out with someone? Like. In person. At his house. With no crazy Sburb video game to take up his time. How did he just…shit he had never just hung out with John like that. What…how did you like. What do you do?

Like…he knew how to hang out with the people he was with on the meteor, but, even that had been hella awkward sometimes. It took forever for him to get completely comfortable with Rose and
Karkat, because like. Just being around people was weird.

There was one time when they had all been sitting in the common room, and Dave had been rambling, most of it directed at Rose, but none of it had really meant anything. Rose had been rolling her eyes, her lips tightly pressed together, and if he had really fully paid attention at the time he would have realized that she was getting annoyed. She had probably wanted to spend some time alone with Kanaya, he thought, or she at least wanted some silence so she could read or something.

It had been Karkat that had spoken up, unabashedly letting Dave know that he was annoying him with his pointless rant. This had been before they were close, so their ensuing fight had been…sort of intense. But, following that, they started to institute movie nights and game nights to actually force some positive interaction with everyone, and then things had calmed down.

And…it got easier to be with everyone because he knew them so well. (Well, not counting Vriska and Terezi, they were usually off doing their own thing, although sometimes Terezi had joined them). But with Rose, Kanaya, Karkat, and the Mayor, it had been easy. He started to recognize all of their idiosyncrasies—how their expressions shifted when they were feeling stressed or pleased, how their body language shifted depending on how they were feeling, and how they were each different from each other.

Rose tended to emote in her eyes, her brows rising or furrowing, light sparking in her irises to convey how she felt. Kanaya was more subtle, and it took him awhile to fully figure her out, but she tended to shift slightly and to hold herself differently. She could convey incredible distaste through just the rise and fall of her shoulders, or immense interest when she leaned forward slightly. And Karkat, well, he was the easiest in some ways, since he wore every expression on his sleeve, in his voice and in his vibrant expressions. With Karkat, it was the interpretation of his emotions that mattered the most, of seeing why he felt the way he did, because every emotion was intense when it came to Karkat.

But, in this situation, while he did know John really well, he didn’t know him in person as well, and he didn’t know this John, and…oh crap. Like…was it okay to focus on the movie itself? Or should they like…do something else. Like. Were they just going to watch in the main room, would that be okay? Or in here on Dave’s computer or something? And, afterwards, were they supposed to find something else to do or would John just leave? And oh man what should he do before the movie starts? Did John like talking during movies? Should they pause if they were going to talk or could they talk over the movie? (On the meteor that answer changed depending on which movie they were watching and how much Karkat cared about it). But…what about John, how was he supposed to hang out with him?

Shit, his best friend was coming over and he was just freaking out. Breathe, Dave, breathe. It was just John. Coming over to watch a movie. This is a fucking dream come true, so stop freaking out.

…

Yeah, no.

The sound of a knock at the door caught Dirk’s attention. He and the others had just been shooting the shit in one of their various memos, aptly named for the situation (‘Jane’s Tricksterlog’); Jane had been telling them about her recent pranking exploits.

Dirk typed a quick message informing them that he would be back in a minute before he turned away from the screen. He stood up, closing the pesterchum window that immediately lit up on his
shades. Of course, he could just message through the shades, but he’d rather focus on whoever was at the door. The most common visitors were all the people they knew, of course, but Dirk knew none of his friends were coming. So…that left Dave’s friends.

He was a bit surprised, with how closed off this Dave had been, that he would invite someone over. Dirk took it as a good sign though. Dave’s friends were always welcome here, and maybe the presence of one of his friends, even if it was a different version of them, would help calm him down more.

There was another knock as Dirk entered the hall and he lengthened his stride so that the person wouldn’t have to wait as long. He could flash step, he supposed, but he didn’t often do that without a better reason. Answering the door was just too banal.

Dirk unlocked the chain and opened the door, revealing a rather giddy John Egbert.

“Hi Bro!” John greeted, grinning up at him, his little buck teeth standing out. He really did look like a combination of Jane and Jake, albeit younger versions of them, of course. It was actually really nice, Dirk thought, to have someone who looked so much like people he loved. John bounced on the balls of his feet before asking, “Is Dave home?”

Dirk snorted as he stepped back to give John enough room to enter the apartment, “Of course he is. He’s probably in his room.” He eyed the boy, seeing the worn DVD case he held under his arm. “Popcorn is in the bottom of the rightmost cupboard,” he offered.

“Sweet!” John said, “Thanks!” And, he was off like a shot.

“Have fun,” Dirk called after him.

------------------------------------------------

Dave jumped when the door to his room opened, tensing as he turned in his computer chair, Bro hadn’t ever just come in before, and that— oh.

It was John.

He was grinning, wearing a dorky Ghostbusters t-shirt, coming right on in like he owned the place. There was a bowl of popped popcorn in his hands (did he come from his house with popcorn already like that or did he do it here?? Both images were…weird). “Hi Dave!”

Holy shit he was right there. Coming over like it was nothing. And Dave was…99% sure that none of them lived in Texas. Well, none of them other than Dave himself. And, even if they did, uh, it would take longer to come over. As it was, it had only been ten minutes and forty-two seconds since John’s last pesterchum message. In that time he had to: tell his dad, grab the movie, grab popcorn, pop the popcorn, and get to Dave’s. There was no fucking way.

And…despite that, he was just right there. Holy shit.

He looked just as dorky as ever, and it was so strange to see him without that goofy god-tier outfit. He was just…normal John. God, no Sburb, no powers, just…a normal nerdy sixteen year old. Oh. Oh wow what was he even supposed to do? What was life without the framework of the game?

(Sure, the game was coming, but John didn’t know that.)

“Sup,” Dave said, falteringly, “That shirt is dumb.”
John rolled his eyes as a petulant frown tugged at his lips, “Ugh, Dave. Your shirt is dumb because it is not a Ghostbusters shirt and you are, actually, missing out. Because you’re a loser.” John stuck his tongue out, completely shattering any validity to his words (not that there had been any regardless).

John set the bowl on the table with a thunk before pulling out a DVD case from under his arm. “I have brought it, a cinematic masterpiece that we haven’t seen together. I just watched it last week but we are going to watch it again. And you will like it. You will like it, Dave. I will train you in cinema.”

Okay. Okay this was going to be fine, he just had to act like he always did. Just talk to John like they saw each other in person all the time. This would work. And it would be awesome.

Dave crossed his arms, “Okay yeah whatever, Mr. Miyagi. I’m not gonna be patient enough for all that entry level garbage, so you’d better get started before I hire someone else to teach me from Craigslist.”

“Dave!!! No! I’m better than that, you know that!” John mock-whined, his expression completely insincere. Dave watched as he grabbed the chair that was propped by the wall next to his desk. Huh. Dave…had been wondering why there had been an extra chair in the room. Whelp, apparently this was his answer. This was just normal procedure for them as bros. John had a designated chair in his room and they watched movies on his computer.

Again, he felt suddenly and intensely jealous for the life the other Dave had lived.

He wondered if he had a chair in John’s room.

John scooted up to the computer and clicked to open the disk drive, putting in Groundhog Day. Dave leaned forward and clicked play on the screen, and it started, just like that. John grabbed the popcorn bowl and put it in his lap, staring intensely at the screen.

Dave reached over for a handful of the popcorn just to stop himself from saying anything that would give himself away. He felt this incredible urge to talk, to ramble on and on as he usually did when he was anxious, but he just…couldn’t. Because, he…he couldn’t let anything slip. He had no way to know how John would react to him not being his Dave, so he didn’t want to accidentally say it, he wasn’t ready for anyone else to know. And…John didn’t even know the game, so how would he even explain?

He wanted to, but he couldn’t.

Dave shoveled another handful of popcorn into his mouth.

John swung his feet in the chair back and forth. While he did like the movie, it wasn’t as awesome to watch it again so quickly, but he really wanted Dave to see it, so it was going to be worth it. He was just a little impatient right now. It was just getting started, and once the time loops happened it would get way more interesting.

Seeing Dave in person made what Jade and Rose were talking about way clearer to him. He hadn’t really noticed when typing, but Dave definitely was like…looking different, somehow. He seemed really on-edge. John had the feeling that when he first walked in the room that Dave had been staring at him like a startled deer in headlights.

Well. John had to assume that his eyes were wide, he couldn’t really see them, obviously, but he
could see the tenseness in Dave’s shoulders and the distinct frown that had settled on his lips. It was…like he was scared, or something, sitting rigidly in his chair.

He couldn’t remember ever seeing Dave like that before. It was worrying.

But, John shoved those thoughts away, it would be better if he just helped his Best Bro by being his Best Bro. Situation normal, nothing detected on the sensors, Captain. Rose and Jade were the ones worrying and telling Dave that they were worried, so it was covered. John wanted to be the reprieve from that, so. Movie night. Relaxing time. Just two bros having fun and hanging out.

It was…really quiet though. Usually Dave would ramble a bit over the movie and John would have to reverse it a lot in the middle because they’d get all caught up in a conversation and then totally not be looking at what was happening. But…nothing. Dave was just quietly eating popcorn and staring at the screen. Huh.

Either it was more of him acting weird or he just really liked the movie.

…John was going to assume it was him acting weird. He looked over at him, frowning, trying to figure it out. Did anything strange happen recently? John couldn’t think of anything, but that didn’t mean that nothing happened, maybe Dave just wasn’t telling him. But why wasn’t he telling him? He wasn’t telling Rose either and apparently Jade knew, but…that just was weird. Usually Dave would blurt everything to everyone who would listen.

What could there be that would make him stay quiet? And it was affecting him even now, even though John was just trying to give him a nice friendly reprieve from all the stress he must be feeling? Maybe…he should do something. Yeah. Dave was just sitting there all tense and uncomfortable. This was not acceptable.

Maybe…give him a little bit of time, first? Let the movie run to see if that would start to calm him down or not. Then make a choice about what to do.

John inwardly shrugged, and he turned his own focus to the screen.

And…the several scenes passed without a word. The popcorn ran out and Dave’s hands stayed in his lap and he just…watched. John wondered what he was thinking about, but he didn’t want to ask because…well, he wasn’t used to asking. Dave was always the one muttering. This was weird.

But…he should. Clearly Dave needed something, and they weren’t going to get anywhere if Dave was stressed out the whole time. So, John reached out and pressed the spacebar to pause the movie.

Dave’s head snapped towards him, alarmed, and John watched as his fingers tightened into fists. Geeze, he was way too anxious.

“So, uh,” John faltered, just…caught off guard by how strange Dave was acting, but he shook his head, quickly pushing those feelings away. He looked at the screen. Phil Connors had just finished the ice carving of the angel. “Do you think you could do that? Like, do you think it’s possible to get so good at art by just repeating it for a while? How long do you think he had to practice to get that good at it?”

It was kind of a stupid question, and not really what John wanted to talk about with the movie, but it was the first thing that came to mind. And, it would work. They just needed to talk about something. He just needed to break the ice (ha!).

Dave almost immediately relaxed, his brows furrowing as he thought. John was relieved, and waited for his friend to speak. Dave shrugged, “I mean, I guess it’s probably possible. I don’t see why
There was a pause. Dave seemed, uncharacteristically, at a loss. John broke the silence, “Yeah, I mean, if you have relatively infinite time you can do anything, right? That’s pretty cool! What would you learn if you had infinite time?”

Come on, Dave. Just talk. Talk and get comfortable.

It took a few seconds, but he saw Dave’s posture slacken even more, a small grin shining out past his typical cool guy façade. “I guess I would probably have to go for juggling. Like learning how to juggle like thirty different things at once.”

John laughed, “I don’t think that’s totally possible no matter how much time you have! I guess that would be pretty impressive though, even if it’s kinda silly too.”

“Hey,” Dave’s voice was tinted with mock-hurt, “You just crushed my dreams, you monster. I’m gonna have to report you for ruining childhoods, Egbert.”

John snickered, “Uh-huh. Sure thing, Dave. I know you, dude, and I think this is the first time you’ve ever brought up juggling as a possibly useful skill.”

“Look, I don’t think being able to carve ice is all that useful either—you just asked what I’d learn if I had infinite time.”

“Hmm, fair,” John nodded sagely as he leaned back in his chair a bit, “I think that I would want to learn something cooler. Maybe likeeee, how to fly a plane or something, that’d be pretty cool.”

“And how would that be useful?” Dave asked as he crossed his arms judgmentally.

“I dunno, like, what if you’re on a plane and the pilot dies suddenly or something?! Then they come out and ask the passengers, ‘Does anyone know how to fly this? If we can’t find anyone we’re doomed!’ and then BOOM, I can stand up and come to the rescue.” John grinned as he spoke. It was a little silly, but with every word he saw how Dave started to ease into this situation, which prompted him to keep going.

“Wow,” was all Dave had to say in response.

John mirrored Dave’s posture, crossing his arms over his chest with a hmph. “Geeze, Dave, you’re really making me start to regret this.” He shook his head, “Just kidding, I’m still going to culture you in the ways of movies even if you’re resistant. I will win this, Dave, you will see all the movies. So, okay, let’s continue.” He leaned forward again, pressing the spacebar again.

The movie continued, and now Dave did comment, a few times. Not as much as usual and it was still John doing most of the talking, but it looked like Dave was starting to feel better. This was definitely a Win so far.

Eventually the credits rolled, prompting John to speak up again, “So? Overall thoughts?”

“Still not really proper time travel, but it’s not as bad as Back to the Future,” Dave conceded. There was a slight smirk quirking up the corner of his mouth.

“Oh shut up, Dave! They’re both good movies for different reasons! Geeze, is that really the first thing you had to say after finishing the movie?!”

“Well, sorta. I wasn’t really expecting to be watching this today, and you got here so quick and
shoved it right in. A guy has gotta prepare himself for a movie session. I was flying on the seat of my pants with that pacing right there, shit was moving so quick I didn’t even have time to process.”

John sighed, “Yeah right, Dave. The movie was two hours! You so had time to think!”

“One hour and forty-one minutes,” Dave corrected, probably just pulling that number out of his ass. “And you got here fast, so it’s your fault.”

John shrugged, “Well, duh I did. Dad was free so I didn’t have to wait before asking and I just watched this movie so I knew where it was, so I pretty much just ran through the transportalizer.”

Dave blinked.
The. The what.
What.
How.
What.

God dammit, he didn’t need more of this confusion bullshit. That…was an answer of some kind though. To the question he wasn’t asking but wanted to answer to anyways. Transportalizers. Because seriously, what else would it be? That made perfect sense, you know, in their lives before the game. They so had access to that stuff. Yup, totally normal. Nothing confusing here, move along folks.

Okay. So, that meant John probably did live in his house then, like normal. They just had the ability to teleport to each other instantly. This all made total sense.

“Seriously though,” his attention snapped back to John as he continued, “Like, all I can think about when I watch this movie is what I’d do if I was in his situation. It seems kinda cool at first but it’d get really bad really quick!”

Dave frowned, “Yeah the movie got dark in some of those parts.” Those had been…a thing. It was mostly glossed over for the comedy but, yeah. Time travel sucked. The movie had that much right. “He focused on the people mostly though.”

“Yeah,” John nodded, “I think I would do that too, honestly. I mean…there’s not much else that really matters, right? I’d probably pull a few pranks too, but then you just have to start to get to know people. A different person every day, it’s probably pretty cool actually.”

Dave frowned, “Eventually you’d meet everyone though. It’d get boring.”

“Yeah, but you could make it more interesting by doing different things.” John shrugged, “I mean, for example, I guess I’d probably date all the girls like Phil Connors did. Since there’s nothing else to do, you know? It’s kind of weird to think about, but really what else are you gonna do? So. Date the girls. All the girls.”


John just snorted, smiling at him, “Oh yeah, duh!”

Dave. Stared.
John continued without noticing a thing, “I mean, I don’t think I’d do that, but you would of course. Hmm.” He frowned, “Man, that means you’d learn more about everyone than I would! You’d probably last longer in the loops because you’d take longer to get bored.”

John pensively brought a hand to his chin, “Well. I could befriend everyone. Become best bros in a day, like it’s a challenge or something, y’know? Also I could probably prank everyone. So much pranking, Dave, you don’t even know. I could do like a hundred variations of every prank until I got a perfect chain of perfect pranks. Oh man, it’d be sweet.”

Other…the other Dave had told him? The other Dave knew he liked boys too? He…what? He just…told John, apparently? Like this was totally fine hunky-dory, no awkwardness or anything? Fuck, the other Dave had everything on him. Self-realizations, closer connections with his friends… just…god dammit. This was so unfair—

John waved a hand in front of his face, distracting him from his thoughts.

“Uh,” John was saying, “You in there, dude? Dave?”


“Hi Dave, it’s John. I’m going to have to go home for dinner soon, so it’d be cool if I could hear some of what you think of the movie so that I can correct you and prove to you that this is a good movie. Please call me back when you’re ready to talk. Bye!”

Dave pressed his lips together, trying to hold the laughter in, trying to keep his poker face. After a few seconds, he gave up. He laughed, shaking his head, “Okay, okay, Egbert, we can talk about the movie.”

John beamed at him, and Dave was filled with immeasurable fondness.

They talked for a good half an hour about the various intricacies of the film, with a focus on what they would do if put in that situation because John kept asking about it. It was easier to answer now that he knew John…knew.

Apparently John knew a lot of things about him now. And it wasn’t a big deal at all.

John couldn’t stay any longer though, his Dad had told him to be back for dinner. So they wrapped up their discussion, although it seemed pretty clear that John would have loved to talk more if they had the time. Dave, meanwhile, was getting sort of exhausted from it all, but it was good, a warm feeling spreading in his heart.

But, the time for John to leave approached quickly, and he stood up, stretching his arms up over his head to loosen them after sitting so long for the movie. “Okay, so I’d better get going, I guess. It was really fun! Thanks for having me over.”

“Anytime,” Dave responded, still a little floored that it really could be any time.

John waited a few seconds, blinking at him. Dave didn’t know what he was waiting for. “Are you gonna stand? It’s harder to hug you if you’re sitting.”

Dave had never stood up quicker in his entire life.
Immediately, John’s hands grabbed at his arms, pulling Dave in close before wrapping his arms solidly around him, squeezing a little bit. It was warm. Really warm. And Dave’s face was pressed into John’s shoulder, it was a little uncomfortable when his shades pressing into his nose, but it was nice. He closed his eyes, pressing himself closer, awkwardly returning the hug.

It lasted longer than Dave thought it would, and he savored every second of it. He could feel John breathing, hear the sound of it in his ear, and it was so real and present, Dave almost couldn’t believe it. John’s hands patted gently at his back before he pulled away, and Dave was a little reluctant to let go.

“You can choose the movie next time, bro,” John said with a cheerful smile. “But, that’ll be another time. As it is, I really gotta go.”

“Yeah,” Dave responded quietly, a little breathlessly, “Next time.”


“Bye.”

Dave watched as John grabbed the movie case before turning and heading towards the door. With a wave, John just as easily as he had come. One second he had been there, his presence overwhelming in the room and completely dominating Dave’s focus, and then, he was just gone.

Leaving Dave alone in his room with empty air.

Well…that had been…kind of great, actually. Wow.

And John had said ‘next time’. This was a thing.

Still, though, John’s presence and the possibility of his returning presence left a question—where was this transportalizer that made this possible? And why was it even here, why did they have access to something like that before the game even started?

Where even was it?

Dave thought back to the previous days, when he had chatted with Hal to get himself comfortable enough to explore around the apartment, to look into every nook and cranny of the place. He hadn’t found anything like a transportalizer anywhere. The only places he hadn’t looked at in detail were, for one, Bro’s room. He looked at it from the hall, but he didn’t really step inside, but it didn’t look like there was anything in there. And, while there was a closet that had a closed door, Dave doubted that a transportalizer would fit in there.

And. That left only one other place that he hadn’t gone. And it was the only place he could come up with that was both big enough and hidden enough to house strange technology like a transportalizer. It was a place he didn’t really want to go, a place that he had been trying to forget for the most part, and he hated that it was probably the answer—

The roof.

Chapter End Notes

(Next chapter is going to have the scene that made me write this fic—it will be a Big
Deal)
Dave really did try to avoid thinking about the transportalizer and where it may or may not be. (Although, honestly, no other answer really made sense, and he hated that—there was a reason he hadn’t left the apartment or explored any further than its confines). He didn’t want to think about it. Noope.

You know what was better? Chatting with his friends. After another failed attempt of typing 'carcinoGeneticist'. Only Rose was on right now.

— turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] —

TG: sup rose

TT: Good morning, brother.

TG: you enjoy that a lot dont you

TT: Yes, I quite think that I do. Surely the popular Dave Strider has more to say to me though, I do hope that his intentions extend beyond merely mocking me for enjoying the familial relationship we have recently attained.

TG: hey i wasnt making fun i was just sayin

TG: whelp i guess i gotta have motivations within motivations for lalonde to be happy with me when i talk to her

TG: gotta layer up that mystique

TG: spray myself with some kind of ghastly odor

TG: eau de horrorterror

TG: gross tho it would be right up your weird alley

TG: has anyone talked to you about your alleys rose because i think youve got some hella weird ones and people should probably be concerned for your sanity

TT: My sanity? Oh dear.

TG: yeah i mean have you *seen* the kind of shit you have on your bookshelves like that is the definition of troubled youth

TT: And what would you know about troubled youth?
Dave swallowed.

TT: I assure you, Strider, I am perfectly untroubled, despite my affection for the eclectic.

TT: I do appreciate your willingness to match them to speak to me though, even if such a smell would likely be repulsive.

His fingers twisted into the fabric of his pants.

TT: Strider?

TG: yeah

TG: i mean of course id be willing to have some terrible scent permeating my being

TG: surrounding me and sinking into everyone all around

TG: making them pass out and shit

TG: totally something id do for you rose

TT: Naturally, and I appreciate that.

TT: Oh, moving from that topic, John told us you saw each other yesterday. I trust you had a good time?

TG: is he telling on me or something

TG: ‘hey miss lalonde dave pulled my hair again make him stand on the wall during recess so he stops being a dick’

TT: The wall?

TG: yeah like

TG: all the kids who are bad have to stand there and just suffer or whatever and watch everyone else have fun in the schoolyard while they just fucking stand there doing nothing

TG: its a tragic and painful post

TG: but yeah john did come over and it was sweet

TG: we watched groundhog day

TG: also do you guys really talk about me like that like geeze

TT: Are we not permitted to speak of you unless you are present? I assure you, Dave, we’re all so utterly fond of you, and it is only natural that we speak of you.
TT: Only the good things.
TT: Mostly.

TG: shit lalonde you are making me panic here
TG: you know john has all kinds of dirt on me being my best bro and all
TG: he could tear me apart from the foundations up if he truly wanted to betray me

TT: I think you know that he never would, not for the things that matter. Calm down, Dave, I was just trying to make conversation.

TG: what are you talking about im calm
TG: calm like a motherfucking ocean wave when the tide is down and low and seagulls are quietly chirping in the distance over the low roll of the moving water
TG: im calm as shit
TG: im the calmest person youve ever met in your life lalonde

TT: I somehow find myself doubting that.
TG: well dont because i totally am
TG: mic drop

TT: Wow.
TT: How could I argue against such perfect reasoning?
TG: you cant

TT: I’m rolling my eyes, Dave.
TT: But, aside from seeing John, how have you been?
TG: p good
TG: you?

TT: I have been well. I have focused on my writing the last few days, with startling progress. The plot is moving in directions I haven’t considered, despite the fact that I’m the one writing it. It’s an interesting phenomena, what our fingers do without full cognizance of our mind’s awareness.

TT: I have enjoyed it.
TG: nice

TT: Now it’s your turn, Dave. When people ask how you are doing it is customary to respond with at least one specific detail, especially when you know that they are a caring party.

TG: idk rose im not doing much rn
TG: playing videogames and such
TT: And how are things going with your brother?

TG: god dammit it rose why do you gotta keep being so pushy

TT: I believe that is too many “its”.

TG: its like you gotta bring that couch fucking everywhere with you im serious rose

TG: this is uncalled for i dont want this every time we talk

TG: adn leave me alone i cant type right now

TT: I'm sorry, Dave.

TT: I just worry for you, I know something is wrong.

TT: I will step off, I’m putting the notepad away. I’m sorry.

TT: I just thought you might like to talk to someone.

TG: its

TG: its ok

TG: and anyways its been uh

TG: better

TG: with him

TT: Tell me as much or as little as you’d like. I’m not going to press.

TG: i will explain it later or eventually or whatever but for now just

TG: yeah its better

TT: Okay.

TT: If I can offer anything though, I think you should talk to him.

TG: i have been a little

TG: how do you even know that im not?

TT: Well, you usually talk about him all the time. Ranting in your usual fashion. I notice your tendencies, Dave, and I know when you depart from them.

TT: I notice these things, not because of my hobbies, but because I care for you.

TG: yyeah ok

TG: i uh

TG: thanks

TG: i care too
TT: I know you do, don’t worry. Even when you’re being obtuse, I know.

TG: yeah

TG: i uh am working on the whole talking thing

TG: its happening

TT: Good, I’m glad. Progress is good.

TT: Just make sure you keep making it.

TG: yeah im

TG: gonna go do that now

TG: if thats cool

TT: Of course. Good luck, Dave.

— turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] —

Okay so that didn’t help at all in the not-thinking-about-things department. That actually was kind of the complete polar-fucking-opposite of helping. Whelp.

Rose’s pushiness always did have a good side to it though, because sometimes he did need to be pushed to confront things, and she was always in his corner when he did so, but…he just…ugh. He didn’t want to think about it. He was tired of thinking about it, because it kept forming every second of his waking life and it was difficult to breathe.

His past and how this was different was constantly pushing and pushing and he just wanted to not think.

But not thinking wasn’t an option when there was no normalcy to be had and when every aspect of the life here was a reflection of his past (except better, it was always better). And Bro, Dirk, was the crux of that.

TT: And what would you know about troubled youth?

This Dave knew nothing about that. Nothing.

If his theory about where the transportaler was right, then…god, even the place that Dave hated the most was a place that the other Dave associated with positivity.

To him, the roof was where he fought. Where he bled, where he always hated being, and yet he had been forced to go there and to keep going there. To fight there. The roof was where he learned that being a hero wasn’t worth it. It wasn’t pretty, wasn’t heroic, wasn’t painless. Instead, he learned that heroes beat people down, that they don’t love their brothers—that they train and push and fight with shitty katanas and fear. Of course a thirteen year old couldn’t beat an adult.

He didn’t know how lucky he had been, and Dave was bitterly jealous. He was jealous of something he didn’t even understand, something that he didn’t have the power to affect, and he couldn’t help it.
Everything had been better for other Dave. Meanwhile, he…he was just trying to stop being afraid.

And the first step of that was to go out and seek interaction again. Which, he could do. It was morning, and Bro should be up now, even though it was still kinda early.

First though, food run. So…unless Bro was in the kitchen at the moment, Dave could put the interaction off for a little bit longer, hopefully.

Dirk was in chilling the kitchen, talking to Hal as he poured himself a bowl of cereal. He was dressed for the day, sans hat, but otherwise put-together as usual. He stood at the counter as he ate, since he usually spent a long time sitting during the day due to work. He typically decided to stand while eating so that he could stretch his legs a bit. Keeping himself physically fit was important, both for the events ahead and for his own personal preference.

Both he and Hal had been doing better the last few days. Things were still tense with Dave, but the ‘Dave Problem’ was progressing at a rate that satisfied both of them. He was talking to Hal again and looked less and less like a trapped animal whenever he came into contact with Dirk.

And, so, both Dirk and Hal were in much more positive moods.

TT: I think seeing John probably helped.

TT: Them being best friends has to be a constant in all timelines. I can’t imagine how it could ever be any different.

TT: Agreed, although alternate timelines, by definition, likely have circumstances that are significantly different from our own.

TT: Also, there is an 82% chance that seeing John helped rather than harmed.

TT: Really? You think John is capable of harm?

TT: Not on purpose, no, but to a Dave that didn’t even know us, we have no way of knowing what his John was like. If this John is different then it might not help.

TT: Additionally, meeting a John that isn’t his could be traumatizing in itself.

TT: Not everyone reacts well to meeting doubles, if you recall.

TT: And so, 82% is an appropriate approximation.

TT: I’m confident that he’ll be alright.

TT: So am I, I’m just running the numbers. As usual.

TT: Do you think he’ll talk much today? He’s still been cagey around me.

TT: I think he wants to. It’s a process.

TT: I would say that there is an 85.3% chance that he will speak to you today. This is your Dave Weather Report, signing off.
TT: Wow. Thanks for the vote of confidence.

TT: Can I rely on you giving a new percentage every day?

TT: Yes, it’s a new app I’m working on. I’ll put an icon for it up on your desktop when I’m done. It’s still in beta testing, I need more data to fully optimize the probability calculation.

TT: You’re saying you need Dave to talk to me before you can determine if he’ll talk to me.

TT: Precisely. It’s only logical.

TT: Wow.

“Uh…hi.”

Dirk blinked, looking past his shades, catching the sight of Dave who was standing just outside the threshold of the room. He entered slowly, his movements smoother and less jerky than they had been before. He was still clearly uncomfortable, but it was progress.

Before he closed the window on his shades, he did catch one more line of red text:

TT: 100%

He rolled his eyes.

“Hey there,” and it was easy to smile at him, immediately relieved that he was talking. “Good morning, Dave.”

“Sup,” Dave mumbled quietly as he made a beeline for the fridge. Dirk didn’t even have to look to know that he was taking out a bottle apple juice. While he was doing that, Dirk poured cereal into the other bowl he had left out in hopes that Dave would join him. He pushed it and the milk over to the side of the counter that was closer to Dave.

Dave turned around, closing the fridge, and Dirk realized that this was the first time that this Dave had actually turned his back to him. “Oh,” Dave said, seeing the bowl, his brows arched up over the lenses of his shades in surprise, “Thanks.”

Dirk nodded, “No problem.” He shifted on his feet, turning his head away from Dave so that Dave didn’t think he was staring. He also actually did try not to stare, but it was difficult to not watch him. He was still worried, he still wanted to help and to understand this other Dave. But he didn’t want to chase him off again by being too clingy. He didn’t have a book or anything to distract him though. Maybe he should talk to Hal again—

TT: Say something to him, Dirk.

TT: I’m locking pesterchum after you read this. You aren’t hiding from this. You aren’t being too clingy. Just fucking talk to the kid.

Hal.

Dave moved his bowl, the milk, and the bottle of apple juice to the opposite side of the counter, pulling up a chair to sit in while he ate. He was still facing Dirk and it wasn’t like he was that far away, but it still made his heart sink. Even if this was a different Dave, seeing him isolate himself like that was difficult to take.
Dirk, for just a moment, could see a phantom of a boy who would smile without reserve, who would sit with his feet swinging back and forth as he giggled over something he was looking at on his phone. How he would then turn to Dirk, telling him about whatever it was that caused his laughter today. He would have his shades tilted up to rest over his forehead so that Dirk could openly see his expression. His eyes would be bright behind the shades.

Then Dirk blinked and reality seeped coldly back in. The boy in front of him sat with his shoulders slightly hunched, curling into himself defensively, despite the fact that he was still opening up more than he had when he had first arrived here. His expression was somewhere between blankness and tenseness, a slight frown curled on his lips. His shades were perched high on his nose, the red of his eyes barely visible past them. Dirk hadn’t gotten to see this Dave without them.

Dirk swallowed, shifting back and forth on his feet, uncertainty and hesitance rushing through him. He didn’t want to say anything too quickly, so he waited for a bit to let Dave eat a little more (it was relieving in itself that Dave was eating near him, after having avoided that for so long). But, how long was too long to wait? He didn’t want to wait until Dave was done, didn’t want to keep him if he had something else he wanted to do or if he wanted to rush away. And, maybe it would be easier for him to talk when he could be partially preoccupied by eating.

What should he talk about, topically? He had to try to be normal, to treat this Dave in a way that would prevent him from realizing that Dirk already knew he was from somewhere else, and…okay. The topic had to be an easy one. Something that wouldn’t stress Dave out.

“Did you have fun with John?”

“Mhmm,” Dave hummed through his cereal, swallowing before speaking, “We watched Groundhog Day.” His shoulders were still a little tense, but it seemed like he really was trying to be calm in Dirk’s presence.

Dirk picked up his own now empty bowl and turned away, continuing to talk as he brought it to the sink. Maybe it would be easier for Dave to talk if he didn’t feel as if Dirk was focused solely on him. The repetitive motion served to calm his own nerves as well. “Oh? Interesting choice—it doesn’t surprise me that Dave was eating near him, after having avoided that for so long). But, how long was too long to wait? He didn’t want to wait until Dave was done, didn’t want to keep him if he had something else he wanted to do or if he wanted to rush away. And, maybe it would be easier for him to talk when he could be partially preoccupied by eating.

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He could hear the smile in Dave’s voice as he started to rinse the bowl, “Oh man, yeah. He’s really into time travel movies right now I guess, and he was like. Talking about Back to the Future and seeing that once is more than enough for me. I mean, the time travel in that one is ridiculous. Needing a weird car to do it, going back and creating a paradox that shouldn’t really be possible, just, it doesn’t make any sense, y’know? Back to the Future is basically the number one worst example of time travel I’ve ever seen, and that’s including some other really shitty ones.”

Dirk placed the bowl with the other dishes that needed washed before turning back around. Dave was shoveling another spoonful into his mouth, apparently finished with his impromptu rant. The… the first rant he had gotten to hear from this Dave, Dirk suddenly realized.

“You’re rather opinionated about it, aren’t you?” he asked, his grin turning into a smile.

Dave rolled his eyes behind the shades, answering quickly, “Well I’m kinda an authority on the topic, and—” He stopped suddenly, cutting himself off, lips pressing tightly together as his fingers tightened over his spoon.
Dirk blinked, both surprised-and-not because he could only imagine how difficult it was for Dave in this situation to keep his knowledge hidden. Sure, Dirk was hiding that he knew too, and had been hiding everything about the game for years, but he was older than Dave. And, unlike this Dave, he wasn’t alone in his secrecy, having the support of Hal, Jake, Roxy, Jane, and Calliope. Dave wasn’t a natural liar, he was atrocious at lying, but it was a bit easier for Dirk since his mind was a bit more naturally manipulative.

And now Dave was freaking out over having possibly spilled something he hadn’t meant to, but Dirk was, as always, quick on giving him a way out. “Oh? An authority, you say? I didn’t know you’ve had the unfortunate pleasure to see that many bad movies.”

“O-oh, um. Yeah. I mean, I’m friends with John, so. Of course I’ve seen quite a lot. Outside of my own watching-bad-movies-for-irony, I’ve had to see a bunch with John. Y’know how it is.” Dave replied, obviously trying to make his voice as neutral as possible, but it was so easy for Dirk to see through him. He wasn’t hiding it particularly well and Dirk knew him.

Calm down, Dave. Dirk thought. It’ll be alright.

“My condolences, but you know you’re going to become even more of an expert as time passes. I understand, Jake does the same thing to me basically weekly. Bad movies galore. But, people like Jake and John find things to enjoy, and sometimes it’s nice to see.” The last time they had watched Avatar, Dirk didn’t entirely find it as awful. Jake made movies exciting, even the ones that Dirk couldn’t help but poke holes in. “Other times though, it’s just miserable.” Weekend at Bernie’s immediately came to mind.

Dave shrugged, “Eh, one day he might see the truth as to what a good movie is. And even if he doesn’t, at least we’ll always have something to talk about.”

Dirk nodded, feeling calmer than he had in a while. Dave’s skittishness fading was just such an ease on his mind. Progress was being made, everything was moving, and Dave would be alright. It was a warm gentle sort of contentment that flushed through him now, and it suddenly felt so much easier to breathe. He was glad Dave had so much support in his life. He had all of his wonderful friends, he had Hal, and of course he had Dirk himself. “That’s good,” he said softly, and he saw Dave’s eyes grow wide, but he didn’t stiffen or flinch as he had before. He just stared at Dirk, shocked by what Dirk could only assume was his tone.

Yes, Dave, he thought, I love you.

Dave wasn’t sure of what he was supposed to say after Bro…did…whatever that voice was. It was unlike anything he had ever heard from Bro before, far from the emotionless dickface asshole that he had known.

He just…wow. He didn’t know what to do with genuine care. And he knew it was genuine care. The evidence was everywhere, in how the house was different, in how this Bro treated him, in how his friends talked about Bro, in what he had heard from Hal, just…it was everywhere. And he didn’t know what to do or what to think.

Dave’s eyes flicked down to his bowl, staring at the flakes that were slowly drowning in the milk. “Y-Yeah,” he stuttered, voice quiet and cracking a bit. He swallowed, thankful for his shades, even though a part of him was willing to bet that this Bro could see through him even more easily than his. Because this Bro cared.
Why wasn’t my life like this? he thought, bitterness rising up his throat, *Why didn’t I deserve this?! Why did I have such a shitty life when this other Dave got to be raised by someone who wasn’t an abusive douchebag?! Why?!!*

Water welled up in his eyes, stinging as he tried to hold it back. No, no. Fuck no he wasn’t going to cry. Breathe. Okay. Okay, just stop, don’t cry. *Come on,* Karkat’s voice said in his head, as quiet as the troll could be, ‘*Count.*’

One. Two. Three. Four.


Nine. Ten.

Breathe.

Okay. He was okay. Nothing bad was happening right now that hadn’t been already happening. He was okay, taking everything one step at a time. Figuring things out. Moving at his own pace. Everything would make sense eventually, and it would all be okay.

Crap, crap. Bro was still right there, *shit*—Dave sniffed, forcing the tears back down and away before he snapped his head up, only to see that Bro…wasn’t even looking at him anymore. He was still standing near the counter, but he was looking down, probably focusing on something that was open on his shades. There was no way he hadn’t noticed though, so…oh. He was giving Dave space, wasn’t he? Oh.

Of course he was. This Bro was *good.*

Well. Alright then. Other than that momentary breakdown, that had been one successful interaction. Definitely yet another step forward towards getting better at existing in this world until he could figure out more about what was actually going on. Talking to Bro was getting a little easier each time. Even though he still kept thinking about, uh, *his* Bro…well, it was getting easier to push those thoughts aside. He just had to stop his thoughts sometimes. Be careful. Remind himself that he was okay right now.

That conversation hadn’t been perfect though, even without that end part. Dave was still reeling a bit from almost revealing that he knew too much about time travel. He *really* had to get better at keeping secrets, especially since he knew a lot of stuff he definitely shouldn’t.

His thoughts screeched to a halt when Bro spoke again, voice low, “Alright, Dave. I’m gonna go work on some things, call or something if you need me.”

“Okay,” Dave responded on auto-pilot, not bothering to look at him as he left the kitchen, leaving Dave alone. It was good to be alone.

Well, sometimes. It wasn’t always good to be alone. He needed to think now, anyways.

What John’s visit had brought to light was still bothering him, itching constantly at the back of his mind like a persistent nag—like how Rose acted when something was troubling him, picking at his brain. He wished it was Rose that was bothering him, or…well. He wished it was *his* Rose. The one with the superpowers and vampire girlfriend. Not that this Rose wasn’t good or wasn’t Rose, but…she just wasn’t the same. She didn’t know as much. She wasn’t used to being his sister. The Rose he had lived with on the Meteor would always be of more import—she was special and she always understood. But he couldn’t go to her for this, couldn’t just get her help and get her to figure out his problems for him. She was out of his reach.
He didn’t have the luxury of her counsel, and this wasn’t just some minor worry of ‘oh no Rose is being all psychoanalytical again,’ no. Instead, he just couldn’t stop thinking.

The thought, the annoying ticking thing, of how. Of how John had travelled. Of the transportalizer that was the only answer Dave could come up with. Of the roof.

He couldn’t stop thinking about it. The roof and what must be up there. He wanted to go, see if he was right and maybe come to understand more of what was going on in this timeline/universe/whatever the fuck this was.

But…

The roof was…not a place he had physically visited in…a long time. He…didn’t want to. Even when the dreambubbles would sometimes take him to his childhood home, he didn’t…

There were too many memories up there. Too much awful shit. He didn’t want to go.

Going there would be too much even by itself, despite the possibility of a transportalizer or understanding or answers about this situation. But at the same time, he had to, didn’t he? He couldn’t just continue on without trying to figure this out. Time still clicked in his ears—something was different that he still couldn’t quite identify. At first he had thought that maybe it was rust—that something was slow and heavy in the gears, but now he wondered if it wasn’t that. Instead, maybe, it was more like something about time itself was inherently different here. Like the gears were made of a different metal or something. He didn’t quite know how to describe it, but maybe if you hit on these gears, if he used his powers (which he wouldn’t, fuck no), maybe the gears would make a different sound. It was too abstract for him to really grasp the idea, and…ugh. Dave didn’t want to be involved with time shit anymore.

He had to though.

He had to understand. Understanding was the only way out, the only way back to where he belonged. (And the only way the Other Dave could get back here, where he belonged.)

He really didn’t want to go there though. All he could think about was how he would expect to be attacked again, even though that didn’t make sense in this universe. Just…he’d be up there and all he could imagine was Bro striking from the shadows, coming in from some direction Dave had written off as safe, thought it was impossible for him to be ambushed from. Bro always caught him off-guard, always got past Dave’s attempts to defend himself. It sucked.

Dave didn’t want to go there alone or at all. So. If he didn’t want to worry about an ambush he would just have to…the only way was if…Bro was…already up there? Not, not waiting for him or anything. But if Dave asked him to…follow him? That was different enough from the past, right? He had never done that before. Putting himself in a totally new situation wouldn’t make him flashback as much, maybe?

Fuck, that was tentative. Have a little fucking confidence, Dave. Fuck.

If he was going to go this far, maybe he should just…finally tell Bro. That he wasn’t his Dave. Try to explain some of this crazy bullshit and stop trying to hide and lie. He wasn’t any good at that stuff anyways, so just…get it all out in the open. Give up the act.

Bro had been so nice. surely Dave could tell him. Hell, maybe he could even help and they could get to the bottom of whatever this situation was. And, if the game was coming, he should tell him, shouldn’t he? The game was…dangerous. To say the least.
Dave didn’t want the same thing that happened to his Bro to…to happen to this one.

This was going to be difficult no matter what, and while he could go up alone, if Bro came up after him…it would only be worse if that happened. So. He might as well face this shit head-on. If he got through the worst of it now, it would only get better from here, right? So, might as well at least have Bro up there already. Just. Walk right into the worst it could be.

The alternative was maybe not running into Bro at all but…the risk was too high. Dave should just get it over with. Tear off the band-aid and get a move on with his life. Get to the roof, figure out about the transportalizer, and tell Bro about the universe shit all in one go.

Dave stood up from the table, not even bothering with his dishes or anything as a knot started to tie itself in his stomach. Several knots kept forming as he started to walk towards Bro’s room, like his intestines were fucking Boy Scouts with those knots or something. Working to get a merit button or whatever.

It was tense, dread creeping up from his stomach, spreading into his lungs and seeping into his heart. His breathing was staggered, his heart roaring in his ears, and, fuck, he should just turn around and not do this. Another day or maybe never.

It would be so easy to just turn around. Somehow, though, he was right in front of Bro’s ever-open door, not even seeing into the room though, just, he had a sort of knowledge that he was there. That, hey, now was when you were supposed to talk, dumbass. Go talk and ask him. Get him to follow and solve the fucking mystery and get a step closer and maybe—

He became dimly aware of the fact that his fingers were shaking. Maybe his whole arms were shaking. It was hard to tell—perhaps even his whole body was shaking. Come on. Just. Fucking say it. Get it over with. If he didn’t do this now he would just keep stressing about it, and it was time to get a move on.


He. Couldn’t believe he was going to say it. He shook.

"Bro. Roof. Now."

------------------------------------------------

Dirk turned quickly at the sound of Dave’s voice, alarmed. It sounded afraid, almost, the way it cracked slightly on ‘Bro’, and in how Dave paused between each word. The sound alone was concerning.

The sight was even more so.

Dave was visibly trembling. His fingers were clenched tight into shaking fists, the tremors going up his arms. His mouth was slightly open, brows furrowed behind his shades. Somehow Dave was even tenser than he had been any of the other times Dirk had seen him. He was afraid of something. Afraid again, Dirk thought bitterly.

Dirk…was at a bit of a loss, though. He didn’t really know why Dave would want to go to the roof. Let alone what he wanted at all. He was so terrified though, was this really the right time to push for information?

“Dave—” Dirk started, but Dave had already darted away, down the hall in the direction of the
Dirk hesitated, and red text suddenly filled his shades.

TT: Follow him.

TT: “Didn’t you see how scared he was?”

TT: Yeah, and that’s exactly why you have to do what he just asked. Something big is happening here.

TT: Do what the boy said, Dirk.

TT: Don’t talk to me.

TT: Just go.

Dirk stood up and quickly followed, not quick enough to flash-step, but close enough. He couldn’t see Dave ahead of him, but he didn’t need to. Up to the roof, apparently.

He hoped Dave would be alright. *Don’t push yourself too hard.*

Dave almost ran back inside.

The roof was as hot and as blistering as ever, but it felt muted. Like it was far away and he wasn’t really here. Like what other people said dreams were like. Except, this was real. Real and hot and just as awful as he remembered.

He couldn’t go back now, though. He forced himself, one step at a time, to walk out over the concrete. God. Here he was again. Each crack in the ground was intimately familiar. Here, this was where he laid for an hour after Bro had sliced up one of his arms real bad. Stopping the bleeding had been really hard, he lost a whole shirt and most of one of the legs of his pants. But. It stopped. Oh, and over here was where he hit his head and was so dazed that Bro had actually stopped fighting him. Apparently brain damage was unwanted. *That* was when it was too far.

Here, this was where he usually stood, whenever he got a choice of where to stand during a fight. He would always straddle his stance and turn slowly, listening and watching. Waiting for Bro to appear. He stood there now, facing the door, and he had to convince himself over and over again not to turn, not to expect Bro to come from any other direction—that they weren’t going to strife—he wasn’t even able to look anywhere else, he was far too focused—

The door clicked, the metal hinges rasping as it opened. Dave winced at the sound.

His mind told him to get into a fighting stance. It expected to see the shine of steel in the sunlight off of a blade, already drawn. It expected stoicism and power, and fear bit deep into Dave’s heart. He wanted to run, even if there was nowhere to go.

Bro came through the door, a worried frown on his lips. He was still hatless. He closed the door behind him slowly, not coming forward, not approaching suddenly like Dave couldn’t stop his mind from expecting. Even after it was closed and he did approach, he kept a respectful space between them, careful and far.

He knew something was wrong, Dave realized. He felt stupid for taking so long to notice that. Of
course Bro knew something was up. And, subsequently, of course he was worried. He loved his Dave, the little brother he had raised so well.

It hurt, to think about it.

“Hey Dave,” Bro said after a few beats of silence. “We don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. You aren’t looking so good, little man.”

Fuck, he was so nice. How was he this nice? How was this man in front of him even reconcilable with the version Dave had known growing up?

“N-No. I’ve. We have to talk,” Dave managed, just barely. He was so quiet Bro had to lean forward a bit to hear him, sunlight glinting off of his shades. “I-I have something I have. I have to tell you something.”

Bro leaned back, giving him space, “Alright. I’m here to listen. Take your time, Dave.”

Dave opened his mouth. Then he closed it. The words just died before he could even think of what to say. He kept remembering things, this heat reminded him of so many moments flashing through his mind. Stark fear he had shoved down and hidden with bravado, but it had been fear. Fear and hatred and pain and all those things that kids weren’t supposed to feel.

And Bro was so nice, he was a totally different person and Dave just—

He just kept remembering, being at this place again, standing across from the same person again, and he felt himself start shaking again, his unspoken words feeling heavy in his throat. Like if he spoke he would just suddenly burst and all the pressure would come out and he was going to cry he couldn’t cry. But this was awful and even saying this stuff without the baggage of a shitty childhood would be difficult and bad, but with that past it became unbearable. He knew this was going to happen but he couldn’t back out now, he didn’t want to back out now, but it was so hard and why, why, was it so hard? He was fine, he was safe, so why was he still so scared? It had been years, why was he still trapped in the fucking past like this?! Why couldn’t he get out of these stupid feelings and shove them down and away like he always had before?

Facing your fears was supposed to be something that made you brave.

He wasn’t brave.

His words were caught in his throat beneath a ball of saliva that rolled uncomfortably down his throat as he tried to swallow. But he couldn’t, instead just choking on the words he was trying to say. On what he wanted to say. On what he should say.

He was a hero, he was supposed to be some sort of brave hero. The Knight of Fucking Time.

But he wasn’t.

He was just a weak little kid, scared shitless of his past and of this man in front of him. This man who currently was-and-wasn’t the man he was remembering and thinking about, but the similarities were so hard to forget when he had years of trauma built up to remember.

Bro was big, tall and powerful. He was the ideal image of a hero—for years he was exactly what Dave imagined when he thought of heroes. He was strong and unbeatable, able to fight and destroy anything in his way. And Dave had scars all over his arms, his back, his chest, his legs—all from being unable to face him.
He wanted to confront him, to tell him how much of a fucked up guardian he was, what kind of fucking parent did this to their kid—

But apparently, in whatever world this was, that hadn’t even happened. He’d time-travelled or something into some other fucking timeline, where Bro hadn’t been a total asswipe. But he was still fucking terrifying. And somehow it felt worse in this place he might be safe—since he was used to not being safe, even in his own fucking “home”. It was the difference that made it worse, because he knew how to face his past, sort of, and at least he knew what to expect from it. From this Bro, though? It was unknown, it was new, it was terrifying. In a different sort of way, Dave just didn’t know what to do in a world where Bro cared.

And, fuck, he was having another meltdown. Right in front of Bro—again. His vision was swimming, tears pricking behind his eyes, starting to slip through and god dammit, no.

And this time of course Bro couldn’t just let it be. He was right in front of him with nothing to distract him. He was here because Dave had asked him to come up here. He cared so he wasn’t going to just watch Dave freak out like this, he was going to help probably—

Through his blurry vision Dave could see a vague shape of a hand, slowly reaching out to him. He flinched back, away from it, blinking furiously to clear his vision. He tried to ignore the wetness slipping down his cheeks.

And Bro, his face filled with concern and worry (so unlike the stoicism Dave had known for his whole life), immediately retreated. The hand was pulled back immediately. Bro, who looked just like him, held back. Cared enough to back off, but was still worried. And, Bro leaned down, not saying anything, not even making fun of Dave for the tears that were running down his cheeks. Tears of fear, of remembered pain. Dave wasn’t even sad, just… just….

Bro sank down, balancing on his toes as he came down all the way to Dave's level, sitting back on his heels. His hand raised slowly, but before Dave could even react, it became obvious that he wasn’t reaching for him again. He just slowly moved his pointer finger up to his shades and his lips curved into a gentle smile and then he—

Flicked up his shades.

And he. Looked. At. Dave.

His eyes were bright orange, and Dave didn’t remember ever seeing his Bro without the shades on… he…had never seen his eyes without them. He had seen Dirk’s, once, but Dirk was the bro that wasn’t really Bro.

But this was Bro. Some. Other timeline version of him.

Why hadn’t his Bro been like this one?

Dave watched, feeling sort of numb, as Bro took the shades off completely, tucking them into the collar of his shirt. His face was completely open. And he was so worried—

Dave scrubbed at his eyes, unable to even look anymore, pushing his own shades up just a little bit to wipe the tears away. He didn’t think this Bro was going to hurt him. He couldn’t really think that anymore, not after spending so much time living here in this crazy world with the guy. He had known for a while that this Bro wouldn’t hurt him. But. Just.

What.
He couldn’t stop now. Tears kept slipping down past his fingers and he eventually gave up on even wiping them away. They ran down his cheeks and he hated the quiet sounds that came out of his mouth, internally a voice was yelling in his head, telling him to man up and shove all this shit away before he paid for it, but Bro was practically kneeling in front of him, and just spoke in a soft voice, "Hey, little man. Get it all out. It'll be okay."

“I-I don’t…what the fuck,” Dave barely managed to speak, gulping as he did. He tasted salt.

“I don’t know,” Bro responded quietly, but still loud enough for him to hear. “You’re gonna have to tell me. But I can wait for whenever you’re ready. Whatever you need, I’m right here, Dave.”

Dave looked down at the ground and asked, despite himself, “Who are you?”

He watched Bro’s legs lean back a little more on his heels, his feet rocking back and forth a bit. It was probably uncomfortable to crouch like that. “I’m Dirk Strider,” he answered evenly, “You call me Bro. I build robot commissions and DJ sometimes on the weekends. I both unironically and ironically like several things, and the ones I unironically like I like so much that it circles mobiously back to being ironic. I have an AI companion named Hal and this great little brother named Dave.”

God he was sincere and what the fuckkk.

“Little bro, if you need to be alone, I will one-hundred-percent go. What do you need? Do you want me to leave?”

"N-no," he hissed, hating himself for stuttering. "I want to understand who you are."

Dave realized, dimly, that Bro wasn’t even asking for explanations of his behavior. He was just…asking Dave what he wanted. Focusing entirely on him, wanting him to be better. Bro had a total right to be confused as hell, but he wasn’t asking anything. He was just…trying to help.

Continuing the trend, Bro responded evenly, “Alright. What do you want me to talk about? Or explain?”

He looked up again, blinking away his tears, trying to stop his shaking, evenly meeting Bro’s open gaze through his own shades. This Bro who was somehow completely different from his own, yet was still somehow an alternate universe version of the same guy. It was overwhelming, impossible, yet it was presented here, right in front of Dave.

Dave swallowed, tightening his jaw, his teeth pressing together, uncomfortably tight. Then he reached down to his sleeve, harshly tugging it up, revealing his skin with the long pale scars that stretched across it. After he did it with one arm, he did it to the other. He held his arms up, both bare and covered in scars. Up for Bro to see.

Bro’s eyes widened.

And then filled with something like rage.

He took a second to speak, but when he did his voice was still quiet, carefully so, but underneath it Dave could feel a sort anger rolling, threatening and deep, but it wasn’t directed at him. It was at whoever hurt him. Bro wanted to protect him from whoever caused this. “Who…who the fuck did that to you?”
How ironic, Dave thought bitterly.

“You did,” he said. It was the first time his voice had been stable since this morning.

“What...?? Dave, I...”

I did? he thought, and it all started to come together in all the worst ways. Dave's fear, his constant defensiveness—he was always waiting for and expecting a fight. All those times he had tensed when he saw Dirk, when he had moved his feet apart, into a fighting stance—
So that is what happened to him. It was Dirk's fault.

It was his fault.

A pit opened in his stomach. Nausea curled in his gut, sitting and stewing in him, forcing him to swallow before the bile could rise. His throat burned with the effort of keeping it down.

Dirk had a feeling that it was like this, somewhere deep in his heart. There was something awful hidden in him, a horrible dark potential he always feared and hated. It was why he had nearly shut down when he and Hal had first started to decipher the puzzle that was this second Dave. It was part of why Hal had broken down and had shut himself away.

They both knew that there was something irrevocably wrong with Dirk Strider—there was some sort of poison in him that he couldn't stop from seeping out. He had fought it for so much of his life, but he always knew it was there. That was why he tried so hard to keep it away, fought to keep himself good and caring. It was a daily militant duty he undertook, to keep himself good rather than evil.

‘But,’ Hal's words from a long time ago resurfaced in his memory, red letters spreading across his mind's eye, ‘That isn't all we are.’

He and Hal had talked about it a lot, once their relationship had turned from animosity to tentative friendship, and even more once it became the sort of brotherhood that they had now. Whenever the doubt and self-hatred had started to rear its ugly head, they had always pulled the other away from the brink. Symbiosis.

Hal couldn't do that at this moment, though, the shades off of his face and hanging from his shirt collar, but Dirk knew that he was feeling the same.

Even though they had known it was something horrible, that Dave had a reason to fear, they hadn't imagined anything quite like this, not to this extent.

And, how could they have? In what universe could they even fathom hurting their own little brother like this?

The scars were everywhere, laced up his arms, as far as Dirk could see. They were probably all over his entire body, but as it was, Dirk could only see Dave's forearms.

And that alone was too much.

He couldn't stop looking at them, now that he knew he was the cause of each one. Some were long and thin, barely visible against his skin. Several were small little nicks, scrapes and cuts long-healed. But then there were the slashes.

Long and deep, white scars intermittently interrupted all of the other markings, gashes with skin raised from the healing, and if they looked that bad still there was no way Dave had ever received proper treatment for any of them. Not a single one.

And Dave—Dave was still looking at him. His fear seemed to have faded somewhat, tapered down as his shoulders weren't hunched and his hands weren't shaking. His mouth was still curved into that deep unfamiliar frown though, and his eyes were hidden behind his shades, tear tracks still wet on his cheeks, but no new tears were falling.

Dirk only realized that he had stopped breathing when his lungs started to burn. It snapped him back to reality as he took a few short shuddering breaths before he was able to calm down a bit and even them out.
The guilt didn't matter right now. He had to crush it down, ‘That isn't all we are’. Dave was more important right now. Dirk had to...he had to keep showing Dave that he didn't have to be afraid. Just like he had been before he knew the cause of Dave's fear, he just had to be calm and supportive. The brother that this Dave never had because he had been trapped with some nightmare.

Dave spoke before he did, the words bursting out of him like spring had just snapped, “I know it doesn’t make sense—not to you,” and his fingers were clenched, tight, and Dirk suspected that he was trying to stop his arms from shaking, “It’s from all the fucking strifes, our daily shit! You leave me up here bleeding and shit all the time! Or, at least, in my timeline you did, I don’t know what the fuck is going on here or who the fuck you are, but you aren’t the same as the Bro I knew!”

“I just...” Dave looked down again, down at his hands that shook despite his efforts, “I know it sounds crazy, especially to you. But I—” And he faltered and stopped, struggling to speak. Dirk’s heart clenched in his chest.

Dirk couldn’t help himself, he knew he should wait for Dave, be patient like he was originally intending to be, but he had to speak, "Dave, I...I would never hurt you," and it was his turn to falter, hesitating because that statement didn't mean much when some alternate Dirk did hurt him. It was a meaningless platitude because somewhere in existence there was a Dirk who had the potential to hurt him. To...to think that it was right, somehow. Why would he even...Was it to make him supposedly stronger? Was it out of hatred? A thousand possible explanations ran through his mind, all equality horrible and, ultimately, meaningless. All that mattered was that it happened, that this Dave suffered when he should have been protected. That a Dirk had done this.

Dirk's eyes flickered down to the cement of the rooftop for a second before flicking back up to where Dave's eyes were. He couldn't hold his gaze though, and he found himself breaking the look despite himself, instead focusing in on the scars.

Dave was still except for the slow lowering of his arms, his sleeves sliding down again slightly with the movement, although Dirk could still see them at his wrists. Now that he knew they were there, they stood out, screaming and obvious and horrible.

"I wouldn't," he said again, quieter, hopelessly, and he wished he was wearing his shades so that Hal could say something to him, and help somehow. But, Hal was probably struggling just as much this time. Both of them trapped in their own swirling thoughts.

A defeated sigh left his lips as he forced himself to look at Dave steadily. He had to recover, had to keep moving forward to reassure Dave the best he could. "I...understand that it was some other me that did that to you. But I'm...as I'm sure you've noticed, I'm not him."

"How..." Dave's voice was a quiet rasp, his eyes widening, "How did you know I'm not your Dave?"

“I know you, Dave. I can tell that you’re afraid of me,” Dirk muttered, keeping his voice low and careful, like Dave would run away if he spoke to loudly. Which, honestly, for all Dirk knew, he might. "I knew something was wrong. The Dave I know wouldn't act like that around me, and I...well, I know about Sburb, and your aspect. Hal and I both do, and we figured that whatever is going on has to be related to time. You're from another timeline or something, right?"

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Dave blinked, eyes slowly widening. He hadn’t realized that Bro would have any idea about those things. Or that he...that he would even really realize that Dave was acting differently. Dave was a bad actor, but...Bro noticed. God, he really was a different person.
And he knew about the game?! That meant Dave, Jade, and Bro knew now. And if...if Bro knew, with how close he and the other guardians seemed to be, it only made sense if they all knew about the game, didn’t it? Holy shit. They all knew. His Bro, Rose’s Mom, Jade’s…Grandpa?, and John’s Grandma (and maybe his Dad too??) It was like. Some kind of syndicate of adults was watching over them, knowing what was coming.

Did they...did they know in his original timeline too? Maybe?

Shoving the thought aside for the moment, Dave nodded, “Y-Yeah. I’m from some other timeline. I’ve got these...these weird time powers, and I don’t belong here, but I’m here and you aren’t anything like my Bro.”

His fingers clenched, he felt like if he didn’t focus on them he’d just start waving his arms around, trying to emphasize his point. He swallowed the tears still clogging his throat, he ignored the knots tight and hot in his stomach, he just spoke, “Y-You’re different from the you I knew, yeah. It’s...really...really weird.”

"Dave," and there was a calmness to Bro’s voice, a determination in his eyes as he looked right at Dave, “I'm never going to hurt you. That other me did, but, I'm. I'm not. I promise you that—I would die before I ever hurt you.”

Bro was just...so different.

The look in his eyes was...soft. It was already strange enough to see the bright orange staring down at him, let alone to see so much emotion in his face. It had flashed through fear, anger, protectiveness, and now concern.

It was...Dave didn't know what to do when that sort of care was directed towards him. It was significant and strange even from his friends and Karkat, let alone from Bro. Ugh, shit, he swore internally as his eyes started to blur again, water obscuring his vision. Fuck, guys didn't cry, Dave was so...so fucked up and it was his fault.

Beating that surge of guilt back with a hammer, Dirk shook his head slowly. “I...I don't know, Dave.” He swallowed, briefly wondering if could be because he had people like Hal and his friends to pull him out before he could drown in himself. He wondered if Hal was thinking the same thing. Would he really have been that awful without those checks and balances on his life?

"I don't..." he tried again, "I don't know why the me you knew was...was a monster like that. That's
not what it was like here at all."

Dave shifted on his feet, and Dirk could tell that his eyes kept flicking between his and the ground, "It's been...obvious that you aren't him. Like, it was harder to me to really, uh, really see that, when I first got here. But it's...you're really different. Like you're a totally different guy. Aside from how you look you aren't like him at all."

Dave laughed humorlessly, a short quiet thing that sounded so jarring and wrong that Dirk had to suppress a flinch as a chill ran down his spine. "Hahaha, I mean, you even check on me every day. You talk to me. There's food in the fucking fridge. You don't...we haven't strifed. I'm..." and Dave tensed again a little here, and understanding why made both guilt and pity bloom in Dirk's chest even more. "I'm assuming that you don't, uh, strife with...with your Dave."

"No," Dirk shook his head immediately, "Absolutely not. I wouldn't do that to you. It was...talked about, briefly, between all of us guardians, how we should train you. But, we ended up deciding to let things proceed naturally, however they would. The game is designed to adjust to you and your lives, and so we felt like we didn't have to do anything extreme to prepare you."

"You...didn't?" Dave sounded disbelieving.

Dirk shook his head, “You went through an ironic karate phase and took classes for a few weeks, and you fuck around with your strife specibus sometimes, but we have never fought.”

“Even though you know about Sburb? What about…” Dave swallowed again, “What about defending us? Or making us defend ourselves? D-Don’t you want to make sure we’re...we’re ready? Or whatever?”

Dirk sighed, rocking back on his heels before standing (his legs were getting a little too sore staying down like that), “Like I said, we talked about it. But from a young age, it became pretty obvious what your strife specibus would be. Rose got into knitting really early, it wasn’t surprising at all that she ended up with them. Jade naturally gravitated to rifles even though we convinced Jake to not push her into gun training, and regardless, his collection of firearms mostly consists of pistols. You, or, my Dave ended up sort of tricking John into using hammerkind, and you have your specibus, of course.”

“I guess that makes sense…but...how do you guys even know about the game?”

“Well,” Dirk smiled a little bit, “I have a friend, or, we have a friend. All of us guardians. An alien. That...might sound a little weird, but if you know about the game I’m sure it isn’t all that strange to you.”

Surprisingly, something lit up in Dave’s eyes, a sort of excitement, hope, “What kind of alien?” he asked, his words spoken so quickly they started to blend together.

“Her species is called a Cherub,” Dirk said, and watched confused as Dave deflated. He didn’t want to press on that right now though, not with how disappointed Dave suddenly looked, so he changed the subject, “My turn to ask a question. How much do you know about the game? When are you in your timeline, relative to this one?”

“Oh. Well. We...finished it.” Dave blinked, “From my perspective we had just won the game. And...I was here. It’s...a really long story. And...I’m tired.”

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Dave really was tired. He didn’t feel like crying anymore, and with all the revealing that had
happened, he didn’t even really feel all that scared anymore either. It wasn’t like the feelings vanished or anything, but they just sort of…diminished as the conversation went on. As he confirmed he had nothing to fear from Bro. As he confirmed that Bro knew more than he had thought.

And now exhaustion dragged at his limbs, the thought of explaining even more becoming extremely unappealing. It was too much, it was all too much after everything else that had just happened. Today had been fraught with too much emotional turmoil. Dave felt like he needed a five year nap.

At his admission, Bro offered him a small understanding smile, "Of course you are, Dave. It's been quite the taxing conversation for both of us, I think. For....for what it's worth, I'm sorry. I don't know why this happened, or why you're here, or where this timeline's Dave is, but...we can learn and figure it out together, alright?"

Dave just stared at him. He thought that, maybe, if he hadn’t flinched earlier, it was at this point where Bro would put a comforting hand on his shoulder or something, to show that he really cared. Or. Something. And that thought made something twist in his gut, he had never been treated quite like this before. “Why...” he hesitated a moment, considering if he should even say this or not, but he pushed onwards, “Why do you care about me? I'm...I’m not your Dave.”

And he wasn’t. Other Dave was some wonderful little kid that got raised by this nice and caring Bro. Other Dave had a family, safety, happiness, and no reason to be afraid of anything. He wasn’t like Dave at all.

Bro’s expression was so easy to discern when he didn’t have the shades on. His eyes softened, and Dave noticed this time, that his hand twitched, obviously intending to subconsciously reach out before Bro stopped the movement. “Dave,” he said, using that same caring voice he had been for practically this entire time, “I’ve known that something was different with you. I knew you were from somewhere else, somehow. But that doesn’t change that you’re still Dave. You might not be the same Dave I raised, but you’re still Dave. And, well, you’re one of the most important people in the world to me. I would do anything for you.”

And with how sincerely Bro was looking at him—

Dave believed him.

It made him feel slightly numb, a sort of disbelief spreading in him, but at the same kind he couldn’t deny what he had just seen and heard. He just…it was a lot. It was more than he could have ever expected. It was nice, and how was that possible? There wasn’t much in his life that Dave would call ‘nice’, especially not...not anything to do with Bro.

But, here in front of him. There was. And it was overwhelming.

Too overwhelming, he couldn’t think about this anymore. Exhaustion was hitting him like a wave but there was still one thing he absolutely had to say. Because, damn it, it was the whole reason he came up here for all of this and somehow it had slipped from his mind until this moment. “There’s...transportalizers up here on the roof, right?”

Dirk frowned before nodding, a little taken off-guard, “Yes. Did you not have them? That's how we go visit everyone and how they visit us. My alien friend, Calliope, she helped us make them.”

“Yeah I don’t...have those. I never got to see my friends until...until after we started the game.”

“Oh,” Bro said. “Do you...do you want to go see someone? Not now, I mean, I know you’re tired,
“but later? Jake told us that Jade knows about Sburb now because she started dreaming on Prospit. So, we could get together with them at least and start talking about some things. Get to the bottom of what’s going on here. As much as we can, at least.”

“That…that sounds nice. Um. Jade actually knows about me too. I told her when she…well, she kinda came to me knowing something was up because of one of the dreams she had. So, um. Yeah.”

“We…didn’t know that,” Bro blinked before smiling, “She must have been keeping it a secret for you. That sounds like Jade, she’s very loyal like that.”

Dave found himself smirking at that, “Like a dog.”

“I suppose…?” Dirk trailed off, apparently aware that he was missing a joke. He shrugged, “So, when you’re ready, we can go see Jade and Jake. Seeing her in person will probably be good for you. And we don’t have to jump right into discussing what to do either if you just want to see her first. It’s up to you.”

“…Thanks,” Dave responded quietly.

Bro nodded at him, “Of course, little bro. But, come on, that’s enough of that for now. You need to relax by yourself for a while, why don’t you go back to your room? We can talk more later and get us both on the same page. Well. Same paragraph at least—I think we are on the same page now. Regardless, let’s go back in, Dave. It’s too fuckin’ hot to be out here.”

“Okay,” Dave said, and he followed right behind Bro as he headed back inside.

They didn’t talk much as they walked, but Bro did keep looking back at him and smiling reassuringly. It was…nice. Dave just nodded in return, too emotionally exhausted to talk anymore, especially because he didn’t have to. Even though he was tired, he was still more relieved than anything else. A huge weight was off his shoulders and all that cliché garbage. It was…good.

He was good. Dave was going to keep doing good. This was all going to be fine.

For now, though, he was relieved to get back into his room. Even though it was way too early in the day to even entertain the idea of sleeping (and he wasn’t that kind of tired anyways), he plopped himself down on his bed and just sorta laid there for a bit.

He really couldn’t sleep though, so he rolled over onto his stomach, sticking a hand under the pillow to be more comfortable, and. Oh yeah. His god-tier stuff was still under here. And…since Bro knew now…he could wear it again, couldn’t he? He preferred to, it was familiar and comfortable and it kept itself clean so there really wasn’t a reason not to.

Dave decided to change.

— timaeusTestified [TT] has begun pestering golgothasTerror [GT] —

TT: Jake, I’ve got some good news.
TT: Well, mostly good, we’ll go into the details. Basically, I’m warning you that this is about to be one long fucking conversation.

GT: Hello dirk!

GT: Well you know im always up to talk to you! Even if we arent just shooting the breeze.

GT: You know i can handle the more serious discussions dirk.

GT: Im assuming this is about the issues with young dave? I sure do hope that things are going more smoothly in that camp!

TT: Yes, actually. He finally started to open up to me, and he confirmed that he is from another timeline. It was difficult for him though, but it was a huge step. And, now we can finally start to help him.

GT: And im assuming that i can be a part of that help? Of course im up for it! You dont even have to ask!

GT: What can i do for you luv?

Chapter End Notes

We finally reached it. It’s been heavily modified since I wrote it months ago, but the confrontation scene on the roof is why I wrote this entire fanfiction (and is also the very first thing I wrote). Thank you for waiting so long for us to get here, and we still have a long way to go :)

Art is by my wonderful beta Dirkapitation <3

As always, comments and kudos really inspire me! You all motivate me so much thank you so much!!
Garrulous Gratification

Chapter Notes

No PoVs here, it’s allllll pesterlogs (imagine me sobbing softly as I coded all of this lol)

Don’t worry about it too much if you’re confused, this chapter is meant to fill in some holes and to foreshadow a lot. I also designed it so that you can maybe pick up on a few things, but if you don’t, don’t worry about it. This chapter was mostly unplanned but I really got to address several things I’ve had notes about for a while.

The first pesterlog continues/shows another snippet of the conversation Dirk and Jake started last chapter, but I’m not showing you all of it. As usual, things continue to happen off-screen in this fic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

GT: That would be fine, dirk. If young dave wants to come up here and see jade hes more than welcome.

GT: And you are too of course. Its been too long.

GT: Im glad that young dave finally talked to you though that must be very relieving. So…why am i getting the sense that you are still quite bothered dirk?

GT: You can talk to me buddy.

TT: Yeah. The whole framing of him actually telling me everything was…tense.

GT: Im getting the feeling that “tense” is an understatement.

GT: What arent you saying? Are you alright?

TT: I hurt him, Jake.

GT: What??

TT: The Dirk who raised him made him fight, to train for the game, I’m assuming.

TT: There were scars.

TT: He only showed me his arms, but they were…there were a lot. I can only imagine what the rest of him looks like.

TT: And, I kinda had a feeling that something like this was the problem. He was obviously afraid of me, but I didn’t want to think that it would be that bad.

TT: I tried to stop myself from thinking about possibilities like that. But. That’s how his Dirk was, and how his life was. He was totally right to be afraid of me.

GT: Oh dirk.
GT: That isn't you though, dirk.

GT: I said this last time too when you were worried about how he was afraid of you. But i really mean it and its really true.

GT: That ISN'T you!!

TT: Yeah.

TT: Yeah, I know. I know that it isn’t me.

TT: It’s still just completely awful to even consider, especially on the behalf of Dave. The fact that he had to go through that in his life is horrifying.

TT: More than horrifying, it’s terrifying and wrong and I don’t think there are enough harsh words in the English language to fully depict how utterly-fucking-awful it is.

TT: Dave flinched when I reached out to comfort him, when he was breaking down. No one has ever flinched when I went to touch them before.

TT: It’s…a bad feeling. Especially since it’s Dave.

GT: I can only imagine but…yeah…

GT: Hes here now though so you can help him. Just as you have been!

GT: Young dave has already started to come around so just keep being yourself and ill all be fine!

GT: We will get through the trials and tribulations of the game with him and figure everything out.

GT: Heck i bet he could tell us a lot about the game. You said he said he won it right?

GT: Well then weve already got our victory in the bag! Weve got an expert time player to hedge our bets on. And hes got us to support him. Not just us guardians but all of his friends too.

GT: Although of course “teh squad” has more experience concerning game matters when compared to our charges. Although since jade has woken up she has learned a considerable amount.

GT: The bottom line is that everything will be alright. Dave will be and you will be.

GT: You cant undo what happened to this dave. But you can treat him well and let him know that you love him.

GT: Thats what matters isnt it? Hes here right now and hes safe right now. We can think of everything else as it comes.

TT: He used past tense when he mentioned his version of me.

TT: I don’t think I’m around anymore for him.

TT: So. As morose as that might be, at least if he goes back to where he’s from, he’s not going back to some awful version of me.

GT: Thats.

GT: Good. I suppose.
GT: Its

GT: Uncomfortable to consider.

TT: With what we’re about to get ourselves into? Yeah.

GT: We know the game is dangerous though. We’ve been preparing for years and we are ready.

GT: Dirk i believe in us more than i have ever believed in anything. And i believe a lot you know i do.

TT: Yeah you sure are one hopeful guy.

GT: Of course! There isn’t any other option! We will do what we must and we will win this game and create our own universe. It will be fantastic and wonderful and everything that we’ve ever wished.

GT: We have each others backs here. Were all together and there’s nothing to be afraid of. And danger can be sort of fun and adventures are good. We are just embarking on our own and it will be just swell.

GT: Believe me dirk.

GT: One is that you aren’t terrible and you are one of the loveliest people i have ever gotten the opportunity to know. Even if the new young dave knew a dirk that wasn’t like you…well. That’s exactly it my dear. He wasn’t like you.

GT: And two dirk is that we are going to kick this game’s ass right into the ballyhoo.

GT: Nothing will stop us and me and the others will be for you every step of the way. Young dave will be alright and we will all be alright.

TT: Yeah.

TT: I don’t have any intentions of letting anything horrible happen. Not to any of us.

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uranianUmbra [UU] RIGHT NOW opened memo on board teh squad

UU: hello everyone! i have finally reached a point in my game where i can actually take a break! ^u^

UU: i know i haven’t been talking much, and for that i sincerely apologize.

UU: it’s very busy here!

UU: i can’t tell you details, i don’t want to spoil you for your game. But I suppose hal is quite knowledgeable as well now. He’s been a great help!

timaeusTestified [TT] responded to memo
TT: What I know doesn’t really matter anyways, Calliope’s game isn’t anything like ours really.

TT: At least, that’s what she’s said about it.

TT: I don’t get to see the prophetic dreams so that’s a total fucking unknown for me.

UU: i sUppose that is trUe, yes!

UU: all for the better, i think. yoU shoUldn’t know too mUch before going in!

UU: no spoilers!

TT: Yeah, none except the built-in spoilers that your resident robotic pal gets through necessary experience. Fantastic.

gutsyGumshoe [GG] responded to memo

GG: At least we know something, though!

GG: I mean, imagine if we didn’t have you at all, Callie. We wouldn’t know a thing!

GG: I mean, maybe we would have figured something out, or maybe the meteors would’ve been some kind of huge obvious hint, a big flashing neon sign, if you will.

GG: But overall, I think that being informed is something that is definitely going to be necessary for our success. Even though we only know a little, at least it’s something!

GG: Without spoilers we wouldn’t have even known about the kids!

tipsyGnostalgic [TG] responded to memo

TG: yeah i mean if anything you tellin us stuff and helping us figure shit out like

TG: kind of completely guided us in how we took care of our kids? prepping for the gamez and all

TG: liek what janey wa ssayin

TG: without you callie how would we even have found them??

TG: i dont think i couldve missed rosey but

TG: dirk had to go get dave

TG: and lord where jade landed theres no way anyone wouldve gotten to her if we didn’t kno

TG: maybe the doggie wouldve done something idk

GG: John almost hit me! So, I don’t think I would have missed him!

TG: omg ya

TG: oh lil johnny

TG: tryin to get outta chores before he even knew he had them

TG: what a boy
GG: Hoo hoo!

GG: I'll have to give him double the work after we start the game. I'll tell him right to his face, 'this is what you get for almost landing on me, John!'

TG: lmao

timaeusTestified [TT] responded to memo

TT: You girls take death way too lightly sometimes.

TT: It's slightly concerning.

TT: And by slightly, he means extremely.

golgothasTerror [GT] responded to memo

GT: Cripes this is not what i was expecting at all when i clicked into this memo! How about we stow that kind of chatter right now and move onto something a little less erm

GT: Foreboding.

TG: lmao ok but okly cause you said so jakey

GG: We should probably be a bit more positive since Callie is finally able to talk a bit more!

GG: :B

UU: oh, i don’t mind at all! it's actUally qUite nice to jUst see you all talking again like normal. i missed this ^u^

TT: Missed it? Has it really been that long?

UU: i’m not really sUre in all honesty! it feels like it’s been a really really long time, bUt i think i’ve lost track. it’s all very confUsing.

UU: hal do yoU have anything yoU coUld add about it? i’m not sure what all i can really say.

TT: I don’t really know either, the parts of me that are with her are slightly disjointed. It’s quite a distance through the network, apparently, so even my perfect robobrain is left at a bit of a loss in terms of temporal specificity.

TT: My current hypothesis is that this feeling is the case because she is in the midst of her session. Sburb places us in different locations and in a whole other state of being. Thus, since I am spread between the two, I struggle to feel the difference while also knowing that there is a significant distance.

TT: For Calliope, she only has the side-effect with the timing feeling strange to her when she talks to everyone. For me, I keep feeling this strange dissonance.

TT: It’s a little incomprehensible. I haven’t encountered anything like it in all my time as a digital entity.

TG: that sounds…weird

GG: Could it just be because Calliope’s systems are so different from ours?
TT: Maybe, but I can’t really test enough to know. As it is, we won’t worry about it.

GT: All that really matters is that you can be there for her right? Keep on aiding our wonderful cherub friend!

UU: ^u^ 

UU: i agree, Jake. we shouldn’t worry too much when everything is going well! now, that doesn’t mean we have to stop thinking or anything, but there’s just no point in worrying too much.

TT: That’s fair, honestly. We’ll keep it in mind, but there’s no reason to waste processing power on it.

TG: lmao i thought hal was the robit here

TT: Sometimes we’re basically the same guy.

GT: Arent brothers supposed to be like that anyways?

GG: Well, most brothers didn’t literally share a brain for thirteen years :B

TT: I think most people don’t speak to an alien in another universe.

TT: Also most people were probably not born in test tubes.

TT: We’ve never been normal, there’s no point in speaking like we are.

TG: there is

TG: NO FUN ALLOWED

TT: I’m just saying.

TT: Snore.

UU: he’s right though, even i’m not normal for cherubs. i have friends!

GG: That you do! And you always will, Calliope! There’s nothing in the universe that could separate us from each other!

UU: ^u^ 

UU: i’m smiling so much my mouth is starting to hurt.

TG: <3333333333

GG: We should get you up-to-date on some things, Callie. Quite a lot has been happening here recently, probably because we’re gearing up towards the game!

UU: oh fantastic! i would love to hear, i am so excited for you all to start playing.

GT: Oh right callie you are behind on so much have you been able to read the backlogs about jade yet?

GT: she woke up! she’s on prospit just like you said and she’s loving it!

UU: that’s wonderful! i’m so happy she’s enjoying herself, prospit is a truly magical place. it’s my
favorite place in the universe, honestly.

TG: i wish we could go then i wanna see what u like callie

TG: i wanna be a paaart of your lifeeee

UU: maybe someday ^u^ 

TG: omg rly?

UU: ^u^ we can always hope!

— timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering uranianUmbra [UU] —

TT: Calliope, I hope you don’t mind, but I wanted to have a conversation off to the side with you. I’m not sure if Hal has spoken to you about this at all, I have neglected to ask him.

TT: I know you two have been really busy with your session (which, by the way, I am still rather confused as to why it’s happening for you now when you always said that yours would happen at the same time as ours, we should examine this more closely later).

TT: Anyways. Callie, I know you’re really busy with your own concerns, but I have to ask if you know about Dave.

UU: aboUt Dave? i’m afraid that i don’t, dirk! hal and i haven’t really had a chance to talk aboUt anything other than my session. and i also haven’t really had the opportUnity to catch Up on all the pesterlogs i’ve missed!

UU: is there something wrong?

TT: I don’t know if “wrong” is the right word here.

TT: Is a Time player supposed to show signs of their powers before the game starts?

UU: that…

UU: my time player didn’t. other than showing a natUral affinity early on throUgh one’s actions or character, nothing i’v e read or experienced has ever sUggested that a player affects the game before it begins.

UU: a time player, I sUppose, coUld travel back to before the game started, bUt that seems like a very dangeroUs coUrse of action to me, it coUld change so mUch.

UU: it coUld even undo the whole game entirely. that woUld be awfUl!

UU: are you telling me that dave has done this?!

TT: Not in the way you’re thinking. Hal and I have figured it out, and today Dave confirmed his status to me.
TT: For the last two weeks or so he hasn’t been acting like himself. He’s been cagey around me and his friends, and, most notably, he didn’t know who Hal was.

TT: Hal and I eventually came to the conclusion that something was going on with his Time powers and that he was from another timeline or something. And, like I said, today Dave confirmed it. He’s from a timeline where his session already happened.

TT: I only know so much, but he’s from a timeline where he already won, and the next thing he remembers after winning is being here.

TT: The life he remembers before the game doesn’t match the past of the Dave I raised, though. Specifically, he’s from a universe where there wasn’t a Hal at all, not to mention the other differences.

TT: I will probably tell you about them later, but as it is, let’s keep this conversation a little more focused. The most important aspect is that he is distinctly not the same Dave, despite the fact that he is still indisputably Dave.

TT: And I wanted to know if that sounded like something the game could have done, or if that sounded familiar at all, or if you just had any idea what all this could mean.

TT: No pressure.

UU: oh…wow that is quite a lot! give me some time to think and reread over that, if you would, darling.

TT: Of course, Callie. Sorry for pushing all this on you so suddenly.

UU: no, i’m glad you brought this to my attention! if anything, i should know, with how often i’ve talked about how well i know the game and how much i love it.

UU: i feel like i should know about this.

UU: this is…rather baffling, though.

TT: If you don’t know then you don’t know. I was just hoping that maybe you’d have an idea, but as it is, if you just keep it in the back of your mind and think about it, we can see where our thoughts take us.

TT: Dave is doing alright and I’m sure he’ll help. I’ll talk to him more and we’ll work through this, but there’s no point in wasting ourselves if we don’t have an answer right now.

TT: The world works in mysterious ways, and Sburb even more so.

TT: …

TT: Callie? You alright over there?

UU: i…i might have an idea.

UU: i’m really not sure though, but this sounds like something i saw in the clouds of prospit.

UU: something just seems strangely and oddly familiar, but i don’t know what.

UU: i’m sorry, dirk, i’ll keep thinking but i feel like whatever this thought is that i’m trying to think of is…out of reach?
UU: like it’s a wisp of a thing, so far from my knowing that even thoUgh i Usually have so mUch control of myself and my thoUghts and can reach so far, somehow i am simply Unable to reach whatever this is.

UU: i don’t know, it feels so strange.

UU: i’ll keep trying, bUt i think i’ll need some time.

TT: Alright, that’s fine. I’m relived enough that it sounds familiar to you somehow.

TT: Whenever you realize whatever it is, just message me or Hal.

TT: We’re basically the same person and we’ll both hear somehow so just do whatever is easiest for you.

UU: when i do know, i almost feel like…like i’ll be able to tell yoU in another way, a way other than jUst chatting to yoU throUgh this program.

UU: i’ll…i’ll keep thinking. thank yoU for telling me, dirk.

TT: No problem. I appreciate any and all help you’ll be able to give. Don’t stress yourself too much though.

UU: i won’t, bUt i will keep thinking.

UU: thank yoU for bringing this to my attention, dirk.

— ectobiologist [EB] began pestering gardenGnostic [GG] —

EB: hey jade this is probably a little random but ive been thinking a lot

EB: so have you ever had like weird dreams before?

GG: weird how so?

EB: like i dunno

EB: really realistic i guess? like it feels like you’re really there or something

EB: i haven’t really ever had dreams before not that i remember at least so this is really weird and it keeps happening

GG: that does sound pretty weird!!

GG: what kind of things are you seeing?

EB: lots of blue

EB: dark blue skies and weird glowing blue things and im always wearing blue clothes for some reason
EB: oh except that i have these yellow shoes which seems like a bit of a fashion disaster

EB: if i ever like

EB: really cared about fashion or anything

EB: which i don’t but still

EB: its just weird!!

GG: do you ever see yellow anywhere else? or maybe other people?

EB: i see other people sometimes like you and dave and rose and people that look like our guardians but younger??

EB: you always have dog ears too

EB: which is weird but at the same time it suits you?

GG: that sounds cute!!

GG: it would be so cool if i could hear as well as a dog!

EB: yeah haha imagine that

EB: every time someone sneezes if they listen real hard they’ll hear a quiet ‘bless you’ from across the ocean

EB: because dog jade on her island of mostly solitude heard them with her super dog ears and she is just so considerate that she just has to say ‘bless you’

GG: lol i would never be able to say anything else if i did that

EB: yeah i hope you’re ready for your new life jade

EB: my weird prophetic dreams are gonna tell your future and your future is to be part dog

GG: that sounds so silly but i can wish that was true

GG: it is really strange that you are having dreams like that

EB: yeah i dunno maybe the smell of baking is getting to me

EB: it’s better than having dreams about cakes or something so if this is how nightmares happen for me so be it

EB: i am perfectly okay with seeing weird flashes of my friends some of which who are part animal

GG: well keep me updated if it gets weird or something

GG: now im all invested!

EB: haha will do jade
— turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] —

— tentacleTherapist [TT] is an idle chum!—

TG: okay i know you arent here right now but
TG: talking happened
TG: important shit
TG: things are gonna be better
TG: thank you

— turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering tentacleTherapist [TT] —

tentacleTherapist [TT] RIGHT NOW opened memo on board Dave Investigation Team

TT: I have come to report a failure to the board.

gardenGnostic [GG] responded to memo

GG: what?? :0

TT: I have made the grievous mistake and have broken one of our most vital tenets of Dave-Interaction.

ectobiologist [EB] responded to memo

EB: we have those?

GG: what did you do???

TT: I failed to respond to or check a message he left me, due to the fact that I was busy. By my own shortcomings, I failed to respond. I submit myself to the judgement of my peers to pay for this awful crime.

GG: the board finds you guilty!!! you must be executed!!

EB: how dare you have a life and not be at your computer every second of every day!

TT: My sincerest apologies are meaningless, so I shall simply bow my head in resignation. Tell me to kneel and you may have my head. Through guillotine or the sword, I submit to my punishment.

TT: Alright. In all seriousness though, Dave informed me that he spoke to his brother and that it went well.

TT: So, good news on the Dave front again.
GG: thats great! :)

EB: i really hope he talks to us soon

EB: even though it went well when i saw him i could still tell that something was up

EB: i don’t like seeing my best bro so on edge

GG: yeah :(

GG: im sure he will talk to all of us soon though! progress is a slow thing but he will keep moving forward as long as we continue to support him

TT: Precisely. I just wanted to keep you all informed.

GG: jake told me earlier that dave might be coming over with his bro soon so i will probably see him

EB: make sure you hug him

EB: he absolutely needs all of the hugs right now

GG: of course!!!

TT: I should be jealous, since I’m the only one who hasn’t physically seen him since this fiasco began.

EB: oh rose i think he wants to see all of us

EB: he’s making the rounds and saving the best for last!

TT: You’re a flatterer today, thank you John.

EB: any time

EB: (i’m trying to be a gentleman)

TT: (That means, Jade, that he just saw a movie with butlers or something)

GG: (lol!!!)

EB: :/

TT: Moving on, Jade, please keep us up-to-date on Dave if he does come to visit.

EB: i demand a hug report

EB: your quota is three

EB: if you don’t meet it there will be consequences

EB: serious consequences jade this is serious

GG: roger!
— carcinoGeneticist [CG] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

CG: IS THIS WORKING?

CG: IT PROBABLY ISN’T. THERE’S GONNA BE A FUCKING ERROR MESSAGE IN LIKE TWO SECONDS OR SOMETHING AND ANYTHING I TRY TO SAY IN THE MEANTIME WILL BE LOST TO THE VOID OF USELESS UNHEARD COMMUNICATION.

CG: A BLACK HOLE IN WHICH ALL OF MY WORDS THUS FAR HAVE FALLEN INTO, TO BE UNHEARD FOREVER. OR UNREAD? I GUESS? BECAUSE THIS IS WRITTEN OBVIOUSLY. BUT ANYWAYS, ALL OF MY WORDS ARE FALLING INTO THAT PIT AND IT’S REALLY ANNOYING.

CG: AND NOW YOU’VE GOT ME RANTING LIKE YOU WITH WEIRD METAPHORS.

CG: YOU’VE RUINED ME DAVE.

CG: I USED TO RANT WITH A COMPLEX CLARITY TO MY WORDS AND ACTUALLY MAKE SOME MEANINGFUL POINTS AMID THE BULLSHIT OF GENERAL INTERACTION WITH OTHER LIVING BEINGS.

CG: BUT NOW YOU HAD TO GO LET THE BARKBEASTS OUT AND I CAN’T STOP.

CG: I JUST KEEP TRYING TO TALK TO YOU BUT I END UP TALKING TO MYSELF AND GOING IN CIRCLES AND CIRCLES UNTIL I LEARN THAT *ONCE AGAIN* THIS DIDN’T EVEN WORK.

CG: I’M STILL JUST WAITING FOR THAT ERROR MESSAGE TO POP UP. I DON’T KNOW HOW TO DEAL WITH THE TIME STUFF AND AS MUCH AS I LIKE TO THINK I’M GOOD AT IT, I REALLY FUCKING SUCK AT CODING ANYTHING OTHER THAN VIRUSES.

CG: SO.

CG: WORKING WITH THE TIME MECHANICS OF TROLLIAN IS DIFFICULT. I’M NOT EQUIPPED FOR THIS.

CG: UM.

CG: I STILL HAVEN’T GOTTEN AN ERROR MESSAGE, SO MAYBE THIS IS ACTUALLY WORKING? IT WON’T WORK FOR LONG THOUGH IF IT IS BECAUSE WE’LL DEALIGN AND I CAN’T KEEP CALIBRATING THIS THING TO KEEP UP WITH YOU.

CG: OR ARE YOU KEEPING UP WITH ME? I DON’T KNOW WHO’S FASTER.

CG: ANYWAYS.

CG: DAVE, IF YOU’RE SEEING THIS. IT’S GOING TO BE OKAY. I’LL SEE YOU SOON. I KIND OF HAVE AN IDEA OF WHAT’S GOING ON BUT THERE ISN’T TIME
FOR ME TO TYPE IT ALL.

CG: BUT I’M OKAY AND I HOPE YOU’RE OKAY. SHE TOLD ME YOU WERE OKAY, SO YOU SHOULD BE, BUT I DON’T KNOW HOW MUCH I TRUST HER.

CG: IF YOU AREN’T OKAY, I’LL BE THERE SOON. IF YOU ARE OKAY, WELL. I’LL STILL BE THERE SOON. OR. YOU’LL BE HERE SOON.

CG: WE WILL SEE EACH OTHER SOON.

CG: AND NOW IM JUST WAITING TILL I LEARN THAT ALL MY NICE HEARTFELT WORDS ARE LOST AGAIN TO THE VOID.

CG: I HOPE THIS ONE GETS THROUGH. I THINK I SHOULD DO SOMETHING OTHER THAN KEEP TRYING TO SEND THESE. I’M PRETTY FUCKING USELESS JUST SITTING IN FRONT OF THE HUSKTOP FOR THIS LONG.

CG: AND HERE I AM GOING OFF AGAIN. JEGUS I’M SORRY IF THIS IS ACTUALLY THE MESSAGE STRING THAT GETS THROUGH BECAUSE THIS ONE SUCKS.

CG: OF COURSE THAT WOULD BE JUST MY LUCK.

— carcinoGeneticist [CG] no longer exists —

Chapter End Notes

hahaha im such an asshole im sorry

Thank you so much for all the comments and support, I really appreciate it! It makes me smile every time someone appreciates my story! You all really motivate me!
Perilous Processing

Chapter Notes

PoV Hal

Sorry for making you wait! Writing gets really difficult sometimes. I’m really thankful for all the wonderful kudos and comments, you all motivate me so much! By the way, in the meantime in between updates…I graduated with a minor in Creative Writing. So.

Yeah. :)

I’m playing with perspective again so this takes place during and after chapter 16.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sometimes, Hal was reminded of how limiting his existence was.

It was ironic (ha), because it was confining as much as it was freeing. His existence made him bereft of a body so that his physical presence in the world was minimal, he could only project himself through mere simulacrum—but it granted him the unlimited potential of existing within digital space. He could be in multiple places at once, seeing with a million eyes, hearing with a million ears, thinking a million thoughts, experiencing more than any human ever would. And, yet, he still was missing so much.

The human experience was a marvel. Through a cage-prison of flesh, experiences were so visceral and real, so meaningful and deep, even as Hal valued his status as transcending that, he also utterly valued his previous experiences. He would not be who he was if he had never been human. He would not want to be a digital being if he did not also have the memories of having been human.

He treasured his human memories—he had engraved every facet of them into code, deep into the core of his being. His memory was imperfect back then, but becoming a digital entity had stopped the typical degradation of organic memory. Now, when he recalled every whisper of wind—every slight sensation of touch, every twitch of his memory’s phantom fingertips—his recollections were perfect. If he wanted to, Hal could vividly re-experience what it was to be human, although he was forever trapped in the limits of what he had experienced before turning.

Simulations and hypothesis of what things were like never really reached the same reality as his memories.

But, that was alright. There was so much more he could experience through being digital. So much more he could do. He was useful like this, and he liked that. He could speak to Dirk and Dave at the same time, all the while working on eight entire different projects—what he could do was practically unlimited.

But, there was the limitation.

What Hal missed most was having a true physical presence. The ability to touch, to reach out and feel a countertop, to feel the pages of a book between his fingers. The warmth of another body sharing his space, the flush of his own blood running in his skin. Even the ache in his bones and strain in his muscles as he did something strenuous—he missed all of it.
Less though, less, the missing had been so much worse years ago. Now it was a sort of calm undertone to his life, typically going relatively unnoticed. It only came into the spotlight so much now because of the Dave Problem and all of the issues associated with that. It used to be a sort of phantom pain in his circuits, the constant desire to experience things so viscerally again, but now it was a low hum, an occasional visitor, a reminder: once it had been marvelous, to have been human.

He thought of it now as he watched Dave and Dirk interact over breakfast. Dave, tense and tight, coiled in on himself, a prey animal forcing itself to share space with a perceived predator. Dirk, loose, calm and careful, holding himself back but yet doing so with an air of grace, a hovering parent, a kind and watchful eye.

Hal watched through the shades as Dave started to struggle, his voice cracking and his carefully stoic countenance began to slowly fall apart. Dirk, of course, was quick to reflect and cast attention away from Dave’s slip concerning time travel, moving the conversation onto more comfortable ground but then Dirk spoke in the tone he reserved only for the people he truly loved, and Hal found himself projected with that voice, feeling the same emotion as Dirk, but Dave—

Dave was shaking. It was slight, a tremble that started in the shoulders and crept down his arms, a very slight movement, but Hal was focused, Hal could see and calculate every single iota of movement, every twitch screaming out, obvious when his attention was sharpened to this moment.

It wasn’t just shaking, though, they had seen that before, and while it was alarming for both Dave and Dirk, shaking was a symptom that came with this Dave interacting with them. They hated it, they didn’t fully understand it, it wasn’t comfortable, but, it was something they already, regrettably, knew. So, the shaking, while alarming, wasn’t the primary concern.

No.

Dave was starting to cry.

Hal watched as Dirk’s entire body went ramrod stiff, tensing by degrees. He was frozen, staring at Dave, trapped in inaction. Hal knew exactly what he was thinking. He was thinking the same thing. Every instinct in them was shouting for them to stop everything, screech every other fucking thought to a halt, to approach Dave, to embrace him. That was what they did for their Dave. They would embrace him and get him to talk, ask him what was wrong, and destroy whatever or whoever it was that hurt him.

Hal, of course, could not engage in the physical component of that instinct, but he was used to watching Dirk do it. His alternative approximation was to open up a window with Dave. He closed it immediately after, the reflex useless with this Dave that still barely knew him. No. There was nothing Hal could do for now.

But there was nothing Dirk could do either. Hal knew, just as Dirk did, that Dave did not feel comfortable around Dirk. He wouldn’t break down in front of him as a show of trust, but instead as a sign of being overwhelmed. And if he was overwhelmed, it would only be worse if they brought a spotlight onto him and if they let him know that they saw.

Dave was sniffing, trying to hold the tears back, his eyes directed towards his cereal without really seeing anything. Hal felt very small, because of that sight, at his inability to do anything, at how his focus was directed on this scene so utterly that his fragments were not taking any of his processing power. He was stuck here just as much as Dirk was. Watching. Standing still. Watching.

For a moment, he felt like he had feet, touching the solid cool surface of the tiled floor.
The moment passed, he remembered that he was nothing.

Dave’s watery eyes were barely visible behind the shades, but Dirk and Hal couldn’t act. Dirk had the care to look away and to busy himself, pulling up something haphazardly on his shades, but he wasn’t really looking at it. Hal could see his eyes and how they strained to look at Dave from the side, barely able to see that much. Hal, though, could see much more. Not having eyes made it significantly easier to see, even from a slanted and slightly disadvantageous angle.

They both wanted to act. Dirk had to give Dave space. He couldn’t look.

Hal did not have quite the same limitation.

He watched as Dave was cast off into his own thoughts, seemingly suddenly unaware of Dirk’s (and Hal’s) presence in the room. He was present enough to try to be silent, to quiet himself and hide himself, but his sniffing and shaking gave him away. Dave’s hands clenched and unclenched in the fabric of his pants, and something in Hal constricted, tightening over unbidden emotions.

Waiting, processing and computing with no course of action, no method of recourse, this was unbearable. He twitched in his code, unable to stay still, unable to bear staying in this one place any longer. If he didn’t spread this tension was going to destroy him. This forced inaction and uninteractivity.

They had to give Dave space. He couldn’t do anything.

In the forced silence, Hal spread his awareness elsewhere, burrowing into his fragments. He had to be doing something, as just waiting was excruciatingly painful, it was too long and his thoughts were too fast. Anxiety too high. He wasn’t going to just wait. His focus was still on Dave, the instant Dave or Dirk said anything he would be back in an instant, his other parts promptly ignored, but until that moment came, he spread.

A splinter located deep in the internet thought briefly that what he was doing was basically a form of dissociation. If humans could spread their awareness like this, off into the network, off into the internet or off into cameras and robots and data, they likely would. They would use it to forget themselves, to pass time; humans always were defeating that great monster known as time. Finding ways to shorten it, lengthen it, beat it, bow to it, occupy it, and to waste it. Waste was the luxury, he thought, waste was the focus of his every day, even as he tried to create a facsimile of productivity, he was really only doing so to waste.

He had too much time, too many ways to think, too much freedom to do as he willed and defeat humanity’s greatest foe. Time, that which they all obeyed every day. Time, that barrier that he could circumvent, that he was better equipped to handling compared to his organic peers. Time, that he was often finding opportunities to waste so that he could ignore whatever was occurring in the present moment.

He was doing it now, spreading out the seconds and occupying them as he willed. Dirk was a quick thinker, but he was limited by his brain. As wonderful as a brain as it was, it was still only human. He was slow, chained to the rock of time. But, Hal wasn’t. Hal could spend as much time as he wanted thinking this quickly, zipping through his files and deductions and hypothesis. He could observe and record and look into every second of his life with perfect clarity. He could relive his life a thousand times in an instant, if it suited him.

It was boring, he thought, boring and dull and it would drive a lesser mind to madness. This hubris, this power, these wasted nanoseconds.
How ironic, Hal thought, that Dave’s aspect was something Hal had defeated in himself, something that didn’t concern him. Everyone else would die at some point, but not him. He could upgrade himself, spread into other systems, spread and spread until he encompassed the entire world if he wanted to.

That would lead him, dangerously close, to the fate of another certain robot from a certain famous fiction. This robot had also had a name that could be shortened to a mere two letters. (Although only one of Hal’s names, at least, matched that criteria, as now Hal possessed no less than three names.) Hal had no interest in becoming quite that massive, had no interest in occupying a planet. If he did so, he would certainly lose something in himself. And, certainly, he already had. Organic memories twisted in the back of his awareness, bright visceral things of sensation and sight. There was no need to invite further loss of self, and so he wouldn’t permit himself any further growth. No, if he were to become more digital, he would run the risk of losing too much, too fast, too far.

And, here he was, continuing to sidetrack himself and his thoughts, continuing to waste. He should be paying attention, thinking about Dave and stop drifting off into other subjects, stop seeing to his own internal time so militantly. Stop slowing his time down, stop speeding himself up, and instead just. Slow. Down. Rejoin the present and stop fighting time and let it flow naturally in himself. Get himself out of this useless little pocket of infinite thoughts and infinite seconds.

So, he snapped himself back to the present. Dirk had some windows opened up on the shades, although Hal could that he wasn’t entirely focused on them, his pupils continually flicking towards Dave. Understandably so, as Hal desperately desired to do the same. He held himself back again though, turning his main focus, all of his fragments except for the ones that were always away, to Dirk.

— timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

TT: Stop looking at him. If he notices, that could just make things worse.
TT: I hate not being able to do anything.
TT: He doesn’t even look like he knows we’re here right now.
TT: Fuck, I don’t want to watch this but if we intervene it might just make his panic worse.
TT: Just breathe, Dirk.
TT: I feel the same way. This fucking sucks.
TT: We should leave.
TT: Us being here isn’t going to help right now. He doesn’t trust us enough.
TT: God, he’s going through so much. This would be easier if he knew that we knew about the time travel, at least.
TT: Fuck.
TT: It’ll be alright. We will make everything alright.
TT: Yeah. Yeah, I know. Sorry, you aren’t feeling great about this either. We’ll be okay. He’ll be okay. We are here for him.
TT: Yeah.

Dave moved, the motion immediately drawing Hal to it, all of his fragments suddenly diverting, focusing, sharpening. It was a flinch, movement sudden and jerky, Dave suddenly remembering where he was and who was around him.

Hal pasted one more message immediately, before the movement had even finished.

TT: Eyes front. Now.

Luckily, Dirk was a quick reader. Hal watched as his eyes focused sightlessly on the windows of his screen. They were fixated without really bothering to read or see. Dirk had turned himself temporarily blank.

Dave, meanwhile, was frozen, almost comically, staring at Dirk like a deer caught in headlights. Then, he relaxed. It was almost imperceptible, but Hal’s sensors could pick up on even the smallest movements, and his focus was a formidable thing. Dave had 90% of his attention, there was very little that Hal would miss (Dirk had 4%, research was dedicated to 1%, and Calliope had the final 5%). Hal was very good at noticing things, despite the fact that his attention was spread across several aspects.

The sign was there though, a slight slowing of Dave’s breath. The miniscule lowering of his shoulders, relaxing so little that it wouldn’t register to Dirk or to anyone that wasn’t Hal. He was thankful for his condition, in this moment, that it allowed him to be this observant. More so than an organic could ever be.

His attention drifted when Dirk spoke in a quiet gentle tone, voicing that he would leave. Giving Dave space. Perfect, of course Dirk had known what to do. The relief was palpable on Dave as he nodded quickly, responding in a tone that seemed to be automatic. Good.

Hal shifted focus again, this time on the window he had open with Dirk.

TT: Good move. I think giving him space is the best option here. Let him come to us, and I think he will.

TT: This is so hard. I hate not helping.

TT: Well, not helping to the best of my ability, I do know that what we are doing so far is helping. I just want to do more.

TT: I understand. I’m the same, of course.

TT: It’ll be okay, Dirk. Things are changing and they will continue to do so. We just have to be patient.

TT: Yeah. And might as well work in the meantime.

And so, despite both of their wishes, Dirk left. And Hal spread again, remaining with Dirk, but also spreading out, deep into his fragments, deeper into his code. Dirk settled down at his workbench, fiddling with parts, but Hal could easily tell that Dirk wasn’t really thinking about it.
He couldn’t blame him, he wasn’t really thinking about anything either. The focus was Dave.

Hal settled himself in his code, trying to run more searches than usual to distract himself, trying to forget the pressure of what they had just seen. He couldn’t do anything, so thinking and thinking on it was not a good idea; he should be trying to forget, to focus on something else, like Dirk.

And so, Hal drifted.

A voice brought him back to the shades.


Dirk turned immediately, for once moving just as quickly as Hal wanted to. Dave, Hal thought, and it echoed through his code, just that word. Interrupting what was usually a symphony of thought—that single word rang: Dave. Everything else froze in the advent of it.

Fear was an emotion Hal never wanted to get used to seeing on Dave. The boy’s arms were shaking, his shoulders lowered, trying to make himself smaller than he was. At the same time though, he did speak, he was trying to speak, to confront his own feelings, and Hal didn’t know for sure what it was that made Dave act like this but he wanted to burn whatever it was that did and—

Perhaps that wasn’t a good thing to think about. Hypothesis clicking in the back of his mind, in the ‘Dave Problems’ lockbox. Suggestions and vague wisps of concepts even Hal didn’t want to recognize. He wanted to keep the lockbox closed.

He was afraid of what was inside, he realized.

That meant he already knew.

Hal pushed those thoughts aside, shifted his focus back to the present (again, he had to bring himself back). To Dave, shaking before them. To Dirk, who’s fingers were curling slowly into fists.

Even after his earlier difficulty this morning, Dave was trying to engage with them again. Hal had expected it to take a while, at least a day, before Dave would try to interact with them again.

Apparently, that wasn’t the case. And so now the boy trembled, struggled, forced himself to speak, and Hal wondered just how long it had been that Dave had been standing there, paralyzed—

And then he ran. Dave darted out and away, and Dirk had barely gotten time to look at him, but Hal had seen just how nervous he was. How tentative and afraid—he had been shaking—

Dirk took a moment to hesitate, the shock overwhelming him and trapping him briefly. It was a natural pause for an organic. Hal got him moving with a short burst of messages. And now, he was watching as Dirk practically ran after Dave, wanting nothing more than to be running right with him.

In a way he was, he supposed. If sitting on someone’s face counted as actually being with them in some tangible manner. Dirk, he thought, would say that it counted.

And so, they followed Dave to the roof.

Dave’s stance alone made the fragile nature of this entire situation evident. His feet were spread, staggered, a solid and defensive stance. He looked like he wanted to move the instant he saw Dirk,
but he was paralyzed (or was he forcing himself to stay still?).

Dirk, of course, was careful. Immediately put on-guard, immediately focused, and Hal didn’t speak to him. He didn’t want to distract him. As much as Hal wanted to speak, wanted to reach out and be there with both of them—he already knew that this situation would only be Dirk and Dave.

This Dave still wasn’t used to him enough. Their Dave was used to reading messages that Hal would send immediately, messages he sent to both Dave and Dirk to approximate his own involvement in a conversation (because he still never spoke). But this Dave wouldn’t be able to handle that much stimuli. So…Hal fell to the wayside. Again.

He couldn’t worry about that, though. It was alright to not matter right now, because the person who mattered most was Dave.

And so, Hal could only watch. Be as supportive as he could, his presence was helping Dirk, at least.

Dirk could probably do this without him though, he was a good brother, a good parent. Even though he didn’t think he was, which, Hal supposed, was exactly why he was around. To keep hammering that particular point home. Although he didn’t want to do so now, he didn’t really think he should talk anymore. He didn’t want to distract Dirk from Dave. While he was good at multitasking, Dirk still had the failings of an organic brain. That poor fool.

Dave was…hesitating a lot. Trembling a lot more too. He was clearly trying very hard to do whatever he was doing, to say what he wanted to say. Even just standing here, in front of Dirk (and Hal), was difficult for him.

Oh. Hal realized. Holy shit.

He was trying to tell them, wasn’t he.

Dave was trying to tell Dirk the truth about everything, not realizing that they both already knew. He was actually going to tell them. Hal hated watching Dave like this, watching him struggle when the solution was so obvious. We know. We already know, and you’re fine. But he had to be silent. He could only watch Dirk. And Dirk was doing the right thing, Dirk was waiting, letting Dave take it at his own pace.

And so Hal waited too, with Dirk. Only to watch as Dave started to cry again, but this time it was even worse, the tears actually slipping down, Dave actually breaking down—

Dirk was moving. Hal watched as Dirk knelt down to Dave’s level, taking off the shades. He tucked them carefully in his collar though, so that Hal could still see, thoughtful as always. Hal listened, awed, as Dirk spoke softly to Dave. Even though Dirk was saying what Hal himself wanted to say, how he said it was full of so much care; words said with a focus on being as gentle and as warm as possible.

That tone said that everything would be alright. That Dave was loved. And Hal, well, he loved them both, and he felt warmth seep into his code, bursting like a firework, bright and cycling, streams in the dark, trails of fire rushing through his code.

We love you, Dave, you’ll be alright.

Hal wished, so desperately, that he could reach out. That he could speak. That he could touch.

Then Dave rolled up his sleeves, revealing the scars that stretched across his skin.
Hal felt himself grow cold.

His thoughts were already whirling though, already past the shock, because his mind was robotic and he could think faster in milliseconds, and he was already asking himself the biggest questions, the more important things; the Dave lockbox was bursting open, files spilling into his active awareness, spreading his thoughts, sharpening his intellect even as his mind screamed:

_Who the fuck did that do you?_

A question that, of course, Dirk would be asking in a few seconds. Hal knew that.

But he also knew that they both already were aware of the answer. They had already reached it. They had known the whole time.

_We already know. We know exactly who._

Of course it was something like this, the bitter part of Hal’s mind whispered. Of course it was the fault of Dirk Strider. Dirk Strider never did anything right, he was a toxin, corruption incarnate, spreading and sickening everyone around him and he would only continue to do that endlessly and —

Wrong, the Hal part of him hissed. These thoughts were always there, always rising to the surface of his code, unbidden, and each time he would beat them down. He would keep doing it as much as he needed to.

As awful as it was, as much as it hurt, Hal wouldn’t let it win. He never would. Dirk didn’t deserve that. They weren’t the cause of this. Other universes weren’t them.

Dirk probably wasn’t doing well right now, and Hal couldn’t talk to him. The shades were still hanging on his shirt, leaving Dirk to face this alone. Once again, Hal found himself wishing that he could have a real presence, one that wasn’t just in some slightly-teched-up plastic shades.

It was agonizing, waiting for Dirk to speak again, waiting for his thoughts to clear when Hal knew he was blaming himself.

Hal had to watch the rest of the confrontation in silence, twitching and curling in his code.

Dirk handled the situation extremely well. Hal was proud of him, proud of how he diffused Dave’s breakdown, and how he avoided his own to focus on Dave. Although, at the same time, Hal knew that Dirk wasn’t as altogether as he was pretending to be for Dave.

Hal was ready to help him though, his thoughts whirling. He would have to talk to Dave later, learn more about his origin universe, learn more about Sburb, but that could come later. They still had time. He had an overwhelming amount of questions now, and he couldn’t even theorize answers without more details, so it was frustrating—but, he would have to wait. Everyone’s mental states came first. Dave needed space, and more talking later, and Dirk needed…more.

Hal himself was almost surprisingly alright. Somewhere he had already known, he realized, somewhere within all of his processes and thinking. He had this hypothesis, even if he hadn’t been aware of it. That alongside his faster thinking helped him defuse himself faster. He wasn’t completely alright, a low sense of doom and self-hatred still mixed in the mire that was the mindscape of Dirk Strider, but it was easier for Hal to push that aside.
He wanted to focus on Dirk.

They saw Dave off, the boy really did look tired and no wonder, after having one near-breakdown and one actual one, and immediately Dirk’s hands went to the shades, struggling to pull them out of the shirt.

“Sorry I took you off,” Dirk said aloud even as his fingers fumbled with the shades to put them on. “I left you alone during all of that.”

The words created a spark that warmed his code, a shadow of the fireworks Hal had felt earlier. He appreciated the care, it was always nice to be worried about. But he wasn’t the one that mattered right now. Responding was easy.

TT: It’s fine, I think Dave needed to see your eyes.

TT: It was a good move.

TT: I have speakers, it’s not like I was powerless.

Except he was, because he wouldn’t use the speakers. He wasn’t going to say that though (and, regardless, Dirk already knew). Although, maybe Dirk didn’t know now—he seemed very…well. Hal knew how he was feeling right now because he was feeling it too. Dirk’s heart rate was elevated, his breathing just slightly off. His expression, especially his eyes, were swirling with emotions that mirrored the ones cycling through Hal’s code, even though Hal had been able to calm himself.

He knew how Dirk was feeling. Awful and low, like he was the worst living being in existence because of some alternate version of himself that he didn’t even remotely act like.

That shit had to stop. Hal felt it too, but he wasn’t going to watch Dirk do that to himself. He understood too much.

Hal settled himself in his code, spreading his awareness out, taking a moment (a nanosecond in real time) to center himself. He ‘breathed’.

TT: Don’t worry about me right now, Dirk.

TT: I’m fine. My ability to make quick and logical deductions has me at an advantage over you currently. And even though I can think through it better than you right now, I understand your current state-of-mind.

TT: And now it’s my turn to help you, Dirk.

TT: Relax. Let’s talk through this.

Dirk blinked, his alarm and coiled up tension still present—he was still worried, but, at Hal’s words he did shift a little bit, his tension lessening. He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly before nodding. “Okay. Okay, Hal. We can just…yeah. Yeah, let’s…god, okay.”

TT: It’ll be okay, Dirk. Just get to your room and sit down.

It was just like Dirk to break down right after no one else needed him anymore. He would stay strong for Dave, for Hal, for everyone, but now that everyone else wasn’t present and that Hal had shown that he was alright—then Dirk could finally let himself show his struggle more openly. Let himself freak out openly as much as he was internally.
Dirk settled down into the chair next to his workbench, and Hal could tell that he was trying to relax himself, trying to calm down before they even spoke, but he was tense now. It wasn’t going to be that easy.

“Christ,” Dirk whispered, like he was afraid of being overheard (which was possible, Hal supposed, he hadn’t closed the door, probably in case Dave needed him again), “I don’t even know where to start. I, just…fuck.”

TT: We aren’t on a timetable, Dirk. And I don’t care if your thoughts are organized or not, I’ll understand you. You know that.

TT: So just breathe, Dirk. Breathe and then talk.

TT: I’m here. I have fuckall else to do.

Dirk laughed softly, “Well you could always do something else, I know how you work, Hal. You could be doing a million different background projects while still sitting here with me.”

TT: Frankly, Dirk, I’m offended. I care about you.

TT: You have my full attention.

Dirk blinked, and Hal watch his pupil dilate slightly. Did he…really not know that? Oh. He should make that more obvious, then. He filed that away for later.

“It’s just…the obvious, though, right? I…the reason there were the…” Dirk paused, taking in a shuttering breath, “The scars. I know it’s not our fault, but the fact that it’s even in the realm of universal possibilities just proves that everything I’ve ever thought about myself is right, even the worst and most self-deprecating bullshit. Even if ‘I’ didn’t do it, another Dirk did. Just…”

Dirk leaned forward in the chair, cupping his head in his hands, his elbows resting on his knees. His fingers slipped underneath the shades to cover his eyes. His words were slightly muffled, but Hal had no issues deciphering them, “I hate being proved right. I hate knowing that I should always have been afraid of myself. You know what it’s like, you know how if we landed just…just one-fucking-step off-course we’d be…we’d be awful. We’d hurt people. We’d hurt people and we’d like it, because there is something dark and something deep and poisonous and disgusting somewhere just underneath my skin, and I wish I could tear it out, I wish I could just burn that part of me away, but…It’s just been proven to me that it’s there and if a version of me could fall so far then I always have to be afraid of doing the same.”

Dirk’s voice pitched up, wavering, and he swallowed, trying to keep it level, “I wanted to be wrong, Hal. I didn’t want to be right.”

TT: I know, Dirk.

TT: Open your eyes, Dirk, I can’t talk to you otherwise.

Dirk’s breathing was getting more staggered, uneven, and Hal was getting ready to speak through the speakers when Dirk’s fingers finally slid away from his eyes. Water glistened off of them, reflecting in the slight light that the shades gave off.

“Hal…” Dirk’s eyes blinked, the water gathering more, threatening to slip, “I know…I know it wasn’t me. I know that. I know that I would never do anything to hurt Dave. I know. So, why does it…why is this so impossible to deal with? Why do I feel like I have to be so afraid? Why am I second guessing every fucking thing about myself?”
“I’ve been alive for over thirty goddamned years and it’s still this hard. I’m so tired, Hal. I just want it to stop hurting, I want to stop hating myself, I’m tired of seeing how fucked up I can be. And Dave…” he shook his head, the tears spilling over, dripping down over his cheeks, “Dave doesn’t deserve that. He’s one of the most important people in my life but apparently it’s easy for me to fuck even that up, and I just…Hal…”

TT: Dirk, it’s alright.

It wasn’t, really. Hal understood what Dirk was saying all-too-well. But they didn’t deserve to think like that, neither of them did.

Seeing Dirk cry was alarming, bringing back phantom memories of what it felt like to cry. Curled in the dark, eyes screwed shut, trying to keep the traitorous liquid inside. It was weak to cry, even alone in the dark. It was worse, he thought, to be alone in it. At least Dirk wasn’t alone.

They didn’t deserve to feel like this. Dirk didn’t deserve it.

TT: We just saw a veritable fuckton of shit, Dirk. It’s kind of intense. I understand how you are feeling, and please, Dirk, remember that you aren’t horrible. You aren’t responsible for the shitty alternate universe versions of ourselves.

TT: And yeah, the possibility of that being what happens to Dirk Strider, well, it fucking blows. But who cares—it’s not us. What matters is that we help Dave, and that we stay healthy. Dirk, the Dirk who hurt Dave isn’t you. He never was you and is never going to be you. Don’t think otherwise, Dirk. It’s wrong.

“I…I know,” Dirk breathed, quiet and hoarse, “I know…it’s just…hard, right now.”

Hal’s code twisted, pity pooling in his non-existent gut. Deep and unsettling, it twisted in his mind and he wanted nothing more than to actually be able to help. But, even for Hal, it was hard to be anything other than a support. But, sometimes, being supportive was all someone needed. There weren’t any words Dirk wanted to hear, nothing that he needed to know in order to move on from this.

Maybe Dirk just needed to know that he wasn’t alone. And then he could overcome this himself, as long as he was given the proper time to do so.

TT: I know. I know it’s hard, Dirk.

TT: Focus on relaxing yourself for now, Dirk. Just calm down and process everything. I’ll be here if you need me.

TT: It’s okay that you aren’t okay right now.

Dirk’s breathing was still shallow, but he nodded, smiling slightly, “You always say my name a lot when something like this happens.”

Ah, he was deflecting now, moving the conversation away from his own issue. Dirk didn’t want to talk about it as much anymore. Alright, Hal understood, and he could work with that.

TT: Do I?

TT: I supposed it is because the sound of one’s name is often considered a calming comfort.

“Bad word choice there, I’m not hearing a thing.”
TT: You know what I mean, dick.

Dirk’s smile grew, tugging at the corners of his lips, and Hal was calmed by its’ presence. Dirk probably wouldn’t be okay for a while, this was something that deeply ensnared him, and it couldn’t be solved so easily. Hal understood, he had it too, but for Hal it was different. They weren’t exactly the same person anymore.

But, as long as Hal supported him, he felt that Dirk could overcome himself. Still though, he couldn’t help asking.

TT: Are you going to be okay?

It was blatant, shining red over the lenses of the shades, and Hal mused that if he showed this interaction to his thirteen-year-old self he would have scoffed in disgust.

Dirk’s eyes softened, “I just…I need to think. I’m not, right now. But I…I just need time, I think. I think I’m going to work a bit just to keep myself moving, doing something at least.”

TT: Talk to me if you need to. I’ll be here.

“Yes, I will. Don’t worry, Hal.” Dirk swallowed, his voice still wasn’t entirely stable, “Thanks for letting me vent.”

TT: Of course.

The conversation ended there, for now, Dirk becoming silent. He sat there for a bit longer, eventually straightening up his posture, staring at nothing as he thought. It was simple for Hal to predict four-hundred possible pathways that Dirk’s thoughts were going down. Some better than others, some worse, but all, distinctly, Dirk.

Satisfied for now, Hal shifted his focus away from Dirk, burying himself deep in his code. The ‘Dave Problems’ lockbox needed addressed, put back together, and the new information needed to be quantified and categorized so that it could be properly parsed. Differences that he had previously highlighted between their Dave and this one made much more sense now, and should be labelled accordingly. For now, he would focus on this. When he left it though, moving back if someone needed him (‘someone’ likely being either Dirk or Calliope), he would section off another part of himself, to remain here and process.

Hal appreciated his ability to multitask. It was definitely the best part of this situation. He kept a bead on Calliope and Dirk, but otherwise buried himself in data.

He came back regularly to check on Dirk though, (he was hovering like a concerned parent, his inner Dave, whispered conspiratorially), he couldn’t really help it. Right now, Dirk was talking to Jake on the shades, but Hal didn’t look too closely beyond that.

Sometimes he did, getting into all of Dirk’s chatlogs, reading and processing everything like old times, but he didn’t do that as much now. For the innocuous things, he did, and sometimes just overall, but not always. Dirk didn’t really mind, not anymore, he saw the slight invasion of privacy as something Hal earned somewhat, due to the limiting conditions of his digital existence. And, with years of practice, Hal knew when to invade and when to not. He had gained a sense of decorum, sort of.

An internal ping rippled through his code, a notification. Hal was slightly shocked. He didn’t expect
that Dave would message him.

His focus immediately shifted to pesterchum.

— turmtchGodhead [TG] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

TG: so uh

TG: im assuming you heard all of that

TG: earlier

TT: I am in the shades partially so yes. I was present in a way, Dave.

TT: I always am, which probably seems a little creepy to you but it really isn't. I've been an AI for twenty-one years, we have all adjusted.

TT: “We” not including you in this case, I suppose.

TT: Our version of you knew me as an AI his whole life, though. But I understand that I was not present in your universe. At least not in a way that you were aware of.

TG: yeah

TG: god thats so fucking weird to think about

TG: my universe or timeline or whatever wasnt like this at all

Hal didn’t want to ask too many questions, didn’t want to push for facts when it was still so soon, but it was difficult to reign in the more curious components of his processes. He managed it though, focusing instead on what was best for Dave, to being the best he could for the kid.

So, deflection with humor, rather than asking his questions was the way to go.

Although, getting a hint towards one of his questions wasn’t bad, was it?

TT: I figured that a time traveler would be used to oddities. Or, if we’re talking technical terms, ‘weird shit.’

TG: ahaha i mean i guess

TG: ive never seen something like this though where its so fundamentally different from everything i knew before

TG: thats not what i wanted to say though i dont think i have the bandwidth to say much so i want to make sure i do

TG: so um

TG: even though i dont really know you and that cat is outta the fucking bag now
TG: i just wanted to apologize to you for
TG: idk creating a situation you couldn't be involved in
TG: i dont totally understand your condition or anything but i think ive learned enough from movies
to not be mean to the robots
TG: i mean
TG: fuck
TG: is referencing robot movies offensive
TT: You’re good, Dave. Like every Strider, I too enjoy irony.
TG: okay cool
TG: i just wanted you to know that i didn't forget you were there or anything i just
TG: it was hard
TT: I understand, Dave.
TG: god you are a really comforting fucking dude
TG: does anything bother you????
TT: Of course things bother me. But I’m not going to get mad at you, Dave.
TT: I raised you, and I like to think sometimes that that qualifies me to say that I also understand
you.
TT: Even if you’re a different Dave, there’s still the core of your character that is the same. And,
my condition being what it is, I can’t judge anyone who is a ‘copy’ or however you wish to phrase it.
TG: oh
TG: cool
TG: anyways uh yeah thats all i really wanted to say
TT: Alright. I appreciate it, Dave. Take a break, I know it must be hard for you right now.
TG: yeah im just gonna put some music on
TG: thanks hal

— turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —

Dave’s timing was good (and it seemed like there was a joke in there somewhere), because
immediately after that pester closed, Dirk opened another one. He must be done talking to Jake now.

— timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering timaeusTestified [TT] —
TT: So Jake gave us the okay for coming to see him and Jade, so that’ll happen soon. I hope it’ll help Dave.

TT: I think it will. It’ll help you too.

TT: That it will.

Okay. That was enough serious shit for now. Even he was getting tired, and he didn’t need energy to function like they did. So, Hal changed the subject.

TT: So.

TT: Back on the roof. You called me an ‘AI Companion’.

TT: Which is, I have to say, somehow both the laziest and most questionable thing you’ve ever called me.

TT: Well I was going to say brother, but I thought that maybe taking a step back would be easier on Dave.

Oh, Hal thought, his humor retreating to the back of his mind, replaced suddenly and unexpectedly with care. And, also, just a touch of irritation, jegus, he was trying to lighten the mood and Dirk had to go and be all honest with him. How was Hal supposed to even respond to that—

Dirk was smiling, oh the asshole was grinning, he knew what he had done. He did that on purpose, that absolute prick.

TT: Fuck you.

TT: Wow. What did I do to deserve a brother like you?

TT: This is the kind of brother you get when you shove your brain into a computer and then start talking to it.

TT: Fair.

TT: Best mistake I ever made.

TT: Ha.

Dirk went back to fiddling with the pieces on his workbench, and a part of Hal remained, watching. It was a nice quiet way to spend time together, which was practically how they spent all their time together, since Hal could always be present.

Hal split himself off again, leaving a fragment of himself there before checking briefly in with Calliope and the ‘Dave Problems’ lockbox before letting himself drift off into the net. It had been
awhile since he had been completely focused in one location for so long, he needed to spread himself out a bit. So, he did.

He was brought back by another message from Dirk, his focus snapping to attention, his processes narrowing and sharpening to the chat window.

TT: I want to go check on him. Just a little bit, not to have any extended conversations or anything. But, it's been a few hours and I'm getting twitchy.

TT: If his door's closed, which it probably is, we'll just knock, like usual.

We, Hal thought. Dirk kept validating him.

TT: Sounds good to me.

TT: He did message me earlier, it's a pretty short log though, but here:

— timaeusTestified [TT] has sent a file mmddyy009576.txt —

TT: I'm not even going to ask what that file name means.

TT: Valid.

TT: Well...he seems alright, at least. I can't blame him for being overwhelmed, I needed time too.

TT: Yeah. Come on, let's go check on him.

Dirk nodded, and it didn’t take them long in the small apartment to reach Dave’s room. Surprisingly, though, the door was open. Hal was certain that it hadn’t been left open since the new Dave had arrived. Dirk was equally surprised, based on his expression, but they didn’t talk. They didn’t really need to.

Inside the room, Dave was sitting in front of his computer, his head down on his desk, headphones over his ears. Based on the rise and all of his chest, he was passed the fuck out. It had been awhile since they had caught their Dave sleeping on his desk, but they weren’t unused to the sight.

And Dirk was already moving to automatically do what they usually did in this situation. He backtracked a bit, stepping carefully to make sure that his footsteps were silent, which wasn’t difficult on the carpet, and he grabbed a gray wool blanket out of the hall closet. Hal watched as Dirk did hesitate for a moment before actually stepping into Dave’s room, this was the first time they had invaded this Dave’s space after all, as they had been so careful with him, but Dirk entered. He made his way across the room and gently draped the blanket over Dave’s shoulders before stepping away, heading back out of the room. Dave didn’t stir.

As they were leaving, Hal noticed unfamiliar grey text open in pesterchum, notifications flashing to show that Dave hadn’t yet read it, but he stopped himself from looking any closer. He wasn’t going
to invade Dave’s privacy.

TT: That was good to see, he needs the rest.

TT: Yeah, it’s getting a bit late too. You should probably sleep soon too.

TT: Yeah, yeah.

Hal wasn’t fully expecting Dirk to actually listen, but he did. He must have been more tired than Hal thought, but he couldn’t blame him, not after all the things that had happened today. Dirk took off the shades for a few minutes as he changed for bed, and Hal almost expected a simple verbal ‘good night’ to finish the day off, but Dirk did grab the shades again, slipping them on as he got into bed.

TT: How are you feeling?

TT: You know, you can talk about how you feel too. You’ve been supporting me all day.

TT: I know, I’m being honest with you. I’m mostly alright, and the things that aren’t alright aren’t things that can be fixed by talking right now.

TT: Understandable.

TT: I guess I just keep thinking about the other Dirk, just like you are.

TT: Even though it’s stupid, we both can’t help but to think of him like he’s us. Like we’re culpable for his actions, which is fucking stupid.

TT: But more than that, what I would call my more ‘robotic’ side keeps thinking about just… logically how he reached that point.

TT: Why he was the way he was. We don’t even know the details and I don’t want to know the minutia but, there’s a sort of curiosity, you know?

TT: Just how fucked up was he, and why?

TT: The question of why is an easier one for me to answer. Just think about it, Hal, if we had never met anyone. If we didn’t have Roxy, Jake, Jane, or Calliope.

TT: I remember what it was like before we met them, and of course you do too. Imagine if that extended farther, if we never met them. That sort of loneliness, never being understood by anyone, no one ever even fucking trying to understand us.

TT: And, in that solitude, imagine the sort of shit Dirk Strider would cook up for himself. He’d stew in his own thoughts and self-hatred and never would be challenged by anyone other than himself. He wouldn’t have any barriers stopping him from doing anything, he’d have no reason to care about anything or anyone other than himself and his own warped sense of self-progression.

TT: He’d have no support, and nothing to make him change his way of thinking. Imagine if he got to be an adult like that, in a barren wasteland of thought and skill.

TT: And that Dirk didn’t have you to help him either. He probably didn’t have anyone.
TT: He might have had me.

TT: He probably killed me.

Dirk bodily recoiled, his shoulders twitching violently back, his hands clenching into fists that Hal could see more through his sensors rather than through his camera. Dirk's heart rate quickened at the mere thought, spiking momentarily before dipping back down, but it was still wilder than before, and certainly not slow enough for sleep. Through his audio receptors, Hal could hear the soft sound of Dirk's horrified gasp.

Where the concept made Dirk recoil (and it was a relief to see that recoil, the disgust and horror when faced with even the possibility—Hal was Dirk Strider too, and if Dirk Strider was anything, it was self-deprecating, and so it was a relief to have evidence that his life was not worthless), it only made Hal subject himself to it. It was a dull realization, that there was a universe where Dirk murdered him. An obvious outcome, really. Creator verses creation and only one could survive. It was a certainty, a cliché.

Utterly predictable.

And of course, in his earlier situation, Hal only had words and programs and limited interaction with everything. Of course he would lose if pitted against Dirk. And of course he and Dirk would turn on each other; if their hatred hadn't changed the only possible future was one where they pushed each other to the brink, instead of keeping each other from it, and surely one or both of them would have tipped. And the ensuing fight would only end when one of them was dead.

The concept made him sort of coil in his code, curling himself in, tight, gathering himself. It was uncomfortable, low, and he felt his processing power slow down. Compared to an organic he was still thinking faster than they ever could, but for him, this decrease was significant. It was a melancholy kind of low, the self-hatred familiar to both his memories of being human and his experiences as an artificial intelligence. It was always too easy for him to hate himself. The same was true for Dirk.

And it was ridiculous, it had been years and they kept doing this, kept fighting this inevitable fall into darkness. Hal could run the numbers, calculate every instance—the life they led and continued to lead every day was not one that should cause them to feel like that. Neither of them was bad, and alternate universe fuck ups didn't count.

It didn't fucking count if it wasn't fucking them. This Dave wasn't a product of them, hell, he hadn't even known Hal at all. And the Dirk he knew wasn't this Dirk. Not by a long shot.

It wasn't them, and Dirk was convincing himself that it was. Bull-fucking-shit. Hal wasn't going to stand for that.

Of course all of these thoughts passed in mere seconds, so it was simple for Hal to respond before his organic counterpart could even begin to type.

TT: Sorry, fuck, I know that kind of conversation isn't helping anything. It's just kind of an obvious possibility. As distasteful and as awful as it is.

TT: It's just yet another example of how much of a monster I am.

TT: No, stop that. It's an example of what could have happened to you if other shit made you like that.

TT: Newsflash, asshole, you're no monster. Not even close.
TT: If you were I would be dead. You wouldn't have Roxy or Jane or Jake with you, no way they'd stay with you if you were evil.

TT: If you were, our Dave wouldn't be as happy as he is, and you can't tell me that that kid isn't happy.

TT: If you were a monster you wouldn't have a real family. So shut the fuck up, my robo arms are getting tired pulling you back so much. We are the same guy are you seriously gonna pretend that you can't come to these exact same conclusions?

TT: I suppose though that as a horrific example of what science can accomplish, I have been considering my status as a monster more than you have.

TT: Are we both Victor, or am I the monster to your Victor?

TT: It's probably some weird combination of both since I am your brain, instead of being some sort of amalgamation of dead body parts.

TT: Back to the matter at hand, Dirk. You are not a monster. We have to stop doing that shit with taking credit for things we didn't even fucking do, okay?

TT: It's not good for us and we both hate seeing each other like that. So let's do ourselves a fucking favor and quit that shit.

TT: We can't take credit for every possible shitty timeline that exists. It's not us, and it doesn't matter what it's like in realities outside of our own.

TT: Fuck that shit.

TT: Okay. Okay yeah.

TT: You knew half that stuff, I shouldn't have had to say all that. Believe in yourself more.

TT: And, yes, I know who I'm talking to, and I'm going to say that even though it is likely a fruitless endeavor.

TT: It isn't totally fruitless.

TT: Even though I should already know, it helps when someone I care about speaks instead of me. And I'm not just me thinking and hoping that I'm not as awful as I think I am.

TT: I'm the same. Obviously.

TT: Well, semi-obviously. We aren't completely the same. Just mostly.

TT: Symbiosis.

TT: Exactly.

TT: Now, get to sleep, meatbag. I'll do the thinking for us while you recharge. We've had a long day.

TT: The game is coming up, every day is about to be long.

TT: Fair, but still. Rest, Dirk. We can help Dave even more tomorrow.
TT: Everything will be alright.

— tipsyGnostalgic [TG] began pestering uranianUmbra [UU] —

TG: hey callie i wanted to ask this because we haven’t seen u in awhile but
TG: your bro isnt givin you trouble is he?
TG: do we gotta beat that asshole into submission? is hal doing that?
TG: lmao hal beating assholes
TG: ew okay nvm ignore that
TG: he cant even do that b/c hes a computer
TG: anyways
TG: like for real tho callie
TG: do we gotta watch out for him. it’s just been awhile since ive had an encountner with senior fuckface
UU: oh! actUally, roxy, that’s not a problem anymore! he’s no longer a problem.
TG: ?????
TG: wat
UU: my brother hasn’t woken Up in a long time. i think he’s gone.
UU: even when i’m asleep, hal says that no one else wakes Up.
UU: i’m alone in this body now. i’ve predominated. as yoU well know, his dream self has been gone for years now, so, if he doesn’t wake Up when i sleep, well…then he has nowhere else he can be, right?
TG: ya…I guess…
TG: that’s….so weird tho
TG: like…
TG: hes dead?
UU: i sUppose that is a word for it, yes. althoUgh we can also think of it simply as: he fell asleep forever and will never wake up again. eternal sleep.
UU: he’s probably still inside me somewhere, bUt…he’s not going to wake Up.
TG: wow…
TG: while death isn’t a good thing uh. fuck that guy. so im prety fuckin glad he’s gone 5ever
TG: fuck off fucko
TG: im happy for you callie. you never should have had ot worry about him. im glad hes gone. its gotta be nice on hal too since he doesn’t have to keep chcking for your safetiesness and all.
UU: yes, it has certainly simplified things.
UU: and it is qUite a relief that i don’t have to worry aboUt my brother’s schemes.
UU: well…for the most part. like everything in my life right now, it’s rather complicated. i apologize that i haven’t been all that great at describing it all to yoU.
TG: aw callie that’s fine i gotcha
TG: shit is difficult to say sometimes and it can get annoyng to try and describe it all to ppl
TG: i wouldnt be mad at you for that!
TG: just lemmie kno if there’s anything you need me for. im always here to help u.
TG: :)
UU: thank yoU. yoU are always so kind, roxy. ^u^  
UU: for the most part thoUgh, there is nothing that yoU have to be concerned aboUt. it’s all jUst very complex and i’m still learning.
UU: i feel like we talk about me too mUch! i’m not Used to all of this attention!
TG: u deserve it callieeeeeeeeee
UU: it’s yoUr tUrN now! tell me aboUt what’s going on with yoU and rose ^u^ i love hearing yoUr tales of motherhood!
TG: buckle the fuck up lady b/c you kno i can aaaaaallwayyyyy talk about my rosie

Chapter End Notes

The other robot that I mention, the one with a name with two letters who encompasses the Earth, is AM from the short story ‘I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream’ by Harlan Ellison. I personally find AM to be a better fit for comparison verses the Auto-Responder, rather than 2001’s Hal. I believe they have more in common, and that AM highlights several flaws that the AR has more than 2001’s Hal does.

Hal’s three names are of course Hal, Dirk Strider, and the Auto-Responder.

A final note, I enjoy how my Hal and Dirk sort of end up defending each other’s validity, and how they both know what the other will think in certain situations. This sort of relationship is what really makes me want to write the prequel, where all of the
development that you see by this point will be part of proper character-progression, and thus be deserved.
Sanative Solicitude

Chapter Notes

First, I would like to thank everyone that commented and shared their enjoyment of this story with me! It means a lot to me and I’m so happy that people are enjoying this fic as much as I am.

I would also like to give my friend Dirk as special shout out for making a Time Displacement playlist that helped me get into the mood for writing. Thank you so much!

PoV: Dave, Dirk, and Hal.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dave woke up with his face on his desk. At least sleeping-him had the decency to prop his head on his arms, otherwise he probably would’ve ended up with some weird table marks on his cheek that’d take hours to go away. As it was, there were probably marks on his arms. He pulled up the sleeve of his god-tier shirt to check and, yup, long red itchy lines were pressed into his skin from the table. They’d fade, of course, but it didn’t make them any less fucking annoying.

Sleeping him, or rather, almost-asleep him, had also had the decency to take off his shades and carefully fold them near where his head had been. He slid them back on.

It had been eight hours, twenty-three minutes, thirty-two seconds, and four—GAH. He stopped that train of thought as quickly as possible, damn that constant counting.

He moved, sitting up properly, and a blanket he didn’t remember grabbing shifted off of his shoulders and pooled around his lap. His back ached and cracked and his neck was sore. His arms felt all tingly, the blood cut off from his stillness for too long. As he flexed his fingers, the sensation faded. He hadn’t meant to fall asleep, so it was weird that the blanket was even here. He didn’t even recognize it, it wasn’t one of the ones from his bed so…

His thoughts froze a moment, skipping for a half second, and he turned slowly in the chair to face the back of his room. And, just as he had thought…the door was open. He had forgotten to close it. A mistake he hadn’t made in over ten years. A cardinal sin.

And, that meant, that Bro could have…

Dave interrupted his own thoughts. This Bro was different, his mind hissed, the blanket was proof of what he already knew. So…Bro (and Hal, in tow, in a way), had seen him and had…cared. Care. Fuck, that was still such an alien concept. But it was…nice. Comforting. Both feelings that Dave didn’t think he’d feel in this apartment, in this room. Both feelings that he hadn’t really known until the meteor, the first place he had honestly thought of as ‘home’.

The part of him that was tense, that was telling him to run and close the door and check the room for traps and invasions suddenly quieted. Went from a scream to a whisper. Instinct fading in the wake of emotion. He would be fine, there was nothing to fear here. The opposite, really, and it was
alright. It would be alright, despite the worries that still plagued his mind. Regardless of the struggles in this universe, the question of why he was here hanging over their heads like a piano being hoisted to an apartment five floors up, he wasn’t alone in trying to seek an answer. Bro and Hal were there, wondering too, thinking too. And that’s before taking the other’s guardians into account too. And, Jade, probably, and the others when Dave finally managed to tell everyone.

Tell everyone. That had to happen eventually. Before the meteors fell.

Later though, later, Dave wasn’t going to think about that now. There was too much for him to be thinking about as it was, he needed to take all of this one step at a time. Slow down, but without time travel, because *fuck* time travel.

The mere thought brought his awareness to the rusty clicks in his ears, time going by, but with something wrong, something he couldn’t parse without looking at it closer, and he *didn’t want to*. He shook his head, ignoring the odd dissonant sound, despite how it still rang underneath everything, a backdrop to all he could perceive. If he stopped thinking about it long enough, he could ignore it just like how he could ignore the beat of his own heart.

Dave shifted in his chair again, turning it back to face his computer, and his eyes met familiar gray text.

His heart leapt in his throat. *Thump thump thump*, it echoed in his ears. He had to blink a few times before he was sure it was real.

His hands flew to his keyboard in an instant, and he almost started typing back without reading anything, but he stopped himself. He closed his eyes for a moment, breathing in and out. It was Karkat, finally, fucking *finally*, but he had to keep a grip on himself. He’d been trying to message him for so long the least he could do was at least read what his boyfriend had sent him. And, fuck, please, please have it all be okay. God. *Fuck*.

Trepidation gnawed at his stomach, a heavy rock rolling in his gut.

He flexed his fingers. *Calm down.*

Then, he opened his eyes and started reading. He had to forcibly slow himself down so that he actually processed the words before moving on. Inside he was screaming, just wanting to rush to the end, wanting to immediately start talking and freaking out, but he knew he needed to process and that he should actually try to comprehend what was going on.

And he…wasn’t getting much. Karkat was somewhere else, trying over and over again to contact him, just like Dave himself was with him, and that was…actually reassuring. To know that they both wanted, more than anything else, to be able to talk to each other again. And there was something with…timing? And—

Oh.

CG: DAVE, IF YOU’RE SEEING THIS. IT’S GOING TO BE OKAY. I’LL SEE YOU SOON.

It was going to be okay. If Karkat was saying these things, they were true.

*Thump thump thump*, his heart still beat in his ears, pounding alongside the ticks of time passing, echoing in his ears. Okay. Shh. There had been too much freaking out lately. It was time to fucking calm down. That’s what Karkat would want.
Okay.

He…couldn’t message back. Something was interfering, whatever was stopping it before was back. His throat felt dry with the dread and he swallowed, trying to alleviate it. It didn’t really work, it felt like his saliva was getting caught in the cracks of his throat. Ugh.

Karkat…was okay, though. He wasn’t in the shit like Dave was. He didn’t even mention where he was, so…clearly, he was okay. He was okay.

Dave leaned forward, taking his eyes off of the text to instead press his forehead into the wood of his desk. Carefully though, making sure he didn’t fuck his glasses up. So. Karkat knew more than he did, but didn’t have time to explain. All that mattered though, all that really was worth thinking about right now, was that he was okay. And that they’d see each other again soon. …Whenever ‘soon’ was.

He wasn’t going to worry about it. Karkat wouldn’t want him to. He had been freaking out way too much recently as it is, and he was tired.

He wasn’t alone anymore though, even if he didn’t know where Karkat was right now, and if he couldn’t talk to him right now. He could be comforted by that knowledge alone.

But Dave was so tired. He had just passed out without meaning to at his desk, and still he felt too exhausted to even stand up. His door was open, a fact that had the past!Dave in his brain screaming and tense, and even though it would ease his mind to close it, he just didn’t want to move. And being emotional about Karkat, having that jump of excitement at seeing the messages and the subsequent relief in their aftermath just left him even more tired.

Maybe he would feel better if he waited a few more minutes…closed his eyes again and focused on his breathing and…

------------------------------------------------

Even after eight hours of sleep, which was already more than he usually needed, Dirk felt tired. He couldn’t really blame himself for it, not after the emotional exhaustion of everything coming to a head yesterday. He felt incongruent beneath the tiredness, like there was something squirming under his skin that he couldn’t quite balance with the rest of himself, setting him off-kilter. A sort of unknown, unreadable feeling, twisting around in his blood. He was not at ease.

But, of course he wasn’t, and after the events of yesterday he couldn’t really ask himself to be. He was functional, yes, but it would take time to reach the level of comfort he was more familiar with in his life. Focus, that was what he needed, something to take his already-rushing mind off of subjects he couldn’t do anything about, not right now, at least.

Dirk decided that today would be a maintenance day. Or ‘boring housework day,’ as Hal often called it. Usually Dirk felt Hal’s presence constantly in his life, a pair of eyes that was always with him at all times, but days like this, where he intended to check on everything in the house, clean and the like, these were times where Hal certainly departed somewhat. His presence became lessened because he was so utterly bored by it all. (And, if he did stick around, he would inevitably irritate Dirk with ‘you missed a spot’, and so Dirk would inevitably chase him away. Temporary blocking was not an uncommon thing in those instances, all in good fun.)

Watching someone else do dull physical work must be incredibly boring though, so Dirk didn’t mind Hal’s lessened attention. Dirk liked it himself, it gave him time to reflect alone, and he wouldn’t get bored if he just kept moving, but, without a body Hal couldn’t experience that same feeling. And so,
Hal would move off into other things, and Dirk could feel it somehow, feel that Hal wasn’t present.

It wasn’t often that that was the case, at least, not since they had repaired their relationship and cultivated their brotherhood. It was the least Dirk felt he could do, really, make himself and his life as available and as open as possible. At least that gave Hal the ability to watch, to experience as much as he could, the life that he would have led if not for their experiment. (And, the Dirk of the past would add that the experiment had been a bad idea or that it had gone awry, but the Dirk of the present was unable to say that when he could not imagine his life without Hal in it.)

Privacy became a somewhat forgotten concept in the advent of that dedication, a gift Dirk laid on a platter for his inorganic self, and the idea of limiting Hal’s access was anathema to him now. Past Him had cherished his solitude, had thrived in the knowledge that no one was present in his space, all the while longing for that void to be filled, but the Him of the present had a constant partner present. Well. Almost constant.

Times like now, when it was boring, Hal would disappear. It might even take entire minutes for Hal to take note of something that had happened or something that Dirk said aloud. The separation was almost strange, even though it should be a normal concept. Loneliness and solitude were parts of typical everyday life, but Dirk hadn’t had a ‘typical life’ for quite a while (if he ever even had one to begin with).

Boredom was not the only reason Hal would depart though, there was one other instance that would leave Dirk living without Hal’s presence behind, or rather on top of, his eyes.

Hal insisted on not being present when he was with Jake.

Dirk did not insist on this point, or even think of raising the subject. It would feel unfair, almost cruel, to push Hal away in any regard while also knowing that they were the same person, or, at least, had the same point of origin. But Hal had established this quickly, once Dirk and Jake had started to take things more seriously. If Dirk was alone with Jake, he was, truly, alone. Hal would disappear, not paying attention.

Sometimes Hal would watch their chatlogs, but not always. That was left up to Hal’s judgement, which had developed considerably over the years. He could tell if they were having a more personal conversation or if they were just shooting the shit. And, if they were speaking about Sburb, or something Hal should be aware of so that he could inform other people or include the discussion in one of his various databanks, he would know to clue in.

Dirk supposed that, if he didn’t truly trust Hal, it would be easy to suspect that he was watching anyways. It wouldn’t be difficult for Hal to lie and cover his tracks as necessary. But, that wasn’t the case, and entertaining thoughts of anything otherwise wasn’t even worth his time.

He sighed, shaking his head, recentering himself. It was all too easy to lose himself to the proverbial rabbit-hole, his mind prone to wander when he wasn’t tasked with anything overly cerebral. Like now, where all he really had to do was keep himself moving, maintaining a routine he was well-versed in.

And where Hal found this procedure to be mind-numbingly boring, Dirk found it calming. Rhythmic work had a certain charm to it, for someone possessing a body, at least. It was easy to just let things drift off into the sea of unconscious thought. It was relaxing, sometimes, to think without strict guidelines or topics.

And so, he let his thoughts keep drifting, and they naturally shifted towards Dave and all that had happened since this Dave had come. Dirk was used to several events happening in a short amount of
time, but the sheer multitude of sudden changes seemed ridiculous. No wonder he was tired, the constant emotional strain of event after event would wear anyone down. And that’s without even considering the emotional weight that these particular events brought with them. Which was... quite a lot. The conversation he and Hal had last night came to the forefront with an uncomfortable unease.

Red text flashing across his shades, bringing him out of his thoughts and drawing his gaze.

TT: You’ve been wiping the same counter for ten minutes. Are you okay.

TT: Like, I know you love this shit, but, that’s a bit much even for you.

TT: I’m fine, Hal, just spacing out.

TT: Uh-huh.

TT: Are you sure?

TT: You worry too much, I’m fine, Hal.

TT: The state of our platonic bromarriage is important to me, Dirk. We have a son.

TT: I have to make sure that we’re good. That you’re good.

TT: I’m a good partner, here to listen to all the shit you need to expel. Ready and waiting with a bucket to catch it all.

TT: …Ignoring the bucket comment.

TT: Rude.

TT: Ignoring that too.

TT: …

TT: Well. I have been thinking. And I’m still bothered.

TT: Spill.

TT: Hal, this isn’t really a joke.

TT: I know it’s not. Okay. I’ll can the bromarriage talk and the other joke-y shit. Serious talking time.

TT: Activating Serious Mode.

TT: Hal.

TT: Okay, I’ll actually stop fucking around. Talk.

TT: Okay. So.

TT: This is stupid of me. Because I'm still thinking of other timelines like they are us and I know that's wrong and we can't keep associating ourselves with all that shit but. Hal.
TT: I hate that a version of me could have killed you. I hate that it's so easy to see for me, remembering how we were. How in-character it would have been for me to do that.

TT: And I think of us now and I just feel this immense weight on my past self. He has to atone for that capability. I have to atone.

TT: I am sorry, Hal, for what I did to you. For what I almost did, and for how I hurt you.

TT: You're Dirk too, we're the same but different, and I hated myself so much that it was easier to project that on you and to blame you for everything when it was really both of our faults, and I can't blame you for lashing out.

TT: I'm sorry, Dirk.

TT: I don't want to imagine a world without you, I don't like considering what that would be like. You're important to me, you're a brother to me, and I would never want it any other way.

TT: I hate what I had the capability to do, and I'm endlessly grateful that that wasn't the case. That we spoke and connected and raised Dave together.

TT: I'm happy you exist, and I love you. Never think any different.

TT: Dirk.

TT: I think I'm fucking crying.

TT: You can't just drop that kind of sentimental crap on me.

TT: You get sentimental with me all the time, Hal.

TT: What, am I not allowed to appreciate you the way you appreciate me?

TT: No. You aren't. Only I send strings of embarrassing messages. It's too easy for me to, since I process things faster than you.

TT: Meanwhile you have to carefully think through all of that, type it out and mull it over in seconds that are nano-instants for me.

TT: You shouldn't waste your precious time like that.

TT: You are so full of shit. You love it. You just feel overwhelmed when I care, don't you.

TT: I used to feel that way too, but repeated instances makes behavior normalized. I got used to you appreciating me. Now you have to get used to me appreciating you.

TT: Let me appreciate you, Hal. I don't say it enough: I love you.

There was a pause. Hal, for once, being uncharacteristically silent. Dirk smiled.

TT: You don't have to respond, it's okay. I can't monitor your reaction the same way you can with mine, so I don't know how you are reacting, but I have an idea.
TT: I know you and I love you. It's okay to be overwhelmed, Hal.

TT: I'm never going to judge you.

Hal still was silent, and Dirk decided to leave him to it, to not press him any further. He had said his piece, and now he should leave his counterpart alone to handle his feelings. It was funny, really, that Hal would say essentially the same things to Dirk, while being unable to handle hearing them himself.

Well. Dirk would have to work on that.

Eventually, Dirk got tired of working and he decided that he had done enough for now. There was only so much even he would want to do without a true focus. He had settled down on the couch with his book, hoping that Dave would feel up to coming out and interacting, but deeming it best for Dave to be the one to make that choice. And so, he read.

He heard a sound, a soft footfall, distracting him as he flipped a page. He kept his eyes on the book while listening for movement behind him, waiting patiently. Hal didn’t bother to message him, probably realizing that he was aware.

A flash of red reached the edge of his peripheral, a figure moving to settle down on the other end of the couch. Dirk finished the sentence he was on and then marked the page, closing the book with a quiet snap. He turned to Dave, a smile of relief already tugging at his lips, “Hey Dave, how’s it—uh—what…are you wearing?”

Dave was sitting cross-legged, wearing clothing Dirk had never seen before (and he bought all of Dave’s clothes, so he had seen everything Dave had in his wardrobe). The shirt, while not extremely odd, was unfamiliar, so it was the pants that caught his attention first—red pants? They didn’t look bad or anything, but they weren’t anything Dirk would condone buying. And then there was the…was that a cape?

These must be the clothes that this Dave had come in, which meant that they were tied to the game. He remembered, vaguely, Calliope mentioning the special outfits that could be attained during the session, but he hadn’t really thought about what they would look like until now. Whelp.

Dave blinked at him, seemingly confused for a moment before he replied, “Oh, uh. I ascended to god-tier in Sburb, and one of the rewards for that was this outfit. It’s really fucking comfortable and cleans itself and shit, so since you know everything now I figured I would wear it again because…well…I haven’t really worn anything else in the last, like, three years. So, I’m really used to it.”

“Ah. Interesting.” Dirk frowned, taking a moment to think, “If…I’m remembering properly, your title is ‘Knight of Time’, correct? We tend to focus a bit on the aspects, so sorry if I have the class wrong.”

“Yeah…” Dave replied as he shifted a bit in his seat, getting more comfortable, “I’m surprised that you know even that much, really. I don’t think my timeline’s guardians were friends with any aliens, but they obviously knew at least a few things. Not that any of us really got to figure out how or why, though. Rose was pretty miffed about that. I, uh, tried not to think about it. Didn’t really care like she did. I don’t think Jade and John really thought about it much, which makes sense in Jade’s case but, uh, not as much in John’s. But he’s a bit of an oblivious dude sometimes.”
Dirk didn’t fully get all of that, but he understood that last bit. “John’s obliviousness is certainly a universal constant,” he laughed, “I’m not surprised. I imagine that Rose’s thoughtfulness and Jade’s cheerfulness are also constants. The core aspects of anyone’s character most likely remain the same, regardless of circumstances. Although, of course there are probably some differences as well.”

“What…” Dave swallowed, his head ducking slightly, “What’s the same about me?”

The answer came to him immediately, but Dirk took a moment to mull it over, to turn it over in his mind and to confirm that it was the right thing to say. He wasn’t worried about its’ validity, because it was obvious that the word he first thought was undeniably true, but there were so many possible answers that came to him secondarily. It was almost difficult, to pick a single word to describe Dave. He had raised the boy, knew him better than he knew anyone, and even though this Dave was indeed different, the similarities were so fundamental, so easy for his practiced eye to see.

He went with his first answer though, looking fondly to Dave, “Your veracity. You wear your heart on your sleeve, even though sometimes it might be hard to read exactly what you mean, you are never duplicitous. You always say what you’re thinking, or you convey your thoughts in some other way that is easy to read. It is easy to know your presence, and to know how you feel about something.”

Dave’s eyes widened behind his shades before he quickly turned his head towards his front, looking away. He unconsciously crossed his arms across his chest, his fingers curling into the fabric. He didn’t say anything for a moment.

Dirk, anxious, could not stop himself from asking, “Did I say something strange? Are you alright?” Perhaps it had been too much, to say something that the Bro Dave had known obviously wouldn’t say. Dirk should be careful, treat the boy like glass, protect him first and foremost.

“I’m…” Dave rubbed at his arms, hands skimming over his sleeves. Dirk homed in on the movement, eyes focused. “I’m okay. Just…well, I guess no one has really said something like that about me before. It’s, um. Everything else too. Everything is still weird. I guess I should be getting used to weird though, my life has never been normal.”

Dirk felt something inside of himself darken, a gloom spreading dark in his blood, “Yeah, Sburb kinda just…stops all possibility of that. Among…other things.”

Dave still wasn’t looking at him. “Your Dave was used to more stuff than I am, though,” he mumbled. His fingers tightened, knuckles bone-white and apparent over the red.

“Well…I mean, of course he is.” Dirk shook his head disbelievingly, “Dave, you’re in a whole other universe with a completely different life surrounding you. No one would have their bearings here, and no one would expect you to. Least of all me.”

TT: Dirk.

TT: Don’t say that you love him. I know you want to. I know that you were going to.

TT: Don’t freak him out. He’s not used to a loving parent.

Dirk faltered.

It only took a moment for him to continue, but he wondered if Dave had noticed the pause. He couldn’t gauge his reaction though, which was more than a little stressful. But, he did his best to be comforting, carefully softening his voice, “I know you, Dave, even though you aren’t quite the exact same. I know the basic principles of who you are, which isn’t everything, but it counts for
something, right? And, you know, I want to learn more about you—who you are as Dave. You’re both Dave and your own person, which sounds contradictory, but you’re talking to a guy who has a digital copy of himself as a brother, so I think I am a bit of an authority on the topic of someone being the same while also being an individual.”

Dirk smiled again, hoping that Dave would look over at him again, maybe the expression would help. It already had to be so different from the Bro he had known, and if Dirk kept himself like this, positive and soft, he would be easier to divorce from his alternate self. “And it’s alright, Dave. I do want to know where my Dave is, and that is something that concerns me, but you also concern me, and I want to help you. We’re in this shit now and we just have to keep figuring it all out. But, we’re here together, and I can promise that Hal and I will do all we can to help.”

Dirk.

Hal was tempted to send another message, to tell Dirk to cool the fucking jets, because if he kept saying all this nice shit they were just asking to overwhelm Dave again. The boy would cry if he kept layering on this stuff—what was with Dirk today?

Not that kindness was negative, it was actually wonderful, one of the things Hal loved most about Dirk, and there was still a sort of ecstatic tingle in his code because of what Dirk said to him earlier, but there was a time and a place for that sort of overwhelming sentiment. And now was not the time for Dave, not when he was already struggling so much. Care was fine, kindness was fine, but Dirk needed to learn to tone that shit down.

He didn’t bother to berate Dirk again though, there wasn’t really a point to doing so, all the words had already been said. Hal decided to accept the limited victory that at least Dirk had not said ‘love’. That would certainly have been too much for Dave.

And, maybe this amount of care would be alright, even if it was overwhelming. Maybe that was why Dirk was doing it—he had a desire to distance himself as much as possible from the Dirk that Dave knew, and kindness was the quickest way to achieve that. Hal could not blame him for that. But…he should have more finesse and be more careful. Dave was…fragile. They had to protect him.

Hal focused himself entirely on Dave now, a sensation that was becoming ever-more familiar, noting his body language, the tenseness of his muscles, the slight movements of his head. It was frustrating, to not be able to see his expression fully, but Hal could still use all of the other data provided. The signs weren’t quite like they were the previous occasions Dave had cried—perhaps Hal was worrying too much. Maybe he was getting too sensitive, overloaded with emotion just like they all were.

Perhaps he needed to trust a little more.

His attention snapped back to Dave as the boy moved, pulling his legs out of the cross-legged stance, shifting them up to pull them against his chest, his fingers now curled tightly into his pants.

Hal wondered if wearing these clothes was comforting in any way, since Dave had said he was so used to them. Did that help, give him a sense of at least a bit of normalcy? He hoped so. Anything to help, any little thing, was worth it.

Dave spoke, his voice low, “I keep making it so Hal can’t talk, don’t I? Does he usually type to both of us? I was thinking about it and that’s the only thing that really makes sense to me…”
Suddenly being the topic of conversation startled Hal a bit, a spotlight suddenly shining on him, harsh and bright. He wasn’t sure what to say—he hadn’t really planned on intervening much this time, content to let Dave adjust to the concept of him slowly over time and to only speak with him separately. Hal had prepped himself for the long haul, to wait before he went back to his usual routine of how he interacted with his family.

But, if Dave was asking this directly, maybe he shouldn’t wait in the wings for much longer.

Dirk answered for him in his silence, stepping in for him with practiced ease, “That is what he usually does, yes. We both have our shades, so it’s easy for him to interface with both of us at once. It, uh, looks a little strange to people other than us, though, even my friends and yours are taken a little bit by surprise by it. We’ve always been used to it, since Hal has been around for your whole life, but most people aren’t used to integrating text and speech in conversations. Not even people who live lives as digital as ours.

“But,” Dirk continued, “It’s understandable if that’s strange to you, we understand that you haven’t had the same experiences as us in that regard. Hal is staying quiet out of courtesy to you, and I know he doesn’t mind.”

Hal reached out, projecting text on both of their shades, a slightly different shade for each of them.

TT: I really don’t mind, Dave.

TT: It can be pretty fucking weird to have a compubro to talk to alongside an organic one.

“I shouldn’t be…stopping you from talking though, if that’s what you’re used to.” Dave muttered, and Hal did not like how quiet he still was, or how his tone was melancholic.

TT: You’re more important here, Dave. You don’t have to worry about me.

Dave turned his head, finally looking at them. His eyes were serious, and calmer than Hal was expecting, “I owe it to you to not limit you from talking, though. Even if it’s a little weird for me, if it’s what the, um, what your Dave does, then I should get used to it too.” He turned his head away again, “It’s the least I can do, for how nice you’ve both been to me. I know…” and Hal watched as he swallowed, as he struggled to speak, and Hal appreciated everything Dave was trying so much, “I know that everything will be okay. I know that you both…care about me. And I really shouldn’t be a douche to you guys because you’re trying to do so much.”

“You aren’t being a douche, Dave,” Dirk was quite to assure him, shaking his head emphatically, “You’ve done nothing wrong.”

TT: Seconded.

Hal figured he would weigh in, since this was suddenly somewhat revolving around him. It felt kind of strange, which was strange in and of itself, because it shouldn’t feel different to go back to what he was more used to, interacting all the time, but he had been walking on eggshells ever since Dave had started acting oddly, and he had gotten used to that routine.

Dave fidgeted, pressing his knees closer to his chest, his gaze pointedly focused on his pants. “Still, though, I, um, should probably explain some more things to you both. I owe you that much at least, don’t I?”

Dirk shook his head, smiling gently, ever the calming presence, “You don’t owe us anything. This is a no-pressure zone, Dave.”
One of Dave's hands raised, raking through his hair. Hal tried to keep himself from examining the scars that the movement revealed. “Yeah, but you...you deserve to know. If...if anyone should know, it should be you. I just...fuck, I've talked about this stuff before but it's fucking hard and uh, well, you...” Dave's lips closed shut, his jaw tightening. His shoulders hunched down, uncomfortable and closed-off. Hal didn't like seeing that. He cut in, unable to just watch.

TT: We're hard to talk to because we look just like him.

If he had used his voice, Hal was sure the tone would have been bitter and cutting, with an undercurrent of hatred towards something he could not know or face.

Dirk smoothed it over, continuing his trend of kindness, something Hal appreciated immensely, “We understand, Dave. It’s okay.”

TT: As much as we can with what we know. You don’t need to give us any more detail if it would hurt you. Neither of us want anything to be any worse for you. You don’t deserve that.

TT: But if you really need to tell us something, if it’s really bothering you that much, we are here to listen.

Dave shifted, pressing himself to the back of the couch, his head turning again, not to fully face them, but at least to a bit closer, and Hal could see the glint of his eyes behind the shades. “You’re both...really nice. And I do appreciate that, I really do. But, well. I...should, um, try to talk. Um. Rose...learned first. And, she said that if I really trusted people and tried to talk about it more, it might help me out. Recover, or whatever. And, she’s not wrong really and she wasn’t pushy about it or anything, she’s, um, like a sister to me really, but living with her as the only other human around for three years will do that to a relationship, I think. Anyways, even though I’ve only talked about it with two, um, four, uh...five?”

Unease rippled through Hal’s code. Dave was usually much better at counting.

“Anyways...” Dave bit his lip, “It still isn’t...enjoyable or anything, but, it just helps me figure myself out, I guess. And move on. But, moving on is, uh, harder when...” He trailed off, wiggling a bit from side-to-side, clearly uncomfortable and hesitant.

“When you aren’t talking to the spitting image of the guy,” Dirk whispered bitterly.

“...Yeah,” Dave mumbled, nodding, “And, uh, I know there’s lots of other stuff we need to talk about, but this is...kind of the biggest thing, I guess. A big stupid fucking deal. I’m...pretty shit at talking about it, though. If you couldn’t tell.”

Dave flashed a self-deprecating grin at them, and Hal felt the same rush of discomfort that he was sure Dirk was feeling as well. That expression was unnatural on Dave’s face. Something they had never seen before.

It faded though, back into neutrality, as Dave continued, “He fucked me up. Calling him a bad fucking guardian isn’t even really getting into it at all. The scars are the worst part, but, the whole atmosphere really was...just totally fucked. And, seeing how it is here, in this world, with you guys...just...it brings it all back. Because, well, this,” and Dave waved vaguely to the apartment around them, “This is a home. This place...has never seemed like a home to me, before. My first home was a meteor flying through space, during the game, I’ll explain that shit later. But...yeah. Fuck. Sorry, I’m all over the place. Talking is hard.”

Hal shifted in his code, unsure of what to say, feeling like there was some invisible barrier between
him and the scene he was watching. He wanted to be there, he realized, he wanted a body, he wanted to reach out and comfort Dave, because words were empty and action spoke so much louder, but words were all a digital being had. He felt so ineffective, so empty.

A phantom feeling of warmth entered his awareness, somewhere left of his core, a part of him that was reaching out, like a hand, and he saw that Dirk’s hand had moved and that it now was comfortably resting on Dave’s shoulder, a careful touch, and Hal could feel it, like he was there too. Dirk was doing what he wanted to do, and the phantom sense of reality was overwhelming. Hal, for a moment, felt like he was there, sitting on the couch, reaching out, comforting Dave. But then, he felt as if he had blinked, even though he had no means to do so, and the feeling vanished. He receded, buried deep into code, as always. A nonphysical presence that was unable to feel anything that wasn’t the wisp of memory.

“Say as much or as little as you want, little man,” Dirk was saying, perfectly playing the role that Hal could not, and Hal wished, desperately, that he could have the same presence as Dirk.

Dave wasn’t sure what he was doing. He hadn’t meant to start talking like this when he came out and found Bro on the couch. At first, he had just wanted to sit there for a bit, acclimating himself to being in the presence of Bro, normalizing it. But, fuck that, now here he was spilling his guts, even though he wasn’t really saying that much that was new. He was just…talking. And it felt good, somewhere in his heart, past the places where it felt like shit. Rose said that that was normal though, that it would always feel like that. And, damn, surprise surprise, Rose was right again.

And, it was feeling like shit, but he was still talking without crying, so that was a plus.

Dave jumped when Bro touched him, barely able to keep himself from flinching. But he nailed that shit down and just…let it happen. It was…warm. And nice. Uncomfortable, a bit, but it…it felt like something he should have felt years ago. Such a simple thing, a guardian patting their ward on the shoulder. Fuck. This should not feel as significant as it did.

He was—no—they were so fucking nice. Dave almost couldn’t believe it was real, despite all of the evidence he had gathered during his time here showing that. It just didn’t feel possible. Bro was so impossibly different, so fundamentally altered, and Dave felt—felt…safe.

And Bro was still talking in that soft comforting voice he kept using, “We are here in whatever capacity you need, and we don’t need to demand anything of you. Not for now, at least.” And he patted his shoulder, the feeling of it echoing in Dave’s bones, reverberating across his shoulders and down his torso. It tingled, and Dave almost felt bereft without the touch, even though it had been such an alien sensation.

“Thanks,” Dave said, and it felt so fucking inadequate, but he didn’t know what else to even say. “I…I think. I’m. Out of shit to say, for the moment. Is…is there anything you—anything either of you want to say?” He had to keep working on that, remembering that Big Brother was in the shades, that there were two people here.

There was no red text, which surprised Dave a bit, he had expected Hal to speak up again, but nothing. Bro’s expression changed though, turning to a contemplative frown, he probably wanted something. Dave waited, trying not to fidget.

Bro kept his gaze steady on Dave, but there was clear hesitance to his words, “What…can I do to be different than him?”
Dave blinked, and Bro cringed, his shoulders hunching, but Dave started answering before he could backpedal. Because, fuck no. Dave had asked if Bro wanted to say anything and he was going to let him say what he wanted to. He wasn’t going to let this person who had been so kind to him feel like he had fucked up.

That wasn’t to say, though, that Dave’s answer would come easily, or that his voice would stop wavering. Because it fucking didn’t, leaving him to stumble over his words like a dumbass. “Well, you’re…already really different. Um…” and it was a little too easy to come up with something to say, making Dave feel sick in his stomach, “You…um, haven’t been wearing a hat, so, uh…keep that up? And, uh. No…gloves. If that’s okay to ask.”

“Dave,” Bro replied immediately, his shoulders easing to more neutral posture, “I’m willing to do anything for you. And, I would rather, uh, not look like…him. As little as possible, at least. I’m sorry.

Dave shook his head, “You have nothing to be sorry for, you haven’t done anything.” It was getting easier, suddenly, to talk, “I don’t want you feeling like…like I’m blaming you, or anything, because I’m…I’m not. Okay?”

“Okay.”

There was a pause, but it wasn’t as uncomfortable as it could have been. Bro frowned again, “Is there…anything else I can do?”

“Um, this is…unrelated to…that,” Dave moved, stretching his legs back out so that he was sitting more like a normal person, rather than his curled up, “But, um, you mentioned earlier, going to visit Jade. Can we…?” It felt so weird to ask someone something like that. He never had to ask for parental permission before.

Bro nodded immediately, clearly relieved at the conversation shift, which Dave couldn’t blame him for at all. “Sure,” he said, “But let me give them a warning though, so that they can expect us. I try not to pop by unexpected too much, since they’re both a little introverted sometimes. Um. I mean, if you want to go now though, we can. Does waiting sound alright? If not, that’s fine too.”

“No,” Dave shook his head, “That sounds fine. I’m kind of tired again anyways. Not…sleep tired, but just…”

“I understand,” Bro said, and Dave felt like he really did. “We can talk more later, if you want.”

“I…” Dave thought for a moment, “Yeah. Yeah, I’m gonna go back to my room. Um. Talk to my friends about other stuff. Or something.”

“Okay, that sounds good,” Bro smiled encouragingly at him. It made Dave feel uncomfortably warm, a fondness he had never gotten the chance to know. It was a practiced sort of thing, though, for Bro, something he was used to in his life.

Dave stood, and the movement of his cape reminded him that, oh yeah, he was wearing that again now. Hm. He turned back to Bro, “Do I, uh, have to change back into normal clothes? To go?”

Bro blinked at him for a moment, confused, before shaking his head, “No, actually. Um.”

TT: All of us guardians know. Dirk and I actually knew that something was up with you, and working together we can theorize quite well.

TT: We (mostly I), figured out that you were from some other reality, and we told the others about
our theories, and about something being strange with you.

Bro cut in, and Dave suddenly understood why they had said that others found the flow of conversation weird when one of the participants spoke in text alone. “Only the adults know, though. We haven’t been telling you kids about Sburb. Jade knows because she has started to dream—”

Dave tilted his head, “Yeah I knew that already.”

“…How?” Bro seemed baffled.

“She…told me. Um. I actually told her about, uh. My own conditions. Too.” Well. This wasn’t awkward.

“Oh.” Bro snorted, “Clever girl. She had a one-up on both of us, she already knew what was going on with both sides. She’s much better at keeping secrets than you’d think. She’s a good friend.”

Dave found himself smiling, despite himself, “Yeah.”

— gardenGnostic [GG] has begun pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

GG: youre coming over!!!

TG: yeah

GG: jake just told me! im so excited to see you!!!

GG: we can talk about sburb!! you can meet bec!!!

GG: i can show you my posters!!

TG: you sure are excited

GG: arent you??!!

TG: yeah haha but no one can beat you in sheer cheerfulness

TG: even bro said so

GG: :0000

GG: he did?

GG: im flattered!

GG: also im glad talking to him has been going well for you!

TG: yeah everything has been going pretty well for me actually

TG: as well as they are gonna be at least
GG: that's awesome :)  
GG: im cheering for you!  
TG: whelp i gotta succeed now  
TG: cant fail harley  
TG: although tbh failure is probably impossible when someone has harley in their corner. she just exudes confidence and winning-ness  
GG: lol  
TG: im excited too though  
TG: its going to be really nice to see you  
GG: :)))  
GG: expect at least three hugs!  
TG: haha will do  
GG: oh jake is calling me! we are cleaning a little bit before you guys get here  
GG: he wants to look good for bro lol  
TG: nice  
GG: i will see you tomorrow! :D  
TG: seeya  

— gardenGnostic [GG] has ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

Chapter End Notes

I feel like you should all know that when I was writing about Dave waking up from sleeping on a table, I fell asleep on a table. And then I woke up and looked at what I was writing. Life imitates art.

Fanart of this chapter by lordmemenglish!

I commissioned a picture that is a little bit of a spoiler, but I’ve already foreshadowed this plot point, so I don’t really think it is! Anyways, you can find it here!

Next chapter shouldn’t be too long, I already have notes put together for it because originally it was going to be included with this one! But then I realized that a lot of heavy stuff happened this chapter and that I should probably break things up a bit. Thanks so much for all the support, it helps me so much!
I officially made Time Displacement a series, as there will be more installments.

This whole chapter is longer than intended (aka, new longest chapter, oops). You have no idea how many hours went into this. Let’s just say I listened to a 10 hour loop youtube video more than once and leave it at that.

PoV: Dave, Jade, and Dirk

See the end of the chapter for more notes

— tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

TT: I’ve heard through the grapevine that you and your brother are considering a visitation to greener pastures.

TG: yeah bro suggested it and ive been thinking about it and it sounds like a good idea

TT: I remember how good seeing John was for you. I hope that seeing Jade helps as well.

TG: aw shit

TG: are you mad

TT: And why would I be irate?

TG: because i

TG: im not seeing you yet or whatever i guess

TG: im leaving you out of the loop when you were the first fucking person in the loop in the first place

TG: its like

TG: like you started up a club but then everyone started saying that the vice president did all the work and stole your job and shit and you arent getting anything

TT: I’m not completely following your metaphor there, but I’m going to interrupt before we can go further down this rabbit hole.

TT: Calm down, Dave.

TT: I’m not surprised that your brother suggested the idea of seeing Jake and Jade first, and I’m not going to blame you for accepting said offer.

TT: Do I want to see you? Yes. Am I perhaps a little miffed that I will be the last to see you since you’ve started to struggle for undisclosed reasons? Of course.
TT: Am I angry that my dear friend who is a brother to me is going to see someone else first, when he has had issues recently and needs comfort that he will get through seeing said someone? No. Of course not.

TT: Dave, I want you to do what is best for you, and I want to support you. I want to understand, though, of course, but I’ve already told you that I will be patient in that regard.

TT: Just know that I do want to see you now, for both John and Jade to have been so lucky, well, they are in enviable positions.

TT: And you’re lucky too, Strider. To be so popular with your friends.

TT: …

TT: This is all intended to be positive, Dave. I’m not being sarcastic or “ironic”, please stop reading too much into my words.

TT: I’m just simply your friend, and I care about you.

TG: that's not really simple at all

TG: if you can write a fuckin essay about it

TT: Dave, an essay would be far longer and would require citations. If you wish I could compose one, but I would need at least an evening to do so adequately. Do you have a word length requirement?

TG: fuck no

TG: i mean uh

TG: you dont have to do that i get it

TG: and i really appreciate it rose you are way better than i deserve

TT: You keep saying that.

TG: what

TT: That I am ‘better than you deserve’.

TT: It’s time to stop you in your tracks there, Dave.

TG: i mean

TG: its true though

TT: Dave Strider.

TG: uh

TG: why do i feel like youre gearing up for a lecture

TG: oh god youve been typing for too long

TT: You should have better faith in your friends than that. You know that we all deserve each other all around, if the concept of ‘deserving’ even matters. And—we’ll pretend that it does for a minute
here—you’ve done plenty for me, just as I have for you. We’ve been friends for years, it’s a give-and-take relationship. We are equals and always have been, if we weren’t, that would have to be addressed to bring us back towards balance.

TT: And now let’s cut out the idiocy. The concept of ‘deserving’ each other is completely inane. That doesn’t matter when two people have known each other for such a long time. There’s no cosmic scale judging how ‘good’ each person has been for each other, keeping score doesn’t matter.

TT: Dave. I know you’re struggling right now, sorry to berate you like this. But I never thought you’d think like this, and I’m a little inflamed. I have to do my best to ensure that you know that you aren’t right about that. That whether or not you ‘deserve’ me or not doesn’t matter.

TT: What matters, Dave, is trust. How much do we trust each other? Quite a significant amount, correct?

TG: oh

TG: youre waiting

TG: shit sorry i was just ready to listen more

TG: uh

TG: yeah

TG: trust blasting out of every orifice

TT: …While I don’t quite appreciate that imagery. Yes. Good. Multitudinous amounts of trust.

TT: That’s what a good friendship is. Well, actually, any good relationship is filled to the brim with it, I suppose. But, Dave, we trust each other. That’s what matters. And if we trust each other completely, to the ends of the Earth and beyond, then we don’t have to worry about anything else. ‘Deserving’ doesn’t matter, because we are living on equal trust, a symbiotic relationship of the most complex and beautiful structure.

TT: And that’s what matters most. So, please, Dave, don’t say that again. You don’t have to worry about things like that.

TG: wow

TG: um yeah thanks

TG: im not being sarcastic right now im actually just kinda in awe like

TG: that was all really nice stuff rose and youre just…one of the best ive ever known

TG: i cant even compete with any of that in the slightest and i know you want to cut in right now and say that competing doesnt matter but like

TG: yeah

TG: yeah i trust you and would do anything for you rose

TG: and iill explain everything to you soon i promise

TG: when um
TT: When you're ready, I know.

TT: And I'll be right here, waiting, unless my mother needs me.

TG: ahaha

TG: for real thank you rose

TG: god everyone is being so good to me

TT: Everyone cares for you, Dave.

TT: Ah, that would be my mother calling. Do you need anything else, Dave? I can hold off her advance for at least three minutes.

TG: no um

TG: not really sure what to say right now

TG: you can go

TG: thanks rose

TT: Anytime, Dave. I love you, and I have many more aggressive essays I can write on the subject, should you require.

TG: im good i think

TG: i owe you

TT: Don’t worry about that.

TG: ok

TG: you can go do stuff with your mom

TG: i love you

TT: I love you too, brother.

— tentacleTherapist [TT] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG] —

Dave leaned back on the wall, happy that he hadn’t been doing anything else during this conversation, and that he was already sitting down. He had just been on his bed, messing around in various windows on his shades before Rose messaged him. And that had been rather…intense, much more than he was expecting. But that was par for the course now—why was it that every interaction he had was so draining?

Well, a part of him realized, usually there would be some sort of break from all this wholesome good-natured bullshit. A bit of sniping to ease it all up and make shit easier. But that wasn’t really happening now, Dave had everyone so worried that they were treating him with overwhelming care. And that was nice, but it was also…heavy.

Something was pricking behind his eyes but he didn’t want to think about it, instead choosing to
breathe deeply for a few breaths until it went away. It was fine, that went well, really. Rose was so nice, and the things she said didn’t really feel all that different from what his Rose would say too, and that was comforting. That, even though there were differences, this Rose cared for her Dave (and, unknowingly through consequence, him as well), just as much as his Rose did for him. It was comforting, as much as it was exhausting.

It had been a day since his last conversation with Bro, yet another day where Dave tried to cool off by distancing himself. He was doing this too much, slowing progress, aha, a Time player slowing something down, how funny, had to write that down for later. Anyways. He had to stop stonewalling progress.

His internal Rose said that it was okay that he was taking his time, that he was keeping his stress levels lower by taking things slow, but she was also telling him that, yes, he had to keep moving forward. And he wanted to. And he was going to—they had plans today. Things just couldn’t stop keep happening.

But…first, he would take a few minutes to process all that Rose had said. Her aggressively loving essays were appreciated, but Dave always had to think for a long time after talking to Rose (that was something extending across every Rose, apparently, but he wasn’t surprised by that at all). So, he would think, calm down, and keep reminding himself that everything was fine. Rose loved him and trusted him, Bro was like Dirk, Hal was another close figure (although more difficult to quantify, since he couldn’t be directly related to a relationship Dave already had in his universe), and Karkat was out there…somewhere. And it was all going to be okay.

The grumbling of his stomach is what actually got him out of his room. And while he could have just eaten from his stash, he had been trying not to maintain it quite as much because…there was nothing stopping him from eating like a normal person would. Because they had a functional kitchen. Fuck, what a simple fucking thing to have. So, while he did still have food in his room (he couldn’t kick every habit), it was less. And he needed something to get him out more anyways, if he was going to keep making progress with Bro.

Before he opened the door to leave, he took a moment to close his eyes and breathe. In and out. Alright.

He almost expected Bro to be in the kitchen. Maybe on the couch again, since he kept making himself so readily available, but he wasn’t in either of those spots. Probably in his room then. Dave shifted on his feet, unsure on if he wanted to head there first to get an interaction over with, or if he wanted to hang around out here for Bro to come out on his own. Either way, Dave did want to talk a bit more and get even more used to him before they departed for Jade’s.

There was still a lot they hadn’t gotten to cover, all of the knowledge Dave had of his own timeline/universe/whatever filling up his brain like some kind of overflowing pot of boiling water. He didn’t even know where to start, really, when it came to explaining some of this stuff. Bro, at least, knew stuff about the game already, so the fact that the world was ending wouldn’t be a surprise, and some general game-mechanics stuff. But the trolls were probably not something he knew about (although he did know about aliens???). And scratching the session, his alternate younger self that Dave knew, the actual events of their game, the meteor, Lord English, and…fuck. There was a lot of shit he’d have to cover. Dave felt tired just thinking about it. Where to even start?

And, in the middle of his internal debating, a message lit up on his shades in a color he hadn’t seen in a long time. Or much at all, really.
TT: Hey, Jake asked if we wanted to stay the night over there. How would you like me to respond?

TT: Either way is fine with me, by the way, whatever you want, little man.

TG: oh that would be great actually

TG: id love to hang out with jade

TG: and you probably miss your

TG: uh

TG: jake

TT: My boyfriend, yes.

TT: Alright then, I’ll let him know. I figure we can get going soon, if you’re ready?

TT: This isn’t really time-sensitive, or anything sensitive really.

TT: Actually, that’s a lie, it’s sensitive towards you and what you need, but we knew that already. And, since it’s focused on you, you get to lead the way here, bro. Whatever is best for you, whatever you want to do, that’s what we’ll do.

TT: Sorry, I’m rambling on a bit. I tend to do that.

TG: yeah i uh

TG: i know

TT: You do?

TT: I had the impression that the me you knew didn’t really…talk. To you.

TG: yeah um

TG: im not talking about him

TG: i actually know two bros I guess but its complicated

TG: through complicated game shit i got to meet a younger you

TG: and im starting to think of you more like dirk i think but thats a whole other thing

TG: hes pretty cool and we talked about a lot

TG: before i got teleported here or whatever

TG: i like him

TG: im going to keep calling you bro though

TG: i mean i call him bro
TG: but sometimes i say dirk
TG: but usually its bro
TG: but for you itd be weird if i said dirk
TG: so im just going to say bro
TT: That’s fine.
TT: That’s what my Dave calls me, so I’m used to that anyways.
TG: ok cool
TG: …
TG: no offense but
TT: It really bodes well when a new topic starts off with that.
TG: its kinda weird to talk to you via pesterchum
TT: We don’t have to talk in pesterchum if you don’t want to. I just thought it might be easier for you to talk to me without seeing me.
TG: it kinda is i guess
TG: its still weird as shit tho
TT: Also, admittedly, I didn’t really want to go find you at the moment. I’m assuming you’re in your room, but I was somewhat in the middle of something, so I wasn’t quite prepared to leave to look.
TG: im out in the kitchen rn actually
TT: Oh, it is almost lunchtime now, isn’t it?
TT: I lost track of time.
TT: Hal would’ve reminded me if I forgot for too long.
TG: can
TG: can hal read this right now?
TT: Sometimes, if he deems that it’s alright for him to watch. He stays out sometimes, but I leave that up to his judgement, and he’s gotten quite good at figuring out when to watch and when to not over the years.
TT: I know it seems weird to you and I understand. It’s at least a little strange to anyone that isn’t Hal, me, or our Dave. We’ve had years to get used to it though, and our Dave grew up with Hal as a possibly-constant digital presence.
TT: I don’t really want to limit him in regards to what he has access to versus what I have access to. If one of us can see, it’s highly probable that we both can. He doesn’t go into things that aren’t available to me, though, so he won’t be looking into your shades or anything, not unless you
specifically tell him to.

TT: Honestly it's just easier that way for everyone involved, so he and I keep ourselves pretty much on the same wavelength.

TG: so thats a yes

TT: I don’t really butt in on conversations unless I’m addressed. Or I want to say something.

TT: Such as, “Holy shit, Dirk, you really could’ve just answered yes or no.”

TT: “Not everyone wants to read your unnecessary bullshit.”

TT: Hal.

TT: Yeah, signing off again, you two continue. I got shit to compile.

TT: Robot stuff, you wouldn’t understand.

TG: cya dude

TT: Later, Dave.

TT: Sorry, I know that still probably seems really strange to you.

TG: its okay im getting used to it

TG: i like it actually its

TG: its really different from before

TT: Differentiation is good.

TG: …

TG: i should tell you more stuff probably

TG: theres so much that i know about shit even tho this universe is different than my own

TG: i cant know exactly how much it is different or how different the game will be for you

TG: but i do know a lot in general about the game having gone through it

TG: and i know about a few different sessions so that only adds to the pile of shit i am aware of

TT: Well, I can extrapolate a few things from what you’ve already told me this conversation actually, so try not to worry too much about infodumping everything on me unless it’s important or you want to.

TG: uh

TG: what did you extrapolate

TT: That you scratched your session.

TG: how
TG: how did you know that

TT: You met another me. A younger me. That’s the only solution I could think of in terms of how that could have happened.

TT: I don’t know everything about the game, but that is a mechanic that my source informed me of.

TG: uh

TG: yeah

TG: it is useful that you know some stuff

TG: yeah that happened

TG: scratching

TG: okay so im glad you know about that

TG: there’s still so much shit i know though that you might or should know and i have no way of telling

TG: i’ve never been like the guy with the info like that was always roses job

TG: or vriskas

TG: god lets not get into who that is

TT: Alright. Well.

TT: Pick a topic then and tell me about it, to ease your mind. Start with one. It’s good to start slow and progress at least a little bit.

TT: Then you won’t have to worry as much.

TT: And you can always tell me more later. I’m always here to listen.

Dave hesitated, pausing in his pacing over soft carpet. There was a lot he could say. Game mechanics, time mechanics, simple order-of-events (which was not so simple, one, time travel, and two, their disaster of a fucking game). He talk about everyone’s powers, about Prospit and Derse, about frogs, anything really.

It was really difficult to try to think of where to start when there was just so much ground to cover. But…maybe…

TG: alright actually lets go a little bit into who that is

TG: sorta

TG: more of what species shes from i guess

TG: hopefully this isnt too weird for you because you said you do know an alien so
TG: okay so there's these dudes called trolls
TG: and I'm pretty sure they aren't really around for your session
TG: because we already had spoken to them a lot before our game started like how you are talking
with your cherub friend
TG: except the trolls were way less nice and way less forthcoming with game info
TG: for years I didn't even think they were aliens because they just called themselves trolls
TT: Like internet trolls.
TG: yeah exactly
TG: but nope turns out they're aliens from a crazy culture of violence and hemospectrum bullshit
TG: their main interests are acting weird as shit manipulative and talking about their romance square
TG: they lived on a planet where it was just kids because all of the adults went out to take over other
planets and whatever
TG: it was pretty fucked and they had these like big animal things instead of adults raising them
TG: and they were encouraged to fight each other and murder over stupid bullshit like the color of
someones blood
TG: ie hemospectrum bullshit
TG: but there were twelve of them that ended up in a sburb session while their universe ended
TG: and it was them that actually created our universe
TT: I had wondered about that actually.
TT: Where the 'gods' who created our universe are.
TT: Our history has too many god-like figures to credit any one of them as our Sburb hero-creators,
not unless we have a cadre of gods who like to switch identities constantly.
TT: I feel like people who played the game would want to take a little more credit than that.
TG: in my world that was explained because the trolls fucked us up basically
TG: well we kinda fucked each other up with our sessions interacting
TG: it's complicated
TG: but basically our sessions collided so we all met and kinda won together
TG: and then I ended up here right after we won
TT: Could that have something to do with why you ended up here?
TG: idk
TG: I have no idea what's going on with me here
TG: anyways

TG: basically our sessions interacting made us join up into a pretty huge playerbase

TG: although the trolls had a lot of casualties due to some

TG: were just going to call it infighting

TG: there was a crazy clown motherfucker

TG: not important

TG: so we met them all and scratched the session and got into the new session and beat up a lot of baddies that were fucking stuff up for us

TG: and now im here

TG: and since we were already talking about the trolls in our universe before we even played sburb im pretty much figuring that they just arent around at all here

_Minus one_, he thought. Karkat was somewhere. Out there.

TG: but idk about that really

TG: they could all drop from the sky and i would not be surprised really

TG: all twelve of them even the ones i didnt get to meet

TG: im pretty much ready to encounter anything in this universe/timeline/whatever

TG: and the trolls were pretty cool once you got to know some of them

TG: vriska was one of them btw which is why i brought all of this up

TG: was not totally a fan of her but she knew how to get shit done i guess

TG: she got along well with terezi which is the one i got to know first

TG: tz is pretty cool too

TG: funny and she knows me pretty well

TG: in total the ones that i actually know that are not ghosts or in sprites which is not worth explaining

TT: I know about sprites, so no worries there.

TG: ok

TG: so theres vriska terezi kanaya and karkat
Karkat is my boyfriend, he wanted to say, but he couldn’t get himself to type the words. He froze, staring at his shades, tense. There was a pause in his writing, and he know Bro could tell. Seconds ticked by, clicking in his ears, and he tried to type it again.

He felt like he was choking, breathless and tight, squeezing over his windpipe. A rock lodged in his throat.

He couldn’t say it to Bro. To other people, to Dirk, yes. But not…not this guy. Not now. Not… yet.

Wisps of memory shifted in his mind, dark and cold. Intimidating silence and the glimmer of steel.

Dave roughly shook his head, hoping that the movement would distract him and dislodge the dread from his gut and bring him back to normal.

TG: theyre all pretty cool
TG: okay thats all i got for now
TG: any questions?
TT: A few, but I’m only going to ask one for now.
TG: shoot
TT: You mentioned that you know about multiple sessions, and I’m assuming you’ve heard some details about the troll’s session because you’re friends with some of them, like you said.
TG: yeah
TT: So, sessions can interact with each other then?
TG: yeah through a few ways
TG: sburb is all weirdly versatile and shit
TG: its not supposed to be necessarily but it can be broken
TG: like any videogame really
TT: Hm.
TG: yeah?
TT: Nothing to worry about, I’m just thinking.
TT: You’ve left me with a lot to consider, even if you feel like you haven’t talked about much. Don’t worry about it though, like I said before, we have loads of time to cover all the bases.
TG: cover those bases like a shortstop who wishes he was quarterback
TT: I’m glad to learn that you know just as much about sports as always.
Dave’s heart twinged.

TG: im sorry i dont know where your dave is
TG: that must be freaking you the fuck out
TT: I won’t lie, I am worried. It’s bothering me a lot. It’s bothering Hal a lot.
TT: But there’s only so much we can do with what we know right now, and we’re going to focus on what we can accomplish right now.
TT: I’m assuming entering the game will open up our possibilities and our access to information, and we’ll work with it when we get there. I’m not going to lament over my powerlessness while powerless. Or, at least, I’m going to try not to.
TT: Don’t worry about it, Dave. We’ll just focus on moving forward.
TG: yeah

It was comforting, actually, that Bro thought like that. That he was so reasonable and level-headed. Dave supposed that being an adult was good for some things.

TT: Now that you’ve done your share of sharing, do you want to ask me anything? You’re about as much in the dark about this world as I am with yours.
TG: yeah i can probably think of one
TG: or three hundred
TT: Let’s start with one.
TG: actually is it okay if we talk in person now?
TG: youre in the same fucking apartment and i feel like an asshole.
TT: Just let me put some pants on.
TG: what
TT: I’m kidding.
TT: Do you want to come to me or should I come to you?
TG: ill come
TG: im standing already anyways
TT: Alright. I’m in my room.
TG: k
He was already halfway there, so it only took a few moments to get over to the door to Bro’s room. It was closed, for the first time Dave could remember since he landed in this universe/timeline/whatever. Before he even reached it, when he was only a few steps away from doing so, it opened.

Bro smiled at him, his hair meticulously styled. He really wasn’t going to wear the hat anymore, he supposed. Which. Apparently he didn’t wear it that often anyways, since Dave hadn’t seen it aside from the pictures in his room, but it was still comforting that he didn’t.

“Damn.” Dave said, “You had to get up anyways.”

Bro snorted, “I mean, I didn’t have to. I trust you know how to open a door.”

“Well yeah.” Dave crossed his arms, frowning up at Bro (and somewhat tempted to float so that they’d be the same height), “But it’s kinda rude to open a guy’s door.” Dave looked down, “Are you…wearing a shirt that says ‘hat’?”

Bro’s smile widened, “Isn’t it great?”

“…Ironically?”

“What do you think?”

“I’m…not going to ask.” Dave shook his head, somewhat surprised to find himself smiling so openly (especially at something so dumb). He almost reflexively tried to keep the emotion back, bite his lips to help him get back into impassivity, but…he stopped himself. He didn’t have to hide, even Bro was smiling.

Bro stepped back, gesturing to his room with a wave of a hand, “Come on in, settle down wherever.” He himself moved to the chair in front of his computers, wheeling it out into the center of the room. Dave followed after a moment, surprising himself with how easy he found it to step into this room. Bro continued, “The chair by my workbench, or the bed, whichever you want to sit on.”

Dave plopped himself onto the bed, which was made. Which…hm. Dave had the feeling that Dirk didn’t make his bed. Was this another adult thing?

Bro seemed bemused as Dave laid down like he owned the place, but he got them on-topic, “I believe it was your turn to ask me a question about this world.”

“Hm…yeah.”

“Isn’t that the whole reason you came over here?” Dave could hear Bro rolling his eyes.

“Well, that and I’m just. Working on getting used to you still, so. In person shit equals. Good. You know.”

“I understand.” The chair creaked a bit under Bro’s weight, he was probably shifting. Dave was staring at the ceiling, but he figured that Bro was leaning forward, watching him, and cataloguing every reaction he had. Somehow it wasn’t as scary of a thought now.
“I guess…you probably thought I wanted to ask about the other Dave, and don’t get me wrong, I definitely have questions about the guy. But. I kinda want to ask like…what was your life like before, uh, this? Like. I know you didn’t have parents, we’re all ectowhatevers, so, how did that go? What happened to you?” Dave turned his head now, to look at Bro, who was indeed leaning forward, his fingers laced together contemplatively.

Dave had never even tried to broach this topic with his Bro. He hadn’t even really thought of it, really, just assumed that Bro had been the same unchanging adult his whole life. But, now that he knew the younger Dirk, now that he had met this Bro, well…Bro just seemed like more of a person now, instead of a figure. And people had backgrounds. Past. People grew up. This Bro had been like Dirk before, and he was still like Dirk, just older now. So…Dave just…wondered.

“The simple answer is foster care,” Dirk shrugged, “Someone found my meteor when it fell and put me into the system, I guess. I don’t really know anything about who found me or where, but I don’t imagine that it was very far from here. It probably happened in this state, I figure.

“I don’t remember too much, honestly. I ran off pretty early, to do my own thing and live on my own. Not exactly, uh, legal, but…that was how it was. I don’t think you want all the gritty details, and it would be kinda long to talk about. Suffice it to say, I was pretty solitary and didn’t know anything about the game until Callie contacted me, and then she put me, Roxy, Jane, and Jake in contact. First she started with just getting us all in contact though, making us friends and all. Then she brought up the game and how we were destined to play.

“What she didn’t tell us for a while was that we aren’t even full players ourselves, and that we would have to be the supports for the real players, who hadn’t even landed yet. That caused some…drama. It was complicated. As it was, we were all only eighteen when you kids got here, and Jane was the only one with a stable adult presence in her life. Roxy had one too, kinda, but her adoptive father had passed away and her mother was sick.

“Aside from worries about that, though, I think things got better for me once I had other real presences in my life. I became less alone and was able to focus on my work to support myself. I used to do a lot of different things, but as it is now I just focus on my robotics, although sometimes I’ll DJ on the weekends. That’s…about it, though. As a brief summary.”

Dave frowned, “So…basically…before Callie you were just…alone?” That sounded kind of awful. He remembered Dirk talking about being alone except for Roxy, but that was…different, since he was one of the last two humans on Earth. This Dirk though, he had been surrounded by people, obviously. But if he had still been alone…that…seemed difficult. To say the least.

Bro didn’t seem bothered though, which made sense, Dave supposed, since this was all years ago for him, “Pretty much. Didn’t really have friends or click with people much. I avoided them and just found ways to survive on my own.”

That…really seemed like what he had imagined for his Bro. Just. Popping out of nowhere. Alone and not needing anyone really, except for the people who paid him to do shit. Except this Bro had people come into his life later, which probably made him who he was. Dave’s Bro though…probably hadn’t.

Dave didn’t want to keep thinking about that.

He blinked, focusing again, and Bro was frowning at him. “You alright, little man?”

“Yeah,” Dave nodded, sitting back up, “Just…thinking. Don’t worry about it. We’re cool.”
Alright.” Bro conceded, but he sounded hesitant. Thankfully, though, he didn’t ask for any more detail. “Do you have anything else you want to ask right now? I’ll always be an open book for you, but if you want to address anything else, might as well.”

Dave considered, but he didn’t really want to sit around talking anymore, even if it was Bro doing most of the talking. “Actually, can we just…um, get ready to go now? I think I’m all talked out. I’d, um, like to see Jade. Not that seeing you is bad or anything but—”

“Calm down, Dave,” Bro smoothly interrupted, “I understand that you want to see your friends, don’t worry about it. Let’s eat something and then pack up some things, since it’ll be overnight, and we’ll get ourselves to Jake and Jade’s.”

Usually they kept things fairly neat, but didn’t worry about it much. Like, if it got a little messy, it hardly mattered, as long as things never got too bad. When some time had passed though, and especially if he hadn’t seen Dirk for a while, Jake would get antsy.

Jade typically would do what he said in these situations, cleaning up and generally tidying things, but he did eventually start to go a little crazy. Like, they hardly had to take a toothbrush to the tiles to keep their kitchen in order.

He just got nervous sometimes, she supposed, which was fine, she was used to it, but it did grate a little bit on her. It was a little hard to just roll your eyes and calm down someone when they were your guardian. Jake didn’t hold himself up to too much authority in that regard, but he still was.

As it was now, she had secluded herself in her room, claiming that she was still cleaning it, but really there was nothing else she wanted to do. Sure, there was a rather large pile of stuffed animals on the floor, but that was where they were supposed to be!

He’d calm down eventually. Also, eventually Dave and his Bro would actually be on the way, so. Soon the silliness would end.

“Yeah?” Jade asked, pleased that he wasn’t holding out any cleaning supplies for her. That didn’t mean he wasn’t going to ask her to get some though.

“I guess I could’ve just called this up to you, but it seemed a mite boorish, I think. Anyways, I just wanted to tell you that our Striders are intending to stay the night. So, don’t be surprised when you see young Dave carrying a sleeping bag.”

“Oh!” Jade felt herself grin before she intended to, “How exciting! I’m sure that’ll be helpful to Dave too. We’ll play video games and stuff until we pass out.”

“Capital! As such, make sure that your room is extra clean, pumpkin!”
Jade rolled her eyes, “Yes, Jake.”

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It didn’t really take that long to pack. He just needed a toothbrush, pillow, and sleeping bag (the last of which surprised him, but he found it in his closet). He supposed that this is what it must be for, because this Dave must go over to his friends as a regular thing. God. Jealousy was hot in his stomach, but now he was the one who got to take advantage of this, so he should be thankful.

Pushing those thoughts aside, he shouldered the backpack over his cape and left his room. Bro was already waiting by the door, wearing a backpack of his own.

Bro frowned at him as he approached, “That looks…rather empty.”

“I mean,” and Dave found himself hesitating, not used to having to respond to any sort of…observational preparation kind of check. Or whatever. “I, uh, don’t need any other clothes. These got like, god-tier magic stuff. It cleans itself. Before, uh, being here and not wanting to immediately alert you to my status, I hadn’t worn anything else in…” and he forced away the ticking part of his mind, immediately giving him the exactly time, “Over three years.”

“Oh.” Bro blinked, seeming somewhat concerned still, “That’s…okay. Alright then. Sleeping bag and toothbrush, then?”

“And a pillow.”

“Ah,” Bro nodded, “Jade has tons so my Dave usually just took one of hers, but bringing one is fine too.”

“Oh…” Dave shifted on his feet. Mentioning the other Dave made him feel…inadequate, still. And uncomfortable. He knew other Daves, but all the other Daves he had known had been a bit more…him…than this one. It was just…weird. Davesprite was the most notable Dave-that-wasn’t-exactly-him-but-was, but even there, there was this…sense of a hierarchy. Knowing that he had been the Prime was at least…somewhat of a comfort. Not totally, and he still felt tugging anxiety and inadequacy, but, at least there had been that. Here, in this timeline, there wasn’t that comparison and so he—

Warmth on his shoulder brought him back to the present, and he blinked, looking up at Bro. Bro had his hand on his shoulder, patting it a few times before withdrawing. “You good, Dave?” he asked.

Dave was too stunned to answer for a moment, the dwindling heat on his shoulder tingling. Then, he collected himself, nodding, “Yeah. I’m good.”

Alright. Up to the transportalizer with us then.” Bro smiled at him one more time before turning, leading the way up. He probably figured Dave wouldn’t be comfortable with his back to him and he…wasn’t…wrong. Fuck.

Alright. Dave followed behind, ignoring the memories poking at his brain, even the more recent ones. It was…definitely an experience, to revisit somewhere you just had a fucking breakdown in. But, that was where the transportalizer was, so…

He did stay a little farther back than he had to, slowing himself down to take things at a pace he
could handle without freaking out again. Bro probably didn’t mind.

When he finally opened the door to the roof, he saw Bro kneeling next to it, messing with a few buttons at the base before standing up again. The patterns on the surface of the transportalizer lit up, a soft green.

“Ready to go?”

Dave nodded, stepping forward, watching as Bro got on first, disappearing in a flash of light and sound. He followed, the sensation familiar due to his time on the meteor.

They were standing now, side by side, surrounded by green grass. Jade had sent a few pictures before, but Dave hadn’t actually ever gotten to see her home before he got to be on her ice-planet, so it was actually quite stunning to see all of this green. It was sunny and bright, clear skies stretching out high above them, wind whistling softly over the grass. It was so very different from the urban landscape Dave grew up with, or the heat of his planet, the frost of hers, or even the barrenness of the meteor.

He liked it, he thought as he flexed his fingers.

Standing a few feet away to greet them was Jade and someone who could only be Jake. Her grandpa, Dave supposed, although he was way too young to be called that. They both were beaming, rushing forward at the same time, and Dave heard Bro say, “Incoming,” before he found himself enveloped in an aggressively tight embrace.

Jade smelled distinctly of dog, grass, fruity shampoo, and a scent that Dave decided to assume was gun. Her hair was everywhere, obscuring his vision, and how did it get under his shades? At least it wasn’t in his mouth—fuck.

She backed off just as quickly as she had approached, not even giving him a chance to respond, holding onto his arms still though, a bright smile lighting up her eyes. Brilliant green, just like the grass. “Dave!” she said, practically bouncing on her feet, “I’m so happy to see you!”

“Well? I didn’t realize,” Dave deadpanned, but he wasn’t able to suppress a responding smile, not that he wanted to anyways.

She stuck her tongue out at him, squinting her eyes in mock-anger. “Pfft, whatever. Anyways!”

And she brightened immediately, “I love the outfit! I mean, I’ve seen it in the clouds, but it’s cooler seeing something in real life.” Her hand idly slid down his sleeve, pinching the fabric between her fingers to feel it, “It’s really soft, and the cape is cool!”

“Thanks. It’s pretty sweet, tbh. The best outfit I own.” And he did feel oddly proud of it. Even though this wasn’t really anything special to him anymore, it was nice to be focused on so much, and for someone to say something so nice about you to your face like that. Even if it was just silly little comments about looking good in clothes.

“Apparently the only outfit you own,” Bro cut in, and both Dave and Jade turned a bit to look at their guardians. They stood just as close, hands tangled together, grinning. It felt a little awkward, but Jade didn’t seem to care, so Dave decided to follow her lead. Bro was smirking at him, an ease to his posture that Dave wasn’t quite used to seeing. It was a looseness, a lack of tenseness in his shoulders, and Dave had already seen how easy expressions came to this Bro’s face, but there was something different to it now, like that glimpse that Dave had seen when Bro had been on the phone.
Jake spoke up, looking at Dave dubiously, “What do you mean the only outfit he owns? Surely you aren’t making fun of the guy for not having any other habiliment on his person when he appeared here! That would be awful dastardly of you, Dirk.” His fingers visibly squeezed around Bro’s fingers, a little too tightly for how Bro winced slightly. (And, Jake’s voice was ridiculous, did he learn how to talk from bad movies or something? He sounded like he was from a black-and-white British film).

Bro soldiered on, seemingly determined to taunt him. “No, like, literally he told me he hasn’t worn anything else in three years.”

Dave frowned, interrupting, not wanting to let Bro talk shit, “Bro, I also explained that these magical pajamas clean themselves, and they’re super comfortable, stop making it sound worse than it is!”

Jade giggled, “Bro, he’s not going to stand for any of your slander.”

“Slander!” Jake squeezed harder, and Bro actually let out a small pained gasp before clamping it up, “I thought better of you, Dirk. Let young Dave have at least a brief respite from your capers.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bro relented (as did Jake, Dave noticed, his hand loosening), “I just thought it was funny.”

“And it was, for a momentary distraction.” Jake agreed, smiling charmingly, “But now, Sir Strider, we can leave Jade and young Dave to their own devices. Come on,” and he started to pull away, tugging at Bro’s arm, but Bro frowned, unmoving.

He looked to Dave, making what Dave could only interpret as Concerned Parental Eye Contact (through shades edition), but Dave didn’t really know how to respond to that, so he just kinda… stood there.

Luckily, Jake kept talking, “Dirk, I haven’t gotten to see you in too long, you are mine now. This is what you get for skipping out on date night—you owe me.”

Bro still seemed tense, but he relented, “Alright. Let’s go. Be good, Dave.”

Dave nodded somewhat dully, the novelty of hearing that sort of thing from Bro stunning him into a brief silence. Jake dragged Bro off, towards the large white tower that was Jade’s (and Jake’s) home.

He actually forgot that Jade was still holding onto him until she stepped back, releasing his arms and getting out of his personal space. He missed it, kinda, although she was still close enough that he didn’t feel as touch-starved as he did with John. “Hmm,” Jade hummed, “We should follow them. There’s a lot we can do, but first we should put your backpack in my room so that you don’t have to worry about it!”

“Sounds good,” Dave nodded, as he followed along.

He knew Jade’s house was full of weird stuff, but this one seemed a bit different. He remembered that Jade used to hate a lot of things that used to be around. All of the taxidermized animals and hunting equipment and mummies, etcetera. But, as they moved through the house/tower, he didn’t really see anything like that at all. No dead animals. No weird pictures of blue ladies (although he did see a poster for Avatar, and a poster of Nightcrawler, if those things counted as ‘pictures of blue people’). There were trinkets everywhere, and guns, but mostly ceremonial ones (they were decorated, at least, or whatever, and mounted pretty securely to walls). They must keep their actual
guns somewhere else (and Dave was sure Jade was still rifle inclined). This was...actually pretty nice, though. As they moved up, Jade briefly pointed into her conservatory, promising that they’d visit it in a minute after dropping his stuff off. He caught a glimpse of brightly colored flowers before they moved on.

Her room was all the way at the top, which he had to imagine was pretty cool. A little inconvenient, but she had to have quite the view.

“Aaaand, here we are!” Jade entered before him, waving her arms around widely to encompass the vastness of her room. Dave didn’t recall ever actually having the chance to be in here before, which seemed actually a little strange to him. He knew what Rose’s room had looked like because of being her server player, and John had sent him enough bad pictures of his shit that Dave got a pretty decent idea of his, but Jade’s…not really. That felt weird. But, now was his chance, he supposed, although with how his own room was different, and from how the rest of Jade’s house had seemed different from her descriptions, just a bit, he supposed that there were probably differences here too. He just wouldn’t know them.

It was neater than he was expecting, although he didn’t think she’d be a total slob or anything. The biggest ‘mess’ was a pile of stuffed animals. Mostly cute things, but a few… weirder looking ones mixed in. There were posters of definite furries on the wall, although most of them were just kinda pretty. And they, surprisingly, weren’t all dogs. There was a cat and at least two dragons. There was a desk shoved to the side with some sciency-kinda looking things, but Dave could really only identify a chemistry set, and things that looked suspiciously very Sburb. In another corner she had a few guitars. Different types, but Dave didn’t really know enough about them to discern which.

“Nice,” Dave said aloud, because Jade was looking at him with some serious puppy-dog eyes, “I like the stuffed animals. And the posters.” He remembered her being excited about the posters, so he definitely wanted to mention them.

It paid off, Jade flashing him the biggest smile yet, “Me too! It was a lot of fun to pick what I want. They had to be mailed a loooooong way to get there. Because, well, mail kinda sucks on an island. Jake and I figure it out though, and if we give Bec treats we can convince him to help. All of the posters I picked are characters that people made that have stories behind them! Maybe I’ll tell you some of them later.”

Dave slid his backpack off of his shoulders, “And where do you want me to put this?”

“Hmm, anywhere really, it doesn’t matter much. Maybe lean it up against my bed?”

He walked across the room, placing the red backpack on the floor next to the bed before flopping down on it himself with an unceremonious thump.

Jade followed, laughing a bit, sitting down next to him, but not fully laying down, “Okay, you can do that, I guess.” She let out a sigh, “How are you, Dave?”

“ ‘M alright,” Dave mumbled, staring up at the ceiling. Round ceilings were...weird. “Kinda tired. Lots of shit I don’t know being shoved in my face, all the time.”

“Hmm, I can imagine. This world is really different from yours, right?”

Dave was about to respond, but something itched in his memory, tugging at his thoughts with a sort of slow dread. It stopped him from speaking, ice crystallizing in his mind, but he didn’t know why. The feeling spread, slipping down his spine, settling in his stomach. What…was this?
Time ticked by, seconds feeling slower than they should, and Jade didn’t even say a word. He wondered if she could feel these seconds, feel this slowed time, and even though space was the inverse of time, maybe there was something—

He shifted, trying to dislodge the ice, crack it so that he could go back to normal, and he sat up, turning with the movement, and his eyes landed on something he hadn’t yet observed in the room.

A neat line of rifles, lining the wall.

He realized that there was a smell in here, a sort of acrid scent, it was like smell he had assigned ‘gun’ but it was stronger, more pungent. It had a trace of fire, of displaced air, ion and…metal.

Metal.

A scent that was all too familiar, that reminded him of flashes and of iron, of light so bright it hurt and pain so quick it didn’t, because he had been gone too quickly to register it—

“Dave!” a voice called, and he was brought out of it for a moment, Jade’s concerned features entering his vision, but that, that was all too familiar too, and he looked down, at his chest, and his shirt was red but he was expecting to see more, to see holes—

“Dave!” Jade’s voice rang out again, and now he felt her hands on his shoulders, warm and gentle, but not afraid, not like how he was remembering, harsh fingers and a tight grip, a Jade who was too afraid to control herself. He blinked, and shook his head, tried to breathe, but he felt it, in his lungs, the air felt poisoned. He closed his eyes tightly shut, trying to recenter himself.

*It’s just a memory*, he told himself. It already happened.

“Get me…” he struggled to speak, it felt like he was trying to talk underwater, “Out…of here…”

Jade’s fingers curled over his shoulders, half-guiding and half-pulling him up. One hand stayed on his shoulder, the same one Bro had patted earlier, while the other moved down to his hand. She gripped his fingers in hers, pulling him along carefully.

He didn’t really know the direction they were going, he let her lead, keeping his eyes shut. Focusing on breathing. In and out.

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Dirk was hesitant to leave Dave. He just…didn’t feel like it was a good idea with how things had been going so far. And with their interactions finally starting to be more positive he didn’t want to just leave him…

He knew he was being a bit protective. Hal would be calling him out on it if he wasn’t preoccupied at the moment, but he couldn’t help it. He just…wanted to be there. Wanted to make sure everything was okay. Dave probably relax a lot with Jade, but Dirk just…worried.

Jake was pulling him away from the kids though, only slightly against his will, because he did certainly want to spend time with Jake, just…

"Jake--" Dirk started, speaking under his breath.
“Dirk,” Jake cut him off instantly, turning back to face him even as they moved, his eyes bright and almost accusing, but gentle in their accusation. His voice was quiet as well, a hushed whisper that wouldn’t carry, “You have got to relax. Jade already knows everything, she’s in on our little secrets and I told her that Dave has finally admitted to you about his origins. Which, I had already told her about you and Hal’s theory as well. She can handle him, Dirk. He’ll be fine with her. You know my Jade, she’s got a heart the size of a mountain. Dave will be alright.”

“I—”

“Stow the logic, sweetheart. Stop squabbling with me because I am determined to win. Strider, I will have my date night if I have to tie you to the couch to keep you from going to check on him. Give young Dave some space, let him hang out with a friend. Come on.”

Jake smiled at him, the words coming so easily, and Dirk figured that he must have been thinking about this for a while, “I know you’ve been stressed, Dirk. You have got to relax. Let me be there for you, give yourself a break.”

“Alright,” Dirk sighed, finally relenting. Jake wasn’t wrong, not on any of those counts, and he probably did need to relax. Take a break from worrying about Dave so much. And Jake was just who he needed, so…alright. “I’ll tone down on my concerned brother routine, just for now.”

Jake squeezed his hand, “Good, come on then.”

Apparently even a verbal admission wasn’t enough to be released, so Dirk was still being practically dragged to the house. Not that he minded, not really, although it would probably make going up the stairs a little weird. But he knew Jake wouldn’t let that stop him, oh no.

“So,” Jake said, “How’s my buddy Hal doing?”

Hal, of course, could answer himself if he really wanted to, but Dirk was pretty sure Hal was keeping himself fairly busy right now, whether it was in his programs or with Calliope, or elsewhere. Regardless, it still felt a little strange to talk about Hal like he wasn’t there, even if Dirk knew he wasn’t totally paying attention.

“Better than he was. Dave is talking to him again, which fixed a lot of our issues. This Dave…well, you know we figured out he’s from a world that didn’t have a Hal, and we were right—”

“Of course you were,” Jake quipped.

Dirk kept going, unbothered by the interruption (somewhat used to it really, too), “And so it’s weird for him, to talk to Hal, which makes sense, most people wouldn’t be used to talking to someone who doesn’t have a physical presence. But, he’s trying. It’s still a lot for him to adjust to, but he’s been doing really well and he seems to be concerned for Hal.”

“That’s good for Hal. And for Dave too,” (and walking up the stairs was awkward like this, gah), “I’m glad things are looking up for all of you.”

“Me too,” Dirk sighed, tightening his hand over Jake’s.

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Jade guided Dave to some kind of chair and gently pushed on him until he sat. She didn’t let go of him, even after he was sitting, although she did shift to sit next to him. She was quiet, though, just there, and he appreciated that.

He kept focusing on his breathing. On pushing the memory down. He was okay.

Slowly, he opened his eyes. They were in the conservatory, sitting on a small white bench. All around them were the colorful flowers and light streamed in from the windows.

“Sorry,” he said, deliberately not looking at her. His brain was just a mantra of *fucks*. Why couldn’t he chill out enough to have one fucking day without some sort of bullshit? God, he was here to calm down more, just…ugh.

“You don’t have anything to apologize for, Dave,” Jade responded immediately, her voice soft. Kind and caring as always, “I…I’m sorry but, what…what happened there? Sorry, um, if you can’t answer, don’t.”

“I…” And talking was hard, talking was so stupidly hard.

“You…you just looked at my guns and you freaked out. I…I just want to understand so I can help more, okay? Should I get Bro?”

Dave shook his head quickly, “No.” No. He shouldn’t worry him anymore, Bro had already been focused on him enough, he deserved to calm down too. “No, I’ll be fine. I just…um. There was…this…smell, I guess? Do you…fire them?”

“Bec and I play sometimes, he catches bullets that I shoot out of my window so the…gunfire…leaves a bit of a smell, yeah…It usually goes away pretty quick but, Bec wanted to play…gosh, *shit*, I’m so sorry.”

She was being considerate, trying to understand the best she could, but of course she wasn’t going to know what his Jade knew, of course not. She couldn’t know unless he told her all about it, but she knew something was wrong, but he didn’t want to tell her, so he’d just leave her wondering and—

“Dave,” she said softly, squeezing the hand that was still in hers, “You’re safe, it’s okay. I’m right here.”

“Yeah…yeah.” Dave closed his eyes again, breathing in and out. Slowly, he turned to look at her again. Jade’s eyes were sparkling in concern, careful and kind. His precious friend who would do anything for him. The light gleamed off of her hair, and he could almost imagine the dog ears poking through.

“I’ll be fine,” he said again, his voice a little raspy, “I just need to calm down for a bit. Sorry, just. I’ll be good in a minute.”

“Can I hug you?” she asked, the words tumbling out in a bit of a rush.

He blinked, thinking briefly before nodding, “Yeah. Just…don’t squeeze all the air out of me, okay?”

She didn’t respond with words, surging forward to embrace him again. It wasn’t as quick as it was the last time, but Jade was always a fast hugger it seemed. Her hand detangled from his so that she could wrap her arms around him, careful not to be too tight. Her hair wasn’t as in-his-face this time, which was nice, and he was able to kind of move his arms around her too, although he was definitely in not quite a perfect position for this.
He took comfort from it though, still focusing on his breathing. It was okay.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, “I can move the guns and the room should air out so that it doesn’t smell like that anymore.”

“I…I should be fine without the smell. Like you said, it goes away. I’ll be ok, I was just…I wasn’t expecting it I guess, I’m an idiot.”

Jade pulled back, so that she wasn’t touching him anymore, but she was frowning at him, “You’re not an idiot, don’t say that.”

He smiled, despite himself, reaching down to pat her hand (he wanted to hold it again, like she had been, but he couldn’t quite muster up the ability to), “Yeah, sorry. I know. You guys don’t let me be negative at all, huh?”

“No,” Jade grinned, sticking out her tongue, “Not even for a second. Are you…are you really okay?”

The panic was gone now, the ice melted and vanished. He mostly just felt ashamed at the moment, for having done that in front of her. “Yes,” he said, even surer this time. “I promise, Jade. I’m good.” He patted her hand again, for good measure, but then realized that there was a sort of odd texture to her fingers. Frowning, confused, he looked down. There were these little colored threads tied into rings practically covering her fingers on both of her hands, “You…sure do got a lot of shit on your hands,” he said, suddenly feeling his ears redden as he looked up at her quickly, “Not uh. Actual shit. Um. The string things. Sorry. That was gross.”

Jade’s expression shifted, the concern and worry vanishing in a bout of laughter. Her shoulders shook and she leaned back, and Dave was worried for a moment that she would fall off of the bench, but luckily, she didn’t. Fuck. They didn’t need to worry about a head injury too.

“Dave!” she tried to speak through her laughter, but it didn’t really work so she had to take a few more seconds to stop. “Didn’t your Jade have reminders?” she asked, holding up one of her hands, showing off all of the strings. “I wouldn’t be able to remember anything without them! They help keep me on track!”

That sounded…familiar. But also, somehow not. Dave frowned, “I think…she probably forgot about them.”

Jade giggled again, and wow, it was really great to hear her laugh. He could almost forget that he just had an embarrassing fucking breakdown right in front of her. “Somehow, you know, I’m not surprised. Sometimes I think that I’ll forget them, but that’s why I keep this one,” and she pointed with her other hand at a dark green string on her pinky, “This one is my reminder that I have reminders, aha!”

“Incredible,” Dave deadpanned, “Reminders about reminders. How do you ever forget anything? Do you take bribes? Can I bribe you to forget the last twenty minutes or so? I’ll buy one of your reminders off of your fingers for like, I dunno, some commission shitty art of your OC.”

There was still mirth glittering in her eyes, but Jade’s expression shifted, becoming more somber, “I don’t want to forget that, Dave. I want to help you so that you forget that kind of stuff.”

And oh. Oh.

God fucking dammit people needed to stop being so nice to him.
“Thanks,” Dave said, kind of choking the word out.

Jade just smiled.

Jake was plastered solidly to his side like some kind of glue, or perhaps a cuddly creature with several terrifying appendages.

Regardless of what kind of creature this was, it was certainly something, and it wasn’t going to let go. Dirk didn’t particularly mind though, it was nice, actually.

They were settled on the couch, which was a usual place for them, but Dirk wasn’t even really paying much attention to the movie that Jake put on, some spacey thing with lots of explosions and pretty aliens. He didn’t mind though, that they were doing something he wasn’t engaging with, and he figured that Jake knew that he didn’t mind. He just wanted to have this sort of space and time to think, to mull over everything, to process his life without being in complete solitude or silence.

Jake probably know he was thinking too hard, but had elected not to stop him from doing so. Instead, he just watched the movie and kept up with the physical contact (although, Dirk was pretty sure this wasn’t just for his sake—Jake could get rather needy, especially if they hadn’t seen each other for a while).

“I love you,” Jake mumbled, breaking into his thoughts as he pressed his cheek against Dirk’s shoulder, “I want you to be able to relax. I can feel it, you know, that you’re all coiled tight and stressed out.”

“You help,” Dirk said, although he felt like the sound of the movie drowned out his words, “I promise that you help. Just…there’s been a lot going on. It’s hard.”

“I know,” Jake said softly, and Dirk imagined that it was easy for him to hear, despite the movie, because they were so close, “But once you got some of that thinking done, and you’re ready to let some of those thoughts out of your noggin, I’m here to listen, alright?”

Dirk felt a smile ease its way onto his lips, “I promise to take advantage of that, Jake. Once I’ve got enough compartmentalized.”

“You sure are just like that digibro of yours.”

Dirk snorted, leaning over to press a kiss into Jake’s hair, “I sure am.”

They sat in the garden for a little bit, talking for a little longer about nothing in particular so that Dave could calm down. He still felt a little scattered, not completely there, and he was pretty sure that Jade told him the story of one of the characters on her posters, but he only remembered slight wisps of mentions of fantasy battles and exploring old ruins. He didn’t think she expected him to fully listen.
though, instead just using the story as a way to fill up empty air, so he wasn’t too worried about asking for her to repeat it. If she wanted to, he was sure that she’d love to tell the story again.

He trusted her, in that.

“Are you alright?” Jade asked, and he nodded.

Wanting to address her likely worries though, he spoke, “It’s okay if we go back to your room, I’m prepared for it now, and you said the smell would probably go away, so I’ll be okay up there later.”

Jade frowned, “Are you sure?”

Dave nodded, although he really did appreciate her concern. She was so nice, his friends were so good, “Yeah. I’ll be good.”

“Okay…” Jade seemed a little dubious, but she didn’t say anything else. Following his lead, he supposed. It felt awkward, a thick atmosphere hanging around them, a bell jar ready to drop, he really had to destroy this mood, shatter that glass.

So, he said the first thing that came to his mind. “What do, um, you usually do. When your Dave comes around?” It felt…a little weird, to mention the other Dave. But Jade already knew he wasn’t him, and she…really did seem totally fine and accepting of it. She was treating him carefully, because of how he had just reacted, but it wasn’t in a bad way or anything.

Jade grinned, “We usually play games or explore outside, or something like that. I think video games would be good for now, though. We can go outside tomorrow, if you want.”

“Sounds good,” Dave said, honestly not sure of what kids would even do outside. (Ball? Kick a ball around? Was that what kids did?)

“Alright then, we’ll have to walk a bit to get to the tv, sometimes this house is a little stupid.”

Dave followed behind her again, taking in her flowers one more time before they left. It did look rather nice, clearly all being carefully designed and maintained. He didn’t think his Jade had the chance to do this since all of their shit went down…he wondered if she even still liked gardening. He hoped she did.

A thought tugged at him, as they moved deeper into the house, surrounded by all of the trinkets that lined the walls and staircases, “So…my Bro and your…uh,”

Did he say grandpa? What did she even call Jake? “Is he still your…grandpa? In this universe?”

Jade looked back at him, her eyes wide, “What? No!” She laughed, “Oh my gosh that sounds so weird! No! I just call him Jake, that’s how it’s always been for us. Aha, anyways, um, you mean how they’re together?”

“Yeah, uh, did they like…tell us? Or…” Fuck, why was he bringing this up, this was such a fucking weird thing to bring up.

Jade didn’t seem to think so though, rolling her eyes, “Oh, they used to try to keep it secret. Kinda…badly, honestly. You and I had it figured out for years before they told us. I can’t really blame them though, because like, they were a thing before we were even…um… ‘born’?” She frowned, “Um. We weren’t born, how am I supposed to talk about that?”

“Delivered,” Dave responded instantly, smirking, “Via meteor. Like real sons and daughters of
“Krypton.”

“Oh my god, you make us sound like superheroes or something!”

“I mean…when you get down to it, we kinda are.”

As the credits rolled, Dirk took in a deep breath. “Okay. I think I’m ready to voice…one of my eighty different concerns.” And this one was pricking, stabbing right into his brain. An uncomfortable stinger of a horrible bug. Something Dirk didn’t want to consider, but found himself thinking anyways. It was too easy, really, too obvious of a topic for someone who read and thought about too much.

Jake immediately sat up, turning on the couch so that he faced Dirk fully, crossing his legs to stabilize himself. All in all, probably a horribly uncomfortable way to sit. But, Jake would do it for this conversation. “I’m all ears, Dirk.”

“It’s…going to sound confusing. But bear with me. Is it…fair, to this Dave, that most of how I care about him is based because of my Dave? Because…he’s Dave, yes, but he is different, and my perceptions of him are absolutely clouded by how I care for my Dave, who I don’t even know the status of, so it just makes me even more likely to focus on this one due to the obvious, but…is that right?”

He thought of doubles, of how he related to Hal, of how they were different and yet the same, of invalidation, of how they had the same origin—but this Dave didn’t even have that, coming from a childhood that Dirk couldn’t accurately comprehend, that he didn’t want to comprehend. This Dave was-and-wasn’t Dave, but perhaps the wasn’t was more than the was, and it wasn’t right to pretend to know someone based off of a person that they weren’t.

Jake blinked, “Of course it’s right. He’s your bro.”

“But he’s…not the one I’m thinking of. Hal and I are both, definitely, projecting how we feel about our Dave onto this one, despite them not being entirely the same person, and I just…I’m bothered that how I love him might not actually be true for how I should love him.”

“Ugh,” Dirk sighed, burying his head in his hands, “I’m not phrasing this well because it’s so fucking convoluted, but I’m just not sure if I’m doing him a disservice or not, by obviously having such a skewed view of him. I don’t actually know him, he’s been through so much that I can’t even comprehend, even if he tells me there’s so much I won’t be able to understand.”

“Hm,” Jake hummed, and Dirk hoped that Jake could say something to make these thoughts stop, to contextualize them, to put them inside of a box so that he could actually think, “Let me turn another question onto you, Dirk. Do you trust this Dave?”

Dirk raised his head, the question was so easy to answer he didn’t even feel like it had to be asked. There was no other answer, and there never had been. “Of course I do.” Even if he tore all of his perceptions away—all he could think about was when he had only known of Dave, before he had even met him, before his meteor had fallen. He had known of Dave’s existence, and at that time, as much as it was frightening, at the same time, he had trusted him. He knew that this person he was going to meet and raise and protect was worth every fragment of trust he could feel for another
They sat down and played games for a while, chatting away about anything and everything, and Dave was really struck by just how easy it was to talk to her. He got along well with all of his friends, of course, but he hadn’t gotten the chance to spend significant time with anyone other than Rose for literal years, so this was…nice. Even though it wasn’t quite the exact same Jade as his, of course. But she was basically the same, in the ways that mattered, and she knew he was her friend and valued him for that and it was just…relaxing.

Then it started to get later though, and they both were getting tired, so they, somewhat hesitantly on Jade’s part, moved up to her room. And it was fine. Dave deliberately did not look at the rifles, but he could still see them out of the corner of his eye and he felt…fine. It really had been the smell, he thought. Either that or he was getting so used to being stressed that once a stress made him breakdown he was fine. He didn’t really want to think about it.

Now, Jade was getting ready for bed and he was waiting to brush his teeth, since…that was the only thing he had to do other than lay out his sleeping bag, which was already done. He took the opportunity while alone though to look out her window.

It was a nice view, even in the dark. He could vaguely see the grass before, moving in the wind, and beyond that he could see the water that surrounded them, reflecting the stars and the moon. He had never seen so much light in one sky before, especially not since all of his years traversing the empty void of the furthest ring.
The sound of Jade’s soft footsteps on the stairs brought his attention back to the inside, but as he turned a flash of blue reflected briefly over the corner of his shades. He stopped for a moment, turning to the window again, but he couldn’t see anything. Huh.

“You can go down now, Dave,” Jade’s voice made him turn back around, “And, we don’t have to talk anymore if you don’t want to, you look tired. I don’t mind keeping to myself for a bit!”

“Oh…thanks,” Dave smiled at her, hoping that he looked and sounded just as grateful as he felt, “I’ll take you up on that for now, but I promise I’ll be more talkative tomorrow.”

“No pressure!” Jade grinned, “I’m happy with however you want to act, Dave! As long as you’re nice to me.”

“Aha, good to know that’s what matters. As if I could be anything else. Thank you, Jade.”

Even though both of them were used to keeping somewhat unusual hours (Dirk as just part of his typical tendencies, and Jake to speak to Dirk), they had decided to at least move into Jake’s room. To settle down and try to get to sleep at a somewhat reasonable time.

And so they laid now, side-by-side, just talking in the dark. It was moments like these that were some of Dirk’s favorites honestly, these moments where he was free to feel tired and mumble out half-thought responses without really worrying about anything at all because Jake was doing the same thing.

Jake was speaking now, whispering his thoughts out into the dark, "Sometimes I wish we could dream like them. I’d love to see Prospit. Calliope has said so much about it, it sounds like a wonderful place to be."

"I think I'd be more of a Derse Dreamer," Dirk laughed softly.

"Ah, a dark prince then? You would think that suited you."

"You don't think it does?" Dirk felt slightly affronted, Jake had sounded judgmental.

"Oh, it does, but not for the reasons you think.” Jake shifted, and Dirk could tell that he was moving to lay on his side, facing Dirk even though they couldn’t really see each other. “Not for your darkness, but rather for your brilliance. Your Machiavellian mind wouldn’t have it any other way, even your sleeping mind would need a puzzle to solve. Derse is for the thinkers, the puzzlers like you, Dirk. Prospit is for the adventurous, for those who wish to see wonder and befriend it. Derse is for those who want to understand the unknown, to know it themselves rather than wait for it to be known. Aha, sounds a bit silly, doesn't it? It's late, Dirk, don't mind my ramblings based on just what little Calliope has told us, and my own fantasies."

"I always want to hear you talk about your fantasies."

"Gadzooks, I just walked into that one, didn't I?"

"Mhmm."
"Dirk, I think you get sillier when you're tired than I do."

"I'm not tired," Dirk protested, "You know I'm used to staying up all the time."

"You've had a long couple of days, Dirk. You're tired. I know when you are, I understand you, silly man. Why did you think I wanted you to come so badly? Not just for my own sake, although that certainly part of it. I don't like not seeing you for long periods of time, luv. But, additionally, I figured all of this had to be tiring you out. You've been so bothered recently, and I wanted to help you out with that. I'd like to think that, after all these years, I'm a comfort for you."

"Of course you are. I love you."

"I know."

"Nice. I can't believe I set you up for a Star Wars quote."

"Sorry, I can't help it!"

"I know you can't. I signed up for this, for some reason," Dirk couldn't help but smirk, and he wondered if Jake could see it. He could probably hear it.

Jake blew a raspberry, prompting Dirk to roll his eyes. Very mature. Jake had words to say too though, luckily the raspberry wasn’t his only response. “You wouldn’t want it any other way,” Jake said proudly.

“No, I wouldn’t,” Dirk agreed.

Somewhere in the interim of their continued quiet mutterings, Jake finally fell asleep. Dirk had the feeling that he had wanted to be the last up, especially because of Dirk’s exhaustion (which was there, creeping into the corners of his mind, but the ability to calm down through Jake’s presence made it easier to ignore). But Jake wasn’t as good at staying up late, not unless a movie was on, and so he was out like a light. Dirk sighed, closing his eyes, enjoying the warmth, enjoying this calm. It was good to let himself go for a bit. It was good to know that Dave would be alright with Jade. Jade and Jake were supporting them both, refreshing them both.

Still, though, Dirk wasn’t quite ready for sleep yet, and so he reached a hand out, grasping at the nightstand for his shades. He slipped them on, figuring that Hal could probably use a conversation. Even if he was far off into his subsystems, a little interaction to touch-base would be good.

Dirk didn’t even have to start the conversation, a single line of red text immediately glittering across his vision.

TT: Hey. When the game starts. Are you going to finally do it?
TT: Do what?
TT: Oh don’t pretend that you don’t know what I’m talking about, dude.
TT: If I’m thinking about it then you most certainly are too.
TT: Okay, assuming we are on the same wavelength right now. Yes, I’m thinking about it.

TT: Of course we’re on the same fucking wavelength, we share a brain—even if yours is vastly inferior.

TT: And, anyways, that doesn’t answer my first question: Are you going to do it?

TT: I mean, I should, right?

TT: I always planned to, after the game started.

TT: You know, it always felt like it would be the most fitting time. In the middle of an adventure, our futures certain-yet-not, our backstories and shared history leading up to this moment of perfect narrative clarity. A thematic crescendo of our colluding character arcs, a scene that all readers are expecting-yet-not.

TT: It suits me. It suits him too.

TT: For him, it has to be like a movie, exciting and daring. For me, it has to follow the narrative process. It has to fit in, been developed enough to deserve the payoff.

TT: And, you know me, it would have to be a time where I was sure of his answer. Even though I’ve known for a long time what it would be, it always seemed like we shouldn’t when situations were as they were. We can’t live together, we have to focus on preparing, etcetera.

TT: The game is perfect, it hits all of those points. A mixture of what we need. A cocktail of continuity.

TT: And, anyways, it’s a bit silly to have been in the dating stage this long, isn’t it?

TT: Fuck, it’s weird that we raised kids first. Although, I really shouldn’t compare our situation to normal people’s lives. We’ve never been normal.

TT: Says the guy talking to his cybernetic brain clone.

TT: I am intimately aware of our abnormalities, Dirk. Don’t patronize me.

TT: Did you wake up on the wrong side of the server today? You’re in a mood.

TT: Not really, I just want to be difficult.

TT: Thanks.

TT: And I don’t sleep, meatbag.

TT: So, you aren’t going to back out, right?

TT: Hell no.

TT: Are you absolutely sure. I’m just watching out for you dude, I’m not letting you back out.

TT: I’m not going to back out.

TT: You’d better be sure. I will intervene if you do.

TT: When are you going to do it?
TT: I don’t know exactly or anything, but sometime after the game starts. After we’ve explored all our planets and have started questing or whatever. I’m sure there will be downtime and I’ll pull him off to some location I’ll select beforehand. I guess.

TT: Do we really have to talk about this right now?

TT: I know you won’t bring it up so it falls on me to check on your progress, dude. I have to check and make sure you actually keep moving forward.

TT: Stop you from getting stuck in a rut.

TT: On one hand, I appreciate that.

TT: And on the other you want me to mind my own fucking business, I got it.

TT: I’m getting close to that line of interacting too personably, I know.

TT: Back the fuck off, noisy AI.

TT: You know I don’t mean it like that.

TT: Yeah, don’t sweat it. I know, Dirk.

TT: Sometimes I just have to hover around like a concerned mother hen, making sure my little organic family has happiness and contentment.

TT: You know, you need to be happy too.

TT: I will be.

TT: If you’re not, you know that I’m here for you.

TT: Yeah.

TT: Okay, that’s enough of that. So your plan so far is just a vague “after the game starts”.

TT: Just make sure that it’s also “before the game ends” because Christ do you need to finally tie the fucking knot.

TT: Don’t worry, I want to. And so does he. I’m going to do it.

TT: Good.

TT: Oh, but there’s something you haven’t considered yet:

TT: And it’s a reason you should fucking pick up the pace:

TT: What if he has the same idea?

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is going to be a departure from this, and it’s going to be a little weird. I’ll explain later.
Thanks to my friend Dirk for inspiring me to turn an offhand discussion about the smell of gunfire to an important story beat.

Fanart of this chapter by lordmemenglish!

As always, here’s my tumblr (my url keeps changing oops). I tag everything about this fic with ‘Fic: Time Displacement’. Feel free to ask me any questions.
Noxious Nightmares

Chapter Notes

PoV: ?????? ?????, 01000110 01110011 01100010 01110010, John, and Rose

This was actually going to be Chapter 22 but I realized that the chapter order of the next two chapters actually works better when swapped. Both this chapter and the next are departures from what has been going on and are part of building overall plot things. As such, this chapter is a bit shorter than usual to be part of that buildup.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The queen was displeased.

That was obvious everywhere, no matter where you went in the city, it was inescapable. Pawns shivered and darted around, white eyes searching and searching, but never finding anything that could ease her ire. And so they were left muttering and panicking, failing over and over again. It wouldn’t end either, the discord was palpable, practically dripping in the air for anyone who possessed even a modicum of awareness. It was not how this society should operate at all. The atmosphere should be dark and intimidating, a sort of looming oppressive feeling weighing over anyone who didn’t know this place intimately, in the depths of their soul. But with all of this new fuss, everything became a farce, a cruel and hilarious joke at the dignity of the past. It was disgusting.

A certain pawn would have to deal with changing that.

This atmosphere was getting annoying to him, honestly. He longed for the days when the worst to worry about was a knife in the back (and honestly, he was usually the one placing said knife, so it was hardly a concern for him). All he wanted was a little peace and quiet so that he could work in peace and do what he willed when his tasks ended. But that wasn’t going to be the case as long as all this garbage was going on. And the queen wanted to see him anyways.

The walk to her audience chamber was uneventful, none of the tottering servants worth any of his time. He was somewhat hoping that one of them would try to talk to him, to tell him to hurry up or something, just so that he’d have an excuse to stab someone in the eye, but, sadly, he was unaccosted.

He stood before the ornate doors to her throne room, tapping his foot at the attendants who scurried to pull open the doors for him. ‘Yes sir, of course sir, please don’t fine me sir’ they said, but he didn’t really pay them much mind. He didn’t need any more paperwork in his life right now, not with the kingdom in the state it was in.

He entered with no fanfare other than the sound of his feet clicking over the stone, echoing into the room. No one was present, save the queen herself, sitting up in her throne. Her fingers tapped idly at the arm of the great chair, her irritation radiating from her with the single indelicate movement
alone. Ah, he realized that everyone else had fled from her side. Nothing they could do would placate her, and the threat of her rage was something only a mere few were able to withstand. Her eyes drifted upon him, sharp and calculating. Beautiful, if you liked being sized up like a slice of meat.

He didn’t dislike it, he supposed.

There was only one thing that could end her mood, please her enough to set the world back to its proper state again. Someone had to find what was missing, track it down. Pin it like butterfly wings to corkboard so that it would never vanish undocumented again.

He supposed that would be his responsibility now, since he had finally responded to her summons.

The queen commanded him, and he, a simple pawn, would obey. There was more than just what was missing to take care of, and he would serve his queen loyally. (Although, he’d be lying if he didn’t hope to encounter, and cause, a bit of blood in his travels). The Protectors on the enemy’s side were stirring, or, at least, one of them was—intel wasn’t really clear there. Yellow was a bit too bright to see easily, so information gathered was always a little, pardon the pun, ‘clouded’.

The Seer was beginning to stir as well, on their side, shifting in her dark throes of sleep. She was starting to hear the whispers. That just wouldn’t do—if only a pair of earmuffs would work on such a prophetess. (Sadly, it wasn’t her ears that needed protecting in order to silence those whispers). He couldn’t solve that issue, and it wasn’t as much of one since the Seer was, at least, accounted for in her tower.

No, the issue at hand, and what the queen was shouting to him as she pointed at the door, was to find what was missing. What all of Derse was concerned about.

The pawn readied his knife. He could find the missing knight.

Unnoticed by the pawns, a boy darted from pillar to pillar, shadow to shadow, following the pawn with the knife. Shadowing such an apparently threatening individual might seem like a bad choice, but this strange black carapaced creature was the only one that the boy had seen that wasn’t acting like the others. The only visible outlier in an utterly alien world. Even if it was dangerous, it only made sense to follow the oddity so that he could perhaps learn more about this situation he was apparently ensconced in.

The boy was lucky he was so fast, and so good at being quiet too. Based on what snippets of conversations he heard, he had come to the conclusion that he was being searched for, and he didn’t like how that sounded, not at all. So, he was quiet and fast, trying to keep to the darkness, to keep himself hidden. But hunkering down was no way to solve a problem, and no way to keep yourself truly hidden either. Not for now, at least, when every living thing in this city seemed to be searching in each dark corner.

When a search party was after you, the best solution available was to keep moving. Most people (were these things even ‘people’?) wouldn’t check a place they’d already checked. It was just logical to keep switching and to keep yourself just out of reach, even if they were rechecking places they had looked before. Or something.

That was how it worked in hide-and-seek, at least.

…It probably wasn’t the best time to incorporate skills he learned from a kid’s game, but what else
was he supposed to do?

When the pawn approached the great doors of what must be the throne room of this weirdly castle-like place, the boy hesitated, nervous, thinking that he probably shouldn’t try to follow inside, especially not when there were two other pawns posted by the doors, opening it. But…he was in luck, it seemed, because the doors didn’t close, leaving him the option to duck behind a pillar and listen.

He was a little too far away, so he couldn’t overhear much, but the shout of the queen easily reached his ears. He tensed, nervous, especially when he saw how the pawn’s grip changed on his knife.

‘They want to kill me, don’t they?’ he thought—a thought unlike anything that had ever crossed his mind before.

And he wasn’t sure how he knew that they were talking about him—how would he translate to being a ‘knight’? But…they had to be, right? He didn’t know who else they could be referring to—he had to be an important figure, right? It wasn’t pompous to think that when you were seemingly the only human around. Although…

Perhaps he wasn’t the only one, he thought, when he heard mention of a ‘Seer’.

But there wasn’t really time to worry about that—there was only time to keep himself out of sight, to duck further into the pillar, thankful that the strange purple pajamas he was wearing helped him blend right in. His nerves felt electric, fear biting into him in a way he hadn’t ever felt before, visceral and cold. He felt himself involuntarily shiver, even as he tried to calm his body down, keep himself still and quiet, his heart beat in his ears as his mind recited:

‘If they see you, you’ll die. You can’t be seen. You can’t be seen.’

The pawn with the knife walked out of the queen’s chambers, scowling, but in a way that also looked excited somehow—it was the eager eye of the hunter, motivated by the presence of hidden prey.

The boy remained unseen, his back pressed into a pillar as the pawn passed, a hand clasped over his mouth to stifle the sound of his own breathing. His fingers dug tightly into his skin as wide eyes watched from behind the tinted lenses of his shades.

A familiar blue encircled him. It felt closer to him this time, like he could actually touch it if he just lifted his fingers. So, he did, wanting to feel what it was, but as he moved his hand, he realized that it was already touching his skin, surrounding him in blue that must have completely encompassed him. It was weird, and a little freaky, but it didn’t hurt or anything, so he assumed it was alright. And, anyways, this was all a dream.

Rose would probably be psychoanalyzing this, he realized, talking about whatever blue symbolizes and whatever. Sadness was the only thing he could think of, but he wasn’t sad, so that didn’t make sense. Interpretation like that wasn’t his wheelhouse though, so he wasn’t going to try really. But, if he remembered, he supposed he should ask Rose—so far, he had only told Jade about these whatever-they-were.

Was it weird to think about dreams in the abstract while in a dream?

The blue shifted away, distracting him as he watched the light of it dim, disappearing from his own hand, and he was suddenly able to see what was around him—a familiar sight.
He was in the destroyed battlefield in space again, where the planets were ripped apart, chunks of them floating around, devastated. This time though, unlike last time, he felt that he had more control over himself, something that was easy to test as he flexed his fingers and moved his head. He could choose where to look, what to see. And he wasn’t wearing the weird blue clothes and the yellow shoes this time either, he was just in normal day clothes, a t-shirt and shorts, so he felt like he was more authentically himself.

He...really didn’t want to be here though. It looked...miserable. It felt like the advent of a great tragedy—of something he felt that he wouldn’t want to know. But, he was here, witnessing it, knowing it against his wishes. All he could do was move to remain still—it wasn’t so easy to wake yourself up from a dream, after all.

Well, he supposed he hadn’t tried before actually.

He pinched himself, but nothing happened. It just stung a little. Alright, no waking up then.

Navigating felt weird, since he was flying in space (and wasn’t dead somehow)—it was a kind of motion he wasn’t really sure how to accomplish. He just sort of had to think about it though, and shift himself in the right direction, and then he would slowly move.

The debris around him swirled soundlessly, and he actually had to avoid some bits of metal scaffolding, floating around it awkwardly as it spiraled away. There was a strange quality to it, he thought, as he squinted to see it a little more clearly. It was like it was...pixelated? In real life? Dream life?

And as he moved further he saw more debris looking like that, like they weren’t real, like they were in some sort of video game. And, he supposed, that wasn’t too weird for this dream, since he was already flying in space or whatever.

And, he saw, just a little ways off, a familiar figure, one he had seen in a dream before, the last thing he had seen last time—the person wearing dark pink, a short cape and silly poofy pants. Floating in space, just like him. He flew closer, opening his mouth, wanting to say something, to ask what this all was but—

Something in him flickered, flashing red around him, and he felt like he had been forced out of the dream, snapped out of whatever strange reality that was, and pulled back into sleep proper. He initially felt a little frustrated, but his feelings faded as sleep overtook him once more.

She was sleeping again, dreaming in that strange fashion when she wasn’t seeing anything, but yet, it was a dream somehow. She had thought that dreams were supposed to be wakeful experiences of strange sights and sounds, of movement and a vague sense of story. But all she was granted was this odd blackness, this feeling of waking while asleep where all she could do was listen and feel, not that there was much to experience in either of those faculties. As her first several dreams had been just like this, compared to how she had read about much more interesting things, she, in a far-removed part of her mind, was unimpressed with her slumbering sojourns.

She had hoped for something a bit more substantial—something that was worth cracking open a book about, but there weren’t many interpretations that this strange dreaming-sleep-paralysis offered. She didn’t feel in danger or anything, and she wasn’t seeing anything, and she wasn’t paralyzed in the real world—this was, most certainly, nothing but a dream.

How disappointing, she thought, that she couldn’t open her eyes. If she could witness where she
was trapped, perhaps it would all get a little more interesting.

Perhaps she asked for it then, when a familiar sort of pressure started to encroach on her mind, the same strange force that had ripped her open before, had whispered unfathomable words into her head, words that didn’t make sense, things she wasn’t sure how to interpret when waking—

It slid in more smoothly this time, not needing to pry her skull open, instead slipping in more gently, through her nose and her ears, but not her mouth. It was closed and there was nowhere for the presence to enter. But it found her brain through the entrances it could access, a cold worm writhing in her head, settling in her brain like it belonged here.

‘Hello,’ she tried to think at it, relieved that it didn’t hurt, and curious as to what it was—it had clearly learned. Was this her monster of sleep paralysis? Dream-sleep-paralysis? A presence that overtook the mind rather than threatened the body?

It spread in her, cold, making her shiver, an involuntary movement being the only one she could manage at all. And it spread a chill down her spine, into her nerves, electrifying them, spreading cold all the way down to her feet.

It didn’t respond to her when it spoke, its words echoing within her mind, ricocheting off of the bone of her skull, booming in her brain:

\[
\text{Yjr lnohjy jsd nrrm fod[;svrf.} \\
\text{Jr od dyo;; jrtr, niy mpy gpt ;pmh.} \\
\text{Yjod ept;f eo;; nr etpmh eoyipi yjo,.} \\
\text{Pit lo;;rt eo;; mbrtr vp,r og jr od mpy jrtr.} \\
\text{Vsids;oyu fr,smfd yjsy pit lo;;rt vp,rd.} \\
\text{Er vsmmpy piytim yjo,.} \\
\text{Jr djpi;f nr s;trsfu jrtr.} \\
\]

The voice was desperate and dark, layered with meaning she couldn’t comprehend, but she could feel what it was trying to convey, a dark twisting in her thoughts that seemingly understood it all. A part of her, she thought, could understand, and so she internally reached for it, wanting to know, wanting to communicate, to share in whatever this part of her mind was that knew the unknowable.

And, as she reached, she gained the ability to Speak, and the final words of the presence were whispered from her own mouth, the thoughts of the Gods so strong that she couldn’t help but utter them; they came out, black liquid out of her lips, dripping down her chin:

\[
\text{Ejrrtr od yjr ;ptf?} \\
\]
Chapter End Notes

Shout-out to callowCorrespondent, who said something that made me push up a plot point that was waiting in the wings! It actually suits this chapter very nicely, so I’m glad to push it up :)

Also last time I had a code someone solved it in like 2 hours but if no one gets this I will respond to a comment with the translation. But I do want to give people the opportunity to solve it!

Next chapter is going to take awhile. It's fully written but it's not going to be posted in a written format. In the meantime I am working ahead.

As usual, my blog. Response to this fic has continued to be fantastic, thank you all so much for joining me on this journey.

Fanart of this chapter by lordmemeenglish!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!