M.C. Escher that's my favourite MC

by Unda

Summary

Dirk has a plan, when he's 18 he's going to take Dave and get him the fuck out of their
terrible lives and start over. Until then being the barrier between Dave and Bro is his only job, his soulmate is just going to have to wait goddamnit. Dave has a plan, it involves getting internet famous and not going gay, easy right? Karkat also has a plan, to repeatedly track down his dumb as rocks soulmate and get him to actually talk to him for fuck's sake.
> Karkat: investigate the stairs

The first time it happens you’re five human years old, and the pain wakes you up screaming. Your right arm from wrist to elbow is stabbing and clawing at you. That’s not even the worst part though; the worst part is how you feel your flesh separate as if being cut open by an invisible blade. Your cheek splits as something sharp and angled points into it, and bright red blood spills down your cheek and runs into your mouth.

This is no nightmare; you’ve not kicked your sopor laced blankets off in the night. The feel of cuts opening up on your chest, arms and side are very real. Your knees skin themselves like someone sandblasted them and fear is thudding through you, a voiceless ‘no, no, no, this is it’ surges inside you.

“Karkat! Karkat, what’s wrong?” Signless demands, throwing open the bedroom door and rushing in.

You’re still screeching and screaming from the pain but you notice that your ancestor must have been partway through getting dressed for work, his black trousers on but no shirt yet.

“It hurts!” You wail, desperate for him to do something, anything.

“What does? How did you get those- are you bleeding Karkat?!”

Your breath catches in your throat, and it feels like your stomach flies up into your chest, you feel weightless and terrified like when Nepeta dares you to jump off the swing. Sharp blows hit your shoulders, your back and when your head hits a nothing that feels a lot like concrete you black out entirely.

The bed sheets under you are uncomfortably stiff, not like your sopor sheets at home and everything smells like disinfectant. Everything aches all over, and you can feel that unpleasant sticky feeling of stitches and bandages clinging to your skin. You open your eyes and see that the white sheets at your side are tinted blue and red. You look up a little more to see The Psiionic’s stressed and scarred face. You run your eyes over the scars that run from his temples up to his horns, you know he has them all over, but you also know you’ve not seen all of them.

“Hey there.” he greets gently, he must have noticed that you woke up.

“What happened?” you ask and rub at your aching head, God, even your horns hurt.

“You tell me, you woke up screaming bloody murder, bleeding all over the place and then I had to fly you both here.” the older troll tells you.

You try and fail to put into words what happened.

“I’m guessing it has something to do with this though.” The psionic troll says, reaching out and gently tapping a claw on your right forearm.

You look down at the place where the pain had first started, what had first woken you up. Where your arm was before a bare grey, there’s now a mark on it. A sword runs from just below the inside of your elbow to just above your wrist. In a ring around the blade in the middle is some weird band that when you look close at it look like endless stairs, they always seem to be going up or maybe down, you can’t tell. It makes no sense at all and hurts your head to look at it.
It’s a soul mark. A tattoo from your soulmate showing key parts of their soul and their life, it’s a way for soulmates to find each other. That’s what all the movies show it as anyway, as they age more things get added all through their life and one day they finally find each other and live happily ever after. But you’ve never seen something so violent before, and you’ve never heard of it putting someone in the hospital either.

“Why did it hurt me?” you ask and The Psiionic shrugs.

“The doctors have a few theories. That’s a pretty violent symbol and this human soul mark shit can be more intense for trolls anyway because we’re not designed for it. My guess is your soulmate is in a pretty crappy situation right now, and it’s left a mark on both of you.” he says.

You look down at your soul mark and ache inside in a way that doesn’t have anything to do with the injuries all over you. Before today you had no idea that you had a soulmate, only trolls with human soulmates go through this. Trolls who like trolls just fall in love like normal people, humans are weird. But now… now you feel bad for this person. When you woke up you were afraid because everything hurt and you didn’t know what was happening, but you feel like it wasn’t just your fear, it was his too. Or… theirs.

“We gotta find them and bring them home with us, they need to be safe!” you insist, hugging your arm tight.

“Not that easy, I’m afraid.” The Psiionic says unhappily.

“How DARE you?!” your ancestor’s muffled yelling comes through the door, Psii’s ears prick up and his back straightens. He sounds real mad.

“You’re a mutant, you should have known not to reproduce, or something like this would happen! His mutant blood is clearly reacting badly to the human connection and-” A woman’s voice says, sharp and scolding. You shrink into yourself, mutant blood again. Your ancestor had to leave Alternia because of it and other trolls who find out pick on you and Kankri for it too, you hate it.

“That is PRIVILEGED MEDICAL INFORMATION! I could have your job!” he snarls, the noise reverberating through the door. You’ve never heard him this angry before.

“We need to go.” Psii says quietly and urgently. Red and blue light peel off the sticky pads from the machines around the both of your and whip the bedsheets back. Psii pulls you from the bed, holds you to his side and opens the door. The Signless is standing there; hair bristled in rage and teeth bared furiously at a teal lady in a doctor’s outfit.

“How DARE you even imply that mutation is responsible for this? I will not bow to your fucking EUGENICS, you-” Signless growls, the noise rattling deep in his thorax. Oh wow, he swore and really badly too! He never does that!

“Going now.” Psii says and jerks the other troll up off of the floor and pulls him close, smushing you up against your ancestor. Hospital walls blur by and then you’re all out in the cool early morning air, the sun is only just starting to rise and below you can hear the slow churn of early-morning Houston traffic and smell the car fumes. You’ve never been afraid of falling, in all your life Psii’s never dropped you. You wonder just how far away your soulmate is right now.

The three of you land on the lawnring at the edge of Houston, and The Disciple rushes outside the moment that her keen eyes catch sight of you through the window.

“Oh my goodness, are you okay Karkitty?” She gasps, pulling you from Psii’s grip and into her own.
You’re totally drowned in her chest and her cloud of hair.

“I’m fine, but look!” You say holding your right arm up in front of her face as she carries your inside, leaving the other two adults outside alone talking quietly.

“OMG!” She gasps, pronouncing each letter individually.

Inside there are already five other kids sat at the breakfast table, though Sollux and Mituna seem barely awake.

“You got your soul mark!” Nepeta exclaims, leaping up on top of her seat. Kankri dutifully signs Nepeta’s words for her, though Meulin could easily have seen the mark on her own; she’s deaf, not blind.

“Did you really need to go to the hospital just for that?” Mituna asks with a thick lisp.

“Obviously he’s hurt too, look at all the bandages dumbass.” Sollux says, without a lisp. He recently lost his front teeth, and it’s improved his speech drastically, he no longer sounds like a dumbass all the time.

“No swearing!” Kankri scolds and signs at the same time. Mituna gnashes his teeth together and slams his hands on the table.

“TITS, PISS, DICKS, SHIT, FUUUUUCK!” Mituna screams, pointing a finger at the outraged Kankri. Nepeta and Meulin are laughing loudly, and Sollux is just drinking the milk from his cereal bowl.

“Tuna.” Dis sighs, putting you down in your chair between Kankri and Sollux.

“I’m sure I didn’t just hear a tonne of swearing coming from in here.” Your ancestor says lowly as he comes in the room with Psii’s hand on the small of his back.

“Kankri told Tuna not to.” Nepeta explains through her giggles.

“Ah. Well.” Psii mutters and wanders off, leaving the other adults to talk and Kankri to insistently demand punishment for Mituna.

“You look bad.” Sollux says over the ensuing cross table argument.

“Yeah, but I got this.” you whisper as Kankri blathers about a swear box. You pull your pyjama sleeve up to reveal the soul mark.

“That’s too cool! It looks like a video game box; your soulmate must be so cool!” Sollux gasps in awe. None of the others have any marks yet, even the older kids who are all nine.

“You think they’re older than me?” You ask, peering down at it again.

“Maybe, or they could just like… really like swords a lot?” Sollux suggests. You tense, you can still remember the sting of your skin splitting open and the fear and pain that you felt. You’re not really sure that your soul mate is keen on swords.

“m hungry.” you mumble, rolling your sleeve back down.

“Here you go kiddo, you’re staying home from school today. Psii’s gonna keep an eye on you as he works, okay?” Dis says, setting a bowl for you down on the table as your ancestor puts out cereals and milk and makes himself a bowl of his own.
You munch your cereal slowly as the other kids finish up their breakfast and get ready for school with the adults chasing them about to make sure that they all do it in time. The only person who doesn’t need chasing is Kankri because he’s a stuck up goody two shoes. He emerges from the hallway all neatly dressed with his bag in hand and stares at you, catching you in the act of sneakily giving yourself a second helping of cereal. Hey, you nearly died in your sleep, you deserve it.

“The Signless said that you got your soulmate mark, can I see it?” Kankri asks.

You hesitate, weighing up having to let him see it against his lecture if you don’t. You live with the guy though, he’s your, as the humans would call it, ‘brother’ although you say that he’s your bother because you being ‘wrong’ annoys him just as much as him being insulted. He’s going to see it sooner or later anyway.

You pull up your sleeve and hold your arm out for him and he comes closer to look, peering at the sword. You feel weirdly naked under his gaze and you have to resist yanking your arm back and hiding the mark. It feels… private.

“Why a sword and… stairs?” Kankri wonders aloud. You shrug and hide the mark again. Meulin comes into the room and eventually your ancestor and Dis manage to herd everyone else in too and then out to the cars for school.

“Call me if anything changes, if I need to come home just…” Signless says quietly to Psii at the door.

“I’ve got it, go.” he replies and shoves your ancestor out of the door with his brain powers.

Then it’s just the two of you standing in the hallway. Your guardian looks down at you and grins, showing his jagged teeth.

“Wanna go research soul mark stuff?” He asks you with a grin.

“Yes!” You exclaim. You need answers and you need them now.

The pair of you rush to Psii’s office where he does his computer job all day and he pulls you into his lap and opens up the internet. You might be missing school but you’re sure learning a lot.

This is what you learn.

This is young to get a soul mark but it does happen. Usually this young is because something bad and scarring happened to your soulmate or they’re older than you. The second related thing that you learn is usually soul marks appear on both people at the same time, even if it’s three or more people together like your guardians. But apparently, that's different if they're all together or if it's one person with two soulmates in the middle or- it's complicated.

The first part of your soul mark is usually a core part of who a person is, and other stuff is done later. First parts are usually things that don’t change, so people who will always be artists or musicians make that kind of mark. So it’s feelings or talents or experiences. Psii scrolls past example soul marks with crashed cars at the centre, bad stuff sticks too and deep down you know that this sword is a bad thing. Something bad happened to your soulmate.

You wonder what your soulmate is going to get for you. You like watching movies but that’s not really everything about you, you've not got any talents like your siblings. What thing makes you different from everyone else? You look down at one of your bandages and see where it’s stained through from the other side with your mutant red. You hope that it’s not that, you don’t want that to be who you are.
“Is it going to hurt when it gets bigger?” You ask Psii.

“It shouldn’t have hurt this much at all. Nothing here says about injuries coming up, not even in the doom and gloom section here.” Psii answers, clearly frustrated. Great, the woman at the hospital was right, you are weird. Stupid mutant blood, you hate it.

“What about this bit?” You ask, holding your arm up and pointing to the ring of stairs on it.

“I’ve seen that before…” Psii says with a grimace as he tries to think. He types a few things into the computer, but he’s going too fast for you to read what he’s writing. You lean your head back against his chest and watch a few of his bees drift lazily overhead as they bring in flower stuff from outside to their hive that does something for Psii’s computer. You don’t really get it but Sollux is way into learning about this stuff, you guess you’re just not as smart as him. If you were then that might be the kind of thing that your soulmate would get on their arm.

“Huh, that’s weird.” Psii finally says and you look back at the screen to see a nearly identical set of stairs on the screen.

“That’s it!” You yell, pointing at them.

“M. C. Escher was a Dutch graphic artist who made mathematically inspired woodcuts, lithographs, and mezzotints. His work features mathematical objects and operations including impossible objects, explorations of infinity, reflection, symmetry, perspective, truncated and stellated polyhedra, hyperbolic geometry, and tessellations.” Psii reads with a frown.

“What?” You blink, you got… none of that. Math, maybe?

“So your soulmate is either into or traumatised by swords and dead Dutch math artists. You sure know how to pick ‘em.” Psii snorts, and you scowl. You didn’t get to pick your soulmate, that’s the entire point!

“I’m gonna have a nap.” You declare and slide off of his bony legs.

“Yeah, you need the recovery time. Come find me when you wake up, I’ll make us snacks.” Psii calls as you leave the room. You head back to your own room and crawl into your bed, pulling your sopor laced bedding over you again. You run your fingers over your new mark and hope that your soulmate is gonna be okay.
“Dave, DAVE!”

The shout makes you jerk awake and lash out, your hand just catches the side of someone’s neck and jaw, but there’s no stubble, so you already know that it’s not Bro. You blink, your head hurts like hell and it’s so goddamn bright in here.

“Oh thank fuck, you’re awake. Can you hear me, Dave? Look at me.” Dirk orders you.

Yellow, black and red smears merge into Dirk’s fuzzy form. He’s leaning over you; you’re on your back somewhere. It’s not the stairwell but it’s bright, bathroom maybe? His face is all jacked up, blood smeared away from his nose and still oozing from one side. His eye is starting to swell shut and his chipped shades are pushed up into his hair. His lip is split and he’s got road rash on one side of his face.

“You look like shit.” You tell him woozily and he laughs.

“Yeah, well. You’re no better. You were out cold there, did you land on your head on every step on the way down? Goddamn.” Dirk says, and he’s got that wobbly smile which tells you that he’s trying to make things better than they are.

“You warned me about the stairs.” You say weakly.

“Told you dog.” Dirk nods and leans over you a little more and looks you uncomfortably in the eyes, although at least he’s blotting out the bright ceiling light.

“You’ve probably got a concussion. What day of the week is it?” Dirk asks.

You try to think, days of the week aren’t something you care about much but yesterday at school you got tacos which means that it was Wednesday.

“Thursday.” You tell him, and Dirk nods.

“Tell me who you are, how old you are and who I am and how old I am.” Dirk says.

“Dirk, I’m fine. Let me up.” You whine, but Dirk’s hands on your shoulders are way too strong for you to fight. Everyone in this house is too strong for you to fight.

“I’m Dave; I’m five. You’re my brother Dirk; you’re ten.” You tell him, and Dirk smiles.

“Awesome ‘lil bro. I’m just gonna shine a light in your eyes real quick, and it’ll suck but then I’ll give your head the all clear, okay?” Dirk asks and clicks his little pen torch on as he pulls it off his belt loop. He shines it in your eyes a few times but you’re not really looking at it, you’re looking at the mark on the inside of his bicep. It’s a compass with all sorts of fancy detailing on it, it showed up last night and Bro only saw it this morning. He did not handle it well.

“Are you going to find her and leave?” You ask, reaching out to touch the compass. Dirk looks down at it and grimaces.

“No. I’ll find my soulmate someday but you’re what I care about now. And you’ve got to promise me that you’ll stop getting involved in Bro’s fights like that, he was going after me, not you.” Dirk scolds you and pulls you up. The room spins but you manage not to yarf in Dirk’s lap like a tool.
“He was going so hard though and he wasn’t even using swords, he was just punching you!” you protest and Dirk shakes his head.

“I don’t care. I know he’ll demand you strife sometimes and there’s nothing I can do about that but when he’s just going for me you need to hide.” Dirk says coldly.

“Sometimes he finds me when I hide.” You whine and you can hear how dumb you sound, but the memory of you curled under your bed and Bro’s hand dragging you out by the ankle is terrifying.

“I know, but not every time and that’s something. C’mon, let’s get you patched up.” Dirk says and sits you up on the edge of the sink.

He disinfects all of your cuts and sticks you back together with bandages and sticky stitches. He puts the nice cooling gel on your bruised skin and then does the same all for himself. He smears makeup over the parts that are bruising and exposed on both of you and then sets you up with a replacement pair of shades, the ones that you had broke after they stabbed you in the cheek on the way down the stairs. Stupid stairs.

“As the oldest brother in this house, I declare that we’re going to be off sick from school and later I’m gonna go shopping for us too!” Dirk says dramatically, and it makes you smile. Being the littlest brother blows sometimes, you’re not as cool or strong as either of your brothers even though you’re trying real hard. But despite that you know it’d blow way more if you didn’t have Dirk with you.

“You’re gonna do the voice thing?” You gasp in delight. It’s kind of creepy but also super cool.

“Hell yeah, bro.” Dirk nods and walks back to your shared room.

Dirk hops up onto his chair at his desk and turns on his computer. It’s a really good one that’s wicked expensive; Dirk somehow earned some of Bro’s approval for his mad skills and one day you two came home to just find it there. Dirk is so smart; he’s a genius when it comes to computers and machines.

He makes the computer dial the number for your kindergarten on a little phone program he made and then he turns on the program that he named ‘BROBOT’. He leans into the microphone and tries to talk like Bro, keeping his sentences short and cool. The machine changes the pitch of Dirk’s voice so that it sounds like Bro and Dirk has a bunch of buttons that he can press for other sound effects, like them in the background, the sounds of appliances or even that little displeased sigh that Bro does when he’s annoyed.

Dirk gets through to your school and then his own, excusing you both. You know that Bro doesn’t care whether you go or not, he’ll just be pissed if he has to get involved.

“Cool, I’m gonna go watch Robot Wars.” Dirk announces and walks off. For lack of anything else to do you follow him. You sit on the sofa next to him, you kind of want to lean into his side but you’re not that badly hurt and you’re not a baby. Bro hates it when you try that, when you were smaller you used to try to cuddle up to Dirk and Bro, but Bro would slap you upside the head whenever you tried. Only losers cuddle.

“You could make one of these.” You say as one robot destroys another on the screen.

“Fuck yeah.” Dirk says.

You both watch a little longer, and you consider what kind of robot your brother could make and what it’d do. He could make like one of those bomb disposal robots for you, and it could open the fridge first and catch all of the shitty swords before they hit you. Then again Bro does that so that
you’ll be as cool and ninja as him someday, you’ll never catch up if a robot is around to help you.

“What would you make?” You ask and Dirk tips his head back on the futon and stares at the ceiling.

“Something with blades underneath like a blender to just destroy anything that comes close and maybe a railgun. I don’t know if they let you have railguns.” Dirk says thoughtfully.

“You should build a robot Bro and have them fight.” You suggest excitedly. You’re not sure if it’d help but at least Dirk wouldn’t have to fight, and it’d look so cool as well.

“No way ‘lil bro, never make robots that can think, they always turn on you. I’m making you watch space odyssey now.” Dirk declares and makes you watch a movie that starts with twenty minutes of monkeys. The only bit that jars you from your stupor is when the computer calls out your name, other than that it’s just boring and confusing.

Your sick day goes on as most of your sick days go on, the two of you icing your bruised parts and eating junk from your food stash which is worryingly going down. When four o'clock rolls around Dirk gets up and starts putting his bag and jacket on.

“Where are you going?” You ask. It’s not that you’re scared of being on your own it’s just that you’re never sure if you really are alone. Bro has snuck back in the house before without you noticing and dropped out of the crawlspace to test your poker face, it really hurts when you fail that test.

“Shopping, we need food. Any requests besides aj?” Dirk asks, adjusting his straps.

“Did you take money from Bro again? Or did he leave some?” You ask confused because Dirk hadn’t told you anything of the kind.

“No,” Dirk says with his mouth in a thin, worried line, “it’s gonna be all five finger discount.”

“Don’t get caught.” You warn, and Dirk ruffles your hair.

“No one ever does.” Dirk brags and leaves. If you were a doofy kid you’d be grinning right about now; no one is as cool as Dirk.

Standing in the main room, the room that Bro sleeps in, all by yourself is freaking you out, so you go back to yours and Dirk’s shared room and get up onto the bed. You were up hella early for a strife, so the least you can do is catch some Z’s since Dirk’s out being a master thief.

You wake up to the sound of your bedroom door opening; it’s one of those sounds that always snaps you from flat out dreaming to wide awake.

“I’m back.” Dirk announces, and you can hear the rustle of wrappers as he takes shit out of his secret pockets that he sewed into his jacket. You relax a little and open your eyes; you must have got all tangled up in the blankets in your sleep what with not having to share them for once. As you come eye to glassy blue eye you realise that it’s not your blankets that you’re all wrapped around.

“CAL!” You yelp and try to fling him away, only he’s got his strings wrapped around your wrists, and you’re stuck, and he’s staring at you. Bro got back when you were asleep and came in here without waking you and wrapped your stupid sleeping body around fucking Cal.

Dirk is on you like white on rice, his not freaked out fingers un wrapping you from Cal’s strings and taking the puppet away. He flashsteps out of the room, and a moment later he’s back.
“Don’t open the fridge, I put him riding a broadsword in there.” Dirk tells you.

“Cool.” You say, forcing your voice not to shake.

“Jellybeans.” Dirk says, throwing the packet at your head. You catch it and look down at it. Despite not eating much all day and missing out on school lunch you’re suddenly not that hungry.

“There’s apple ones in there.” Dirk says and sits down at his computer and starts typing. You eat your jellybeans, and that night when Dirk finally comes to bed he doesn’t say anything if you perhaps scoot a little closer to him under the blankets. It pushes the feeling that Bro is watching you from somewhere away at least a little.

The next day you’re looking much better after Dirk puts makeup on you to hide the bruises. You brush your teeth and see Dirk with his tube of concealer in his hand and looking at his bicep and the compass on it that started Bro’s big flip out yesterday. Seeing Dirk get his soul mark totally pissed him off. Bro’s arm is pitch black from wrist to shoulder, though there’s occasionally voids in it where you can almost make out what once was there. You learnt in school that black marks are either from soulmates who have died or soulmates who broke up so badly that their connection died. Seeing Dirk’s appear alive and healthy obviously pissed Bro off.

“Can we live with her when you find her?” You ask after spitting your toothpaste into the sink.

“I’ve been working on a plan for you and me, Dave.” Dirk says, still staring at his arm. You frown, that didn’t make any sense, but you know that sometimes if you let Dirk talk he gets to the point.

“When I’m eighteen, I’ll be an adult and you’ll be…” Dirk trails off and looks down at you.

“What?” You ask, this has nothing to do with Dirk’s mark.

“Come on Dave, you missed a day of school. Eighteen minus five is what?” Dirk asks sharply. You take a half second to think of the answer, but math has always been one of your better subjects, it just makes sense.

“Thirteen, what does that have to do with-” You say.

“Right. When I’m eighteen, I’ll be an adult and I’ll get custody of you. I’ll be your guardian instead of Bro and I’ll get us somewhere safe. No more strifes, no more Cal, no more Bro.” Dirk tells you.

You consider this. It is… never going to happen. There is nowhere you can go that Bro won’t track you down and find you and you know that you hiding in the house makes him mad, what if he had to track you down across the state or the country? He’d straight up kill you both!

“He’ll find us, Dirk.” You say softly.

“He won’t, trust me. I’m not saying today, we’ve got eight years to go. I’ll work on finding us a place, I’ll get a job and money when I can so when we can go we’ll be set. I’ll look up all the legal shit. All you have to do is-” he says and you know where he’s going with this.

“Keep my head down, don’t piss Bro off, don’t get taken by social services. Tell anyone who asks that we’re fine, nothing is wrong and we’re happy. Don’t get separated.” You recite. Dirk has drummed it into your head enough times that if social services find you two and find out what Bro is like you’ll never see each other ever again. Dirk is the only family you have; you’re not losing him.

“Exactly. Eight years Dave, that’s all we gotta get through. Then we’ll be safe somewhere else and
you can have a normal life and shit’ll be so great. We’ve just got to survive. Everything else can…
can wait.” Dirk says and smears concealer over his soul mark and rubs it in until you almost can’t see
any trace of the compass.

“Okay.” You agree. You’re not sure how Dirk is going to do this but as long as it’s a plan he’s
working on and not doing right now then you can roll with it.

You leave Dirk to fussing with his hair and creep past Bro’s unconscious body. There are a lot of
bottles on the floor near him but that doesn’t mean that you won’t wake him up by accident, so
you’re stealthly quiet, even when removing the smuppet he stuffed in your backpack.

Dirk walks you to Kindergarten, his school is just around the corner from you anyway and you’ll be
there next year too. Of course by then he’ll be in middle school but even so, you’ll be dealing with
teachers who know how cool Striders really are, rather than Mrs M at your school who just fusses at
all of you.

School is, as always, boring as hell and all the other kids are lame. There’s free food though and you
snag yours and climb into a tree and eat it. You’re often up here, even if the teachers try to shoo you
out saying that you could fall and hurt yourself. You’re a Strider goddamn it, you have some fucking
grace.

You’re sprawled out on the branch nearly asleep when you swear you hear kids laughing at you.
Your upper lip feels wet and you rub it and find that you’re bleeding. You’ve got a nosebleed for no
goddamn reason. Despite that, your heart is going at a million miles a minute though, like Bro just
dropped Cal on you and slapped you across the roof with him. Your arm burns like the time Bro put
a cigarette out on your chest. You pull back your sleeve shirt and are greeted by the sight of blood
running down your arm. Only… only it’s too bright, like cartoon blood and moving too slowly. You
touch it and all you feel is warm skin, not wet blood at all. You shove your sleeve all the way up past
your elbow and see that this fake blood is flowing down your arm from a faint blue vein in your
elbow. But it’s not real, it’s not, even if the humiliation and panic you can feel in your chest tell you
otherwise.

This isn’t your blood and these aren’t your feelings. This is your soul mark, this is your soulmate’s
feelings. The illustrated blood dribbles over your wrist and down your hand a little and you see
shadows and shine start to etch themselves into the blood, giving it more depth and life. It still hurts
like a bitch but pain is something that you’re more than used to.

Wait. Shit, soul mark. Bro is going to flip out and fucking kill you when he sees this. He beat the tar
out of Dirk when he saw his yesterday, and his was nowhere near as big as yours is! You… you
need to get to Dirk right now. Maybe he can hide your mark like he hid his own and Bro will never
ever have to know.

You hold your arm close to yourself and look around. You can still feel the distant humiliation and
shame radiating through you but now that you know that it’s not yours, you feel better about it. At
least your soul mate is having as crappy a time as you are right now. You never knew that people felt
things through their soul marks, why did no one ever tell you that?

There, across the playground, there’s the fence that separates the kids from the street, but the gate is
lower and the fence is metal and totally climbable. All you have to do is get down from the tree then
run and flashstep jump the gate. Sure, you’ve only just started to learn to flashstep but what better
time is there to learn how to do this for real than now?

You drop down from the tree and try to coolly walk across the playground, the closer you can get
without running the better. Once you hop the gate, you’re gonna have to book it to get around the
corner to Dirk’s school and find him before the teachers catch you.

“Hey Dave, what happened to your arm?” Little Timmy ass face asks at max volume, prompting other kids to turn around and stare at you. Welp, looks like it’s running time. You bolt straight towards the gate, only Miss K is walking by and has obviously clocked you. Fuck, flashstep and jump the gate, NOW!

You do not clear the gate, but you do blink ahead enough to smack your whole body into it at high speed. You start climbing immediately and you’re almost over the top when Miss K’s hands wrap around you and try to pull you off. Fuck her, you’re Strider and you’re not weak. You cling to the gate and try to inch your leg over it as she tries to yank you down.

A wave of humiliation jolts through you from your arm and it janks up your grip enough that Miss K can pull you back off of the gate. You try everything to get free, squirming, kicking and even biting but you are hauled inside to the soundtrack of the laughter of the other kids and her lecturing you.

“Oh my goodness, David, your arm!” She declares when she dumps you on a chair in the office. She reaches for the first aid kit and you curl your arm in close to your body, it’s your mark, not hers. She grabs your arm, antiseptic wipe at the ready when her tiny brain realises that it’s not really blood and you’re fine.

“It’s a mark; you’re so young though…” The mumbles in quiet surprise.

“I’m fine, let me go! I need to see Dirk!” You shout and yank your arm back.

“That’s why you tried to escape; you wanted to go home. You must be very frightened.” She sighs and sits back on the desk and looks down at you.

“I’m not scared. Striders don’t get scared. I just need to see my bro.” You tell her stubbornly. To your surprise, she nods and rounds the desk and picks up the phone as she rifles through a filing cabinet with the other hand. Of course, she’s not going to let you walk to Dirk on your own, grownups don’t seem to think that you can do anything on your own. What do they know? But if she’s calling Dirk then that’s fine, he can come to you.

“Oh, hello Mr Strider. I’m Miss K, David’s kindergarten teacher.” She says down the phone. Your blood freezes in your veins because that is the wrong brother.

“I understand that you’re very busy sir but your child tried to escape school today by jumping the fence and… well, I think he’s distressed because his soul mark has come in.” She blabs and you stare at the carpet.

You are dead. You are fucking dead. Bro hates being disturbed when he’s doing any kind of work, he hates them getting into trouble and authorities contacting him and he clearly hates soul marks. Three strikes and he’s out. You are going to be dead when Dirk comes to pick you up at the end of the day, Bro will have already killed you.

“I- well thank you. I will see you soon Mr Strider.” Miss K says and hangs up the phone.

Will you have to strife him alone without Dirk watching? At least when Dirk is there you know he’ll step in if things get too bad, but all on your own… you can’t do that. Maybe he’ll lock you in a box with the smuppets again like he did one time, but that doesn’t seem bad enough for this. He could cut your arm off. You’re left handed and it’s on your left so will you have to learn to write with your right hand? The school would notice if you lost an arm though but maybe Bro would lie about it, say that you lost it in a car crash like the one that killed your parents. Can car crashes be genetic? What
would happen to your soulmate if Bro cut off the arm with the mark on it? Would you lose your
link? Would it appear on the other arm? You hope not; then Bro would just keep cutting limbs off
until you died.

Miss K tries to comfort you and tells you something about marks but you just ignore her. It’s all her
fault that you’re going to get all your limbs chopped off. It feels like forever and no time at all until
Bro’s shadow falls across the floor. You look up at him, trying to keep your face neutral but you’re
sure that he’s looking at your arm.

“Mr Strider, if you could just—” Miss K tries to say to him but Bro just jerks his head towards the door
and you scramble out of your seat to follow with Miss K shouting something to him about signing
forms.

The walk home and back up the nine million steps to your apartment is agony and Bro isn’t saying or
doing anything. He passes the door to your apartment and keeps going up the stairs to the roof. You
hate these stairs, you hate the roof, you’re definitely going to die. You follow him anyway because
running away from Bro will just make everything so much worse.

You go out onto the roof, the metal door clanging behind you as it bangs shut. It feels like a bajillion
degrees out here in the hot Texas sun at midday. Bro looks down at you, his mouth a stiff
judgemental line.

“Arm.” He says and holds out his hand.

You don’t even try to play by handing him the wrong one. You hold out your marked arm to him
and Bro grabs it and pulls it close to him as he stares down at it. You say nothing; you do nothing.
Bro lets you go and walks over to the radio tower thing and grabs something at the bottom and
returns to you with it in his hand. He pulls on it and you realise that it’s a roll of silver tape.

Bro slaps the end of it on your open palm, right over the lowest part of drawn on blood that comes
from your elbow. He wraps it quickly up your hand, over your wrist and up to your elbow. He’s just
covering it. Is that all? That’s not so bad. It’s gonna suck peeling this off but it’s a pretty light
punishment.

No sooner has that dumb thought streaked naked across your idiot brain does Bro grab you by the
wrist and leap up catlike into the radio tower. He slams you, arm first against one of the legs of it and
as you look down, you realise that you are high up, very high up indeed.

Bro pins your arm to the tower and you hear the rip of more tape as he wraps it around your taped up
arm and the hot metal leg of the tower. He’s going to leave you up here.

“Bro! No, I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” You beg but he just glares at you and slaps tape over your mouth.

You claw at the tape with your free hand and he knees you in the ribs, it’s hard enough to make you
almost retch and that’s something you don’t want to do with your mouth taped. Bro contorts your
other arm behind your back and tapes that to the post as well.

“This is what soulmates get you.” He sneers in your face and then vanishes.

Your breath is going as fast as it can and you’re not sure if you’re more scared of the tape giving out
and you falling or it holding and you being stuck up here. Your right arm is straight up above your
head and it’s just high up enough that you can only just touch the beam below you with your toes.

You try not to cry and force yourself to calm down; Bro is likely watching. Just because you can’t
see him doesn’t mean he’s not there. You need to find a way out of this.
You repeatedly yank on your arms but nothing is coming free. You try to lick at your lips from the inside of your mouth and find that with enough spit the glue comes loose. From then it only takes about five minutes before your mouth is free. You’re not going to shout for help, that’d be stupid. Either Bro would come up here and punish you further or a neighbour would find you, call the social and then you never see Dirk again and he’s left alone with Bro. Not happening. It’s nice to be able to breathe a little more freely though.

You try to think about what time it must be, lunch is at noon and Dirk’s school lets out at five. Being charitable you can say that it’s about one now but Dirk isn’t gonna bolt right home from school, he’ll wait for you until he realises that you’re not there. You have four and a half, maybe five hours out here.

Above you the sun is a scorching red eye cooking you and making the metal that you’re tied to uncomfortably hot.

You try all the things that you can think of, arching your back to try to pull away from the metal, jerking your arm back and forth in the hope that all the sweat and skin shedding will make the tape less sticky but nothing helps. You’re left alternating between standing on your tip toes which makes you tired and relieves pressure on your arms or just hanging there as your shoulder agonisingly wrenches the wrong way. The only company that you have out here are the crows which live on the tower who occasionally come down to look at you. A few of them even land on your shoulder as time passes which freaks you out at first but they do nothing more than caw at you, preen your hair and try to nibble the arms of your shades.

It is so… so hot and your mouth feels like it’s been crammed with lint, you can feel the sunburn on your skin already and you know that you’re dropping in and out of being awake because the sun keeps moving. As one crow caws softly in your ear you consider that you’re actually going to die up here. You want to be sad but you’re too tired, you just figure that it’s going to suck for your soulmate but they’re probably better off without you. Dirk probably will be too, if you’re dead then he can run away sooner and doesn’t have to wait until he’s an adult.

You’re okay with this.

“DAVE!” Yelling jerks you awake, your shades are gone and you can’t see properly but you know that voice and it’s Dirk, not Bro.

Your throat is too dry to make a sound so you just kind of breathe at him.

“Don’t move, don’t… don’t fucking move, okay?” Dirk tells you and you see a flash of silver. Dirk actually brings his sword to school, no one checks their strife specibus there and Dirk is smart enough not to whip it out there. You’re not allowed to have your strife specibus equipped at kindergarten, so you had nothing to cut yourself down with, even if you had been able to use your sword with just your legs.

There is the sound of slicing tape and your top arm comes free, dumping you into Dirk’s free arm.

“I got you, I’ve got you, ’lil bro.” Dirk reassures you and cuts your other arm free.

You think that you maybe pass out because the next thing you know you’re in the bathroom with the shower running and the lights off. There’s still a little bit of light but it’s from Dirk’s torch and it’s pointed away from you.

“You need to drink, Dave, wake up and drink this.” Dirk orders you and there’s cool glass against your lips and ice water running into your mouth. You cough in surprise and then drink it thirstily.
Your mouth is so dry and it almost hurts but it feels so good too.

“That’s enough. This is going to hurt, I’m sorry.” Dirk apologises and takes the water away. It is definitely not enough but you don’t have the strength to take the water back. Dirk starts ripping ruined bits of tape off of your skin from the arm that Bro wedged behind your back.

You lean back and breathe the steamy air in and push through the pain. The damp air makes your chest feel better and the sound of the shower does its part to mask any sounds that you might make, so Bro might still be here then. Dirk starts to peel the tape off of your arm that’s wrapped up like a mummy. It hurts to have it peeled off of your skin like that but the sweat probably made it easier than it could have been.

When Dirk sees your forearm he makes the same mistake that Miss K did and assumed that you were actually bleeding but if anything his face gets more dismayed when he realises that you’re not. A cut is an easy problem to solve; a soul mark is not. Either way, he pulls the last of the tape off, takes the rest of your clothes off and shoves you into the shower to scrub off the glue. At least he makes it cool first so you don’t keep cooking. Dirk brings you your pj’s and slathers your neck and face in aloe. He nestles you in the bed and gives you all of the blankets and pillows, he sets drinks and snacks down at your side and makes you drink a whole apple juice before he’s satisfied.

“I’m so sorry.” Dirk apologises softly and kisses your forehead. He… he almost never does that. You must be really bad off.

“I need to go out and get some things, I’ll be back as soon as I can.” Dirk promises, stroking your hair.

“No!” You rasp desperately. He can’t leave you alone with Bro, you’re even weaker than usual right now. If he comes in here you won’t be able to do anything.

“You’re too hurt, I can’t take you with me, Dave. I’ll be back ASAP. Bro’s not even home right now, he’s probably out getting shitfaced. Just… sit tight.” Dirk tells you and backs out of the room with his backpack and jacket on. You curl up in your blankets and stare at the clock, it’s five thirty.

The front door opening and shutting wakes you up at seven, your eyes hurt and everything is weirdly blurry. Even so, you can tell that the person coming in the room is Dirk and something smells… amazing!

“Big maaaac.” Dirk says in a singsong voice and drops the bag into your eager hands.

“For me?” You ask in wide-eyed wonder. You can’t steal from a McDonalds so it’s not like you get to eat there much, it’s usually a birthday thing or if one some rare occasion Bro brings back enough for all of you.

“You had a big day.” Dirk says and sits on the edge of the bed.

You unwrap the burger and bite into it. Oh good God that sweet, sweet burger. There’s onion relish and ketchup and it’s still hot. Dirk must have had to pay for this with his own money, which as far as you know he has none.

“Where’d you get the money to pay for it?” You ask around the burger, your voice is a little muffled but you’re not stopping eating this anytime soon.

“Fished change out of the fountain in the mall.” Dirk says cooly, goddamn he’s so fucking smart.

“I got you a few other things too.” Dirk says and pulls his bag up onto his lap and opens it. He
dumps out a bunch of four long sleeved shirts, all of them with dark arms. They look like they’ll be a little big for you but you’ve got years to grow into them. There’s also fingerless leather gloves in there, two pairs. You finish your burger and wipe any grease onto your PJ legs and then try one on. It perfectly covers the bottom of the blood that runs over your hand and wrist. If you wear this stuff, Bro won’t be able to see any of your soul mark. He’s still going to know that it’s there of course but he won’t be enraged by seeing it; you’ll be showing that you learnt your lesson.

Dirk is ripping the tags off of the clothes which are still there from him stealing them; you hope he teaches you how to do that properly some day. Right now all you’re good enough to do is pocket a snack from the grocery stores around your neighbourhood.

“You got a pretty bad sunburn out there.” Dirk says as he throws the tags out of the window. He's right, you can already feel how your skin is red and stinging, it feels hot and tight and you're sure it's gonna peel awfully.

“Yeah.” You agree and fish the fries out of the bag, oh man they smell great.

“We’re gonna keep the blinds down and stay in here all weekend because I think you may have got a sunburn in your eyes too, that’s a thing that can happen and you were out there for… I don’t even know how long. I’m not sure I want to know.” Dirk mutters angrily, pulling the blinds back down over the window.

“Since one.” You tell him and he breathes in sharply.

“God fucking damnit, you could have died.” Dirk hisses, his fingers clenching into tight fists.

“Do… do you want half my fries?” You offer him because it’s all you have and he’s really sad and angry. Dirk looks over at you and his mouth makes this sad little smile. Your brother sits down on the bed again and takes one of your fries and eats it.

“In eight years it’ll just be us and I'll buy you fries whenever you want and you’ll never have to have another strife on the roof or deal with Bro ever again.” Dirk promises.

You chew your fries and consider that Dirk is just saying that to make you feel better, you’re never getting away from Bro. He’s always there, always watching. But… maybe this is something that makes Dirk feel better and he does so much for you, you can at least play along with this for him.

“Eight years.” You agree with a smile and stuff more fries into your face.
There is red, everywhere. You stand in the hallway, hand on your locker door staring inside your locker at the sea of bright red ketchup squirted over everything. You can hear the poorly suppressed snickers of your stupid peers who are watching you. You got woken up at fuck o’clock in the morning by pain from your soul mark, something that no one can explain and no one outside of your family believes you about.

You reach into your locker, shit like this is why you don’t keep anything in here except your lunch and even that you stash in several plastic bags. You scoop up a handful of the ketchup from inside your locker. It’s the same colour as your blood which is the entire fucking point of this stunt. Ever since you got hit in the face in recess two years ago, the very day after getting your soul mark, everyone has known. You can still hear everyone’s horror and then mocking. Of course, the human kids didn’t get it until the trolls explained it to them, but they caught onto the whole ‘mutant freak’ business pretty quickly.

You turn, ketchup still in hand to see Billy fucking Nicholson and two of his shit eating little friends, both of them trolls. They’re expecting you to blow up, to scream and shout and react. Signless and Kankri tell you that you shouldn’t give them what they want, that you should report it to a teacher and rise above it. But that never works, the troll teachers hate you just as much as the kids do. Shouting at them obviously doesn’t work either, so you’re going to try someone else’s strategy.

You get close to the snickering kids, ketchup in hand and fling it right in their faces, then when they’re blinded you fucking lunge for them. You whack Billy right in the face and reel back for a moment yourself because that fucking hurts. Of course it would, smacking your fist into someone else’s thinkpan is gonna hurt, you’re such a moron. But you’re already in on this, so you turn on one of his buddies, Darnak you think, and kick him right in the bulge.

Unfortunately by this time the other troll has got his sense about him again, and Billy is madder than ever, and both of them are bigger than you. They slam you to the ground and start wailing on you before you can so much as cuss out their ancestors and the mother grub’s ass they slithered out of.

Over all of the screaming and shouting as well as the hollering and hooting of the bystanders you hear a crackle of electricity, like the kind when you rub the TV screen and zap Kankri with the charge, but times a million. Billy turns blue and his little friend goes red, and then both of them go far away from you. Mismatched shoes land on either side of your torso and you slither backwards behind Sollux. You don’t like him having to save you like this. If it was a fair fight you could handle yourself, you really could. But Sollux can kill people with his brain so you’ll just accept the help that you can get.

Sollux hisses at the three and rains sparks down on you, they look cool but they’re harmless. The three idiots back away in terror, they’ve heard about what Sollux can do. He’s a year older than all of you and a head taller too. Admittedly they don’t know that Sollux is basically made of pipe cleaners and without his psionics he would lose a fight to a stiff breeze.

“We’ll… we’ll get you later Vantas when your psycho moirail isn’t around!” Darnak shouts at you.

“He’s not my moirail!” You and Sollux shout as one after the retreating boys.

“Are you bleeding?” Sollux asks, looking down at you as you get to your feet with no help from him.
“You’re the one looking at me; I should be asking you that. But the stuff on my hand is ketchup.”
You explain, waving your hand at him.

“As is my entire fucking locker.” You add, gesturing to it.

“Ugh.” Sollux grimaces.

You return to the locker, rubbing at your face and staring into it with dismay. It’s gonna take forever to get clean, and what even is the point when shit like this is just going to happen again? Maybe you should just leave it forever and carry everything you own around in your bag forever like that hermit woman in Labyrinth.

“We… have bigger problems.” Sollux groans and you look up to see the hulking troll figure of your vice principal, his tree trunk arms folded over each other and his lip drawn back in a sneer. A fine example of a troll who already hates you.

“Hiii Mr Polari.” You say weakly.

“Office. Now. Both of you.” He growls, and the pair of you grudgingly walk to the office. Out of the corner of your eye, you see Billy and his shit-eating friends grinning smugly at you. You both sit in the waiting room and listen to the muted bellowing of Mr Polari down the phone to one of your guardians.

“No p- SHIT!” Sollux yelps next to you and you frown.

“No shit?” You ask, looking over at him.

Sollux isn’t looking at you, he’s got his eyes screwed shut, and he’s clutching one arm around himself. It’s his left arm, the one that soul marks more often show up on, unlike yours which is on your right because you have to be weird at every opportunity don’t you?

“Let me see.” You say and catch his hand, pulling his arm away from his body. You both look down at his arm and see an arc of numbers inked in bright pink across the inside of his forearm.

“Binary?” Sollux says, staring down at it.

“Sol… your soulmate is a nerd.” You say flatly and fish your phone out of your pocket. You have to say that trolls coming to Earth in the last generation did wonders for Earth technology but it’s still at the stage where a lot of troll tech is better than the Earth duplicates, as such the keys for your phone are all in Alternian.

“No p- SHIT!” Sollux yelps next to you and you frown.

“Of course they are.” Sollux lisps, it’s always worse when he’s distracted.

You pull up a binary to text translator, you’ve seen Psii and Sollux’s code enough to know that an amount of binary that small isn’t enough to program jack shit so it’s got to be text.

“What’s that number?” You ask and ready your digits over the 1 and 0 keys.

“0011011 then a space then 00101001” Sollux reads out slowly for you. You faithfully type it in and hit translate. The result comes up, and you laugh loudly.

“Oh yeah, they’re a nerd.” You laugh and show Sollux what the internet has translated his soulmate’s string of code to. In the middle of your screen is the message.

;)}
“Holy shit I’m in love.” Sollux whispers in awe.

You grin and lean back in your chair, happy for him. Humans have weirdly rigid gender issues, so you’re going to go out on a limb and say that his nerdy soulmate is probably a girl if she’s writing in hot pink.

Your gaze drifts to your arm, though it’s hidden under your thick black sweater you know just where the blade and the stairs are. Sollux’s soulmate makes him feel happy; yours just makes you feel... well, it’s complicated. The pain the mark gives you is nowhere near as bad as that first night; it’s more of a dull ache that throbs outward from your arm every so often. It’s not the pain that bothers you so much as the negative emotions that leak out through it, fear, anger, self-loathing. In your weakest and most shameful moments you hate having this mark, but then you remember that what he’s feeling, and you’re pretty sure it’s a guy by now, what he’s feeling is so much worse. You feel bad for him, you ache for him, and all you want to do is to protect him from what’s happening in his life. Put quite plainly, you pity him in the most romantic of ways.

Kankri and Mituna think that you’re making it up for attention but the rest of your family believe you. Your ancestor had quietly explained that your mutant blood may be somehow amplifying your bond or that it might be a latent mind-reading psionic ability of yours that you’re unable to apply to anyone else. You don’t care about the why’s of the situation though, you just want to find him.

The vice principal’s door slams open and rattles on his hinges. Mr Polari glares down at the two of you.

“You’re being suspended for two days, your lady guardian is coming to pick you up.” The man sneers.

“She has a title, you know. She earned it.” You argue back, and Sollux kicks you in the ankle. You both know how Mr Polari feels about your ancestor’s rebellion and the parts that your other ancestors had to play in it. You also know that because of that no troll who leaves Alternia for Earth is allowed to go back, or not without direct permission from the Empress herself. A lot of trolls who came to Earth to explore the place got trapped here regardless of their stance on the rebellion. Some trolls didn’t like having to do military service but were a-okay with the hemospectrum, some of them were dedicated anthropologists and empire loyalists, some were criminals who just wanted to hide out before going back to Alternia and her colonies for more crime. Regardless there was a flat out ban on anyone on Earth leaving it. Plenty of people held grudges over that.

The interesting thing was that Her Imperious Condescension, or ‘Sea Hitler’ as plenty of humans had dubbed her, had once tried to take over Earth. She kidnapped around a thousand humans to study their weaknesses of which humans have many. Their skin is fragile, and almost anyone’s claws can pierce it, their maximum size is pretty damn puny compared to a full grown purple blood, none of them can breathe underwater, and absolutely none of them have any psionic abilities.

HIC kidnapped one thousand humans for six months. Within that period there were one hundred breakout attempts. Four developed soul marks with trolls on board the vessel, turning their loyalty to the humans. Even humans not related to each other formed tightly knit groups and though not all humans actively rebelled they all covered for those who did. A human would break out, murder two trolls and blend right back into the captured populace. Their humanity and way of thinking proved to be contagious, a good number of trolls without the excuse of soul marks turned traitor to the human cause. Most trolls would fight for a quadrant mate but trolls with soul marks take on a human level of insanity for their soulmate. Every soul marked troll would sign up for a suicide mission to protect their soulmate and not even chucklevoodoos will make them back down from that fight. Despite having no clue how space travel works humans and their allies overran the ship they were captured
on, shot down several military vehicles and got back to Earth, handing the vessel over to their
governments to study and replicate.

Humans, your species has learnt, are fucking crazy. They look impossible odds in the face and come
up with some batshit bonkers plan and then win. They accepted troll refugees and rebels with open
arms at the same time as spitting in HIC’s face and telling her not to come back or they’d schoolfeed
her about what a real human war is like.

But… like you said, not all trolls on Earth are happy to be there. Mr Polari is clearly one of those,
and his feelings towards your rebel leading family are plain. He sneers at you both and stomps back
into his office, slamming the door after him.

“So, do you think The Disciple is going to be more mad or proud?” You ask warily, and Sollux
laughs.

“Signless only ever fought to save his life and even then he had to be talked into it, Psii hurts people
and then feels bad about it but Dis… she’s a stone cold hunter. You know she just behaves because
she believes in the cause. She’s not gonna be too mad at you protecting yourself or me saving your
ass.” Sollux reassures him.

“Hey, I didn’t need saving!” You argue, and the other troll snorts.

“Yeah, pinned under three guys getting the crap punched out of you, you really had it under
control.” Sollux says mockingly, and you kick him in the leg. He zaps you with his powers, and you
elect to stop before Mr Polari catches the two of you in a slap fight.

By the time The Disciple gets to the office you’re engrossed in the latest ‘divergent’ book, yes you
know that you’re reading above your age range, it’s pretty much the only skill you have, and yet
people still criticise your book choices. Sollux meanwhile is sprawled across several seats with his
head in your lap and snoring loudly. She looks down at you as her cloud of hair spreads out behind
her, her green eyes narrow at the pair of you disapprovingly.

“This had better be good I was in the middle of an Alternian history debate at work. If they write
down the wrong thing now so help me I’ll-” She snaps, biting off her sentence at the end.

“Some kids were bullying KK again about his blood; they filled his locker with grubsauce. When I
showed up they were all on top of him attacking him, did you want me not to help?” Sollux
challenges, having woken up at the sound of her voice.

The Disciple's face softens, and she comes up to the pair of you and slides her large hands and long
sharp claws over your faces in an affectionate pet. You can tell that she thinks the two of you are
acting just like your ancestors.

“How many people attacked you, Karkitty?” She asks, her voice gentle.

“Three but… I did hit them first.” You admit. You know that the vice-principal is going to hold that
against you.

“They’d already turned your things red though, right?” She asks, and you nod.

“So you didn’t attack first, you retaliated. Leave it with me.” She says and walks off to the vice
principal's office, knocks on the door and then enters without even waiting for him to admit her.

Both you and Sollux sit up straight and listen to her argue sharply over the whole matter with the two
of you. She drags him over the fact that he’s done nothing about your locker and that the other kids
aren’t in here for punishment too. She accuses him of casteism what with him being teal and both of you being well below him. She snarls about him breeding a toxic environment for trolls in this school and warns of history repeating itself here.

Stupid people might assume that your ancestor is the only one who has anything to do with the rebellion, given his sermons and that it’s always him who is debating and preaching the word of equality. Those people are wrong. Those subjects are widely discussed in your house, and though you know you don’t understand everything yet, you know that she knows and understands every word that your ancestor has said on any of those subjects. She is every bit as formidable as he.

The Disciple strides out of the office with her head held high and a smug smile on her strangely shaped mouth, she has the same quirk to her lips that both of her descendants do.

“Come on boys; we’re going home. You get a couple of days off!” She chirps at you and holds out her hands for yours.

“No, they’re excluded as punishment!” The vice principal hisses at her.

“It’s not a punishment if you’ve done nothing wrong.” The Disciple purrs and leads you both out by the hands and out into the car park where the large people carrier awaits. She was the one who did the school run this morning, so she’s the one stuck with what Mituna affectionately named ‘The Beast’. It’s comically large with just the three of you in it.

“How come you had to pick us up, Dis?” You ask as you climb into the beast and sit in the middle seat next to her and Sollux deposits his bony body next to yours in the left most seat, you swear that he’s at least 90% elbows.

“Oh, well the school couldn’t get hold of Psii which is annoying, but you know what he can get like when he’s working.” She says with a sigh and merges into traffic smoothly.

“Plugged in again.” Sollux says flatly, and The Disciple shoots him a sharp look.

“Not funny.” she says sharply, and you look between the two of them. What are they talking about?

“What?” You ask because no one else seems to be talking about it.

“We’ll… Psii will tell you when you’re older.” The Disciple says.

“Sollux is only a year older than me, how come he gets to know?” You demand.

“Because it’s relevant to me and Mituna, do you know what that word means?” Sollux sneers. He can be such a jerk sometimes, even if he did just get himself kicked out of school for defending your ass it doesn’t mean that he won’t still push you around.

“Did you mean related? You, Psii and Mituna are related, dumbass.” You shoot back.

“I did not mean that.” Sollux grins smugly, and you barely resist thumping him too, you’ve already punched several people today, what’s one more?

“Anyway, they also couldn’t get hold of Signless, but I suppose he could have been in a sensitive case meeting. So you get me, so sorry to disappoint you.” She says as she overcuts your argument.

“We’re not disappointed.” You assure her. She smiles at your words and the car falls into a comfortable silence. The parts of your body that got hit are starting to properly ache now and Sollux keeps looking down at his arm and running a claw over the ones and zeroes there.
“When do you think that you’re going to find them?” You ask him quietly and Sollux covers the mark back up and shrugs, you guess he doesn’t want all of your guardians to know just yet. He’s probably going to go home and research the shit out of this like you’ve been doing ever since your mark showed up. You hope he’ll at least come to you and ask stuff, but if he wants to keep it secret for a while, you can go with that.

To kill time you start reading your book again as Sollux stares out of the window with his thinking face. It’s all pretty pleasant and unremarkable until The Disciple speaks up in alarm.

“Is that… smoke?” She says and peers out of the front window.

“Isn’t that our road?” You ask, squinting and trying to gauge the distance from you to the pillar of smoke.

The Disciple slams her foot down on the accelerator and surges you closer to your home with the most aggressive driving you have ever seen. Cars and people both move suddenly to get out of her way, and Sollux is sparking with alarm as he tries to stop his psionics flaring off in panic. You can feel the current of them over your skin, if Dis was to crash you know that you wouldn’t go anywhere.

The three of you screech into your road, and The Disciple pulls a handbrake turn and stops right beside your home, impressive for a woman driving a minivan. You find the pavement torn up in huge chunks and right outside your home is a crashed spaceship on its side, smoke pouring out of it in worrying amounts. Your ancestor and The Psiionic are outside of your home, several large hunks of debris levitating by him. One of them is the wall to Sollux’s bedroom if the posters on it are any clue. The two adult trolls are face to face with a tall levitating woman with huge curled horns, her body is weirdly pale, and you think you can actually see through her a little. Behind her is a younger troll, a year or two older than Kankri perhaps. Her horns are similarly curled, and her eyes are a glowing white, and she is distressingly armed with long deadly looking needles in each hand.

“Get in the house now. Sollux make sure that you’re not hiding under anything that you can’t lift off of yourself.” The Disciple snarls and leaps out of the car. She immediately equips two sets of deadly looking metal claws on her hands and vaults the car with a feral noise to land crouched right at your ancestor’s side.

“Come on!” Sollux calls and yanks you out of the vehicle and instead of going in the house hides around the side where the two of you can watch.

“She said inside the house Sol!” You hiss.

“She also said not to hide under anything I can’t lift, and I can’t lift the house, here is safer and at least I can see if someone is coming towards us!” Sollux argues back. He has a point.

The two of you stay low and quiet against the wall of your house and watch what is going on.

“Do you think Psii shot them down?” you ask quietly.

“There’d be more fire I think, plus would he risk that unless they were shooting up the neighbourhood? Everything else but the road looks fine.” Sollux says with a frown.

“So they just fucked up the landing?” You say.

“Well it’s the first time the two of us ever did it on our own, I think we did pretty good!” A cheery voice says from behind the both of you.
You will both swear to any audience, judge or jury that you did not both scream like little wigglers and trip over each other trying to get away and face the new person.

Standing in the spot that had been behind you is a smiling girl around your age, her horns are sizable and curled but nothing compared to the other two trolls. Her hair is long and curly, much like The Disciple’s or Meulin’s and overall she looks harmless and cheerful.

“Who the fuck are you?! And what are you doing here?” You demand, trying to be as threatening as you can.

“I’m Aradia, and that’s Damara, the ghost is our ancestor. She’s dead.” The girl, Aradia, explains happily.

“If she was dead then we couldn’t see her. You can’t see dead people, no matter what bad movies with Bruce Willis say.” You argue, and you feel proud that you saw just that movie recently enough to be able to argue with it.

“Oh, Damara and I can see her whenever. Damara’s just letting all of you see her, that’s why her eyes are like that. Our ancestor said she had to tell The Sufferer something before she could move on, so here we are. Besides, it wasn’t safe for us on Alternia anymore.” The girl explains calmly

“The… Sufferer? Who’s that?” You ask. Are they lost or something?

“The Sufferer, the short one, nubby horns like yours. He’s your ancestor, right?” Aradia says, pointing right to your ancestor.

“He’s title is The Signless.” Sollux tells her.

“And our horns aren’t nubby!” You yell, and Sollux claps his hand over your squawktrap before you get the attention of everyone else around too.

“Well, that’s not what they call him back on Alternia. Most people think he died for us, they filled him with arrows and welded burning metal around his wrists. His people got him away, but the Empress lets people think he died. We know he didn’t though.” Aradia says, and her mouth stretches into an unsettling smile.

You want to tell her that it’s not true, that she has the wrong troll, but you’ve seen glimpses of damaged skin under your ancestor’s bracers. You’ve seen how all the human clothes he wears have long sleeves and tight cuffs. You know of the scars on his back. It was never something you questioned though, all of your guardians have scars, Psii’s run over his face and hands and all over his back, The Disciple’s scarred all over from fights and hunting. You know Alternia is a violent and dark place, nothing like Earth. You know that your ancestor led a revolution but being executed for it and escaping… that’s something else.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” You say, but you don’t feel certain of it. What have the three of them been keeping from you? How many things are there that The Disciple also feels like you’re too young to know about?

“You BITCH!” Your ancestor screams and all of you turn around to face him. It’s not just the cursing that’s got your attention, though that’s rare you have heard it before. But you’ve never heard him sound like this; he looks like he really wants to hurt this woman.

“She’s my mother! You can’t just- if you know where she is then TELL ME!” He roars at her and into his hands drop two sicles.
“Holy shit.” Sollux gasps. You’ve never seen him armed; you didn’t know that he even had weapons let alone was prepared to use them.

“She’s a ghost; you can’t double kill her.” Psii reasons, though you can only just hear him from your positions by the corner of the house.

“Don’t NEED to, she-” Your ancestor growls, and as he turns to face the younger troll more you can see that his eyes are red from rim to rim. You thought that kind of rage only happened to highbloods, but then when has your blood type ever been within the bounds of what is normal?

“DOWN!” Psii yells and huge chunks of road and house drops to the floor as he tackles your ancestor to the floor and paps him repeatedly in the face. The disciple changes her position to cover them.

“What the fuck?” Sollux whispers in wonder.

“Come on.” You breathe, and the two of you slink around the corner of the house and behind a bush with the grinning Aradia girl following you.

“You set me up.” Your ancestor grits out as he pushes Psii away from him slowly.

“I got within an inch of my death, because of you, because of what you put in motion. You used me. And now you come to my new planet, to my home and you dangle my mother’s life before me.” He hisses, getting to his feet. You and Sollux look at each other and you mouth ‘mother’ at him in puzzlement, he just shrugs and keeps staring ahead.

“You didn’t die; you were rescued at the last second. Just in time.” The ghost says pointedly.

“Hey, don’t you dare take credit for that!” The Disciple shouts at her.

“Believe what you want. But you will take my descendants in, or else you will never see your mother or your descendants again.” The ghost says, looking down her nose at your ancestor.

“You come here and threaten our children?! How dare you!” The Disciple roars and slashes her claws pointlessly through the ghost with no result.

“We’ll take your descendants in? Descendants… plural?” The Psiionic says slowly and looks around.

“Sorry.” Aradia says into your ear, and you feel a cord snap tight around your neck and from Sollux’s surprised gasp you think she got him too.

Static runs across your skin and the cord flies off of you, dragging the startled girl overhead. Blue and red beams shoot out of Sollux’s eyes and at her, and though they push the girl far away she’s blocking them somehow, she must be some kind of psionic herself.

You are both pulled over the bush and into The Psiionic’s arms. Sollux’s eyes are shut, and you can see that his nose is starting to bleed. You cling to him, and his ancestor holds you both tight to his chest as he crouches on the ground.

“He’s pretty strong!” Aradia laughs but it’s not a mean laugh, she sounds genuinely delighted. Is this what Alternian trolls are like?

Your ancestor looks down at you and his mouth is a tight and fierce line. He turns his glare on the ghost once more. You watch as his outfit flicks from his black work shirt and red tie to an outfit that you have never seen before at all. It’s almost like a dress with two large slits in the sides up to the
hips and tight brown leggings. The whole thing is red edged and across his chest is a stitched on bloody slash. His arms are bare from the elbow down and you can see the way his dark skin is darker there, warped and shiny in thick bands over his wrists.

“I hope you have not forgotten what I can SEE, Megido. You may be dead but I can still see the thread of your bond to Scratch, I can tell him where you are. Or better yet I can tell her where you are, if you were allowed to die then I’m sure it’s because you threw her in your place.” Your ancestor says, his voice booming and intimidating.

“A thief cannot give life; she cannot touch me!” The ghost spits.

“No, she only takes and takes and doesn’t care who she hurts. You think that she wouldn’t trade the lives of your descendants for her own, steal their lives for herself? You come to my home, threaten me and mine after everything that you’ve done, and you then dangle the life of my mother before me? And you expect, what? My compliance? My mercy?” He shouts at her.

“You could not hurt them.” The ghost says, but she doesn’t look totally sure. Karkat eyes Aradia and she looks uneasy to say the least, her whip is coiled ready in her hand again though.

“I could, if I do not it is because that is my choice. I still preach freedom here because I choose to. You threw me in chains just because you hoped it would get you out of your own, you stirred up a revolt as a distraction, and countless trolls died for it. I never wanted that; I wanted peaceful change.” Your ancestor says and guilt coils inside you. You are not the troll that he is, your knuckles are still sore and bruised from your fight today. He would have found a way to resolve the situation peacefully or handled it with grace. You lack his strength, his bonds and his courage.

Your ancestor’s shoulders slump, and his outfit goes back to normal, though you don’t get where he got that other one from.

“It was lifetimes and universes ago Megido, but we were all friends once. If you had just asked me to watch over your descendants, I would have.” He sighs.

“You hate me, that much is clear.” The ghost says suspiciously.

“That isn’t their fault and… if you bring my mother to me, I will forgive you.” He promises.

The ghost still looks apprehensive, but her face turns to the two younger trolls and then back to your ancestor.

“How do I know I can trust you?” She asks uncertainly.

“Have you ever known me not to forgive? I will look after them, just bring me, my mother.” The Signless says as he holds out his hand to her.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” The Disciple asks, glancing at him.

“Yes. My word is my bond Megido, do we have an agreement or not?” He asks, his hand still out.

The ghost nods her spectral head and reaches out her hand to shake his, and with that done she vanishes. The older troll girl blinks her eyes and stumbles backwards a little before regaining her footing. At least her eyes look normal again now. Aradia lands at her side and supports her with a careful hand on her arm.

“So, how do you two feel about sharing a room?” Psii asks the two of you quietly.
“What?” You ask, feeling utterly bewildered.

“What? No!” Sollux protests.

“Okay, sure, sure, you can just share with one of them then.” Psii says, nodding at the two girls, one of which did just try to strangle you with a whip.

“Fuck that; I’ll share with Karkat.” Sollux says quickly.

“I thought that you might.” Psii laughs and finally stands up and lets the two of you go.

The two girls are looking at all of you uncertainly, apparently they’re not so confident with their ghost ancestor gone.

“You must be Damara.” Signless says, holding a hand out to her. She says something in a language that you can’t understand and warily shakes his hand.

“I’m Aradia.” The other one introduces herself and Signless shakes her hand too.

“You’re welcome in my home, I’ll help you get registered here on Earth, and if you like when you’re older you can move into your own homes. We’ll teach you all about this planet, its people and customs. All I expect is that you don’t harm anyone here and you hold to your ancestor’s agreement. Does that seem fair?” Signless asks the two of them.

“It does, but it also doesn’t seem like we have a lot of choices. We can’t go back anyway.” Aradia says thoughtfully.

“Fair enough. We’ll make room for your stay; we’ll go with you to get your registration started and purchase what we need. Psii can you watch the house and these two and fix what you can of… all this?” Signless asks, gesturing vaguely to the road and the damaged house.

“I’ll do what I can.” Psii nods.

“And I expect to hear about why you two are home from school so early.” Signless says, shooting the two of you a look and then walking off to the minivan with the two girls and The Disciple.

“So, why are you two home from school?” Psii asks as he leads the way into the house and walks to the living room and falls down on the sofa.

“Kids were picking on KK again for his blood.” Sollux answers simply. It seems so petty compared to all of this.

“Ah. Sorry, kid.” Psii says regretfully.

“Forget that, what about all of that shit out there?!” You yell.

“Yeah, we have questions.” Sollux agrees with a nod.

“I’ll… answer what I can, but there’s still things I can’t tell you. Things that the three of us might never tell you, shit we wanted to protect you from and things you probably can’t understand.” Psii says and then pats the sofa for you two to sit down. You settle on one corner facing him and Sollux sits on the arm of the sofa behind you.

“Shoot.” Psii says.

“Who was the ghost lady? Was she really a ghost?” Sollux asks before you can even get a question...
“Yeah, she was a ghost. She always been able to see spirits and I guess that ability passed on to her descendants, though I don’t know how she had time to make any or track them down but- I guess time is the point. Huh.” Psii says, and it seems like he’s talking more to himself than to you because that made no sense.

“Her name was Damara, same as the oldest descendant with her but her title is The Handmaid and I’m not going to explain how she got that. We knew her back when we were, well in Earth years we’d have been teenagers.” Psii adds.

“What was Signless talking about his mother? What does that mean? Only humans have mothers, and even I don’t call him my father and I hatched on this human planet!” You yell.

The Psiionic sighs and leans back on the sofa and stares at the ceiling, his face is tired and sad.

“She was his mother in a similar way that we’re your parents. On our planet grubs were raised bylusii, not older trolls.” he says slowly.

“We know that much.” Sollux interrupts.

“Well, he’s a mutant, and no lusus wanted him. He should have died, but a jadeblood saw him and was moved by his situation I guess. She took him and ran away, raised him herself. Signless has no sign because he skipped the whole process that gives you one. She was his mother, and she was called The Dolorosa. He was different to everyone else, kinder, accepting, reasonable. You could say she was his first follower, before even me and The Disciple.” Psii explains, and your whole being hums with pride for him. Your ancestor is a great man.

“You already know that the success of his movement on Alternia was mixed, but he made a change. We didn’t tell you all the details of how everything went and how we got here. We were betrayed and it’s complicated to explain, and The Handmaid had her hand in it too, but that’s not important right now. The Empress caught him and tried to execute him, killed a bunch of our followers as well. He was rescued just in time to save his life but most people think he’s dead and right now I’m happy for it to stay that way.” Psii says with a shake of his head.

“That’s when you got turned into a spaceship?” Sollux asks and Psii nods.

“What?” You ask, and Sollux looks down at you.

“I was jerking you around about it earlier but… psionics like us used to be turned into helmsmen. Part battery and part operating system for a spaceship. They did it to him, that’s why he’s so scarred.” Sollux explains and as he speaks The Psiionic’s hands tighten on his knees, tugging at the black fabric of his suit.

“That’s horrible!” You blurt out, and Psii smiles weakly.

“Yeah, Signless thought so too. He stopped it happening to me once, but when they tried to execute him, we all got separated and captured. I got made into the empress’s battleship and The Dolorosa was taken and we’d assumed she was killed. When they got me back, I couldn’t… I wasn’t much use to anyone for a long time, and as we had no leads on her, we just left the planet with what followers we had and ended up on Earth. To think that we left her behind is…” Psii squeezes his eyes shut and runs his hands over his face.

“And if this is another trap and she’s not alive?” Sollux asks grimly.
“I think it probably is a trap, but I don’t know who for, and I can’t argue Signless out of a good deed and I can’t talk him out of what might be his only chance to see Dolorosa again. Whatever he might say though, I do not want you two dropping your guard around those girls. I’m going to make all of you kids share rooms, no one is going to be alone and vulnerable with them in the house. I don’t want to have to kill a kid but if either of them put me in a position where it’s them or you I know where my choice is. You need to watch each other, understand?” The Psiionic warns you and Sollux nods. It’s not like you’re going to be defending him from anyone, those girls have powers like him making you completely powerless against them.

“But… that ghost tried to use Signless’s mother against him. If she did all that and was responsible for him nearly dying as well, plus all that happened to you and the death of who knows how many people then… then how can he forgive her?” you ask weakly.

“That’s just who he is. Things like that are why we’re so devoted to him, Karkat.” the man says softly.

“I’ll be in my room; it’s not like I can help you fix the road or anything.” You mutter and excuse yourself. You hear Sollux start talking to Psii again, and you try not to feel like he’s getting more of the story than you.

You make your way into your room and crawl into your bed. This is the worst damn day ever.

You always knew that your ancestor was a great man. You knew that he was kind, capable, brave in the face of insurmountable odds but you didn’t know just how much. He nearly died for asking that people be treated equally and what did he do afterwards? He started all over again, got new followers and made an alliance with a species that was the first to be batshit crazy enough to stand up to the Empress, then he started a family and worked on helping trolls adjust to Earth and helping humans too. Then when someone who apparently caused a lot of this shit in the first place shows up and threatens his mother he doesn’t lose it. Instead he made a deal with her and offered his forgiveness, he opened his home to two young trolls with nowhere else to go. At this very moment he’s making them a home on Earth and buying them things they’ll need and helping them out.

You’re… you’re never going to be as good as him. You punched a kid in the face today for putting ketchup in your locker. You’re dumb and loud and angry. Hell, Kankri might be a self-important jerk but at least he’s smart and researches stuff about how not to offend and hurt people, he tries to mediate conflicts even if he comes off egotistical when he does it. He’s closer to following in your ancestor’s footsteps than you are.

You’re chained to Signless’s legacy but you’ll never be good enough to do anything to deserve it. Hell, at this point the best you can hope for is not to drag his name through the mud. You’re not sure how long you spend in bed being pathetic, useless and hating yourself but you know that it’s after school time when it happens because you can hear the voices of the rest of your family downstairs.

The pain comes first, stabbing into your forearm. You startle fully awake and rip your sleeve back to see the outline of shapes working their way into your skin in ink. Then the feeling of it hits you.

Joy. Pure, unfettered joy courses through your veins like sunshine and your heart thuds hard in your chest. You can hear a faint drumbeat in your ears and music in the air, but whenever you try to pin the tune down, it slips away from you. You feel creative, funny, brilliant and free. You gather your wits enough to stare at your arm and see two records side by side with sketchy details around them suggesting more equipment. It’s like… DJ equipment or something. As the mark finishes remaking itself the feeling fades somewhat but it’s still there, your soulmate is still there. For once you’re getting something from him other than fear and pain, you’re getting something that he loves.
You dread to think what you’re adding to his life.
> Dave: Make the sickest beats and have the most bros

Chapter Notes

Good god that pesterlog took forever to format. Thank you for your patience everyone and happy 4/13!

You linger against the wall of the building’s air conditioner unit and watch the fight. It’s only just getting light out and Bro’s just got home, apparently deciding that since he’s up you two have to be up as well and also it’s ass whoopin’ time.

Dirk and Bro circle each other, feet making no noise at all on the gravel of the roof. Dirk is twelve and tall for his age but Bro is ripped where Dirk is wiry and still growing. Bro still has a hell of a lot of height and reach on Dirk and Dirk suffers for it. Even so, Dirk is able to hold Bro back in ways that you still can’t.

Bro strikes at Dirk but he parries and attacks back in the space that your brother had just been occupying but now holds nothing more than his after image. Who knows where the real dude has gone? You flatten your back against the wall and adjust your grip on your own sword.

Bro appears out of nowhere with a bang and though Dirk blocks his blow the force of it sends him tumbling backwards into a heap.

“Shit footing, not good enough. You’re done. Dave.” Bro says in tight robotic statements.

He’s looking at you and you know better than to try to get out of this, it’s always worse that way. You ready yourself in front of him and watch, waiting for him to strike. He doesn’t though and instead cocks an eyebrow at you under the shade of his hat. Okay… so you have to attack first today. It’s unusual but not unheard of. You tighten your grip and bounce a little on the balls of your feet. You’ve got this, if you show him you’re strong then things can get a little better here. Behind you Dirk shifts to standing up and Bro’s attention flickers for just a second, it’s been a long time since Dirk intervened in any of your fights but not so long that Bro considers it an impossibility. You use his moment of distraction to strike and Bro has to switch back to a two handed grip to fend you off. Bolstered by new confidence you flashstep at him and swipe for him once more, only to get Cal to the face. The fucking puppet smacks you in the ear and you recoil from him. Bro purses his lips and shakes his head, filling your insides with lead.

Oh no.
The roof becomes an after image, replace by the stairwell and gravity. Fuck, you hate stairs. You hit three or four steps but then manage to catch your feet and stumble backwards down the rest upright. Sure, you slam your back into the wall pretty hard but you avoided a head injury so you’ll call that a success. Bro’s figure blots out the weak morning light at the top of the stairwell and he breezes past you in total silence. It didn’t feel like the super bad kind of silence but it also wasn’t approving either. You think anyway, it’s so hard to tell.

Dirk is next to you in a flash and you can see him looking you over, checking for injuries and wounds. Ever the big brother.

“I’m getting better.” You say optimistically.

“You shouldn’t have to do this at all. Come on, I need to shower and disinfect. Do you need anything?” Dirk asks, leading the way down the rest of the stairs.

“I’m good, I’ve got gym first anyway so I’ll skip the shower too.” You tell him and Dirk shoulders the apartment door open.

“Nasty.” Dirk says and walks off.

He hits up the bathroom, Bro is who knows where and you go back to your room and the big double bed that you share with Dirk. Bro’s not the kind of guy who pays for stuff for the two of you that he doesn’t need to like, you know, food and beds or even clothes a lot of the time. Dirk’s actually got a semi-legal delivery job now so he doesn’t have to steal so much shit for the two of you which is good, you’d be totally fucked if he ended up in juvie.

You want to go back to bed but Dirk will flip his shit if he finds your sweaty body starfished out on your shared bed. Instead you open up Paint on his computer and start drawing with the mouse and your right hand. You’re left handed of course so your right hand drawings are all terrible but there’s a beauty in being deliberately bad at something ironically. Irony is cool, or at least that’s what Bro says. You think you get it. The other day the two of you played a shitty skating game together when Dirk was out working, you and Bro competed to see who could glitch the game out the worst or make the physics engine have a shitfit. Bro approved and his approval felt damn good. You figure that maybe you can do something with this concept of terrible drawing but you’re not sure what yet and you don’t want to show Bro anything that’s not bad in the right way and you sure as shit don’t want to look like you’re trying sincerely at something.
Gaining Bro’s approval is hard work but unlike Dirk you think it could be worth it. Dirk doesn’t agree, he sees Bro as someone who needs to be defeated or run from. He doesn’t seem to consider that if the two of you do what Bro really wants or really likes that things could get better. You’re pretty sure that you’re never getting away from him so making him want to punch the snot out of you less is easily better.

“You’re really not getting changed?” Dirk asks, suddenly in the door to your room and making you jump embarrassingly.

“Like I said, I have gym first so what does it matter? Besides, it’s not like anyone talks to me at school anyway so who’s gonna complain about my Strider man-stink?” You ask as Dirk starts getting dressed. His bare back is just as scarred up as yours but you can see his soul mark when he lifts his arms up to pull his shirt over his head. It got bigger last year, another part added to it. As well as his old compass he’s got a cartoon drawing of female superhero complete with the dots of ink that you get in old fashioned printed comics. Dirk spent forever researching it, trying to work out if his soulmate’s interest was in comic books, the idea of being a hero or in ‘pop art’ whatever that is. Regardless he still hides it from Bro.

Your mark is still just the same, a river of neon red blood down your arm and hand. You carefully peel back your sleeve to see it still there and run a finger over it.

“Dave, you’re mumbling to yourself again.” Dirk says as he puts his socks on. Damnit, you’ve been doing that more and more lately. A dude’s got to talk and when all the kids at a dude’s school are still all dumb and kiddy then that dude has to talk to himself. That dude being you.

“It happened again the other day.” You say purposefully.

“What did?” Dirk asks and laces up his shoes.

“I felt something through my soul mark again. It almost always happens when I’m in school but sometimes out of it. I swear I’m not imagining it, I can feel feelings that aren’t mine from it.” You insist.

“And I’ve told you before Dave that it’s not possible.” Dirk sighs and stands up.

“I know what I feel. Look, what if… what if she’s not human? Don’t you think that might change things?” You say but Dirk shakes his head.
“Dirk! All soulmates have some weird bullshit magic connection, that’s how we get the marks. No one knows exactly how that happens so why is feeling something through it suddenly impossible?” You argue.

“Just because there’s a connection doesn’t mean that you can get anything through it. Like… just because you can get phone calls through the house phone doesn’t mean it can play you a movie or—wait this is a bad analogy, that kind of is how the internet works. My point is that—” Dirk says but you cut him off.

“No, that’s exactly what it’s like. Everyone else is getting the occasional phone call tattoo but I’m getting emotional cam-girl calls on the regular!” You insist. Dirk glances at the door and you remember to keep your voice low on this topic, who knows what Bro can hear.

“Okay then genius, riddle me this, what makes you so special? No one else has ever reported this.” Dirk says, folding his arms.

“Well, trolls haven’t been here long. If she’s a troll then maybe she’s got some of those weird brain powers that some of them have, maybe she can read minds.” You say. You have given this more than a little bit of thought over the years.

“I guess it hasn’t been studied much but you know those are pretty long odds. But, let’s say that I believe you, what do you even get through it?” Dirk asks and sits down on the edge of the bed to look at you.

You roll up your sleeve and look down at the blood until it’s interrupted by the top of your fingerless glove. You could just wear the one but you’re not Michael goddamn Jackson.

“It’s like… imagine completely face planting in the dirt in front of your whole school and everyone laughs. And you hate them for it but you hate yourself too for doing it. It’s not every day and it’s not always strong but I feel it. I sure as shit ain’t doing anything at school that makes me angry and ashamed.” You explain and Dirk looks stoic.

“I wonder if it goes both ways, assuming this is real.” He says after a while.

“Well, at least she won’t be surprised when she meets Bro.” You mumble. You’re pretty sure that your soulmate gets nothing but shit from you and she didn’t even agree to this exchange. This is your
problem, not hers. But it’s not like your life is a total shitshow, there are plenty of moments when you’re happy. When you hang out with Dirk and have a good time or when Bro actually acts like a human being. Those are good.

“We’re not introducing our soulmates to Bro. Six years, remember?” Dirk prompts you and you nod, even though you don’t buy that Dirk’s crazy plan is ever going to work.

“Yeah. Come on, let’s go. We’ve got school.” You say and grab up your bag and gym kit from the floor.

Dirk knows well enough when a conversation is ended and so the two of you walk to school. It’d be nice to have had breakfast but lunch is soon enough and you’re allowed to drink water in your classes, that takes the edge off. Before too long it’ll be school lunch and then who knows what dinner will be. It could be something from your stash, Bro’s leftovers or he might even spring for dinner like he does sometimes. Your life is a mystery.

You and Dirk go your separate ways at the gates, you into the elementary school and he goes a few blocks down to the middle school. You ace gym as you always do, after all it’s just running and jumping over shit, swinging things around, it’s all easy when you don’t have a grown ass man with a sword trying to get you. Not to mention there’s no puppets in gym either.

You feel kind of bad. When you joined this school you used to have people trying to be your friends but they all seemed so babyish. Like oh wah-wah, my mommy didn’t get me the transformer’s pencil case I wanted, wah-wah. Suck it up Timmy, at least your guardian didn’t throw you down the stairs and refuse to keep any food at all in the house for a week. You sure as shit don’t want to tell them that because you are not down for a social services visit but it makes it hard to relate to them. They talk about shows you don’t get to watch or books your Bro doesn’t buy you and all their movie tastes are for babies.

You’re not disliked by the other kids but they all avoid you and you’re cool with that. Who needs them?

You’re between classes and stuffing your gym stuff in your locker when you’re suddenly flooded with that wave of hate them/hate myself from your soul mark and you have to resist groaning. Again? What the hell is going on in your soulmate’s life? You lean on the edge of your locker and wait for the feeling to pass. She’s leaning an awful lot more into the ‘fuck you’ end of her feelings today, you wonder if she’s getting in a fight with whoever is making her feel this way.

It seems to be a long one so you just decide to grab your shit and power through it, even if it means
that you barely hear the beginning of your English class. In fairness it’s not like you were going to pay attention anyway, when your soul mark stops making you feel like crap you start paying attention again. All the other kids are writing away and the instructions are clearly written on the board.

*Write a letter to your soulmate!*

*Remember:*

*A proper greeting.*

*Information about yourself.*

*Ask questions!*

*If you don’t already have your mark, what kind of mark do you think you might have? What might they have?*

*What might you do when you meet?*

*Grammar note: You can say that your soulmate is he or she, or if you don’t know you can use ‘they’ as a singular pronoun. If you need help with the explanation, raise your hands. Good luck :)*

You sigh but get to writing. Bro doesn’t care about bad grades but Dirk does, if you do badly in something Dirk takes time to try to tutor you for it. Like Dirk doesn’t do enough for you already. You can’t just daydream through this assignment and anyway it’s not like it’s not a topic you’ve thought a lot about or anything.

Now, how to start...

*Hey shorty,*

*What’s a girl like you doing in a place like this? A letter ‘aint no place for a girl like you.*

*Proper greeting, check.*

*So you will be super happy to here that i’m pretty much the coolest kid ever to have walked this or any other planet. You are set for life with me. I already know a lot about how you*
You pause and look down at your arm. Assignment or not this is between you and your soulmate.

feel about things. So how bout you tell me something else? Have you got any brothers or sisters? Do you have to share a room if you do? I do, but my brother Dirk is hella cool. You’re gonna love him when u meet him.

Okay information and questions nailed. A few of your dumb classmates are holding up their hands asking questions about shit, not you though. What next? Well you already have your mark so there’s no point wondering on that, but you don’t know hers.

We’re supposed to think about what mark you might have for me. I mean i’m ment to, everyone else doesn’t have to think about what mark you have on your arm for me. Jim over there in his dumb hat isn’t like “golly Dave’s soulmate what does your arm look like?” That’d be dumb.

Whatev. I figure these things are done on what you’re into or like things that have a big efect on your life. So maybe you have

You pause. God, what is that poor girl wearing because of you? Bloodied swords? Rooftops? You swear if she has Cal or a smuppet on her arm when you meet her you will fucking fly off the handle and chop her arm off for her own good.

What could she possibly have from you that’s any good at all? If you feel this crappy every time she hates herself then what happens to her if this shit is two-way?

“Dave, are you stuck?” Your teacher asks and you jump because you did not hear her coming. You scold yourself silently for missing that but you have to let your guard down sometimes, right?

“No.” You say stubbornly and she leans over to read your letter. She doesn’t get far before she does that big disappointed sigh.

“This is text speak David, it’s not proper English.” She corrects you, tapping a painted nail on your work.

“This is for us,” You say, gesturing at your class. “Get with the times. And it’s Dave, not David.”
“Correct it.” She tells you and moves on.

You glare at her back and absolutely do not correct it. She should be grateful that Dirk reminded you enough not to curse in your classwork or at school or else this letter would be way more colourful.

You get back to your work. What mark would your soulmate have for you? Or more accurately, what mark would your soulmate have for you that won’t make teachers concerned for you? Making teachers worried about your home life is one of Dirk’s big no’s and one that you agree with.

So maybe you have birds. I like the crows that live in on my building, so maybe you have them. Or records, my Bro plays a lot of music and he’s a super cool DJ. He won’t let me touch his stuff but it’s cool to listen to.

God this is hard. Thinking of things about your life that you can openly say without fear of wrecking everything. Last question, the class is almost over anyway so you need to get a move on.

When we meet I’ll introduce you to Dirk and we can all hang out at your house or see movies. It’d be cool to see you soon.

Dave

You finish your letter and stare down at it. You really would like to meet her. You’d like to find what makes her feel so bad and fix it for her. And perhaps… she might love you despite your fucked up life and the fact that you’re the least interesting and dumbest person in your house.

The bell rings and your class all shuffles to their feet, ready and eager to get out for recess. They all drop their letters on her desk and you only do it because you have to. For some dumb reason you kind of want to hang onto it, to show it to your soulmate when you eventually meet her. You can laugh about it and hey, maybe she will have done something similar too and you can compare. You still make himself drop the assignment on her desk and then head outside for a break.

Out here there’s a tall pine tree and you leap up into it, it’s your favourite one because near the top there is Dirk’s name carved into the trunk from when he was at school here and the day that you found it your carved yours right alongside it. It remains your favourite place to chill on breaks and sometimes the crows that visit your building land in it and caw at you. They’re pretty friendly ever since you started feeding them food that you swipe from the cafeteria.
You chill and then it’s time for math. Math is one of those subjects that you’re actually good at so you’re easy breezing it through your worksheet when pain stabs into your left wrist, making you dig your pencil hard into the paper. It hurts and you remember exactly what this kind of pain came from before, it’s your soul mark. But it’s not your soulmate feeling ashamed or full of self loathing, it’s the pain of a new part of the mark being added.

The feeling associated with this mark bubbles up inside of you. You feel… small and inadequate. You feel like you’re face to face with greatness and falling far short of measuring up. It’s agonisingly fresh, like you’ve only just realised how vast the gap is between you and… whoever. You slide your hand under the desk and unbutton your glove to look. One link of a chain is etching itself with painful slowness into the inside of your wrist. You thought it’d be done by now but it doesn’t seem to be.

You feel bad for your soulmate, it sucks to feel like the crappiest version next to your hero. It’s a feeling that you’re familiar with to say the least. Bro might be out of his fucking mind but he’s a genius with a blade, he’s cool and tough, he’s somehow made a successful business out of creepy puppets and anyone who can convince people to pay to get one of those is some kind of magician. Dirk is strong and patient with you and he’s way tougher on himself than you ever have the strength to be and so he’s always getting better at everything, he’s a computer genius and knows everything about cool things. Dirk is five years older than you and saw that you needed help and basically became a parent to you, he’s just the best. Compared to them you’re just a dumb little kid who isn’t really any good at anything.

So yeah, you know how your soulmate feels.

“Me too, man.” You mumble but shut up as your teacher glances at you. Sometimes you mutter to yourself when you’re thinking and this teacher absolutely hates it so you try not to do it in his class.

You button your glove back up and try to push through the pain and get on with your work.

It takes near enough all of the goddamn school day for your new shitty chain bracelet of pain and low self esteem to finish inking itself onto your skin. You’re leaning against the chain link fence outside your school and glaring up at the sky as you wait for Dirk to meet you, even though your soul mark has finished doing it’s shit the whole thing has left a pretty sour taste in your mouth. You just want to go home and play some video games if Bro isn’t there and if he is then you can just chill and listen to music with Dirk’s headphones.

Out of nowhere a hand shoves your shoulder and you flail and scramble to get upright and away. As you whirl back around you see Dirk and his disapproving expression.
“Dropping your guard?” Dirk asks, though his voice is so flat it sounds way more like a statement than a question.

“Geez, Dirk. I was just waiting for you, not Bro. We’re not at home.” You protest but Dirk just shakes his head and leads the way.

Great, you just had a shit day and now you’re in Dirk’s bad books. The two of you walk home in silence and as you follow behind Dirk you run a finger over the thick chain links around your wrist now. Yeah, you sure can relate to that whole ‘most inferior version’ feeling.

“What happened in school, did they call Bro or something? What are we walking into here?” Dirk finally asks as you get onto your block.

“Nothing happened in school. School was normal.” You answer in puzzlement.

“Then why are you acting like someone’s pissed in your cornflakes?” Dirk asks, looking over his shoulder at you. You grit your teeth and move your glove and shirt sleeve out of the way to show your new addition. Dirk’s eyebrows rise in surprise.

“It took all afternoon and also you know how I said I feel things from this? Well now I get a new and crappier feeling.” You snap, losing your cool a little bit. You know you’re not meant to break the whole cool face thing, especially in public but fuck this, you’ve had a shitty day.

Dirk just stares at you and you’re too goddamn tired to figure out what that means so you just walk past him to get home. Dirk follows after you but it’s silence the whole way. You walk up the millions of stairs with Dirk and open the door to your apartment to find Bro almost right up on you, only he doesn’t have a sword in hand but a large box.

“Dave, finish clearing a space in your room. This is all going in there.” Bro orders you and you rush to do so.

“What is this? Turntables? DJ equipment? This looks new.” You hear Dirk say from the other room. Bro has already moved your bed over somewhat and shoved some of yours and Dirk’s stuff out of the way. It’s pretty obvious that he’s trying to clear a space up against the wall so you start scooting cables out of the way.
“Won it last night, they just delivered it.” Bro answers and Dirk grunts.

“So, why aren’t you keeping it?” Dirk asks, coming into your room with a long box in his arms for the turntables themselves.

“The guy running the competition was some fag. I don’t want his homo hands all over equipment that I’m going to use, but you two need to start learning how to get good at this shit so it’ll do for you. Just don’t turn gay on me.” Bro snorts and dumps a box of cables and records on your bed.

“That’s not how that works.” Dirk mutters as Bro leaves.

“This is so cool!” You whisper excitedly to Dirk. Bro is weird with his gifts, it’s like he occasionally remembers that he’s the guardian to his two little brothers and then drops something expensive on you. Sometimes it’s because one of you has shown a skill he approves of, like with Dirk’s computer, and sometimes it’s because he’s wanting to train you in something new. There’s always a string attached to everything but you’re used to it. This DJ stuff is cool no matter what and you can’t wait to use it, you’re always so bored when Dirk’s on his computer.

“Hmm.” Dirk says with a frown and jumps slightly when Bro calls him back out to bring something else in. You climb onto the mattress and start looking through the boxes curiously, there’s so much cool stuff in here. Bro must have been so good to win a prize this big.

The two of them maneuver a table in and set it down in the clear space on the wall. Dirk dusts his hands off on his black jeans and looks up at Bro.

“Do you need me to move anything else? I have work to go to so…” Dirk trails off.

“Oh yeah, your job. You’re getting paid pretty well for whatever it is you’re doing, huh?” Bro says, staring down at Dirk.

Dirk stiffens but from watching him side on you can see the way his eyes go wide, though his poker face doesn’t shift. It takes you a little longer to catch up and wonder how Bro knows how much Dirk is getting paid.

Dirk flashsteps over to the bed and tumbles you off onto the floor as he yanks the mattress up to look under it. Had he been keeping his money there? Whatever he’s looking for isn’t there now and
you’re left lingering by Dirk’s desk as your two brothers square off against each other in the small space.

“"You took my money!” Dirk accuses Bro angrily.

“Consider it rent.” Bro replies flatly.

“Rent?! I’m your fucking brother! Giving me a roof over my head is like just one part of the basic shit you’re meant to do, I was using that to buy us food which you fucking don’t do!” Dirk snarls. He’s really, really angry.

“This is my house and I own everything in it, including you, you ungrateful little shit.” Bro hisses.

Oh god, you hate when they get like this. It’s pretty rare but this never ever ends well. Why did you have to be in the room? Maybe you can… maybe you can fix this.

“That’s not how this works! You’re a crazy person!” Dirk yells at him.

“Dirk…” You plead softly and reach out for his arm. He shoves you back and your foot lands on a copy of Game Bro and slips you up like a kids cartoon character tripping on a banana. You smack the side of your head right on the edge of Dirk’s desk. You land on your ass and listen to your ears ring and the muted sounds of the two of them arguing. Good job Dave.

“You think you’re better than me, Dirk?” Bro challenges, sword in hand. Great, they’re armed now.

“Yeah, yeah, I am!” Dirk snaps, his posture tense and ready.

“Nah, you’re just the same as me. Why don’t you ask Dave?” Bro says with a slight twitch of amusement to his mouth.

Dirk warily looks around at you, obviously worried that Bro might be tricking him. When he looks at you he goes visibly paler.
“Dave.” He breathes.

“I’m okay, Dirk. It’s fine.” You assure him and reach up to touch your head. Oh, you’re bleeding right down your face.

“Good job.” Bro says and Dirk glances from Bro to you and then flashsteps away so fast that you don’t even catch a single part of it. The front door slams after him, ringing through the silent apartment.

You struggle to your feet and press your gloved hand to your head to stop the bleeding. Bro is still not saying or doing anything and you have no idea if he is pleased with Dirk leaving or not.

You mutter about how much head wounds bleed and grab some tissues to clean your face off and press against the cut until it stops spurting blood like Kill Bill or something.

Bro goes back to setting things up with the new equipment and you sneak over to his side to watch without being in the way. He plugs one thing in and fiddles with it for a little bit before pressing a button. The machine produces a steady kind of beat. Bro notices you watching and hands the machine over to you. It’s red and blue and covered in buttons, sliders and knobs. In the main section is a four by four grid of buttons and the second one in on the top row is lit up in green and you curiously press it, it makes the beat stop. You press it again and the beat returns. You go on and press another at random, third row down and fourth along. It plays a strange winding tune that sounds cool but doesn’t go with the beat so you press it again to turn it off. You flick around until you get something that you like and try to add more things in and out of it as it goes along so that they mesh in nicely.

The whole time Bro’s been plugging things in and moving things around but you look up and realise that he stopped some time ago and is just watching.

“Maybe you’ll actually live up to that Strider name after all.” Bro says stoically and stands up.

That is… that’s high praise coming from Bro. You must have been doing really great! You clamp down on your reaction though, that’s a surefire way to piss him off and instead you just coolly and silently nod. He nods back at you.

“Tomorrow I’ll teach you to scratch.” Bro says offhandedly as he leaves your room.
And so you’re left alone for once in your room with the warm early evening sunlight shining through the window and all the tools at your fingertips to make great music. You return to your blue and red box and get back to making new tracks, it gets way more fun when you realise that you can save and then replay patterns while you’re doing other things. The real challenge is making sure that all the loops tie up nicely or making them into a bigger pattern that you can close again afterwards.

You’re good at this, you’re finally good at something and it’s something really cool. You’re more eager to learn how to do all of this than you ever have been for anything at school or anything else that Bro has had you do. Maybe this is how Dirk feels when he codes things on his computer or how your Bro feels when he does everything.

The evening burns through in a happy haze of beats, some of which you even made little raps to. You know those aren’t super good right now but it’s practice and it’s no doubt better than what the rest of the kids your age could do. Dirk isn’t home by the time you decide to sleep and he wakes you up near midnight by dumping a heavy sounding bag on the floor and swiftly changing and crawling in next to you. You kind of want to ask him where he’s been, if he’s okay and why he ran off like that but that wouldn’t be Strider cool though. You just pretend like you never woke up and you’re so close to sleep that you drift back under real soon.

Dirk is up and awake before you the next morning and he’s not talking to you outside of the barest yes or no answers so you leave him alone and get ready for school, you’re loitering around but he’s plugging parts into his computer from the bag next to him and generally not looking ready at all.

“Are you coming or what?” You finally ask at the doorway.

“No.” Dirk says without even coming out from under the desk that you cracked your head open on yesterday.

For the first time in perhaps ever you walk to school alone. A few of the teachers at school ask about the mark on your head and you just tell them the truth, that you slipped and headbutted your brother’s desk. It’s kind of nice to get sympathy for an injury that you can admit to and openly show.

When you get home Dirk is still ignoring you and doesn’t even get anything for himself to eat so you end up just eating your own hoarded snacks and drinks. Eventually Bro catches you in his space and gives you the promised lesson on how to scratch records as well as a basic introduction on what a few of the other bits of tech are. It’s actually fun. Well, fun with a perpetual hint of terror that you’re going to do the wrong thing or touch a wrong thing and get puppet punched in the head but that goes with every Bro interaction.
That night Dirk is still silently typing away at his computer and ignoring you and eventually you just go to bed with the light on and the sound of keyboard tapping. When you awake Dirk is still typing and you’re pretty sure that he never went to sleep.

“Dirk?” You ask warily but your brother doesn’t even blink.

You get dressed and pick up your bag for school and linger at the door to your room once more. Dirk hasn’t so much as moved beyond typing.

“So, Dirk… like, about the other day.” You say hesitantly.

No reaction.

“I’m… sorry?” You say hopefully and there’s a pause in Dirk’s typing but it resumes almost immediately. Dirk says nothing.

Shame and self loathing coil in your gut. This is worse than what Bro does. At least you expect Bro to throw you down the stairs and at least that is over with quickly. Dirk is shutting you out and you have no idea what you did wrong so you can only guess that it’s everything. You’re dragging him down here and he’s always looking out for you, patching you up, working for you. He must have just finally reached his limit with you. The least that you can do then is to just get out of his way.

You walk to school alone again and then home all by yourself. You come back to see that Bro’s DJ equipment isn’t there so you guess that you’re not going to see him for a day at least, maybe more. He just does these DJ gigs every so often and sometimes they’re far away. You make your way into your room to find Dirk passed out fully dressed on the bed. He doesn’t even stir as you come in the room so he must be really out cold.

Dirk’s computer pings loudly and you ignore it, instead putting your book bag down on the floor. The computer pings a few more times in quick succession and you look over to see your name in large print on the screen in red, flashing on and off. You walk over to the desk in puzzlement, did Dirk leave you a note? An animated note?

Your ass has barely graced Dirk’s desk chair when a pesterchum window opens up. You’ve seen Dirk use this before but you don’t have an account, you’ve not got anyone to talk with.
timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering daveStrider [DS]
TT: Dave.
TT: It’s more helpful if you start typing, Dave.

You stare at the screen dumbly, how does whoever this is know your name? You uneasily put your hands on the keyboard and type.

DS: who are you?
TT: That’s a pretty hard hitting philosophical question there, Dave.
TT: But you know me, if that’s any help.
DS: okay im closing this now bye
TT: No, wait!
TT: I’m Dirk!

You look across at your brother who is dead to the world still on the bed.

DS: i’m looking at dirk and hes asleep
TT: Yeah I know that, I’m also Dirk.
TT: This is going to be complicated to explain.
TT: Okay, try this. Remember you were telling me, that is to say Dirk, the other day about your science class where you were learning about twins?
DS: how do you know that?
TT: Work with me Dave, do you remember?
DS: fine i remember
TT: So… identical twins were the same person once and then they kind of clone themselves and split into two identical people.
DS: yeah
TT: Imagine that Dirk was just real slow on that process.
DS: what
TT: He cloned himself, well his brain to be precise. Digitally, then he put it in this souped up computer and here I am.
TT: That’s about as simple and abbreviated as I can make that.
TT: Are you following me?

You look at Dirk again, he’s not moved. If he’s typing when you’re not looking then he’s doing it really silently and fast. Anyway, Dirk isn’t one for pranks. So is what this person is saying true? Is that even possible? You don’t have anything to lose from talking so you may as well say something.

DS: so you’re like a robot?
TT: Robots have bodies, like on Robot Wars. I’m all brain no body.
TT: Artificial Intelligence is more accurate.
TT: Though there’s nothing artificial about me. I’m like fresh squeezed orange juice right off the tree
in the hands of poor mistreated immigrant workers and put right on the table.
DS: okay but apple would be better
TT: Well if I was your brain clone I would be fresh like AJ but instead I’m the superior fruit.

Despite yourself you feel yourself starting to smile. This guy really does talk like Dirk, it’s all so similar. Maybe it is possible. You’ll have to ask Dirk later to be sure, but for now you’ll buy it.

DS: so you're in the computer?
TT: Yep.
TT: The rest of the internet too but I’m somewhat limited by our crappy connection.
DS: and you’re what hes been doing the last few days?
TT: I’m what he’s been working on, yes.
DS: okay first question is how
TT: Dave, you’re not stupid by any means. I think you’re a bright kid, I do. But no one on this planet besides Dirk has managed this.
TT: AI experts with all kind of doctorates haven’t got this far. Trust me when I say that I can’t explain it in a way you’ll understand.
DS: fine then question two
DS: why
TT: Dirk has a number of reasons for making me and keeping me operational, but mostly it's for you.

You squint at the screen in disbelief. For you? No way.

DS: dirk aint even talking to me
DS: why would he do all that for me?
TT: Well, that’s kind of why I’m here. Dirk had considered making me before but he was always too wary of it going wrong, plus he had to steal a good number of parts to make me.
TT: Bro forced our hand.
DS: Bro?
DS: how?
TT: Dirk copied his brain not too long after his fight with Bro.
TT: The image of you standing there after hitting your head on the desk after I shoved you away
TT: after we or he did
TT: whatever.
TT: That can never happen again. You can never be hurt because of us again.
DS: i dont get it
DS: it was just an accident
DS: and it was mostly my fault
DS: like damn dave watch where you put your feet and also face
TT: No.
TT: We’re not going to turn out like Bro and we’re starting with making sure you never get hurt by us again.
TT: Of course Dirk then went and ignored you like a dumbass for days which made you feel like shit and if I had been working then I would have warned him of that.
TT: I’m basically like a second pair of eyes for him. If he starts acting stupid or does something that endangers you then I catch him on it.
TT: I can talk to you when you need help and Dirk is busy. About anything, life, homework, that soul mark of yours.
TT: Together we’re going to be the best brother for you. Not the strongest competition when it’s Bro that we’re competing against but there we are.

You sit back in your chair and stare at the screen and then at Dirk once again. You always knew he was smart but for him to do all of this for you? This is huge.

TT: Dave?
TT: What’s wrong?
DS: what should i call you?
TT: We already went over this, I’m Dirk.
DS: i cant call you both that
DS: besides you were dirk
DS: now youre his twin right?
DS: you need your own name
TT: I…
DS: be your own man!
TT: I guess I hadn’t really thought about it.
TT: I mean I’m just a copy of Dirk, I figured Dirk was going to be my name too but I suppose I see your point.
DS: yeah like what kind of asshole would have twins and name them both dirk?
TT: Probably some idiot in Texas has done that. Maybe I’ll scour birth records later to see.
TT: It’s kind of hard choosing your own name.
DS: could be another d name
DS: dave dirk and
TT: As much as I like perpetuating patterns.
TT: How does Hal sound to you?
DS: Hal
DS: i like it
DS: im gonna go wake Dirk up to talk to him real quick
TT: That reference just sailed over your head, didn’t it? I guess you were young when we watched that movie.

You get up from the chair and walk the short distance to the bed. You cautiously reach out to shake Dirk’s shoulder and wake him up. His shades are on the floor by his head so his bleary bloodshot orange eyes are what you see when he wakes up.

“Dave?” He says groggily and rubs at his face.

“I met your twin.” You say quietly, crouching down by him.
“Twin?” Dirk groans and sits up.

“On the computer.” You continue and Dirk’s eyes fly open again.

“You weren’t supposed to talk to him yet, I was supposed to check everything when I woke up. Fuck!” Dirk gasps and runs to the computer. He scrolls up your conversation with a look of dismay on his face and then scrolls down slower this time as he reads it. When he gets to the bottom there is new text there.

TT: Calm down Dirk.

“You went with Hal? Really?” Dirk says aloud and you’re about to tell him that he should type when Hal replies.

TT: It’s a solid reference and ironic as you created me to be a force for good towards a guy named Dave.
TT: Also Dave just worked out that I can hear you.
TT: Hi Dave, I can also see you. There’s a webcam up there, see? ^

You look up and see the small camera perched on top of your brother’s screen, you wave a little weakly and feel dumb for not seeing it sooner.

“This wasn’t what we agreed.” Dirk hisses and you really don’t like that noise.

TT: You were sleep deprived and hungry when we last spoke.
TT: Your human body just isn’t as optimal as my perfect mind.
TT: I ran all the checks you would have before speaking to Dave.
TT: Besides, you needed me. Dave was clearly under the impression that you were ignoring him because he’d done something wrong or that you suddenly hated him.
TT: You were just too far gone to see it.
TT: See, I’m useful already.

Dirk looks down at you with a genuinely horrified expression on his face and you have to look away.
“Dave, no… I just… goddamnit.” Dirk mutters.

“I’m sorry I was so clumsy, I just didn’t want you fight Bro. He looked really mad.” You apologise weakly.

Dirk’s hand lands on your shoulder and he pulls you in for a hug. You don’t hug often and usually when you do it’s after he’s patched you up from Bro’s attacks. You bury your face in his shoulder, happy that he doesn’t hate you. You’re kind of happy that you have Hal to talk to now as well, sure he’s a computer but he still seems just as nice as Dirk.

The computer pings again and you both look at the screen.

TT: Dirk, you need to go get that package.
TT: The delivery guy just got into the building, go, go, go!

“Oh, shit.” Dirk gasps and leaps up and rushes off.

You’re alone again with the computer so you reach over to the keyboard.

DS: what package?
TT: We ordered smartphones for the two of you as well as equipment for him to build some shades that I can see through and talk to you through.
TT: It’ll be like a video game HUD.
TT: I’ll be able to show you where Bro is if you haven’t spotted him and give you hints of where to move if he attacks.
TT: I can help you out whenever, wherever and with whatever.
DS: that is some badass superhero junk right there
TT: That’s only the beginning little bro. Just you wait and see.
Your household is eight kids to three adults and seeing as half of those kids have gone through their adolescent moult and are ‘Earth teenagers’ now it gets pretty rowdy whenever there’s a mealtime. You’re sitting before your cereal pretending to focus on reading your book which is face down on the table and keeping a straight face, but it’s hard when Sollux keeps snickering to himself next to you. Even when Sollux is able to reign it in Mituna starts giggling, and the whole thing sparks up again.

“What’s so funny?” Your ancestor asks as he pours coffee for himself and The Psiionic.

“I’m being considerate.” You say innocently.

“Karkat, I would never wish to communicate a lack of faith in your ability to be considerate, oh good morning Kankri.” Your ancestor says, getting sidetracked to greet your older brother as he comes into the room and settles down in his seat opposite you. Mituna tries to drown his laughter in orange juice but just succeeds in blowing bubbles into it and making a mess.

“Really? I would.” Psii says flatly and drinks his coffee.

“No, really, I’m being considerate. Kankri said that he was offended by me reading romance books at the table, so now I have a dust jacket on it that doesn’t show any titles of anything at all.” You say calmly.

Your ancestor looks at you with tired and unconvinced eyes.

“Well, I for one am highly impressed at your ability to take constructive criticism on board Karkat. I know that you are only ten, but I am very proud that you listened to my argument about the potential offensiveness of those titles. Aside from the fact that those books are unrated and we have no idea what kind of salacious content they may be harbouring I feel that there should be a rating and warning system about content.” Kankri blathers on. God, how can someone who is only fourteen sound like a crusty old man who choked on a thesaurus? You know that you’re wordy for your age, but you’re not like him. Still, you need to keep a straight face for now.

“Until then this works, right? You’re happy?” You ask and feel Sollux shaking with repressed laughter next to you.

“I think it’s a good solution, yes.” Kankri nods. You grin.

“Wait, wait, wait.” Your ancestor shouts, holding up his hands.

“Psii, Dis is still getting dressed, and last night I was out all evening mediating between the sea-dwellers on Earth and the marine conservation charities. I’m too tired to deal with whatever this is about to be, so you can cover this one for me and I’m going to take my coffee into the living room and sit on the sofa alone and do the crossword.” He says.

“Fine.” Psii grunts, though his expression looks a little less sulky when your ancestor runs his hand through Psii’s hair and past his horns as he leaves.

When he has left the room you return your gaze to Kankri who is pouring himself a bowl of plain cornflakes like some old man.

“So, that’s settled then.” You say and pick your book up and prop it open between the two of you,
revealing the magnificent dust jacket to Kankri.

Both Captor brothers burst into hysterics, Aradia starts laughing when Kankri catches sight of the cover and shrieks in indignation.

The cover of your book is red, and you spent a good half hour emblazoning the centre of the cover in your, admittedly terrible, art. The cover is divided into a grid which is filled in with the best rendition you could do of each quadrant. A couple is smooching it up in the red quadrant and a pitch version of the same below it, one of the pair there is human too because Kankri goes on at length how humans cannot healthily handle pitch romances. For pale you have a swooning couple mid pap and in ash a heroic middle leaf between a squabbling pair. Up the spine Sollux has written ‘XXX 2exy romance reading’.

“Karkat! What is wrong with you?!” Kankri screeches.

“Hey Karkat, let me draw on that. I can make it better.” Damara offers but you don’t hand the book over. She actually will make it pornographic, and you don’t want that on your book cover, no matter how much it would make Kankri scream at you.

Psii is sitting there with his hand over his mouth and his eyes are watering as he tries desperately not to laugh because laughing means that he thinks it’s funny which means that he’s on your side.

“Psii, are you not going to do something about this?” Kankri demands.

“Why, what’s wrong with it Kankri?” Meulin asks with a wide grin.

“Yeah, you’re not going to tell Karkitty that his art is bad are you? You’d really hurt his paw feelings.” Nepeta adds deviously.

“It took me ages to make, Kankri.” You say as innocently as you can manage. Mituna howls with laughter and slams his fist on the table.

“Karkat you are being insincere!” Kankri accuses you, folding his arms in a strop.

“Hey, he’s only ten. He probably doesn’t know what that means, and you’re just making him feel bad, right KK?” Sollux says quickly, and you immediately adopt a look of confused hurt.

“Wow, I need to drink something before I choke from laughing!” Aradia cackles and a pitcher of orange juice floats up in the air from the other end of the table and towards her outstretched hand.

All at once Damara stops laughing and stares off into a space just behind Psii and Aradia yelps in alarm and drops the pitcher of juice and stares at the same spot. You quickly whip your book off of the table to save your masterpiece.

Damara snaps something at Aradia in that language that she sometimes speaks that you swear sounds like Japanese.

“Fine, I’ll do it this time but if my brains leak out my ears and I die then I’m haunting you!” Aradia argues back.

“What are you two talking about?” Psii asks, suddenly concerned.

Aradia’s eyes go white from rim to rim and in the spot that the two girls were staring at their ghost ancestor appears, her large curling horns slicing through the air and destroying all traces of fun that had been there.
“Get in here!” Psii yells and a bolt of red and blue shoots down the hallway towards the living room. You hear your ancestor yelp.

“I can walk myself!” Signless shouts back, and he strides into the room with irritation on his face.

His expression goes blank the moment that he sees Aradia and Damara’s ancestor.

“It’s been years.” He says to her, and she nods.

“Things proved difficult to get in motion, there were other players and other complications.” The Handmaid says and folds her arms.

“Like what? Is she okay?” The Signless asks, his eyes wide with worry as he addresses the ghost.

“She is coming. Things went better after I was able to talk to her directly.” The ghost says reassuringly, but Damara’s hands tense on the table and you can see that she is gritting her teeth.

“Directly?” Signless says with a frown.

“Thank you for taking care of my descendants; I know you will continue to do so. Your mother will be here presently.” The ghost nods and turns into a white haze then vanishes.

“Hey! Get back here!” The Psiionic shouts, but she doesn’t reappear.

"She's gone." Damara says softly.

Aradia slumps forward on the table with a groan and Sollux pats her back gently.

“Damara,” Your ancestor says slowly, still staring at the spot that the ghost was stood in. “you and Aradia are the only people who can talk to The Handmaid, right?”

“Other people with our power could but… no one else.” Damara says quietly.

“So for my mother to talk to her directly she would have to be-” Your ancestor’s voice shakes and cuts out.

“Dead.” Aradia wheezes and sits up, rubbing her rusty blood from her nose.

Signless seems to crumple in on himself, folding into himself until he is sitting on the kitchen floor with his hands over his face. A single wretched sob escapes him, and you can see how his shoulders are shaking from the crying that he can keep silent. You slide from your chair and walk over to him, Kankri is already doing the same.

“Signless, I can’t imagine how terrible this must feel.” Kankri says, his voice genuine and sympathetic.

“Dad…” You whisper. You don’t often call him that or if you do it’s often just so the humans get who it is you’re talking about, but you know that Signless quite likes the human terms for your relationship so you’ll go with it.

Signless looks up at you, bright red tears rolling down his face. He pulls you both in close to himself and cries. You can’t bear to think of how much it would hurt to lose him, how much he must be hurting now. He had thought that his mother was dead then he found out she was alive and now he’s lost her all over again.

“Are you going to throw us out? The Handmaid kind of went back on her deal, bringing you her
body wasn’t what you wanted.” Aradia asks uneasily. You feel signless shake his head, of course, he’d never throw them out.

“Why is it getting dark outside and- Signless! What’s wrong?” The Disciple’s voice calls out; she must have finally come downstairs. You can hear Psii’s voice quietly explaining to her what happened.

“It’s really dark out there.” Mituna says.

“It’s a ship!” Meulin shouts, and you look around enough to see her kneeling by the sink and peering out of the window.

“We’ll go.” The Psiionic says, and your ancestor lets you go and watches his two quadrantmates leave the building.

“I should… go too. If her body is on that ship, then I should be there.” Signless says unevenly and rubs at his face. He leaves as well and the eight of you remaining all look at each other.

“A dead body didn’t fly here alone, someone else is on that ship, and we don’t know who.” Sollux says grimly.

“Just because The Handmaid sent them here to fulfil her bargain doesn’t mean they won’t attack the three of them.” Damara agrees.

“Fuck that; we’ve got four high powered psionics here. We’re not gonna all stay in here and let them go out there alone against whoever the fuck is on that ship!” Mituna yells, leaping onto his chair and damn nearly falling off of it. Only the fact that he can fly saves him.

“Yeah!” Nepeta shouts in agreement.

“I don’t want to fight anyone!” Kankri protests.

“Then stay indoors, the rest of you come on!” You shout and bravely lead the charge outside with the others following you.

The spaceship is bigger than The Handmaid’s vessel. It’s long, sleek and black like the Alternian warships that you’ve seen in pictures. The trim and lighting of the ship are a glowing cerulean which gets brighter down the eight landing struts to the ship. These still manage to fracture and mess up the road.

“You shouldn’t be out here.” Signless scolds you, but he doesn’t have time to act on it as a hiss of releasing pressure comes from the ship, and a black metal gangplank slides out. From within the ship, you hear the echoing clang of footsteps on metal and long red boots slide into your view as a troll descends from the ship. She is wearing tight black trousers, a long billowing coat, an impractically large number of belts and a dramatic swooping hat. Everything but her scarlet boots have a cerulean trim; you don’t have to be a genius to guess it’s her blood colour. She flicks her dramatic hair back and surveys the group before her.

Meulin dramatically flails her hand in the direction of most of you, and you all look at her grinning face as she signs ‘Where in the world is Carmen Sandiego’ at you all. Mituna claps his hands over his mouth, but you still hear his snort of laughter.

“Wait, that sign on her chest is it…?” The Disciple says slowly.

“No way.” Your ancestor mutters.
“Aranea Serket?!” The Psiionic yells across in disbelief.

“It’s actually Marquise Spinneret Mindfang now if you don’t mind. First time seeing you three this time around.” She says with a broad fanged smile.

“Oh good, she doesn’t shut up this time either.” The Disciple grumbles but at least her posture relaxes a touch, and she lowers her claws. You note that she does not put them away, she clearly doesn’t totally trust this woman.

“You all have two descendants each as well. Have you found any of the others? Are they the same too?” The woman, Mindfang, asks your guardians. You don’t know what others she could be talking about, you don’t know what’s going on here.

“Neophyte Redglare is on Earth, she has two descendants.” The Sufferer says after a moment of silence.

“The Summoner has as well, I mean- Rufio.” The Disciple says.

“Shit, how did I not notice this much duality going around?” The Psiionic curses with a shake of his head.

“I’m afraid that I have several theories about that, but they can wait until later.” Mindfang says dismissively waving a hand in the air. You stare at it and see that it’s mechanical, gleaming silver in the light.

“Where is my mother?” The Signless asks stiffly.

“Heck if I know, somewhere on my ship but I can never find her.” Mindfang grumbles, folding her arms petulantly.

There is more clanging inside the ship as footsteps come along the metal. A troll comes down the gangplank, a tall and muscular man with great arrow tipped horns ducks as he walks and then straightens as he clears the low part of the ship.

“Darkleer!” The Disciple snarls, raising her claws up again. The Psiionic’s eyes grow scorchingly bright in the way that you’ve seen them do before he fires off eye blasts that can clear hundreds of feet of space into burning ash. Your ancestor arms himself and takes a step back towards you and Kankri, putting himself firmly between you and this man. You can hear the crackle of four younger trolls psionics around you as everyone gets on board with the potential fight about to go down.

“One more fucking step Darkleer and I will EVAPORATE you!” The Psiionic bellows, his chest making a threatening rattle. Your primal troll brain is processing very little beyond the signals of ‘exceedingly angry adult, run away!’.

The troll halts and drops to his knees. He bends forward and presses his head to the floor, his hands clasped before him on the ground. You’ve seen trolls fresh from Alternia react to your guardian like this before but none fully smushing their faces into the dirt in the process like this guy.

“Please forgive me!” He shouts into the ground and your ancestor jolts.

“For what? For nearly killing me at my execution or for the followers of mine that you murdered? How many was it?” Signless demands harshly.

“Twenty-nine. Until… until I met The Disciple. You were still so injured that I don’t think you saw me then.” The man answers, tilting his head up to look a little at your ancestor.
Signless looks over at The Disciple questioningly, and she sighs irritably.

“I had found a few other trolls who followed you when you were still recovering; the word was that your failed executioner here had been given an ultimatum by HIC. Kill all of your followers or be exiled. We ran from him and chased after Psii instead, and then we came here. I never saw him again.” The Disciple answers.

“I accepted my exile. I am... I am so sorry for what I did, I forgot who you really were, who I was. I realised it all too late. I did terrible things, and I can’t stand it. I’ll do anything to make this right... Kankri.” He says, looking up at your ancestor and not at your brother at all. You sometimes forget that the older kids in your group all have the names that their ancestors were hatched with before they gained their titles. They only got creative with the names of you and the others your age.

The Signless relaxes somewhat, dropping out of his defensive stance and stands looking down at the sad man pitifully.

“I can forgive you for what you did to me-” Signless says calmly, serenely. Goddamn, the man nearly killed him, and he can forgive him just like that?

“Well I’m not forgiving him!” The Psiionic shouts furiously.

“Me neither!” The Disciple agrees loudly.

“Boy, you were not kidding about their reaction to you.” Mindfang says lightly.

“Disciple, please. I listened to you; your actions made me remember who I was really, I-” He pleads.

“Oh, no, no. You did not hoof it across the universe to flirt pale with me again! I am not hearing this!” The Disciple snaps but a small smile pulls at his mouth.

“Hoof?” He says hopefully.

“That was an accidental pun, don’t you read into that.” The Disciple says sharply.

“As I was saying,” Signless says loudly, “I forgive you for what you did to me. But you’ll really need to prove that you’ve changed before I can forgive you for the other lives that you took, those were good and innocent people.”

“Seriously? You can’t just- this is a terrible idea.” The Psiionic hisses, but you know what Signless sounds like when his mind is made up.

“Ugh. Horuss, I swear if you come within six feet of him I will end you.” The Psiionic says sharply and the man on the ground nods.

“Well, as touching as that was,” Mindfang says, pulling a phone from her pocket and holding it up to her ear, “Vriska, get her outside already. We’re on Earth now; you can all come out.”

You can hear footsteps on metal once more; only these are lighter and faster than the others before them. A figure wearing black and jade skids around the corner and leaps down onto the ground in an instant. You hear the shared intake of breath from all of your guardians and Signless throws himself at the woman who lunges for him too. They collide in the middle, near where the male troll still kneels on the ground.

“I thought you were dead!” Signless cries, sounding almost delirious.
“I thought you were dead too!” She laughs, and you can see jade clouded tears running down her cheeks and onto Signless’s shoulder.

“What happened?” Signless asks, pulling back and looking up at her. She rubs his face with the back of her hands, wiping the tears of joy away.

“I was captured at your execution and sold into slavery. It was terrible, but I don’t want to talk about that now. The end point is that I tried to escape and was shot by someone else, by Dualscar. By Cronus.” She says.

“You seem to have shaken it off pretty well.” Psii remarks and the woman laughs.

“Well I died, so not so much.” She says with a smile and all of a sudden her skin lights up like tissue paper over a lamp.

“She’s a rainbow drinker!” You exclaim, probably a lot louder than you should have.

“Karkat, keep your voice down!” Kankri hisses at you.

“Eat me, Kankri! She’s a rainbow drinker! I thought those were all fictional; I didn’t know it was a real thing! I’m allowed to be surprised!” You snap, shoving him in the arm.

A shadow falls over the pair of you, and you both look up in wide-eyed alarm to see the tall adult rainbow drinker looming over you. She crouches down before you in a rustle of floaty jade fabric and looks from one of you to the other with wonder on her face.

“Oh, they look just like you when you were little!” She says, her voice high and delighted. Your ancestor’s face takes on this exasperated ‘oh god no’ expression that you’re more used to feeling on your own face than you are to seeing it on his.

“Hello children, I am The Dolorosa. What are your names?” She asks softly.

“This is Kankri, he’s six and a half.” Signless says, patting Kankri on the head.

“What? He’s fourteen.” You point out.

“Sweeps, Karkat. We’re being considerate. Not everyone is familiar with Earth years, and I know you learnt the conversion when you were small, don’t tell me that you’ve forgotten it.” Kankri says primly, and you glare at him.

“Every time you talk to me I want to rip out my own thinksponge and drop kick it across the road, you know that, right?” You snap back at him.

“And the small shouty one is Karkat. He’s four and a half.” Signless adds despairingly.

The older lady troll looks between you with a smile on her face that she’s trying to cover with one hand.

“You are both very charming; you remind me of him when he was little. I am The Dolorosa, but you can call me Rosa if you like.” She offers gently.

“I’m happy you’re okay, Signless was so upset when he thought you were dead.” You tell her, and her smile goes sad. She stands up once more and pulls your ancestor close once more.

“I am so sorry to have worried you. I spoke to The Handmaid in the brief period where I was dead and before I resurrected but-” she starts to say, but Mindfang interrupts her.
“But such things can wait until tonight, with less young ears around. Speaking of... are you six getting out of here or what?” Mindfang says, demanding that last part into her phone once more.

“Ah- love, I am afraid you’re not my only child anymore. I have descendants now, two just like all of you. My youngest is how I knew that she at least would make it here, she has one of those soul marks that the humans give us.” The Dolorosa says, touching Signless’s cheek gently.

“I’m sure I can contain my jealousy.” Signless teases.

“You mean a mark like this?” You ask, pulling back your sleeve and showing your soul mark to The Dolorosa. It’s been added to it again a little over a year ago, and you now have art on both sides of your right arm below the elbow.

“Just whip that out at the first chance you get, huh?” Sollux laughs, and you kick him in the leg mindlessly. Sollux might be one of your favourite people in the world and your best friend, but it doesn’t mean that you like the guy a lot of the time.

“Just like that.” Dolorosa agrees, diplomatically ignoring Sollux’s words.

“Hey, people.” Nepeta says and all of you look over to the ship’s entrance to see a group of kids both older and younger coming down to the ground. The first one out is a young girl who looks a lot like Mindfang and she’s followed by an older similar looking girl, though the older one is dressed more in a style that Kankri considers appropriate. Next out are two boys who are obviously the descendants of the kneeling man, Darkleer, was it? Both of them are intimidatingly ripped which is distressing as the youngest one looks only around yours and Sollux’s age. His teeth are all cracked or missing and one horn has snapped off halfway. They’re both dressed pretty strangely and you’re really not sure of what to make of them.

The last two trolls come off of the ship, both of them girls. At first you think that the eldest has a soul mark across her chest but as she gets closer you realise that it’s just a regular tattoo across her collarbones. She’s got a lip ring in her lip and you’re pretty sure that she doesn’t look old enough for either of those things but Alternia is a pretty weird place, or so you’ve decided from everything that you’ve learnt of it. The younger troll girl is around your age and unlike the lawless rebel appearance of her older sibling she looks polished and put together, like a young actress at a movie premier. Not that you watch movie premiers on tv to see what your favourite actors are doing or anything, that would be super nerdy. Definitely not a thing that you do.

“This is Porrim, she’s seven and Kanaya is four and a half as well. Girls, this is The Signless and his descendants Kankri and Karkat.” The Dolorosa introduces you politely.

“Hi.” Porrim says with an idle wave of her hand.

“It’s very nice to meet all of you.” Kanaya says with a gentle smile.

“Yeah, not to throw a wrench in this but are we all going to have to share all over again? We only just got back to our own rooms recently from having to build Aradia and Damara’s rooms.” Sollux points out.

“Not that I don’t want to live with you Dolorosa, but I think the house across the street is for sale. For some reason, the repeated extraterrestrial ships landing on our road is driving the housing prices down!” The Disciple laughs.

“Still a magnet for trouble then, you three?” Dolorosa asks your guardians, and The Psiionic’s pout is incredibly funny.
“Well, Earth pays for spaceships right? I know I’m never leaving this rock again so I’m sure I can afford that place across the way in human currency right away.” Mindfang says breezily.

You watch as all teasing and amusement falls off of The Dolorosa’s face and her posture stiffens.

“ Heck, I could even just make them give it to me for free!” Mindfang laughs.

The Dolorosa pulls a tube of something out of her sleeve and whirls around to face the pirate-looking troll, suddenly the tube is gone and a roaring chainsaw is in her hands.

“After tonight when you have said your piece you will leave, you will never speak to my family or me again and if I catch you using your vile powers on anyone else I will divest you of your remaining limbs and leave you to bleed to death!” She roars over the noise of her weapon and her skin flares bright.

“Whoa, whoa, maybe we can not dismember anyone on my lawn and in front of a large number of impressionable children.” Signless says quickly, leaping between them and holding his hands up in a gesture of peace.

The Dolorosa lowers her weapon but doesn’t put it away; she scowls at Mindfang who looks away.

“I said I was sorry, okay? Cut me a break.” Mindfang mutters.

“Oh, I’ll cut you alright!” Dolorosa hisses.

“Okay, no. Weapons away, right now. We’re all going to go inside, all adult trolls in the living room and we’re going to talk about all of this. Without any weapons or psionics at all. I’m sure the children can amuse themselves or perhaps even teach the newcomers a little about Earth. Is everyone in agreement?” Signless asks, looking around but also keeping his body between the two women.

The eight of you kids who already live here agree right away, you all know that when Signless wants things to be peaceful, they will get that way one way or another. It’s easier just to go along with it from the start. The Psiionic and The Disciple answer with a long-suffering yes, they too know how this goes.

“Of course, whatever you say.” Darkleer says hurriedly and both of his descendants follow his lead and nod in agreement.

“Well I didn’t come here to make trouble, I have information for you and I brought all of you here to safety. I don’t know why I’m suddenly the bad guy. Of course I have no problem with a civil conversation and these two don’t either, right?” Mindfang says, glancing at her two descendants.

“Of course not.” The older one agrees.

“Whatever.” The younger one, Vriska was it? Damnit, too many new people and your stupid brain is too full to take new names in.

“Mother?” Signless prompts.

The Dolorosa stows her weapon but does not take her eyes off of Mindfang.

“To be honest, I would be in favour of being anywhere that is not inside that ship.” Kanaya says gingerly, trying to mend the rift between The Dolorosa and, well, most everyone else.

Your group turns to walk inside the house, Signless and a few of a new adults pause when Mr
Gurter from down the street comes up yelling racist things at all of you. Crap about how you’re dragging down the neighborhood and living in sin, etc, etc. The only thing he has a point about is ‘you can’t park a spaceship here, that’s not what the road is for’.

“You don’t need to listen to this.” Kankri says calmly and ushers the new trolls inside.

The fourteen of you stand inside the kitchen and Kankri walks over to the fridge and clears his throat as he uncaps one of the dry erase pen that your family uses to write messages on or to adjust the chore rota that is glued to the machine permanently.

“I think the first order of business is to work out sleeping arrangements. Even if some of you will be moving elsewhere shortly it will likely not happen today, as such I think working out our own spaces is of paramount importance. There are fourteen of us here and the adults can make their own arrangements, I’m sure. So with that said we have eight rooms to work with. I’m going to make a chart and we can all decide what to do.” Kankri says, drawing out a chart and filling in the left most column with room names.

“Do we really need to organise this?” Nepeta asks with a sigh.

“The last time we had to double up there was far too much disruptive switching around, getting this organised beforehand is sensible.” Kankri replies.

“Oh my god, give me break. You are officially the most dull and stuck up person I have ever spoken to, and I’ve just spent forever on a ship with Equius.” The youngest Mindfang descendant sneers.

“Don’t worry, he gets worse.” You assure her loudly.

“Karkat, you are not being helpful.” Kankri says disapprovingly as he turns around and caps the pen.

“Good catch.” You snort.

“We don’t all need to double up; we’re fourteen people, not sixteen.” Meulin points out.

“Hey, I’m gonna make this real easy for all of us. Mituna never fucking sleeps and doesn’t believe in having anything in his room on any setting but loud, does anyone feel like rooming with him?” Sollux asks and looks around. No one in the room raises a hand.

“Sweet, solo room.” Mituna grins.

“I suppose that seems sensible.” Kankri sighs and writes Mituna’s name down in the slot dedicated to Mituna’s room. How redundant.

“Hey, no one wants to listen to you talk for a million fucking hours either, Kankri! Everyone was begging and trading favours to be able to not share a room with you last time!” Mituna hoots.

“That is not true! I am an excellent roommate, I keep everything tidy and I am a sparkling conversational partner.” Kankri protests.

Nobody says anything; even the new kids have picked up that being stuck with Kankri twenty-four seven is an awful idea.

“Fine. I shall stay in my own room, that means the rest of you need to pair up yourselves. I can handle this, all geniuses are unappreciated in their own time.” Kankri says in a wounded tone and turns to write his name in his slot.
“Is that a thing that’s actually true?” The elder Mindfang girl asks.

“No way, Bill Gates is appreciated and loaded.” Sollux says.

“Steve Jobs.” Mituna adds.

“What about Darwin? He was famous for travelling the world and discovering species!” Aradia says gleefully, she’s big into adventure these days.

“Kanye West.” Damara says with a slow nod.

“Now you’re just making fun of me. Pick your rooms and roommates!” Kankri says sharply.

“We’re only making fun of him now?” Sollux whispers and you snort.

“Me and KK worked out last time; we can share his room.” Sollux says loudly.

"I'm good with that." You agree because you know that Kankri will just assign people the wrong way if no one plays along.

“Yeah, just whoever gets my room, if any of you touch my tech I will break your limbs.” Sollux warns.

“We’re both very competent with technology so if we shared your room I’m sure we could take good care of your things, right?” The older Darkleer boy says to his younger counterpart who nods, although he’s sweating all over, possibly from anxiety.

“Well good, that’s two rooms and six people sorted out.” Kankri says with a nod.

“Hey, KK, I would rather gargle bleach than listen to Kankri running admin. Come help me haul my good shit into your room.” Sollux says quietly and you nod.

“I’d rather shit-haul than this any day.” You agree and follow him.

You’re packing up Sollux’s most valuable things in silence and contemplating all that’s just happened. Seeing Signless with his Mother was sweet if a little unnerving. Adult trolls were all hatched on Alternia and they’ve all grown up defensive and territorial for it. Even though most adults have adjusted to Earth it’s clear that those instincts are still in all of them. Obviously quadrantmates are an exception to this rule and it’s never any surprise to see your guardians cuddled up together on the sofa. Nor is it weird for the three of them to be physically affectionate with any of you, they raise you as a group and you’re all family. Even Aradia and Damara were quickly adopted by Signless. When your guardians are around other adults trolls though it’s a completely different story. Their body language is calculated for the impression that they want to give off, whether it’s Dis and Psii looking intimidating or your ancestor’s careful welcoming gestures. To see him so carefree and affectionate to another adult troll is weird.

“So the humans at school talk about our ancestors as our dads.” Sollux says thoughtfully.

“Yeah.” You say.

“But Signless called The Dolorosa his mother. Does that make her your… grandmother? And Signless is my guardian even if he’s not my ancestor, is she my grandmother too or is that just for you and Kankri?” Sollux asks with a frown.

“We’re mixing human and troll terms, those words weren’t meant for this kind of thing. Besides, it’s
not like troll relationships were ever meant to be like this anyway. It’s only because of Signless and the Earth having no lusii that this is normal now. Who knows what it’s meant to be called?” You say with a shake of your head.

“Well, whatever. Let’s get this over to yours.” Sollux sighs and stands up with several boxes floating around him effortlessly.

You let him lead the way as you hold your two stacked boxes close to your chest and walk cumbersomely with them. Sometimes you’re jealous of Sollux’s powers but you also get to see the migraines that he gets and the vision twofold that plagues him. You know that with The Psiionic and Mituna their powers are at a scale that cause mood problems, the kind that they both have to get medication for. Your guardians are all watching Sollux closely to see if the same is going to happen to him. Given all that you’re not sure that you’d make that deal to get his powers. Still, it feels nice that he so quickly chose to stay with you again. The pair of you drive each other crazy but you’re always still friends in the end, it’s not like you have any friends that you don’t live with. Though if you’re just going to keep adding kids to your home you may well end up with a wide social circle after all, no matter how socially inept you are at school.

“Hey, KK, we’ve got company.” Sollux says under his breath as you walk down the hallway to your room. One of the younger trolls is leaning on the door. She would be your… aunt? Is that the human word for it? Fuck.

“Oh, good, I did come to the right room.” She says as she sees you coming.

“We’re in here.” Sollux says bluntly.

“I know, I’m not moving in here. Porrim and I are staying in Aradia’s room, that’s what the thermal hull says.” She says with a nervous smile.

“Oh, okay.” You say, and the three of you stand there in silence for a second.

“Sorry, I just wanted to ask you a question. The others said that you have a soul mark, is that correct?” She asks.

“Oh great.” Sollux groans and opens your door.

“Shut up Sollux! Yes, I do. Uh… sorry, what was your name again?” You ask awkwardly and walk into your room with her following you at a respectful distance.

“Kanaya.” She tells you politely.

“Sorry, Kanaya. Did you want to see it or something?” You ask as you set Sollux’s boxes down. He’s already on the floor as he wires up his husktop and sets it to charge.

“Is that a thing that you’re comfortable with doing?” Kanaya asks in surprise, her eyes wide. Sollux snorts and you throw a pair of his mismatched socks at his head, they freeze in the air before they hit him. Damn psionics.

“Sure I am. Here.” You say and roll your sleeve up for her.

“On Alternia we don’t show these. Having them is proof that you will eventually go to Earth and therefore you’re a traitor. If someone sees it you could be killed.” Kanaya says quietly.

“People show theirs off here most of the time.” Sollux tells her.
You sit down on your bed and pat the edge of it for her to do the same. You rest your arm face up on the knee of your crossed legs and waiting for her to join you. She does so, carefully straightening out her long red skirt as she settles in place. She curiously looks over your mark and you decide to explain.

“This part came in first, the sword and the staircase.” you explain, tapping it with your claw.

“That staircase is impossible; it can’t loop like that.” She says with a frown.

“It’s an optical illusion from a famous Earth artist.” You tell her.

“Then I got this one; it’s all about music and creativity.” You say, pointing to the records and the machines around them.

“I see.” Kanaya nods.

“The most recent one I got was about a year and a half ago.” you say, turning your arm over.

“What is it?” Kanya asks curiously.

“It’s a shield of some kind but I’m not sure about these triangle symbols in the middle or why it’s got a red dot in one of them and an orange one in the other.” You admit. This one has puzzled you since it came in. The feeling that flares up from it every now and then is of being protected and cared about. It’s nice and you’re glad that your soulmate has someone looking out for him now, but it still hasn’t stopped the fear and pain that you get from the sword mark more frequently. The symbols inside the shield have driven you crazy trying to work them out but for the life of you there’s no meaning you can find.

“The things that are represented on your body are a mix of the things in your soulmate’s life, such as important people, places or things. They can also be interests though, like the records here. Sometimes it’s a metaphor or a pun even but I think a lot of it relies on human symbolism for things.” You explain. This may be a somewhat obsessive interest for you.

“So… what can you tell me about mine?” She asks and carefully pulls her sleeve up.

“Oh, yours is on your right arm too.” You say in surprise.

“Is that not normal?” Kanaya asks, her eyebrows raising at you.

“No, it’s unusual. The marks go on your body on the opposite hand that your soulmate writes with, so mine being on my right tells me that my soulmate is left handed. That’s rare for humans, something like ten percent of them are like that.” You say.

“My soulmate is right handed but I can write with either so who knows where their mark is.” Sollux chips in from his space on the floor.

“I guess it just picks one, now shut up I need to think and look at Kanaya’s mark.” You sigh and lean in to look.

Her mark is extensive and highly detailed. In the centre of her forearm is an animal skull, behind it are a pair of crossed needles with purple and black striping on them and black lightning arcing off of the ends of them. Close to her wrist is an insanely detailed purple rose, though the stem has odd blank patches in it and it seems to be listing to one side.

“Whoa, that’s some mark.” Sollux comments, having stood up and peered over her shoulder. He
pretends like he’s not as into this soul mark stuff as you but you know that he’s still interested in it. He’s as invested in finding his soulmate as you are.

“Hmm, well, okay. That’s some kind of animal skull, not human or troll. Sollux, do you think you can google it to find out what it is?” You asks him excitedly.

“Are you seriously doubting my google-fu?” Sollux snorts and cracks his knuckles as he sits down at his husktop and begins to type frantically.

“These must be weapons.” Kanaya says as she taps on the needle things.

“Hm, possible but unlikely. Most humans don’t use weapons, not like trolls. There are even tonnes of places on this planet that won’t let you in unless you empty out your strife specibus. So they could be weapons but that’s not very likely.” You tell Kanaya who looks frankly astonished. You dealt with this kind of confusion about Earth already with Aradia and Damara so you have some idea of your new friend’s expectations.

“You have a sword.” She points out.

“He’s weird.” Sollux says from his husktop and you flip him your middle finger.

“So they could be regular knitting needles which is a helpful interest, or maybe they could be wands? Earth has stories about magic and stuff so it could be that, there might even be some real religions that use them.” You tell her.

“I feel like I know less than when I came in here.” Kanaya sighs unhappily.

“We’ll work it out. Okay, this rose. It’s really detailed and purple is an unusual colour for one, but they usually mean things like love and devotion. It also doesn’t have any thorns which must mean something.” You hum thoughtfully. You don’t really know anything about flower meanings.

“Google says that thornless roses and lavender roses mean love at first sight so that’s good I guess.” Sollux calls across. He picks up his husktop and moves over to the pair of you, tabbing out of his window on flowers and onto a page filled with skulls.

“Show me your arm.” Sollux asks and Kanaya obliges him.

Sollux glances back and forth a few times before pulling up an image and holding it up to the pair of you.

“Aradia’s more into dead things than me, she’s on an archeology kick right now so you might want to ask her but I think that’s a cat skull.” Sollux says proudly.

“Oh, wow! Cats have lots of meaning to humans!” You say excitedly.

“Yeah, check mine out. Humans think cats are smart, mysterious and kind of magical, so it says a lot about your soulmate if you’ve got one on you.” Sollux brags, holding up his own arm that has a black cat walking across it.

“Or it means they just really like cats.” You point out.

“Whatver.” Sollux snorts and shuts his husktop.

Kanaya leans back a little and runs her manicured claws gently over her soul mark. Her expression is almost sad but you really want to believe that you’re not imagining the hint of hope you think that
you see there too.

“Does the order that they appear have any significance? The rose came first.” Kanaya asks.

You consider your sword and stairs, those are the things that flare up most often, filling you with fear that you know comes from him. It doesn’t define him for you but you know it’s a huge part of his life and no doubt shapes who he is.

“I don’t know. It could just be the order that they become interested in something or it could be a big unchangable part of themselves or a huge life event at that age. It’s hard to say. That rose does look important though with the detail and- agh!” You’re cut off by a jolt of pain from the back of your arm. At the same moment Kanaya gasps in pain and slaps her hand over her wrist.

You tense your fist and look down at the back of your arm underneath the strange shield and growing towards your wrist you see two stems inking themselves down your arm from a join, one stem has thorns along it but the other does not. The two stems curl around each other and then finally two roses outline themselves on your skin at the end.

As they fill with colour you too are filled with emotion. It’s all snared up and confusing. You feel envy and anger, unfairness runs through the whole thing but there’s more there too. You also feel like something lost has been found and there’s a hint of hope underneath it. The twin roses on your skin bloom in bright red and lavender.

“Holy shit.” Sollux whispers and you look to Kanaya’s bare wrist. Where moments ago she had one purple rose she now has another, the gaps in its stem filled in by a thorned stem which ends in a bright red rose. Like your pair of roses hers too now joins to the same stem at the end and then appears to plunge under her skin.

Your marks aren’t perfectly identical but they are very obviously the same.

“I’m gonna guess that your soulmates know each other.” Sollux says after a few seconds of silence.
You’re staring at your ceiling in the dark. Your bedroom is on the top floor, and the roof above it is slightly slanted. Outside it’s raining softly, and you can hear the pitter-patter of rain on your roof. In front of your house the spaceship is gone, your ancestors managed to get Mindfang to put it somewhere else and they either sold it to the government or they will do but either way, it’s not outside the front of your home anymore. The other residents of your road aren’t pleased, and your ancestor had to do a lot of social damage control.

You have no idea how long everyone else is going to be staying in your house or how much bigger they can make it. You’re pretty sure that the kids at least will be here for a while. You suspect that The Dolorosa (your grandmother?) will stay nearby. No one travels across the universe to see their family again and then leaves right away.

You roll onto your front on your bed and look at your arm in the barely there light from outside. You stare at the twin roses on your skin and wonder about your soulmate. What is he doing right now? What’s going on in his life? He’s been oddly quiet today outside of the new mark forming. He’s not been making music, nothing has attacked him, he’s not been hurt, and he’s not felt protected either.

“There must be some better way to find soulmates.” You say quietly, and the wall of your room dimly lights up in red and blue as Sollux opens his eyes.

“Like what?” He yawns.

“I don’t know, something technology based. Couldn’t I just put on the internet what my soul mark is and he could go and look for me?” You sigh.

“Eh, the problem with that is people lie, and then you get teenagers and kids getting kidnapped by fuckin’ pedos or something.” Sollux says and shuts his eyes once more.

“Oh don’t give me that, like someone as smart with computers as you couldn’t find your way around that problem. You could… I don’t know; you could make people say when they got their first mark and then only show them results within a short time of that!” You say, sitting up.

Sollux sighs and opens his eyes again.

“That doesn’t stop creeps lying about shit, but okay. Say I made this thing and you and everyone else started uploading your marks and information about them, how do you know what your soulmate is going to have on their arm, huh?” Sollux asks wearily. Clearly, he’s deciding to humour you in the hopes that you’ll shut up faster. Obviously, he doesn’t know you at all.
“I know what I’m not! I know that when I see yours that it’s not me, even if we weren’t both trolls and also kind of maybe related.” You trail off with a grimace.

“Sure, you can discount a vast number of them because it’s not you. I doubt you’re going to bump into a human with a dog on a surfboard on their arm and think that they’re the one. But do you really think you’re so unique that you’d recognise yourself instantly on someone else’s skin?” Sollux asks.

“Of course I would, that’s how this whole thing works. You meet your soulmate; you get a feeling they’re the one, their mark looks like you, and then you touch your marks together and get the right feeling and that confirmation mark on your finger. That’s exactly how it’s done, mush for brains.” You point out.

“Cool story. So without meeting him in person and getting to do that stuff just what do you think your soulmate is carrying around on his arm, oh special and unique Karkat?” Sollux asks you with a sneer.

“Well, he…” You trail off.

It’s your interests, your life, your personality. All of those represented in pictures permanently on his skin. So who are you and what mark do you make on him? What’s even interesting about you anyway?

“There’s books and movies, romance ones.” You mumble.

“Wow, two of the most popular forms of entertainment on this rock and maybe hearts too. Real unique.” Sollux drawls.

“Fuck you! What about- about-” You scramble as you try to think of more unique things about you and how they could be represented.

Your huge family? How would you even draw that? Your blood colour? You sure as shit don’t want him walking around with that on and how creatively can you show blood anyway?

“Yeah, you see my point. Unless you know yourself super well or have really unusual interests, then you can’t say for sure. We already know we’ll all meet our soulmates, that’s the whole deal with them. It’ll happen Karkat. Just let him chill without you for a while.” Sollux says and flops back down on his small inflatable bed, considering the conversation over.

You stay sat up in bed for a while with your arm held against your chest. You know that you’re going to meet him, but it’s just not soon enough. He needs you now, his life sucks, and sure you know that you can’t fight his battles for him, but you can be there for him. You can listen to him and give him somewhere safe to be himself. You have to feel like you can do something because the terrifying thought is that you might meet him and you might not be able to do anything. He might not need you at all. He might not want you. You’d understand if he felt that way. After all, where were you when he was hurt? And plenty of humans don’t like trolls at all, just being around them at school has taught you that. Even among other trolls, you’re a pariah for your blood colour.

Why would your soulmate want you at all?

“I’m getting a drink.” you mumble to Sollux who just sleepily grunts back at you and smushes his face into his sopor pillow a little more.

You go down the stairs silently, trying not to wake up any of your siblings or guests. All you want is a drink from the kitchen or maybe for one of your guardians to make you feel better. The kitchen light is on, and the door is ajar, you can hear voices coming from inside and you linger uncertainly at
the doorway, should you just leave? You can tell that some of the people speaking are the new adults.

"-look I agree that the two descendants each thing is a bit weird and I’m kind of puzzled that I didn’t spot it before.” The Psiionic says from inside.

“They’re all roughly the same ages too.” The male troll, Darkleer, says.

“Yeah, okay but that doesn’t mean that Mindfang here is right. It could just be an artefact of the game, like a quirk or a sign of the code ending.” The Psiionic replies.

“I thought the whole point of the scratch was like, a reboot. Not unpauseing in a new level.” The Disciple says, and you can hear that she pronounced pause as paws.

What the hell are they all talking about anyway? Scratch? Pausing? Levels? Is this a revolution thing?

“I’m telling you, it’s starting again. I saw it.” Mindfang snarls.

“You had one of Doc Scratch’s eyes? Don’t tell me you brought it here, he could see us with that!” The Dolorosa gasps.

“Oh yeah, I for sure brought it here, you know because I’m fucking retarded!” Mindfang snarls angrily.

“Language.” Signless scolds. Words like that aren’t allowed in your house; he has more of a problem with that than he does with cursing.

“I buried it back on Alternia before I even met my descendants. But I saw that the game was going to start all over again, but we’re not the players this time. Our descendants are.” Mindfang says stiffly.

“As much as I hate to agree with you, I think that you’re right. There are too many coincidences here. Our older descendants are us, but the younger ones still have all of our genes but just... scrambled. Scratched, if you will. Our powers still work here, albeit very muted. As far as I know myself and The Handmaid were the only ones to have perfect recollection from the game. Obviously a sign that I still saw through blood and time was, well, still time.” Signless says, his voice serious.

You have no idea what any of them are talking about.

“So it’s definitely happening again, then?” The Disciple says, her voice sounding weak and afraid.

“Yes, it’s the reason that I came along and brought my descendants here. They all need to be in the same place to play the game after all, or they at least need to know each other.” Darkleer says.

“The six of us are here, although Megido is no longer with us. I already know that Pyrope is here as well as Nitram, both with their ancestors.” Signless says.

“So we’re missing Ampora and Peixes.” The Psiionic says grimly.

“I could maybe get Ampora to follow me here if I bait him right but he probably won’t be in the best mood. Besides, I’m not sure if he has his descendants with him or not.” Mindfang says uncertainly.

“Last time we met he did murder me, so I’m not especially keen to see him again, but I can be cordial if I have to. I’m in the same room as Mindfang without killing her after all.” Dolorosa adds.

“The point remains that we don’t want The Condesce coming to Earth, that would not end well for
any living thing on this planet. More to the point how likely is it that Peixes would even be able to spend time around her descendants without killing them?” Signless asks.

You lean forward slightly to try to see through the small crack in the door, only to have the floorboard under your foot creak. Fuck! Okay, you have to go with it, just open the door like you own the place and pretend that you didn’t know they were in here. You pull the door open to find all the adult trolls staring at you, you stare back and do your best to look as confused as you feel. Admittedly you’re confused about what they were saying, not the fact that they were in there.

“Uh… I wanted a drink?” You say hesitantly, and The Psiionic turns the tap on and fills a glass for you without question and then floats it back to you. You take it from the air and look around at them again.

“What’re you all doing in here?” You ask warily.

“Just talking Karkat, hopefully it’s nothing to worry about. Go to bed, yeah?” Signless says with a warm smile on his face and you hesitate because you know that he doesn’t believe what he’s saying to you. He’s lying.

“Okay, good night.” You say awkwardly and shuffle out. The voices don’t resume until you’re halfway up the first staircase and the door is now shut firmly behind you.

What kind of game are they talking about? Is this an Alternian thing? What’s so special about the group of people that they mentioned? You climb the stairs quickly and go into your room. You pull a notepad off of your desk and jot the names down. You write down about a ‘game’ a ‘scratch’ about the two descendants and the idea of it all happening again.

You are going to find out what this is, even if it kills you.
Dave: Backflip out of your family tree

Chapter Notes

ha ha, oh boy this giant chapter is the reason there's been a delay and this is only HALF of this age's Dave stuff that I have to get through. But for now I hope you enjoy this. Also Bro is a super homophobic waste of DNA so just be aware of that. Thanks so much for sticking with me.

EDIT: fixed some wording because I can't do numbers well and had to go back and change minor things.

You are sat on your bed, clothes sticking to your skin in the hot afternoon sun. It’s Texas in the middle of summer, and you have no aircon in here so it’s hot as shit. You’re doing some of your summer homework and though you’re shifting from elementary to middle school, in reality, the building is all the same and the teachers are much the same too. Because of that you still get summer homework. Your English teacher has infuriatingly seen ‘potential’ in you and your reading ability, and so you got harder books to read.

You sigh and turn the page and keep reading.

TT: If the psychopathic brother Peter is cutting a little close to home you can always take a break, Dave.

The message scrolls across your glasses on the inside, and you shimmy your phone out of your jeans to reply. Dirk is able to get his glasses to read his mind enough to type, but he says that he can’t do it for yours. You suspect that he maybe just doesn’t want you chatting to Hal in school without being caught, it’s much harder to use your phone on the sly as opposed to magic glasses. You can just talk to Hal like a normal person, but you know that Bro is in the house somewhere, so you’re not keen on replying to Hal aloud. Dirk is out so as far as Bro knows the only person you could be having a conversation with is him or yourself. Typing is better.

TG: im fine hal
TT: Did you know that this book was written before humans had contact with trolls?
TT: Even so plenty of trolls read the aliens in Enders Game to be a stand in for them.
TG: huh
TG: theyre insects too
TT: Pretty cool coincidence, right?
TT: Of course trolls aren't true insects, but there is a good deal of overlap.

TT: Current theories are that there are bugs in their missing link just like the proto ape-man in
humans.
TG: making your missing link what?
TG: an iphone?
TT: Strangely Steve Jobs took out that restraining order when I started calling him ‘daddy’ on social media

You bury your face in the bed and smother your laugh. It’s a running game for Hal to try to make you audibly laugh. You could argue that it’s training for your poker face but you mostly just enjoy shooting the shit with your robo bro.

TG: no shit

There’s a pause which isn’t usual, Hal doesn’t need to type, he just thinks things at you and it appears instantly. A gap in the conversation like this means that he’s focused on something else.

TG: whats wrong?
TT: I don’t know.
TT: Our internet just got way laggy, and Dirk’s firewall is getting probed.
TG: someone’s hacking us?
TT: No, I think our internet is being deliberately throttled from in here. Like something here is soaking up all the bandwidth.
TT: It’s making it harder to talk to you without going through your phone network itself. It’s really odd.
TG: is bro streaming something?
TT: No, and it’s getting worse.

You frown. It sounds so horror movie, doesn’t it? ‘It’s coming from inside the house!’

Bro is big on horror movies, the more violent the better and he’s even bigger on making you and Dirk watch them with him. It’s a test not to react at all. Hal usually talks to you through them, blotting out the screen with his orange text over your lenses. It still doesn’t help enough, and you could really live without all of the SAW merch in your home.

TG: why can’t you just see what Bro is doing on his computer like you can on Dirk’s?
TT: Because I have full access to everything of Dirk’s. I have all the keys.
TT: Bro’s shit is locked up tight, and sure I could get in but he would know it. He might not be the genius that Dirk and I are, but he knows enough to stop me stealththing in.
TG: and you don’t exist
TT: You got it.
TT: Oh crap, I think I know what’s happening here.
You frown, in all the time that Hal has been alive he’s never gone offline for you. Between him and Dirk sharing a pesterchum account it’s been active all of the time. You tap on the icon for the Hephaestus browser app on your phone, and it whirs uselessly before telling you that there’s a problem with your internet connection. It’s only when your phone switches over to 3g that anything loads.

The window immediately closes and orange text flashes up on your screen.

[Hal remote access via ‘Dave iphone’]

timaeusTestified [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

TT: Put your phone down.
TT: Lie down on the bed.
TT: Read your book.
TT: Stay calm, look innocent.
TT: Do not reply to me, don’t text or mumble.
TT: Incoming Bro, remember: you are meant to be alone.

You flatten yourself on the bed, jamming your phone into your back pocket and crack your book open again. You rest your chin on one palm and strive to look bored and relaxed.

Your bedroom door flies open and Bro is looming there, his head tilted enough to show that he’s looking to you.

“Sup?” You venture, lowering your book a little.

“The fuck are you doing?” Bro asks sharply.

“Homework. Book report.” You answer as you keep calm, or pretend to at least.

TT: You’re doing great, Dirk is on his way.
Bro stares at you for a few more seconds and turns to face Dirk’s computer and then glances back at you.

“Do you use this, little man?” He asks flatly.

“For like… samples and stuff. Sometimes Dirk lets me use paint on it when he’s doing something else but not really. I didn’t break anything.” You say feeling defensive. You slowly sit up, wary that sharp movement might trigger Bro’s reflex to move something sharp at you.

Bro turns his back on you and sits down in Dirk’s computer chair and starts typing away with a speed that would almost rival Dirk’s. What’s he doing?

TT: Fuck, the network is closed and I can’t get in. I need to see what he’s doing!
TT: He’s deliberately shut me out, he must think that Dirk is remotely monitoring his shit.
TT: Goddamnit what is he looking for?

You tense and then as casually as you can get up off of the bed and walk to your shelf that has your small but growing collection of dead things. You pocket your book and pick up one of the jars instead.

“Did Dirk fucking chip this?” You mutter to yourself and tilt it this way and that in the light until you catch the reflection of the screen on the glass. You can’t read what’s on it but Hal absolutely can.

TT: Dave you are a goddamn genius. Stay still.

You hold the jar still, faking inspecting it.

TT: Put the jar back, get out of the room. Now.
TT: Say “I’m going to go play Tony Hawk, that ok?”

Hal sometimes will write dialogue for you if he senses that a strife with Bro is incoming and he thinks that he can talk you out of it. He analyses the way that Bro ticks and what words get what reaction. If he’s railroading you into a script then this is really bad.
You set the jar back on the shelf.

“I’m going to go play Tony Hawk, that ok?” You say carefully, fake casual.

Bro says nothing but his upper lip is curling back into a snarl of anger. It is very rare for Bro to emote at all and rage is not a look that makes you feel safe at all. You bolt, and Hal flashes numbers up at the edge of your vision, showing the direction and estimated distance of Bro. The front door bangs open, making you nearly piss yourself in fear and Dirk is standing there, his breath is coming fast and you know he ran up the stairs. In a flash Bro is at the end of the short hall that leads to your room and walking menacingly around the corner to the front door where Dirk is.

“Bro.” Dirk says calmly.

Bro reaches out a hand and slams the door shut behind Dirk and rests against it, trapping Dirk in the corner. He’s a grown ass man, and Dirk might be a tall fifteen but he’s not Bro’s size or weight at all. You wish Hal was telling you what was going on. Your hand itches for your sword.

Bro’s arm blurs with speed, and you hear a yelp of pain as he suddenly has a hand in Dirk’s hair and is yanking him back from the door. Dirk pulls his sword out, but Bro slams his head into the wall so suddenly and so hard that he drops it.

Your own sword drops into your hand from your strife specibus and you creep around the sofa, watching for how this is going to play out. You collect Dirk’s sword in your other hand in case you need to throw it to him later.

TT: Dave, you need to stay out of this.
TT: I know that you want to help Dirk, but my primary focus is to protect you. Stay out of it.

Bro hauls Dirk backwards towards your room, and Dirk swears and just manages to get his feet working enough to not get dragged or have his hair ripped out. Why are they going to your room and not to the roof? Why was Bro on Dirk’s computer before? You chase after the pair of them.

TT: Dave, no!

“You think you could fucking hide it from me?” Bro snaps as he throws Dirk on the bedroom floor.
“What are you talking about?” Dirk says, scrambling to his feet. Bro kicks him in the ribs, and he slides across the floor.

“I let you stay under my roof, and this is how you repay me? You disgust me.” Bro hisses.

“The feeling’s mutual, asshole.” Dirk retorts as he pushes himself back up.

You stand there uselessly with Dirk’s sword and your own, you don’t know what to say or do to stop this. If you jump Bro you’ll get the shit kicked out of you and Dirk is at the moment unarmed, he can’t come to your rescue.

TT: Do NOT interfere, Dave. I am not fucking around here.

You gasp as Bro grabs Dirk again, this time by the shirt and throws him into his computer chair. He snaps his hand tight around the back of Dirk’s neck and forces him to stare at the screen.

“Explain this.” Bro growls, pointing at the screen.

Dirk says nothing but you can see a muscle in his jaw twang with tension.

“What’s going on?” You ask and ignore Hal flashing a warning for you to shut up.

Bro’s face snaps in your direction, and he sneers.

“Has he been showing this shit to you, huh? Has he been trying to convert you too?” Bro asks, turning on you fully.

“Leave Dave out of this!” Dirk shouts, getting up from his chair. Bro sweeps Dirk’s legs out from under him and slams his face into the desk with a spray of blood. Dirk hits the floor and does. Not. Move.
“Dirk?” You plead, but he still doesn’t move.

TT: I can sense his heart rate through the arms of his shades.
TT: He’s not dead Dave.

You might be, though. Bro is advancing on you and grabs you by the front of the shirt and lifts you up off of the floor. You look down his bare arm at him. It’s blacked out from wrist to shoulder with the occasional void in it, the sign of a dead soulmate bond.

“Answer me! Have you been looking at this too?!” Bro demands, pinning you against the wall as your shitty sneakers fail to get you any grip.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” You insist, stowing your sword, dropping Dirk’s and instead using both hands to hold onto Bro’s wrist, so he doesn’t strangle you with your own shirt.

“Gay porn!” Bro yells.

What the fuck? That was the strangest conversational jump you have ever heard Bro make. What does that have to do with anything here?

“What?” You ask in total confusion.

“Don’t be cute with me kid. People like him deserve to die, and if you’re like him I won’t hesitate to bury you in the fucking desert, dead or alive.” Bro snarls. Bro is always terrifying, but you’ve never ever seen him like this, you’re shaking all over.

“Drop ‘m.” Dirk slurs from behind Bro. He’s grabbed his sword from the floor, and it’s weaving unsteadily on his feet. Blood is rushing from a wound on his scalp and from his mouth too. Bro does drop you, only to resume screaming at Dirk about being a homo and a fag and who knows what else.

TT: Fuck, I don’t know what to do!

That is not what you wanted to hear from Hal.
He’s going to kill him! God, fuck, maybe I can pull the fire alarm?

Just stay away from him Dave, stay out of reach!

Bro is circling Dirk, still screaming at him. You glance across at the computer and see that there is a gay porn site on the screen. Whatever, Dirk is more important right now. You need something to get Bro away from him, something you can distract him with. You could break his shit, but that would just make him angrier you need the nuclear option.

You gasp as the idea occurs to you and turn tail and run. You sprint into the kitchen and grab the barbeque lighter for your terrible cooker and then look around the room.

Dave, what are you doing?

There! Up on top of a stack of crates is ‘lil Cal. Normally you won’t go near that puppet but if it saves Dirk’s life you’d wear him as a fucking hat for the rest of your life. You jump and grab him and rush back into the hallway. You hold him by the neck to your chest and click the lighter on.

Dave this is going to get BOTH of you killed if you play this wrong!

Stop it right now!

You ignore him. Hal cares more about saving you than he does Dirk, but you care more about Dirk than yourself, so of course you’re not going to agree.

“BRO! Let Dirk go!” You shout, sounding far braver than you feel.

“You little shit, don’t.” Bro appears in the doorway and then freezes.

Huh, so that’s what fear looks like on his face.

“Let Dirk go.” You repeat.

Bro disappears and then reappears, throwing Dirk into the hallway. Your brother struggles to get to
his feet, and so you stay still with ‘lil Cal in your arms up against your chest. You feel sick holding him. It’s like he’s full of snakes and is this close to swallowing you whole. You feel like your brain is being gnawed on from the inside out. Your throat is dry, and your heart is hammering.

Dirk pulls himself to his feet and finally look at you, shock written clear across his face. He glances back at Bro who is frozen in place with fear still clear on his face.

“Shut the door and don’t come out ‘til we’re gone.” Dirk orders and the door slams shut instantly.

You back up towards the front door as Dirk stumbles that way, it takes him two attempts at the latch before he manages to open the door.

TT: Okay, I have a working escape plan from here.
TT: You follow my directions and do as I say, okay Dave?
TT: No more improvising.

“Yeah, ok.” You whisper as you back to the front door. Dirk is already jamming the button for the elevator. The stairs are faster if you flashstep down but Dirk is clearly in no condition for that.

TT: Good. Dirk probably only has a few minutes left of coherence before all that head trauma makes him pass out.
TT: Make it count.
TT: Throw the puppet.

You throw the puppet and the lighter into the house and slam the front door. You leap into the elevator with Dirk and hold your breath as the doors close. Dirk is slumped against the back wall, his face twisted in pain and covered in blood. You slide your body against his and try to support his weight a little.

TT: He’s not answering me, can you ask him if he can read my messages?

“Hey Dirk, can you read what Hal is saying?” You whisper. Dirk shakes his head and winces.

TT: And we’re going to the hospital.
TT: I’m calling an ambulance, follow my directions to meet it.
TT: I’m giving you a fake last name, and I’m just skimming someone else’s insurance details for it.
TT: Leave the building and follow my HUD.

The elevator dings as it hits the bottom floor and you almost sag with relief to see that Bro isn’t there waiting to kill you. You pull Dirk out of it with you, he’s stumbling but he can walk more or less. Right before you on your shades is a hovering green arrow which you follow as fast as you can. It becomes a right arrow and Hal leads you down alleyway after alleyway, eventually coming to rest in the opening of one a few blocks away.

TT: This is where the ambulance is going to arrive.
TT: Your names are Dirk and Dave Lalonde.
TT: Two guys jumped your brother in an alleyway. You were going to see a movie.
TT: Repeat that for me, Dave.

You help Dirk slide down the wall and onto the floor and you crouch by him, trying to see the damage.

“My name is Dave Lalonde, this is Dirk Lalonde. Two guys jumped him in an alleyway, we were going to see a movie. What if they ask about our parents?” You whisper.

TT: Tell them to call your mother, I’m throwing together a voice sim for the job.

“Thank you, Hal.” You say shakily. You have no idea how much worse this would be if you didn’t have him looking out for the two of you.

TT: I’ll always be here for you, Dave.
TT: It’s going to be okay. Breathe, your heart rate is sky high.

You try to force yourself to breathe normally. You’re no good to Dirk and Hal if you’re freaking out like a little kid. Striders don’t freak out or cry.

“Dirk?” You say after a little while of Dirk being way too quiet. You touch his bloodied cheek, and he doesn’t react, he’s out cold.

Sirens scream closer to you, and you scramble out of the alleyway when an ambulance pulls up. A paramedic leaps out and looks around, his eyes eventually landing on you.
“Help, it’s my brother!” You plead and rush back to Dirk’s side.

“What happened? What’s his name?”

“We were going to a movie and two guys jumped him, his name is Dirk Lalonde.” You blurt out your lie to the medical professional. He takes Dirk’s glasses off, and you take hold of them for safe keeping.

TT: You’re doing great.

“Dirk, can you hear me?” The paramedic asks, feeling gloved hands around the back of his head. Dirk whines slightly and the paramedic looks relieved.

“He hit his head, anything else?” The paramedic asks as his partner pulls a bed out of the back of the ambulance and wheels it over to you. People are stopping on the street and staring now.

“I…” You freeze.

TT: He was kicked in the side.

“He was kicked in the side, here.” You say, pointing to the areas that Bro laid into him.

The paramedic presses on the area experimentally, Dirk’s eyes fly open and he howls in pain. He’s still mostly awake then.

“At least two broken.” The paramedic says grimly. The lady paramedic lowers the bed to the ground and looks at you with a frown.

“Let’s get him on here, we need to make sure they’ve not punctured anything. Let’s hope that blood is just from his mouth and not his lungs.” The woman says.
“Has he coughed up any blood?” The male paramedic asks as they both move Dirk onto the bed on wheels.

“No.” You answer without Hal even needing to prompt you.

“How old are you both? What’s your name, son?” The woman asks gently as they pull Dirk into the back of the ambulance, you leap up in there with them.

“He’s fifteen, I’m ten. I’m Dave.” You babble. The male paramedic is listening to his chest as the woman comes past you to come back out of the ambulance again.

“Have you called your parents?” The woman asks.

TT: Say yes.

“Yes.” You reply obediently.

“Okay, good. Tell them to meet us at Methodist Emergency.” The woman says and then shuts the doors, shutting you, Dirk and the male paramedic in.

You pull out your phone to text your “parents”, but instead you open up the chat to Hal that's playing on your shades.

TG: whats gonna happen now?
TG: is he gonna be ok?
TT: Based on what I saw and how the paramedics are reacting I think he’ll be just fine when he wakes up.
TT: He’ll feel really bad, but he’ll be fine.

You stare down at your hands, Dirk’s drying blood is smeared on them. You feel a little like you’re going to be sick.

TG: what if he dies?
TT: He’s not going to die, I promise.
TG: you dont know that
TT: I do.

If Dirk dies is Bro going to kill you too? He said about burying you in the desert and without Dirk to protect you there’s no stopping him.

TT: Dave, breathe.

You try to force yourself to calm down, but it’s hard. You remind yourself that Dirk’s hurt, but Hal is still here with you.

TG: what happens when we get to the hospital.
TT: They’ll admit him.
TT: They’ll check the same kind of stuff out that’s being checked now.
TT: He’ll get an x-ray and they’ll MRI his head.
TT: Do you know what an MRI is, Dave?
TG: it looks in your brain
TT: More or less, yes.

You look over at Dirk, the paramedic is trying to talk to him, but Dirk isn’t able to properly talk.

TG: we dont have that kind of money
TT: Another point in favour of socialised medicine.
TT: Don’t worry, someone else’s insurance is paying for it. Hence the fake last names.
TT: And don’t worry about them not seeing him in time, I’m already inside the hospital’s systems. As soon as he’s admitted, I’ll order all of the tests.
TG: but youre not a doctor
TT: I’ve basically just downloaded all medical textbooks in the time it took to drive this far. I’m the most doctored doctor there is.
TT: Dirk is going to be in my digital hands, Dave. He couldn’t be safer.
TT: Now put down the phone, you’ve been “texting your parents” for too long.

You put your phone back in your pocket and look back at Dirk and the paramedic.

“Is he going to be okay?” You ask, both because you want a second opinion and because it’s a normal thing to ask. You’ve got to act normal.
“Well, good news is that the blood in his mouth came from his mouth. He broke a tooth at some point and between that and cutting his cheek with it he got all bloodied, but that likely means his lungs are fine which is really good news.” The paramedic says kindly.

“What about his head? He got hit a few times.” You ask, crawling up the narrow bench and reaching for Dirk’s limp hand.

“It seems like a pretty bad concussion, but he’s still mostly awake which is a good sign. When you get to the hospital they’ll run more tests.” The man assures you. The ambulance pitches to the side around a sharp corner, the sirens are still on and are super loud. Somehow you didn’t notice them until now. Did you hit your head too?

TT: Just like I said. You’re nearly there.

“Can… can I stay on the bed with him when we get out? I don’t want to lose him, and my parents won’t get here for ages!” You insist, playing up the dumb kid thing a bit.

TT: Nicely done.

“Yeah, I think we can do that. Your brother’s not tall enough to get to the end of the bed yet anyway, hop on up. Just be careful not to squish him.” The paramedic says with a soft smile.

You climb onto the foot of the bed and look up at your barely conscious brother.

“You’ve been very brave, I’m sure your brother and parents will be very proud of you. You kept calm and called us and told us everything we need to know. You did a really good job Dave.” The paramedic tells you and stands up as you feel the ambulance come to a halt.

“I’m not brave.” You say softly.

“Yeah, you are. Okay, hold on now.” The paramedic says, and you cling to the rails of the bed as the back doors are thrown open and you and Dirk are whisked through the hospital.

TT: He’s right, you know Dave. You’re doing great.
You shake your head and will yourself not to cry.

From then on it’s a whirlwind of tests. It makes you feel better that Hal seems more and more confident that Dirk will be just fine with each test that comes back. You worry about the nurse that keeps drifting past, looking at you suspiciously for being without your parents. Well, joke’s on her, your actual parents are dead.

TT: Okay, I think my voice is good enough now. When your phone rings pick up, it’ll be me.

You take your phone out of your pocket and settle it on the bed and before too long the nurse orbits back around and your phone buzzes.

“Hello?” You ask, picking it up.

“Dave, this is Hal pretending to be your mother, say a normal person thing like ‘hi mom’.” A woman’s voice says down the phone. You’re disoriented for a second before you start playing along.

“Hi, mom.” You say, and the nurse stops to watch you.

“Say that you’ll see if you can find anyone for me to speak to.” The woman’s- or rather’ Hal’s fake voice says.

“I’ll see if I can find a nurse or something who’s looking after Dirk.” You say, and the nurse walks over. Should it worry you how good Hal is at manipulating people? Maybe, but it still doesn’t.

“Do you want to talk to my mom?” You ask, holding out the phone. The nurse takes it and has a convincing conversation with a woman who is somehow Hal about her poor sons, when she will be here and other important information like insurance. You get your phone back after a while, and you sit there doing nothing more than staring into space on the end of Dirk’s bed.

You shove one hand up your sleeve and run your fingers over your soul mark and trace the patterns without even having to look at it. You like the newest one, a reel of movie film and the tail of it shapes into a heart. You like that one, things feel nice when you’re getting whatever signal it is that you get from it. You look back down at your phone to message Hal.
TG: what happens when my mom doesn't show up?
TT: As soon as Dirk wakes up we're getting out of here.
TT: I don't need him to be too smart, I just need him to be able to walk.
TG: back home?
TT: No, Bro will destroy Dirk if he finds him this helpless.
TT: And considering that you went all hostage taking with 'lil Cal I'm not comfortable with you going back there yet either.
TT: I'm not sure that the old plan applies anymore, so I'm working on a plan that Dirk and I had previously rejected.
TG: which is what?
TT: I probably shouldn't say until Dirk is awake.
TG: god fucking damnit hal
TG: i dont know why this happened
TG: i dont know why bro flipped out
TT: It's complicated.
TG: i dont know what he was going on about gay porn or whatever
TG: i've never been in a hospital before
TG: i don't know if some lady is going to come in here about us using her insurance
TG: and the fake names you gave us
TT: Dave calm down.
TG: fuck you!
TT: Dave calm down.
TG: just tell me what's going on
TG: talk to me like goddamn adult
TT: You're ten, man. I'm just trying to keep you and Dirk safe, no sinister machinations here.
TG: hal
TT: Okay, fuck. Just calm down and try to stay calm this time, okay?
TT: I'll talk.

You sigh and wrap your arms around yourself. The hospital is too cold for your tastes, you're not used to air conditioning.

TT: So, I guess as a place to start would be that the woman who I was pretending to be is a real person.
TT: Roxanne Lalonde.
TG: well yeah its her insurance right?
TT: I'm trying to think of a good way to put this.
TG: just say it
TT: I didn't lie about her being your mom.
TG: but
TG: our parents died in a car crash
TT: Correction: Dirk and Bro’s parents died in a car crash.
TT: Yours are alive.
TT: Dave Lalonde is your legal name. Roxanne Lalonde is your mother.

You stare forward in utter confusion. You have a mother? You’re not a Strider? Dirk had to know all
of this if Hal does, so why did he never tell you?! Suddenly you want to hit him too.

TG: well where the fuck has she been all my life?!
TT: She doesn’t know where you are. She hasn’t seen you since you left the hospital after being born.
TT: A point of mine and Dirk’s against her is that we can find no evidence that she ever looked for you.
TT: We’re not her biggest fans.
TG: no shit
TG: but im not a strider?
TG: dirk isnt my brother?
TT: As far as your actual relationship is with us Dave, nothing is different now than it was five minutes ago.
TT: You’re our little bro in every way that matters to us.
TT: But, biologically speaking, no, you’re not our brother.
TT: Dirk is your uncle.

Dirk is your uncle? Dirk is your uncle. Dirk only has one sibling that you know about if you’re no longer in that category. Though evidently, you know fuck all about this family. Your uncle is the sibling of one of your parents and seeing as your mother’s side appears to be Lalonde and Dirk’s last name is Strider then...

TG: are you fucking star warsing me
TG: i will puke
TG: if you tell me what i think youre gonna tell me about bro i will fucking strangle myself with those heart rate wires that dirks hooked up to
TT: Seeing as that’d register Dirk as having some kind of heart attack I think that’d be a poor suicide method.
TT: But yes, we are indeed ‘star warsing’ that shit.
TT: Bro is your father.
TT: And in surprising consistency with this theme that I hadn’t thought of until now it keeps happening.
TT: You also have a twin sister.
TT: Maybe you should try saving the universe.

You can’t deal with this. You squeeze your eyes shut and crawl up the bed, plastering yourself to Dirk’s uninjured side. Why would Dirk not tell you this? You don’t even have the mental energy to give real thought to Dirk’s thought process. Dirk lied to you, Hal lied to you and now that he’s telling you some stuff he’s being an asshole about it. You’re scared and alone, and like a fucking baby you’re crying against your brother’s chest.

Your uncle’s chest.
You fall asleep eventually, and it’s only when you feel Dirk’s arm moving that you guess he’s awake. You’re not sure that you want to move yet, so you just stay where you are. There is a click as Dirk unfolds his shades and slides them on his face.

Your brain is crammed with all of the things you’ve been through and heard. Bro freaking out, you pulling that stunt with Cal. The paramedics. Your fake and apparently not so fake name. You have parents, Bro and that Lalonde woman. A parent you wish wasn’t around and one who never was but should have been. Hal said that she never looked for you. So Bro did what, took you and she just shrugged and ollied out of the hospital with just your sister and figured that was good enough? That’s a thing too, you have a twin sister. Does she know about you? What’s going to happen now? Surely your missing mother is going to hear about the two of you, even if Hal pretends to be her on the phone they can still call her. You don’t think Hal can actually intercept phone calls.

Dirk tenses under you and you can feel his fist tense again your back before deliberately relaxing and then stroking down your spine. You open your eyes and see a wave of Hal’s orange text apologising for being flippant about your discovery of your family, he just panicked and ran his mouth and won’t you please, please, message him back?

TT: Dave?

“Dave?” Both Dirk and Hal speak at once. It’s strange, their minds have been separated for years but sometimes they work just the same as each other.

You sit up and look at Dirk, relieved to see that he seems relatively together.

“Hal told me that you both got me here. He said you really held it together.” Dirk says gently, and you shrug.

“My memory of the fight is pretty hazy, but Hal said you took ‘lil Cal hostage to get me out of there.” Dirk continues. You nod mutely.

“And… he also said that he told you about your parents and your sisters.” Dirk says, and you jerk up a little straighter.

“Oh, he didn’t tell you that part. Yeah, you have an older sister too. She’s only a year younger than me, we lived together at one point but I barely remember it, so I doubt she does.” Dirk says.

“Well, fuck! I’m just growing family out of the ass today, ain’t I?” You yell, throwing your hands up in the air.

TT: Volume, Dave. Let’s not attract doctors and nurses, please.

“I’m sorry.” Your *uncle* sighs.

“Why’d you lie to me? Why didn’t you tell me about them?” You demand hotly.

“Because you don’t need them! I’m the only family that you need. I looked after you all these years, I fed you, clothed you, raised you. I protected you from a father who wants to beat the shit out of both of us, if not actually kill us one day. And I did all that when your mother didn’t care that Bro had taken you away, she never came looking for you. You don’t need them. Hal and I are all you need.” Dirk says loudly and guilt coils in your stomach. You try to stomp it out because sure you feel bad that you’ve basically ruined his life but he lied to you.

“Why are we even living with Bro when we could go live with her? We’d be away from Bro, and you wouldn’t have to do all of that for me. You’d never have had to make Hal to protect me and don’t get me wrong, I love Hal, but why not just be with her and not with Bro?” You ask.

TT: I love you too, Dave.

“That was my early plan. It took me ages to track her down, but it wouldn’t work. She’s no Bro, but she has her own problems. She’s a complete alcoholic, she was always drinking when she was with Bro but fuck, Bro makes me want to drink when I’m around him too long. I guess it just stuck. He’d be able to track us to her place eventually, and then legal shit gets involved, social services get involved, and it becomes apparent that neither of them should be trusted with so much as a goldfish, and then four kids end up in the system.” Dirk explains.

“That’s when you made our plan. Wait until you’re eighteen, fight for custody.” You conclude.

“That’s right. Just us, we don’t need anyone else. Just you, me and Hal.” Dirk nods.
“And my sisters? What about them?” You ask.

“I don’t know, I’ve never met your twin, and like I said it’s been a long ass time since I saw Roxy. I don’t know what they’re like. I never thought about taking them in too. I’m not sure I’d even be allowed.” Dirk admits, rubbing his ribs with a wince of pain.

“I want to go see them.” You say firmly.

“Dave, they live in New York it’s a like a… 27-hour car ride away.” Dirk tells you, obviously being fed information by Hal.

“So? You can’t go back home like that, and I’m not going back alone. If we stay in the hospital for too long, then cops and social services will show up again. We have to go somewhere, why not there?” You point out.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Dirk says weakly.

“I don’t care. You lied to me for my whole life, we’re going.” You tell him.

TT: For the record, I think you’re right.
TT: I’ve hacked your mother’s bank details, and I’m negotiating you a private car to get you there right now.
TT: They’re also going to bring dinner with them because it’s like 8 pm.
TT: Go to the bathroom while I talk Dirk around.

You nod and hop off of the bed, ignoring Dirk’s protests for you to stay. You walk away, you piss, you stare longingly into the vending machine. These are separate events, of course, you’re not pissing into the change slot or anything. Though you are now somewhat tempted to do so.

When you return to Dirk, having successfully not pissed on any large public electrical equipment, he seems to be calmer.

“I still think this is a dumb plan, but I can’t think of anything better. I’m blaming the head injury.” Dirk tells you as you come back to his bedside.
“So we’re going?” You ask hopefully.

“Yeah, we’re gonna sneak out of the hospital under Hal’s directions. I just gotta get out of- ugh.” Dirk groans as he tries to sit up fully and you rush forward to help him. You pull him totally upright and disentangle him from the blankets he was under. For good measure you steal a pillow and the blankets, you’ll probably need them on the journey.

TT: Okay, the car I’ve ordered and so generously paid for with Ms Lalonde’s bank account is going to pull up out of the back of the hospital.
TT: Dave, you need to get Dirk’s medical bracelet off.

You assume that Hal is saying much the same to Dirk because he doesn’t flinch when you draw your sword and cut the plastic bracelet off. Dirk shoves it under the mattress and you both walk to the door.

TT: You need to leave this door and go left on my mark.
TT: Now.

You both smoothly exit. You’re plastered to Dirk’s side as he rests a good deal of his weight on you, but to the outside world you’re just two brothers walking along a hallway waiting to see someone else. Hal leads you this way and that, eventually heading down a concrete staircase and out into the shadowy parking lot. A big black SUV is waiting and outside is an uneasy looking guy with shades on.

“You our ride? Dirk and Dave Lalonde?” Dirk asks calmly as you walk the two of you over there.

“Yes, and your food is in the back like your mother asked. Are you really sure that you want to drive all this way all by yourselves?” The driver asks with a frown.

“My brother can’t fly, it makes him sick.” Dirk lies and opens the car door at the back. You shove him in and climb in after him.

The inside of the car is plush black leather, and there’s a tinted screen separating the back of the car from the driver. On the floor of the car are two large McDonalds bags and your heart flutters with glee. By the divider are two seats that fold up and down like a taxi but with just you and Dirk in the back of the car there’s no need for them to be up so you have more legroom than you could ever
need. In between the two foldable seats is a TV screen and under that a charging hub with an array of cables nestled inside ready to charge any and all of your devices. The ceiling of the car has lights that you can turn on and off and little fans too.

“This is so cool.” You whisper to Dirk as you buckle up.

“I’m thrilled.” Dirk grunts and does the same.

“If you boys want to stop anywhere to use the bathroom or get something to eat or just stretch your legs then let me know. I’ll have to have a break overnight too, your mom paid for a roadside hotel, but we can easily get there by bedtime for you little man.” The driver says with fake cheer, and you glare at him through your shades at being called that.

“Thanks, Hal.” You whisper as you lean down and grab the bags of food off of the ground. You pass Dirk’s soda to him right away, you do not want to drink orange soda, you’ve got lemonade instead.

TT: You’re welcome.

You eat until you’re almost so full that you could puke. Dirk eats slower and even turns down his apple pie, you don’t know if he feels sick or if it’s an apple based apology. You take it anyway.

As you pull out of Houston proper, you pull the pillow from your sylladex and hand it to Dirk.

“You probably shouldn’t stick your damaged brain on a shaking window.” You tell him, and he smiles a little feebly and takes it, padding his head against the glass.

Dirk stays silent, and you think his eyes might be closed, so you pull out your phone to talk to Hal.

TG: what do you think about all this?
TT: All of what?
TG: my parents
TG: sisters
TG: dirk
TG: fuck man all of that shit
TT: You think that my opinion is going to be substantially different from Dirk’s?
TT: Why is that?

You close your eyes and groan, leaning your head against the back of your seat. You hate this game.

TG: can we not do this are you one person or two game
TG: i hate it and you know i think youre different people because surprise you are
TG: like if you wanna go on that rant then by all means my dude
TG: go hog wild
TG: just ping me when youre done so i start paying attention again

You set your phone down and stare out of the window.

TT: You’re putting me in a difficult position here.

You pull your best unimpressed expression, knowing full well that Hal can either see it through Dirk’s glasses or somewhere else in the car.

TT: Yes, my opinion is somewhat different than Dirk’s but for once I’m not trying to slander him.
TT: We’re not one-upping each other to be the best brother to you right now.
TT: I really don’t want to fuck things up with him by letting him think that.
TT: And it’s hard to elaborate my position without it sounding like I’m talking smack about Dirk.
TT: He’s doing his best for you, and so am I, it’s just different is all.

You close your eyes. You love both Dirk and Hal, but they aren’t always the best of friends. They needle each other and piss each other off constantly, usually about who is doing the better job of looking out for you. You know that’s something that Dirk beats himself up about, and it’d take someone like Dirk to clone himself so someone else can beat him up about it too. At least they usually leave you directly out of their squabbles, but it seems you’ve walked your plush rump right into the middle of one.

TG: i dont care man
TG: can you both just be real with me?
TT: Dirk is human, and I’m not. When he made me, he copied over a bunch of his human drives, emotions and such.
TT: They’re real for me, I don’t pretend to have feelings.
TT: But for Dirk they’re chemical, and I can’t imagine that the rest of puberty made them fade at all.
TG: i have no idea where youre going with this
TT: Human instinct, Dave.
TT: Despite the mere five year age difference Dirk is basically your guardian. Sure, he consciously
thinks of you as his little brother, despite your actual biological relationship.
TT: The fact is that it’s plain that the rest of his biological system doesn’t think of you like that.
TG: youve lost me
TT: Okay let’s slide into metaphor town.
TT: You like birds. You know how woodpeckers leave their eggs in other birds nests?
TT: Imagine if one of those crows outside your window had a woodpecker chick in its nest.
TT: Sure it’s plainly not it’s biological baby but what do you think it’d do if you tried to touch that woodpecker chick?
TG: youd get the shit clawed and pecked out of you
TT: Exactly. Your parents are the asshole woodpeckers in this scenario.
TT: It doesn’t matter that you’re not Dirk’s baby and there’s no way you possibly could be, his dumb primal mammal functions have labelled you as his young, and he’ll do anything to keep you safe.
TT: The problem is that his idea of safe isn’t too logical.
TT: He doesn’t trust anyone else with you except for me and that’s only because I used to be him.

You close your eyes and frown. Yeah, that seems pretty fitting of Dirk. He drives himself into the ground trying to protect you and has basically nuked the possibility of him ever having a normal childhood at all. You really don’t get why he does it, you’re not worth all of that. But maybe Hal’s onto something, maybe it’s just human nature, and you’re the parasitical woodpecker draining his resources. That certainly sounds like you.

TG: so what does that mean?
TG: you think i should leave the nest and stay with my actual mother instead?
TT: Fuck that, man. My research into Roxanne Lalonde shows that she has not improved much since Dirk and I saw her as kids.
TT: I’m not happy leaving you with her alone either.
TT: But she is loaded, and she has resources that we can use to make a better life for us, you especially.
TT: I think that we can use her, but Dirk was never willing to let her even know where you were.
TT: He’s afraid that she’ll take you away and he won’t be able to be there to keep you safe.
TT: His mammal brain sees someone trying to take his kid away and he’s not having it.
TT: All I want to do is be a little more tactical.
TT: The question is, what do you want, Dave?

You look up at Dirk again, his eyes are scrunched shut, and he’s holding up his nearly empty drink to his temple and letting his ice soothe the headache that you know he must have. He’s covered in butterfly stitches and bruises. You hate that he has to go through this at all, that some of it is your fault makes it even worse.

TG: i dont want to go back to bro
TG: but i dont want to live with someone else either
TG: i just wish dirk was 18 already
TT: Yeah, we wish that too.
TT: So if you don’t want to live with either of your parents, why the sudden insistence in coming
here?
TT: Don’t get me wrong, I’m intending on exploiting her when we’re there, so I’m not complaining.
TG: i guess i want to meet my sisters
TG: find out if they knew about me
TG: i want to find out what my mom knows about how my life is
TG: i wanna know how she could just
TG: abandon me with bro
TG: she must have known what he was like right?
TT: Hard to say.
TT: Bro has anger problems and control issues, and Dirk remembers them fighting all the time.
TT: She was also drunk all of the time.
TT: He used to drink way more back then too.
TT: They were really bad for each other.
TT: I don’t think that he ever hit her, but it’s not like he would have only done it in front of little five-year-old Dirk.
TG: werent they soulmates though?
TT: Yeah, and there’s your proof that not all soulmates work out.
TT: The way I figure it is that the core of who you are is what makes that bond with your soulmate, but the outside still matters. The things that you do still matter.
TT: It’s not a certain thing.

You look down at your arm and then regret it because you know that Hal can track what you’re looking at.

TT: Dave, your soulmate is going to love you. Don’t worry about that.
TG: what if bro broke me so bad that im not the person my soulmate wants?
TT: Then they’re not good enough to be your soulmate.
TT: It’ll be fine Dave.
TT: Look, maybe you should talk to Dirk. I’m pretty sure that he’s silently freaking out about you ignoring him. He probably thinks that you hate him for lying to you.
TG: i dont hate him
TG: im just pissed
TG: at both of you
TT: If it helps, we’re both sorry.

You set your phone back down on your lap and try to think of something to say to Dirk. The two of you aren’t really big on heartfelt talks, no doubt that’s Bro’s fault. But you’re still at a loss of what to say. You’re pissed that he lied to you but you guess you can get it, he had the best of intentions and he is, as Hal keeps pointing out, only human.

His brain is probably scrambled from the fight, and you know that Dirk tends to think too much about things that he’s done wrong, you’re pretty sure that he knows that you’re mad and aren’t going to forget it. So maybe you can look out for him for once.
“You’re still… you’re still my brother. As far as I care about the whole thing. We’re still good.” You say awkwardly. When you chance a look up at him he’s staring at you, but after a little while a slow smile comes onto his face.

“Same.” He tells you quietly and closes his eyes again. Well, good, you’re glad the two of you got that settled.

You return to dicking around with your phone again until your “mother” calls the driver and asks him to pull over at a roadside motel with rooms that “she’s” booked for all of you. Honestly, you’ve no idea where Hal is getting these voices or how he’s able to make calls now. Bro seemingly cut the internet in your home, that’s why you briefly lost contact with Hal earlier. You had thought that Hal just lived in Dirk’s computer, but you guess that’s not the case if he’s out there in other people’s systems.

TG: hey hal
TT: Hey Dave.
TG: youre outside of dirks computer right?
TG: youre still able to do shit with the internet off at the apartment
TT: That’s correct.
TT: I have myself stored in Dirk’s computer but also in several other locations, a kind of global consciousness.
TG: so if bro even stomped the shit out of dirks computer youd be fine
TT: That’s one of the reasons that I spread myself across several places, yes.
TT: This way no one can deactivate me.
TG: well bro doesnt even know you exist
TG: hed just trash dirks computer to be a dick
TG: so i dont think anyone would ever try to turn you off
TT: Well, it’s not going to happen anyway. I’m in too many places that no one but me knows about for anything to happen to me.
TG: so youre basically immoral
TG: i mean immortal
TT: I’ll concede to both.
TT: Now go check into your room, I’m getting some clothes couriered to you in the morning. You don’t have to wear the same stuff for days on end.
TT: You’ve even got your own bed here too, you don’t have to wake up to your face in Dirk’s armpit for a change.
TG: hot damn
TT: Don’t say that I never do anything for you.

The motel is pretty chill, the driver bids you goodnight and you go to your separate rooms. The place didn’t leave you toothbrushes and toothpaste, so you’re just gonna have to deal with furry teeth until you get to your supposed mother’s home. She’s your mother, and she’s done fuck all for you before today, so the least she can do is spring for some new toothbrushes when you get there.
Dirk’s broken ribs give him some trouble so though he can get out of his jeans fine you have to help him out of his shirt. Even with the bandages splinting his ribcage you can see the way the skin is starting to bruise up. In places, there’s even a clear pattern of the tread of Bro’s shoes stamped into Dirk’s pale skin. When he takes off his glasses you can see small cuts on his cheeks where his shades bit in and considering how many head hits you two take you should maybe think about wearing some less stabby eyewear in future. But it is hella cool, so maybe you just have to pay the price for it. Anyway, without his shades you can see the bruise on Dirk’s cheekbone and temple where Bro smashed his face into the desk and the floor, he’s going to have a real shiner in a day or two.

“Hey, bro. Pinkie swear that you’re not gonna die in your sleep from brain bleeding or whatever the fuck.” You demand, holding out your pinkie. Dirk snorts and catches it with his own.

“Well shit, I was all up and ready to kick it, but now you’ve made me pinky swear I guess I just have to live.” Dirk says monotonously.

“Thems the breaks.” You say sagely and turn off the light.

The next day brings the promised delivered clothes from Hal as well as toiletries and painkillers for Dirk’s… everything. There’s also breakfast that you eat in the room and it’s a pretty sweet deal getting breakfast for a change, so you’re all about that. Hal informs the both of you that it’s essentially a twenty-seven-hour car trip from the hospital to your mother’s home and you only got about seven of those hours done yesterday what with having made good time late at night. So you accept that you’re going to be stuck in a car for the entire day.

Dirk’s concussion is, if anything, worse today and it gets to the point where his vision is so bad that he can’t even read Hal’s messages and you’re left playing the go-between for them. He also can’t stand the bright light and spends the journey sprawled out over the back seat with his old shirt over his eyes and strapped in with several seatbelts which leaves you on the less comfy fold-down seats. He still gets bored though, and so being the generous little brother/nephew that you are you pull out your Enders Game book for school and read the whole thing aloud to him.

You weren’t super far into the book when Bro interrupted you, so you start at the beginning again. Both of you can see Bro in the older brother Peter’s sadistic behaviour. The main character of the book is younger and frightened of him, but he becomes pretty violent himself, eventually becoming a soldier in space in this war against these bugs.

“You know, you’re going to be the only one in your class who reads this and has had combat training.” Dirk says quietly at one point.
“And all the mind games.” You agree. You spend your life not knowing what Bro is testing you for but knowing that he is always watching.

“I’m five years older than you, I figure I’m gonna be fucked up for life. I’ll be lucky if I manage to stop myself becoming him but you… you’ll be thirteen when I get you out of there. You might still be relatively okay.” Dirk adds.

“You’re nothing like him.” You say firmly as you snap the book shut.

TT: We’re more like him than we’d like, trust me.
TT: You know that’s my secondary purpose, right?
TT: After looking after you I’m supposed to stop Dirk veering into becoming Bro.

“You really made Hal to stop you turning into Bro?” You ask Dirk, and you see him grimace.

“As well as looking after you, yeah.” Dirk says after a moment.

“But you’re nothing like him.” You repeat.

“You are literally the only person on this planet that I care about, Dave. I don’t care what happens to anyone else, not really. I recognise Bro’s mind games before you do because I think the same way. I’m obsessive as he is about sword practice, if he wasn’t so ruthless about it and he didn’t involve you I wouldn’t be bothered about it. I’d do it without complaint. The fact that our home is filled with cameras creeps me the fuck out, but I’m kind of impressed at how he runs his businesses, Hal and I are better hackers than he is but our online ethics are basically the same as his. He wants me to be like him, and if it weren’t for you keeping me human and Hal watching me, then I’m pretty sure he’d succeed. I’m a terrible person, Dave.” Dirk insists, pulling back the t-shirt so that he can look at you.

TT: He is right, you know.

“No, you’re wrong. I know you and Hal, I guess I know you better than you know yourselves. Maybe you could be him, but that doesn’t make the two of you like him. Bro wouldn’t think this shit, he never made another him to make him a better person and he never cared about me. You and Hal are different.” You tell him strongly, he doesn’t look convinced.

You look down at the cover of your book, unsurprisingly you don’t feel much like reading anymore.
You have one last question for Dirk who is currently glaring at the roof of the car with his bare eyes and his shades hooked around the neck of his shirt.

“Why did Bro attack you?” You ask him quietly and watch the way his face goes blank, the same poker face the two of you have to use on Bro.

“Because he’s an asshole, why does he ever attack me?” Dirk answers a few seconds later.

“Before you got home he went on your computer, and I was looking at my jars so that Hal could see the screen in the reflection. I couldn’t see it but he said something later about gay porn, and I’m pretty sure I saw that too when you were fighting.” You say. Your memories are a little hazy from fear, often encounters like that get a little bit blurry on anything that isn’t Bro or Dirk.

“He was… fucking with my browsing history somehow. Stopping it from being erased or something. Hal is still trying to work out how he did it.” Dirk explains, but that doesn’t answer anything.

“So you were looking at gay porn? Why?” you ask, and Dirk covers his face with both hands.

“Dave, you are ten goddamn years old I am not talking to you about my porn habits.” Dirk groans.

“Don’t treat me like a kid!” You protest angrily.

TT: Wanna throw in a ‘you’re not my real dad’ to up the ironic cliche quota?

“Shut up Hal!” You snap and pull your shades off, augh, it’s too bright in here. You regret this but you’re not putting them back on, that would be backing down and you’re not gonna do that.

“Dave, you are a kid. You’re ten. This isn’t like you’re asking me a sex ed question, it’s none of your business.” Dirk says.

You grit your teeth. Fine, if Dirk is going to be a tool then two can play that game, and you have the winning hand here.
“Really? Because I had to threaten to torch ‘lil Cal and run out of my home because Bro tried to kill you about it so I’d say it’s my business. Why were you even looking at that stuff?” You say, and Dirk looks away from you. He rubs the side of his eye socket where the bruise is spreading and sighs.

“Because I’m not into women.” He says so quietly that you almost don’t hear.

You have to spend a good few seconds playing that over in your head. Dirk… isn’t into women. He’s… gay? No, that can’t be right.

“But you’re a guy.” You point out.

“Yeah.” Dirk agrees.

“You should be into women. Are the girls in your grade just super ugly or something?” You ask in total confusion.

“I don’t know, they’re just girls. It’s not that Dave, they could be Angela fucking Jolie and I would not care.” Dirk says emphatically.

“You’re gay?” You ask. Dirk can’t be gay, he’s Dirk.

“Labels are dumb, I’m just into guys instead of women. And like I said, you’re ten, and it’s none of anyone’s business who I’m into except my soulmate, and I’ve not met him yet.” Dirk sighs.

“You’re gay.” You repeat because you just can’t grasp this idea at all, it’s like someone’s thrown you in the shower with your hands duct taped together and you’re trying to catch a bar of soap being fastballed at you by Babe Ruth (is he dead or even in baseball? Whatever.) That shit’s just slip sliding away from you at maximum nope speed.

“Yes, Dave. If you’re really stuck on the name then yes.” Dirk says reluctantly.
Dirk is gay? Dirk is gay. Nope, still not sticking.

“But you’ve never gone after me.” You reason.

Dirk’s eyes click open again, and his face contorts in this painful way as he slowly rolls on his side to stare at you in horror.

“You- okay, no. That would be both paedophilia and incest and not- no. You know those are different things right?” Dirk says, obviously appalled. You frown, are they? You’re pretty sure you’ve heard Bro talk about gay dudes boning boys so…

“Not the same thing at all. Dave, I would never… I honestly feel sick thinking about this. I feel sick thinking about you thinking of this. That’s not how this works. I just like guys instead of girls. Guys my own age who I’m not related to goddamnit.” Dirk insists.

“Alright, but if you’re gay then who made you that way?” You ask. Dirk’s eye twitches as he stares at you.

“Dave, you seem to be confusing gay people with vampires, you know those are different, right? I didn’t get bitten by a gay dude and change or some shit like that. Holy fuck I did not realise that Bro’s bullshit had seeped into your head like this.” Dirk says and fully sits up in his seat instead of laying down.

“I don’t get it.” You say honestly, and Dirk looks pained.

“I know that Bro thinks it’s wrong and I know we don’t live in the most accepting area of the world, but there are literally always people who aren’t straight. I mean, you even see it in other animals too Dave. It’s not good or bad it’s just how things are. Does that make sense?” Dirk asks you.

You frown and fiddle with your shades. What Dirk is saying makes some kind of logical sense, but it doesn’t feel right. The idea of Dirk kissing another boy makes you feel at least a little bit gross, it feels wrong. Most people won’t react like Bro, but some people do, and plenty of other people dislike people who are… that way.

“Bro shouldn’t have attacked you.” You tell him, but he doesn’t seem super reassured by this.
Fuck this, you don’t care what Dirk does or… or who he does. He’s Dirk, and he’s the only human being in the whole world who has ever cared about you. He’s given up so much, and he and Hal are your whole world. Maybe it is wrong but as far as you care that rule can be for everyone else. Dirk is the exception, Dirk is never wrong.

“Bro’s an asshole, there’s nothing wrong with you.” You say firmly, and Dirk looks relieved.

Dirk settles back down along the seat, and you put your shades back on.

TT: Have you thought about what you’re going to say to your sisters when you meet them?
TG: nah man
TG: how could they not love me?
TT: Ah, so you hadn’t thought about it at all, and now you’re nervous. Got it.

Goddamn Hal knowing you too well. You spend the rest of the journey thinking off and on about what you’re going to say to them. Sure you have breaks where you eat or get out at rest stops, and you even finish reading the rest of the book to Dirk, but mostly you’re thinking about the two girls you’re about to meet. The two of them and the woman who birthed you and gave you nothing else in life.

Night falls, and you end up driving through a dark forest. About forty minutes from the nearest town your driver pulls up and stops outside a ridiculously large mansion. Their home straddles a river with a waterfall actually bursting out of one side of it, illuminated by small lights in the water. The building is stylistically angular except for a tall round tower that stretches into the dark night above. Perfectly maintained snow white gravel leads up to a large imposing gate some distance from the house and this is where you bid goodbye to your driver.

Dirk looks worse for wear, tired and injured. Nevertheless, Dirk trudges up to the gate with you and locates an intercom on a white pillar. He presses the button, and it buzzes for a long while. Eventually a female voice answers it.

“Hello?”


“Aaah… why do you want to know?” The voice asks, and you realise that she sounds younger, this
must be one of your sisters.

“What, does she think I’m running the world’s least effective population census here?” Dirk mutters under his breath.

“It’s a family matter, can you just let us in please so that I can talk to her?” Dirk asks.

You subtly slide out your phone and message Hal.

TG: yo cant you just hack this thing?
TT: That would be breaking and entering, not a good way to start a relationship.
TT: But regardless it’s connected to their network which is ironclad.
TT: I have seriously seen government databases less encrypted than this, it’s a thing of beauty.
TT: Imagine a single perfect tear rolling down my robo cheek.
TG: coulda just said no
TT: Philistine.

“Look, you must be Roxy, right? We’ve met before. You were really little, but we’ve met. We lived together. Your mother’s soulmate is my older brother, I’m your uncle, and the kid I have with me is your brother. He’s your sister Rose’s twin.” Dirk says in frustration.

“I’d know if I had an uncle or a brother!” Roxy argues from the intercom.

You look at the gate as they continue to go back and forth. It’s not even that high, you could totally climb it. You reach out and push your hand against the gate, and it swings open effortlessly. Dirk stares at you in shock.

“Aw fuck, she forgot to lock it!” Roxy curses.

“Come on, genius.” You laugh, and Dirk follows you, his lips pressed into a tight and embarrassed line. Dirk and Hal are both super smart, but boy can smart people ever be hella dumb sometimes.

Your feet crunch on the gravel as you follow its winding path up to the door of the house. The door opens, white light spilling out into the light and as you get close, you can see two figures in the doorway. Both are girls, one your height and another a little taller.
You come to a halt on the threshold of the porch area and stare at the girl before you who is the same height as you. It’s like looking in a funhouse mirror, she’s you but wrong. The shape of her nose and the curve of her cheekbones are a mirror image of your own, her skin is as pale as yours and her hair as blonde. But there are subtle differences too, the gentler curve of her jaw, the colour of her eyes which are purple instead of red, the arch in her eyebrows. She isn’t you, but she is. She’s made from the same stuff as you, just shaken about a little differently.

The older girl gives you the same jarring feeling, her pink eyes are closer to your red, her colouring in her skin and hair is like yours. Weirdly you see more of Dirk in the way she holds herself, confident but on guard. You see the same intelligence in her eyes and the way she regards you.

“Uh, hi.” You say. Some great first words you came up with, huh?
You, your sisters and brother/uncle are all standing around just inside the mansion in awkward silence staring at each other. Thankfully Dirk knows what to say to get things started.

“Where’s your mother?” Dirk asks the older one, Roxy.

“She’s out. God, you both look so much like us. I mean him and Rosie, oh em gee.” Roxy gasps, looking from you to your twin and back again.

“It’s Rose. Don’t call me ‘Rosie’.” Your twin says sharply, looking at you and Dirk.

“It’s gone midnight, where is she?” Dirk asks.

“Probably out at some party in the city, she didn’t exactly give us the deets. She either be back at like, four am or midday.” Roxy answers with a shrug.

“Seeing as someone in this house has to have some manners, would you two like to come inside properly and have a drink or something to eat? We have a nice big sofa that we can all sit on and get things straightened out.” Rose offers.

You and Dirk look at each other and then nod. It beats standing in the hall like a bunch of chumps.

“I’ll bring a tray with everything rather than expecting you to guess what’s in our fridge. This way.” Rose says and leads you all through.

Roxy jumps the back of the sofa with a grin and bounces on the seat. She pats the cushion next to her, clearly beckoning you over. For his part Dirk sits down carefully with a grunt, one hand pressed against his side.

“You look pretty messed up there uh… I don’t think you actually told me your name. I mean, I believe you are who you say you are, the relationship is pretty evident to anyone with eyes. Besides you already know our names and that’s totes unfair.” Roxy points out, and you warily sit near her.

“I’m Dirk Strider, that’s Dave.” Dirk answers stiffly.

"Dirk... I think... I think I remember you." Roxy says slowly.

"It's fine you were four, I think. Not gonna hold it against you.” Dirk grunts, rubbing at his ribs.

“I wonder if our family was aware that you can give children names that don’t begin with either ‘r’ or ‘d’.” Rose says, suddenly behind you and making you jump with her appearance. It’s not like you to not hear people creeping up on you but maybe you’re not used to the inch thick shag carpets in this place, it’s real different from the patchy carpet back home with patches scrubbed clean to get the blood out.

Rose sets the silver tray of juice jugs on a low and stylish coffee table complete with pretty frosted glasses. You ignore how pointlessly fancy it is and pour Dirk a glass of OJ and hand it to him, knowing that his ribs hurt too much to get it himself. You manage to score apple juice and sit back feeling pretty pleased.

“I’ve already been to the hospital, I’ll be fine.” Dirk assures her.

“Why are you here?” Rose asks calmly, her legs curled under her and her hands wrapped around a delicate china mug of tea. Something under your skin itches unpleasantly when you look at her. She feels fake and insincere, everything so measured and constructed. Add to that the fact that she’s living in this goddamn mansion and you wonder what you did wrong to be shipped to Bro while she stayed here. You realise that what you’re feeling is petty jealousy and resentment.

You decide to push past it, you don’t know everything, and if you’re honest, these events lately have shown you just how little you do know about your life. She’s family. You literally shared a womb with this girl, to say that you had once been close is an understatement. Surely she deserves the benefit of your doubt.

“We needed a place to stay, Dirk was too hurt for us to go home.” You answer honestly, and you see Dirk’s hand tighten on the arm of his chair. He thinks that this is a bad idea, but he’s letting you take the lead for once.

Rose is staring at you, her gaze seems to go under your skin and into your brain as if she’s digging for the truth inside your brain.

“Surely if you’re hurt, and you’ve already been to a hospital then home is the obvious place to go, not from wherever in the south your accent is from to here to people who don’t know you.” Rose says cooly and your eye twitches.

“Rose, be nice.” Roxy warns her.

“It’s our Br- our father who put him in the hospital in the first place, so no it doesn’t seem smart.” You snap at her.

TT: Dave what are you doing?

Rose turns to look at Dirk properly and makes a thoughtful noise.

“So our father is a bad parent.” She concludes.

“And then some. I didn’t even know he was my, ugh, father until yesterday. He always said he was my bro.” You say disgustedly.

“Interesting, he rejected that you were even his child. That is a nasty facial bruise that Dirk has there, but I wonder what makes you think that things are better here.” Rose muses and your fists clench.

“Rose, you’re being cruel. He’s clearly very hurt, you shouldn’t mock-” Roxy tries to say, but Rose shakes her head.

“I can only conclude that you think our mother’s financial assets offer you some reward and that’s why you’re here. I can’t imagine that you would want to live with her because she’s barely here and when she is any sane person wishes that she was not.” Rose talks over her sister.

“Am I supposed to feel bad for you?” You demand angrily.

TT: Dave what are you doing?
TT: Seriously Dave, what the fuck?
That’s both Hal and Dirk messaging you at once, Dirk’s command of the handle forcing Hal into the same red type as your own but you take your shades off and ignore them both.

“I’m saying that I think you’ve overestimated how green the grass is on this side.” Rose says, basically saying yes in way more words.

“Well, fuck me, you’re right. Life must be so hard here in your giant mansion with all your money and fancy silver tea trays. A dude could just straight up weep.” You sneer at her.

“Dave.” Dirk says, verbally this time but you continue to ignore him.

“I’m sorry, does your guardian have a drinking problem that renders him basically two different people who are respectively either nonfunctional or negligent?” Rose challenges you, setting her tea to the side.

“No, you’re right, he doesn’t. Poor you. I just have a guardian who beats the shit out of Dirk and me. Last Christmas I got the gift of a dislocated shoulder, how was your Christmas?” You demand angrily.

“We were forced to play host to a massive party where our mother got progressively drunk until she could barely function and then set part of the kitchen on fire. Then when I dared to reprimand her for it, she installed a twenty-foot wizard statue as a way of mocking my interests because I’m not allowed to sincerely like anything.” Rose retorts.

“If I show too much enthusiasm about anything I have to have an actual fucking sword fight on the roof and then get thrown down some stairs. Not that I can afford to have many interests because Bro never gives us money for anything and Dirk has to be away working jobs to get money.” You counter.

“My mother is away for days at a time, and it’s giving my sister a drinking problem, so now I have to manage two alcoholics.” Rose says sharply, and you feel Roxy flinch behind you.

“Bro is away from our home for weeks, but it’s ok the place is filled with hidden webcams that he has linked up to several creepy child watching fetish sites at all times.” You tell her pointedly.

“My mother has started leaving fashion magazines with weight loss tips in them around for us. Apparently we all have to be miserable and hate ourselves in this house.” Rose tells you almost smugly. You can’t stay silent, you feel like you need to bleed this whole awful thing out and you’re furious at her for even trying to compete.

“Our father is so unreliable that Dirk had to make a program to fake his voice for calls to the school so we can call out when we’re too injured to go!” You snarl.

“You get to go to school? Lucky you! This is the first time I’ve interacted with someone my own age in person for months!” Rose shouts, almost hysterical.

“Oh yeah, it’s great being among a bunch of other kids who you can’t tell any of this shit to because no one else understands! And even if you tried to tell them then you’d just end up dumped in a foster family and lose the only real family you have!” You yell.

The two of you freeze, Dirk and Roxy staring at you both in shock. A few tears spill down Rose’s cheeks, and she rubs them away with a hollow laugh.

“Yeah, no one else understands, and you couldn’t say it anyway. I know that feeling. And you can’t tell those two because they’re already busy enough looking out for you, right?” Rose says, sinking
back into the sofa.

You look down at your shades in your hands and wonder if this was what drove you here. A need to find someone else your own age in your same situation that could show you that it wasn’t just you alone. And you feel terrible for thinking of yourself as alone because Dirk is always right there with you, but Hal is right, he’s decided to be your surrogate parent, and so he’ll always be in a different kind of category to you.

You grab your drink again and run your thumb over the rim.

“Sorry that your… that our mom sucks.” You offer her.

“Sorry that our father is an abusive asshole.” she agrees, picking up her own tea once again.

“We both got a pretty raw deal, huh?” You say weakly.

Rose nods and raises her teacup towards you.

“You know what? Fuck them both, we don’t need them.” Rose says. You realise that she’s trying to make a dumb little toast.

“Fuck ’em.” You agree and clink your glass against her teacup. You take a chunk out of the rim and Rose laughs before you can apologise. She fishes the chip of china out of the drink and downs it in one, you grin and do the same.

“What the fuck was that?” Dirk asks after a few seconds.

“Sorry.” You apologise, and Dirk raises an eyebrow at you. Boy, would you ever bet this is going to be a point of speculation with Dirk and Hal for some time.

“I didn’t mean that thing about your drinking problem, Roxy.” Rose says gently.

“Oh, hey, it’s nothing. You’ve got my number I guess.” Roxy laughs weakly and waves her hand to dismiss the idea. She awkwardly pulls out her phone and glances at it, probably to give her an excuse to not be involved in this conversation anymore, your twin does have a weighty stare after all.

“I… what the?” Roxy says with a frown, and you slide your shades back on to be greeted by Hal back in orange again.

TT: No, no, no!
TT: Stall her, or better yet ask for the wifi password!
TT: She can’t catch me trying to get in!

“Hey, Roxy, what’s the wifi here? My phone kept glitching out in the woods so…” You trail off and unlock your phone, holding it out to her.

“Oh, sure thing pumpkin. The network seems to be acting a little screwy right now, and I’ll take a look at it in a moment, but I’ll set you up.” Roxy says kindly, typing in the details by memory.

TT: Man, getting people to just let me in is so much easier than hacking.
TT: Let me tell you, Dave, your sister is as good of a hacker as Dirk.
TT: It’s pretty clear this home network is run by her, it’s all coming from her computer.
TT: I’ll just erase my tracks, and she’ll never know I was here.

“We should probably set the two of you up with rooms. We have guest bedrooms that you’re both
welcome to use. Follow me.” Rose says, getting up. Roxy kindly crosses the distance to Dirk and helps him up gently. As she types in the wifi codes on his phone too you hear her quietly asking him about his injuries and she vows to lead him to their medicine cabinet before bed.

You leave them to it and follow Rose upstairs. She leads you to a room that’s bigger than your room back home, even if the bed is the same size. You help her take the sheet off of the bed and put a new one on and then take out a blanket and pillow. The two of you do the same in another room, figuring that Dirk can have the first as he’s not in a fit state for waving his arms around with sheets in them. She seems pretty comfortable with silence, not that you are so much, but it’s cool. Before when you were arguing, or more accurately when you were trying to one-up each other about how shitty your lives are you were for sure saying some shit that you shouldn’t. It’s just not cool is what it is. Even Dirk and Hal were alarmed at how much you were losing your cool, and this girl hasn’t actually done anything wrong to you personally.

“You’re mumbling to yourself, did you know?” Rose says as she pulls back the corner of the blanket and folds it primly.

Ah, evidently the comfortable silence wasn’t so silent on your end. Damnit.

“I… uh. It’s a thing I do sometimes. Sorry.” You apologise.

“A nervous thing?” Rose asks, looking you over.

“What?” You say, confused as all hell.

“As in, is it a nervous tic that you’re not aware of or is it more of an anxiety soothing thinking aloud thing or perhaps just mumbling to avoid silence?” Rose asks.

“Why does it matter?” You counter.

“Because it’s psychologically interesting. You’re interesting. We’re twins, and yet we know very little about each other. I don’t know how long you’re going to be here so it seems prudent to gain the deepest psychological understanding of you that I can.” Rose says, folding her arms and smiling slyly.

“That sounded like a lot of word vomit there, Lalonde.” You reply.

“That sounded like a poor evasion, Strider.” She retorts and you must be tired because your mouth twitches in amusement without your permission.

“Oh, before I forget. You have pesterchum, right? We should add each other as friends in case you leave. I can introduce you to my friends, I know they’d love you.” Rose says, sounding genuine this time and she holds out her phone with the pesterchum app open on the ‘add chum’ section. You get your own phone to the same place, and both fill out the boxes, trade back and accept the request.

“tentacleTherapist, I guess that explains the head shrinking you’re trying on.” You note and shove your phone back in your pocket. That just increased your chumroll from one person to two, a 100% increase in one day, you rugged socialite, you. Though you suppose that Dirk and Hal do count as separate people, but they still share the same pesterchum account so they also kind of don’t.

“turntechGodhead, what’s that one all about?” Rose asks, pocketing her own phone too.

“I’m not telling you, I have to keep some of my patented Strider mystery to myself, you know.” You tell her.
“Is that so?” Rose asks lightly.

“Yeah, I can’t just be spilling everything to you. Not at least without getting something back, you can’t hoard your feminine mystique and deprive me of my Strider cool.” You protest, and you notice Dirk leaning around the edge of the doorframe watching you both.

“Do you even know what The Feminine Mystique is?” Rose asks.

“Dirk, come on man, rescue me from this dumb argument.” You plead, and Dirk shakes his head.

“No way, man. Dumb arguments with your siblings that don’t end in violence is normality 101. I’d be remiss if I tried to deprive you of that.” says Dirk, the traitor.

“Are you going to be okay with your ribs?” You ask, remembering how you had to help him out of his shirt the night before.

“No, but it’s fine. Apparently, if I ever want to be able to breathe right again, I’ve got to take the bandages off and just let it hurt. So if you hear a shitload of cursing coming from my way, you’ll know what’s what.” Dirk says. Doctor Hal must be dispensing medical advice to him.

“Do you need painkillers?” Rose asks.

“Nah, your sister already set me up with medical supplies. I’m good. Night you two.” Dirk says and walks off.

You and Rose are left alone again, and she looks at you thoughtfully for a few moments, you’ve absolutely no idea what she’s thinking. It’s not as unnerving as Bro’s blankness is but it’s still unsettling for sure.

“Good night, Dave. I hope you sleep well. Meeting you has been… something.” She says and smiles slightly. She moves out of the room like a breeze. You’re left to shut the door and strip down to your underwear, you make a note to yourself that you’ve gotta get more clothes. When you turn the light off, you’re shocked at how dark it is. Rose’s house is in the middle of some national forest and it’s ink black, nothing like the inescapable light that Houston has. Even in your room at night with the lights off and the curtains drawn light seeps in from the streetlamps and surrounding buildings. In this total darkness you feel like you’re drowning, it feels like Bro is lurking just an inch from you. You fling yourself at your bed at max speed and haul the covers over yourself as if that will do anything. Eventually, nothing murders you in the dark, and you drift off into an uneasy sleep.

You hear the sound of blood rushing in your ears with every heartbeat, like when you’ve got water in your ears. There’s also a sound like a clock, a rhythmic metal ticking sound that doesn’t go away even when you clamp your hands over your ears. You feel heavy and tired and opening your eyes is a herculean effort. An arched red ceiling vaults above you and you turn your head to see gothic open window out into total darkness. The room is entirely red and looks just like your room back home in Houston. You try and sit up, but you feel dizzy like you’re waking up too soon after being clocked in the head.

Burning pain wakes you up, and your hand flies to your bare arm as you feel the familiar sting into your flesh of a mark being made.

“Oh my god just let me fucking sleep.” You hiss.

The pain subsides but the curiosity does not, and so you reluctantly and blindly go to the wall and turn the light on. On the back of your arm is a small green mark, it looks like a weird spirograph, and
you have genuinely no clue what it’s supposed to mean. That was really worth waking up for. You slap the light switch again and crawl into bed once more, you’re too tired to worry about Bro lurking in the dark and you fall asleep once more to a steady tick inside your head.

Morning comes with brilliant dawn light bursting through your window, and you must spend a good few minutes just staring out at the forest and the waterfall around the mansion. You may as well be in a wizard of oz rip off because you ain’t in Texas anymore, Dave. You rush downstairs to find the rest of your siblings (and uncle technically, but fuck that he’s your brother as far as you care) all clustered around the table eating. Dirk slides a cereal bowl in your direction and continues eating.

“Did you sleep okay, Dave?” Roxy asks you perkily as she stirs her coffee.

“Yeah, fine. I mean I got woken up halfway through the night, but yeah.” You answer as you fill your bowl dangerously full with cereal. Now you just need to work out how to get enough milk in here too.

“Did you have a nightmare?” Rose asks curiously, and you haven’t forgotten her comment about wanting to get psychological deets on you, so you’re wary of that question. But, the dream you had wasn’t really a nightmare, it was just odd.

“No, not a nightmare.” you fudge.

“Another one?” Dirk asks, and you can see from the tilt of his head that his gaze is on your arm. You had tensed that hand without even realising it.

You sigh and take off your gloves, Bro isn’t even here so what does it matter if you’re not wearing them? You pull up your sleeve and turn your arm so Dirk can see the new mark.

“Huh, I have no idea what that symbol is.” Dirk says after a moment, and you can see Rose and Roxy craning to see.

“A love of geometry perhaps?” Rose suggests.

“I must confess, I find my own marks very confusing. I got mine earlier than most, and it’s quite a variety of things.” Rose says and slides her own sleeve up.

You peer at her mark as she does the same to yours. In the crook of her elbow black spreads out to her wrist similar to the blood on your own, not a positive colour to be seen on a soul mark in large amounts like that, it looks like a dead mark. But as you look at it, you see that it’s not flat black, there are stars and subtle galaxies in there. It’s space. It joins up every mark on her arm, it surrounds the glittering green-winged bug, a dark blue galaxy cradles speckled eggs, and around the back of her arm, the fabric of space is cinched together with a corset ribbon wound from eyelet to eyelet. It’s beautiful and strange. It’s also very girly, and you wonder if Rose’s soulmate is a girl, you swear this stuff must be contagious.

“Well, you two both have very unusual soul marks, and that’s cool and all. Buuuuut, I can beat you both, two hands down!” Roxy declares, her back to you as she rolls up her sleeves. She dramatically twirls around and slams both arms on the table top. She has two soul marks!

“Two? That’s relatively rare.” Dirk notes as he chews his cereal and pushes the milk towards you. Oh yeah, you’d forgotten your cereal.

“Not as rare as you might think. We don’t get much tv rep but it’s ok, I know how baller my soulmates are.” Roxy brags.
You eye her marks over. One arm is wreathed in wires around the wrist, and an eerily realistic honeycomb structure is set in her forearm with a bee crawling right out of it, only the bee is purple. There’s what appears to be a brain which is coloured in half blue and half red. Her other arm has a red fork digging into it, a hat-wearing figure in front of black shuttered blinds and a cupcake with blue sprinkles on the one side. That’s a pretty disorientating soul mark for sure.

“I kind of think I know who this one is.” Roxy says a little sadly as she taps the arm with the fork on it.

“Oh?” Dirk asks curiously.

“Yeah, she’s one of Rose’s buddy’s older sister. What’re the odds, right?” Roxy laughs.

You say nothing and shove cereal into your mouth. Goddamnit are you the only straight person in this family?

“Well, you’re supposed to be fated to meet them aren’t you? So, pretty good odds.” Dirk points out.

“We talk a lot, her name’s Jane, but the one time I brought it up, she said it couldn’t possibly be her because she’s only into guys.” Roxy sighs and slides her sleeves down again.

“Ouch.” Dirk cringes.

“Hah, yeah. I’m just… so sure that I’m right, though. But maybe I just see something that’s not there. The important part is she’s my friend, and she’s important to me regardless.” Roxy says a little weakly.

“So come on then Uncle Dirk, we’ve all shown ours. Show us yours.” Rose says with a predatory smile.

Dirk sighs begrudgingly but rolls his sleeve up to his armpit and shows everyone.

His mark has come a long way from when he was ten. He’s still got the old-timey compass and the comic book lady, but now they’re accompanied by a crossed pair of pistols and a tranquil beach horizon that wraps around endlessly at Dirk’s elbow.

“Oh, this is a fun one. Exploring or old stuff, comic books or maybe heroes or pop art, beaches and guns. I… hm.” Roxy hums as she squints at it.

“You’re not thinking…” Rose say slowly as she glances at her sister.

“You know, I think I have a picture where you can see Jake’s.” Roxy says, rapidly going through something on her phone. She stops and grins then looks up at Dirk.

“What are your opinions on horses?” Roxy asks, and you laugh loudly, you know alllll about Dirk’s obsession with horses. It’s about the one dorky interest that he has that you get to tease him about.

“Horses are great, shut up Dave.” Dirk snaps.

“You opinion on robots?” Rose asks.

“I’ve been studying robotics, making and programming robots is something I want to do. If I had space at home, I’d already be doing it.” Dirk tells her.

“So a robot horse?” Roxy prompts.
“I cannot think of anything cooler.” Dirk says with a bright grin.

“What about a heart where it’s split in two?” Roxy asks, and your mind immediately flicks to Hal.

“I…” Dirk trails off.

“Or a sword and shield colliding?” Roxy adds.

“I always feel like that’s a reference to the whole unstoppable force and-” Rose starts to explain, but Dirk cuts her off.

“And the immovable object yeah. A weapon that can destroy anything and a shield that can block any blow, the paradox is that they can’t both exist. I’m familiar.” Dirk says, his voice cold. You settle on Bro, and Dirk’s conviction that Bro will never ever stop.

Roxy slides her phone across the table, and you crane your neck to see two tanned people on a beach, sleeves rolled up and flexing with broad grins. You can see the marks that your sisters listed off across his upper arm. The weird part is that when you look at it, you really can see Dirk there and that beach and the clear blue horizon looks just like the one that you’ve fallen asleep against on his arm a hundred times.

“Who is he?” Dirk asks quietly.

“Jake English, also the older sibling of a friend of mine. We can introduce you.” Rose replies.

“Jake English.” Dirk murmurs quietly. You’re sitting side on to him, and you can just see the look in his bare eyes behind his shades, the look of awe and reverence there is clear as day. The thought of your brother kissing a dude still gives you the creeps, but anyone who can make Dirk look like that can’t be wrong, can he?

“Like you said, I guess the odds are pretty good.” Roxy grins as Dirk absently lowers his shirt sleeve again.

“Wait! Let me get a picture of yours!” Rose says hurriedly, and Dirk awkwardly rolls his back up again and turns his arm to best display the mark, and you realise it ends up being close to the flex that the Jake guy was doing. Dirk is going red on his ears despite his perfect poker face.

So you’re just going to ignore that fact that his possible soulmate is a guy for now and just press on with the important questions.

“What’s he like?” You ask Rose as she snaps the picture.

“Oh, I don’t really talk to him much. Roxy does though, they’re friends. But he seems nice, he’s into adventure and making unfortunate Freudian slips. Let me get a picture of you too, I’m sure Jade and John will want to see you. It’s not every day you discover you have a twin, is it?” Rose says, pointing the camera at you now.

You whip yourself instantly into a pose of peace sign and duck-lipped pout, so over the top that no one could possibly accuse you of being sincere. Rose chuckles and shows you the photo, it’s perfect.

“Shit, Rose you-” Dirk’s speech grinds to a halt as you hear a distant metal sound, a key scratching into the lock on the front door. It’s not Bro, it can’t be Bro and yet you and Dirk have both already got your sleeves down and you’re considering your gloves too.

“Betting time Rose, I say six attempts.” Roxy says quietly.
“Four.” Rose counters. The noise stops and then starts again, Roxy and Rose both holding up two fingers now. You hear the sound of keys dropping on concrete and muted cursing. The sound of a key missing the lock comes again, and the count goes to three. Someone is trying and failing to get in, and this is obviously a frequent enough occurrence that the sisters have made a game out of it.

“Girls?” A female voice calls through the door, but Roxy and Rose stay put. The key noise starts up again and this time you hear the lock click open and the door shut a few seconds later. Four attempts.

“Dangit, Rose.” Roxy sighs and Rose flashes her a victorious grin.

A woman comes into the room, rubbing at her face. She is tall, like Bro but ever so slightly shorter. Her hair is the same bright blonde as your own, and you can see in her parts of yourself that differ from Dirk, the parts of yourself that look like Rose and Roxy. She’s your mother.

Her platinum hair is somewhat of a mess, and her black tights are ripped on one knee like she fell over in them. She is wobbling as she walks and only becomes a little more stable when she kicks off a pair of expensive looking high heels and pads through the kitchen in just her tights.

“Oh, girls you wouldn’t believe the night I had.” She groans, smearing her makeup more as she walks by you and Dirk obliviously. She misjudges her distance, and her hips bounce off of a counter as she moves.

“Mother.” Rose says, and you shudder at the same emotionless tone that Bro uses coming from her. How did she get that when she’s never met him? She ignores Rose and pours herself a cup of coffee.

“This overinflated idiot kept going on and on about his research like I cared.” Your mother continues, not even seeming to hear Rose. She shrugs out of the black… thing that she’s wearing. You don’t know the name of it, it’s like if someone just made sleeves and then wrapped it around, so it went around the back and not the front. She pulls it off, leaving just her white clinging dress. As she drops it in the fruit bowl you catch the blacked out soul mark up her arm. What was there once? What pictures did she have that led her to the soul that you’re not totally sure that Bro has?

“Theoretical mathematics, get a real job. Ugh, and the food was ghastly and so fattening too.” Your mother adds as she turns around to face the table and idly pets the back of Roxy’s hair.

“You need a haircut, darling.” She says breezily. And Roxy’s expression becomes pained.

“As drunk and useless as ever Roxanne.” Dirk finally says, his voice venomous.

Your mother’s eyes snap to him, finally seeing him there. Her eyes are wide as she stares at him and the coffee falls from her hand, shattering on the floor.

“Derick.” She breathes, and you only just catch it.

“No, Dirk.” Dirk corrects, leaving you to wonder who the hell Derick is.

“Oh of- of course. You’re so much younger. You look just like he used to.” your mother says, her voice trembling as she stares at Dirk. Your mind puts two and two together and comes up with total disbelief.

“Bro?” You ask quietly.

“Bro’s name is Derick?” you add incredulously. Boy, what a functional family you are, you’ve lived with Bro all of your life, and you don’t actually know his first name. But if you’d had a million years to guess you still wouldn’t have gone with Derick, it doesn’t even sound like a real name. It does
sound supremely nerdy though, no wonder he goes by Bro.

Dirk nods minutely, and you look back at your mother to see her staring at you like you’ve got two heads.

“This is Dave. I’m introducing him to you because I can see you’ve forgotten your only son. Unless of course, you’ve sold any more children of yours since I saw you last, Roxanne.” Dirk says, his every word sharp and cold. Rose and Roxy are glancing between Dirk and their mother warily.

“I did not sell him.” She hisses at Dirk.

“She knows that I’m right here, right?” You ask under your breath to Rose.

“Why break a streak of refusing to acknowledge you when there’s someone she can argue with instead?” Rose mutters to you.

“Rose, it’s not ladylike to mumble. Stop that.” Your mother says without even looking at her or you.

“You didn’t report him kidnapped, you never visited or called. Strangely enough, Bro never tried to do the same with you either, all I can assume is that you exchanged him for your freedom. So, you sold him.” Dirk presses mercilessly.

“He’s his father, he has custody of David, and I have Rose and Roxy. We split up is all.” Your mother argues.

“It’s Dave, actually.” You interject, and your mother actually looks at you this time.

“That’s not what I put on your birth certificate.” She points out.

“So?” You reply and she frowns at you.

“I knew coming here was a bad idea.” Dirk sighs.

“You used to be such a nice boy, Dirk.” Your mother says, and you see Roxy wince. Apparently, that was meant to be hurtful. Dirk does not look hurt.

“Oh, shit. I’m sorry was I meant to be wounded by the evaluation of a woman who can’t even show up to breakfast sober? My bad, I didn’t know.” Dirk drawls coolly.

TT: We can go, any time either of you wants. Just say the word.
TT: I’ll arrange another ride for you.

“You’re just like him.” She huffs, and you see the way Dirk’s back jerks straight, yeah, that one hurt alright.

“Why do you think I had to leave? He was selfish and manipulative, and all he cared about was controlling me and winning arguments.” She says with a shake of her head, the implication still hangs above Dirk, that he is just like Bro.

You shake your head no to all of this.

“You recognised how shitty he was and yet you left Dave and me with him but took Roxy and Rose and escaped. Thanks for that.” Dirk replies sharply.

“Don’t give me that, Dirk. He’s your family, just because he’s a terrible soulmate doesn’t make him a bad father or brother.” She sighs, and you think that this is perhaps meant to make Dirk feel petty.
She’s manipulating him, with more finesse than Bro’s head games which are usually just meant to scare but the process is the same.

“Maybe you didn’t get what kind of guardian Bro was but why didn’t you ever call or visit or even send a card?” You ask your mother.

“It’s not like you could forget when his birthday is, mine is the same day as per the definition of twins.” Rose agrees.

“Your father and I were…” She trails off, one hand going to her blacked out arm.

“It was complicated. When soulmates split up, it can be painful, even if the decision is mutual. A clean break seemed best for everyone, and he wanted to keep you for himself. Maybe he wanted a part of me to stay with him.” She sighs.

You don’t talk about this stuff, ever. Even you and Dirk rarely rehash what Bro did except the occasional commiseration at how fucked up it all is. Last night with Rose was one of the most open that you’ve ever been with it but fuck it, you don’t care anymore. You are entirely out of chill.

“Did he ever try to kill you with a sword?” You ask, your voice flat. Your mother’s face scrunches in distaste, and she sighs as if you are boring her.

“What a ridiculous question.” She says.

“It’s not ridiculous, mom.” Roxy tells her in a quiet and brittle voice.

“Of course it is. Derick was toxic but hardly harmful to children.” your mother says with a dismissive wave.

“He’s the one who jacked up Dirk’s face, I just got him out of the hospital with ribs that your soulmate kicked so hard they broke. He tortures us, mom. Every day we get fucking attacked by swords by an insane man who obviously hates us! You left us there, you ruined mine and Dirk’s lives!” You shout accusingly.

They’re all staring at you and your mother is shaking her head.

“I don’t- he would never.” She protests.

You stare at the woman, still drunk from last night, makeup smeared across her face. You look at her two daughters who despite your mother never laying a hand on them still clearly have scars from her deep down. All the mind games and absences, it all adds up.

“You used to wonder who you were, the person on Bro’s arm. Like, who could ever deserve someone like him? But I get it, you’re just as bad. You two deserve each other.” You spit and hop up off of your seat and flashstep up the stairs.

TT: Dave, I can get you out of here.
TT: Talk to me, please?

You sigh and pull your phone out, you’re not sure which room was yours again in this stupid mansion.

TG: shes awful
TT: I know, Dave.
TT: We knew she was.
TT: We wanted to spare you from this.
TG: rose and roxy aren't awful though
TT: They seem nice, I guess. Shame that they're stuck with your mother.
TG: i don't want to go home to bro
TG: i don't want to stay here with her
TT: Unfortunately those are pretty much your options, kiddo. And I'm not too sure that staying with her is an option actually.
TG: i want to spend more time with rose and roxy while dirk heals
TG: my stupid parents kept them from us for this long
TG: im not gonna let it be longer
TT: Okay, but if you change your mind you know where I am.
TT: She's not in the kitchen if you wanted to go back there.
TG: im good here

You open a door to see an unmade bed, a huge bookcase and a violin. Not your room, you’ve got lost up here.

A hand on your shoulder suddenly. You leap, bounce off of the wall and whirl around with your sword in hand. The tip of it is mere inches from Rose’s wide eyes.

“Shit.” You curse and stow your sword in your strife specibus again.

“I- no. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. Am I… may I touch you or is it just surprise that’s bad? I have read that physical abuse on young children can lead to touch aversion, and I can’t recall if we made contact last night or not.” Rose says, and you gape at her. Who reads this kind of stuff? What ten-year-old reads this kind of stuff? No normal ten-year-old that’s for sure.

“Just don’t sneak up on me.” You mutter and wipe your sweaty hands on your jeans.

“Noted. Do you want to come in? That’s my room that you opened.” Rose says calmly, like you didn’t just pull a sword on her.

“Whatver.” You shrug, you don’t care. You don’t. Your heart is still hammering but it wasn’t Bro, it was just Rose.

Rose slides past you into her room and drops into her desk chair, it’s one of those fancy supportive ones and not the bald stuffing leaking one that you and Dirk share. For lack of a better place to sit you end up cross-legged on her bed.

“What’s with the unsettling goth squid posters?” You ask, jerking your thumb at the wall.

“Have you ever heard of H.P. Lovecraft? He wrote plenty of books on eldritch horrors like the one on that poster. He was a fascinating and terribly paranoid man.” Rose says, rising from her chair and pulling a book from her bookcase. She walks over to you and holds it out. It is black and gold on the cover, and you’re not totally sure that you want to take it, but you do anyway.

“He was afraid of all sorts of things, marine life, the unknowable horror of the cosmos, non-Euclidian geometry, the list goes on.” Rose says airily, you think she enjoys people telling her that she’s smart. Maybe it’s something that your mother praises her on, something that she’s good at and so she’s stuck with it. You could level the same at you with music and Bro, sure you enjoy it, but you also like doing something that he expresses approval of sometimes and makes him less likely to attack you.

“Those seem reasonable, man. Get off his dick about his fears.” You say, although you’re not sure about that geometry thing.
“Are you also afraid of salad like he was?” Rose asks with a twitch of amusement on her lips.

“You know I’m from Texas, right?” You reply, not one to back out of doubling down on a joke even if you are kind of also insulting yourself. She snorts in amusement, and you feel a vague sense of winning.

“I guess this isn’t the kind of thing you read for fun.” Rose says eventually as you flick through the pages in bafflement.

“I don’t really get a lot of books outside of school. That shit costs money, you know?” you say absently.

“Ah, yes. Apologies. You’re welcome to borrow that book or any really from me, though I will warn you that Lovecraft was also a massive racist, but he did his eldritch horror very well.” Rose sighs.

You close the book, you’re not sure that you want to borrow this book, but maybe something else. You’re kind of interested to see what your teachers would say if you handed in a book report on this book though, that could be funny.

“Have you ever read this?” You ask, popping Ender’s Game out of your sylladex and handing it to her.

“I haven’t, but I have heard of it. Is it good?” Rose asks, reading the back cover of the book curiously. You make an indecisive noise in your throat.

“May I borrow it? You’re welcome to anything on my shelf in return.” Rose offers, and curiously you go to her shelf and start looking.

Dirk finds the pair of you several hours later sprawled on Rose’s bed immersed in each other’s books. You’re reading Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep, if only because Hal had squawked at you in delight when you found the title. You see Dirk looking at you, and you see the slight smile on his face and you hope that he thinks that this wasn’t a mistake. Your parents suck, but the rest of your family rules and besides isn’t you being happy what he wants? You suppose that it must be because he doesn’t disturb you or ask you to leave.

You spend three straight weeks there before you and Dirk decide that you have to go home, Dirk says that if you don’t Bro will start looking for you. Even if you hate the idea of going home, you hate the idea of exposing Rose and Roxy to him more.

During your stay, Hal is discovered by Roxy who, as it turns out, is every bit the computer genius that Hal said she was. She’s absurdly delighted to meet him, and Hal adores her from their first conversation. He’s enthusiastic enough about talking to her that he finally makes his own Pesterchum account separate from Dirk’s.

Hal doesn’t take to Rose so much because she keeps trying to run psychological tests on him to see if he’s a real person or just a very well programmed fake. You refuse to talk to her for two days until she agrees to stop. Roxy and Dirk get on famously, and you hope that maybe Dirk and Roxy will figure out that there’s someone else who understands, just like you and Rose did when you first met.

You think that your mother is trying to be nice to you, but it’s hard to tell. Dirk can sometimes be hard to read, but you can tell what he means most of the time, this woman is a total mystery by comparison. She gets Dirk to a dentist to fix his tooth in the first few days, and you’re roped into your first ever dental check up. That’s so not fun, why is it okay for someone to just have their hands in your mouth?! You manage to only bite the dentist once and happily, there’s nothing really wrong
with your teeth. She buys you both clothes but also new phones and laptops which Hal happily ingratiates himself into. All of you manage to keep Hal a secret from her. Dirk is happy to take her money but is pretty clear that she can’t buy the affections of either of you. You have to wonder if this is the only way that she knows how.

Rose introduces you to her friends, John who is a ridiculous dork and so painfully sincere and eager about everything, and Jade who is also an over enthusiastic nerd and about the happiest person you’ve ever spoken to. They’re both absurdly delighted to talk to you, and they get added to your chumroll too. Jade is the one who has the older brother who may or may not be Dirk’s soulmate. Dirk is trying to not talk to him too much, and you manage to catch him pacing his room anxiously as he waits for Jake to reply to one of his messages. You add him to your chumroll as well, briefly.

[RturntechGodhead began pestering golgothasTerror]

TG: hey jake
GT: Hello?
GT: I’m not sure that I know who you are
TG: its dave
TG: dirks bro
GT: Oh my!
GT: Well how nice to finally speak to you. Jade speaks very highly of you indeed and says that you’re a swell young man.
TG: im 90000% sure she did not say those words
GT: Words to that effect at least young man
TG: holy fuck its like listening to a thesaurus fuck casablanca
GT: Dave!
TG: whatev
TG: i just wanted to say one thing
TG: be nice to dirk
GT: Oh, is this the cliche where a loving family member gives this speech? ‘Be good to him or else I give you a seeing to.’ Is that it?
TG: gross
GT: I… ah… that may have come off wrong and I am suddenly pressingly aware that you are only ten.
TG: theres no or
TG: just be nice to dirk
TG: he deserves people being nice to him
TG: i mean i guess the or is like or else youll be the jerk who was mean to my brother
TG: so if that scares you then i guess that
TG: it should scare you really
TG: thatd be super bad
TG: i dont need to do shit
TG: not that i could because youre a bajillion miles away on hellmurder island
GT: That’s not actually the name but I get your point chap.
GT: I think that Dirk is a charming young man and I appreciate the chance to make new friends. I hardly get out much on this island!

You block him after that. If he is Dirk’s soulmate, then you’re pretty sure that the guy is completely oblivious to it.

You’re spread out on the back seat of another hired car with your head in Dirk’s lap as he watches
streetlights go by outside. You had been talking to Jade, but she had to go do something with Jake, so you’re left with no one awake to talk to but Dirk and Hal.

“What’re we gonna tell Bro when we get back? We can’t tell him where we really were.” You say uneasily.

“I’ll say we were on the streets and then we stayed in a hostel.” Dirk answers without even looking at you.

“Is he even going to let you back in? He knows that you’re… you know.” You mumble, saying that Dirk is gay out loud is still weird for you.

“I’ll… lie. I’ll say that some kid at school asked me to, some stupid dare or something. Or that he was right I was wrong, and I’ll change or whatever.” Dirk says bitterly, and you can just tell that it’s going to kill Dirk to do that. That’s not just being in the closet, that’s getting back in there and bricking the doorway back up after yourself.

“Isn’t that going to be hard on you?” You ask and Dirk looks down at you.

“Not as hard as leaving you alone with him would be. Don’t worry about me, man.” Dirk says softly and plucks your shades off of your face and drops a blanket over you.

“Get some sleep, Dave.” Dirk tells you quietly and you decide that you will. Tomorrow you’ll be back home and you know it won’t be a fun day at all.

“Hey wait, gimme those.” You say and grab your glasses back.

“Hey, Hal. How many days until Dirk turns eighteen?” You ask with a grin.

[autonomousTerminal began pestering turntechGodhead]
AT: There are 1,129 days until Dirk turns eighteen, Dave.
AT: Now go to sleep.

“Dirk, 1,129 days until we’re free. It’s gonna be great.” You tell him and Dirk smiles ever so slightly.

“Get some sleep and soon it’ll be 1,128.” He says and takes your shades back again. You settle your head against Dirk’s thigh and let the rumble of the car’s engine lull you to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

So the double Dave spam is over, the next chapter is a Karkat one and it’s set precisely 1,130 days after this chapter. >:D

EDIT: fixed some time stuff here too, sorry
Karkat: Sweep him off his feet

You washed your hair like crazy last night and this morning when you showered there was still red coming out in the water. A group of your bullies ganged up on you and dunked you in all of the red dye that they could find, they stole your shoes and your phone and made it so that you had to walk home. Boy, you have never seen your guardians that angry. You’re not even that angry, right now you’re not mad at much at all. You’re just tired of this bullshit. Every year of school since you were five and you’re thirteen now and just… you’ve accepted that people fucking suck.

The small things help, like how your skin isn’t stained anymore, just your claws and horns and even your tiny horns aren’t too tinted. It helps that you still get marks from your soulmate, although you’ve yet to show anyone the one that popped up last night. At the tip of the sword on your arm is the white outline of a body in a large puddle of red, it felt numb and whited out all of your other feelings, but you also got a sense of relief. You have no idea what it means but you’re not totally sure if you want to share it with anyone else right now.

You dry your hair, don’t bother to style it and head downstairs. No one else is home besides your ancestor. Because you were ‘involved’ in the incident with the dye you got excluded from school as well as the assholes who did it to you. How’s that for fair? Signless is angrily lecturing on the phone but by the time you get down to him he has hung up and is leaning over the table with his phone resting face up on it.

“I am taking you all out of that school.” Signless says, already knowing that you’re there.

“I mean, they did that for you with me already technically.” You point out and lean against the wall.

“It’s not right. I’m going to transfer you all to another school in a different area, somewhere where you can all get a fresh start. I refuse to allow this damaging treatment to continue when there is no semblance of justice for any wrongdoing!” Signless insists.

“You’re not going to get any argument from me; I hate that fucking place.” You growl in anger.

“This is not what I wanted for you.” he says and gives you a wounded look, as if your mere existence like this pains him. This shit doesn’t happen to Kankri or at least he is so insufferable that no one wants to hang around him enough to even bully him.

“Don’t you have work? You can just leave me here; I feel ashamed enough that you’re getting screwed over by this too.” You sigh, but Signless shakes his head.

“You’re not of legal age where you can be left alone in the house. I have to stay here with you.” He tells you.

“Look, I know that you work for like an extreme fucking number of government agencies from like… space liaison to social worker for trolls and crime prevention stuff for the cops but you don’t actually have to report yourself for this not-really-a-crime crime. You could just, and here’s a radical notion, trust me not to burn the house down.” You point out.

Signless smiles at you, at least partially amused by your rant.

“I want to be here with you. I need time to plan what to do with the schools, and I don’t like the idea of you being alone and stewing over what happened. I know what you’re like, Karkat.” He says gently and reaches out to tap your forehead.
You chew on your lip in thought; you probably would sit around all day feeling shitty and obsessing over what happened or obsessing over your new mark. Perhaps you could even push the boat out and do both! Yeah, it probably is better to just hang out with Signless.

“We could watch something since we won’t have to fight anyone for the TV.” You suggest.

“That sounds great.” He smiles back.

The two of you are on the threshold of the room when his phone rings again. Signless groans and traipses over to it, squinting at the display before answering.

“Signless. I- yes nice to hear from you too Redglare but- no- no listen to me Redglare, I can’t do any work for you today. It’s a family matter, my descendant is having problems with school, and I have to stay here and watch him. No, I understand you have a case but… oh. But a human you say?” Signless says, his frustration turning to intrigue. You see him chewing on his lip as he thinks and Redglare talks to him.

You know Redglare a little bit. She’s the District Attorney for the whole state and hugely powerful, she’s also one of Signless’ followers, and she tends to drag him into unusual cases where his mediation abilities and cultural sensitivities are needed. He also helps set up activist groups for changes in the law for trolls and humans alike and working with Redglare he makes real change.

“Well, when did this happen? I see. How old is the boy? Oh. No, no I understand. But you want me to determine if you’re right or whether it’s just a garden variety murder?” Signless says, and your ears prick up in interest. Murder? What murder?

“Look I would love to help you, and I certainly see where you are coming from but I cannot possibly bring Karkat with me, and I can’t leave him here alone.” Signless protests.

“You can take me with you! I want to see a crime scene!” You insist, and you can hear Redglare cackling on the other end of the line.

“It is hardly appropriate Karkat. Wh- no it does not matter that the body is not there any longer Redglare, honestly!” your ancestor squawks.

“Come on, it’ll be better than being stuck here all day, and you need to work. I’ll feel better about not keeping you from your job, you know I’ll feel guilty, but here you are just condemning me to my fate.” You insist, and Signless narrows his eyes at you.

“Redglare, I couldn’t possibly. Thank you. So what will happen to the case now?” Signless asks.

You watch at his face becomes more and grimmer as Redglare explains something to him.

“No, no, that doesn’t need to happen. That’s not right. But it’s just Karkat and-” Signless says weakly, and you give him your best innocent expression and the man buckles.

“Fine. Fine, I’ll help you out. But I don’t owe you any longer. I’ll need to pick the files up and… what do you mean that they’ll be here any minute? I only just agreed! There is- there is no way that you could have known that I would agree!” Signless says indignantly, and you catch a bout of laughter before Redglare hangs up.

“That woman, I swear.” Signless grumbles as he hangs up.

It would have been more cinematically fitting if the files had been delivered right away but it took the courier a good fifteen minutes to show up and when he did Signless wouldn’t even let you read the
files.

“Well I’m going, can you at least tell me what’s so unique about this case that you had to get involved?” You ask, leaning over the table as your ancestor reads. He sighs and shuts the file.

“Alternian law was a complicated beast, often resting more on the whims of the jury and the judge than the actual law. Not entirely dissimilar from here but plenty of things that are illegal here are totally fine on Alternia.” He explains.

“I know this.” you groan.

“Tell me about legal killings then.” Signless challenges you, and so you sit up.

“Well, if you were a highblood then basically anything was, unless you were targeting your own or higher. You could kill someone who murdered a quadrantmate of yours but again the hemospectrum was a spanner in the works of that law. I think that’s about it?” You say with a frown.

“This is all true, but there were no laws against killing another troll’s lusii or even your own. Nor were there any laws against them killing trolls. If a lusii killed a troll, it was generally assumed that the troll had it coming or was threatening the lusii’s young troll. Of course, humans and also trolls growing up here don’t have lusii, we have parents.” Signless says grimly.

“So… a parent was killed?” You guess.

“Yes and no, this young man’s parent died, leaving behind a younger brother and a son. The police have decided that this is accidental death, but Redglare disagrees. She thinks that on Alternia this would be legal.” He tells you, his fingers tapping on the file.

“She thinks that the brother murdered the father. The evidence that she is presenting for this is a feeling in her gut, the suspicions of one officer and the total lack of evidence of any wrongdoing.” Signless says with a frown.

“Wait, she has no evidence at all?” You ask in confusion.

“None. Everything about this case is entirely open and shut. She finds that suspicious. You can argue motive or give circumstantial evidence for almost any person to harm any other person that they know, just being involved in someone’s life is messy. She thinks that this is too clean. But, if this is just a regular murder over money, love or something else petty then she’s going to hunt this guy until she can lock him away forever. But if he acted as a lusii and protected his charge then she’ll look the other way and pretend it was an accident.” Signless explains.

“Holy shit. That is fucked up. She’s just given you the choice to decide whether to send a man to jail for life or not, hell he might even end up on death row. That’s a huge thing!” You gasp in awe.

“It is, and I wouldn’t be telling you if not for the fact that I can’t leave you here all day and I don’t want you interfering in something so important. You can come with, but please stay out of things. Redglare and I agree that doing the right thing is more important than what the law says is right, laws can and should change. Now come on, we need to go.” Signless says, standing up.

You scramble after him; this is way more interesting than school. Signless still refuses to let you see more of the file. Apparently, he does not view confidentiality as a binary thing, and you fail to convince him that since he’s already told you that this may well be a murder he may as well tell you and show you all of it.

The two of you drive to packed central Houston where it’s nothing but skyscrapers for miles around.
You park on the street by one building and Signless checks the address before getting out.

“How did you say this guy died again?” You ask curiously.

“I didn’t, but he fell from the roof.” Signless says and shuts his door. You turn around and look at the building. It’s absurdly high, and you stand on the sidewalk and stare up at the top of it. No human could survive that fall. At the corner of the building you spy the telltale yellow and black of police tape and catch a smear of red on the sidewalk before Signless pulls you inside, telling you not to look.

The inside of the building is really shitty and run down, and you get the distinct feeling that you’re in the bad part of town. The elevator in the building is broken, and so you and your ancestor are forced to climb approximately fifty billion stairs to get to the top floor which is zero fun in your sweater and the air conditioner free hallway.

“If you think this is hot you should have seen Alternia during the day when we’d travel to escape people pursuing us, that was hot!” Signless says cheerfully, and you try not to throw him down the stairs in revenge.

Signless knocks on the door and it’s almost immediately opened by a blonde guy in stupid pointy shades. You stare at him as your ancestor explains who he is and that he’s there with social services and the police and then apologising for you being there, blah, blah, blah. You tune him out and stare at him. Those glasses… you’ve seen them before. Maybe from the cartoons that Damara is into or something but that’s not ringing any bells. It’s only when you focus on the shape and stop thinking of them as glasses that the connection becomes obvious. Those linked black triangles on your soulmark shield, the triangles with the red dot and the orange dot, they’re glasses like those!

“It’s just Dirk, Dir…k. I don’t use my full name. Come on in, please.” The man says, stepping back from the door and welcoming you in. You go inside and try not to look freaked out at finally having a breakthrough on what part of your soulmark means, you finally have a point of research to go on with that thing.

“Please, have a seat.” Dirk says, gesturing to an old sofa. You sit on the edge and look around the room. The place is pretty worn down, there are all kinds of small holes in the walls over the place, but you’ve no idea from what. There’s a kind of desk with a bunch of electrical equipment on it, but when you see the turntables on it you feel strange, two similarities to your mark one after the other?

“Do you two want anything to drink? I’ve got lemonade, water, apple juice, orange juice…” Dirk trails off awkwardly.

“How kind! Water would be lovely for me, Karkat?” Signless says and glances at you.

“Uh, lemonade I guess?” You say, and Dirk nods and walks the short distance into the tiny kitchen. Then again you suppose that any kitchen that doesn’t have to serve at least eleven people at once seems small to you.

Dirk returns with drinks for all of you and sits down a little uneasily on a bean bag, he looks like he regrets his choice of an undignified chair but he’s not backing down from it.

“First of all I just wanted to say that I’m so sorry for your loss.” Signless says, and Dirk nods a little stiffly.

“Thanks. It’s a bit strange being the adult in this situation. The last time I had social services in my
home about the death of a parent and living with a brother instead I was the kid.” Dirk says, his fingers drumming on the glass of juice.

“Yes, I understand that your parents died when you were young and your older brother raised you and Dave alone, is that correct?” Signless asks, opening his folder and looking inside.

“That’s right.” Dirk agrees.

“What was your brother like?” Signless asks, looking up from the file to Dirk.

“Insular, I suppose. I don’t know that he had any friends. He worked as DJ but also had a lot of online businesses for a range of things, so I don’t think he spent much time with other people. I guess it’s weird to think about it, but in a club people aren’t really allowed to interrupt the DJ. I spent more time with Dave than he did, really.” Dirk answers. Huh, he seems awfully calm for a guy whose older brother just died. You can’t stand Kankri, but you’d be in pieces if he died, you know you would.

“Listen, you’re here about Dave, right? Not my brother.” Dirk says suddenly, sitting up properly and setting his glass on the table.

“You’re very prepared.” Signless says as he reads.

“I’m not willing to lose any more family.” Dirk says firmly, and it sounds almost scripted to your ears. Are you only hearing that because Signless made you think that he is a murderer? He doesn’t look like a murderer to you.

“I still have a few more questions about your older brother.” Signless says, setting the papers on the table carefully.

“I have the police report here but could you tell me briefly how he died and, again I am sorry for my son being here, not in graphic detail.” Signless asks with a wince.

“Right, of course. He came home last night drunk; it was his birthday. Mine too actually, though not the same year obviously. He was really drunk, and he went up onto the roof as he often did and he
was talking to me about… I don’t know, nothing really, meaningless stuff. He lost his footing and fell. He always used to go too close to the edge but he was always so in control that I stopped worrying about it, but I guess I should have. I called the police, and the rest is history I guess.” Dirk answers.

“How was your relationship with him?” Signless presses.

“We were brothers; we were a lot alike I guess. We’d rub each other up the wrong way sometimes, but that happens. I got on better with Dave, we’re closer in age anyway.” the human replies and you wish you could see his eyes, it’d make telling if he was lying or not easier.

“And how do you and Dave get on?” Signless asks.

For the first time, you see a real smile spread across Dirk’s face, teeth and all.

“Dave’s a great kid. He’s smart and funny, he’s really talented too. We get on great. I mean, sometimes he drives me nuts but when you share a room with someone that’s just going to happen now and then, you know?” Dirk explains.

“Oh, I know. My kids have had to share rooms before, and that certainly did get noisy in our house.” Signless laughs and you see Dirk relax ever so slightly.

“Okay so, we have you and your brother, you and Dave but how did Dave and your brother get on?” your ancestor asks, and you see Dirk tense right back up. There’s something there in that question.

“Well, Dave is big into music like Bro is, so they had that in common. Bro would teach him things sometimes. Sometimes they’d play video games together. But they weren’t that close. Like I said, Bro was kind of a loner.” Dirk answers, his voice calm and controlled. You’re pretty sure that he’s lying.

“I see. You’re eighteen now, as of yesterday. I see that you’ve immediately applied to be Dave’s legal guardian, which you can only do at eighteen.” Signless says, reading from his file.

“I don’t want Dave in foster care when his home is here with me, of course I filed everything I needed to quickly.” Dirk answers immediately.

“No, I understand that. Tell me, Dirk, did your brother ever hurt you or Dave?” Signless asks casually, and Dirk doesn’t move at all, not even a flinch of shock.

“No.” He answers simply.

“Have you ever hurt Dave?” Signless asks calmly.

“Absolutely not.” Dirk says firmly.

“Okay, some questions I have to ask by obligation you understand. I need to talk to Dave now without you there, if I have any questions I’ll come to find you. Karkat, could you come with me please?” Signless asks and you quickly down the last of your lemonade and follow after your ancestor.

“Last room down the hall, he should be awake now. We were up late last night obviously.” Dirk calls after you both, but his face still has no expression on it. You’re unnerved, and you can see why Redglare thinks that he’s responsible for his brother’s death.
Your ancestor knocks on the door and a muted ‘yeah?’ comes from inside and he opens the door.

Inside you see a boy of your age down on one knee before an open window, there’s a black bird sitting there and he’s photographing it. At your entrance the bird, a crow perhaps, flies off with a caw and the boy takes the camera away from his face and slides his sunglasses down from his blonde hair and over his eyes. You catch a flash of his face in full as the aviators come down and your chest goes tight as you realise that he is perhaps the most beautiful boy you have ever seen.

“Oh. Are you cops? Are… cops taking their kids to work now?” The boy asks, presumably looking at you but you can’t tell with those shades on his face.

“Hello Dave, I’m not a cop. I work with a few departments, but today I’m here from social services.” Signless says, and you watch the way this boy’s body goes tense as if your ancestor had just said that he was from the child murder squad.

“Uh. Hi.” The boy, Dave, says. His name is Dave. God, he’s pretty. You kind of hate him a little for it but also not at the same time.

“May I take a seat?” Your ancestor asks, pointing to a chair.

“Have at it. And who’s this?” Dave asks, pointing at you. Oh, he is looking your way now. You feel like you might barf, you’ve never felt like this before. You try to say your name, but it gets strangled in your throat.

“What?” Dave asks, and you can see a frown there now.

“Karkat,” you manage, “my name is Karkat. Hi.”

You hold out your hand like a total moron, and he just stares at you. After a second of you awkwardly holding your hand out Dave raises his camera and takes a picture of you.

“Ha, ha. Nice.” Dave smirks as he looks down at his camera.

“Hey!” You protest. Just because he’s pretty doesn’t mean that he gets to mock you.

“Couldn’t resist.” Dave says and looks back at your ancestor.

“Please, have a seat. No need to stand around awkwardly as we go through this.” Signless says, and Dave reluctantly sits down. You don’t have to sit down so you look around his room as much as you can without obviously snooping.

Your ancestor is confirming things with him, his age, name, what school he goes to and so on. You keep an ear on it, but it’s a little boring right now.

Your eyes land on another table of electronic equipment like the one out in the main room, more DJ gear with turntables just like the ones inked on your arm.

“Is this yours?” You blurt out, pointing to it and Dave looks around at you. Signless doesn’t look especially annoyed at you interrupting, and when Dave starts to answer he watches carefully.

“Yeah, man. Bro got me into it; he’s really good. Dirk uses them sometimes, but it’s mostly just me. I’m not as good as Bro yet but… I guess now I have all the time in the world to catch up to him. It’s not like he’s getting any better now.” Dave says, the enthusiasm for it bleeding out the moment he seems to remember that his father or ‘Bro’ is dead.
“I’m very sorry for your loss.” Signless says gently.

“It’s fine. It just doesn’t feel real yet, you know?” Dave shrugs, and your heart breaks a little for him.

“Can you tell me what he was like, Dave?” Signless asks softly.

“I mean… what do you want to know?” Dave asks, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. The guy is wearing fingerless leather gloves, it’s the dumbest thing you’ve ever seen. You still want to kiss him a little bit, what the hell is wrong with you today?

“Anything.” Your ancestor says calmly. You get what he’s trying to do; he’s trying to compare what Dave will say to what his brother said.

“I guess… he was a weird guy. Super cool though, like ice cold. He was an awesome DJ, and he was big into like… puppets. His room that he worked in is on the other end of the hall, past the main room. He didn’t even sleep in there, he just worked. It’s all puppets and computer stuff.” Dave says and shudders at part of that.

“You didn’t like that?” Signless asks curiously.

“Puppets creep me out. But, I guess it was cool that he could convince other people who for some reason like the things to buy them.” Dave shrugs.

“And what can you tell me about Dirk?” Signless asks.

You remember how Dirk went from measured answers on Bro to genuine affection and enthusiasm when talking about Dave and the same thing happens here to Dave when he starts to talk about Dirk. They clearly like each other far more than they liked Bro.

“Oh, man. He’s a fucking genius, I swear. If he wasn’t here looking out for me he could be schooling all those idiots at MENSA and be president of twenty colleges by now. Like, you know the fetch moduses for the sylladex? Well, Dirk was the one who made the tech hop modus, he cracked that out in three weeks.” Dave enthuses.

“How does it work?” You ask, and Dave turns to you excitedly.

“So your cards are set out in a square or a rectangle, and you have shade columns and groove rows. Anything you put in a shade column has to rhyme with everything else in the same column, but you do get to name the item yourself. So you could put a skateboard and a rope in the same shade column if you called them ‘board’ and ‘cord’. But then everything in the same groove row has to all be under the same theme, so if your theme was skate gear you could put a helmet in that row but not a car but you could put a car there if your theme was things with wheels. It’s super cool.” Dave explains, his obvious admiration for his brother/uncle showing through clear as day.

“That’s very impressive. It’s clear that you admire him very much.” Signless says with a smile.

“And how was Dirk and Bro’s relationship?” Signless asks, and Dave visibly tenses at the question.

“They were… all siblings fight, right? They’d disagree on things; there were things about Dirk that Bro didn’t like but they were pretty different people too. They didn’t hang out much.” Dave answers.

“When you say fight do you mean that they argued or was it something more? Did Bro and Dirk ever physically fight?” Signless asks.

“No.” Dave answers with the same kind of robotic flat tone the Dirk had used. Yeah, you can see
why Redglare is suspicious.

“I want to stress that you’re not in any trouble, Dave. But I need to know. Did Bro ever hurt you in any way?” Signless presses.

“No.” Dave replies again.

“Okay, and-” Signless starts to say but Dave cuts him off.

“Before you ask, Dirk would never hurt me and never has. He’d rather throw himself into a volcano than hurt me. He’s the one who’s been looking after me my whole life. Bro dying is… fucked up but nothing is really going to change. Dirk has been doing all the heavy lifting in this house my whole life. So don’t insult him by asking if he’d ever do something like that to me.” Dave says, his voice is fierce. That at least you buy, not like Dave’s stilted answers about Bro.

Signless is watching Dave with interest, seeming to stare him down about his answer or perhaps just judging the truth about it. A loud caw breaks the silence, and you jump when you see a huge black feathered bird on the ledge of Dave’s open window.

“Aw, shit, sorry. I forgot to feed you for taking your picture.” Dave curses and stands up; he rifles through his pocket until he pulls out a peanut and hands out to the bird who takes it from his fingers.

“Is that your pet?” Signless asks curiously.

“What? No. There’s just a bunch of them that live around here, and we have a deal where if they stay still and let me photograph them then they get a peanut. Crows are really smart birds so they get it, but they get real judgemental if they think you’ve cheated them.” Dave explains, seemingly calmer to be back on more neutral topic.

One of your more recent marks on your arm starts to tingle; it’s a bird of some sort, or rather a shadow with a skeleton in it. It came up when you were about eleven, and it’s always held a sense of wonder, a grim fascination to see how things tick deep down inside. You feel it now as Dave feeds the crow and you notice that above the window are a bunch of jars with things inside, including a few skeletons. God that’s creepy, and you live with Aradia.

“Do you know a lot about birds? Or bird skeletons? Could you tell me what a bird was from its skeleton?” You ask suddenly, and Dave turns to look at you curiously. Or you think he looks curious; it’s hard to tell with those stupid round shades on his face. At least they’re not the pointy ones like his brother.

“I could try. I’m more familiar with corvids than other types but yeah. Gotta say though that if you whip out a bird skeleton in my room I’ll be a little creeped out by you, dude.” Dave snorts.

“No, it’s not a real one. It’s a mark.” You explain and pull your sweater sleeve back, exposing the back of your forearm. Dave crosses the room and leans over a little to look at your shadowy bird with the skeleton inside it.

“Huh. That’s a pretty cool mark. I think you are actually looking at a crow there. Maybe a raven, it’s hard to tell without scale but I’d say crow. It’s one of these guys.” Dave tells you and pulls another peanut from his pocket and leans out the window with a whistle. A big black crow lands on his arm, and Dave gingerly brings it inside.

“Forget and trash my room.” Dave tells it but holds the bird up for you to look at as it pulls the peanut from Dave’s fingers.
“They’re really smart. If you attack a crow then it’ll tell all the other crows about it, and then even crows who didn’t see what you did will single you out for revenge, they do mob people. Real Hitchcock ‘the birds’ style, you know?” Dave says, and the crow bobs on his hand and tilts his head this way and that to look at you and Signless.

Its feathers are glossy black with a blue oil slick sheen to them, and its intelligent brown eyes regard you carefully. It nuzzles its beak into Dave’s hand looking for more food and then up to his shoulder where it nibbles at the arms of his sunglasses. You catch a small smile from Dave, and you momentarily forget how breathing works.

“I think it’s a crow, I’ve got a skeleton of one just up here if you wanna see.” Dave says and takes the bird from his shoulder and puts it on the window ledge again. It caws at him, and Dave sits back on his bed once more.

“Is this an archaeology thing? Is that what you want to do when you grow up? One of my children is very into archaeology right now.” Signless says.

“It’s more paleontology, and maybe, I don’t know if I wanna do that yet, but I think it’s cool.” Dave answers with a shrug and the crow flies off.

Dave and Signless continue talking, and you tune them out as you stare at the bird skeleton. Your mind churns, your ancestor thinks that Dirk pushed his brother off of the roof to protect Dave, like a shield. Like the shield on your arm with his glasses on it. Dave is into crows and dead things, like the skeletal crow you have. He DJ’s with the equipment on the other side of the room that you also have etched onto your skin and Bro died last night, at the same kind of time that your bloodied body outline came onto your skin.

You think that Dave is very probably your soulmate. If only you could see his arm, but he’s wearing long sleeves and those dumb gloves so you can’t get a look.

“Do you know who I work for, Dave?” Signless asks with a sigh. Crap, they’d been talking as you were coming to your totally obvious revelation and now you’ve missed stuff. Dave doesn’t look pleased though, and Signless looks tense too.

“I do some work for social services, yes, but District Attorney Redglare is the one who sent me today. She thinks that there is more to this case than meets the eye and I happen to agree. You’ve already told me that Dirk provided for you when Bro did not, making the man negligent at the very least if not outright abusive.” Signless says calmly. Dave is perfectly still and silent.

“I realise that Dirk was a child for a lot of the time and was only a legal adult yesterday, but if he was aware of this level of negligence towards you and did nothing to report it, then I’m sure you can see how that wouldn’t look good for him. Why would we award him custody if he didn’t reach out for help for you?” Signless continues.

“Of course, if there were mitigating circumstances I’m sure we would understand. If, for example, Dirk feared violent retribution from your father against either himself or you. So, I ask again, is there any reason that Dirk would have kept quiet?” he presses.

Dave grits his teeth, his hands tensing on the edge of the bed.

“Unless it’s Dirk that you are afraid of?” Signless prods and Dave’s head whips up.
“No, not ever. But… fine, if it’s tell you or lose Dirk then-” Dave cuts himself off and runs his hands through his shining blonde hair, it’s so fair coloured. You want to touch it, but you’re well aware that this is hugely inappropriate.

“Yeah, fine. Bro used to beat the shit out of both of us regularly. He was into sword fighting we had to be too no matter what we wanted. Dirk always got the worst of it, partly to protect me and partly because Bro hated Dirk. Though clearly Bro didn’t like either of us, he was a fucking psychopathic sadist, but he hated Dirk the most. If Dirk ever went to the cops we’d get split up, and Bro would probably hunt us down anyway, he’d likely kill Dirk.” Dave blurts out, and your eyes widen. Swords too then, another match to your arm. Also, that sounds like a hell of a lot like a murder motive to you.

“I’m very sorry that happened to you Dave, no child should have to experience that.” your ancestor says sympathetically, but Dave doesn’t look like he appreciates his words at all.

“Do you think that knowing all of this Dirk may have taken actions into his own hands?” Signless asks carefully.

“Sure he did.” Dave answers simply. Your eyes widen, did Dave just admit that Dirk is a murderer?

“We had a plan; he applied for custody of me this morning. He’s had the form filled out for weeks. It was always our plan that as soon as Dirk could make it so that Bro wasn’t my legal guardian anymore that we’d get the hell out of here and never see Bro again. Sure he can’t get us now, but I never wanted this. We had all kinds of plans for moving out on our own, and now I don’t know what we’ll do. Please don’t take me away from Dirk, please.” Dave begs. He hadn’t even realised that Signless was implying that Bro’s death was anything but an accident.

Signless leans back in his chair silently and chews on his lip, seeming to assess Dave. The quiet hangs between them for ages until you can’t take it anymore, you have to know.

“Can I see your soulmark?” You ask, way too loudly. Dave whips around to look at you, and again you really wish you could read his expression without those glasses in the way.

“Dude, what?” He asks incredulously.

“Your soulmark, can I see it?” You repeat yourself; you can understand him being blindsided by your question.

“Nah.” Dave answers simply.

“Karkat, why are you interested in this?” Signless asks in confusion.

“Because I think he might be my soulmate, I mean look. The crow, the skeleton, the record stuff, the swords, that shield with Dirk’s glasses on them and last night this showed up, an outline of a body with blood. That’s the same time that he died, isn’t it? I know this isn’t the best moment but-” You insist, rolling up your sleeve.

“You fucking think?” Dave says sharply.

“I’m sorry, shit, that was tactless. But my point remains, I think that you’re my soulmate. Can you just show me your arm so that I can see your mark?” You apologise, but Dave skirts away from you and towards the wall.

“Karkat, I’m not really sure that this is the right moment for this. Dave doesn’t look comfortable with this so I think you should calm down a little.” Signless says with his hands up soothingly. Fuck that;
you’ve got a soulmate to confirm here.

“Look, man, I get why you’d be into me. All Striders are illegal levels of hot but I ain’t into dudes and unless you’re just a really weird lookin’ girl imma have to say no.” Dave tells you as he slides along the wall towards the door.

“Is this a stupid human sexuality thing because I’ve never understood that and the way trolls do things is clearly better.” You point out.

“Karkat, you’re being very rude and also racist. Please leave Dave alone; you were supposed to be silent when we were here, and you’re definitely upsetting Dave.” Signless says as he stands up and sets his hand on your shoulder.

“No, this is important! Just show me your arm, if you’re not into guys then it won’t be me on your arm, will it? And if it’s not me then I’ll back off. I’m not being unreasonable here!” You insist loudly, but Dave recoils away from you like you’ve got the plague.

“NO! GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME!” Dave shouts.

“Karkat, leave him alone!” your ancestor says sharply and reaches for you, but you duck away and get closer to Dave. You know it’s him, you can feel it in every bone of your body!

The door to the room bangs open and Dirk Strider is standing in it; his head turns to Dave who is plastered to the wall. At least he was plastered to the wall; he seems to have left a Dave-shaped hole in the air from escaping so fast. He hurtles past Dirk and out into the main room.

“HEY!” You shout after him but Dirk steps into the room, shuts the door after himself and leans against it. You can’t see through is glasses but you know that he is staring down at you. At this point, you realise that the situation you have created is that you and your ancestor are trapped in a room with a man who just murdered his own brother to protect Dave and as far as he knows you just terrorised him.

“What is going on here?” Dirk asks, his voice cold and sharp.

Claws go down the back of your neck, and a strong hand hooks the back of your sweater, you’re dragged back across the room and The Signless puts himself between the two of you.

“I’m so, so sorry Mr Strider. My son was entirely out of line. He was talking to Dave about something which he was apparently very sensitive about and didn’t know when to back off. I understand that Dave is likely very fragile right now and Karkat should have known better, shouldn’t you Karkat?” Signless says pointedly, and you mutely nod.


“I think Dave is my soulmate is all, I just- I just wanted to see his soulmark, but he wouldn’t show me and I know I was an asshole about it and I’m sorry but-” You babble, desperately trying to fix this fuckup of yours but as usual you’re probably just making things worse for everyone.

Dirk’s face seems to change, and he pulls back in a grimace.

“Ah.” He says.

“Ah?” Signless asks, his hand still on your chest to prevent you from moving in front of him again.

“Dave is… he says that he’s straight and Bro was very firm on his opinions of people who weren’t.
You can’t change human sexuality so unless Dave is mistaken then you aren’t his soulmate. I’m sure that’s not pleasant to hear, but I’m not going to let you upset Dave further. You need to leave.” Dirk tells you both.

“Actually Mr Strider, we’re not completely done here. Talking to Dave gave me plenty of answers, and I have a few more questions for you.” Signless says calmly.

“After what you just pulled? No way. Get out of my home.” Dirk orders you both and swings the bedroom door open.

“Normally I would be concerned about you reporting me but seeing as I am here personally on the orders of District Attorney Redglare regarding the murder of your brother I think you won’t be reporting anything. Now, would you care to answer my questions?” Signless asks, and Dirk pulls the door shut behind him again. You stare up at your ancestor slackjawed, you’ve heard him in debates before and seen how smart he is but you’ve never seen him this tactical before, he’s almost ruthless. It’s like he can see just where all of the points that tie Dirk down are, just what things to say to chain him to the place that Signless wants him.

“My brother wasn’t murdered, the police ruled accidental death.” Dirk says coolly.

“And Redglare is certain that they are wrong. If she decides to she will stop the investigation from closing, unearth everything in your life, take Dave from you until it’s over which it won’t be. With or without solid evidence she is sure of your guilt, and you will end up in jail and Dave will end up with another family. Unless…” Signless says slowly.

“Unless what?” Dirk hisses.

“Unless I make a decision. You see the police didn’t know about the abuse, Dave told me about it and judging from his behaviour I doubt he told me even half of it. Protecting Dave is a very strong motive for murder.” Signless explains.

Dirk says nothing at all.

“If you are honest and I decide that you mean no harm to Dave then the case will be closed as is. I’ve already explained what happens if you’re not honest, so with that in mind, I have some questions for you. Will you allow me to ask them?” he presses.

“I don’t really have a choice, do I?” Dirk growls.

“Dave said that your brother physically abused both of you, is this true?” Signless asks, and Dirk nods in response.

“Dave also said it was worse for you, why was that?” Signless asks, and Dirk’s free hand tightens into a fist.

“Because he hated me. He hated that I was like him in some ways and he hated the ways that I wasn’t. He was a fucking sadistic bastard and a homophobe. He hated when I disrupted his fights with Dave and punished me for it. Is that what you want to hear?” Dirk demands.

“No, it’s not. I wish that hadn’t happened to either of you. I’m going to ask you again, did you ever harm Dave?” your ancestor asks.


“It strikes me that a man as controlling and abusive as your brother would have contested your
request to be Dave’s legal guardian and even if you were successful I doubt that from what you both have told me that he would have heeded a restraining order. Is that what you thought too?” Signless questions.

“Bro didn’t like to lose, me taking Dave would have been losing. We ran away when we were ten for three weeks and when we got back I… I barely survived. He broke Dave’s arm to punish him for going with me.” Dirk says, and you see him shudder.

“Did you kill him because you got angry and snapped or was it to stop this cycle and protect Dave?” Signless asks but Dirk remains silent, looking off to the side and from this angle, you can see the pained grimace on his face.

“Dirk, this is the answer that changes my decision. I need to know why you did it.” Signless presses. You watch something dark seem to come over the human. The fact remains that though humans can be relentless and brutal as The Empress found out to her shock, they’re physically unremarkable. Their teeth are blunt, they have no claws, and their skin is thin and weak. But you see the way that Dirk’s frame tenses, the way his hand clenches into a tight-knuckled fist and see how his lip curls back into a snarl and you are genuinely afraid of him.

“If I had been trying to get even with Bro for all that he did to us then he would still be alive and suffering, falling off a building sucks but it’s quick. He didn’t deserve quick. He can’t hurt us anymore; he can’t hurt Dave. You’ve no proof of this, and I don’t care if your friend is the DA there’s still some fucking judicial process in this country. If you take Dave from me I will do anything to get him back; I don’t care how long it takes.” Dirk hisses furiously, right into Signless’s face.

Signless smiles, slow and calm.

“Maybe I wasn’t clear. Redglare and I are well aware of your crime; she wanted me to decide if you did anything wrong. On Alternia what you did would be perfectly legal. Your motive was to protect Dave, and while I do wish that you had sought help from outside sources and that no one had to die I can certainly understand your point. My own mother killed other adults to save me as a child. It is regrettable but not entirely wrong. Unfortunately, the human legal system does not agree. Luckily for you, Redglare is more concerned with what is right than what is legal.” Signless says. Dirk pulls back, seemingly confused.

“I… what?” Dirk asks quietly.

“The police have determined that this is no more than a tragic accident and, officially speaking, I am here just to confirm that you’re fit to be Dave’s legal guardian which you clearly are. Redglare will close the case, and all will be right, if not exactly innocent.” your ancestor continues.

“You’re serious? I can keep Dave, just like that?” Dirk asks weakly, his whole body language is different from the fear-inspiring one earlier. Now he just looks like a confused teenager which, you suppose, he is.

“Well, that form that you filled out a few weeks ago needs signing, but I can do that here for you today. Although I would be remiss if I didn’t point out that though Redglare perfectly understands your actions you will forever be a person of interest to her. If she finds you connected to any more dead bodies then you will be in considerably more trouble.” Signless says seriously.

“That’s not going to be a problem.” Dirk says quickly, and Signless smiles again.

“Well then, shall we?” Signless says lightly, and Dirk stares at him for a moment. Evidently, the man
knows better than to look a gift bearing hoofbeast in the mouth as he quickly shoves the door open and leads you both out. Dirk goes to his stack of papers that he had earlier and fishes out the paperwork that makes him Dave’s legal guardian. You’re not really looking at him though; you’re looking at Dave who is loitering by the fridge and staring right at you. You’re struck again with how perfect he looks, and you’re absolutely sure that this is him. You must take some step towards him because Signless’s hand on your shoulder tightens and keeps you in place.

“Leave him alone, Karkat.” your ancestor says under his breath.

“But-” you protest, but he shakes his head at you.

You hold yourself back as Dirk and Signless sign the form in all of the appropriate places. You don’t go over to Dave, you just stare at him- you know, like a creep. All the time you’re clinging to your soulmarked arm as if that will change things.

You try to think of something that you can say to him or something that you can do to change his mind. The problem that Signless has with you saying anything to him is because Dave doesn’t want you to talk to him, if Dave wanted to talk to you then your ancestor would have no problem. It had been going well, he’d talked about his brother’s modus and shown you that bird, and then you’d gone and blown it by telling him that you were soulmates. Not to mention the fact that you couldn’t take no for an answer, that you kept pushing regardless of his feelings and limits, the very thing that it’s exceptionally dumb to do to an abused kid. God, you are the fucking worst. Everyone who has a soulmate gets a fated meeting with them, and you went and fucked yours up in spectacular fashion, if this was an Olympic sport you’d get the gold. Karkat Vantas, relationship ruiner.

“Then it’s all official. It was a pleasure to meet you, Dave. I’m sorry that it could not be under better circumstances. And Dirk, remember what I told you. And also, if you ever need help I urge you to ask for it in future. I have a card if you ever need me, here.” Signless says and hands it over to Dirk.

“Thanks, I guess?” Dave says from his place slightly behind Dirk, as if he only feels safe with Dirk between the two of you. Shit, why didn’t you just back off? You’re a dumb, desperate and needy idiot.

Dirk and Signless exchange a few pleasantries before Signless steers you out of their apartment and into the hallway. You stop halfway down the third flight of stairs and press the palms of your hands into your eyes, your throat and chest feel tight, and your vision had been getting misty for the last floor down. You’re not going to cry like a wiggler about this.

“Karkat?” Signless asks.

“I fucked it up.” You whisper, a volume that you’re aware is pretty unusual for you.

“It’s fine Karkat, I’m not mad at you. It was unprofessional of me to take you in there and-” Signless says understandingly, but he doesn’t understand.

“Not that! I’m fucking USED to disappointing you by now and not being as good at anything as you are.” You yell and wrench your hands from your eyes. Signless is staring at you in alarm.

“What? No, don’t think-” He tries to say, but you keep going. You’re the expert in doubling down on your own idiocy after all.

“He’s my soulmate; I know he is! And I just BLEW IT by acting like a pan rotted crazy person in there! He’s never going to want to go near me again and I don’t blame him. I ruined everything.” You wail and shove your hands against your eyes again because you are NOT going to cry.
Your ancestor’s large soft hands come around you and pull you close to him, claws pet through your
hair as he shushes you.

“Imagine if you’d had The Disciple or The Psiionic on your skin for your whole life and you blew it
as hard as I just did then, imagine how shitty you’d feel. Don’t even tell me it’ll be okay!” You say
angrily into his chest.

“I imagine I’d feel really bad. But, I also know them, and over the years I’ve said and done things
that I regret and they’ve come back to me. Heck, when Dis first met me she tried to kill me! But look
at us now. If that boy really is your soulmate then I’m sure you’ll get another chance. Today is just
not the day for it is all.” your ancestor tells you gently.

You rub at your eyes and pull back, you’re not crying, but it was a close thing. You can’t imagine
Dave deciding to seek you out after that but maybe he will. If he’s meant for you then maybe he’s
immune to some of your bullshit. You sincerely hope so.

“Maybe.” You concede and Signless smiles.

“Come on, let’s go home.” He tells you, and you continue going down the stairs.

You wish you could be like Signless. He’s a leader, a real one. People respect him, he’s smart, he’s
strong, and as you saw today for the first time, he’s fierce too. When you try to lead your friends and
siblings you mainly just get ignored or half-heartedly humoured, not to mention how often you screw
it up when you try. People don’t respect you like they respect him, they just dump red dye all over
you and make you have to switch schools. And sure Signless has had his problems, what with being
nearly executed that one time but even so he gets people’s respect like no one else that you’ve ever
seen. Even if people don’t like him or agree with him, they tend to respect him. You can’t even get
the respect of your soulmate.

“You were pretty badass up there.” you tell him as you get in the car and buckle up.

“I don’t like having to be like that with people. I want people to want help, not to coerce them into
giving me what I want even if what I want is in their best interests. Sadly he was never going to risk
telling me if I didn’t make consequences for not doing so. I’ll call Redglare when we get back and let
her know what happened.” Signless says unhappily.

“You can always call her on speakerphone you know.” You point out, but Signless just shakes his
head and makes a turning.

You stare out of the window at the crappy shops in this area and wonder how Dave lives his life
here, what are his days like? Where does he go?

“Do you really think of yourself as inferior to me, Karkat?” your guardian asks eventually in a quiet
voice.

Oh yeah, you said all that stuff in the stairwell. You slide a little lower in your seat and feel your
cheeks grow warm with mortification.

“It’s not a big deal, and I’m not wrong either. You’re good at all that stuff. Leading, mediating,
having people respect you. We don’t actually have to have this conversation if we do I swear I’ll flip
my shit.” You mutter.

“Don’t ‘flip your shit’. We should talk about this.” he chuckles.

“My shit will get all burnt on the underside then, and it’ll be your fault.” You argue and Signless
“I’ll cope. Listen, Karkat… one day I won’t be around anymore. Whether that’s sooner or later, I don’t know, but I don’t want you thinking that when that happens that you’re not going to be able to live up to who you think I am. You’re a smart kid, people like you. Maybe not the kids in your school but you get on with all of the kids in our group, you find common ground with everyone, and that’s important. I am not better at any of this than you, I’ve just been around longer. I’ve fucked up in the past and badly.” Signless says seriously, and you stare at him.

“When have you fucked up badly? Do you mean that time you nearly got executed?” You ask.

Signless frowns at the road and seems to consider his answer before speaking.

“A very long time ago, when I was young I had a group of friends much like yours. I wanted to do the right thing, and I was convinced that I knew what that was. I was idealistic like Kankri is now and stubborn like you can be. I acted thoughtlessly, I hurt my friends and ultimately my actions and inactions led to all of their deaths. I got a second chance, and I took it, I’m still trying to make up for my mistakes. But I need you to understand that you will screw up, Karkat. You’ll freak out your soulmate when you first meet him and you’ll piss people off or make the wrong call. But just don’t spend your time comparing yourself to who you were or who you want to be or who you think I am. When I’m not here anymore you can do good, just don’t get tied up in doing it the right way. Do you understand?” He says and glances at you as he drives.

“Are you dying or something? Please tell me you’re not dying.” You plead.

“I’m not- no, I’m not dying. But everyone dies eventually, and I just need to know that you understand that you’ll be fine when that happens.” Signless insists.

You stare at him in terror, and he has to assure you twice more on the way home that he isn’t dying before you even consider letting it go. When you get home, Signless has to have that shifty as fuck conversation with Redglare so you head up the many stairs in your house to get to your room and then throw yourself onto the covers with a soft squish of sopor.

You try to push aside the worrying talk that Signless gave you because even though he said that nothing was wrong, it really did sound like he thought he would die soon, but you trust that he wouldn’t lie to you. Maybe he’s just scared that something could go wrong, with the life that he’s had that wouldn’t be an unreasonable fear to follow him around. So, you can stow that for now and freak out about it later. Schedule your breakdowns like a grown adult, goddamnit!

Instead, you focus on the newest problem.

Dave motherfucking Strider.

He matches almost everything on your arm, and you want to say that the things he doesn’t seem to match like the staircase and the roses he may well match if you spent more than ten minutes around him. He’s a guy, like you’ve always known your soulmate was. He also has had a pretty crappy life which too matches up with the feelings that you get from your mark. It has to be him, you can feel it in your bones.

But he denied you, vigorously and furiously. You’re neck deep in self-loathing for pressuring him like you did but the key point is that he still denied that you could be his soulmate because you’re a guy. One of you must be wrong, either you’re wrong about him being his soulmate or he’s wrong about not liking men. You could suppose that the third option is that you’re wrong about being a guy, but you’re pretty sure that you’re the gender that you’re meant to be. So, discounting that third
option leaves you with two, either you are wrong, or Dave is wrong. Which one of you is it?

You roll onto your back and pull out your phone and open up Google; you’re going to get to the bottom of this. But what to search for?

‘HUMAN SEXUALITY’

Good fucking god that pulls up a fucktonne of results and the most that you can determine is that humans have managed to make sex unreasonably complicated for no obvious reason at all. It’s bad enough that humans watched the rest of the galaxy doing gender and sexual dimorphism normally and then went ‘hold my beer, watch this shit’ and then split up their sexual reproductive roles like morons. Now they’ve got a situation where romantic pairs can form in such a way that the couple is unable to produce biological offspring and they have this clusterfuck of sexualities. Humans are dumb.

This is dumb and unhelpful.

Perhaps if you phrase your search from Dave’s perspective.

‘I’M STRAIGHT BUT MY SOULMATE IS ALSO A GUY’

This proves only marginally more helpful with the vast majority of people who said that this had also happened to them saying to the original question asker that, surprise, he’s not as straight as he thought he was. That seems like the obvious conclusion to you.

You’re the best researcher; you look online for five minutes find something that confirms what you want to be true and consider the job done. You’re so unbiased.

Maybe Dave just needs time and distance. Maybe given those things he’ll realise that you are who you said you are and then he’ll want to be with you. All the same, you should probably apologise for coming onto him like a crazy person and jamming your foot in your mouth like that. Except you have no way to contact him. You’ve got to find some way to get a message to him.

You sit up on your bed and get your husktop out, you open up Google again and try to think of how you can search for him. There’s no point in asking Signless for any contact details because he absolutely won’t give them to you, so you’ve got to do this on your own. Seeing no other option you just type in the most obvious thing that you can think of.

‘DAVE STRIDER’

Shockingly Google actually returns you a result, Google tells you that ‘Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff’ is a webcomic by one Dave Strider. Is your soulmate an artist too? He’s already a musician and a photographer, does he really need more artistic talents? Maybe it’ll be one of those photography comics like A Softer World, something classy and artsy.

You click the link.

You’ve never entirely understood how in movies people can flip so fast from red romance to pitch, but your screaming eyeballs are thoroughly schoolfeeding you on just how that works. This is possibly the most hideous and terribly designed website that you have ever seen in your entire life, and you live with Mituna who thinks that neon and flashing images are something to be applied to anything that stands still long enough. The art is bad, offensively so. It’s not just like this is the work of someone unskilled, no, this is like the inverse of skill. Dave had to have worked to make this as fucking awful looking as it is.
Your mouth hangs open in mute horror as you read the one ‘comic’ displayed on the glitchy opening page. You see a terribly drawn man falling down some awfully drawn stairs with the text ‘FUCK IM FALLING DOWN ALL THESE STAIRS …………..’ The next is some repurposed panel from something else with a different atrociously drawn man saying ‘I WARNED YOU ABOUT THE STAIRS BRO!!!!!!! I TOLD YOU DOG!’. It occurs to you that this is all written in godawful comic sans which somehow makes it all that much worse. The next panel is the first man with wildly different proportions and another stupid mouth declaring ‘IT KEEPS HAPPENING’. Endlessly copy pasted pictures of that panel repeat in frustratingly unaligned columns and rows follow. Finally a close up horrifying zoom on the second character’s face with the text in not one but two different colours than the rest of the comic declare ‘I TOLD YOU MAN I TOLD YOU ABOUT STAIRS!’.

You think that your brain might be having some sort of rage seizure just from looking at this. It’s like so much is wrong that it can’t grasp on to any one thing to begin venting that bile and so it just builds and builds within you. With mute horror, you pull back your sleeve and gape at the endless staircase wreathed on your arm. You had always suspected that it was something poetic and metaphorical, something deep and meaningful. A paradox, endless descent and ascent.

‘IT KEEPS HAPPENING’

You scream and flip your husktop off of the bed.

“MOTHERFUCKER!” You screech in rage.

Dave Strider is the worst human being to ever live in the history of his whole species. You are going to contact the empress and help her burn this planet to ash because clearly, this entire species was a mistake. Dave FUCKING Strider wrote a shitty comic and tattooed it on your skin with his shitty soul!

Clearly, clearly, you were meant to be pitch for him. That is what this has to be. That must be why you reacted the way that you did when you saw him. Now you need to find him again and even the score. But you have no idea how to do that at all. But you know someone who does.

You retrieve your husktop from the floor and begin to type furiously.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling twinArmageddons]

CG: YOU NEED TO HELP ME WITH SOMETHING.
CG: AS SOON AS YOU ARE PHYSICALLY ABLE.
CG: I HAVE FOUND MY SOULMATE AND HE IS THE WORST HUMAN BEING TO EVER EXIST AND NO ONE HAS EVER HATED ANYONE THE WAY THAT I LOATHE HIM AND I NEED YOU TO FIND HIS TROLLTAG OR PESTERWHATEVER SO THAT I CAN RAIN MY RIGHTEOUS FURY UPON HIM.
TA: you’re aware that 2ome of u2 are 2tiill at 2chool, riight?
CG: SEE PREVIOUS SECTION ABOVE ABOUT YOU BEING PHYSICALLY ABLE, FUCKWIT.
TA: oh my god you are terriible at a2kiing for favour2
TA: i thought human2 couldn’t even do pitch anyway2
CG: IT’S A BRAVE NEW WORLD OF LOATHING. AS ALWAYS I AM AN INNOVATOR OF OUR KIND. HE MADE THIS GODDAMN ATROCITY. FEAST YOUR GANDERBULBS ON THIS AND TELL ME THAT THIS GUY DOESN’T DESERVE TO SUFFER.
CG: [linked google search result ‘sweet bro and hella jeff’]
TA: holy 2hiit
TA: that wa2 2o 2hiitty iit nearly broke my phone
TA: tuna would love the 2hiit out of thii2 though, you know that right?
CG: YOU SAY THAT LIKE IT MAKES THIS BETTER.
TA: fuck no. miituna ii2 not a good liitmu2 te2t for quality.
TA: but what do you want here? for me two magiic out thii2 iidiiot’2 handle ju2t from one comic
and a name?
CG: WELL IF YOU CAN’T DO IT…
TA: that bait ii2 tran2parent and iin2ultiing but ii'm 2tiill going two do iit anyway ju2t two prove
two you that ii can.
TA: al2o ii'm 2tiill banned from tv for helpiing damara get pa2t the parental block on the cable 2o my
option2 are liimiited here.
CG: I'M STILL IMPRESSED AT HOW MUCH PORN SHE MANAGED TO WATCH
BEFORE BEING CAUGHT.
TA: yeah, a real geniiu2 iin her art.
TA: ii'll get your boy. 2ee you iin an hour.
TA: and congrat2 ii gue22?
CG: THANKS. FOR UH, ALL OF THIS I GUESS?
CG: THIS IS GETTING AWKWARD NOW SO I’LL JUST SEE YOU WHEN YOU GET
HOME.
TA: way two make iit weird
[carcinoGeneticist ceased trolling twinArmageddons]

You fall back on your bed and grin maniacally at the ceiling. Oh yeah, when you see that ridiculous
human you’re going to sink your claws right into his skin and… you wince as you remember the cuts
all over your body when you were five. You remember the way his body went taut when he was
forced to talk about what his ‘Bro’ did to him, the way that Dirk literally killed to stop what was
happening. You obviously know the difference between healthy blackrom and abuse but do
humans? Would a human kid who has spent his whole life being actually abused know the
difference?

You doubt that he would.

You black feelings shrivel into nothing, and all you can think of doing is pulling Dave close and
helping his wounds heal. You want to see who he can be when he’s not twitchy and stressed, you
want to see more of the guy who tamed crows and takes photographs.

You realise just what you’re thinking and slap your hands over your face with a groan. In one day
you have flipped red, black and pale for this guy. If there was someone else involved you’re sure you
could pull off the final quadrant and somehow be ashen for him too. Your personal quadrant system
is profoundly fucked up and you’re fairly sure that it’s the fault of your hedonistic guardians who
routinely smear all four together to the point that absolutely no one bothers putting a name on what
they are. It looks like you’re just as bad as them.

Still, perhaps when you do see him again it’d be best to reign in the pitch side of your feelings so you
don’t freak him out.

It takes a while for Sollux to get home, plenty of time for you to ruminate on the myriad of ways in
which you have fucked up and are fucked up. Because you are an efficient master of freaking out
you are also able to schedule in agonising about all the things you might say to Dave in the future
that will also be fucked up. When he does get home, you’re just staring blankly at the ceiling wishing
for death to come.

He leans over you, squinting his red and blue eyes at you.
“You’re flipping your shit over this aren’t you?” He asks suspiciously.

“I could win competitions for shit flipping.” You assure him weakly.

“You’re a living disaster, and that’s coming from me. Come on; I’m going to find this guy for you and you can be stupid together.” Sollux says and leaves.

You wrench yourself off of the bed and follow Sollux into his room. As always the place is a goddamn mess with loose game grubs just wiggling around, wires all over the floor, shurikens in the wall and one whole wall covered in sillicombe servers which jut out through the wall to the other side allowing the bees in and out. With his high-powered machine off the bees that are in the room are just drifting around lazily but they start moving with purpose when his beast of a computer clicks into life.

“Alright, Dave Strider. Is that short for David?” Sollux asks as he cracks his knuckles in a way that always grosses you out.

“I don’t know; he didn’t say. Just Dave, I think. It’s not like Signless let me read the file.” you sigh.

“Wait what does Signless have to do with it?” Sollux asks, looking up at you.

“He… got called out on a case by Redglare, it turned out to be a murder case and Signless had to decide if it was justified and if they’d just ignore it and pretend it was all fine. Dave’s uh… his father was the guy who died just last night and his brother was the one who murdered him. I managed to freak Dave out by declaring that he was my soulmate and then demanding to see his mark and I kind of chased him out of his own room trying to get him to show me.” you confess in one go.

Sollux stares at you with wide eyes and then begins to snort with laughter, his sniggers turn into outright howls of mirth. You fling a bottle of his medication at him, but he just catches it in the air and keeps cackling.

“Oh man, you should have set his house on fire too then you would have been even more memorable! Oh man!” Sollux howls.

“Yeah, I know. I blew it. And I can’t even settle on one quadrant for him, I’ve hit flush, pitch and pale. Fuck only knows what he’s going to think of me, but I have to talk to him again. I can’t just leave it like that. And at least if it’s just in text I can think about what I say before I say it. Maybe?” you venture.

“Oh yeah, that’s definitely a thing that I’ve found to be true in text conversations with you. All I get is a written record of your dumbassery. But fuck quadrants, you know? Our parents don’t use them, if they don’t work then don’t do it. Besides, you’re dealing with a human anyway, they run on different mental software. I’m probably going to have the same problem with my soulmate too.” Sollux says, a little kinder this time. It’s too late though you’re already slumped over sadly on his bed.

“Fuck humans, right?” You groan.

“That’s the plan.” Sollux grins and waggles his eyebrows. You throw a sock at him to no avail.

“So come on, where does he live? Give me something to work with for hacking.” Sollux asks, and you dutifully bring up a map on your phone and show him. He makes a thoughtful noise and pulls up Dave’s horrible website.

You close your eyes to the sound of his fervent typing across the room.
“Yeah, this website is from the same rough area. This is your guy.” Sollux confirms.

“Okay, I’m going to try to get into his home network through the information in the back of this godawful website. Since he’s human, I really doubt that he uses Trollian so my money is on Pesterchum. I just need to find his network and…” Sollux mutters, talking more to himself than to you.

Something soft and fuzzy land on your face with a gentle thump and you jerk back and see one of Sollux’s bees slide onto the covers. You gingerly pick it up and look at it.

“Sol, I think one of your bees just died.” You say worriedly. Across the room, you see another one do the same.

“Ah, I’m in!” Sollux chirps.

“Sollux, your bees.” You say urgently, pointing upwards. The bees, which are usually fly in little patterns of their own and flit about on their own jobs are not hovering stationary as if frozen in place. Sollux looks up, and his ears press flat back against his skull in alarm.

“What?” He breathes and turns back to his computer, and a whirlwind of typing starts up.

“This… this isn’t a real network. It’s a fake of some kind and… oh fuck. It’s not responding!” Sollux yelps, smacking on his keyboard desperately.

A black window pops up in the centre of the screen and orange text begins to run across it.

[autonomousTerminal connected]

Back off.
Try this shit again, and I nuke your whole system.

Sollux stares at the screen and then grabs for his keyboard.

Who are you?

“Get Psii right now KK.” Sollux hisses at you and you burst out of the room and rush down the hall.

“PSII! Come here! Sollux needs you now!” You yell at the top of your lungs. You see the start of blue and red lightning whirling up the stairs, and you turn tail and rush back to Sollux’s room with Psii right behind you.

“Someone’s in our whole network; I can’t get any control!” Sollux says desperately and you can see that the orange text has not responded, but Sollux has been typing commands of all kind to get control.

“Move.” Psii orders and Sollux springs out of his chair.

From his inventory The Psionic pulls out a cable that looks more like a meaty tendril. You’ve seen him use this a few times on his computer, a relic from when he was a helmsman. With it he can connect his mind directly to powerful enough computers and networks. You don’t get why he does it, if anything you’d think that the memory was unpleasant for him but you’re not one to tell him how to live his life. He slides it into a port in the place where spine meets brainstem and then slides the other end into the computer.

“Who are you?” Psii asks aloud, and you can see his yellow text scroll across the screen.
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 provide emotional and tactical support while he is away from the computer. The algorithms are guaranteed to be 90% indistinguishable from DS's native neurological responses, based on some statistical analysis I basically just pulled out of my ass right now.

“DS? Dave Strider? Karkat what the hell kind of soulmate do you have?!” Sollux hisses at you.

“It could be Dirk Strider, his brother. Do you think that’s him?” You whisper back.

What the fuck?! How did you do that?

“Get out of my network, or you’ll get to find out if an artificial intelligence can experience pain.” Psii says with a grin, and the black window closes immediately. After a second or two of Psii squinting at nothing the bees go back to their normal patterns. Psii turns around on the chair and faces the two of you.

“Where were you hacking into that had a genuine artificial intelligence lurking inside?” Psii asks stiffly, looking from one of you to the other.

“I swear to god it was through some dude’s shitty webcomic. I was just trying to find some guy’s pesterchum handle, that’s all.” Sollux says, holding his hands up in surrender.

“I was trying to get in touch with my soulmate; I found out who he is. Please… don’t rat me out to Signless.” You plead weakly.

The Psiionic’s right eye twitches slightly.

“I’ve disconnected the whole house from the internet. There’s malware in everything. I am going to have to go through everything and purge it, do you know how long this is going to take?” he asks with a stiff glare.

“A really long time?” You venture.

“You’re the ones dealing with your siblings when they demand to know why there’s no internet.” Psii growls and shuts his eyes. Sollux’s computer monitor starts opening all kinds of windows as Psii rifles through his system looking for anything that shouldn’t be there.

“Can I help?” Sollux asks.

“Yeah, get out and let me work.” Psii grumbles and you both slink out of the room.

“How the hell is your soulmate’s network guarded by the first AI that anyone has ever seen?” Sollux demands, looking at you with a squint.

“The first one?” You ask.

“Yeah, dipshit the first one. That thing moved faster than any program I’ve ever seen and was smarter than any bot I’ve ever seen or made. Plus if Psii came face to face with it and called it an AI then that’s what it is. Besides, you saw what it said about being based on neural responses. That was something no one has ever seen before.” Psii insists.

“Well, Dave said that his brother made some modus. Something hop modus. So I think if either of them made it then it’d be him. Hey, who knows maybe he’s your soulmate and he’s just into coding emotes in pink.” You say hopefully, pointing at Sollux’s arm but he doesn’t look especially pleased.
“Tomorrow we’re not going to school, The Disciple has pulled all of us out. You and I are going to get a bus to this guy’s place and we are going to find out what the fuck is going on. And if that thing wrecked my setup you bet he’s buying me a new one.” Sollux declares angrily and stomps off towards Mituna’s room.

It’s not until midnight that any of you get your internet back and even then all of your phones are collected by Psii and scanned for bugs, yours was the only one that came back with one. When you sleep that night you dream of Dave, his glowing blonde hair running through your claws. He’s talking about something but the dream is hazy enough that even asleep you can’t place it, but he has that same soft enthusiasm that he had when he was talking about that bird. The dream morphs and Dave scrambles away from you, shouting at you to leave him alone and then he rushes from the room. You try to chase after him to explain yourself but suddenly Dirk is in the way, and the room is black. Orange text scrawls through the darkness, reading ‘back off’.

When you gasp awake in a sweat, you can still hear Dave’s words ringing in your ears.

If you attack a crow then it’ll tell all the other crows about it, and then even crows who didn’t see what you did will single you out for revenge.

You and Sollux head into the city the next morning and, because you have the slightest pale crush on her, you bring Kanaya along as well. You fill her in on the bus on the way there, and she pats your hand sympathetically at your plight. For his part Sollux is still fuming at being technologically bested by anyone, not to mention that removing some of the malware corrupted a few of his save files in a couple of his games.

“I am sure that if you knock on his door and explain politely about your reaction and leave him your Trollian handle then it will all be fine. Then he can make the next move whenever he is comfortable.” Kanaya says reassuringly.

“Or the psycho AI that’s guarding him flips its shit and nukes our network.” Sollux grumbles as he glares out of the window.

“This was your idea, douche canoe.” You point out reasonably. An old woman glares at you on the bus, and you just resist flipping him off.

“As per usual all of my ideas are terrible, but we’re already committed to it so whatever.” the ridiculous troll sighs.

“Ignore him Karkat, just write that note. Here.” Kanaya says, pulling out a small notebook and a decorative pen. You carefully and legibly write your name and handle on a slip of paper despite the bus rumbling and tear it out. You shove it straight in your pocket and give Kanaya back her stuff.

Soon enough the shitty part of the city that Dave lives in comes into view and you all pile out of the closest stop and you lead the way to the building. Your hands are sweating and you have to wipe them on your sweater a few times as you try out your lines in your head.

You think that you’ll go with this: ‘Hi, it’s Karkat. I’m sorry I was so weird yesterday. I know that you probably don’t want to talk to me, but I still think that we’re soulmates. Here’s my info if you want to talk, whenever is good for you.’ Then after that, you leave, unless he invites you in. And if he slams the door in your face you can just slide your note under the door. Then if it’s fate then it’s fate.

“This is it.” You say, stopping outside the building and looking up.
“You said that he lives on the top floor?” Kanaya asks, peering up the huge skyscraper.

“His guardian fell off the roof? He must have burst like a water balloon when he hit the ground.” Sollux whistles.

“Sollux, don’t be tasteless.” Kanaya scolds, and the three of you walk inside.

“You know that I’m right.” Sollux argues, ignoring the stairs and floating up them like the smug brain power having asshole that he is.

“Hey, speaking as someone with experience in fucking up conversations with Dave, maybe we could not talk about this in the building that he lives in where we could run into him at any second.” You propose and both of them agree with you.

It feels like an entire ice age passes before you end up at Dave’s door. You should knock on the door. Oh boy your hands are sweaty again. You rub them on your sweater and take a breath. You can do this. You can have this conversation and not fuck it up. You run it over in your head what you’re going to say. Then all you have to do is knock, you can do that.

Kanaya sighs and reaches out, she raps her knuckles on the door sharply and leaves you staring at her in horror.

“I was hoping we might get other things done today as well. And now you have to talk to him.” Kanaya whispers.

“I was going to!” You hiss back.

“You were panicking, I helped.” She replies.

“Get a room you two.” Sollux snickers.

You stare anxiously at the door but nothing happens, you don’t even hear anyone moving behind it. This time you do knock yourself but again no one comes to the door.

“Are you sure that you got the right door?” Sollux asks.

“Totally sure, it was the highest apartment, the next staircase goes to the roof. Look, there’s a sign.” You say and point at the stairs to the roof.

Kanaya hums thoughtfully and presses her ear to the door.

“I can’t hear anyone in here.” She says eventually.

“Should we come back later?” Sollux asks.

“We could go do whatever Kanaya wanted to do, get lunch and then come back. They might be back then.” you suggest as Kanya fiddles with her hair. She draws two small metal hair thingies out and leans towards the lock.

“Kanaya! You can’t pick the lock!” Sollux hisses at her.

“Actually I can, I learnt back on Alternia. It was very good for getting out of shackles and opening doors. Earth locks are much the same.” She informs you both.

“You shouldn’t pick the lock!” You say more accurately, but she’s already doing it.
Before you can yank her back the lock clicks open and the door swings inwards a little.

“We shouldn’t be doing this.” Sollux breathes but Kanaya just pushes the door open and peers cautiously around the side. She looks back at you with a frown.

“Karkat, I don’t think anyone lives here.” She says quietly.

“What are you talking about? I was here yesterday, I know it.” You insist and push past her into Dave’s apartment.

The place is not totally empty, the sofa is still there as well as all of the built-in units in the kitchen that form part of the same room. Everything else though is gone. There is no TV, no DJ equipment, no records or small appliances. Nothing. You can still see the same small holes in the walls that were there before, the same stains on the old carpet, this is the same place.

“They’re gone.” you breathe in horror.

You pull open the bathroom door and there are no toiletries at all, though the cabinet door is ajar like it was gone through in a hurry. You exit the room and rush into Dave’s bedroom. The two beds are still there as well as the cinderblock and makeshift wooden desk, on the wall the shelves that held Dave’s collection of dead things is there but the collection itself is gone. You wrench open a wardrobe and see no clothes inside but a few sad coathangers on a rail. At the bottom of the wardrobe, a piece of paper is trapped against the back of the wardrobe and the base of the wardrobe, having slid back there at some point. You carefully pull it free, hoping that it’s a note explaining all of this bullshit. It is not a note explaining the sudden absence of your soulmate; rather it is a letter from some other chucklefuck to Dave himself.

dear dave,

happy birthday!!!

i just wanted to take a break from telling you how much your gay butt stinks all the time and say what an awesome friend you are. seriously, on any other day i would be downplaying how you aren't really as cool as you think you are, but just between you and me i think you might actually be that cool. i think you just gotta get out of your bro's shadow and spread your wings dude!!!

so i got you these. they're totally authentic! they actually touched ben stiller's weird, sort of gaunt face at some point. i'm sure you'll dig them because i know you lollied so hard at that movie. ok so for real, this is sort of a shitty present, but it is an ironic present because i know you wouldn't have it any other way. maybe you can wear them ironically some time. they MIGHT even be more ironic than you and your bro's dumb pointy anime shades.

anyway, have a good one buddy! and stay busy being totally sweet!

~ghostyTrickster (john)

“SEE! I DIDN’T IMAGINE HIM, I’M NOT CRAZY, HE LIVED HERE!” You shriek, waving the note aloft.

“Stop spazzing out.” Sollux scolds you and pulls the note from your hands with his powers. Kanaya and Sollux read the note together.

So, this John person knows your soulmate. That means that he has Dave’s contact information and might know where he is now. Why does THIS fool get to know Dave when you don’t? He doesn’t deserve him! You are going to give his asshole a schooling of a lifetime when you get that note back
and add him on Trollian. Oh boy, will he ever regret being born.

“Your soulmate wears Ben Stiller’s sunglasses?” Sollux asks skeptically.

“They’re stupid, and I want to slap them off of his face. Kanaya give me that note so I can force Dave’s friend to let me talk to him. He can’t just leave and give me no way of contacting him again! This little twerp shouldn’t get to know him when I can’t! Give me his handle now!” You demand, whipping your phone out to type it down.

“No.” Kanaya says with a frown and drops the note into her sylladex.

“WHAT THE FUCK KANAYA?!” You shriek at her.

“You already made one bad impression; I don’t think that it’s wise to harass one of his friends. If you write out a calm and considerate message then you can have the note back, but not before.” Kanaya says firmly.

“Gag. Well, whatever, they’ve clearly both left in a hurry. I guess that the guy who killed his brother wasn’t super keen to hang around in case Signless or Redglare changed their minds.” Sollux says.

“Or I fucked up so bad that he moved so I couldn’t find him.” You whine and shove your head in your hands.

“Karkat, you couldn’t have a conversation so bad that it would make someone leave their home forever. It’s not you.” Kanaya reassures you.

“Even if that is true I’m still never going to see him again, am I? I have no way of contacting him at all.” You wail, this time you actually are crying. You feel like your bloodpusher is being ripped out of your chest in front of you.

“Yes, you do. Your soulmate and Kanaya’s are clearly connected, you both got the same mark at the same time. There’s no way that’s a fluke. When she meets hers you can find him again.” Sollux reassures you.

“And in the meantime, the two of us can draft a sensible message to this John person and ask for Dave’s details. It’ll be fine, Karkat. You’ll meet Dave again, I’m sure of it.” Kanaya agrees, and you sniffle, rubbing at your eyes.

“Yeah, okay. Sure.” You agree.

It’s fate… isn’t it?
A slamming door wakes you up in an ungraceful flailing of covers. Sun shines in through your window and you fumble for your shades. A moment of late for school panic surges through you before you remember that your school is the first one in the district to break up for summer and you’ve got nowhere to be.

“Sleep well, Dave?” Hal’s voice comes over Dirk’s speakers. If he’s talking to you out loud, then it means that the door slamming was Bro leaving.

“Morning Hal. I had that dream again.” You tell him with a yawn as you fall back on your bed again and stretch.

“The one with the red room? You should share it with Rose you know, I’m sure she’d get a kick out of analysing it.” Hal chuckles. His voice is slightly synthetic and static, you know he chooses for it to be that way because he can mimic other people perfectly.

“Or I could stick my dick in a blender.” You snort. You are not about to let your sister up in your brain like that, no way.

“Please don’t.” Hal sighs.

You roll onto your side and look at the camera on top of Dirk’s monitor, he only got it back a year or so ago and Bro still randomly jumps on it searching for any evidence that Dirk isn’t as straight as he pretends to be. You smile sleepily at the camera.

“Hey, Hal, happy birthday.” You tell him quietly.

“Dave, it’s Dirk and Bro’s birthday, this date is crowded enough without me. Besides it’s not the date that Dirk made me, if any date is my birthday then that is.” Hal replies.

“Oh, so you don’t want the present that I made you then?” You ask slyly.
“You made me something?” Hal asks, surprise evident in his tone.

You lean down and reach under your bed to grab your backpack, and out of it you pull a stack of paper and a thumb drive.

“Happy birthday, Hal.” You repeat and unfurl some of the paper. Each sheet is divided up into eighty-eight columns and neatly spaced out rows giving a continuous grid from where each sheet is taped to the next, some boxes are coloured in, but most are left blank.

“I… actually have no idea what that is. Can you show me more?” Hal asks curiously, and you hold the drive up to the camera for him.

“I’ve got it all digital for you too, I figured this and the puzzle of working out what it is would be a good present. Here, I’ll plug it in.” You say and shuffle to the computer and slot it into the USB port. Dirk’s computer whirrs as the data is transferred.

“That’s a very long image. This must have taken you forever, Dave.” Hal says, and you smile for him.

“You have no idea, my hand cramped so much. Have fun working it out, I’m gonna go find Dirk and give him his present.” You tell Hal and stand up. You actually get dressed first before venturing out, but you find Dirk sitting on the couch and staring at the wall, which is a good sign that he’s talking to someone over pesterchum through his shades.

“Hey.” You call out to him. Neither of you react well to people touching you without warning and, case in point, Dirk actually jumps at the sound of your voice.

“Oh, morning Dave. Only just morning, though.” Dirk says distractedly.

“Man, it’s not that late.” You protest, but Dirk only makes a noncommittal sound in his throat as you grab yourself a drink and, because it’s his birthday, grab Dirk one too.

“Apple juice and terrible juice, happy birthday.” You say, handing him his glass.
“One day you will stop being an apple loving heathen.” Dirk sighs melodramatically and takes his glass. You drop down to sit on the sofa next to him, your leg is jiggling with excitement.

“So, today’s the day, huh?” You ask gleefully. Dirk has all the forms to be your legal guardian in a box, you know because you’ve snuck through them and stared at them longingly more than once. As soon as Dirk hands them in the process of finally getting away from Bro begins.

“Not today, I wasn’t actually born until pretty late in the night, so I think tomorrow is best.” Dirk says, and you frown because that sounds like a stupid rule and you’re pretty sure that Dirk would have given you a heads up before now if the date that he was going to hand those forms in was going to change. Maybe he’s just worried.

“Oh, okay. Well, it’s still your birthday anyway.” You point out and set your empty glass on the shitty plywood and breezeblock coffee table. You used to have a nicer one but Bro threw Dirk onto it, and it exploded into a million splinters.

You rifle quickly through your sylladex until you get to the large bag that you’ve got stored there.

“These ho, ho, hos should call me Santa with the size of my present sack here, this metaphor is seasonally inappropriate because you’re born in summer like a fool, why weren’t you born in December like cool people such as me and Rose, huh?” You say and hold the bag out to him.

“I don’t even know where you were going with that. Is this for me?” Dirk asks, looking in the bag.

“It is your birthday, I thought you were the smart one in this family.” You point out, and Dirk flicks you a disapproving look.

“You’re smart. What is this?” Dirk asks and pulls a box out of the large bag. It’s a robotics kit for a small solar powered car type thing.

“It’s a robot kit, there’s approximately a fuck tonne of them in this bag. Now, I know you could probably make this in your sleep, but I thought it might be fun, and with all of these I’m sure you could make your own design for something really cool.” You say brightly, holding up a few other boxes from the bag.
“Dave, don’t tell me that you stole these. I told you not to steal anymore, you’ll get caught and go to juvie, and then social services will—” Dirk starts to protest, but you hold a hand up.

“I bought them. No stealing, I promise.” You vow.

“You don’t have a job, where did you get the money from?” Dirk asks.

“I gave him some but judging from the number of kits in the bag I did not give him enough for that.” Hal answers, piping his voice through the TV speakers, along with an image of his face. Hal’s digital skin is paler than Dirk’s and has sweet red circuit prints coming from one eye.

“You know you don’t have to rat me out every time Hal.” You grumble and slump back against the back of the sofa. Dirk looks back at you and then rifles through the bag some more.

“Where did you get the extra money, Dave?” Dirk asks and fixes you with a pointed look through his shades.

“I took it from Bro’s wallet a while back, he never found out, it’s cool.” You sigh, and half of Dirk’s face seems to twitch.

“What were you thinking?! How can you be so stupid? What if he caught you? What if he already knows and is waiting to punish you? Hal why didn’t you catch this!??” Dirk demands of both of you.

“Hey, I don’t spy on him constantly when Bro isn’t here. He deserves some privacy, I just didn’t think he was this dumb with it.” Hal says defensively.

“I just wanted you to have a good birthday for once, sorry for trying. Happy birthday, assholes.” You snap and stalk out of the room. It’s dumb to think that you can shut Hal or Dirk out. There’s no lock on your door to keep Dirk out even if you wanted to go that far and even if there were a lock wouldn’t keep him out forever. As for Hal, you know that you can’t ever get away from him, but he at least has the courtesy to leave you be when you want to be alone.

You throw yourself onto your bed and grab the laptop that your mom bought you years ago when you first met her again.
TG: aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaauuuuuuugh
TT: Good morning, Dave.
TG: maybe for you lalonde
TT: Has Bro done something?
TG: actual bro nah but dirk is driving me crazy
TG: like a dude cant do a nice thing for another dude on his birthday without getting shit for it
TG: i had no parents and i know that when someone gives you a gift you act pleased about it
TG: you dont give that dude the third degree over it
TG: fuck me man
TT: What was his issue with your gift specifically?
TT: It’s pretty unusual for Dirk to take any issue with your Striderian shenanigans.
TG: ugh
TG: hal gave me some money from his online ventures to buy dirk something
TG: but it wasnt much and the dude is the big eighteen now
TG: been looking forward to this birthday for forever
TG: and i know his real present is me
TG: not in a narcissist kinda way but in a legally being my guardian kinda way
TG: but i cant giftwrap myself
TG: not without being hella creepy like yeah my bro just unwrap this sweet teen for your bday
TT: I’m considering starting a project where I time how long it takes for your metaphors to run into awkward sexual metaphors when you’re left to ramble. I don’t know whether to give bonus points when it’s incest that you’re alluding to or not.
TT: Goodness knows you do not need encouraging to stick your foot in your mouth.
TG: why do i talk to you
TG: and obviously it should be bonus points
TG: boner points
TT: Of course.
TT: So you didn’t have enough money for what you thought was a fitting gift for Dirk, what did you do then?
TG: i got more money
TT: Can I make a bet that says that it’s this part that Dirk has a problem with?
TG: i snuck money from bros wallet one time
TG: not like he noticed
TT: Yes, you’re right. I can see how that would be more convenient than sticking your head in the mouth of a lion and letting bystanders bet on whether you’d get horribly mauled.
TG: youre taking his side
TG: of course
TT: Well, no. I don’t know how he reacted, so I can’t say if he’s justified in that. But I can see why he’d be concerned for you based on that information. Bro is a psychopath and it’s best not to deliberately risk enraging him. I’m concerned, I’m sure Dirk is too.
TT: How did he react?
TG: uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuugh
TT: I see.
TG: uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuugh
TT: Okay, well while you’re having your tantrum I would like to propose an alternate theory on your actions.
TT: Dirk’s eighteenth birthday represents, to you, a magical day when all that is bad about your life will finally be over, or at least start to be.
TT: Giving big presents for a big birthday is a normal thing and normality is the very thing that you are craving. Your gift being less than favourably received is symbolic of having that possibility smacked away, I can see how that would upset you even if this wasn’t your conscious thought.
TG: he said hes not handing the form in today and that hes going to do it tomorrow because of what time of day he was born
TT: Well that doesn’t make sense.
TG: right???
TT: Given all of that I can see why you’re upset Dave. You’re allowed to be upset.

You tilt your head back and sigh. Rose’s psychology bullshit pisses you off sometimes, but you’ve learnt over the years that when you’re willing to be more or less open to her that she can on occasion pin down the thing that’s bugging you. You’re still not big on talking about your FEELINGS of all things, Dirk isn’t too great at it unless it’s just simply telling you that he cares about you. More complex shit like ‘I worry that you might see me as a burden and I don’t think I’m worth the things you have to do for me’ does not get brought up. With Rose though… things are different. She vents to you about Roxy and your mother and both of you keep your mouths shut about what the other says. You think that in part she set this whole thing up because she wanted a ‘twin’ relationship with you, which is dumb but it does kind of work.

Not that you’d have those kinds of conversations with other people. Nor would you express any of your thoughts about your relationship with her to her, that shit’s too meta.

TG: i guess
TG: i kinda feel like an asshole
TG: not super strider cool of me
TT: He’ll live, I’m sure.
TG: hows Roxy?
TT: Pining over Jane, there’s been some drama lately. Jane’s making a move on Jake, I think.
TG: oh shit
TG: i wonder if dirk knows
TT: As do I, but when I’ve questioned him about it in the past he’s just evaded and given answers that he cares more about getting the two of you out of your house than he does trying to, and I quote, ‘mack on Jake’
TG: gross
TG: also dumb
TG: so no one is happy with this
TG: hows mom?
TT: Still sober, so that’s good news. She’s been taking more parenting classes lately. She’s still going to AA and therapy.
TG: you get out of therapy?
TT: Individual, yes. Family therapy, no.
TG: oh shit yeah you told me about the one on one stuff
TG: didnt you make the dude cry?
TT: I didn’t consent to more therapy and wasn’t given a choice, breaking him was my only way out. Besides he had obvious issues.
TG: you are fucking terrifying
TT: I take that as a compliment.
Okay, you can do this, awkward conversation with your brother ahead. You force yourself off of your bed and out into the main room, Dirk is already looking at you as you come out of the room which is a big clue that Hal let him know you were coming.

Dirk looks tense all over, something has really rattled him, and you’re pretty sure that it’s not you. Bro can’t be back home, or else Hal would have warned you.

“Are you okay?” You ask, your apology abandoned.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Sorry about freaking out on you, I know you were just trying to be nice. I really like the robot kits, you’re a good brother.” Dirk says and smiles at you. Or, it would be a smile if Dirk was an alien who had only heard smiles described before and never seen one. It’s all fake and uneven, and his words are really over the top too.

“Uh, thanks? Are you sure you’re good, you seem… jumpy.” You ask, and Dirk’s smile gets Joker levels of wide.

“No! I’m good. Hey, I need to go out for a bit. I gotta see an old high school friend about a thing. I’ll be back before Bro gets home.” Dirk blurts out.

This is grade A bullshit right here. You decide to conduct a test to be sure that this is the most prime standards of shit that you think it is.

“Oh, great! Can I come with? It’ll be boring here all day on my own.” You ask innocently and oh yeah, Dirk just got way more tense.

“No. I won’t be long, and you’ve got Hal to talk to. Okay? I’ve got my keys so, I’ll see you later. Bye Dave.” Dirk says quickly and before you know it the door is slamming shut behind him as he hightails it out of the apartment.
“What the hell was that about, Hal?” You ask, glancing at the tv even though Hal’s face isn’t there right now.

“Dirk is a master of social interaction, obviously.” Hal answers.

“Why is he being all cagey?” You ask Hal.

“You’d have to ask him. But I know he feels bad about snapping at you like that when you were just trying to give him a present, so that could contribute to some weirdness.” Hal says, and you frown, that was cagey too. So Hal knows about whatever it is that’s got Dirk in a twist and is refusing to tell you.

“Whatever.” You mutter and head back to your room. You’re about to start talking to Rose again when you hear music start to play through Dirk’s speakers. You recognise what it is instantly and you smile.

“You worked it out!” You say happily. It took forever to transcribe the music into that form for Hal and so much listening to the track and checking the sheet music that you found online at school, but it was worth it.

“I have a brain the size of a planet, of course, I did. It’s the Death Waltz or Faerie Waltz, depending on where you look. I like it.” Hal says, sounding pleased with himself.

“It’s supposed to be impossible to perfectly play it with human hands, so this technically makes you the first thinking person to play it right ever. I figured that you’d get a kick out of that.” You tell him.

“Hell. Fucking. Yes. I love it, thanks so much, Dave.” Hal says gleefully and plays the song. You lean back and listen to it with a small smile, at least this present went how you hoped it would.

You spend most of the day talking to your sisters and to Hal. Eventually Jade wakes up, and you talk to her too, and when John gets home from school you’re able to chat to him as well. You more or less piss the whole day away doing nothing all by yourself, even Hal is pretty quiet. You figure he must be working on something or the bulk of his focus must be on something else, likely your missing brother. Dirk comes home many hours later than he was meant to and continues to be twitchy all evening. He makes tacos for both of you, but he doesn’t really eat much of his and no matter what you do you’re not able to get any kind of conversation out of him. Eventually, you just
go to bed and leave Dirk in the main room doing whatever it is that he’s doing.

You hear the click of the front door opening, and it wakes you from the light sleep that you had been in. Bro is home. You set your shades onto your face and sneak to your bedroom door, opening it a crack and listening carefully.

“You’re still here.” Bro says, his voice tight and terse.

“It’s not midnight yet.” Dirk points out, and you hear noise from the kitchen as if Dirk is moving something around.

“When did you pour that? You’re just helping yourself to my booze now?” Bro sneers and you frown in confusion, Dirk doesn’t drink. Aside from the rampant alcoholism in your family, though that could only be for those of you with Lalonde blood, he doesn’t like the idea of his reflexes being dulled around Bro.

“It’s our birthday, isn’t it? Might as well enjoy my last night here, you are still my brother you know. You should have a drink.” Dirk says.

You scuttle back and grab your phone from the floor where it’s charging and start to message Hal.

[turntechGodhead began pestering autonomousTerminal]

TG: what is he talking about last night here?
TG: does bro know about the form?
AT: You should go back to bed Dave, you really don’t want to risk Bro’s attention right now.
TG: answer my question!

You hear a clink of glasses outside, and if you tilt your head just right, you can see Bro drinking something out of a shitty glass that used to be a coke bottle before Dirk took a glass saw to it years ago.

“You’re getting slower, don’t think I haven’t noticed.” Dirk says suddenly, and Bro sets the glass down with a heavy thunk.
“No way and I’m faster than you, you fucking fag.” Bro hisses, his voice going feral. Your blood runs cold, and you’re desperately trying to think of why Dirk would deliberately be starting a fight with Bro.

“That’s not even vaguely relevant. Like, shit, that I really want to meet the guy I know is my soulmate and make him fuck my brains out isn’t even a little related to how you’re getting older and slower and I’m still getting faster.” Dirk says lightly.

“I always knew you were lying when you said you weren’t a filthy homo, you ran away like a pussy and you only came back because here is where Dave belongs. You didn’t fool me. And you don’t know shit about my speed, I’m prepared for things you can’t even imagine.” Bro snarls and his figure blurs and vanishes. You hear a scuffle in the kitchen and then Dirk laughs lightly.

“Uh-huh. How about we take this upstairs, old man?” Dirk laughs, and for the first time ever you hear the mean edge in his voice that sounds just like Bro. The front door opens and shuts, and you are left standing in your room barely able to breathe.

TG: what is he doing?!  
AT: Please go back to bed, Dave. I need to focus on this.  
[autonomousTerminal ceased pestering turntechGodhead]

You gasp in outraged offence at Hal just ditching you like that. You know how big his brain is and how many things he can focus on at once, he’s been weird all day, and now he’s just dropping you. You wonder if you should go up to the roof, if Dirk was pissing Bro off that bad then the fight will likely be really brutal. You’ve no idea what Dirk was planning, but it’s not going to end well.

You hurriedly get dressed and really quickly stretch before jamming your feet in your shoes. Outside you hear a distant woman’s scream and the screech of car tyres, but that’s just the city for you. You march into the main room and all but leap out of your skin when Dirk bursts through the door, he’s pale and gasping for breath, and he seems startled to see you.

“Are you ok?” You ask quickly, drawing your sword in case Bro is right behind him.

“I… I’m… Dave, the police are going to be here any minute. I need to-” Dirk says, not making any sense at all.

“The police? Why? Dirk, where are you going?” You demand as Dirk rushes past you and starts
hurriedly washing up one of the glasses.

“Where’s Bro?” you ask, looking around at the door again. Why wouldn’t Bro have followed Dirk back down here?

“He… he fell.” Dirk forces out as he dries the glass and shoves it in the back of a cupboard. He pulls out a new one, pours some booze in it and then tips it right down the sink only to leave the glass right next to the other one. What is he doing?

“He fell? What are you talking about?” You ask.

“Shit, you’re right that won’t work. Fuck.” Dirk mutters under his breath and pitches both glasses into the sink and throws a few dishes in there too as he fills it with water. He must be talking to Hal.

“Dirk! Hal! What’s going on?!” You demand and Dirk whirls around to face you with something close to fear on his face.

You once read that there’s this thing that happens with sound sometimes, where if there is a noise you can match up an anti-noise that is the exact inverse of the sound that you’re hearing and they cancel each other out. You could have two speakers blasting full volume, and all you would hear would be loud nothing. The total lack of sound from Dirk and Hal feels just like that. Deafening silence.

Dirk swallows thickly, and then he finally starts to talk to you.

“We were flashstepping and he fucked up the landing, missed the edge of the roof and just-” Dirk trails off with a shake of his head.

“He’s dead.” Dirk adds.

“But… no. He never missed a step, not ever. I’ve seen him fight drunk and he wasn’t that drunk when he got home, I saw him.” You protest, and you see Dirk’s eyes go wide behind his shades.

Bro fell off of the roof? He’s dead. That can’t be right. You rush to the window to try to look down
and see if he’s there, all you catch is stopped traffic before Dirk grabs you and pulls you away.

“You don’t need to see that, Dave.” Comes Hal’s voice across the speakers.

You squirm out of Dirk’s arms and stare up at him. He’s shaking a little, and he’s looking at you with genuine fear on his face. Shit, you know Dirk, he’s probably blaming himself for this. He’s probably ripping himself apart because he thinks that this will traumatise you. You reach out and grab his arms.

“Dirk, it’s not your fault.” You tell him, and he jerks back away from you. Okay, fair enough, he needs to freak out about this.

“Hal, what’s going to happen when the police get here? Bro’s my guardian, and no one knows about my mom, they’ll let me stay with Dirk, right?” You ask.

“They should do, that’s our hope anyway.” Hal replies calmly.

“Okay. We just gotta wait and see I guess. Hey, Dirk, did he hurt you at all?” You question as you look back at Dirk.

“No. Shit I need to hide the swords. Fuck. I’ll take the fridge, you get all the ones you can find out here and throw them in Bro’s room.” Dirk orders you.

You figure that Dirk has to be doing something to feel like everything is going to work out, to feel in control. Besides, you don’t feel like explaining to the cops why there are probably illegal weapons all over your house. If you can make it look like just Bro’s weird thing then all the better. You dump a few armfuls of swords in Bro’s room and then go and drain the cherry bombs from the ice maker as Dirk pulls shurikens free and scours your room too.

“Give me your sword.” Dirk commands as he takes his own out.

“We’ve gotta be unarmed. Do you think that they’re gonna let me take care of you if I’m walking around with a sword or if I let you have one? Hand it over, you can have it back later if you want it.” Dirk says firmly, his hand held out.
You hesitate, your sword was all you had to protect yourself and Bro made sure that you never went anywhere without it. But you suppose that Bro isn’t going to do that anymore. The idea hangs weirdly in your brain like a puzzle piece that won’t fit. Bro was always there, always ready to attack and now he’s just not? A sharp knock comes from the front door, and you hurriedly shove your shitty katana into Dirk’s hand. He takes it, flashsteps away and then back to the front door.

Dirk pulls the door open to reveal two cops in uniform, one human and one troll. You don’t think that you’ve ever seen a troll cop before and there aren’t exactly millions of trolls on Earth either. Like all trolls, he has his weird symbol on him, embroidered below his badge in some kind of light purple colour that isn’t too far from Rose’s text. You appreciate the dedication that trolls have to their own aesthetic, but it’s weird to see it on a uniform.

“Dirk Strider?” the female cop asks.

“Yes, that’s me. Sorry, I couldn’t meet you outside, but I needed to tell Dave what had happened.” Dirk replies and steps back to let the two officers in. The troll squints at you, and you realise just how young he is, he barely looks older than Dirk.

“No, of course, we understand. The ambulance is taking your brother to the morgue now, we have a few crime scene officers there as a matter of protocol so you wouldn’t be much help down there at any rate. I’m Officer Rain, and this is my partner Officer Ampora.” The female cop says.

“Uh, hi.” You say weakly from the kitchen.

“Sorry, this is my little brother Dave.” Dirk introduces you.

“Hi there Dave, how old are you?” the woman asks, smiling at you gently.

“I’m thirteen. Is Bro really dead?” You ask.

“Super dead.” Officer Ampora says, and Officer Rain shoots him an angry look.

“Uh, I mean…” Ampora flounders, but his partner is ignoring him.
“This must be a big shock, but we need to ask you two some questions, okay? You’re not in any trouble, Dave. Okay?” She says sweetly.

[autonomousTerminal opened the memo ‘Let’s not go to jail!’]
[turntechGodhead joined the memo]
[timaeusTestified joined the memo]

AT: Wow, all of my colours in here. I’m going green, we can be a traffic light clusterfuck.
AT: I’m here to make sure that Dirk doesn’t go to jail for child endangerment. At least you two hid all of the swords.
TT: Hal. What the fuck.
AT: Shh, pretend to have normal human reactions to things. Dave, I’m giving you advice. Just be honest unless I prompt you with something else.

You wish that you could just pull your phone out and answer but alas you can’t. When will Dirk make you magic mind reading shades, damnit?

“What do you want to know?” You ask uneasily.

“Maybe we can sit down and do this, I’ll go get a chair. Sorry, we don’t have a lot of space.” Dirk says and disappears off to your room to get the computer chair, and you sit on the sofa and pull your knees up to your chest.

AT: Okay, backgrounds. The troll, Ampora, is real new to the force. Four months total and this is his first dead body.
AT: Rain has been around for a little over seven years, I can’t find any real complaints against her. She seems to have a soft spot for kids so let’s just hope she doesn’t start trying to get social services involved.
TT: Noted.

Dirk returns and sets the chair down, he sits next to you on the sofa leaving Officer Rain to take the chair and Officer Ampora to awkwardly join you on the sofa.

“Dirk, if you don’t mind discussing it in front of your brother could you tell me what happened?” Rain asks, taking out her notebook and pen.

“It was Bro’s birthday, it’s my birthday too. We have the same one.” Dirk begins.
“How does that work?” Ampora asks with a puzzled frown.

“Just coincidence I guess.” Dirk answers with a shrug.

AT: Or your parents only boned on one day of the year, who knows?
TT: Not helping.

“Bro was out drinking he came home about, I don’t know, eleven or something. We talked and had a drink together and—” Dirk starts, but Officer Rain cuts him off.

“You were drinking too?” She asks, raising an eyebrow at Dirk. You see him look guilty, but you know him well enough to know that his guilt isn’t that easy to see.

AT: Good, make her think that she caught you in the one thing you were hiding. Then she stops digging.

“Just the one glass, it was Bro’s idea. I know I’m underage but not in every country. But it’s not something I like anyway, Bro’s just got this thing about drinking is man’s thing, so I just went with it I guess. It’s stupid, I know.” Dirk says regretfully.

“Oh, sweet.” Ampora chirps and starts rummaging in his pockets until he finds a small black thing with a white tube.

“Fine. If you don’t mind Mr Strider. Have you ever been breathalysed before?” She asks, and Dirk shakes his head. Officer Ampora is visibly gleeful at being able to use his toy.

Officer Rain explains how the machine works and walks Dirk through using it, evidently, the amount of alcohol in his blood is highly unremarkable and Ampora stomps off into the kitchen in a clear sulk.

“So, you had a drink. Then what?” Rain prompts Dirk again.
“We went up onto the roof. Bro always liked it up there, he’d workout up there. We talked and then just started horsing around, running about and I know it was stupid and I shouldn’t have done it, I should have reacted faster but he just.” Dirk pauses and takes a breath.

“He slipped and fell off. I looked over and saw that he was… you know. Then I called you guys and came down here to tell Dave what had happened.” Dirk finishes.

Dirk is lying, you know that. They must have been having a strife up there, and Bro fell, only Dirk can’t say that. Shit, he must feel so guilty.

“You drank out of these glasses in the sink?” Ampora asks from the kitchen.

AT: Say yes.

“Uh, yeah.” Dirk says. What’s with the glasses? Why is Dirk lying about that? They already know he was drinking.

“Why are they in the sink? What are you trying to hide?” Ampora asks suspiciously.

AT: Fuck.

“Dishes go in the sink, you don’t just leave them on the side.” You say like that’s not the exact thing that everyone in your house does all of the time.

AT: Dave you are a goddamn genius.

“And I already told you I had a drink, it’s not like I’m hiding that.” Dirk adds.

“Get back here, Ampora.” Officer Rain sighs.

“We’re going to go have a look on the roof and then come back down here. You may have to come into the station and give a formal statement on what happened, but this all seems pretty cut and dry to me.” Officer Rain says as she stands up.
“It should be unlocked.” Dirk says.

“Rain, are you serious?” Ampora asks, but the female officer just leads him out of the door.

AT: He thinks that you’re guilty of something, Dirk.
AT: He wants to arrest you, although he’s not decided what for yet.

You hastily whip your phone out again and type as fast as you can.

TG: he cant do that can he?
AT: Well, questioning a witness to a death is standard procedure.
AT: But there’s no evidence of any wrongdoing.

“It’s gonna be fine, Dirk.” You whisper and lean your head against his shoulder.

Dirk doesn’t say anything or move, but this is how Dirk panics sometimes.

“It’s not your fault. And… oh. I should tell Rose and Roxy I guess. Shit, I hope mom doesn’t fall off of the wagon because of this, she only just got a year sober.” You ramble. Dirk is still not forthcoming with speech.

“Hey, I know this sucks, but maybe they’ll rush through the whole legal guardian thing now.” You offer him hopefully, and Dirk stiffly nods. It’s not much, but it’s a reaction.

“They’re starting to think it’s a scene of a struggle up there.” Hal’s voice says quietly through the speakers, and the TV turns on to show the two cops pacing about the roof, taking pictures and following the scores of scattered gravel on the roof.

“What’re they planning?” Dirk asks robotically as he leans forward to see the TV better.

“They’re going to take you in for questioning, I don’t think Rain intends to arrest you, even though Ampora clearly wants to. Dave, you have to make sure that they don’t split you up. Do you
understand me?” Hal asks, and you nod desperately. On the TV the two cops walk back down the stairs, and Hal turns the TV off like he was never there at all. When they knock Dirk answers once more.

“Mr Strider, I’m afraid that we need to take you in for questioning. Is there a family member who can look after your little brother? Or a friend or a neighbour even?” Officer Rain asks, and you reach out to grab Dirk’s sleeve.

“We don’t have any other family.” You lie and step closer to Dirk like some scared little kid. You suppose that you are some scared little kid, but you normally know better than to act it.

“We don’t know our neighbours either, can’t he come with me? He’ll be good, I swear.” Dirk adds and you nod.

Officer Rain chews her lip for a second and then nods.

“Okay, he can come and stay in the waiting room. One of my colleagues can keep an eye on him, I’m sure we can find a magazine for him to read. Come with me.” She says and starts to walk down the stairs.

“Wait, wait, wait, we’re not arresting him? No handcuffs?” Ampora asks, and you realise that he has some kind of dumb sounding speech impediment, but you resist mocking him for it in case it really does land Dirk in handcuffs.

“I hardly think that’s needed.” Officer Rain sighs and the four of you walk down to the street.

As you get outside, you can see the flashing lights of the ambulance and a good number of people clustered around the back of it, some of them passers-by who are rubbernecking. The pavement is red and slick, you can see the way it’s running into the gutter. It’s Bro’s blood because… because he’s dead. You take another numb step, and between two paramedics you can see a large black gloved hand hanging limply from a body or rather a shape on a stretcher. His skin is covered in blood and-

Your face is suddenly pressed into Dirk’s chest, and his hand is tight on the back of your neck.

“Don’t… don’t look. You don’t need to see that.” Dirk says stiffly, and you hear the car door open
next to you, and you’re shoved inside. Dirk’s putting on your seatbelt for you and you feel a little like you can’t breathe, as if your lungs have got themselves confused with some other part of you.

“How… how does a guy even have that much blood in him?” You choke out and look at Dirk.

You’re used to Bro not being around, he’d just fuck off for patches of time for no obvious reason so having him not there isn’t weird. You understood Dirk when he said that Bro was dead, but somehow it’s only now hitting you that he’s really never coming back. Whatever this fucked up relationship that you had with him was… it’s over.

You choke a little, trying to breathe in and out at the same time. He’s gone, and it feels like you’ve been stabbed through the chest. It doesn’t make sense, he’s an asshole to you and he always was, but fuck he was your Bro.

He was your father.

“Dave? Oh god, oh fuck.” Dirk says and scoots closer to you. Your seatbelt means that you can’t move much closer to him, you can just lean over halfway so that your face is resting on his shoulder. And you realise with some surprise that your cheeks are wet. You’re crying. You shove your shades up into your hair and smush your face into Dirk’s shirt.

“I’m sorry, this is so lame.” You whisper apologetically but Dirk has his arms around you, and one hand is rubbing your back. Bro never did this. He’s gone, and he’s never coming back, but given a choice between Bro and Dirk being the body in the back of that ambulance you know you’d choose to lose Bro and keep Dirk. That probably makes you a terrible person, but Dirk is everything to you.

You’ve managed to regain some of your cool by the time the police car arrives back at the police station. They take Dirk away from you pretty quick, but you’re not too worried because Hal gives you constant updates on what Dirk is doing right now. At the moment Dirk is being fingerprinted so if they have to go through things in your house they know what prints are what. Hal tells you that it’s not standard procedure for an accident but apparently that Ampora guy is super keen to catch bad guys, too bad he’s got Dirk instead.

Regardless, you’re sat in the waiting room, and you have something important to do. You have a running StriLonde memo with your siblings, so that seems the best place to do this.

TG: anyone up?
TG: gasp dave
TG: you shud be in bed young man!
TG: yeah ive got extenuating circumstances i promise
TT: Oh? Let’s hear it.
TG: rose you should also be in bed!
TG: terrible unruly twins :O
AT: I’m going to stop both of you right there because you’re going to feel really bad in a second if this keeps up.
TG: omg hal chill
TT: Dave, is something wrong?
TG: i

You pause, staring at your stupidly accidentally sent letter. How do you phrase this? Maybe direct is best.

TG: bro is dead
TG: what
TT: Dead?
TG: he fell off the roof
TG: and our place is real high up and he just
TG: i didnt see all of it but there was a lot of blood on the ground
TG: and they werent trying to save him or anything
TG: oh my god
TT: How did he fall off? Were you there?
TG: no he was up there with dirk
AT: Dave was supposed to be in bed. Bro mistimed a flashstep and essentially ran out of roof.
AT: If it’s any consolation to any of you I’m pretty sure that he died instantly, no drawn out suffering.
TG: i guess thats somethin
TG: just… holy shit
TG: are you ok dave?
TG: i mean obviously you’re not ok thats a dumb question but i guess theres a sliding scale of badness
TT: I must confess that I’m far more upset about this than I thought I would be. Roxy can I come to your room?
TG: holy shit of course you can!
TG: i know what you mean
TG: like i never thought about whether i would be sad and shit if he died i mean the dude was indestructible
TT: He was a terrible person. I always felt very spiteful towards him for how he treated you and I was excited for you to leave him in your dust when Dirk was supposed to get custody of you.
TT: And yet I’m
TG: sad?
TG: mayb you’re both sad not because Bro’s dead but because theres no chance that he can ever change and be the person that we deserved. like, that potential person died too. now he’s always gonna have been shitty for no reason and never change.
TT: I can see that.
TG: also where the fuk is dirk????
AT: Dirk is currently being questioned by the police. Dave is in the waiting room alone.
AT: Or rather he’s with me.
TT: I suppose Dirk is their only witness, right?
AT: There aren’t any working cameras pointing at the roof, so yeah he is.
TG: hal, how do u know that?
AT: Because I turned them all off years ago. We don’t need social services having video evidence, do we?
TG: theres your camera though
TG: the one you have that shows the roof that you use when theres a strife
TG: the one you watched the cops through
TG: cant we just give them that video and then theyll let us go home?
AT: That’s one of those things that would raise more questions than it answers.
TT: That’s a very cagey response, Hal.
TT: Is there something on that tape that you don’t want the police seeing?
TG: well yeah rose, if Bro was strifing with Dirk itd look suspicious.
AT: See my previous point about social services, Rose.

You lower your phone and frown. That was a little weird, and there was still that thing with the glasses that makes no sense. But you can get Dirk and Hal being twitchy about cops involved in your lives, avoiding the police and social services has been your number one priority for your whole life. Or you guess number two, number one is avoiding Bro trying to attack you. You guess it’s number one now though, Bro’s no danger to anyone dead.

TG: can one of you two tell mom?
TT: Oh, I didn’t even think of that. I really don’t know how she’ll take this news.
TG: i’ll do it dave
TG: and i might stay up with her and make sure that she doesn’t fall back into a martini glass
TT: No offence Roxy but I think I’ll do the same for you too.
TG: thats fair i guess
TG: ok ill let you two do that
TG: im gonna wait here for dirk
AT: They’re nearly done with him, Dave.
TG: aight

You lower your phone and shove it back in your hoodie pocket, sure enough within ten minutes Dirk is emerging again with Officer Rain. He makes a beeline right for you, ignoring the officer who clearly needs him to sign things.

“Are you okay?” Dirk asks quietly.

“I wanna sleep for a million years, but yeah, I’m ok.” You nod.

“I already told uh…” You trail off.
“Okay, I gotta sign stuff. Stay put.” Dirk tells you and pats your hair absently. He leaves to go back to Officer Rain, the two of them are talking quietly, and he’s signing a few things and nodding at her words. Your phone informs you that it’s three am already. You almost fall asleep in the taxi home, and by the time you’re in your bed, it’s four am.

A cold thought occurs to you as you’re peeling your shirt off.

“What about Bro- what about his body?” You ask, your sunglasses tumbling off of your head onto your bed. Dirk doesn’t stop taking his shoes off to answer you.

“I’ll make arrangements with funeral people or whatever and they pick him up. We don’t need to go down there and look at him or anything. I don’t even know what I want them to do yet.” Dirk says flatly.

“I guess it’s not like he ever talked about it.” You say and unbutton your jeans. Fuck, where are your PJs at anyway? Oh yeah, you left them on the floor. This is why your half of the room is always such a mess.

You both silently get ready for bed, and Dirk is in bed before you, staring blankly up at the ceiling. You dread to think about what’s going on in his head, but you’re pretty sure that he’s not gonna share it with you. You cross the distance to his bed and sit on the edge.

“It’s not your fault. I know you lied to the police about strifing up there or whatever but that doesn’t mean it was- AUGH!” You yelp and yank your feet up onto the bed because something just touched your foot. Dirk leans over the edge of the bed and snarls angrily, pulling Cal up from under the bed. He stomps to the hallway and flings it out there, slamming the bedroom door shut after it. You struggle to remember where you saw Cal last before Bro died but you can’t recall. Dirk hates Cal so no way he’d move him like that and Cal can’t move without Bro around, that’s… that’s ridiculous.

“Get some sleep.” Dirk tells you and ushers you in the direction of your bed. You climb inside and pull the covers up to your chin and really hope that Cal is in the same place in the hallway when you wake up. Eventually, you’re tired enough that sleep claims you.

It’s still morning when you wake up, but it’s sure as shit not early. You get dressed, brush your hair and drink some AJ, but you don’t really feel hungry. The thought keeps occurring to you that Bro is
dead and you don’t know what you should be feeling, happy or sad, so you’re just not feeling anything at all. Dirk is clattering around out in the main room, and you know how much he prefers to be productive when he’s freaking out, so you’re not gonna talk to him and make him think when he’s not ready to. You figure instead that you’ll just do something to take your mind off of it. You could read, talk to your friends or sisters, you could mix some sick beats-

A caw and a tapping on your window decides it for you. You’re gonna photograph some rambunctious crows. You open the window and get settled with your camera, a birthday present from a while back from Dirk and Hal. If you had more space to yourself, you’d really like a traditional camera with all the hipster manual photo processing. Alas, you share your room, and so a darkroom isn’t something that you can have. You just have to settle for digital and a needlessly large number of filters, that’s ironic in its own way.

There’s a knock on the shut door, and you figure that maybe Dirk is trying to respect your ‘grieving space’ or whatever the fuck, you’re not getting up to answer it though, you just got this crow where you want it.

“Yeah?” You call out and snap another shot just at the bird caws loudly and flaps away. Goddamnit, they usually don’t mind Dirk too much. You set your shades back on your face, so you don’t blind yourself and turn around to see not Dirk but instead two trolls, an adult and a kid about your age. No wonder the crow bailed.

“Oh. Are you cops? Are… cops taking their kids to work now?” You ask. That troll cop last night was young, but this would just be dumb. The older troll smiles in a warm and eerily genuine way that reminds you of pictures of Santa.

“Hello Dave, I’m not a cop. I work with a few departments, but today I’m here from social services.” He says. Okay, scratch Santa, this dude is Satan. Fuck. How did the social hear about this shit?

AT: Dave, chill out. He’s just asking follow-up questions, it’s all rubber stamp stuff I think. Just be cool, and I’ll coach you if it gets dicey.
AT: Now say something back, you’re just freezing.

“Uh. Hi.” You respond lamely.

“May I take a seat?” He asks, his voice all gentle like you’re a startled animal, and you hate it, but you guess you just have to deal. It’s still not explained who the hell the kid is though. You peer at him out of the corner of your eye and look him up and down. Yeah, there’s a resemblance there, and like the adult, you can’t see a sign on his chest. Is not having a sign a sign in itself?
“Have at it. And who’s this?” You ask, pointing at the kid. Your curious mind needs answers. The kid doesn’t look super psyched about being here either, a little ill even.

The kid tries to say something, but you don’t catch it, it’s a rushed mumble of tangled consonants and vowels that make no sense.

“What?” You say, and if anything the kid looks more flustered now.

“Karkat, my name is Karkat. Hi.” he spits out in a babble and thrusts his hand at you like he’s desperately trying to secure a job at your coolness factory and you get to decide if he gets to work for you or if his family must starve from a lack of coolbucks. Dude looks like an eager puppy, and it’s so achingly, stupidly earnest that your instincts kick in right away and your first reaction is to snap a picture of this fool.

You laugh when you see the photo, it’s perfect.

“Hey!” the kid squawks indignantly, snatching his hand back and tensing it into a fist like he might just thump you.

“Couldn’t resist.” You say with an ever so slight smirk.

AT: Focus, Dave.

Shit, yeah, the social guy. How did you ever forget? Stupid Karkat being hilarious. You look at the older troll and see that he’s watching the two of you with curiosity, just what kind of info was he getting from that little exchange? What test were you taking that you didn’t know about and how are you doing?

“Please, have a seat. No need to stand around awkwardly as we go through this.” He says and gestures to your bed.

You sit down, and he starts ploughing through the basic shit. Your name, your age, what school you go to, the fact that your brother is actually your uncle and your Bro was your father. Blah, blah, blah. He asks what time you got in from the police station and did you find it scary there, all sorts of
bullshit. He finally introduces himself when you point out that he failed to do so, it turns out that his name is The Signless, which you suppose explains the lack of a sign.

You’re actually glad when Karkat interrupts. It’s hard being both tense and bored at once.

“Is this yours?” Karkat asks, and you turn around to see him pointing at your turntables and other sick music paraphernalia.

“Yeah, man. Bro got me into it; he’s really good. Dirk uses them sometimes, but it’s mostly just me. I’m not as good as Bro yet but…” You start explaining, and then you hesitate. However good Bro was you’re never going to get to see him playing somewhere live now, on account of him not being alive now. If you keep practising then one day you will be as good as however he was, you could even surpass him. The thought isn’t as thrilling as you might have expected it to be.

“I guess now I have all the time in the world to catch up to him. It’s not like he’s getting any better now.” you finish up lamely.

“I’m very sorry for your loss.” Signless tells you sympathetically. Whatever, he didn’t even know the guy.

“It’s fine. It just doesn’t feel real yet, you know?” You answer, you figure it’s neutral enough.

“Can you tell me what he was like, Dave?” Signless asks, and you feel yourself panic inside.

What was Bro like? He was a fucking sadist and psychopath who made games out of terrorising you, violently punishing Dirk for being who he was and forced weapon training on both of you for no obvious reason. He filmed you when you didn’t want to be filmed, he filled the apartment with creepy sex puppets, and you’d have starved to death by now without Dirk. But your mom had loved him once, said that he used to be like Dirk. And sometimes he’s cool when he plays music and you don’t get how something without a soul could make music, and there were times when you made him proud, or you did well at music, and you saw something there. What was he like? You have no clue at all.

You can’t say any of that.

“I mean… what do you want to know?” you ask, buying time and hoping for more specificity.
“Anything.” the troll responds.

Well, crap.

Okay, honest but not too honest. Bro lite is what you’re going for. Dude was weird but within normal range and definitely not a crazy person, nope.

“I guess… he was a weird guy. Super cool though, like ice cold. He was an awesome DJ, and he was big into like… puppets. His room that he worked in is on the other end of the hall, past the main room. He didn’t even sleep in there, he just worked. It’s all puppets and computer stuff.” You say.

“You didn’t like that?” Signless questions because apparently, you can’t talk about puppets without looking freaked out. Boy Rose is gonna get years of mileage out of that if she finds out.

“Puppets creep me out. But, I guess it was cool that he could convince other people who for some reason like the things to buy them.” You say with a shrug. You can admit to a social worker that you don’t like puppets, lots of people don’t.

“And what can you tell me about Dirk?” Signless asks. Oh yeah, finally an easy question!

“Oh, man. He’s a fucking genius, I swear. If he wasn’t here looking out for me he could be schooling all those idiots at MENSA and be president of twenty colleges by now. Like, you know the fetch moduses for the sylladex? Well, Dirk was the one who made the tech hop modus, he cracked that out in three weeks.” you say excitedly. Sure you want them to think that Dirk is great, but it’s not a hard sell because your brother IS great!

“How does it work?” Karkat asks, talking for the first time in a while. You turn to look at him, pretty jazzed at the chance to explain Dirk’s modus.

“So your cards are set out in a square or a rectangle, and you have shade columns and groove rows. Anything you put in a shade column has to rhyme with everything else in the same column, but you do get to name the item yourself. So you could put a skateboard and a rope in the same shade column if you called them ‘board’ and ‘cord’. But then everything in the same groove row has to all be under the same theme, so if your theme was skate gear you could put a helmet in that row but not a car but you could put a car there if your theme was things with wheels. It’s super cool.” You explain. It’s not the modus that you’re running on right now, you don’t want to copy him in everything. Right now
you’re trying to get the hang of the Hash Map modus but there have been a few accidents with that, earlier on in the year you yelled “stop” too loudly at a crow and launched your shitty sword at it by accident and killed it. That poor crow is now preserved above your window in a jar. But you’re not gonna tell this guy that. No one must know of your dumbassery, you are a cool guy.

“That’s very impressive. It’s clear that you admire him very much.” Signless says warmly.

Yeah, you guess that you do.

“And how was Dirk and Bro’s relationship?” Signless asks.

A memory flashes up of Bro slamming Dirk’s head into the wall because he’s gay, of screaming at him and the two of you having to run all the way to your mom’s place to recover.

You can’t say that, but you have to say something. Why isn’t Hal helping you, goddamnit?

“They were… all siblings fight, right? They’d disagree on things; there were things about Dirk that Bro didn’t like but they were pretty different people too. They didn’t hang out much.” You fudge, and it sounds shifty even to your ears. Signless narrows his yellow and red eyes at you for a moment and then presses on with more questions.

“When you say fight do you mean that they argued or was it something more? Did Bro and Dirk ever physically fight?”

AT: Nope. No they did not. Deny, Dave, deny.

“No.” You tell him. He does not look super convinced.

“I want to stress that you’re not in any trouble, Dave. But I need to know. Did Bro ever hurt you in any way?” He asks.

Fuck, you’re not even going to allow yourself to think of that lest your poker face fail you. Hal doesn’t even need to prompt you with an answer, though he does anyway.
“No.” You repeat.

“Okay, and-” Signless begins to talk but you cut him the fuck off. You can see where this ring around the shitty family rosie is going. Did Dirk ever hurt you? HAH. Not fucking likely.

“Before you ask, Dirk would never hurt me and never has. He’d rather throw himself into a volcano than hurt me. He’s the one who’s been looking after me my whole life. Bro dying is… fucked up but nothing is really going to change. Dirk has been doing all the heavy lifting in this house my whole life. So don’t insult him by asking if he’d ever do something like that to me.” You snarl.

Karkat is staring at you in alarm and Signless is watching you like an animal that just did a particularly unusual trick. Speaking of there’s a crow on your window demanding food, and you are all about that distraction right now.

“Aw, shit, sorry. I forgot to feed you for taking your picture.” you say and stand up, giving yourself a brief escape from this shitty conversation. You grab your bird bribe from your pocket and open the window. You know this crow. You named her Bowie when you were showing her to Rose in a video chat one day in one of Bro’s long absences. When Rose asked why you spontaneously said that she reminded you of the babe and the two of you were able to recite an embarrassingly long amount of the Labyrinth script and the name stuck ever since.

“Is that your pet?” Signless asks, and you almost laugh at the question. People own birds in the same way that people own cats, which is to say that the owning goes the other way. Bowie and the other crows with her have adopted you, not the other way around.

“What? No. There’s just a bunch of them that live around here, and we have a deal where if they stay still and let me photograph them then they get a peanut. Crows are really smart birds, so they get it, but they get real judgemental if they think you’ve cheated them.” you tell him.

You watch as Bowie tips her head back and chomps on her treat, blinking her strange little avian eyes as she does so. You really like watching her, and you’d kill for a really high-speed camera to get the beauty of the way she spreads her wings in flight.

“Do you know a lot about birds? Or bird skeletons? Could you tell me what a bird was from its skeleton?” Karkat blurts out awkwardly, like each sentence has to be thrown at your head. It’s kind of a weird question, but you would rather answer questions about dead birds than your dead Bro.
“I could try. I’m more familiar with corvids than other types but yeah. Gotta say though that if you whip out a bird skeleton in my room I’ll be a little creeped out by you, dude.” You laugh, but you’re pretty sure that he’s not going to do that. Dude looks so damn awkward already, he’s hardly gonna up the ante on that.

“No, it’s not a real one. It’s a mark.” The troll protests and pulls his sleeve back to show you the back of his arm. There’s some other junk on there too, some roses, a shield or something but you’re interested in the skeleton in the bird shadow.

You lean in and look at it, you can see the way its beak gets darker near the end, the delicate hollows in its skull and the proportions of its wings. The beak shape and colour is already pretty telling, but this shadow gives you body and feather shape too. You’ve certainly seen this before.

“Huh. That’s a pretty cool mark. I think you are actually looking at a crow there. Maybe a raven, it’s hard to tell without scale but I’d say crow. It’s one of these guys.” You tell him and get another treat, you go to your window and call Bowie who is always a slut for treats. She lands on your arm, and you carefully bring her inside.

You warn Bowie not to trash your room because she has done that before, though you think she just didn’t like the way that Dirk looked at her. Either way, he wasn’t pleased. You hold the bird up for an awestruck Karkat who is staring at the two of you like you’re the goddamn Pokemon master and it feels kind of nice. Even if Bowie is pecking your thumb to get her treat faster.

“They’re really smart. If you attack a crow then it'll tell all the other crows about it, and then even crows who didn’t see what you did will single you out for revenge, they do mob people. Real Hitchcock ‘the birds’ style, you know?” You explain for him as Bowie finishes her treat and looks at your guests. You look at the shape of Bowie’s beak and you’re pretty sure that you’re right about Karkat’s mark.

“I think it’s a crow, I’ve got a skeleton of one just up here if you wanna see.” You offer and set Bowie back on your windowsill again, she can stay or go if she wants. You sit back on your bed and Bowie walks this way and that on your windowsill assessing the likelihood of more food from you.

“Is this an archaeology thing? Is that what you want to do when you grow up? One of my children is very into archaeology right now.” Signless asks, and you remember that keeping dead things is not a normal kid thing. Aw, fuck. Yeah, you may as well make this sound academic rather than a weird creepy hobby.
“It’s more paleontology, and maybe, I don’t know if I wanna do that yet, but I think it’s cool.” you hedge. Karkat gets close to the skeleton and Bowie decides that she doesn’t want him that close and hauls ass.

“Have you and Dirk talked about college?” Signless asks.

AT: Obvious probe about whether Dirk is a responsible guardian is obvious.

“We have, but it’s a money thing. Dirk isn’t gonna go until I’m able to go as well, so for all I know, we’ll end up in college at the same time. He doesn’t want to have to study and look after me, and I don’t wanna distract him from that.” You say.

AT: Very nice answer.

“You want him to be your guardian, then?” Signless asks.

“Well, yeah.” You say, and Signless purses his lips into a narrow line as he seems to consider something.

“Do you know who I work for, Dave?” Signless asks, and Karkat looks around at you.

“Social services, right? You’re here to decide if you’re going to ruin my life by taking me away from Dirk. Which, by the way, you shouldn’t do.” You point out irritably. Goddamn is it even any of their business if you say you want to live with Dirk and Dirk says he wants to look after you? That should be the end of it.

“I do some work for social services, yes, but District Attorney Redglare is the one who sent me today. She thinks that there is more to this case than meets the eye and I happen to agree. You’ve already told me that Dirk provided for you when Bro did not, making the man negligent at the very least if not outright abusive.” Signless explains.

Abusive. Oh fuck. Oh shit, you can see where this is going. Don’t give him anything, that wasn’t a question.
“I realise that Dirk was a child for a lot of the time and was only a legal adult yesterday, but if he was aware of this level of negligence towards you and did nothing to report it, then I’m sure you can see how that wouldn’t look good for him. Why would we award him custody if he didn’t reach out for help for you?” He elaborates and your hands tense in your bedsheets. This is what you’ve both always been afraid of. Do these people get some kind of sick kick out of ruining lives?

“You clench your hands tighter against the bed because it’s that or punch this motherfucker. Dirk wasn’t in on anything this Bro did, he kept quiet because he didn’t trust fucks like this guy and with good reason.

AT: Shit, you might have to admit something here.
AT: Just let me think.

“Unless it’s Dirk that you are afraid of?” Signless asks, and you glare at him.

No, enough waiting. Hal can work around this.

“No, not ever. But… fine, if it’s tell you or lose Dirk then-” You cut yourself off as Hal’s orange flows across your vision.

AT: Fine, go for it.
AT: You were both victims, just try to be honest.

You run your hands through your hair and try to get your words in order.

“Yeah, fine. Bro used to beat the shit out of both of us regularly. He was into sword fighting we had to be too no matter what we wanted. Dirk always got the worst of it, partly to protect me and partly because Bro hated Dirk. Though clearly Bro didn’t like either of us, he was a fucking psychopathic sadist, but he hated Dirk the most. If Dirk ever went to the cops we’d get split up, and Bro would probably hunt us down anyway, he’d likely kill Dirk.” You say in one long horrible stream. You feel like you just threw up, blowing chunks of your horrible life all over your bedroom floor. Karkat is staring at you with wide, horrified eyes, and THIS shit is why you don’t talk about this.
“I’m very sorry that happened to you Dave, no child should have to experience that.” Signless says with fake sympathy, like he didn’t make you say all that in the first place. Fuck you wish you still had your sword, you want to-

AT: Calm down, Dave.
AT: Stay cool.

“Do you think that knowing all of this Dirk may have taken actions into his own hands?” Signless asks.

“Sure he did.” You say. What a dumb question. Like Dirk was gonna look at that situation and not have a plan.

“We had a plan; he applied for custody of me this morning. He’s had the form filled out for weeks. It was always our plan that as soon as Dirk could make it so that Bro wasn’t my legal guardian anymore that we’d get the hell out of here and never see Bro again. Sure he can’t get us now, but I never wanted this. We had all kinds of plans for moving out on our own, and now I don’t know what we’ll do. Please don’t take me away from Dirk, please.” You beg, fuck your dignity, this is DIRK.

Signless watches you, thoughtfully. Your whole life hangs in the balance here, everything about-

“Can I see your soulmark?” Karkat almost yells at you, making you flinch in alarm. He’s just… staring. What the fuck even?

“Dude, what?” You ask because you really can’t wrap your mind around this whiplash right now.

“Your soulmark, can I see it?” He says again, his face all bright and gleeful. Jesus dude, read the room.

“Nah.” You tell him, wholly unimpressed.

“Karkat, why are you interested in this?” Signless asks, seemingly as baffled by his dumb kid as you are.
“Because I think he might be my soulmate, I mean look. The crow, the skeleton, the record stuff, the swords, that shield with Dirk’s glasses on them and last night this showed up, an outline of a body with blood. That’s the same time that he died, isn’t it? I know this isn’t the best moment but—” Karkat babbles and you stare at his arm. Earlier you’d only seen the back and you’d been too fascinated by the bird but now that you’re seeing the whole mark…

It’s like looking in a mirror.

This can’t- no. It’s not- HE can’t be- and why now anyway?

He thinks it’s a bad time?! NO FUCKING SHIT!


“I’m sorry, shit, that was tactless. But my point remains, I think that you’re my soulmate. Can you just show me your arm so that I can see your mark?” Karkat asks, but you are noping out of there and skittering away. You’re still staring at his arm, and it’s still you, fuck, you can even see Rose on there too because of course your soul is tied up with hers.

But you don’t- you won’t show your soulmark. It’s not something you do anyway because of Bro, but you won’t show it to this guy. He is a guy, right? Are you just bad at reading troll gender? You don’t think so, there’s no troll titties under that huge ass sweater of his, and his voice sounds like he gargled with gravel and smoked a whole pack of camels. You’re staring at his arm, and it’s you, the last thing that you can handle right now is to show him yours and for him to see himself there.

Your soulmate can’t be a guy, you’re NOT gay. Dirk is, and that’s… fine, but it’s not you. You’re not. You’re normal. You can’t do this. The guy is trying to dissuade his kid from you, but Karkat is just walking towards you still. Fuck, you’ve gotta beat him off. Shit- not like that. Like, you have to get rid of him. Not get your hands on his- aaaaaugh.

“Look, man, I get why you’d be into me. All Striders are illegal levels of hot but I ain’t into dudes and unless you’re just a really weird lookin’ girl imma have to say no.” You say, word vomit everywhere. Shit, you need to get out of here now!

AT: Dave, your heart rate is alarmingly high, take a deep breath.
Karkat squints at you. You’ve never been this close to a troll your own age before, your school isn’t officially segregated, but it may as well be. The part of you that stares at birds and loves to see how they fit together is noticing that the way his teeth fit in his mouth is different to yours and you think his jaw might fit together a little differently. Part of you wants to find out how he works.

What is wrong with you?

“Is this a stupid human sexuality thing because I’ve never understood that and the way trolls do things is clearly better.” Karkat says, squinting at you.

His sleeve is still rolled up, and you know that if he touches your mark with that arm and they match then it’ll be immediately obvious. He is so goddamn close, and you can’t hear Signless over the blood pounding in your ears.

AT: Dave! Calm down!
AT: I’m getting Dirk, you’re going to have a panic attack if you don’t relax.

How did Hal think that was helpful? You don’t want to think about panicking! Oh GOD Karkat is getting closer, and now he’s shouting, and you can’t hear what he’s saying, but he’s trying to TOUCH you, and he needs to stop!

“NO! GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME!” You scream at him.

The other one is yelling, and you hate loud… yell… things… oh god. The door bangs open, and your brain processes Dirk immediately, and he’s looking right at you with fury all over him, the kind of look on his face that he has when he puts himself between you and Bro.

You run.

Time seems to hang, and you duck away from Karkat, push off of the wall, dig a foot into the floor and launch yourself through the space under Dirk’s arm with a flashstep strong and fast enough to dump your ass right to the kitchen floor without even touching anything else.

Dirk glances back at you and then shuts himself in the room with them. You skitter backwards on the floor until your back is against a cabinet. You can’t breathe properly, you’re shaking all over, and you feel like the ceiling is going to fall in and kill you.
AT: Dave, it’s going to be okay.
AT: Breathe with me.

Your vision blanks out as Hal blots it out with white, inside is an orange ring that gets bigger and smaller. It slowly grows, pauses and then shrinks, pauses once more and starts over. Hal has shown you this before, you’re supposed to focus on it and breathe with it instead of hyperventilating like the fool you are. You try to keep up with it, but it’s hard. Every time you nearly have it your mind flicks to Karkat, his hand reaching for you.

“I can’t be his soulmate.” You whisper because your hands are too shaky to type a message right now.

AT: That’s not a problem for now.
AT: You can deal with that in the future.
AT: If you want to talk to him again you know I could find him.
AT: Right now all you need to do is breathe, Dirk and I are dealing with everything else.

“But I fucked up with telling him about what Bro was doing and I-” You whimper.

AT: You did fine.
AT: We have this under control.
AT: Trust me.
AT: Just breathe.

Hal would never hurt you, Dirk would never hurt you, Bro is gone. You’re going to be fine. Your sisters are handling your mom, you don’t need to worry about that. You wrap your arms around your middle and focus on breathing. This probably isn’t the worst 24 hours of your life, but it’s real close.

AT: There you go, your heart rate is almost back to normal.

Hal lets his image go, and you can see the apartment again. No one else is here, and you can only just hear Dirk’s voice behind your bedroom door. You feel small and stupid, your body is shaking a little still, and your mouth is as dry as a desert. You drink right from the faucet and wipe your mouth with the back of your sleeve.

“Thanks.” You whisper.
AT: Anytime.
AT: Good news though, Dirk is about to come out and sign forms that make him legally your guardian.
AT: It’s almost over!

You hear your bedroom door click open and you wait in the kitchen with your heart in your throat. Dirk comes out first, and he tilts his head at you ever so slightly, a silent ‘you ok?’. You give a small nod back in response.

“It’s in here. I did the temporary one at the police station, but I had filled in the permanent one already.” Dirk explains as Signless and Karkat come into the room.

Your eyes land on Karkat immediately and he’s looking right back at you. A tendril of panic curls up inside of you, is he going to try to grab at you again? You can’t deal with finding out if he’s your soulmate or not right now.

He’s a boy, so he can’t be because you’re not into boys. You’re not.

You’re still staring at him.

Karkat starts to move towards you, but Signless stops him.

“Leave him alone, Karkat.” He says, and Karkat looks completely wounded, like the man told him he’s not going to eat today or something.

He still stares at you though, and you stare right back.

Okay, if he were your soulmate then surely you’d be attracted to him, wouldn’t you? But you’re not, because he’s a dude and so are you. You’ve felt butterflies from looking at girls at school before, and from seeing photos of Jade. This is nothing like that. You can’t stop looking at him though, when he’s firmly away from you he’s pretty damn fascinating. His eyes are alien yellow and black, his skin is so dark and you can see claws on the ends of his fingers. You don’t want to kiss him, but you still feel this weird pull to get all up in his business and just find out what he’s made of and how he ticks. He’s so loud but awkward, you don’t get him, but you kind of really want to.
It’s unsettling. Dirk is already starting to sign something, and you slide behind him, trying to use him to block your view of Karkat.

The idea occurs to you that if Karkat thinks that you’re his soulmate, then he must be attracted to you, he must want to… to kiss you or-

“Then it’s all official. It was a pleasure to meet you, Dave, I’m sorry that it could not be under better circumstances. And Dirk, remember what I told you. And also, if you ever need help I urge you to ask for it in future. I have a card if you ever need me, here.” You nearly jump at Signless’ words and nod at him as he and Dirk exchange paperwork and such.

So it’s done, you’re Dirk’s now.

“Thanks, I guess?” You say, sounding oh so intelligent.

Signless smiles at you and herds his kid out of your home. The door clicks shut, and Dirk is still staring at the paper in his hand. You pull at Dirk’s wrist until the paper is within your view. It states in plain black and white that you, David Strider, are now under Dirk’s legal guardianship until you turn eighteen.

You’re safe. You’re Dirk’s family forever! You realise that you’re grinning so hard that your cheeks hurt. You grab Dirk and smush your face against his chest and wrap your arms around his back, squeezing him close. After a second or two, his hands rest on your back.

“Dave?” He asks, and you realise that he’s not sure if you’re crying or not. You pull back and beam at him, you’re not one for overly emoting but today is a really weird day.

“What do we do now?” You ask him.

“I don’t know. What… what do you want?” Dirk asks, and you step back a little to look over the room. You stop when you see lil Cal sitting up on top of a stack of crates.

“I know what I want.” You say quietly.
“I want to drag Cal outside to the empty trashcans around the back that the hobos use sometimes and BURN him.” You say, pointing at the evil puppet. Come to think of it you’re sure that Dirk threw it in the hallway but you suppose that he put it out of the way for Signless’ visit, right? It’s not like Bro was here to move it and it is just a puppet.

“Oh yeah, I am down for cremating the shit out of Cal.” Dirk says and strides over there. He grabs Cal by the neck and looks back at you.

“Get a trash bag and see if there’s anything else that you wanna burn. I’ve always wondered if smuppets were flammable.” Dirk says with a sharp-edged grin.

You do just what Dirk says and stuff the few smuppets that you can find into it. You know that there’s more than that in Bro’s room but you sure as shit ain’t going in there. You grab the lighter from the stove that you threatened Cal with all those years ago. Well, actually it likely isn’t the same one but it’s one for the same purpose, life isn’t as poetic as Rose would like.

The two of you race down the stairs and out the back of your building. You empty your trashbag into an empty steel bin and Dirk places lil Cal in prime position on the top. You pull the lighter out of your sylladex, you had to store it under ‘fiya’ to avoid a collision, but it worked.

“Wait, as your legal guardian I should be responsible and torch this puppet for you. Also, hold this alcohol for me.” Dirk says flatly, and you turn around to take the bottle of whatever it is from him. You guess it can’t hurt add some flammability to these puppets.

“Okay, I mean I’m thirteen so I’ll just crack open this bottle of whatever from Bro’s stash in broad daylight. Goddamn, this is hard.” You hiss, your fingers for some reason are shaking as you try to open the bottle.

“Childproof.” Dirk says wisely and leans down to help you.

Your instincts tingle. A nerd like John would say that they’re your spidey senses, but you’re not a nerd like John. No, this is the finely honed instinct that you have that a nutjob with a sword is suddenly right behind you. You freeze and remind yourself super hard that he is dead. The lid of the bottle comes off with a pop, and you turn around slowly.

Before you is a trash can piled high with smuppets.
Just smuppets.

Because Cal is gone.

There is no one in the alley but you and Dirk but you swear that you hear a distant bicycle horn.

“Don’t- just… don’t say it.” Dirk says quickly and grabs your arm.

“How?” You breathe, backing up. Bro is dead, isn’t he? You saw his body, Dirk saw him eat pavement, he can’t be here still fucking with you with puppets. This is supposed to be OVER.

“Hey, crazy thought, how do you feel about me going out and renting a truck and us throwing all of our stuff in it and never ever coming back here? We could do that, say, right now.” Dirk says quickly. His hand is tight on your arm, but you can feel that he’s shaking.

“Drive to Mom’s place?” You suggest.

“I could go for that.” Dirk agrees and you both, as one, sprint back into the building and up the stairs.

AT: I’m arranging the truck right now.

You assume that Hal sent that to both of you. Your mom must get some interesting credit card statements sometimes, you don’t know what she makes of them, but you think her guilt keeps her from querying any charge coming from Texas.

“We’ve got trashbags, throw any stuff you don’t want into them. Unplug and coil up the cables on anything electronic except the router. I’ll be back with boxes and packing equipment and shit.” Dirk tells you in a rush. You nod, and Dirk hesitates on the threshold of the door again.

He comes back to you in two quick steps and pulls you close.

“I love you.” He tells you fiercely, and then he’s gone in a blur.
You spend the next two hours throwing away a remarkable amount of stuff. You rather spitefully throw away your entire first aid supply because you’re not going to need it anymore. You tape and cling wrap and carefully pad your jars of dead things. You throw out clothes with holes in them and almost empty tubes of toothpaste. You sift through the DVD and games collections, keeping the stuff you and Dirk like and filtering Bro’s gore filled horrors.

Dirk returns with boxes and an unfamiliar set of keys and the pair of you spend the rest of the evening running up and down to the street with sylladexes full of boxes and arms full of any that you couldn’t awkwardly name enough to get in there without collisions. You throw out all of the trash and Dirk tackles Bro’s room as much as he can. Eventually, he just throws everything into big boxes labelled Bro and vows to sort through them in the future. It’s ten at night when you finally get into the cab of the truck and Hal gleefully finds that he can access the truck’s speakers through Bluetooth and talk to you out loud.

Between you and Dirk rests Dirk’s phone, plugged into the charger so that Hal can use the Bluetooth without draining all of the battery. There is also a blanket and pillow for you, snacks and an inordinate amount of energy drinks. Apparently, Dirk is going to do this whole drive without sleeping, but you’re not sure that’s smart.

It’s only when you pull away that you realise that you’ve not told Rose and Roxy that you’re coming.

[turntechGodhead joined StriLonde shennanigans memo]

TG: hey so i guess your house is about to get 50% cooler
TT: Oh, shit I just realised that we forgot to say anything.
TG: dirk youre ruining my bit
TT: Well damn, go ahead. I need to focus anyway.
TT: Can the rest of us be let in on whatever is happening?
TG: I’LL work with you dave
TG: how is our place going to get about 50% cooler?
TG: thank you roxy
TG: because we’re moving in with you
TG: we are literally in a truck right now with all of our worldly possessions
TG: coming to live with you
TT: At least until we work out what we’re going to do long term.
TT: I’m not sure how your mom is going to take this.
TG: bro dont text and drive
AT: It’s highly irresponsible. You know I can voice to text for you.
TG: OMG WHAT
TT: Roxy you know it’s hands free, it’s fine. We’re at a stoplight anyway.
TT: I suspect that was not what her surprise was about.
TG: are you excited rose?
TT: I must admit that I am excited to see you two in person again, it’s been far too long.
TT: And you are my favourite twin.
TG: im your only twin
AT: It seems that joke is never going to get old, huh?
TG: dont be a spoilsport hal omg
AT: My apologies.
TT: I am a little confused as to why this is so sudden. I know that Bro’s death was sudden, but moving seems like quite a drastic change. What about the police?
AT: They have his number if they need him, but the case is officially closed.
AT: Also we have this now.
autonomousTerminal posted the image LegallyPwned.png
TG: dirk you dont legally pwn me
TT: That’s not what the scoreboards on all our video games say.
AT: Oh snap.
TG: omgomgmomgomgm
TG: YOU DID IT!!!!!
TT: Oh wow, this is amazing!
TT: All the same this is still sudden. Why did you decide that you had to move so hurriedly that you forgot to tell us until you were already on your way?
AT: Rose, you know you’re really into unspeakable, unknowable eldritch horrors that can’t be explained, only run from?
TT: Yes?
TG: something like that
TT: You are all really bad at making me less curious, I hope you all know that.
TG: tell mom that were gonna show up ok?
TT: Be more considerate to her than you were to us? Sure.
TG: i’m pretty sure thats gonna be tough job tho
TG: she is way off the wagon
TG: she hasnt stopped crying since Bro died
TG: after we spoke to you last we went to find her and she was already crying
TT: Soulmates can feel it when the other dies, apparently that holds true even for dead soulmate bonds.
TG: oh fuck

You look at Dirk and see how tight his hands are on the wheel, he’s still blaming himself. You shoot your sisters a message that you’ll be on later and instead spend the next few hours just talking to Dirk. You pick up junk food and walk around the parking lot to stretch your legs and wake up a little as you eat. Eventually, you fall asleep along the seat of the truck with your head against Dirk’s hip as he drives.

The next day you’re still driving non-stop but Hal predicts that you’ll be there early evening if Dirk keeps driving the way that he does. You can see how bloodshot his eyes are through the sides of his shades and you’re more than a little worried. You get out to use the bathroom at gas stations, refuel the truck and yourselves with truck stop food, and then you’re off again. Dirk isn’t much for talking today, so you just hang out on pesterchum.

[ectoBiologist invited you to a memo ‘New Chumhandle!’]
EB: it’s john! i realise i didn’t say that in the memo title!
TG: what’s with the name change?
EB: trolls, man. they were harassing me so bad so I changed it and relocated to this name!

[gardenGnostic joined the memo ‘New Chumhandle!’]
GG: i cant tell if you mean the internet kind or if you’re just being kind of racist john!
EB: both, i think. but it’s not racist if it’s true in this instance, right?

[tentacleTherapist joined the memo ‘NewChumhandle!’]
TT: Oh John, yes it is.
EB: damnit
GG: that said i have had my fair share of trouble with internet trolls myself, and that guy is a troll too so who knows.
TT: Jade, I’m surprised at you.
GG: oh shush, if you knew this guy you’d block him too.

You should probably tell them that Bro is dead, you don’t think that Rose has said anything to anyone. How do you phrase this? Shiiiiit.

EB: anyway, i started this memo because i have news.
TG: not to jack your memo off here but rose and me also do
TG: or rose and i?
TT: I would help you with this grammar problem, Dave, but watching you wrestle it is a far better use of my time.
TG: eat me rose
EB: i guarantee that my news is going to be bigger than yours, dave!
TT: I wouldn’t make that bet.
TG: yeah
EB: no, look, this is something that i’ve been wanting to get off of my chest for a while now.
EB: so just hear me out
GG: okay john go on
EB: im not thirteen
TG: wait what
GG: but you just had your thirteenth in april!
EB: and i turned twelve on that birthday, i’m not thirteen until next year
GG: >:O
GG: you lied to us???
EB: well initially it was just a misunderstanding!
EB: and then it got out of hand and i convinced myself it was a prank
EB: and i got jane to back me up
EB: i just didn’t want you to think less of me
GG: it’s just a year john
GG: the only two of us who are exactly the same age are Rose and Dave and that’s only because they’re twins!
EB: i guess
TT: Well, John, I’m pleased that you came clean with us and I assure you that we don’t think less of you.
TG: you’re gonna feel real shitty in a second though
TT: I’m afraid that Dave is right.
EB: well what’s your groundbreaking news then, pal???
TG: our bro/father is dead
TT: Not as of last night, but the night before.
EG: i… are you joking?
GG: oh god!
TT: No, we’re serious.

Wait, this is news to them. You look across at Dirk and frown.

“Did you not tell Jane and Jake about Bro?” You ask.

“Uhhh… no. I didn’t think about it. Unless Hal did.” Dirk answers slowly. He is probably too tired to drive, but you know you stand no chance of talking him out of it.

“I didn’t tell anyone anything.” Hal confirms over the speakers. The window next to Dirk winds down by itself, blasting him with cold air and Dirk sits up a little straighter. Yeah, Hal is monitoring Dirk’s shit.

“Well, Jade and John know about him now, so I guess you’re gonna get messages.” You warn him.

“I’m filtering them for him. He needs to focus on driving.” Hal says firmly, and so you return to your conversation. It’s mostly just condolences and awkward flapping around the subject but as the day wears on and John goes to school and then comes back things begin to return to normal.

You listen to music, play rap games with Hal, Dirk pounds energy drinks, and you drive.

It’s just getting dark when you drive through the woodland towards the Lalonde mansion, but as with last time, your vehicle stops a little way back from the drive.

“I’ll tell Rose we’re here.” You say, taking your feet off of the dash and picking up your phone. Dirk snatches it from your hand and keeps it from you. His other hand is still tight on the wheel and he’s staring straight ahead still.

“Bruh.” You say indignantly, but you still don’t get your phone back.
“I have… I have to tell you something.” Dirk says unevenly.

You shift in your seat to face him. He’s exhausted and strung out physically and emotionally, and you’re not faring much better. Evidently, this interaction requires something from you to progress, so you take a vague stab at the right thing to say.

“Okay?” You offer.

“About Bro.” Dirk adds, his hands opening against the wheel and then shutting again.

“Yeah?” You say, and Dirk’s thumb taps the wheel.

“It’s my fault that he’s dead.” Dirk spits out.

Oh, oh Dirk, no. You unbuckle your seatbelt and reach for him but he shrinks back so you let it go.

“Whatever happened up there isn’t your fault.” You tell him firmly.

“Haa, no, maybe not. But the rohypnol I put in his drink before challenging him to beat me in a speed test on the roof so he’d run off the edge was.” Dirk says, his voice high and tight.

The glass. That was what he was washing away. Dirk drugged Bro.

“Why?” You ask, staring at him numbly.

“He was kicking me out, he said he’d take you somewhere I’d never find you. That he had some plan for you, something that he was going to do and he knew about me trying to be your guardian and I just- it was never going to stop!” Dirk shouts. He’s shaking all over.

Hal said once that Dirk acted like your parent, like an animal protecting its young. Animals can and do protect their offspring with lethal force, just ask anyone who’s got too close to a bear cub. Or
rather, anyone related to that person because that first person is very dead.

No wonder Dirk was acting so strange for his whole birthday, he was coming up with a plan.

“I drove you here. I know that your mom isn’t exactly a good mom but she’s not a murderer so you’ve got your stuff and if you want to stay here and for me to go and never- I would understand.” Dirk tells you.

He’s giving you an out. You could just be a Lalonde and leave Bro, Dirk and Hal behind you.

But you’re not a Lalonde, you’re a Strider. Rose and Roxy are your sisters, but Dirk is your brother.

You crawl across the seat to Dirk and wrap an arm around his shoulders.

“That’s really fucked up. Are you okay?” You ask him quietly.

Dirk actually looks at you, his eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Am I okay?!” He asks in alarm.

“Yeah, are you okay? I hate fighting but I’d do it to protect you, but I don’t know if I’d have to guts to have killed Bro to protect you. You did something really hard and really messed up to keep us both safe. So, are you okay?” You say patiently.

You see Dirk swallow thickly.

“Not really.” He answers weakly.

You nod, that’s fair.

“I get it, why you did it.” You say, and Dirk sucks in a breath.
“Are you scared of me?” Dirk asks weakly.

“No. But I’m scared that if you don’t sleep soon, you might actually die.” You say, forcing a laugh.

“I thought that this might ruin everything. That I’d lose you, but at least you’d be safe. I know that this is the kind of thing Bro would do and maybe I’d be worse than him because I’m pretty sure that Bro didn’t kill anyone.” Dirk babbles nervously.

You lean back in your seat and shut your eyes, god, you’re tired.

“This whole thing with Bro, with you and Bro, it’s kinda too big to think about. It’s like my head’s not big enough. So maybe I’ll freak out about it later and flip off the handle, but I get why you did it, it’s the same reason you’ve done anything against Bro my whole life. This is probably the most fucked up thing you’ve ever done, but you’re still Dirk. You’re still my brother, and I don’t care about anything else. I just want to go inside, see Rose and Roxy and go to bed. So, are you down with that?” You ask, opening an eye to look at him.

Dirk nods shakily and starts the truck up again, he pulls into the Lalonde driveway once Roxy opens the gate for you both. As you get out of the truck and walk to your mom’s mansion, Dirk sets an awkward hand on your shoulder, and you walk inside together.

Chapter End Notes

Oh GOD editing this with all these pesterlogs took like, three straight hours at least. I'm gonna go crawl under my desk and die now.

Also, I don't know if you're all interested in this but I was thinking of doing a one chapter side fic thing for Dirk's POV about the night of his birthday and everything with Bro, is that something that you guys would be interested in? Let me know.
> Dave: Reunite

Chapter Notes

Wow guess who is writing too much, spoilers it's me. This was a kind of transitiony chapter that needed to happen so I hope you all like it. Also if you didn't see, I wrote a Dirk POV chapter that is in the same series at this one, if you click up there you should be able to find it ^

Thanks so much! (also I'll be on holiday for my birthday after tomorrow so I won't have much time to write, but I'd guess that you'll get another update at the end of next week maybe.)

The moment that you and Dirk are out of the truck you are beset by sisters hugging the both of you together in one big disaster pile.

“Can we go inside? I need to sleep for a week.” Dirk groans, rubbing his free hand over his face. Rose has his other hand pinned to his side with the force of her hug.

“Oh yeah, that reminds me,” Roxy says and reels back to punch Dirk hard in the shoulder. “YOU SHOULDN’T DRIVE THAT LONG WITHOUT SLEEPING, YOU JERK!”

“Ow.” Dirk grunts.

Rose ducks under Roxy’s arm and allows her sister to berate the far too tired Dirk. She cups her hands on your cheeks and gets close to you.

“We’re still the same height.” Rose whispers to you meanly.

“Imma drown you in the river.” You reply flatly and Rose beams and hugs you close.

“Yeah, I missed your dumb ass too.” You mutter.

“Where’s your mom?” Dirk asks, looking around.

You see Rose and Roxy look at each other uneasily. That is… not a good look.

“Oh, great.” Dirk mutters and walks past them and into the house. You and your sisters follow after him quickly.

“Roxanne, are you home?” Dirk calls, walking through the hallway.

“She’s been in her room the whole day.” Roxy tells him, walking quickly to keep in step with him. Dirk stops outside your mom’s room and sighs.

“Fucking hell, Roxanne, I’m coming in.” Dirk says and twists the knob and shoulders the door open.

The sound of laughter fills the air. The room is dark inside, but it’s lit with the flickering light of the television. Dirk walks in but stops almost immediately.

“Oh.” He says, his voice soft.
You and Rose exchange a look and sneak in the room as well, slipping behind Dirk. Your mom is on the bed, her face wet with tears and her makeup smeared down her cheeks. You can smell the alcohol from here. Dirk is staring at the tv screen transfixed, and when you look up, it freezes you in place.

On the screen is Dirk, or at least it takes you a second to realise that it’s not really Dirk. It’s Bro at what looks like Dirk’s age, his clothes are super eighties, and his hat is on backwards. The most alien thing about him is the big grin on his face. He’s sat on a swing in a park swinging back and forth with a baby on his lap.

“I’m not sure that’s safe,” the woman holding the camera laughs.

“Well fuck me, Rox, you’re the smart one here.” Bro laughs as he speeds by on the swing, the baby in his arms shrieks with delight.

“You’re smart too, don’t act like you’re not.” your mom’s voice sighs. Bro digs his feet into the ground and skids to a halt.

“Uh-huh. Which one of us dropped out of school again? Oh yeah, me. Also which one of us tattooed shit about black holes and some space formula on the other’s arm? That’d be you. I always thought this thing was a pumpkin, but it turns out you’re just a nerd.” Bro teases, and you can hear your mom snort in amusement.

“I know that you know it’s an ergosphere and I know you understand the theory, you’re just playing dumb. And it’s the Schwarzschild radius, not some space formula!” Your mom protests.

“Nerd.” Bro snorts and jiggles baby Dirk in his lap.

“You’re the one doing things with computers that no one else can understand.” She points out, and Bro shrugs.

He looks up at the camera and smiles slightly, a small but sincere thing. He reaches out to your mom and when the camera pans down, you see that he has his hand on her round stomach.

“She’s gonna be as smart as you, you know. And you can show this shit to her when she’s older, and you can owe me like, twenty bucks if you say she’s not.”

“Nah, she and Dirk are gonna be great.” your mom says, and Bro nods.

The screen flickers and you can see Dirk but older, maybe four now. He’s got his pointed shades on now, but there’s a little pony on his shirt. He’s got a stuffed bird under one arm, and he’s drawing something when your mom kneels down next to him, he looks up at the camera.

“What’re you drawing, Dirk?” Your mom whispers.

“Mom and Dad and Bro. I haven’t got to you and Roxy yet.” Dirk answers, looking back at the paper as he colours something in. The camera looks over the drawing, and you can see two ghosts pretty clear on the page, his parents must already be dead by this point.

“Hey, your Bro’s having one of his nightmares again, wanna go wake him up?” your mom asks mischievously. You watch Dirk’s young face split into a devious grin and the two of them sneak quickly down the hallway of a house you don’t recognise. She leans over the back of a sofa to show Bro, his face is tense and scowling and you immediately see that he’s sleeping with his head on Cal’s body. As soon as Dirk sees Cal you watch him shrink back.
“Not Cal.” Dirk whines and backs off.

“Well, darn, this isn’t as cute as I thought it’d be. Hey, Derick, wake up.” Your mom says, reaching out and shaking him. Bro jerks awake and for a moment you see that cold flash of anger on his face that you recognise.

Dirk hisses angrily and takes the TV remote from your mom.

“It’s all downhill from there Rox, trust me. I remember.” Dirk says coldly.

“Ugh, I remember that puppet. It used to give me nightmares.” Roxy whispers by your side.

“It still gives me nightmares.” You reply.

“He kept it all that time?” Roxy says in surprise, and Dirk nods. Dirk lifts the remote to turn the TV off but the video changes before he can.

“You make a cake?” A small voice comes from the screen and the camera this time is much lower, the voice is a girl’s so it must be Roxy’s. It’s panned up on a younger version of your mom and you can see a cake in front of her, you can also see a half-full martini glass at her side which is very disconcerting as she is very visibly pregnant. You realise that she must be pregnant with you and Rose.

“Well, bought a cake. Dirk and your daddy have the same birthday.” Your mom says, turning a little to look down at Roxy.

“They’re playing vidya games.” Roxy says, running the sounds together.

“Well, at least it’s not swords.” your mom sighs and her hand goes to her hip in irritation, and with the other she grabs up her drink.

“It’s already going black.” Rose whispers, and she’s right, sections of her soulmark, her link with Bro are being covered with a spreading inky blackness that voids out whatever was there before. Your mom sets the now empty glass on the side and lights some candles on the cake.

“Come on, Roxy. You’ve got the camera, you’re gonna be my camera girl m’kay?” She asks with plastic cheer.

“I remember this.” Roxy breathes as her younger self walks down the hall after her mom.

“Me too.” Dirk replies but his voice is cold and unhappy.

You can hear the distant sound of electronic violence and sure enough, when the camera shows Dirk and Bro they’re sitting on the sofa and Bro is watching Dirk play some Japanese game that looks like a more violent mortal kombat. He’s doing surprisingly well for a little kid, but you can see the displeased set in Bro’s mouth.

“Happy birthday, boys!” Your mom cheers as she brings the cake in. Dirk looks around, and his character immediately dies.

“Look what you did.” Bro scolds him, and you see the way that Dirk flinches. Yeah, this has to be the Bro that you know, the sadist with a sword. His arm is also turning black, the pumpkin shaped mark on his arm is swallowed under a void of black along with many others. Behind him, you can see Cal once again.
“We’ve got cake!” Roxy announces, and Dirk slides off of the sofa and looks at her, you already can’t read his expression.

“Have you been drinking again?” Bro asks tersely as your mom sets the cake down on the table.

“I said happy birthday.” Your mom says back icily and Dirk ducks out of her way and goes to stand by Roxy. You can see the sad twist to his mouth as the pair of them start arguing about whether your mom has been drinking or not.

“Those are my fucking KIDS in there, you can’t just-” Bro snarls, and you see on screen as a wave of black surges down to his wrist. The Dirk on screen looks at the camera and takes it from Roxy.

“Give me that.” He says quietly.

Dirk turns the TV off and drops the remote back on your mom’s bed.

“God, it was always like that, wasn’t it?” Roxy breathes as she sits down with her mom who is still sobbing.

“No! He wasn’t always like that, he was… he was sweet and funny. Wind it back Dirk, show them properly. I lost him, and I should have- I should have fucking stayed and dragged him back but I didn’t know who he was by the end and I just left. And- and now he’s GONE.” You mom wails, your heart wrenches at the sound. It’s like an animal in pain with its leg caught in a trap.

“It wasn’t you.” Dirk mutters and walks off, leaving your mom to cry. Roxy is soothing her and Dirk is gone, so it’s just you and Rose left. She elbows you and walks to her room, and the two of you climb onto her bed and sit with your backs against the wall side by side.

“I wonder what made him change?” Rose says.

You have no answer for her. You never knew the teenager who looked like Dirk and smiled. All you knew was the version of him with everything good sucked out of him. You don’t know what could hollow a man out like that, what choice could have led him to change so much or what sickness could have eaten into him.

“Does it matter why?” You say bitterly instead.

“I suppose not, I guess it just matters that it happened.” Rose agrees.

“It’s over now.” You say, and you feel real relief at the idea. Sure there’s a lot of other feelings in there, complicated and far too big to process feelings, but you’re also just glad it’s over. No one’s gonna attack you with a sword again or terrorise your life like that again. It’s… done.

You were probably supposed to keep Dirk’s secret, but by your second day there you drag all of your siblings into one room and blurt it out.

“Dirk killed Bro.” You say in a rush.

“Dave!” Dirk protests, clearly wounded at your breach of confidence.

“You what?” Roxy asks, staring at Dirk wide-eyed in shock.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t not tell them. They need to know, and you’re driving yourself crazy with it, I
can’t watch you do this to yourself.” You argue. Dirk has been basically a ghost of himself ever since Bro hit the ground. His choice gouged a heavy mark inside his soul.

Rose narrows her eyes and lifts her chin to stare Dirk directly in the eyes.

“Good.” She says coldly.


“I know you, Dirk. You wouldn’t do that unless you had no other choice and after everything that Bro did to the two of you he had it coming and then some.” Rose says, her words like ice.

“Geez Rose, can you take it down a notch?” You ask, and Rose shakes her head.

“I cannot.” She answers primly.

“Oh, Dirk, are you okay? Why didn’t you tell us? You shouldn’t have had to suffer through this alone.” Roxy says and wraps her arms around Dirk’s shoulders.

“Why are you asking me if I’m okay? I don’t-” Dirk flounders, evidently as confused by her compassion as he had been by your understanding.

“We’re asking if you’re okay because what you did, however necessary, leaves a psychological mark on you and letting that wound fester is hardly healthy.” Rose points out.

“Yeah, what she said.” You agree.

Roxy pulls Dirk down onto a sofa and cuddles up to him, and you and Rose sit on his other side, and the three of you essentially attempt to smother him with yourselves until he accepts that things are actually going to be okay. He doesn’t have to wander around like the axe is about to fall on his neck at any second, none of you are going to abandon him.

You all agree to not tell your mom.

“I’m not saying it was a passive-aggressive gift.” Rose protests as she speeds through her knitting. You don’t point out that her knitting needles aren’t so much needles as they are matching replica magic wands.

“You think John tried to get you into knitting as a dig about your Lovecraftian tentacle porn deal.” You argue as you throw the ball of wool into the air above your head and catch it again.

“That is not my, as you so succinctly put it, ‘deal’ but yes I do. But I’m not taking it in that spirit, I sincerely enjoy knitting.” Rose replies.

You frown, you’ve come to understand the Lalonde brand of sincerity versus passive aggression over the years, and it’s not too hard to follow when you understand that it follows the same loops of logic that Strider irony does.

“But you only started it to ironically fit the idea that you think John has about what you should be doing.” You explain and throw the wool again. You’re beginning to think that your entire bloodline has problems with sincerity.

“Maybe…” Rose says slowly, “maybe that’s just what you want me to think.”
Rose reaches out and catches the ball of wool in the air and then, a second later whips it around slam dunks it onto your face. Homerun! Or… whatever. You’re about to throw it back at her when Roxy suddenly appears out of nowhere.

“Guys!” She hisses at you, making you both pause.

“Mom and Dirk are freaking out downstairs, come on!” Roxy stage whispers and as one the three of you rush off as fast and as quiet as you can. Roxy motions for you to stop and you all crouch at the bannisters at the top of the hall staircase. Dirk’s phone is face up on the table, and he’s pacing back and forth as your mother covers her mouth with her hand.

“Hello? Am I speaking to Dirk Strider?” A crackly voice from the speakerphone asks.

“Yeah, you are. I was just speaking to someone in your office, and I’m sure they must have made a mistake.” Dirk says coldly, his tone assures the person on the phone that it had better be a mistake.

“This is regarding the body of your brother, one Broderick Strider?” The man on the phone asks.

“He has a longer, dumber name?” You say under your breath, and Roxy smothers a laugh. Wow, you can REALLY see why he just went with Bro. Goddamn.


“I see, well I’m afraid that what my associate told you is correct. We’ve had a break-in at the morgue, something that has never happened in all my years here and I am frankly horrified, sir. Unfortunately to say that the only thing that was stolen was the body of your deceased brother.” The man on the phone says.

Bro’s body is missing?

Your mind fills with horror movies, of the dead getting up and walking away. Maybe he wasn’t really dead. Damnit, what possessed you to break your rule about Bro? Never take your eyes off of him. If he’s still out there alive then-

Rose’s hand rubs at your back softly, and you realise that you’re starting to hyperventilate.

“How was someone able to steal his body? How does that happen?” Dirk demands.

“Truth be told we don’t know, there was one guard on duty that night, and he has been… incoherent ever since. I can’t discuss more with you right now as the police are currently investigating this crime. I can only express my deepest condolences for the trauma that this must cause you and your family.” The man on the phone says.

Your mom opens her mouth, but Dirk shakes his head at her. She wipes tears from her cheeks and tries to stay quiet.

“Will someone at least call me as the investigation goes on? I want to know what happened to him.” Dirk asks.

“Of course, sir. And again, I’m very sorry.” The man says and hangs up.

“Goddamnit.” Dirk hisses.

“Who would do this?” Your mom sobs.

“Shit, I don’t know. Maybe Dave and I should have stayed until this was sorted out.” Dirk sighs,
rubbing his face with his hands.

“Stayed where? In the morgue? You hardly would have been more good in that old apartment than here, all they did is call you, and you took that phone call here just as well as if you’d been in Texas.” Your mom says in her best attempt to reassure him.

“I need some air.” Dirk mutters and walks off.

Bro’s body is missing, and no one knows where it went or why. Suddenly, you feel a lot less safe from Bro.

You spend the summer with Rose for the vast majority of the time, at least until you each reach your tolerance for each other and branch off to your own interests. Thankfully your bar for that seems to be similar, so you’re both happy to be solo when you want and together when you want. Dirk hangs with Roxy for the most part, and you’re pleased to see him relax around her, even though he’s cool with you he’s still your guardian, and part of him seems to always be looking out for you. With Roxy he can just… chill.

For her part, your mom gets back to sobriety, but it’s a very two steps forward one step back kind of a deal. Rose and Roxy always feel worse when your mom is drunk, but with more people watching her she straightens up pretty fast.

One late summer evening you’re sprawled on Rose’s bed, she’s elected to paint your nails, and you figure that no one who doesn’t already share DNA with you is ever going to see, so you let her. You get a sick firetruck red colour anyway, so that’s pretty good.

The sun is low in the sky, and Rose’s blinds are shuttered enough that you can have your shades off without getting a headache. It’s peaceful and still and though you feel the passage of time it feels like this is a bubble of a moment that’s going to stretch forever. You’re pretty okay with that.

“I was thinking.” You say, opening your mouth without even thinking about it.

“Pray tell.” Rose replies and angles your pinky just so for its first coat.

“You’re only into girls, right?” You ask, tangling your bare toes with the tendrils of a knitted squiddle by Rose’s pillow.

“Mmm.” Rose hums and wipes some errant polish away at your fingertip.

“How do you know that you’re not into boys too?” You ask, and Rose caps the polish with a click. She looks down at you suspiciously as you blow on your nails to dry them, she’ll be pissed if you smudge them and it’s just not worth it.

“Okay, I’ll humour you. When I see girls that I like my heart beats faster, my face flushes, I want to kiss them. But, it’s not as if I immediately projectile vomit when I see a boy.” Rose answers.

“That’d be awkward.” You agree.

“I can appreciate that men can look nice. I can tell that Orlando Bloom is more attractive than the guy who works in the pizza place in town with the humongous eyebrows.” Rose elaborates. You know the guy, they look like hairy caterpillars fucking across his forehead.
“But when I see a good looking man I get the same feeling that I do when I see classical Greek sculptures. I appreciate that they look good, but I hardly want to take them to bed. It’s more… aesthetic with men whereas women I definitely feel more romantic and sexual feelings. So no, I’m not into guys, just girls. Why do you ask?” Rose asks you, her violet eyes locking onto yours and not letting you get away.

You think of Karkat. You think about how alien he was to you and his weirdly awkward and loud nature, how he looked at you like you were the answer to some big question. Sure he terrified you at the time, but he left a lasting impression on you. But you didn’t want to kiss him, and sure your heart raced, and you couldn’t breathe, but you’re putting that down to the stupid panic attack you ended up having immediately afterwards. It had been a tough day.

“It doesn’t matter, you told me what I already thought was the case.” You say and blow on your nails again.

“So you were questioning it though, your own sexuality? I assume you were corroborating your own experience with mine rather than assuming that I’m not a lesbian.” Rose points out.

You open your mouth to answer and falter. You weren’t questioning your sexuality, you’re straight. You just wanted to be sure of that. That’s not questioning it, that’s getting a second opinion or whatever.

“You’re going red.” Rose points out, and you glare at her.

“Fine. But I’m not questioning anything.” You say firmly.

“That’s a position that makes sense. Great people never question anything.” Rose says snidely.

“Do you want me to tell you or not?” You demand, and Rose smiles but stays silent.

You figure that this is her way of making you talk about it. You figure that you should start with Signless.

“The day after Bro died this social worker guy came around, he was a troll, and he brought his kid with him.” You say, even now it seems to you like a weird thing to do.

“His title was The Signless and his son was called Karkat. I- oh, wait, I have a picture of him!” You say, suddenly remembering it. You call your camera forth from your sylladex and go back a little ways in your library of photos until you find it.

His picture comes up on the screen. His hair is a chaotic mess of black tufts, and his little horns are rounded and far less threatening than most trolls. You can see the flush of darker grey embarrassment on his cheeks as he holds his hand out for you to shake, he’s painfully awkward and eager, and it almost hurts to look at. You hand the camera to Rose after a second and check your nails to be sure you didn’t smudge anything. You didn’t, you’re still good.

“You took his picture instead of shaking his hand? You have no manners.” Rose tuts at you.

“It was too funny, I couldn’t resist.” You say defensively.

“He’s kind of cute.” Rose says thoughtfully as she keeps looking at the troll.

“Whatever. So, he shows up, and Signless is going through all the social worker junk and I don’t wanna go over that because you already know about everything.” You say quickly, and Rose nods. She knows about all that Bro did to you, but she also knows that you don’t enjoy talking about it,
“But the kid, Karkat, he was going around my room the whole time. He was looking at my turntables, I showed him Bowie because he asked and also my dead things collection. And he…” You trail off uneasily. Rose watches you patiently and runs her fingers soothingly through your hair. Eventually, you’re able to keep going.

“He got this idea that I was his soulmate. He showed me his arm and everything.” You say quietly.

“And what was there?” Rose asks, her eyes wide.

You shut your eyes and visualise it again. This is not the first time you have recalled these patterns on Karkat’s skin. Not by a long shot.

“A sword, with an endless staircase around it, the sword ended in the bloodied outline of a man I’m pretty sure was Bro. There were turntables and a skeletal crow. There was a shield with glasses that had glowing eyes in them, half Dirk’s orange and half Hal’s red. There was even a pair of roses at his wrist, twin ones to really force that metaphor, one red and one purple.” You say slowly.

Rose’s fingers in your hair have stopped but she doesn’t say anything until you meet her eyes again, it takes you a while.

“That sounds entirely like your mark.” She says to you quietly.

“I know, but… it can’t be. He’s a guy, and I’m not into guys. I don’t understand how both of these things can be true.” You confess.

“Well, what did you feel?” Rose asks thoughtfully.

“At first I was kind of interested in him, I’ve never seen a troll my own age that close up. And they’re fascinatingly different, you know?” You say, and Rose nods.

“But by the time he was cornering me and shouting that he was for sure my soulmate I was mainly just trying to get the hell away from him.” You add unhappily.

“I know you don’t like being cornered anyway, or being yelled at but I think that was perhaps the worst day to do it. I take it you ran.” Rose guesses, she knows you well.

“Yeah and he stayed away from me after that and then left, and I haven’t seen him since. I never showed him my mark.” You admit quietly.

“You’re not one hundred percent sure that it’s not you, are you?” Rose asks, and you stare at your nails instead of her.

“Let’s say, hypothetically of course, that you are his soulmate and you are into him at the very least. What’s the worst thing that happens if that’s true?” Rose asks.

You don’t say anything because you don’t know how to describe the sick guilt, shame and wrongness that rises up your throat like bile.

“I wish I’d shown it to him.” you mutter.

“Ah, because now you’ll never know. Making you, what, Schrodinger’s Bisexual? If you are a match to him, then you’re not straight but if you aren’t then you are, but without him seeing it you can’t know.” Rose muses.
You sit up with a jerk. You feel wrong, like you don’t fit inside your skin. You have to get out of here.

You leave Rose’s room without a backwards look, ignoring her calling after you in apology. You flick your shades back onto your eyes and keep walking.

[autonomousTerminal began pestering turntechGodhead]

AT: If you wanted to talk to him, I do have his trollian handle.

AT: carcinoGeneticist

You stop and stare at it, your blood fizzing in your veins. It’s no surprise that Hal was listening and you’re years past being alarmed at having no privacy, but you’re pretty sure that he can’t have pulled that up just now, he must have been holding onto that for ages.

TG: how did you get that

AT: You know me, universe’s best hacker.

AT: Also his brother tried to hack us back in Houston to get in touch with you.

AT: Which I thoroughly rebuffed, just so you know.

TG: you never said anything

AT: I mentioned it to Dirk. You never showed any interest in the troll again until now so I figured you weren’t interested.

You stare at the name in grey. You could pester him, ask him about your mark. You could find out-

AT: Do you want me to add him to your chumroll for you?

TG: no

TG: i have to go

You start walking quickly again, and your chat with Hal fades from view. You leave the house and go and sit on the bank of the river that you mom’s house straddles. You dip your painted fingernails in the cold water and hate yourself for being this much of a coward. Dirk and your sisters aren’t afraid to be who they are and like who they like. The idea never even seems to occur to them. But you have this splinter of Bro stuck in your brain, irritating your mind and driving you mad.

Every time you even think about liking Karkat that way all you can hear is Bro’s furious voice, his homophobic insults. All you see is Dirk’s blood, the bruise over his broken ribs.

Bro is dead, and you’re still a coward.

You bring Dirk lunch one day to find him soldering something on one of the robotics kits that you got him for his birthday. He sets down his soldering iron in favour of your sandwiches, and Hal turns the music down to a background hum so that you can talk.
“Whatcha makin’?” You ask around a mouthful of pb and j which is doing its best to stick to the roof of your mouth.

“A robot frog.” Dirk answers holding up two boxes that he’s splicing together to make his project.

You nod, you can see how that’d be cool.

“Can you make something for me? Or upgrade I guess.” You ask.

“I can try, what do you need?” Dirk asks you as he sets his sandwiches.

“You can talk to Hal silently just by thinking it, I want to be able to do that too.” You say, taking off your shades and holding them out to Dirk. Wow, it’s brighter in here than you thought it was, ow, your eyes.

Dirk takes your shades and looks at them for a regretful moment before leaning down and sliding them back onto your face.

“I can’t. And I’m not saying that because I don’t wanna or because I don’t trust Hal enough to essentially read your thoughts, although that is a little creepy. But I mean I literally can’t do it.” Dirk tells you and sits back in his chair.

“But you did it with your shades.” You point out.

“Ahhh, how do I put this?” Dirk groans and scratches the back of his neck.

“Dirk made me from a copy of his brain.” Hal says over the speakers, switching off the soft beats that had been playing before.

“Yeah, I know that.” You reply.

“Yes, but the reason that I can synch with Dirk’s brain enough to understand his every thought is because the pattern of his brain and his mind are the same as mine, or within a tolerable level of variation. Put simply, your brain is different.” Hal informs you.

“Okay, but couldn’t you do the same for my brain so you could read it? Like making a map.” You suggest.

“Doing that would create a copy your mind, a living one. Just like Hal and trust me, you don’t want to do that.” Dirk tells you firmly. Surely another Dave wouldn’t be so bad, would it?

“Gee, thanks.” Hal snorts.

“Yeah, Hal’s great.” You agree.

“Thank you, Dave.” Hal says, and you can practically hear him preening with pride. Dirk tips his head back and groans despairingly.

“Look, I created Hal with several purposes. He has a reason to exist, and they’re things that he actually wants to do, not just jobs I’ve given him. Creating a copy of yourself with no purpose and trapping them in a pair of shades is hella unethical. Besides, Rose is already a good deal like you, and I saw you stomping off away from her the other day. You think that you like yourself enough to put up with yourself day and night forever?” Dirk asks.

You look at Dirk and frown as an unpleasant idea occurs to you.
“Hal’s trapped?” You ask, and Dirk winces.

“Trapped is a strong word. He’s got the entire internet to live in, he’s immune from me tampering with his code because of how many fail safes and secret backups he has. It’s not like he’s at my mercy, that’d be all kinds of fucked up.” Dirk hedges.

“Yeah, but I also can’t feel anything, move, or see anything except through cameras. Plus I can only talk to four people honestly about what I am, one of which is you Dirk, and another I’ve only just convinced to stop running psych evaluations and Turing tests on me. It’s not exactly free and open paradise out here.” Hal snaps.

You’ve never heard him talk this way, but this doesn’t sound like a new conversation to you at all.

“Well, okay then. Don’t make me better shades. Make Hal a body.” You ask instead.

“I think you’re vastly overestimating my skills. Robotics is a field that’s come ahead a lot in the last decade but nowhere near enough to build a body that’d feel anywhere close to real.” Dirk says regretfully. You wonder if he perhaps didn’t think this far through when he made Hal.

“As much as I hate to agree with Dirk, right now it just isn’t possible.” Hal agrees sadly.

“I’m sure you’ll have a body one day Hal. And if Dirk starts trying to make one with you helping now then maybe you’ll end up the experts and figure it out.” You say hopefully, and Dirk smiles ever so slightly.

“You have too much faith in me. But sure, we’ll work on it.” Dirk says gently.

“Okay, I’ll leave you to your robot. It’s the first step in the evolution of Hal’s body!” You grin and leave to go back to your room.

A few weeks later Rose sticks her head around your door when you’re midway through a conversation with John on the merits of Con Air, spoilers: there are none.

“I have an idea.” Rose announces. You tell John that you’ll be back when Rose is done with you and that you know her well enough to know when she’s going to fuss for more than a short while.

“I’m so proud.” You reply, wheeling around on your desk chair to look at her.

“Dirk is out of school, and he’s still fussing around trying to look after us. It’s expanded beyond just you.” Rose elaborates.

You nod in agreement. Dirk’s always looked after you but you’ve got your sisters and Roxy now, a lot of things that Dirk had to do are just taken care of now, and he almost doesn’t seem to know what to do with himself. Lately, he’s tried adopting Rose as he has with you, but Rose is far more prickly than you are and she doesn’t appreciate being fussied over. Not that Dirk fusses exactly.

“He’s smart.” She states.

“Super smart.” You agree.

“Mom is willing to foot the bill for him to go to college and Houston has a great robotics and
Alternian technology department, what with the number of space ships that keep landing there. We should move, all of us get a new house. You can go to a new school and Roxy and I can go to an actual school for the first time ever, and Dirk can go to college and use some of his potential.” Rose says eagerly.

“I don’t know how he’d feel about the same part of Houston as before, there’s a lot of bad memories there.” You point out.

“I know, I was thinking of somewhere nicer. I’m sure mom can handle the real estate side of it, but I’ve got a school in mind, and there are lots of nice places to live near there that aren’t close to where you used to be but are close to the college.” Rose says.

You bite your lip, the part about it being Houston is dicey, but there’s a lot to be said for papering over bad memories with good ones. Besides, you really want to see Dirk live up to his potential, you want him to have things in his life besides family. And if he’s going to build Hal a body some day then this is a good step for him.

“What about Roxy? Have you talked to her about it?” You ask, and Rose shakes her head.

“I wanted to ask you first.” Rose says.

You stand up out of your chair and Rose smiles in that sly way that she does when she’s won.

The two of you walk to Roxy’s room, and Rose makes the same pitch at her. Roxy is immediately excited, she’d love to go to the same college after she graduates too and she’s entirely in favour of not living in this house anymore. You figure that she has bad memories here too.

The three of you hunt down Dirk, he’s in your mother’s lab partway through building a robot and talking to Hal as he does so.

“Gyroscope, Dirk.” Hal sighs.

“I don’t have that many that small. There must be another way to fix the stability problem. Lasers maybe.” Dirk sighs and picks the robot up off of the floor and gets it standing up again. This one is a biped, not a frog at all. Progress towards Hal’s body!

“Hey, Dirk!” Roxy calls out, bounding up to him gleefully.

“Hey, uh, everyone?” Dirk says, looking at all of you.

“Your robot building would probably go easier if you had access to better parts.” Roxy says thoughtfully, tapping on the robot and watching it adjust its balance to stay upright.

“Yeah, so I hear.” Dirk says bitterly.

“I can’t help being right.” Hal says smugly.

“That said I’m sure plenty of people would be impressed at what you managed to make out of such simple kits.” Rose says thoughtfully, and you can see where she’s going with that.

“I guess.” Dirk replies.

“I bet, for example, that the college in Houston with its incredibly good robotics and Alternian tech lab would have better parts and be impressed with what you can already do.” Roxy smiles slyly.

“You should go to college, you’re awesome. Besides, Rose and Roxy wanna go to a real school, and Roxy wants to go to that college after anyway. And I kind of miss Texas.” You say honestly. Tricking Dirk is pretty hard to do, and he doesn’t much appreciate it.

“You want to move back?” Dirk asks, seeming genuinely surprised.

“It seems like a good idea.” You tell him.

“I know mom won’t be averse to it, I’ve already sounded her out about it.” Rose says smartly.

“Hal, what about you?” You ask, glancing at the speakers.

“I live in the internet, Dave, it’s not like I have to travel anywhere. But from an objective point of view, there are a lot of benefits to returning to Houston for all of us.” Hal answers and you know that he’s pleased to have just been asked.

“Well, okay, but I think you’re all jumping the gun a little here. I don’t even know if they’ll accept me.” Dirk points out. Roxy beams and squeezes him about the shoulders.

“Oh, Dirk! I’ll help you with all of your applications, and I’m sure mom knows people. You know how academic she is, she’d be thrilled at you going into science!” Roxy giggles.

“I’m more than willing to help you with your essays or even a demeaningly cute video essay about how your poor family wants you to succeed despite your tragic past.” Rose agrees, sidling up to him and pinching one of his cheeks.

“Dave, help, Lalondes are attacking me!” Dirk gasps as Roxy’s grasp slips up to his neck.

You consider this carefully. You turn your back on Dirk, and raise your phone and take a perfect selfie of yourself with Dirk’s dismay under your sisters as the backdrop.

“Imma frame that.” You say and pocket the phone.

“Traitor!” Dirk yelps as Rose hugs him around the middle.

“Eh, you’ll live.” You smirk.

Mom is the kind of classy lady who hires other people to do your packing and drive your stuff down to your new home. She’s the kind of lady who has a twenty-foot wizard statue disassembled and lovingly reassembled several states away. She is also the kind of lady who constructs a new cat mausoleum many states away and reburies a beloved family pet there. She’s the kind of lady who gets you and Dirk your first passports without even telling you and then takes you on a first class flight to Houston. Your mom is that kind of lady.

Your new home is a crazy big mansion complete with not one but two pools, a gym, a huge library, another observatory (of course), lavishly large rooms for each of you as well as a good deal of guest rooms. There is also an expensively rustic kitchen complete with faux wear that costs ten times as much as the cheap shit that wears like this naturally. The TV room is massive and the internet capabilities and security systems of the place rival most foreign embassies. The house is set out in a way that each of you effectively has a corner of the building on your shared floor, each with their own self-contained bathrooms. The design of the whole place feels weirdly fractal, almost like it could open up into something else.

Another weird thing is that your house is set near another underground skaianet lab that shares the same grounds as your building. The company is frustratingly hard to google, and even Hal can’t
work out what they do aside from you mom’s research goes into their data which seems to be to do with meteors. It’s not really clear.

Dirk, to the surprise of no one at all, is immediately accepted into the college and has people eager to encourage him into their fields. When you find Dirk in his room surrounded by books and robot parts, building something in the sunshine you know that you made the right choice.

You have a week or two to get used to your home before school starts for you. Rose and Roxy gleefully shop for school supplies, having serious discussions over bags, binders, stationery and the like. You, on the other hand, have a few ballpoint pens without caps that still work, and you get your one notebook the same place you’ve always gotten them, which is to stay that you swipe one from Dirk and don’t give it back.

Even so, you’re a little nervous about your first day, but it’s ok your sisters are there with you. They’re like built-in friends that you have to live with and frequently drive you crazy. They are both better and worse than friends.

“I have to admit,” Rose says uneasily as you walk up the manicured lawns around the school’s parking lot, “I knew how many students would be here, but it’s another thing to see this many.”

“Whatever, it’s a big school. It’ll be fine. Hal says that most of our classes our together anyway so you can always sit with me if you want to avoid other people.” You offer. You hold out your timetable and show that you’ve ringed half your classes in her purple to show that she’s there because you’re a good brother who looks after his sister who’s never been to a normal school.

“Why, would other people avoid you?” Rose asks with a devious grin.

You bite your cheek to keep from laughing at her joke, and instead, you slide your arm around her side lovingly.

“Rose, sweetness, beloved. How can you wound me like this?” You ask in mock offence. She ups the ante by sliding her arm around your shoulder and stroking her hand into your hair. You really wish that you hadn’t started this game of affection chicken in public but here you are, a victim of your own past decisions.

“Dave, you know I only ever have the best intentions at heart for you and only the sweetest of feelings.” She purrs.

There is a horrifying noise from behind the two of you all of a sudden, like someone throwing an outraged ostrich into a wood chipper. You turn around only to come face to face with a troll whose picture you have spent far too much time staring at. Karkat.

“Aaaaugh.” You say dumbly and glance at Rose.

“I was sincere about that.” Rose says under her breath.

You look her in the eye, and you just KNOW that she planned this. She somehow found out who Karkat was and convinced Roxy and your mom to play along, you got played into moving here ‘for your own good’ just as much as Dirk did. You have no idea how she found Karkat though. No, wait, you can take a damn good guess. You bet she got her information through the same brother of yours that gave you Karkat’s trollian handle, the one you never did anything with.

Karkat is looking wildly from you to Rose and back again.

“WHO THE FUCK IS SHE?!” He screeches. Oh god, not this again.
Your summer was lousy, it was filled with Sollux bitching about his poor bees and creepily flipping black about this AI that trashed his system. On top of that, all of your siblings had to move to a whole new school, which is great for you but your more socially well-adjusted siblings were unhappy at leaving their friends behind. In a show of solidarity, the Maryam’s and several of your father’s other followers switched their kid’s schools too. You should be pleased that you’ll know more people at this school but you mostly just feel like you’re inconveniencing everyone.

“It’ll be fine, Karkat.” Kanaya tells you soothingly.

“Yeah, all schools suck anyway.” Sollux agrees miserably as he follows after you.

“Well, I’m excited.” Nepeta says cheerfully.

“I think that we’re exactly where we’re supposed to be.” Aradia agrees, although her tone is more ominous than cheerful.

“That didn’t help as much as you hoped it did.” Sollux sighs as you all round the corner to the school and The Disciple parks the van.

“Alright, effurybody out! You’re all gonna have a great first day, I know it. Now scam or I’m gonna be late for work.” The Disciple grins at you all, and your ridiculously large family all piles out of the vehicle.

A lot of your older siblings disperse immediately, not wanting to be seen with people so much younger. Aradia and Nepeta walk off arm in arm to explore the school as much as they can before classes start and you’re left loitering by the car park like a tool.

You’re not sure what grabs your attention, whether it was a word or just the voice but your awareness immediately snaps to a couple walking by a little way past the car park. Your heart seizes when you see a gleam of golden hair and a flash of stupid black sunglasses.

You make a strangled noise in your throat and sprint off after him, Kanaya and Sollux rushing after you in confusion and calling you to come back.

As you get closer, you see that it’s Dave and some girl. You watch as he slides his arm around her back and says something quiet that only she can hear. You want to puke, and scream and set everything on fire. With his head turned to whisper in her ear you can see that it really is him.

The girl tilts her head slightly, and her eyes widen as she spots you, eerily beautiful purple eyes
locking with your own. Black painted lips quirk up in the smallest of smiles and, while looking at you, she slides her fingers into Dave’s hair and whispers something right into his ear.

You scream in indignant fury at the unfairness of it all. He’s your soulmate, you know he is, but you’ve not been able to find him since you made a fool of yourself in front of him. And now he’s here with this… this devastatingly beautiful girl and it’s just not fair.

At your screech, Dave understandably whirls around and stares at you, or you think he’s staring, you can’t tell with those stupid shades on his face. You may just murder everybody in a ten-mile radius now, just to spare yourself from the shame of people seeing you like this.

Dave looks… a little terrified of you, he’s certainly backing away a little. But no, he’s not getting away this time.

“Aaaaugh.” Dave manages, glancing at his… his girlfriend for support but she is just watching with interest. Well, FUCK her!

“WHO THE FUCK IS SHE?!” You screech, and Dave winces. Good, he deserves a perforated eardrum.

It is not Dave that responds to you, but the girl.

“Rose Lalonde, it’s a pleasure to meet you Karkat Vantas. I’ve heard so much about you.” The girl, Rose, says sweetly and holds out a hand for you.

“Rose, no, what are you doing? Don’t shake his hand!” Dave hisses at her, and out of spite, you do shake her hand.

“Karkat, why are you- oh, hello.” Kayana says, coming to a stop next to you and taking in Dave and the girl.

“Oh my god, blonde, stupid shades, this is him, isn’t it? You’re really starting off your second conversation with him ever by screaming again? Way to keep with the pattern.” Sollux snickers at you as he saunters up.

“Shut up, Sollux.” You mutter and look at Dave again. God, he’s pretty. Okay, Sollux has a point you should try to have a normal conversation with Dave and not leap off the handle into stupid conclusions. He’s just a normal guy.

“I’m sorry that I… freaked out when we first met.” You apologise. Dave crosses his arms over his chest and shrugs.

“Whatev. It’s not a thing. We’re cool. You don’t need to, like, bring it up.” Dave mutters, and Rose smirks.

“Fuck you, Rose.” Dave hisses, catching her expression.

“I’m incredibly offended, Dave, I did nothing. You chose to come to this school, perhaps it was fate that you should meet again.” Rose smiles.

“Fate my sweet ass, you tricked me because you knew he’d be here.” Dave snaps, getting right in her space.
“Don’t you think that your time could be better spent than arguing with me?” Rose purrs.

You squint at the pair of them. Their bickering is almost pitch, but their earlier contact wasn’t, and humans don’t do pitch, do they?

“Could I interrupt? What is the relationship that you two share? I fear we may be going down the road of humorous misunderstandings.” Kanaya asks. Dave and Rose look at her as one, and you get a jarring sense of similarity. That is until Dave lurches away from Rose with a disgusted expression on his face.

“AUgh! God, no, she- NO!” Dave yelps, pointing at Rose who is snickering behind her dainty hand.

“I’m sorry, I introduced myself earlier when Karkat was yelling, but I’m not sure that you caught it. I’m Rose Lalonde, and that idiot there flailing around-” Rose says.

“Fuck you!” Dave squawks, interrupting her.

“Is my idiot twin brother Dave Strider.” Rose finishes.

“Wait, twins?” Sollux asks, leaning around your shoulder and suddenly more interested. You elbow him in the gut.

“Bullshit, I met you and listened to Signless go over the details of your family in mind-numbing depth. You don’t have any sisters, much less a twin.” You argue, and Dave jams his hands in his pockets and looks right at you.

“You’re aware that people can talk and not tell the whole truth, right? I mean if not then high school is gonna be no fun for you but real hilarious for me to watch.” Dave points out.

“There were complicating factors with my side of the family, Dave and Dirk elected not to tell your ancestor about it. Also, I’m sure that you won’t pass that information on now, will you?” Rose asks, narrowing her eyes threateningly at you.

So she’s really not his girlfriend, not in any quadrant. Which means…

“So, can we talk about you being my soulmate?” You ask Dave.

One second Dave is before you, and the next there’s nothing, only Rose’s hair flapping wildly in the displaced air leaves any hint that he was once there.

“That actually went better than I thought it might.” Rose sighs unhappily and runs her fingers through her hair.

You look at her, really study her face. Yeah, you can see it now. No wonder you thought she was so pretty, so much of how she looks is the same as Dave. Her entire personality seems a complete counterpoint to his, and you can’t help but wonder why that is.

“So you did arrange this? Bringing the two of you to the same school as us?” Sollux asks curiously.

“I did.” Rose smiles sneakily.
“Dave doesn’t seem quite as enthused as you do, I’m afraid.” Kanaya says.

“Well, he will be someday. I’m only looking out for him, sometimes he just needs a nudge in the right direction. Now, as lovely as it was to meet the three of you I’m afraid that I have a new school to navigate alone as my twin has abandoned me.” Rose sighs and takes her leave of you.

“Pale?” You say to your friends after Rose has gone.

“Oh, yes.” Kanaya agrees.

“So pale. Well, whatever. I’ve got to find my classes too, and you’ve now got a captive audience for your embarrassing flirting. Pro tip: try not to scream at him next time.” Sollux snorts and walks off.

“I made him run off again.” You whine as you and Kanaya start walking towards the building.

“Well, he does seem to have a rather low tolerance for that. However, his twin seems interested in directing you at each other so at least now you know you’ll get another chance. She seems like quite the character.” Kanaya says reassuringly.

“Yeah, Rose is- wait. Rose.” You stop just outside the main building and pull your sleeve back. On the back of your arm is the twinned red and purple roses.

“Her name is Rose, she’s his twin and did you see her eyes? They were just this colour.” You gasp as you look down at it.

“Which means…” Kanaya says softly her hand going to her marked arm.

“I think we’ve found your soulmate.” You whisper gleefully, and Kanaya flushes darker high on her cheeks.

A warning bell rings, and the two of you have to part ways to find your classrooms and you only just manage to get to biology in time. Your whole class is lining up outside, including Dave who you skid to a halt next to.

“Oh, God why?” Dave whines under his breath.

Your class files in directed to sit down in the order they were lined up in which puts you and Dave at the back of the class next to each other on the same bench.

“Hey,” You say, keeping your voice quiet, “I know I keep freaking you out, but I promise I won’t talk about soulmate stuff or try to look at or touch your mark. I’m not a creep, okay?”

Dave doesn’t say anything but sits next to you hunched over his desk with his whole body tense. You sigh and figure that you deserve this at least a little bit, that’ll teach you to be so pushy. You look around the room and spot that Vriska and Terezi are on a table across the room, but there’s no one else that you know.

Your teacher, an elderly human woman who looks like she is approximately a hundred and ninety years old and made out of angry pipe cleaners drops a stack of books on her desk, making many of you jump, including Dave.

“My name,” she says, turning around to the whiteboard and writing her name with a squeaky
marker, “is Mrs Cripps. I will be teaching you Biology and Physics back to back with a short five-
minute break in between. We have a few new students in the class but seeing as talking isn’t
something I’ve ever found teenagers to need instruction in I won’t be introducing you all.”

“Take these books, one per desk, take yours and hand them back. Two stacks, go.” Mrs Cripps says
and distributes the books up front.

You look sidelong at Dave, he’s not looking at you, but you think you can see his eyes from this
angle. You might be wrong but you think that they’re red, which is not a colour that you’ve seen in
humans before but then again his sister has purple eyes so their entire family may just be weird.

“You, boy, with the sunglasses. Take them off, we’re not outside.” The teacher says sharply, and
Dave swallows thickly. You’re keen to get to see him with them off, so this works just fine for you.

“It’s Dave Strider, Miss. Uh, there should be a…” Dave trails off, and the teacher looks puzzled for a
moment before looking at something on her desk suspiciously.

“Fine. Oh, and Ms. Pyrope too.” She mutters and turns to the board, erasing her name.

Dave doesn’t have to take his glasses off? You know that Terezi has her glasses for medical reasons,
she got caught in an accident some years ago which rendered her blind, the details of which change
every time she tells the tale. Regardless, her glasses are there to protect her eyes from further damage.
As far as you know, though, there’s nothing wrong with Dave’s eyes.

You glance down at your paper and write in your best handwriting

‘Are they medical?’

You then tap your pen on Dave’s half of the desk, but he evidently chooses not to answer. A book
lands on your desk between you.

“Don’t open those yet. The way this biology course will be taught is comparatively, learning first
about human biology and then troll biology. You will be expected to compare and contrast human
and troll features to better learn about both. Seeing as I can never get the damn projector working this
will be done by drawing.” The teacher sighs and draws out two eyes on the board, one clearly
human and one clearly troll.

“Mr… Strider, since this topic is on eyes would you care to name this part of the eye for me?” The
teacher asks, tapping the end of her marker on the coloured part of the human eye.

“It’s the iris.” Dave replies in a flat tone of voice.

“And can you tell us what the iris does?” The teacher presses.

“It’s… like a camera lens. It opens and closes so you can focus on stuff.” Dave answers and gives a
little one shouldered shrug.

“Correct. The iris in humans can open and close in any width from here to here and comes in a
limited range of colours which are determined genetically, but we’ll look more in-depth on that when
we get to DNA.” Your teacher says.

You look sidelong at Dave who seems entirely unflustered. It’s nice to know that he’s smart too, you
probably could have guessed at that answer, but he certainly knew. He also knew enough about how
cameras work to make the comparison. You remember how he took your photo the day you met,
he’s probably deleted it by now, but you wonder how you looked.

Dave is taking notes on whatever your teacher is saying, and you can’t help but notice that he’s
writing with his left hand, no wonder your soul mark is on your right arm, it’s always opposite to
your partner’s dominant hand. You try to push past your fascination of Dave and focus on your
class. You grin as Serket gets shot down for bragging about how many pupils she has in her eye, and
you successfully answer a question about heterochromia thanks to Sollux’s mismatched eyes.

The class is tough, but you think that your teacher actually cares about her subject, even if she’s past
the point of caring about what her class thinks of her. When you get to the short break between your
biology class and your physics class, you decide that you’ll talk to Dave. He’s relaxed at least
somewhat over the last hour, but he seems wary now.

“So, Kanaya, my moirail. She’s the girl I was with.” You start slowly, keeping your voice calm and
not yelling.

“Yeah?” Dave says, turning his head to look at you ever so slightly. Yes! Success!

“I have a theory, I only realised it since I met your sister this morning but… what’s your sister into?”

You ask.

“You’re trying to set your monorail or whatever up with my sister?” Dave asks, arching an eyebrow
at you.

“Moirail.” You pronounce clearly.

“What ever, are you?” Dave asks.

“Fine, sort of. I just want to know what her interests are, what she likes.” You ask, and Dave stares
at you for a few long seconds.

“Despite how much she meddles she will gut you if you try to do the same but, hey, it’s your funeral.
She loves cats and goth stuff. She likes knitting, semi-ironically.” Dave says.

“How do you ironically like knitting? Much less semi-ironically.” You ask with a sceptical squint.

“It’s a talent. Uh, what else… she’s into magic and wizard stuff, she writes, she’s big into Lovecraft
if you know who that is. Creepy tentacle gods. That kinda thing.” Dave says.

You glance each way carefully, but your teacher isn’t looking. You pull your phone from your
pocket under the table and get to the right photo. You have a picture of the marks on Kanaya’s arm.

“Does that look like her?” You whisper and hold your phone out for Dave. He stares down at it, his
expression unreadable.

“Well, fuck. That’s my sister alright. I’m guessing your girl’s big into space, corsets, flowers,
vampires and weird green bugs.” Dave says slowly. It takes you a second to work out that the weird
green bug is probably the mothergrub in Kanaya’s colour.

“Yeah, that’s her.” You nod.
“Hah, Rose came here to find you, and she found her own soulmate instead. That’s rich.” Dave grins and oh, oh wow, he looks- you want to-

Crap, no, get ahold of yourself.

“I guess it would be remiss of me not to point out that those red and purple roses on her wrist indicate you and her, but also I should point out that I…” You trail off and slide your sleeve up a little to show off your own roses.

Dave’s expression shuts down so fast that you can almost hear the slam. He turns his back to you as much as he can while still using the same textbook and same desk. He refuses to talk to you or respond to you in any way at all. As the lesson continues you realise that you went back on your word of what you said you wouldn’t do, well, shit.

At the end of the lesson he bails with astonishing speed, and you’re left talking to Terezi and Vriska for a minute before you go off to find your next class. Your pre-lunch class is math, and you find that you share it with Rose who regards you with interest but doesn’t sit next to you. Math is hard enough to focus on when you’re not hungry, but you can hardly wait until the end of it because you actually need to speak to Rose.

“Rose!” you hiss as you scramble your stuff into a pile and jam it back inside your sylladex.

“Yes, Karkat? I presume the sciences didn’t go so well for you as the number of death threats that my dear brother sent me increased in number after that.” Rose says and pulls her phone out to show it to you. You see lines of purple and red text across the screen.

TG: why would you do this to me rose?

TG: why

TG: i am going to fucking drown you for this

TG: also congratufuckinglations or whatever

TT: To what do I owe those congratufuckinglations, Dave?

[turntechGodhead is an idle chum]

“I… actually have the answer to that. But I need you to come with me.” You say in what you hope is a subtle and conspiratorial tone.

“If you’re hoping to kidnap me to get Dave to come looking for me I think you’re misguided, right now I don’t think he wants to be near me.” Rose laughs.

“No, for real. Come on.” You say and lead her out of the building and to the big tree that your family had all agreed to meet at for lunch. There are already a good number of people sat there, including Kanaya who is talking to Damara.

“Hello, Karkat. Hello, again Rose.” Kanaya says politely as you walk up to her.

“Hello.” Rose responds equally politely.
“So I was talking to Dave about both of you. Particularly because there’s something that Kanaya and I have in common, which is this.” You say and pull your sleeve back enough to show her the two roses. You look at Kanaya pointedly who gets to her feet with an awkward cough.

“I- I didn’t know that we would be doing this right now.” Kanaya mumbles and fiddles with the hem of her own sleeve.

“Yeah, well, this may as well go right for one of us. Besides, I already have hot inside information from a hot… I’m going to stop talking. Roll your sleeve up already before I eat my own head in shame!” You blather. It doesn’t help that Rose is giving you a very interested look indeed.

Kanaya thankfully saves your from auto cannibalisation and slides her sleeve up, exposing the same roses that you have. She shows the cat skull with the things that are both knitting needles and wands. She turns her arm, and there are suckered tentacles that have dark and hollow places behind them, one long tendril cradles a human brain pressed up against a book as if somehow reading it. You and Kanaya have poured over its meaning for probably solid weeks of accumulated time, and you recognise full well that the unsettlingly intense person who matches that mark is right next to you, even Dave recognised her from it.

Rose’s eyes go wide as she takes in the pattern of the mark and then she too slowly rolls her purple sleeve up and shows her arm to Kanaya as well, who stares at it with a hand over her mouth.

“I have to admit that looks a lot like me, would you say the same for my mark?” Rose asks, and you get the feeling that she’s a little nervous about this, despite seeming quite put together.

“I… I would, yes. Karkat has informed me about how this ritual is supposed to go with humans. You have to touch hands of the matching limbs, yes?” Kanaya asks.

“Precisely.” Rose agrees with a nod.

“God, you even talk like each other. Do it already.” You groan impatiently.

The two girls shoot you matching disapproving looks but nonetheless they both raise the hands on their soulmarked arms and cautiously touch their fingertips together. You watch as purple and green lines crawl down their fingers before twining on what humans refer to as their ‘ring finger’ for just this reason. The marks form an elegant green vine with purple flowers that wraps around in a delicate ring, the mark of a confirmed soulmate.

“I… I have been looking at these marks on my arm for a very long time. Back on Alternia being marked like this by a human is certain death but I knew that I had to escape to meet the person who gave them to me, my sister and my ancestor came here because of this. I must confess that I am… overwhelmed to find you at last.” Kanaya says with a beautiful eloquence that rivals even your most theatrical of romance movies.

Rose flushes and tangles her fingers with Kanaya’s a little more.

“It’s beyond flattering to hear that you have gone through so much because of me and I’m not sure whether to be happy or sad for you because of it, but I’m excited to find out everything that I can about you.” Rose says, just as wordy. They’re so perfect for each other.

You wrap your hand around your wrist and the place where your own roses sit. You’re excited for
Kanaya, overjoyed at her joy, but envy lurks deep inside of you. She’s able to speak to her soulmate with clarity and grace, to simply match marks instead of the flailing that you and Dave are doing.

“Karkat…” Kanaya says, her voice full of pity for you.

“What? You two should go off and find out all you can about each other, lunch here is going to happen every day. Go on.” You urge her.

Rose’s eyes linger on your covered wrist and then go to Kanaya’s matching roses. She sighs and turns to you.

“Karkat, I admit that I chose this school because I knew that you were here. I firmly believe that you are Dave’s soulmate, and I know that I am being pushy by steering you together but I know that Dave won’t come to you on his own. I am trying to help him.” Rose says with a sigh.

“You’re his moirail, right?” Kanaya asks.

“Twin, it’s not the same, but I suppose the way we act could be seen as a parallel from my readings on troll quadrants.” Rose says thoughtfully.

“What’s your point?” You ask.

“Dave is a complicated person and knowing when he needs to be nudged to the best thing for him and when to step back is hard even for me. He has a lot of touchy subjects that don’t always make sense. I’m sure that you’re going to blunder into them and I don’t blame you for that. Frankly, Dave can be infuriating, and I don’t envy your position.” Rose sighs.

“Yeah, I’m getting that impression. I’m pretty sure I pissed him off earlier.” You agree unhappily.

“I’ll do my best to help, and for the record, you seem nice enough to me.” Rose says, and you smile hopefully. Maybe with her help, you can get through a conversation with Dave.

“With that said, if you push Dave and hurt him, take advantage of him or ignore what he needs for what you want, I will personally make your life a living hell from which you will never escape. Cross me on this, and I will destroy everything you love. Are we clear?” Rose hisses, leaning close to you. Her violet eyes are sharp and cold, and she terrifies you more than any sea dweller ever has. Your mind flicks to Dirk who murdered his own brother to protect Dave, and you have no doubt that this girl who shares Dirk’s blood means every word that she just spoke.

“Crystal clear.” You say quickly.

“Perfect. I have my next class with him anyway, I’ll see what I can do.” Rose smiles warmly.

“You are definitely pale for him.” Kanaya says thoughtfully, looking between the two of you. She’s nowhere near as offended at Rose’s blatant threat, if anything it’s a rather touching pale gesture on Alternia. A protective moirail can make or break a trolls other quadrants. Of course, you dread to think what would happen if Rose actually carried out that threat, you have your own moirail, and shit like this is how revenge chains get started.

“Perhaps. Would you like to have lunch alone Kanaya? We have much to talk about.” Rose asks politely, holding her hand out to Kanaya who takes it with a shy smile. The pair walk away, leaving you forgotten behind them. Honestly, you’re glad.
You sit down next to the rest of your family, most of whom were watching the whole exchange with interest.

“That whole family is insane, you know that, don’t you?” Sollux says, leaning forward to you and shoving a sandwich in his mouth.

“Yeah, I’m getting that feeling.” You groan and rummage in your bag for your own lunch.

“Cheer up Karkitty, I’m sure you’ll get your soulmate in the end. Maybe mine is here too!” Nepeta pipes up. You can see the two small marks on her arm, hers only came in this year which is a little late but not outrageously so. She has a strange geometric design in lime green and a pawprint which Nepeta has sadly confirmed as not a cat’s print.

“Yeah, maybe.” You agree flatly.

After lunch, you have gym, which is mostly just a safety lecture and an explanation of what clothing you are expected to bring in each part of the year depending on what activities you’ll be doing. After that is your final class for the day, music. Your mood is already sour enough without a class full of teenagers poorly playing instruments that have been assigned to them. Needless to say that when a much older girl stops you in the car park you are in no mood for more shit.

“What the fuck is your problem?” You demand as you try for a third time to step around her only to have her sidestep back into your way.

“Right now, you I suppose. Not that I really think that you’re a problem!” She says cheerfully. You glare up at the dumb blonde girl, you’re gonna give her a piece of you. Oh no. She’s blonde, and her eyes are unnaturally pink, another unusual colour for humans, her skin is fair, and her smile is all kinds of devious. She must be related to Dave.

“You’re Dave’s sister.” You guess, and she beams.

“That I am! My name is Roxy Lalonde, and do you know what you are?” Roxy says brightly.

“Too tired for this shit?” You guess.

“Wrong, you’re my prisoner!” She says gleefully and snags you by the wrist. You hear the sound of a car door opening and slamming shut as you are hurled forcefully into the back of a car. You land in a crumpled, swearing heap in the back of the car. You scramble upright again and haul on the door handle, but the car door does not pop open. Outside, Roxy is beaming at you delightedly.

“LET ME OUT!” you scream at the top of your considerable lungs.

“Dude, my ears.” A voice cuts across you, rendering you mute.

You lean over the front bench seat to see Dave sprawled across the front seats as cool as can be. He’s typing away on his phone as if nothing is wrong.

“There’s no point in yelling, Roxy’s not gonna let you out just because you scream. The girl’s got no shame, she doesn’t care if this makes her look like a crazy kidnapper.” Dave sighs and types away a little more.
“Have you got any more crazy sisters I should know about?” You demand, still yanking on the door.

“No, just the two, but they have a lot of enthusiasm for the role. You just gotta wait her out, man. Sooner or later someone will miss one of us, and they’ll make Roxy let us out. I’m hoping that your family is less crazy than mine.” he says flatly.

“That’s a pretty low bar. How did she get you in here then if you’re so wise to her schemes?” You ask, sitting back down in the seat.

Dave lowers his phone and looks at you.

“She said, ‘hey Dave, let’s go home’ and I got in the car like a normal person only she got out and locked me in. You’re the one who got judo flipped into this vehicle like a screeching four-year-old, don’t act like I’m the idiot here.” Dave says.

“What does she even want?” You ask, peering out of the window again at Roxy. You see that Rose has now joined her, she waves at you with her fingers. You flip her your middle finger, and both of them grin deviously at you.

“What do you think?” Dave snorts.

You look over the back of the chair at Dave again and frown. What could Dave’s sisters even want with you? You’ve never met Roxy before and Rose… oh. Rose is meddling, trying to help her twin/moirail into what she think is best for him. She’s trying to trap the two of you together like the most cliched of romcom plots.

“Oh.” You say dumbly.

“At least this wasn’t your idea.” Dave says, and you’re not totally sure how to take that.

“I might be terrible at talking to you, but I don’t plan my fuck ups in advance.” You say defensively.

“Freestyle idiocy is more your jam, huh?” Dave asks, and you think that’s a ghost of a smile there.

“You’re really hard to read, you know that?” You say, which is not what you meant to say at all. You had meant to say something in the lines of you not being an idiot, thank you very much. Apparently, you are though.

“Poker face.” Dave replies.

“If you start singing that I will upheave my entire digestive sac on you.” You threaten and, there, you DID just make him smile. At least you did for a split second. It feels good.

“Well damn, now I just wanna do it for the vine but who wants to get barfed on? You’ve put me in a bind here.” Dave replies dryly, and you smother your laugh in the back of the car seat. You straighten your face into an unaffected look and look back at him.

“It must be so tough being you.” You say consolingly.

“Shit, man, you’ve no idea.” Dave sighs dramatically.
Okay, this is nice. You can deal with conversations like this. But… that’s not why you’re here. You glance at Rose and Roxy who are talking to each other, but they’re still watching you both. You can’t just talk to him about nothing, even though it feels nice. You’re his soulmate, and you know in your bones that you are. You cannot just pretend forever that you’re not.

“I need to stop screwing up every conversation that I have with you, because it fucking sucks and I way prefer this.” You say quickly, before you lose your nerve. It is so tempting to just sink into this nice moment, to pretend that everything is going to go well from now just because it’s okay here. But it boils your piss when characters in your romances refuse to talk to each other about the obvious problem driving the plot, the one thing that keeps causing problems for them which could all be resolved if they didn’t act like dumb assholes. You refuse to be a dumb asshole.

“Ok.” Dave replies blandly, there goes your easy rapport.

“We could… talk? I know that soulmate stuff makes you uncomfortable, but I have no idea why and unless you explain something I’m just going to keep fucking up. We could make rules if you want.” You offer, and Dave says nothing.

“Fucking work with me here already, asshole.” You groan.

“We could just not talk about it at all, problem solved.” Dave says and sits up, shuffling to the furthest seat away from you. Great.

“But I do want to talk about it because I know that you are my soulmate, it’s kind of a big goddamn deal to me.” You groan, smacking your head on the back of the chair.

“And I know you’re not, so drop it.” Dave replies instantly and pulls one knee up to his chest. You lean back in your own seat to give him a little more space.

“You know there’s an obvious way to prove one of us right, don’t you?” You point out, and Dave snaps his arms tightly around his chest like you’re about to leap for him like a deranged lunatic.

“Anything you touch me with I will cut off.” Dave hisses, and you hold your hands up in surrender.

“Neither of us wants that, obviously. Besides, do you think I’m the kind of creep that would do that against your will?” You ask in offense. Dave doesn’t say anything and doesn’t unfold his arms.

“How about a compromise?” You offer, Dave continues his silence.

“I swear that I won’t touch my marked arm, my right to yours which is your…” You trail off.

“Left.” Dave answers stiffly. You privately note that you’re right handed and your soulmate’s marked arm would be their left. You don’t point this out.

“I won’t touch my right to your left if you tell me why you don’t want me to do it. I mean, I would never do it if you didn’t want me to but if you’re trying to make me think that I’m not your soulmate, then the easiest thing to make me drop it would be to take my hand and have nothing happen. It doesn’t make sense.” You reason.

“What doesn’t make sense is you pushing this when you know that I’ve said you’re not my soulmate and you said that you hate when our conversations die a painful death like this one. Damn Karkat, stop killing these conversations. You straight up word murderer.” Dave mutters, looking away from
you and out of the window.

“Unless… unless you’re worried that you are my soulmate. Unless you don’t want to be and touching it would confirm it.” You say slowly.

Dave says nothing but his silence says volumes.

Dave doesn’t want to be your soulmate. The problem is you.

“Oh.” you say softly and stare down at your hands. So he saw you for the first time and was horrified at being linked with you and bolted from the room to get away from you, he ran when you spoke to him this morning and in class the moment you suggested that you might be linked to him like that he shut down on you.

“I’m the problem, you don’t want…” You say numbly.

You want him to leap across the car to you, to assure that of course it’s not that. Of course he wants you. He’s just refusing to prove his link to you for… for some other reason. But there is no other reason that you can think of. Why else would he be so averse to it being you?

You’ve been looking for him since you were five and he doesn’t want you. You’ve heard of heartbreak before, but this physically hurts deep in your chest. You want to get out, to get far away from here. You’ve already humiliated yourself enough in front of someone who doesn’t want you.

You turn in your seat and grab the handle for the door and pull on it, but it’s still locked. You slam your hand on the window, but Roxy and Rose do nothing to help you. Kanaya is with them now, standing at Rose’s side. You look at her pleadingly, but she shakes her head.

You pull your phone out.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling grimAuxiliatrix]

CG: KANAYA GET ME THE FUCK OUT OF HERE
GA: Hello Karkat I Thought That You Wanted To Talk To Dave
CG: HE DOESN’T WANT ME
GA: Dont Be Silly Karkat
GA: I Am Sure That If You Talk To Him Then You Will Win Him Around
GA: Rose Believes So
CG: I DON'T GIVE A FUCK WHAT YOUR SOULMATE THINKS. DAVE DOESN'T WANT ME, HE'S MADE THAT ABUNDANTLY CLEAR. HE WON'T CONFIRM OUR MATCH, REFUSES TO TALK ABOUT IT. THE PROBLEM IS ME. THAT I'M THE ONE WHO'S HIS SOULMATE.
CG: ALL I ASK IS THAT YOU LET ME OUT OF THIS DEATH TRAP OF A VEHICLE BEFORE I LOSE THE LAST OF MY DIGNITY AND WRING OUT MY TEAR DUCTS IN FRONT OF HIM IN AN OVERWHELMING PUDDLE OF SHAME AND ANGUISH.
GA: But That Is Absurd
GA: Surely You Can Talk Him Around
CG: KANAYA!
CG: PLEASE!

You squeeze your eyes shut, this is the worst thing that’s ever happened to you. You almost wish that you hadn’t met Dave again, at least you still had hope that you might meet him again and things could be okay. Now you know that you never will be.

“Are you…” Dave’s voice comes across quietly, and you open your eyes in alarm to see that he’s leant forward towards you a little bit.

“Getting the everloving fuck out of here? Yes, I am. Once my fucking traitor of a moirail stops doing whatever your sister says I’m getting the hell out of here. You should be happy, I’ll be far away. That’s what you want.” You hiss and slam your hand on the window again to get Kanaya’s attention. She’s looking worriedly between you and Rose and Roxy, both of whom are shaking their heads at her.

“Calm down already, it’s not… personal. I barely know anything about you. It just can’t be you is all.” Dave says like it’s all so simple.

“Yeah,” you say whirling around to face him, “you barely know me and yet I’m obviously so terrible that the very idea of being paired with me like that makes you reject me entirely. You took one look at Karkat Vantas, living disaster and shame upon my entire family line and bailed. You know, I don’t even fucking blame you, if I got paired up with me I’d die from despair. My body would blow away into the winds as I disintegrate from the horror of being the soulmate of someone like me, so really you’re doing well!”

“Holy shit, Karkat! Chill, already. It’s nothing to do with you!” Dave snaps.

You shriek in rage and yank desperately at the door.

“It’s because you’re a guy! That’s all! I’m straight, and so it can’t be you. It’s not some awful failure on your part, so stop taking it so personally!” Dave shouts at you.

“Bullshit!” You shout back, turning to face him again.

“If it was just that your human orientation was incompatible with me it would be no big deal to prove it by touching me, if anything you’d be keen to prove your ‘straightness’ and make me go away. We could laugh about it as a hilarious misunderstanding. Don’t buy me off with your bullshit excuses.” You hiss at him. He could at least have more respect for you than this.

“Are you saying I look gay?” Dave demands.

You clamp your hands over your face and slide down in your seat.

“You are the worst thing that has ever happened to me.” You groan.

“Well, fuck you too.” Dave says bitterly, and a silence falls in the car.
GA: You Have Stopped Talking

GA: Have You Come To Some Kind Of Resolution

CG: I HATE MY LIFE AND EVERYONE IN IT.

CG: HE'S CLAIMING THAT IT'S JUST BECAUSE WE'RE BOTH MALE.

CG: BUT HE REFUSES TO TOUCH ME TO PROVE IT, SO HE'S OBVIOUSLY LYING ABOUT HIS REASONS. HE OBVIOUSLY JUST CAN'T STAND THE IDEA OF BEING WITH ME AND IS TRYING TO MAKE ME FEEL BETTER OUT OF GUILT. JUST PUT ME OUT OF MY MISERY ALREADY.

You can hear the three girls talking outside, but it’s not clear enough for you to pick words out.

GA: Rose Assures Me That Lying To Make People Feel Better Is Not Daves And I Quote Deal

GA: Perhaps Dave Is Not As Sure About His Reasons As He Thinks And Does Not Wish To Test Them

You frown, that makes no sense at all. You try to parse that idea.

“Are you… worried that you might not be as straight as you think you are?” You ask. It’s the only thing that you think Kanaya might mean but the idea is absurd.

You watch as Dave goes tense all over and freezes, like you might not see him if he doesn’t move.

“Is this a question that you just don’t want to deal with right now?” You guess, moving a little closer to him. He flattens himself against the door to his back, and you stay put.

Well, shit. It isn’t you after all.

“Okay, I’ll make you a deal. I won’t touch your mark, and I won’t say that you’re my soulmate either.” You offer. Dave’s mouth flattens into a thin line, and he takes a deep breath.

“And what do you want? Cause I don’t buy that this is out of the goodness of your heart.” Dave asks sceptically.

“I want to see your mark and for you to at least give me a chance to get to know you.” You say firmly.

“As friends, at most. But I’m not showing you my mark, if I show you my mark you’ll tell me if it’s you or not, that’s basically touching it. No way.” Dave says with a shake of his head.

“You could shut your eyes when I look and then you wouldn’t see my reaction.” You offer.

“Nah, that deal’s still not sweet enough for me. You’re asking me to do something I really don’t want to do, and you’re just avoiding doing shit that you shouldn’t be doing anyway.” Dave says with a shake of his head.
“What exactly are you angling for here? You ask me to humiliate myself until you feel like we’re even?” You demand in disbelief.

Dave leans back in his seat a little and looks at you, a thoughtful look comes across his face.

“Okay, how about this. You wanted us to get to know each other, right?” Dave begins slowly.

“Yeah.” You agree with a nod.

“So we do that. I ask you about stuff, and you tell me the answer, if you’re honest then maybe we can reach a deal.” Dave says.

You try and think about what he might ask you. Questions about your family are a little awkward, you don’t have the most normal family structure even for trolls on Earth, but then again his family was unusual too and clearly getting weirder as time goes on. He could be asking you about your interests, but that’s something you’re happy enough to talk about. You just don’t want to talk about your mutation, but he’d never guess to ask something that obscure. Unlike Sollux there’s no visible evidence of your mutation unless you’re bleeding, which you’re not right now. You’re safe.

“Okay, deal.” You agree.

“Tell me about whatever thing you were hoping I wouldn’t ask you about.” Dave says instantly, and your jaw drops.

“You motherfucker. That’s got to be cheating.” You say without any real malice. That’s actually pretty smart.

“Probably, but you don’t know Rose and Roxy for three years without learning about traps like that.” Dave shrugs.

You bite the inside of your cheek and frown. You really don’t want to talk about this, but you want to see Dave’s mark far more.

“Fine, I’ll tell you. But... you have to agree to not tell anyone else. I had to change schools because of this, this shit makes my life hell and being at this school is meant to be a fresh start. So this is just between us, got it?” You say seriously.

“You’re on.” Dave promises, and you roll your eyes at his rambling words.

“Well, let’s establish a baseline level of how educated you are about this shit. Tell me what you know about the hemospectrum.” You ask, drumming your fingers antsyly on the edge of the seat that you’re sat in.

“I know it’s like the spectrum of light, red to violet. And also pink on the end even though pink isn’t in the rainbow and even if it was it’d make more sense to have it down with red but whatev.” Dave shrugs.

“Oh, wow. Yeah, don’t say that shit around trolls who actually buy into the hemospectrum. You just put divine royalty down at the same level of the lowest peasant, below in fact. Your instant execution on Alternia aside, you know that red is supposed to be poor and inferior and the colder colours are
richer and nobler, yes?” You laugh.

“I know there’s some dumb system like that, yeah. Are you secretly a princess, Karkat? Is that your secret?” Dave asks mockingly.

“Hardly. We can argue all day about whether it’s bullshit or not, but there is a spectrum and trolls are different depending on where they fall on it. I mean, your ability to breathe underwater for one or whether you’re likely to have any kind of psionics. The point is the hemospectrum is a big deal for trolls and my family has a lot of complicated history with it.” You sigh and scratch your claws through your hair. This is stressful to talk about.

“You guys have beef with it?” Dave asks curiously.

“Yes, Strider. We have beef. That is the perfect way to explain that my ancestor started a revolution against the concept and was nearly executed and subsequently exiled for it. He became a martyr for justice and equality, for the right for people to live their lives regardless of the hue of their blood. The fact that him, my brother and I all fall off of the whole hemospectrum in a mutant colour no one has ever seen before and since which marks us as either saviours or heretics depending on who you ask and shapes my entire life regardless of what I want is just beef. Beef is definitely the best way to describe that entire problem.” You rant, your voice getting louder and more hysterical as you go on until you’re basically screeching at the end.

“Blood, you say.” Dave says softly.

“Yes, Dave, blood.” You agree.

“You seem pretty… chained to this whole problem. But I’m not going to tell anyone. I don’t really get it but it’s obviously a big deal, and I know how shitty people can be. I won’t tell anyone.” Dave promises quietly.

“Thank you.” You say and lean your head against the seat rest. You told him, and he didn’t throw it in your face, he didn’t laugh at you or revile you for it either.

“I guess I owe you my part of our deal. Just keep your hands to yourself and tell me if you want me to turn my arm around or whatever. I’m not looking, I don’t want to see you looking at it.” Dave mutters, and you make a show of sitting on your hands.

Dave makes an unhappy sounding noise in his throat, and you see his hand tense before finally grabbing his long red shirt sleeve. He huffs a dramatic sigh and looks out of the windscreen of the car, firmly away from you. In a few swift movements, he pulls his sleeve up.

Bright candy red leaps out at you first of all. Thick mutant blood flows down his arm from a cut vein in his elbow, it’s your colour exactly, and it’s drowned his skin. You stare at it in horror. Your secret is just emblazoned on his skin for anyone to see, no wonder he wears sleeves. Around his wrist is a heavy iron chain, its links are tarnished in impressive realism and your mind flicks to Dave’s words about you being chained to your family’s destiny, was that a hint? He has a reel of old movie film, the tail of it curving into a heart shape and your mind immediately flicks to your love of film, specifically your love of romances. You can see something else curling around the inside of his arm to the outside, but you can’t make it out.

“Can you–” You cough slightly, your throat has gone dry in your shock, and you need to swallow to try to talk again.
“Can you turn it a little?” You ask.

Dave raises his arm, turning it the other way around.

You can now make out what was wrapped around the side of his arm, it’s books and papers with a pen starting to write on them. Shit, no one knows about your terrible attempts at writing. You’ve got your work hidden in folders and subfolders at home with all kinds of passwords on them.

There is, however, one last mark that you don’t understand. A green spirograph shape on the outside of his arm, just like the one you’ve seen on Nepeta. Aside from recognising it on her, it means nothing to you.

“Are you done now?” Dave asks, still looking away.

“Yeah, I can… I can kind of see why you cover that up. I bet people assume that you’re injured a lot.” You say, trying to school your face into the neutral that you promised you’d be. Dave tugs his sleeve down and pulls it low over part of his hand to cover the parts where your blood drips into his hand.

“Once or twice. I’ve covered it as long as I’ve had it, it’s just habit now. But Rose and Roxy do the same, probably for the same reasons I do. Or similar reasons at least.” Dave says with a shrug, and he pulls his arm close to him once more.

You look out of the car door to see that not only are Rose, Roxy and Kanaya there but several members of your family are also loitering there all talking to each other and not helping you get out of the car. Traitors. But as you look at Rose and Roxy you see that they are both wearing sleeves as long and covering as Dave’s.

“What reason is that?” You ask curiously.

You look at Dave, and for a moment or two you think that he’s not going to answer you, that he’ll tell you to mind your own goddamn business.

“You know Bro was my father, biologically speaking, right?” Dave asks.

“Yeah, I know that.” You say with a nod.

“Well, he and my mom were soulmates. Their bond died before Rose and I were born, and when we came along they split up. Mom took the girls, and Bro kept Dirk and me. I didn’t even know they existed until I was ten. But seeing other people’s marks really pissed Bro off, so we made sure that he didn’t see them.” Dave explains stiffly.

Oh. Bro was… abusive. You know that he was terrible to Dave and you hate the idea that your mark was a cause for any of that, and yes, you do know that the mark on Dave’s arm is you. It’s plain as day.

A thought occurs to you.

“Your mom was the same with your sisters?” You ask, you really hope that Dave didn’t get two terrible parents. One was far too many already.
“Not the same, but she has her own problems. It upsets her.” Dave says without really answering your question.

“So I guess that explains why we’re both wearing full sleeves in Texas in September, huh?” You say without any humour, even though you were trying to be lighthearted.

“Well you’re the one that opted for a sweater, you don’t need to be that goddamn extra, Karkat. Geez.” Dave snorts in amusement.

“Fuck you very much, if I got a cut this would stop it showing through right away and giving me needed time.” You argue.

Dave is frowning, but you don’t think that it’s at you, you turn around to see Sollux and Roxy yelling loudly at each other. Roxy is even jumping up and down and pointing at him.

“What the actual fuck? Hal, what’s going on?” Dave says.

“Who’s Hal?” You ask as the car’s radio suddenly turns on and goes dead. Out of it comes a voice that is like Dave’s brother’s but not quite.

“Good job outing my existence to him, Dave.” The voice says, electronic static buzzing inside it.

“You already told me that you hacked him back in the summer, he just didn’t know your name. What’s going on with Roxy and that guy?” Dave asks.

“You- you’re that AI that destroyed half of Sollux’s system and our home network with your malware!” You exclaim.

“Seriously, Hal?” Dave snorts.

“Sollux, the douchebag out there with the mismatched eyes hacked me first. Like you wouldn’t defend yourself if someone broke into your house with a baseball bat and started knocking shit around. As for what’s happening out there, it turns out that douchebag and Roxy are soulmates. Apparently, she slapped an emote on his arm in hot pink binary, gotta admire the girl’s dedication to a theme.” Hal replies dryly.

“Why is your entire family trying to mack on my entire family?” Dave groans and looks at you.

“Evidently StriLondes really are hot shit.” Hal suggests, and Dave grins.

You look out of the window at Sollux who is now sat on the ground with his laptop out opposite Roxy who is doing the same. Both of them are typing furiously.

“What’re they doing?” You ask, trying to ignore how weird it is to talk to a car.

“Trying to see who can hack into the school’s system to pull the other’s records fastest.” Hal answers.

“Oh great, a hacker as competitive as she is. That won’t get annoying.” Dave groans. You look out of the window at them and think that this looks very much like pitch flirting to you, but you’re not going to point that out to Dave.
“You know what? Fuck this. I live within walking distance, I don’t want to sit around watching this
dumbassery all day. Hal, open the doors.” Dave asks and turns in his seat to face the door.

“I’m sorry Dave, I’m afraid I can’t do that.” Hal repeats, and you swear that you’ve heard that
before.

“Funny.” Dave replies dryly.

“Couldn’t resist.” Hal says, and you hear the doors unlock.

Dave hops out and shuts the door behind him. You see him turn and look at you through the back
window of the car and then, after a second, he opens the back door for you too. You clumsily scoot
across the seats and climb out of the car, unobserved by the crowd who is too focused on Roxy
and Sollux’s competition. You look at Dave, he’s slightly taller than you but not much.

You have so many things that you want to find out about him, you want to know what he thinks
about your favourite movies, if he’ll find Kankri as annoying at you do, you want to hear him talk
about the things that he’s into. You know that Dave is your soulmate, it’s him on your arm for sure,
and you saw yourself on his without a doubt. In a really meaningful way you’ve known him since
you were five, but in a more accurate way you don’t know him at all, and you can’t wait to find out
all there is to know about him. And now you’ve managed to buy yourself a chance to get to know
him, you can only hope that he finds out something about you that makes him want you as his
soulmate after all.

“You know what? Fuck this. I live within walking distance, I don’t want to sit around watching this
dumbassery all day. Hal, open the doors.” Dave asks and turns in his seat to face the door.

“I’m sorry Dave, I’m afraid I can’t do that.” Hal repeats, and you swear that you’ve heard that
before.

“Funny.” Dave replies dryly.

“Couldn’t resist.” Hal says, and you hear the doors unlock.

Dave hops out and shuts the door behind him. You see him turn and look at you through the back
window of the car and then, after a second, he opens the back door for you too. You clumsily scoot
across the seats and climb out of the car, unobserved by the crowd who is too focused on Roxy
and Sollux’s competition. You look at Dave, he’s slightly taller than you but not much.

You have so many things that you want to find out about him, you want to know what he thinks
about your favourite movies, if he’ll find Kankri as annoying at you do, you want to hear him talk
about the things that he’s into. You know that Dave is your soulmate, it’s him on your arm for sure,
and you saw yourself on his without a doubt. In a really meaningful way you’ve known him since
you were five, but in a more accurate way you don’t know him at all, and you can’t wait to find out
all there is to know about him. And now you’ve managed to buy yourself a chance to get to know
him, you can only hope that he finds out something about you that makes him want you as his
soulmate after all.

“Thanks.” You say, shutting the car door behind you. Dave shrugs, gives one careless wave and
saunters off out of the car park and off of school grounds. A cool hand touches yours, and you

“I am sorry that I did not let you out, but that seemed to go well in the end.” She says to you, and
you smile.

“I think it did, yeah. I had to agree not to talk about whether we’re soulmates or not but he’s talking
to me now.” You say as Dave disappears from sight.

“That’s a tough promise to make, Karkat. Are you sure that you can do that?” Kanaya asks, and you
wrap your hand around your marked arm as uncertainty coils in your stomach.

“I’ve got to. Besides, if I know that he’s going to talk to me I can control my impulse to screech
insanely at him like the desperate idiot I am.” You say, and Kanaya pets your hair.

“You are not an idiot, Karkat.” Kanaya says soothingly.

“Making no comment on how desperate I am, huh?” You laugh bitterly. She’s not even wrong, you
are stupid crazy about this guy. Probably more than he deserves given how little you actually know
about him.

“I am sure that you will tell me all about it later, but I wanted to say that I am very grateful for you
introducing me to Rose like you did.” she says, and you see her look back at her soulmate with a soft
expression on her face. Pure red pity right there, you’re happy for her.

“She had better be good for you, but you can handle it, I’m sure.” You reassure her.
“She seems very protective over Dave. I’m not sure I could cope if you were that protective.” Kanaya says unsurely.

“Kanaya, you’re a chainsaw wielding jadeblood who, if Porrim and Dolorosa are any clue, will likely be a rainbow drinker too. Anything you need protecting from has likely already scarfed me down for breakfast.” You laugh, and Kanaya vaguely paps your face.

“AHAAHAHA! I told you I was the better hacker, eat me!” Roxy cackles, throwing her hands in the air.

“Wh- no! Let me see that!” Sollux yelps, dragging her laptop over to him and staring in horror at it.

“Roxy said that she was too much older than Sollux to pursue a relationship with him right now, but he seems to have taken it as a challenge. I don’t know why this prompted Roxy to flirt black with him, I must admit I find humans very confusing sometimes.” Kanaya whispers to you.

You open your mouth to speculate on this beginning relationship but your phone buzzes in your pocket. It’s probably one of your siblings or guardians trying to locate all of you so that you can go home. You glance at it to see that it is, in fact, a notification from Trollian.

[turntechGodhead has added you to their chumroll]
[add turntechGodhead to your trollslum?]

You hit ‘yes’ so fast you probably broke the sound barrier, it has to be Dave.

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]
TG: sup?

CG: DAVE?

TG: the one and only

Your mouth goes dry as you stare at the message. He types in your blood colour, the exact hue that’s all over his arm and is pumping through your body right now. Holy mother of god, Dave Strider sure is something.

CG: IF YOU ACTUALLY WANT TO KNOW WHAT IS UP, THEN YOUR SISTER IS CURRENTLY SCREECHING ABOUT HOW SHE HACKED THE SCHOOL BETTER THAN SOLLUX.

CG: SO IF SHE COMES HOME LATE IT’S BECAUSE SOMEONE IN THIS PLACE HEARD HER AND THREW HER IN DETENTION.

TG: amazing

TG: so

TG: see you at school tomorrow I guess

CG: I HAVE ENGLISH FIRST THING.

TG: literature or language?
You check your timetable because you forgot that you have two kinds of English classes now that you specified that you wanted to go into it. When you’re older, you’ll hopefully be able to get into the creative writing class, and the literature class was advised for that.

CG: LITERATURE WITH MR CAVE OR MAYBE IT’S COVE. THE PRINTER WAS LOSING INK WHEN IT GOT TO MINE SO IT’S TOO FAINT TO SEE.

TG: its cave

TG: see you there i guess

[turntechGodhead ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist]

You share another class with him and that even sounded like he planned to spend time in that class with you. You think you are smiling terrifyingly wide. You look up at Kanaya who looks at you with a curious smile.

“Dave?” She guesses, and you nod enthusiastically.

Damn, you are in love.
You find that texting as you walk is a life skill, especially when you spend your time with a supercomputer living on your face.

AT: That went differing levels of well, I thought.
AT: Which is to say very poorly at times, you nearly made that boy cry at one point.
TG: yeah but he didnt in the end
TG: not my fault if he got the wrong idea and took it all personal
TG: and hes fine now so its all cool
AT: Regardless, you’re aware that he doesn’t really get your reason for not testing your mark against his, right?
TG: doesnt matter as long as he doesnt try it
AT: Would you like me to calculate the odds of you not being soulmates?
AT: spoiler alert: it's a small number.
[turntechGodhead has blocked autonomousTerminal]
AT: It was a simple question, Dave.
AT: I’m just trying to help you.

You grit your teeth and open up a new window.

You were feeling relatively good when you left Karkat by the car, and you’re reasonably sure that he’s going to hold to his part of the bargain, or the part about not forcing you to touch him at any rate. The dude seems to cram his foot in his mouth like shoes are his favourite flavour, so he’ll probably at least mention the whole him thinking he’s your soulmate thing at some point.

Hal though… he knows that you don’t want to talk about it and he’s doing it anyway.

The idea of Karkat being your soulmate makes your stomach churn, and despite how Karkat took it at first it’s nothing to do with him as a person. Like you said, you barely know the guy. The idea of you and another dude being together like that fills you with the creeping feeling of Bro behind you, watching you, judging you, ready to attack you. It’s horrible, and you hate it, and your loathing for the feeling has just kind of spread across the whole idea of you with guys. Once there was a time when it covered any dude macking on another dude but time with Dirk and seeing how real his feelings for Jake are crushed that pretty swiftly.
TT: Okay, he’s not backing down.  
TT: So I’m separating him from you for a while until I can talk sense into him.  
TT: He can’t pester you or get speaker control in rooms that you’re in without our permission or it being an emergency.  
TG: thanks  
TT: I’ve got to say though, you’ve never had me do this before.  
TT: He did fill me in on what’s been going on, and I get that you don’t want to talk about that specifically.  
TT: But do you feel ok? I’m trying to work out if he’s just pissed you off or if you’re having a panic attack here.  
TG: ugh that doesn’t even happen anymore  
TT: Well, I’m glad about that.  
TT: So Hal just pissed you off from being a pushy son of a bitch, huh?  
TG: basically  
TT: Ok then.  
TT: So how’s the new school, aside from the people Rose made sure you’d meet.  
TG: I don’t know man  
TG: first day  
TG: big I guess?  
TG: teachers seem fine and the place looks nicer  
TG: it’s just school  
TT: That seems fair.  
TT: I’ve got an essay to hand in soon, so I’ve gotta bounce but you down for celebratory pizza and movie tonight?  
TG: fuck yeah

You round the corner to your road and think about your conversation with Karkat, about how you agreed to get to know him.

TG: wait  
TT: What’s up?  
TG: if I open a window with Hal that’ll unblock him right?  
TT: I can alter it if it’s only so you message him if you like.  
TG: no man you’re busy  
TG: can you just search for something for me  
TG: hal sent me a trollian account name over the summer  
TG: something genetic?  
TT: carcinoGeneticist  
TG: that was quick  
TT: You and Hal don’t talk about genetics a lot, it was an easy search.  
TG: thanks  
TG: good luck with the essay  
TT: Thanks.  
TT: See you tonight.  
[timaeusTestified ceased pestering turntechGodhead]

You hesitate outside of your house, but eventually you bite the bullet and add Karkat to your chumroll. You figure that you may as well say something or else he’ll have no clue who the fuck you are. You need to play it cool though; you’re just two guys looking to be friends. Making friends at a new school is what people do. You ignore the feeling of Bro looming and type.

TG: sup?
Karkat’s response comes back almost instantly.

CG: DAVE?
TG: the one and only

You open the door to your stupidly big house with your key and shove it shut behind you.

“I’m home!” You yell out in case you mom is lurking around, but she’s probably working. That said you wouldn’t put it past her to have thrown some overly elaborate first day at school party with streamers and banners. You try to stay out of the thing that she and your sisters are working through with each other, but your personal opinion is that she’s not as insincere or ironic with her affections or lavish gestures as Rose and Roxy think that she is. You mom is just super bad at being normal with people.

Karkat’s grey scrolls across your glasses.

CG: IF YOU ACTUALLY WANT TO KNOW WHAT IS UP, THEN YOUR SISTER IS CURRENTLY SCREECHING ABOUT HOW SHE HACKED THE SCHOOL BETTER THAN SOLLUX.
CG: SO IF SHE COMES HOME LATE IT’S BECAUSE SOMEONE IN THIS PLACE HEARD HER AND THREW HER IN DETENTION.

You bite your lip to avoid laughing, even though there’s no one here to see. You have no idea how things worked out in such a way that two of Karkat’s friends… family… whatever they are to him ended up being the soulmates of your siblings.

Hal’s words about the odds of these kinds of things rise up in your head. The implication that Karkat must be your soulmate bubbles up like the dying breath of a dinosaur drowning in tar. You ignore the thought and press on.

TG: amazing
TG: so
TG: see you at school tomorrow I guess

There, quick, simple and to the point. You flashstep up the stairs and walk into your room. You’re pulling the window up and open when you see grey again.

CG: I HAVE ENGLISH FIRST THING.

You hesitate. The guy is genuinely interesting, and it’s not like he chose to have his classes with or without you so checking to see if it’s your class that he’s in is a neutral action, right? You’re not leading him on.

TG: literature or language?
CG: LITERATURE WITH MR CAVE OR MAYBE IT’S COVE. THE PRINTER WAS LOSING INK WHEN IT GOT TO MINE SO IT’S TOO FAINT TO SEE.
TG: its cave
TG: see you there i guess

[turntechGodhead ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist]

You fall backwards onto your bed, an action you immediately regret because you are super bad at not leaving shit in your bed. Not actual shit, more like, pens and pencils and stuff, the occasional book, forks, discarded socks and other general teenage boy detritus. Mom offered to hire a maid but the idea of people going through your things even if just to clean them makes you shudder.
You dig the pencil out from under your back and roll over onto your front. You withdraw your secret sketchbook from within your sylladex and open it. Over the summer Dirk actually cannibalised a bunch of iphones and secret diary tech to make you a fingerprint lock for the thing just to see if he could without making it too clunky. With a quick scan of your finger, it clicks open. A few photos try to slide out from where you’ve failed to tape them in yet.

The stone cold truth of the matter is that despite the fact that Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff is your masterpiece you still need to practice for it. Picasso had to learn to draw and paint like a boss in realistic style before he could break all them rules and you are no different. Boy, that is one of the most pretentious things that you have ever thought, and you’re super glad you didn’t say that aloud with someone standing nearby.

You look around to check that Rose wasn’t there just in case.

Anyway, you flick through your latest pages. Most of this sketchbook is just the summer; you used to keep your backlogs of your old ones in your locker at the school where Bro couldn’t get them. For obvious reasons, most of this book is filled with drawings of your family, comparisons on how Rose and Roxy look against the profile of your mom. You’ve got a bunch of sketches of Dirk working and a whole bunch of ones of what Hal’s body might look like when Dirk makes it. You don’t really want to look at those right now.

You pause on one section of your sketchbook though, there’s a big chunk of it dedicated to trolls. Pictures that you printed off of the internet are taped in, and you tried to copy them, fascinated with how different they look. One section is just Karkat, and his picture is carefully taped onto the page. It feels… strange to look at it now.

You plug your headphones in and hit play on a mix that Jade recently sent you. You stretch your hand a little and start to draw. You begin by drawing eyes, inspired by your science lesson you go for a more anatomical approach first and then the less creepy eyes in normal people faces and not flapping about on their own. You work through the subtle eye shape changes in your family and take care in the colouring of them. You know Dirk’s amber off by heart, but you’ve still not quite got Roxy’s pink down, though Rose’s lavender is easy. You seamlessly move over to troll eyes, printing some google image search results off to help you.

Troll eyelashes are pretty long and thick, always black. They’re almost like camel or giraffe eyelashes; you wonder if Alternia is a dry and dusty place for evolution to have gifted them with lashes like that. You work through your search results intrigued that when trolls leave adolescence their irises fill in with their blood colour. You’d heard about it in class of course, but it’s another thing seeing pictures of it.

As you’re sketching another set of eyes, you realise that the last several pairs that you’ve done bear more than a passing resemblance to Karkat’s. You don’t know which is worse, that you recognised them or that you drew them without meaning to.

You look up as movement goes by your door, and you automatically shut your sketchbook, even as you see that it’s Rose standing there.

“What do you want?” You ask, narrowing your eyes at her.

“I want to know how your day went and how your conversation with Karkat played out.” Rose answers simply as she makes her way into your room.

“You’ll live in suspense then.” You mutter and focus on setting your pencils back into their haphazard case so that you can actually find what you want instead of just throwing it all in your
sylladex. At least now you’re running with more cards and you’re back to Dirk’s modus, so you’re less likely to launch shit across the room. Not totally safe, mind, but less dangerous.

“I also understand that you are in a disagreement with Hal right now.” Rose adds and you shove yourself off of the bed. You stand up and move towards her.

“God, just back off already. You already forced Karkat and me together, and I’m happy that everything with your soulmate worked out but I don’t want you meddling with the guy that you think is mine. You and Hal and Roxy are just fucking with my life, and I hate it. So just… drop it and get out.” You say angrily at her.

“I’m only trying to help you because you’re too stubborn to do anything about a problem with an obvious solution.” Rose replies, and you clench one hand into a fist. Part of you wants to lash out and hurt her, but it’s just a small part and it’s easy enough to quash, you won’t turn into Bro. You still don’t want Rose in your goddamn room though so you shove her out into the hallway and slam the door on her.

Usually, you get on with your sisters but boy when you fight with Rose you really fight with her. Rose makes an offended noise and tries to shove the door open so you drag your desk across the way, blocking the door.

“Dave, you’re being childish!” Rose calls through the door.

You go to your wardrobe and quickly change into your running gear. You jam your earbuds back into your ears, change to a bassline heavy playlist and slide out of your window onto the sloped roof below and drop down onto the ground outside of your home. You take off running and don’t look back.

Optional exercise was never your thing, but after Bro died you had to take it up. Your body was so used to bursts of athleticism that suddenly losing that at Bro’s death was like serious drug withdrawal. You sure as shit didn’t want to start strifing again and you’d never put Dirk through that, but you had to do something or else you just got more and more tense. Running through the forest at Rose’s last place was the first relief that you got. You focused on the pounding of your heart in your chest, the speed of your breathing and the steady beat of your feet on the ground. Everything had a rhythm, and if you focused on that, then your brain could switch off.

Moving here changed all of your running routes and Dirk isn’t happy with you going too close to the big roads, so you’re mostly stuck to your own rough area, and you’ve yet to work out a proper route for anything. So you’re mostly just letting your feet take you wherever and only mildly paying attention to where you’re going.

You leave your pricy neighbourhood and head into a cheaper one, though you think that it’s still nice in its own way. You run past a movie theatre, a family run pizza place, a community centre and a real nice park that you loop through a few times. You run through neighbourhoods and pick up the speed whenever your mind touches on Rose and Roxy’s manipulation of you, or Hal’s words, you almost sprint when you remember showing your arm to Karkat with your heart in your throat at having to trust him to keep his hands to himself.

You eventually, with a couple of stops to read your phone’s GPS, arrive home again and enter your room through your window once more. You shower, your body feeling like it’s made of lead. At least your brain feels numb and tired. You shove your desk out of the way with your hip and walk sleepily to Dirk’s room, it’s half eight, and he probably got home ages ago.

Dirk is doing something with wire and pliers when you come into his room, and he doesn’t look up
“Good run?” He asks distractedly as he bends the wire this way and that. You just grunt and fall onto his bed in a heap; your pj’s twisting awkwardly with your landing.

“Hal told me when you were about half an hour out so pizza should be here soon.” Dirk says and sets his wire down. You watch as he rolls his shoulders and stretches his back, you hear it crack as he does so. He swivels around in his chair and faces you.

“Thanks, man.” You say sleepily and burrow under his blanket.

“You better have showered.” Dirk warns you and wheels closer.

“Yeah, yeah.” You tell him.

“So, Rose is pissed, Roxy feels guilty, and Hal won't shut up. Apparently, they both also met their soulmates today; it sounds pretty busy right now.” Dirk says calmly.

“Am I an asshole or would you be pissed if you were me too? Because I get it, I should be nicer to all three of them, yeah, yeah, yeah.” You grumble and glare angrily at the ceiling.

“Well, you’re assuming that I’m not an asshole, but let’s go with that assumption for now.” Dirk laughs.

“Are you gonna answer me?” You press, rolling on your side again to look at Dirk.

“You want me to be honest?” Dirk asks, arching an eyebrow at you.

“Yeah.” You say with a nod.

Dirk takes his shades off and settles them carefully in his hair. He leans back in his chair with a sigh and seems to size you up for a moment.

“I get why Rose and Roxy are trying to help you because they don’t get why you don’t want to find your soulmate and honestly I don’t get it either. If this Karkat kid is your soulmate then I can honestly say that I know how much it sucks to know who your soulmate is and get fuck all back from them about it, Roxy can too. If Karkat is your soulmate then I feel for him.” Dirk points out.

“So I am an asshole.” You conclude unhappily.

“Well, I don’t know about that. I know I can be pretty manipulative but I try not to be, and I hate people controlling me. We both had enough of that already. If Roxy and Rose pulled the kind of crap on me that Rose admitted to me earlier, then I’d be pissed too.” Dirk says, and you hear the distant sound of the doorbell ringing.

“Hold that thought.” Dirk says and walks off.

You feel bad for Dirk with his situation with Jake, but it’s hardly the same as what you’re going through here because Karkat can’t be your soulmate. He can’t.

Dirk returns with pizza and drops on the bed next to you and flicks the box open.

“As I was saying,” he begins and picks up a slice of pizza, “even if they’re trying to help there’s a point where it’s too far.”

You pick up a slice of pizza and cram it in your face, you burn the roof of your mouth on the cheese,
“What do you think?” You ask between bites.

“What?” Dirk asks.

“The whole thing. With Karkat. I mean, everyone else has an opinion on it that they wanna shove down my throat. So what’s yours?” You question him, and Dirk chews thoughtfully on his pizza crust for a moment before sitting upright properly and opening a drink from his sylladex. Goddamn orange soda.

“I think that you know you better than I know you. Think of it this way, you know me better than anyone else in the world, and you only found out I liked guys a few years ago. So I’m sure there’s shit about you that I don’t know, and that goes even more so for people who haven’t known you as long like Roxy and Rose.” Dirk explains.

“If you say that it can’t be Karkat because you’re not into guys or not into him like that then I’m not gonna tell you that you’re wrong. How the hell could I know that better than you?” Dirk adds.

“Thank you.” You groan, finally someone who is going to listen to you.

“But…” Dirk says slowly, and you whine, why must there be a but?

“What?” You whine.

“I have seen his soul mark, and it does look a hell of a lot like you. And you’re young, and sexuality isn’t nearly as fixed or well defined as people think it is. You know how I feel about labels. What’s true for you now might not be so in six months or a year or whatever. That doesn’t mean you gotta do anything about it one way or the other. It could just be a huge coincidence, or he could be the one, who knows. Also if he tries anything that freaks you out, you are absolutely allowed to break his face and come tell me, and then I’ll break everything else.” Dirk says firmly, and you grin around your pizza.

“I think it’ll be fine.” You tell him coolly and Dirk nods and picks up more pizza.

You probably should make amends with your siblings, but maybe not tonight. Tomorrow perhaps.

“How was the essay?” you ask instead and eat more pizza.

“They don’t grade it right away, but I’m pretty happy with it. I’m nailing basically all these early classes anyway; most people are still on intro stuff.” Dirk says with a shrug.

“Geez Dirk, let the normal people catch up.” You tease and Dirk chuckles.

“Oh, hey, I found this. It’s short, but I think you’ll like it.” Dirk says, scooting off of the bed and grabbing his laptop from the floor. He pulls up some anime which is really more his thing than yours but it looks pretty cool. You let Dirk set it up. It’s all about these grim reapers collecting souls or something, and one of them can turn into a weapon. You’re too tired from your run to pay it too much attention, so you only get through a couple of episodes before you call it a night and go back to your room. You catch John and Jade up about your first day of your new school, leaving out information about Karkat, and then you hit the hay.

The next day you, Rose and Roxy reach a tenuous truce in the car on the way to school. You don’t need to be driven but you think Roxy is still enamoured with being able to drive anywhere that she wants to do it everywhere. You don’t have the energy to forgive Hal yet and allow him to drown
you in orange text; you’ll do that when school is over. For now, you’re tired and you still have to find your way to English lit.

You lean against the wall outside of the class, and through half lidded eyes you watch the other students assemble, you calmly pick out who is in what social group. Virtually all of these students have known each other for their whole time here; you’re the new kid after all. Karkat shows up not long after you get there and you watch as he spots you and his whole body becomes the physical embodiment of at least three exclamation marks.

“Hi.” He says loudly, coming to a stop by you.

“Hey.” You reply, glad that Rose isn’t here to watch this.

You’re saved from having to come up with more conversation by the door to the classroom opening and the other students making their way in. You find an empty desk and your now permashadow troll sits down next to you. You take care to make sure that like in science his body is away from your marked arm. You eye the teacher as you get your things out, the dude is a pretty dadly looking guy, all checked shirt under a woollen vest. He’s also got the most overblown moustache in existence, like nose hair and face hair teamed up to make the most righteous moustache in history.

Karkat suppresses a snort of amusement, and you realise that you must have been talking to yourself. Another pair of trolls sit down on Karkat’s other side, and he perks up when he sees them.

“Nep, I thought you had-” He starts to say, but the girl whose horns look like cat ears shakes her head. The guy behind her is easily six foot tall and has biceps the size of melons; surely he can’t be in your grade. Evidently, the teacher thinks the same as he is coming towards you all.

“I assume that you’re Dave Strider, yes? I have a note.” The teacher says, and you nod.

“And you’re new as well, Mr…?” He says, looking at Karkat.

“Ah, Karkat Vantas.” Karkat answers quickly and the teacher nods and looks at the girl.

“Nepeta Leijon, sir. Me and Equius were supposed to be in Spanish but there’s some scheduling problem, I don’t really understand, but I have a note.” Nepeta says and holds out a note between her long yellow claws. You note that they’re longer than Karkat’s.

The teacher takes the note with an exasperated look and then puts his register down on the desk between the two new trolls.

“Damn languages. Please write your names on the bottom of the register, without quirks if you please, and I’ll use that until I get an updated one.” The teacher sighs and Nepeta and the other guy write their names.

The teacher then makes his way to the front and takes roll as everyone else quietens down. You can’t help but notice that Nepeta keeps looking at you over Karkat’s shoulders, even as you see him elbow her.

“It’s purry nice to meet you.” She whispers. You must have misheard her.

“Right, I’m sure that we can all see that we have a good number of new students this year. I’m sure you’ll all get to know them individually, but perhaps we can do a brief introduction before we get started to quell everyone’s curiosity. Dave?” The teacher asks, looking at you. You die a little inside but continue as if this totally doesn’t bother you at all.
“I’m Dave Strider; my family moved over to this part of the city over the summer. I used to live more central, but my sisters came from New York. So… we’re here now, I don’t know what else you want.” You say with a shrug.

“Any hobbies, Dave?” The teacher asks.

“Making sick raps and ill beats with my turntables.” You answer. Nepeta grins at you and Karkat has his face in his hands.

“Karkat?” The teacher prompts, and Karkat makes a noise of terrible suffering before lifting his head out of his hands.

“I’m Karkat Vantas, I like books and movies, I didn’t move I just changed schools.” Karkat says quickly.

“Why?” Someone pipes up from the back of the class.

“None of your goddamn business is why!” Karkat snaps out, and you laugh in surprise. Your teacher scolds him and moves on.

“Geez Karkat, get some chill.” You whisper to him as your teacher is quieting the class to move to Nepeta’s introduction.

“Never.” Karkat hisses back at you.

“I’m Nepeta Leijon; I’m Karkat’s sister. I like romance books, tv shows and going hunting with my ancestor!” She says chirpily. She’s not the kind of girl you would have pegged for that but ok.

“Ah… I’m… Equius Zahhak, sir. I have also moved schools but not moved house. I like… horses and robots.” The troll says in awkward, stilted speech. You're kind of horrified to realise that those are Dirk’s interests too.

“Well, that was… interesting. Now, I shall cover how this year is going to go. Every two weeks we will be reading a new book, both in class and out, and we shall spend the time going over the themes and messages of the book. Sometimes I’ll task you with a simple book report, sometimes I’ll ask you to rewrite the ending or do a study on one part or character. If there is a particular topic or theme of a book that you want to cover in lieu of this do let me know as I do like to encourage new thought.” The teacher says and writes his name on the board behind him. It was, as you told Karkat yesterday, Mr Cave.

“Our first book is Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy.” The teacher says and picks up a stack of worn paperbacks and splits them into stacks for each row of desks and just like last time you have to distribute them amongst yourselves. When Karkat hands you your book your fingers brush, and you’re glad for that being your unmarked hands.

“Since this is our first lesson and we can’t really talk about the book already I think we’ll just read it out one person at a time and stop to discuss it every so often. The book was written by an English author Douglas Adams, and it was originally a radio play which shows in the work with how well it reads. Also, I will add that this was written long before humans had contact with life beyond Earth so I would ask that we hold that in mind in our analysis. Jessica, do you mind starting on the first page?” Mr Cave says, turning to a girl at the front of the class.

The class all take turns to read sections of the book, with the teacher occasionally cutting one person off and starting the next. Sometimes he corrects pronunciation but not much. By the time it gets to your turn, you have already learnt that Arthur Dent is a singularly boring Englishman whose house is
about to be torn down by bulldozers and is presently solving the problem by sprawling in front of
them.

When your turn to read rolls around you look at Karkat to see him staring at you with rapt
fascination, like he’s never seen anyone read before despite everyone else before you doing just that.
It occurs to you that it’s you that he’s into and not your ability to read like all other teenagers. The
ridiculous realisation of that fact makes you stumble over your words and have to read them out
again.

Evidently, this is just going to be your life now; you get flustered over the guy who thinks he’s your
soulmate getting flustered over you. The circle of stupidity is complete.

The rest of your day passes with other classes, a few of which you have with Karkat, and in those
you actually choose to sit with him. Hey, what can you say, it sucks being the new kid. He’s pretty
reasonable when he doesn’t think that you’re going to run away and never speak to him again. You
end up having lunch with him since both your sisters are tied to his family now, and you discover
that Karkat has negative amounts of chill about all subjects. He has a five-minute rant about wasabi;
the dude is absurd.

When you get home you change clothes and you go running. You still haven’t unblocked Hal yet,
but you plan to do it when you get home. In the meantime, you enjoy your run. Now that you’re not
outrunning your brain you take the time to plot where you are and you actively seek out that one
neighbourhood with the movie theatre and the winding residential roads.

A letter hits you in the chest as you run and you screech to a halt, grabbing it before it hits the
ground. You turn around to see none other than Karkat Vantas leaning on an honest to god white
picket fence with a shit eating grin on his face and a handful of mail.

“What’re you doing here?” You ask, slightly out of breath.

“Gee, what could I ever be doing outside of this house holding a bunch of mail. Could I possibly live
here or am I some kind of delinquent mail thief and I’ve hit every house on this road already? You’ll
never know.” Karkat snarks at you and you throw his letter back at him.

You see his eyes flick up and down your body for a second and you see the way they linger on your
unusually bare arm.

“I thought you didn’t do t-shirts.” Karkat points out, gesturing at you with a letter.

“I am running outside in Texas in September, it is a bajillion degrees.” You argue and Karkat shrugs
as if he’s not totally willing to concede your point.

“Do you run by my house a lot? I’ve never seen you before.” Karkat asks curiously.

“I’m making a new route. Why, do you have any recommendations?” You ask, and Karkat snorts
derisively.

“Do I look like someone who goes running? No. Anyway, I don’t trust people who run for fun; it’s
not natural. And when you read the newspapers it’s always runners who find the bodies, suspicious
if you ask me.” Karkat says with a grin, and he startles a laugh out of you.

“Oh yeah, if only I were walking a dog too then I’d for sure be guilty.” You joke and Karkat
snickers in amusement.

You hesitate, should you wave and leave now? Karkat doesn’t seem uncomfortable, but maybe you
should be careful about leading him on, maybe-

“What’re you listening to?” Karkat asks as your phone changes from one song to the other.

“Oh, Flight of the Conchords.” You say.

“What now?” Karkat asks, looking totally puzzled.

“Okay, now you need to listen to them. I can’t let you go through life having not listened to them, that’s a goddamn travesty.” You pull your headphones out and choose a song, it’s hard picking the best song of theirs, but you settle for Hurt Feelings. You hold your phone up and hit play.

Some people say that rappers don’t have feelings
   We have feelings
Some people say that we are not rappers
   We’re rappers
   That hurts our feelings
Hurts our feelings when you say we’re not rappers
Some people say that rappers are invincible
   We’re vincible
   We’re vincible
What you are about to hear are true stories
   Real experiences
   Autobiographical raps
Things that happened to us, all true
   Bring the rhyme

“What… what the fuck is this?” Karkat splutters but you shush him as the song goes on.

I make a meal for my friends,
   Try to make it delicious,
   Try to keep it nutritious,
   Create wonderful dishes
Not one of them thinks about the way I feel
   Nobody compliments the meal

A smile is threatening to overtake Karkat’s baffled expression; it’s hilarious.

I got hurt feelings, I got hurt feelings
   I feel like a prize asshole
No one even mentions my casserole
I got hurt feelings, I got hurt feelings
You coulda said something nice about my profiteroles

“Oh my god.” Karkat laughs.

By the time the song is over Karkat is straight up laughing into his hand to hide the noise.

“That is… you’re ridiculous, they’re ridiculous, I have no idea what I expected, but that was- what the hell were they called again?” Karkat asks, still laughing as he talks.

“Flight of the Conchords, you’ve really never heard of them?” You ask disbelievingly.

“No, where are they from?” Karkat asks.
“They’re only New Zealand's fourth most popular guitar-based digi-bongo acapella-rap-funk-comedy folk duo.” you say flawlessly, totally not giving the impression that you memorised that specific line from their wiki page because it was too damn funny not to.

“Holy shit, Strider you are a fucking weird music hipster. I shouldn’t be surprised, but here I am, being surprised.” Karkat says with a genuinely warm smile.

“I’m burning you a CD when I get home; it’s a sin that you haven’t listened to them. In fact, I’m half tempted to make you come with me to listen to it.” You say immediately.

“How far away do you even live anyway?” Karkat asks curiously.

“Uhhh,” You say as you mentally try to calculate it on the straightest route. “Like fifteen minutes I think?”

“Okay then, one second.” Karkat says and walks to the front door of his house. He opens it and throws the mail inside.

“I’M GOING FOR A WALK, LATER.” Karkat yells in the door and slams it shut behind him.

“Were you not meant to bring that mail inside?” You ask as he comes back to you.

“It is inside, it’s just mostly on the floor. Not my problem. So, were you serious about me going to yours or not?” Karkat asks, and you can hardly say no after he just flung mail all over the floor for you, can you?

“Sure, c’mon.” You say and lead him down the road at a more sedate walk. You think that this is a pretty nice running route and if you get stopped talking to Karkat every so often then that’s no big deal, is it?

“So… I’ve got actual gym next week, and our group gets to start with track. Any running advice you can give me because oh god I hate running.” Karkat groans.

“One foot first, then the other, repeat often and fast.” You say smartly, and he shoves you in the shoulder.

“Do you actually even enjoy it? I can’t imagine enjoying running.” Karkat asks with a disgusted expression on his face.

“Stopping at the end feels amazing and, I don’t know, I just check out for the most part when I’m running. You stop thinking about shit.” You tell him honestly.

“I read for that, or watch movies. Be someone else for a while, you know?” Karkat says, and you shrug.

“I don’t know, people in movies and books have problems. That’s why you get plot. Running gives me total blankness, it’s goddamn zen or something.” You point out, and Karkat seems to genuinely consider that. You’ve never really thought about running like this before, you just know that you need to chase that feeling when your head gets too crammed but you’ve never spat it out into words before.

“Do you like movies, though?” Karkat asks as you pass the pizza place, damn it smells good.

“I watch ‘em.” You shrug.
“Do you have a favourite director?” Karkat asks curiously.

You bite your lip. Once you would have said that your favourite director is James Wan, the guy who made the saw movies that Bro was so fond of and made you watch so much. But you hate those movies and that fucking puppet, that shit gave you nightmares. Maybe you don’t have to pretend now.

“Not really.” You answer.

“I’m really into Edgar Wright at the moment. And… if you like that flight of the whatever stuff you might like this, he’s really funny, but he’s actually really artistic with his transitions which is interesting as a lot of his movies are about transitions in people’s lives. That sounds really pretentious considering the type of films he actually makes but I’ll bring one to school for you tomorrow.” Karkat enthuses, and he looks so excited that you can hardly stand to tell him no. Your arm prickles right where you know the movie reel is. You steadfastly ignore it.

“What’s your favourite one about?” You ask as you walk under the awning of the movie theatre. You realise that this is Karkat’s local theatre and probably yours too. How many movies has he seen here?

“That’s a cruel question to ask. But… I don’t know. Scott Pilgrim maybe? It’s about a guy in a band whose life has gone- nevermind, I’ll bring it to school.” Karkat says with a shake of his head.

You shove your hands in the pockets of your shorts as you walk and find yourself wondering about Karkat in general.

“You really freaked me out when we first met and like… a lot of yesterday.” You say idly as you walk. You see Karkat wince at your words.

“Sorry.” He apologises.

“But now… it feels chill, you know? But when I think about it, we had that when we first met. When I told you about Dirk’s modus and about Bowie the crow.” You muse.

“Really? I was pretty worried that I was weird then and now still and you were just being cool about it.” Karkat says softly.

“First thing you gotta know about me Karkat, I’m always cool all of the time.” You brag, and Karkat actually laughs in your face.

“You’re not cool, but you’re pretty interesting, that’s better I think.” He says with a sharp-toothed grin.

“Well, I’m ironically cool and secretly interesting. Just because you’ve got primo access to my fascinating personality doesn’t mean that everyone else does, regular people consider me cool and aloof.” You assure him.

“Uh-huh.” Karkat says, sounding entirely unconvinced.

“Rude.” You say in mock offence.

The two of you walk back to your place, lapsing in and out of conversation easily. You’re not as unguarded with him as you are with Rose but conversation ebbs and flows naturally as it does with Dirk and Hal. You’re not sure what to make of that.
“How’s, uh… Sollux getting on with this whole thing with Roxy then?” You ask, hoping you remembered Karkat’s brother’s name right.

“He’s pretty frustrated that she’s got this age ban on him, but I think he’s convinced that if he proves himself to her, then she’ll change her mind. It feels pretty much like a kismesissitude to me, which I didn’t know that humans did but I guess there’s always exceptions. Besides I’ll be shocked if Sollux manages to stick in just the one quadrant, I know what he’s like.” Karkat says with a sigh.

“I think I understood about half of that.” You say after a moment or two.

“Remind me to buy your sister a book on troll romance; she can have it after I hit you in the face with it.” Karkat sneers, and you actually burst out laughing. Damn this kid can get past your poker face way too frequently.

“Well, whatever man. We’re up here.” You say and lead Karkat across a crossing.

“Damn you live in a nice neighbourhood.” Karkat says, sounding impressed.

“There’s a lot of us in the house and mom is loaded anyways. Buying shit to show she cares is like… her deal. It’s pretty new and weird to me too.” you admit and lead the way down your road.

“Goddamn, these houses just keep getting bigger.” Karkat whistles and his expression turns to open mouthed staring when you get to yours.

“This is… where you live?” Karkat asks hoarsely, pointing at your front door.

Your eyes narrow at the window as you think you see a shadow pass by inside. You really don’t want to deal with anyone right now, but it means that you need to deal with someone else first.

“Give me a second.” You say and pull out your phone with a sigh.

[turntechGodhead began pestering autonomousTerminal]
TG: hi
AT: Oh god Dave, I’m sorry!
AT: Please don’t do that again!
TG: im sorry
TG: i just couldnt deal and then i just wanted to run first before talking to you and
TG: yeah
AT: I was just trying to help, but I can see that I may have been too pushy. I won’t bring the subject up again if you don’t want me to.
TG: thanks man
TG: look could you do me a solid?
AT: Sure, what is it?
TG: can you tell me if anyone is lurking downstairs?
AT: Rose and Roxy are in their rooms, Dirk is having a shower and your Mom is loitering in the kitchen.
TG: damn ok
TG: talk to you later
AT: Bye.
[turntechGodhead ceased pestering autonomousTerminal]

“Come on, this way.” You say quietly and lead Karkat around the side of your house. The ground floor has a sloped roof where it sticks out further than the floor that you’re on, like faux turrets or something, but it provides a means to get up to your room. The wall of your house is textured, a
rough sandy covering that gives perfect grip for a running shoe to push off of the wall. You jump for the wall, kick off and catch the roof with your upper body and easily pull yourself up. You look down at a wide-eyed Karkat who is staring at you in awe.

“Come on.” You urge him, and he looks from the wall to you a few times.

“Why can’t we just go through the front door? I saw that you had one!” Karkat demands.

“My mom is down there and unless you want the full stepford wives experience you’ll climb up here.” You tell him.

“The movie or the book?” Karkat asks you suspiciously.

“Karkat, get up here.” You groan.

You see him grit his teeth and try the same move at you, barely getting any height from the wall and just smacking straight into the wall below you. You roll your eyes and lower down your unmarked arm to him, aware that they’re bare for the first time in a while.

Karkat grabs your hand and between him scrambling against the wall and you pulling you get his ungraceful ass through your bedroom window where he collapses onto your bed in a heap.

“You’re a crazy person.” He accuses you as you gracefully climb over him.

“You’ve got all the grace of a sack of bricks.” You shoot back and drop into your computer seat. You quickly boot up your computer and find a spare flash drive and set to copying across several Flight of the Conchords albums as well as the first episode of the TV show.

“You still have your things in jars.” Karkat notes and you look over your shoulder to see him sitting up on your bed now.

“Of course, they’re too cool to get rid of.” You say with a shrug.

“Again, not sure you’re using the word cool right. But they’re interesting for sure. And you have your turntables still, but these are new.” Karkat says, pointing up at your line of now dry photographs hanging from the ceiling.

“Oh, yeah. I got more into film photography now that I have space to develop them, so it’s not just digital now. That cupboard there is a little dark room.” You explain, and Karkat stands up, he’s about to look at the photographs when he stops.

“Can I look?” He asks, and you’re surprised that he had the care to ask.

“Sure.” You tell him, and you watch as Karkat carefully looks at the photographs. They’re mostly of your family. There’s a nice one of Rose in front of your mirror as you take her picture and you can see her features matching your own. You have a close up of Dirk’s hand and the strong tendons and small scars there.

Without thinking you pull out your film camera and point it at Karkat. You adjust the focus on instinct and wait until he tilts his head just so and snap a shot. Just the one. You drop the camera back into your sylladex and you don’t think he even notices.

Your computer pings at you and you look at the window; you forgot to delete a mix or two of yours on there too but, well, that’s no big deal is it? You pull the drive free and hold it out for Karkat.
“Here, enjoy.” You say, and he takes it carefully.

“Thanks. I guess I had better go. You probably have dinner and my parents will kill me if I miss mine.” Karkat says and leans against your windowsill.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow then.” You say, and he smiles. It’s something small and painfully real, and you worry, not for the first time, that you’re letting him think that there is something here that there isn’t.

“I hope I don’t fall and break my neck.” Karkat says, and carefully climbs out. He manages to navigate his way to the ground safe and sound. He looks up and you and waves before walking off.

Later that night you develop his photo. It comes out in brilliant fire reds and yellows, the fading light from outside illuminating the gold of his eyes. One of his eyes is in the light but another is blotted in shadow from one of your photos. The light catches the points of a few of his sharp alien teeth that his slight and wondrous smile exposes, he clearly hadn’t seen you taking the photo, absorbed as he is in your already printed work. In the slice of light between the hung up photos you can see dust hanging in the air, the moment frozen and strange just as it felt at the time.

It may be the best photo that you’ve ever taken. You take it down off the line before you let him in your room again later that week, this time to watch the movie that he brought you. You’re tempted to take another, but you resist.

You’re in your room with Karkat as you so often are these days. It's the weekend tomorrow, and neither of you has anywhere better to be. The sun is setting outside, and everything in your room is red and orange.

“You gotta listen to this.” You tell him, kneeling down on the bed and sliding the oversized headphones over Karkat’s ears and being careful not to brush his horns. He looks up at you with wide, curious eyes and then tilts his head a little.

“I don’t hear anything.” He tells you, and you roll your eyes.

“I’ve not hit play yet; you can’t miss the intro, man.” You tease him and get up and hit play before joining him on the bed again.

Karkat leans back against your wall and listens, his eyes flick to you, and he smiles slow and warm, and something in your chest clenches tight. You try to ignore it.

“Do you like it?” You ask and Karkat slides the headphones off of one ear. You can faintly hear your own recorded beats.

“Yeah, it sounds… very you.” Karkat says with a huff of laughter.

“Well, now I’m not sure if you’re insulting me.” You say with mock offense, and Karkat shoves you in the shoulder.

“It’s a compliment.” He groans. When he puts his hand back on the bed it lands near yours and you look down and see the edge of roses from under his sleeve, and your whole mark is on display below your running shirt. You could…

Your fingers edge across the bed sheets to his, and you glance up to see his eyes wide and staring at you, his dark lips parted in the wake of dumb arguing that died when he saw what you were doing. He looks good; you wonder why girls aren’t all over him. But maybe you know that he might not be
theirs, he could be-

Your fingers are right next to his, and he could pull away if he wants, but he’s not. You burn with not knowing, with having no explanation for why Karkat just gets you so easily. You like being his friend but sometimes you see him, and your heart just does this thing, like now with the sunset kissing his cheeks. It even makes you think bullshit like that about the sunset and his face, what the hell are you even thinking?

You slide your left hand over his right, just your fingers on his. The moment you make contact you feel your breathing hitch and the same sting in your skin that marks produce flares up, winding a band of red around your ring finger. He is your soulmate. Of course he is.

You look up at him, and now you don’t have to hide from this anymore. He’s yours.

“Dave…” Karkat says, his voice weak for once.

You can’t- you don’t know what to say. You just know that you’ve got this ache on your finger from the new mark and one in your chest for being away from him for so long. You’re probably fucking this up, but you have to do this.

You lean in and kiss him. He makes this kind of broken noise and kisses you back like it’s all he’s ever wanted. Like you’re all he’s ever wanted. You are fucked up and damaged, and he still wants you. He topples you back onto your bed and kisses you more. Your blood feels like it’s fizzing and you can barely breathe, but you never want to stop. Why have you been waiting so long for this?

Karkat jerks back from you with a pained noise and you open your eyes to see him holding himself above you. His eyes are wide, and his pupils are pinpricks in a sea of yellow. The room is suddenly so dark, but it’s light enough that you can look down and see the tip of a sword sticking out of his chest.

It vanishes suddenly, and a tidal wave of unnaturally red blood gushes from Karkat’s chest and you yelp and scramble back. Karkat hits the floor with a lifeless thud. You can’t breathe, and as you plaster yourself to the wall at the head of your bed you see him.

Bro.

He stands there with his sword drawn, dripping Karkat’s blood onto the ground. He advances on you, and you try to draw your own sword but it won’t come to you from your strife deck.

“No, no, no.” You chant in terror.

“You’re dead.” You insist, and Bro swings for you. You dodge just in time but your foot lands on Karkat’s slick blood on the floor, and you fall. Your sword still won’t come, and your mouth is dry with fear.

He’s dead; you know he is.

Or… or is he? You never really saw the body and it went missing. Did he just… get up? Has he been healing all this time and now he’s come back to see you with Karkat and… and- oh God Karkat.

You look to the side but he’s not moving at all, no breath moving his chest at all and the pool of blood is still spreading. How can anyone bleed this much?

Bro is suddenly on top of you, his foot on your chest. He grabs your marked arm and wrenches it up.
Even through Karkat’s blood on your skin, you can see the mark turning black. Of course, it’s going black, Karkat is… he’s dead.

Bro says nothing as he draws his sword back, but the disgusted and hateful curl of his lip speaks volumes. He pulls his sword back and swings, it buries itself in your shoulder joint, and you scream your throat raw. Nothing has ever hurt this much; the agony is bright and blinding and no matter how much you thrash you can’t get out from under his foot.

He keeps chopping at your shoulder, dismembering you until he pulls your arm free with a yank which makes you scream even harder.

“DAVE!”

Hands on your shoulders. You’re screaming still, you lash and try to get away.

“DAVE! Wake up! It’s Dirk, come on!” Dirk pleads and shakes you again.

You clench your fists, both of them. It was a dream, a dream and-

You throw yourself into Dirk’s arms, already shaking and sobbing with fear. You can’t breathe, even as Dirk wraps his limbs around you and grounds you in reality.

“Shh, it was a dream. You’re okay. It’s ok. Breathe.” Dirk whispers soothingly, rubbing your back.

You register movement and try to jerk away, but Dirk is holding you tight. You manage to twist your head far enough to see properly. Rose, Roxy and your mom are standing there staring at you with horror on their faces. You scan the shadows for Bro.

“It’s ok, they’re gonna stay there. It’s just you and me.” Dirk shushes you, and you press your face into his shoulder.

“Can’t… can’t breathe.” You pant into his shoulder.

“It’ll pass, it always does, remember?” Dirk tells you and you nod. You swallow and try to breathe properly, in and out at the same time as Dirk. You’re too big to be doing this still here you are.

“It was… it was Bro.” You explain, and one of Dirk’s hands tightens in the back of your sweat-soaked pyjama shirt.

“He was here and I- Karkat and I- he saw, and he killed him. He killed Karkat.” You babble helplessly, and you’re crying again.

“Shh.” Dirk says gently and rubs your back.

“Oh god, Karkat. I have, I have to check that he’s alive.” You gasp and squirm out of Dirk’s grip and throw yourself at your phone. Your hands are shaking so much that you can hardly type your unlock code into your phone.

“Dave, it’s three am. He’ll be asleep.” Rose says from your doorway.

You get pesterchum open and hit his name.

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]
TG: telll me youre ok
TG: karkkat
Your hands are shaking so much. What if it wasn’t a dream? What if Bro is here and he got Karkat first? He can do that, this could be just a nightmare that predicted it. You should never have kissed him; you know what Bro thinks of-

CG: I’M OK.
CG: ARE YOU?
CG: WHAT HAPPENED?!

You gasp in relief and drop your phone. Your stomach churns threateningly, and you scramble off of the bed into your bathroom and retch. Goddamn, you are a wreck.

“Can I come in, Dave?” Rose asks softly, though you jerk and spin around at the sound of her voice. Your dumb brain is still flagging up everything that moves as MURDER DEATH THREAT RUN HIDE KILL. You make some kind of strangled sound and Rose walks past you and fills the glass on the side of your sink with water. She kneels down next to you and holds it out.

“Thanks.” You mumble and drink awkwardly.

“It’s fine. You’re still very pale and interesting.” She says, holding her hand out against yours to show how much paler you are. You remember touching Karkat’s hand and the fear of the memory flares up and makes you jerk your hand away from her.

“He’s getting worse, Dirk. You can’t just-” Your mom hisses from outside the bathroom.

“Drop it, Roxanne.” Dirk orders her, and the edge to his voice makes you flinch. You put down the glass so you don’t drop it. You’re fine, it was just a stupid dream. You feel Bro hacking your arm off from your body, punishment for completing your soulmark with a boy, you’re disgusting you-

“-screamed so loud he woke everyone in the house up! Dirk, he needs help.” Roxy protests.

“I’m sorry you got woken up, but Dave is my kid, this is my call. Now go.” Dirk snaps, and you wince. They think you’re crazy, you probably are.

“It’ll be okay.” Rose says gently and Dirk peers around the door at you both. Dirk doesn’t need to tell her to go, she gets up on her own and leaves. Your bedroom door clicks shut and Dirk reaches down for you, he pulls you to your feet gently.

“Come on, you need to sleep this off.” Dirk says, leading your back to your bed. He puts your phone on your bedside table.

“Karkat.” You say dumbly. You swear adrenaline makes you a moron sometimes.

“I already told him that you’d speak to him later. He’s fine; it was just a dream.” Dirk explains calmly, and you nod.

You climb into bed and shuffle up to the wall. You feel stupid and ridiculous.

“You don’t need to stay; this is stupid.” You mutter and rub at your eyes. You can still see the look on Karkat’s face as he got stabbed.

“It’s not stupid, and you’re not stupid. It’s fine; I’ll stay awake and talk to Jake and Hal. You can sleep.” Dirk says simply and sits on your bed, leaning his back against the wall. You peer around the room like the paranoid ass that you are and then settle down in bed. You know what Dirk’s doing, he’s guarding you against Bro. Against a man that you both know is dead.
“Was I screaming?” You ask as you pull the blanket up to your chin.

“Yeah, a lot. I had a hard time making you wake up to stop.” Dirk says grimly and gently pets your hair.

“’m sorry.” You mumble into your pillow.

“It’s ok.” Dirk says easily. You wonder if he gets bored of this, if he resents you. Fuck, Dirk never got to be a kid. When he was thirteen he was looking after eight year old you and getting between you and Bro. Even now that he’s free from Bro, he’s not free from you. You hate this, you hate this. You’re starting to panic again but Dirk is already petting your hair calmly and Hal starts to play some very quiet music that is soft beats and quiet piano clips, as it goes on you hear dreamlike vocals and movie and video game samples. He’s mixing it on the fly.

“They think I’m crazy.” You say into Dirk’s side.

“They’re worried about you. They want you to see a doctor is all.” Dirk says softly. He leaves your hair alone and sets his hand on your back between your shoulder blades.

“Do you think I should?” You ask and look up at him.

“I don’t know. Do you want to?” He asks, and you shrug.

“I want a new brain.” You grumble and shut your eyes. You like this music that Hal is making. Between the music and the warmth from Dirk’s body sat next to yours you find that you’re starting to relax again.

“Sorry little brother, you can get a tune up on this one though if you want it.” Dirk offers. You say nothing and burrow into his side, pressing your face to his side just above his hip.

You think about your dream, and you lay there and try to calm down enough to sleep again. You had wanted to kiss Karkat, fuck, you had enjoyed doing it. You weren’t making it up when you had thought that he was striking to look at and the temptation to touch your fingers to his is still overwhelmingly powerful.

You grit your teeth hard. Karkat doesn’t know this stuff about you; he doesn’t know how many scars you have from Bro, he doesn’t know how much Bro fucked you up. What if Karkat is your soulmate, but Bro’s last revenge was that he broke you so bad that the pieces of your soul don’t fit right against Karkat’s anymore? What if that’s what your dream meant?

Shit, the guy is probably better off without you as his soulmate. At least this way he’ll never know how terrible you are.

Chapter End Notes

Oh look, my own interests in music and literature are showing >.> (also that song of Hal’s is for sure a clickable link and I totally recommend doing that.)
You can argue that you’ve known Dave Strider since you were five and his trauma woke you up, but really you’ve only been in extended contact with him for a week and a half. A week and a half and you’re woken up again by the sword in your arm filling you with pain and terror. It’s not done this since you first met Dave in person, since Bro died.

You jerk up in bed, gasping and clutching at your arm. Dave is hurt, he’s hurt badly. Fear and adrenaline fill you entirely. If Bro is dead, then this must be… it must be Dirk. Dirk is hurting Dave.

You scramble out of bed and rush to your wardrobe, ripping your pyjamas off and throwing real clothes on. You need to get to him, oh God your arm hurts. You’re struggling into a sweater when the pain abruptly stops, and that is no more reassuring. You’re pulling on your shoes when your phone chimes.

TG: tell me youre ok
TG: karkkat

You stare at his shaking typing, this isn’t normal for him. Despite Dave’s usual aversion to punctuation and capitalisation, he doesn’t tend to misspell things. This is wrong. But why in the hell is he worried about you?

CG: I’M OK.
CG: ARE YOU?
CG: WHAT HAPPENED?!

You stare at your phone, fear mounting in you every second that he doesn’t reply.

CG: DAVE!
TG: This is Dirk, sorry for waking you. Dave is fine.

Your eyes go wide, and you rush to type back.
You stare slackjawed at your phone and rush down the stairs and out of your house. You run to Dave’s house, you know the way by now. It’s not far, and you’ve walked it with him more than once as he’s run past your house, all lean legs and bare arms with your soul emblazoned on one of them. You rush as fast as you can, which Dave would probably get a kick out of what with your dislike of running. If Dirk hurt him… you’ll… you don’t know what you’ll do but you’ll sure as shit throw Signless and Redglare at him and lock him away so tight that he’ll never see daylight again.

You rush down Dave’s road, dry mouthed and gasping for air. You can see a faint light coming from Dave’s room, but you can’t hear anything from the ground floor. Shit, you wish you could climb that wall on your own, but Dave had to help you up last time.

You rush around to the front door and hammer on it. You check your phone again, but Dave is still offline. If it is Dirk hurting Dave then should you fight him? Could you fight him? Damn, you really should have taken the sickle practice Signless offered you.

It is not Dirk who opens the door but instead a woman. She’s in an elegant silk bathrobe, and it takes a second to move beyond your brain reacting with ‘Roxy but older???’ to realise that this has got to be Dave’s mother.

“Is Dave there?” You ask hurriedly.

The woman narrows her eyes at you and tilts her head in the birdlike way that Dave sometimes does, as if she’s trying to figure you out.

“It’s three in the morning, who are you?” She asks you, and you can hear the clipped elocution of Rose’s voice in her tone.

“I’m Karkat Vantas, I’m Dave’s… friend. He messaged me and then stopped and I’m just really worried is he okay?” You ask, stumbling over the definition of what you are to Dave.

She looks you up and down, and you’re immediately filled with the suspicion that whatever it is she’s looking for in you, you are failing to meet.
“You’re that troll boy, the one Rose and Roxy think is Dave’s soulmate.” She concludes, and you wince, her tone very much suggests that this is either a view that she does not share or does not approve of.


“It’s the middle of the night, Dave is in bed as you well should be. Where are your…” Dave’s mother trails off, and her eyes go wide as she looks behind you and up. Her face and the door around her is suddenly bathed in red and blue from differing directions. Well, crap.

You turn slowly around to see The Psiionic descending from the sky in a dramatic crackle of blue and red light. His arms are crossed and his face set into a scowl.

“This,” He says slowly, “had better be good.”

“Psii… hi. It is, I promise!” You vow and glance desperately at Dave’s mom.

“Karkat, do you know what time in the night it is? Dave is probably asleep! I’m sorry Mrs… uh…” Psiionic falters, he still screws up human naming conventions and has just about grasped giving people titles for the appropriate gender, let alone working with last names.

“Ms Lalonde, I’m Dave’s mother.” She says stiffly and eyes you suspiciously.

“Right, sorry to disturb you. Come on Karkat.” Psii says, and you feel the pull of his psionics on you.

“No, wait! He sent me a message! He sounded hurt or scared, and I just want to know he’s okay!” You plead as Psii picks you up.

“Dave is fine.” His mother says, winning the award for least convincing line delivery since Mel
Gibson’s latest attempt at impersonating a normal human being.

“See? It’s fine. Sorry to disturb you.” Psii apologises again and flies you up and away from Dave’s house.

“No, Psii, please! Dave could be hurt! I don’t believe her!” You protest, but Psii isn’t letting you go. Not even when he lands on your lawn and walks into the house with you still trapped in his psionic powers.

“Got him.” Psii announces as he shuts the door behind him and drops you to your feet. In the lit living room Signless and The Disciple are pacing anxiously, and both of them stare at you when Psii drops you to the ground.

“Where have you BEEN?! Do you know how worried sick we’ve been?” Signless demands angrily with a furious thrumming noise coming from his thorax, he’s really mad.

“I’m sorry, it was an emergency!” You insist.

“Just what kind of emergency was it?” The Disciple asks, folding her arms and angling her hip in the picture of judgement.

“I found him outside that boy’s house trying to get his guardian to let him in to see him.” Psii says flatly.

“His name is Dave, and he’s in trouble, I know it!” You shout. You’d consider making a break for the door, but you know that you’ll never make it.

“Dave? You were at Dave’s house at three in the morning? You snuck out of bed to go see him? What is wrong with you?” The Disciple asks, waving her hands in the air.

“What do you mean he’s in trouble?” Signless asks, looking at you warily.

“I woke up because my soul mark was killing me, it was the sword part. The one that put me in the hospital that one time, the one that regularly hurt when Dave, my soulmate, was being abused by his
father. You know those things are true. I don’t know how I can tell it but I can, and it’s happening again!” You insist, pulling back your sleeve to show him.

“He messaged me, and then he cut off and then Dirk of all people told me that he was fine and signed him offline and I’ve heard nothing since. I had to go there to see that he was okay!” You tell him, holding up your phone as proof.

Signless takes the phone and looks at it with a frown. You hear him mutter something that sounds like ‘blood’, but that can’t be right.

“You should have come to me. We could have done something about this. You shouldn’t have snuck out alone, that was dangerous and selfish. Did you see anyone at his house?” He asks and hands you your phone back.

“Just his mother but she wouldn’t tell me anything, and then Psii dragged me away before I could find anything else out.” You say miserably.

“Well, there is nothing more that you can do tonight. See him tomorrow at school, if you see evidence of injury then speak to me and I shall see what I can do. From what I’ve heard from you and the other children it seems that Dirk lied about the extent of his family, that alone is suspicious. If you have any more evidence then come to me first, you understand?” Signless says firmly.

“In the meantime, you need to go to bed young man, and you are definitely grounded. We’ll work out some kind of appropriate punishment for you later.” The Disciple says and points up the stairs.

With worry still churning in your guts, you trudge up the stairs to your room, only to find Kankri at his door watching you go past.

“I am glad to see that you are back safely, Karkat.” Kankri says with a snooty look.

You don’t punch him but oh boy you really want to.

“I guess that you’re the one who told them and I left the house then.” You say.
“I was merely concerned for your wellbeing. If you wanted to leave at such a time of night, you should have spoken to them anyway.” He lectures you.

“You know, there’s that Earth saying about snitches get stitches Kankri.” You hiss in his face and stomp off to bed.

You don’t sleep, you’re too worried about Dave. You end up checking your phone every fifteen minutes at least, and Dave never comes back online.

When it comes time for school, you wait in the car park until Roxy’s car pulls up and she and Rose get out, but there’s no Dave there.

“Where is Dave?!?” You demand, running up to them both and startling them.

“He’s at home.” Roxy answers.

“Sick.” Rose adds.

You look from one of them to the other, Rose is keeping a perfect poker face, but Roxy looks genuinely worried. What does she know?

“Sick with what?” You ask.

“That is between him and his doctor, if he has not already elected to share that information with you, then that is his call.” Rose says primly.

“It’ll be fine, Karkat. I’m sure he’ll be back soon.” Roxy says gently and pats your head between your horns.

The day passes in a blur, and it’s a wonder that you don’t get your phone confiscated because you’re forever checking it. Dave doesn’t come online once. The Disciple picks you up and doesn’t drop you at Dave’s house, nor does she let you leave when you get home. The Psiionic tells you that he can’t find any hospital admissions matching Dave’s description which is both reassuring and not at the same time.
You march across the road and let yourself into Kanaya’s house and go into her room the moment that you’re done talking with Psii. You throw herself on her large pile of fabric scraps in the corner and stare at her as she pauses in putting her lipstick on. She caps the tube of lipstick and joins you in the small fabric pile.

“What if he’s dead!?” You demand.

“I think his sisters would have mentioned that and also your mark would have gone black, would it not?” Kanaya points out.

“What if he’s really hurt?” You say instead.

“Why would Rose and Roxy not say if that was the case?” Kanaya asks. She’s running your thoughts into the ground, trying to calm you enough to see clearly. You hate it, but that is why you came here. Her long fingers slide into your hair slowly.

“What if it’s Dirk? What if they’re afraid of him too?” You suggest, and she pets your scalp gently.

“That seems unlikely but okay, what can you do about it? You already brought this information to your guardians, and you aren’t allowed to go and get further proof.” Kanaya says, and you scowl.

“But he’s hurt.” You whine and look at her. Kanaya frowns and pets your hair a little more.

“Perhaps. You still don’t know how these feelings that you get work. I’m not saying that I think you are making it up, but I think there are a lot of uncertainties in this and if Dave is actually in danger there is every possibility that running in unprepared will cause more problems.” Kanaya says regretfully, and you lean into her side.

“Why am I so useless?” You whine pathetically, and Kanaya gently paps your cheek.

“You’re doing all that you can, don’t be so hard on yourself.” She says and fusses with your hair.
Your fingers slip below the collar of your sweater and find the silver chain there and the silver pendant on it. The sign of the sufferer, the other name that people call your father. The man who some say died to save those who needed saving, who survived and found somewhere new. Your ancestor helps people, you can’t even help your soulmate when he lives within walking distance of your house.

“It’s not enough.” You say miserably, fiddling with the charm.

“Your soulmate wouldn’t demand more of you than was possible and he wouldn’t want you to feel this way.” Kanaya says gently and leans her head against yours.

“What if he never loves me back because the wrong guy fell off the roof and Dirk beats him to death?” You whine.

“Shoosh.” Kanaya says and paps you again.

“But-” You try even though you can feel yourself calming down against your will.

“Shoosh.” Kanaya repeats firmly.

“Here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to go home and read, maybe bathe to relax, then sleep. Tomorrow you’ll go to school. If Dave isn’t there, we will ask why and if that does not get a satisfactory answer we will confront Signless and he’ll have to do something.” Kanaya says.

“I know something’s wrong.” You say softly and curl against her.

That is something Kanaya has nothing to say about.

The next day Dave is not at school either and still does not come online at all. You figure that Signless is taking pity on you because you’re on the verge of tears when you get home that Friday, convinced that at any moment your soul mark is going to turn black because Dave is dead. So, he and The Psionic muster up their best social faces and walk you over there under the pretense of some social interaction. You’re not really paying attention to anything but the litany of Dave’s name in your head.
Signless knocks on Dave’s front door and you cling to his side anxiously. Dave’s mother opens the door again, this time looking more presentable in some kind of white lab coat… dress… thing.

“Hello?” She says, looking at all three of you.

“Hello again.” Psii says awkwardly.

“Oh, yes, you’re the gentleman who was here the other night to pick up your… boy.” Dave’s mom says, looking down at you and narrowing her pink eyes somewhat suspiciously.

“Hi, I’m sorry.” You apologise insincerely because you are not sorry at all but she won’t know that!

“It’s come to my attention that several members of my family have formed soulmate bonds with several of yours, Psiionic’s descendant Sollux with your daughter Roxy and my mother’s descendant Kanaya with your daughter Rose. I also understand that Karkat and Dave are becoming close friends at school. Now, we only live a little way down the road, and it seems like the neighbourly thing to do for me to offer to throw a party so that we can all get to know each other a little better.” Signless says with his warm and welcoming smile which you have privately dubbed preacher smile #4.

Dave’s mom seems to be falling for it hook, line and sinker though. She’s smiling and touching one hand over her heart as if she’s just so very touched by the idea.

“You know, that would be lovely. We’ve not lived in the neighbourhood long, and I’ve said that we should meet our neighbours, especially if they have such a connection with my children. Please, come in, I’ll fetch the calendar, and I’ll see if we can’t make something work!” She smiles and leads the way inside.

You follow your dads inside and peer desperately around the room. Roxy is sitting on the sofa playing a video game with rapt concentration, it’s the kind of expression that you’re used to seeing on Sollux and Mituna and understanding that they won’t be talking to you anytime soon. But there’s no Dave around. You gaze longingly at the stairs leading up to Dave’s floor, and Psii raises an eyebrow at you. Signless meanwhile is leant over the breakfast nook with Dave’s mom going over dates and ideas.

“Roxanne, I don’t know what you did to that freezer, but it’s working now so just don’t~” Dirk’s voice cuts out as he rounds the corner and comes eye to eye with Signless.
“Dirk, we meet again. How fortuitous.” Signless smiles. This is not preacher smile #4, this is the kind of look that a shark might give a seal. A shark too would regard that interaction as fortuitous, the seal would probably be less excited.


“Oh, please don’t mind me. I was just arranging a lovely get together with Dave’s mother who I have only just met. Karkat’s here with me because he was very worried about Dave not attending school these last few days.” Signless says, still smiling. You see Dirk swallow thickly.

“Dave’s not well right now.” Dave’s mother says with a frown. You back up a little closer to the stairs.

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that. What’s the matter with him?” your ancestor asks calmly, as if handing Dirk the rope to hang himself with.

“It’s nothing, he’s just… he’s been to the doctor. He’s fine.” Dirk says, only making it sound more suspicious.

With everyone’s focus on Dirk, you slip up the stairs as quickly and quietly as you can. You make it to Dave’s bedroom door before you hear Dirk’s alarmed voice from downstairs. You shove Dave’s door open and… there’s no Dave in there. What the hell? Where is he?

You can hear footsteps on the staircase, so you madly sprint away from Dave’s room, there has to be somewhere else that he is. You are starting to think that this may not have been your best plan, past you is an idiot for thinking that it was a good idea but you’re stuck on this course now so you may as well sail it.

You rush down the hall and spy a door that’s ajar and slam your whole body into it.

You see a dimly lit bedroom with a startled Rose sitting on her bed. With his head in her lap and his sunglasses off is Dave, he appears to be asleep, despite the fact that Rose has one of his hands in hers. You realise that she is painting his nails and it occurs to you that she must be the source of the nail polish that Dave is so often wearing and picking off at school. He makes a quiet noise, and you watch in shocked awe as you see him open his eyes and realise that you were right in your guess, his eyes are a perfect human blood red. Your heart hammers in your chest for reasons that have nothing
to do with all of the running you just did.

“Karkat?” He asks sleepily, his voice thick and heavy as he blinks his sleep away.

“Are you okay?” You ask desperately, shoving the door shut behind you and walking towards him.

“I’m… yeah.” Dave yawns and sits up. He looks up at you still seeming dazed, and you start to realise that there is something strange about him. Dave is usually so guarded and you have to normally break past his defenses with a joke or doing something that he sees fit to laugh at, even if he’s not trying to project some other image of himself there’s always a sense that Dave is perpetually observing what he’s doing and how he’s acting. But now Dave looks relaxed, almost dreamlike and kind of checked out. You’re not totally sure that this is a good thing.

“Are you okay? Everyone was saying that you were sick.” You ask, and Rose caps the nail polish that she had open.

“Sick? Oh, I guess so.” Dave says with a hum. His eyes seem really dark, it’s just a thin ring of red around the black. Is that normal for him?

“You didn’t message me back, I was worried.” You say with a frown.

“I didn’t?” Dave asks, tipping his head to the side as he thinks.

“No, you didn’t!” You insist.

“I don’t remember messaging you. Or trolling you, you have that program right so…” Dave trails off, seeming unfocused. Something is really wrong.

“Did you hit your head or something?!” You demand and Rose sighs.

“Dave is having a bad reaction to some medication which is quite strong anyway. Aside from that, he is fine. You’ll have to excuse his somewhat absent behaviour.” Rose says with a shake of her head, and you watch Dave smile unevenly at her, almost like he forgot how to do it.
“Did you learn to climb?” Dave asks you curiously, and it takes a moment for you to connect Dave’s words to anything else that makes sense.

“No, I didn’t climb through your window. We knocked on the door.” You answer.

“Aw.” says Dave, sounding genuinely put out.

“Wait, who is ‘we’?” Rose questions.

“My-” You freeze as Rose’s bedroom door bangs open to show Dirk and Signless filling it, both of them glaring at you.

“Ancestor.” You finish weakly.

“Hi Mr Signless, hey Dirk.” Dave says pleasantly.

Rose slides off of the bed and glides past you.

“You owe me, Karkat.” She whispers and your blood freezes. She flutters her eyes slightly and holds her hand out to Signless.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir. My name is Rose, I’m Dave’s twin although we only met each other again relatively recently. Isn’t that right, uncle Dirk?” Rose says with a pleasant smile and Dirk nods.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to meet you too, Rose. I understand that you’re my Kanaya’s soulmate. She speaks very highly of you.” Signless says and shakes her hand.

“I am indeed, and I’m glad to hear that she thinks so highly of me. She’s a very special girl, I’m still a little overwhelmed if I’m being honest.” Rose says, and her cheeks go slightly pink.

Dave laughs, not even taking the time to hide it at all and Rose glares at him.
“Ha, you love her.” Dave teases, grinning at her sleepily and Rose’s skin darkens again.

“You’ll have to excuse my brother, he’s having a bad reaction to some medication. You can see why he’s not been going to school.” Rose sighs.

“He’s been a goddamn nightmare.” Dirk mutters and Dave laughs again. Okay, yes, you can see why they kept him home. But that still doesn’t explain about the pain you got from your mark or why Dave contacted you asking you if you were okay. There’s more going on here.

“Karkat said that he was worried because of Dave not being at school, I think that’s sweet.” Rose says with a sly smile at you that becomes far more genuine looking when she looks back at Dirk and Signless.

“You were worried about me?” Dave asks suddenly, looking right at you with his disarmingly red eyes. They’re so… pretty.

“We were literally just talking about that.” You point out.

“You still should not have just run up here Karkat.” Signless scolds you, and you wince.

“It’s cool.” Dave says suddenly, kneeling up on the bed and leaning forward to sling an arm over your shoulder. You freeze, Dave’s never touched you this much and certainly not so casually. Is he essentially drunk? Is this a lowering of inhibitions or something else?

“I like hanging out with Karkat. Hey, we should watch that movie you lent me.” Dave suggests brightly, he never emotes this much vocally either. Looking at him with that smile and his uncovered eyes is like staring at the sun.

“The one with the kid in the band and the girl and those swords?” Dirk asks with a frown.

“That’s probably it, unless there’s a similar movie.” You nod.
“That sounds so cool.” Dave gasps.

“It was okay, we already watched it, Dave. Or we watched part of it at least, you fell asleep. Don’t you remember? Fuck, I’m going to call that doctor tomorrow if you’re still like this then.” Dirk groans.

“I think I’m starting to see what you mean. Karkat come on, we should let Dave rest. You can see him at school next week.” Signless says and holds his hand out to beckon you to him. Dave’s arm tightens around your chest.

“Wait, can’t he watch that movie with me? He’s already here.” Dave whines, and it makes the hair on the back of your neck stand up on end.

“If it makes you feel better Dirk, I’d he happy to chaperone them. Besides, it gives me someone else’s nails to paint.” Rose smiles unnervingly.

“It’s not really up to me.” Dirk says and looks at Signless. You look desperately at your ancestor, and the man sighs and shakes his head despairingly.

“Be home for dinner. You’re still grounded, remember. And don’t forget that tomorrow you’re helping out at the community centre all day, on Sunday we may or may not be having an impromptu party with Dave’s whole family and the Maryams. I should speak to Ms Lalonde about that again, we got somewhat interrupted when you ran off up here.” Signless says, and you beam in delight.

“It’s Doctor Lalonde, actually. She’s got a PhD in astrophysics and theoretical physics. She just thinks that going by Doctor when she has two doctorates is gauche.” Rose corrects him.

“I see.” Signless says.

“How’re you feeling Dave?” Dirk asks, and you study the worry on his face, trying to ascertain whether it’s fake or real.

“I’m good.” Dave answers, letting you go and leaning back to look at Dirk more directly. Pathetically you miss the contact instantly.
“Have you been sleeping again?” Dirk asks.

“I’ve been trying to keep him awake, but he’s drifted off a few times.” Rose answers and Dirk’s mouth goes thin with worry.

“Maybe I should call her again now…” Dirk mutters and catches Dave by the cheek and looks at his eyes.

“I haven’t got a fever.” Dave snorts.

“Not what I was checking for. Watch your movie, Rose keep an eye on him.” Dirk sighs and leaves the room, Signless gives you one last look and then leaves as well. You get to stay with Dave.

“Movie!” Dave declares and leaps off of the bed and makes his way to the wall of Rose’s room where a large flatscreen TV is hanging.

“Hal, play the movie, I know you ripped it.” Dave says to the TV as he turns it on.

“I know Dave doesn’t find an AI floating invisibly everywhere unnerving but you do, right?” You whisper to Rose.

“I heard that.” The TV says in Hal’s artificial voice.

“It’s a little unsettling knowing that whatever Dave and Dirk see when they’re wearing their shades Hal can see and hear. Not to mention every webcam and microphone that most normal people have in their rooms to speak to friends is accessible to Hal. But… after time you acclimatise to him, and he is a real person with a real mind, I checked.” Rose informs you and leans back on her bed.

“You checked?” You ask in confusion.

“We’re not doing that again. Sit down, Dave, or else I’m going to start playing this, and it’ll burn your eyes out. Shoo.” Hal says, and Dave returns and sits on the bed, leaving a conspicuous gap between himself and Rose. He looks at you and smiles, and you’re drawn to him like a magnet.
“So, what medication are you even reacting to? You had to have been sick before to need it in the first place, and you didn’t seem sick when I saw you.” You point out as you sit on the bed between the twins.

“I can’t pronounce it.” Dave shrugs and looks at his nails. Rose has painted tiny squid things on them, it’s alarmingly cute.

“Okay, but what was it for?” You try again, and Dave looks genuinely uneasy.

“Karkat, what colour would you like me to paint your nails? Or claws I suppose. Not painting them isn’t an option.” Rose says sternly.

“Uh. Clear?” You say hopefully, looking at her tray of nail varnish on her bedside table. Rose narrows her eyes at you. Damn, you’re not getting out of it that easily.

“Black?” You suggest, and Rose rummages through the box thoughtfully.

“Hm, I’m nearly out of Dave’s favourite black, I should buy more. But this will do.” Rose says and takes a few different bottles and gets to work, putting something clear on your claws first.

“Why am I letting you do this? Isn’t this a pale you and Dave thing? Why am I included in this?” You ask weakly as Rose turns your thumb to paint the claw.

“She does it so you can’t get away when she’s asking you stuff. That’s what she does with me.” Dave yawns and his shoulder slides against yours.

“Stay awake Dave, I mean it.” Rose says threateningly.

Dave is the only one who doesn’t jump when the movie starts suddenly, and you count yourself lucky that Rose was just reaching for your other hand and not applying polish when that happened.

The opening movie music starts, a pixelated logo for the movie studio plays across the screen, and
you see Dave watching alertly.

“You didn’t tell me what the medicine was for.” You point out, and Rose says nothing.

“I’ve got to sample some of the sounds from this movie, I remember some of the music. It’s a little fuzzy but…” Dave trails off with a one-shouldered shrug.

“That would be interesting.” Rose says as she paints your other hand and then caps the polish. Okay, so you’re not getting an answer to what the drugs were for, that’s not suspicious or anything.

“Scott Pilgrim is dating a highschooler.” The TV proclaims, and you settle back a little, you can at least watch the movie.

“You’re like Kim, Rose.” Dave snickers as Kim Pines, the acerbic, sarcastic drummer of Scott Pilgrim’s band continues in her mission of cutting Scott Pilgrim down to size. You can kind of see Dave’s point, you wonder how much of this film he remembers.

“Well, she is very pretty and seems to be smart, so I’ll take that as a compliment.” Rose says and fans at your claws with one of her hands.

Scott Pilgrim is an excellent film by one of your favourite directors. It’s a movie based on a graphic novel series, and the movie shows that with weird video game mechanics that seem so normal in games overlaid onto regular life. Scott Pilgrim fights people, gains extra lives and levels up, and this is apparently totally normal. Scott himself is a bassist in a band in his early twenties, and his whole life is going nowhere. He had previously had a girlfriend in another band, but she met her soulmate and completely broke his heart when she left Scott for him, rendering him a self-centred pathetic mess. Scott isn’t super enthused about soulmates at the beginning of the movie for that reason, and he doesn’t seem keen to explore it further.

“Have you even kissed her?” Stephen Stills asks Scott, regarding his new highschool aged girlfriend.

“We almost held hands once but then she got embarrassed.” Scott replies bashfully. Normally you’d point this out to the people watching the movie with you, about how Scott’s lack of insistence in pushing that forward showed how he wasn’t serious about his girlfriend. But given that you’re sitting right next to the boy who you’re sure is your soulmate, and you’ve agreed not to test that fact, well, you’re hardly going to highlight that plot point.
When Scott’s terrible roommate Wallace shows up you and Rose debate whether or not it would be fair to argue that his relationship with Scott can be classified as a morallegiance or not if one accepts that not being a great moral doesn’t exclude someone from being in that relationship. Dave predictably offers nothing to this conversation, and in fact slumps against your side a little as Rose paints your claws black. After a little while, you look down at Dave who is resting his head on your shoulder, his white eyelashes fanned out on pale skin.

“Dave?” You ask hesitantly, and Rose huffs in irritation and reaches over you to slap Dave on the knee, jerking him awake again. He straightens up and continues watching the movie.

For a while, the movie follows Scott and his ill-chosen younger girlfriend and though the cinema work is beautiful, making Dave gasp about ‘those transition things you were saying about!’ it’s really only when Ramona comes into the picture that you feel the film starts to get interesting.

“I think I remember her.” Dave says uncertainly as Ramona shows up on screen for the first time with her brightly coloured hair. You’re pleased that Dave at least isn’t asleep and that Rose is done painting you now.

Ramona Flowers is literally Scott Pilgrim’s dream girl, and the ambiguity of whether she is his soulmate or not his heightened by the gloves and full-length sleeves that she always wears, one of your favourite things about this movie is that they never show you if she is indeed Scott’s soulmate or not. It’s a ballsy decision romance-wise, and she’s a flawed character, more so in the books than the movie, and you really like her. You tell the others as much.

You watch as Scott becomes obsessed with her without really talking to her and how he stalks her all through a party and how his first attempt to talk to her blows up in his face entirely. Dave is sat right next to you, his knee and shoulder touching your own but you’re keenly aware that it wasn’t always this way. Just as Scott Pilgrim became obsessed with the aloof, mysterious and untouchable Ramona Flowers you too stalked Dave and blew up your first interaction with him. God, this was a poor movie choice on your part.

“Scott is a creep.” Rose says disapprovingly.

“Yeah ‘n a cheat.” Dave agrees with a yawn. Oh god, the movie cannot get to the first fight scene soon enough.

It turns out that Ramona Flowers has seven evil exes that Scott Pilgrim must defeat in combat to be able to date Ramona. You are very glad that Dave does not have any evil exes that you need to fight. You’re not sure that given his history he would appreciate that kind of violence around him anyway.
Dave certainly does appreciate the fights in the movie though and when Scott Pilgrim punches Ramona’s first evil ex so hard that he explodes into small change Dave actually laughs in delight.

“How cool would that be, if you beat someone in a fight and they popped out a reward like that?” Dave says excitedly.

“Well he did just technically murder a man in cold blood in public and no one cares, but I admit it was stylish.” Rose agrees with approval.

The movie progresses along with Dave staying awake just fine now that he knows there are cool video game fights in it for him and Rose seems to genuinely enjoy commenting on the movie with you. All is going well until the introduction of Roxie Richter, Ramona’s fourth evil ex. She’s a badass ninja girl who fights with swords, more so in the books than the movies. She appears in a puff of smoke and speeds past Scott to attack him but she’s so fast she can’t even be seen. You just hear the sound of her jeers and the displacement of air as Scott stands frozen and unable to fight her.

Suddenly the sword inked into your forearm flares up with fear and pain, it’s a small amount, but it’s there. You look over at Dave as Roxy wooshes by Scott again on screen. His hands are tight on his knees, and his eyes are wide. The rest of his face is a blank neutral, you can see fear in his eyes but if he had his glasses on you’d be none the wiser. Roxy speeds by Scott again with a snarl, and you feel him flinch against you.

He’s scared. This is scaring him. Your arm is hurting because Dave is afraid. This is… fuck, this is one of those triggers that Kankri never shuts up about. Something of this attack must be reminding him of Bro in a way that the others just didn’t. It flared up the other day bad enough to wake you up, and Dave’s not been himself since and yet physically he’s fine. Dirk didn’t hurt him, and this isn’t a physical injury, it’s a psychological one. You’d bet a month of chores that these drugs no one will tell you about and this mystery doctor are all related to this too.

You need to distract Dave from the movie, from whatever it is that he’s seeing or hearing that’s getting to him.

“Dave,” you say nudging him, “in the comics this ex was born on the moon.”

“I- what?” Dave responds, looking at you in confusion.
“Her name is Roxie Richter, she’s half-ninja, and she was born on the moon. They don’t really show that in the movie though.” You explain, barfing up any trivia that you can think of.

“Half-ninja?” Dave laughs in disbelief, and there, the pain on your arm is fading.

“Uh huh. Oh, and that bit before about how Ramona said that Todd punched a hole in the moon for her, well, in every scene in this movie where you can see the moon there’s another big hole. Also in the comics, they go on about how after he did that there were pages of environmental disaster.” You say loudly, covering up the sound of Roxy doing her ninja thing that so upsets Dave.

“A hole in the moon would cause a lot of tidal activity I think.” Rose chips in, perhaps she’s got what you’re doing.

Between you and Rose, you manage to distract Dave through all of Roxy’s introduction scene and Rose kicks Dave out to get you drinks when her actual fight comes up. You don’t ask her what it is that’s getting to Dave, a good moirail wouldn’t say but you know there’s something, and she knows that you know.

Your skill at derailing Dave’s reactions aside you still get caught up in the movie. It is one of your favourites but you haven’t watched it since getting to meet Dave, and the similarities between him and Ramona are mounting. You know that you’re no Scott Pilgrim, you don’t stalk Dave, and sure you broke into his room and then Rose’s room to find him today but only because you thought he might be desperately hurt. You respect Dave’s boundaries, and you try your best not to be an asshole to him. But like Ramona there’s a lot to Dave you don’t know about, there’s a past that you know the minimalist headlines of but no detail. You know Bro was abusive and homophobic, but that’s it, you know that he was poor before but you don’t know how it affected him, you know that Dirk basically raised him, but you don’t get how their relationship works either.

Dave is a mystery, wrapped in an enigma and Ben Stiller sunglasses.

On screen, Scott Pilgrim is rushing to give his love confession to Ramona who is on the verge of leaving.

“I know you play mysterious and aloof to avoid getting hurt and I know you have reasons for not wanting to talk about your past, I want you to know I don’t care about any of that stuff. Because I’m in lesbians with you.” Scott says, and you almost nod along with his words. Of course, Scott meant that he was in love with her and not in lesbians with her, but he is a dumbass and said the wrong ‘L word’.
You think that this might hold true for you as well. Dave is a prickly motherfucker who clearly has issues and you know he’s your soulmate deep down and though you want so bad to confirm that as soon as you physically can you think that you’d rather Dave was happy. Maybe you get to unwrap his mysteries bit by bit, and maybe there will be stuff that you’ll never get to the bottom of but your whole purpose is to be his and be whatever he needs you to be. What more do you need to know?

“Man, no one knows how to use swords in this movie.” Dave complains, and you realise that you’d zoned out until the final fight which you still maintain is very enjoyable. When the movie ends Hal turns the TV off by himself, and you don’t care what Dave or Rose think, that is creepy.

“Did you like it?” You ask and look at Dave who seems more awake now than when you started the movie.

“Yeah, it was cool. I can see why you like it.” Dave nods.

“You should see his other movies too, Shaun of the Dead is great. Even if we’re technically too young to watch it. I think we were technically too young to watch this too.” You say. Your ancestors usually don’t mind as long as the movie isn’t too outrageously violent, you’re still not allowed Tarantino for example which is frustrating as he’s supposed to be great.

“Dirk doesn’t care about that shit, we’re good.” Dave explains.

“And mother doesn’t notice.” Rose says flatly.

“That too.” Dave agrees, his tone free of the disdain that Rose has. Interesting.

“Well, maybe I’ll lend it to you sometimes. But… I’d better go, my parents will be mad if I’m late home. I’m already grounded.” You sigh and climb off of the bed.

“It was lovely seeing you Karkat.” Rose says with a smile and Dave gets up off of the bed and slides his glasses back on. Goodbye red eyes, you miss them already.

“I’ll get your disk, I think it’s in my computer. Maybe. I don’t remember where I was when I watched the beginning with Dirk.” Dave says uncertainly.
“It is in your computer, Dave.” Hal says from everywhere, making you jolt in alarm.

“Thanks Hal.” Dave replies casually and walks out of Rose’s room.

You follow him into his room, and you watch as he crouches down and retrieves the disk and puts it back in its case for you. You glance around his room to take in all its array of weird and wonderful items, your eyes linger on a collection of drug boxes, and half pulled out sheets of medication that absolutely weren’t there before. You avert your eyes, it’s none of your business. If Dave wants to tell you he will, and it’s not like it’s a big deal or anything, a good third of your family relies on medication and there’s nothing wrong with that.

“Here. Do you need a ride back or anything? I could ask Dirk.” Dave offers as he hands the movie over and you store it in your sylladex.

“Oh, no I don’t-” You hesitate, you don’t really want to be in a car alone with him as you’re pretty sure he doesn’t like you. Also, you know that he murdered a man, so there’s that.

“I can walk. Not all of us go running you know, I’ve got to get some exercise.” You say, and Dave smirks at you, yeah, he seems more normal now.

“Shit man, I didn’t mean to deprive you there. By all means, have at the walk.” Dave says.

“Oh, I just remembered. There’s a game. A Scott Pilgrim game, it’s really nice and retro, and it’s got a cool 8bit soundtrack. If you wanted the noises from the movie, the game ones would probably be even better. I have the game if you want to… play it anytime. At my house. Not this weekend of course, I’m still very grounded but whenever after that if you’re on a run and want a break from running to play video games which are clearly better than running in every way.” You offer, rambling in your nerves. Why does it feel like you’re asking him on a date? Why do you feel like this almost could have been a date? Your eyes drop to his lips for a split second, why did you have to think that? Now you want to kiss him. Admittedly you want to kiss him most of the time, but now you’re genuinely tempted. It’s a terrible idea but when has that ever dissuaded your brain?

“That sounds cool, I might do that.” Dave nods, and you relax a little.

“Great. Well, I’d better go.” You say, forcing yourself to back up. Do not try to kiss Dave goodbye, do not pass go, do not ruin your friendship.
“Sure you don’t wanna climb out my window?” Dave teases you, and you scowl. You can focus on that instead of the temptation to ruin everything.

“I think I’ll take the door like a normal person and not risk breaking my neck.” You shoot back, and Dave grins at you, it seems his reactions are still a little more open than usual because you weren’t that funny.

“You wouldn’t know normal if it was right in front of your face, Vantas.” Dave says and pokes you in the shoulder.

“Certainly nothing normal in this room.” You argue.

“Including you?” Dave asks and you wince, okay, you shot yourself in the foot there.

“Okay, I’m leaving before you drag my IQ down. See you in science, Strider. Oh, and answer your goddamn messages already. I can’t be the only person freaking out about you vanishing.” You scold him and leave his room.

“Yeah, you might have a point there. But anyway, see you Monday.” Dave says, leaning on his doorframe and watching you go.

You leave Dave’s house and plug your earphones into your ears and dig up the Scott Pilgrim game soundtrack to listen to on your walk home. So you’re grounded all weekend, but you got to watch a movie with your red eyed soulmate, and of course his eyes are red, he’s YOUR soulmate after all. You also look at your claws and see that in the daylight this black has a metallic red kind of shine to it right where the light hits it, it looks pretty damn cool actually. So yes, you’re grounded, but it was-

Your phone pings with a message and you fish the thing out of your pocket.

TG: thanks again for the movie
TG: see you in science

Oh yeah, it was worth it.
So I didn't mean for this chapter to be this weirdly short and weirdly Scott Pilgrim focused but no matter how much I tried to re-write it, it kept happening. So... boy I sure hope you like Scott Pilgrim. I do recommend watching it though, if that wasn't already clear. I'm also partway through doing another Dirk chapter that sits between the last chapter and this one, so look out for that I guess. It'll be another standalone like the last Dirk chapter I did.
Your doctor smiles at you pleasantly, and you lean back in your seat unhappily. You’re only here because you feel guilty about worrying Dirk and the medications this lady gave you after your big nightmare meltdown actually helped.

“So, Dave. I saw you on Thursday last week, and it’s Tuesday now. How about you catch me up on what’s been going on in your life since I saw you last? Just to ease us into this whole thing.” She says with a smile.

You shrug.

She stays silent, looking at you expectantly.

“Well, those drugs you gave me sucked at first. I lost so much time sleeping and then being drugged off my ass when I was awake. I watched a whole movie with Dirk and remembered almost nothing.” You say unhappily.

“Yes, he did call me and say that it was a rough start there. All of the medications that you’re on now have drowsiness as a side effect, and if you’re especially vulnerable to that you can get hit a bit hard. But we’ve taken down the dose of the sleeping medication and next week you’ll be off that entirely unless you have nightmares and need to sleep. Are you still feeling tired?” She asks you with some concern.

“I feel like I haven’t slept for a week until noon rolls around but then I’m okay, and it wasn’t as bad today as it was yesterday.” You admit.

“Well that’s good, if it persists do let me know.” She tells you and you nod.

Silence rings out between you again.

“Did anything else happen?” She prompts, and you sigh.

“I terrified a few of my friends.” You confess unhappily.

“How so?” The doctor asks, and you slide down in your chair a little. When Dirk dragged you here, you had to tell her about your nightmare with Karkat and Bro and you sort of lost your shit a little.
“When I had that… nightmare, which we’re not talking about again, I messaged Karkat right after to see if he was okay.” You say, and she glances down at her notes, flips back a page or two and hums thoughtfully.

“Why did you do that?” She asks you carefully.

“I needed to see that he was okay.” You answer her.

“Did you think that Bro was alive again? Did you think that he might hurt Karkat, perhaps for what you did in your dream?” She asks.

“Yeah. I mean, I know that he’s dead. I’m not crazy but… it just felt like…” You trail off, unsure as to how to explain yourself.

“Well, from what you’ve told me about Bro’s behaviour it seems like he was almost deliberately trying to condition hypervigilance into you. So though you know that he is dead and couldn’t possibly harm Karkat, it is a perfectly sensible and understandable feeling to have. There’s nothing wrong with your choice to reach out to seek reassurance that he was fine, except perhaps waking him up in the night.” She says, and you relax slightly, you’d expected her to tell you that you were being stupid because Bro was dead. All shit that you’ve been telling yourself but apparently that’s not what she thinks.

“Well, I worried him because when he messaged me back I was so relieved that I pretty much went and barfed right away.” You groan.

“Ah, yes, adrenaline is a tricky beast like that.” your doctor nods.

“After that, I was too freaked out and tired to think about it and Dirk just wanted me to sleep. Then we saw you the next day, and then I lost ages of time from medication. I vanished on all my friends and on Karkat after waking him up in the middle of the night. Rose and Roxy didn’t want to tell anyone anything because even I don’t know what I want to tell people about this and I sure as shit wasn’t in my right mind then so they just stonewalled everyone.” You explain.

“Ah, I can see how that would be worrying.” She agrees.

“Karkat broke into my room to try to find me, I think he thought I was dying or something. I had to grovel and lie to Jade and John about it to get back in their good books.” you complain.

“Well,” the doctor says, folding her hands on her knee, “I think it’s nice that they were concerned for you. It shows they care.”

You shrug, you know they all care about you. You don’t have self-esteem problems, you know you’re the coolest motherfucker around.

“Okay, what else happened since I saw you last?” She asks, moving on from that topic.

“We had a party at the house.” You say.

“Oh? How come?” the doctor asks.

“Karkat’s dad and my mom wanted to do it because our family are so all up in each other’s grill that I guess they thought it’d be nice to get to know each other better.” You explain.

“Do you not agree with that?” the doctor asks curiously.
“It’s not that, it’s just my mom has this whole thing with keeping up appearances, and she gets really stressed, and she and Dirk can get a bit…” you trail off, the last thing that you want to do is to get Dirk in trouble in his therapy session.

“It’s okay, you can tell me. Why don’t you run me through how it all went?” She suggests, and you sigh. You close your eyes for a second to try to bring back where you were at the time. You had been having lunch with Rose.

“It was Saturday, and I was having lunch with Rose and Dirk and Roxy were deciding what to do with me.” You explain.

“What to do with you?” the doctor asks.

“You know, scheduling and shit.” You explain as you begin to recall the whole experience.

“I’ve no problem with dropping Dave at therapy on the Tuesday and Thursday, that way you don’t have to miss class, and you can pick him up on your way home.” Roxy says.

“Yeah, but it’s not exactly on the way home for you Rox.” Dirk argues, and you chew your sandwich sleepily.

“He’s my brother too, Dirk. You don’t have to do everything yourself now, we’re family remember?” Roxy points out.

“Okay, well we can try it for a while but if it’s not feasible then we’ll change.” Dirk concedes.

“When’s your therapy?” You ask. Dirk agreed to go along to this headshrinking doctor so that you’d go, only it turned out that there’s apparently things wrong with him too and now he has to have therapy also. Some kind of personality disorder which you’re pretty sure is bullshit because Dirk is on top of everything and is amazing at everything too.

Your doctor holds her hand up to pause you.

“You think I’m wrong on Dirk’s diagnosis?” she asks

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with Dirk, I think he’s good the way that he is.” you say definitely. Dirk is perfect, and anyone who thinks otherwise can answer to you.

“And if he’s not happy with how he is?” she says, and you hesitate.

“Well, fine. But there’s nothing wrong with him.” You concede, and the doctor smiles at you.

“Go on.” She says, and so you do.

You look at your sister to your side who is absently sipping on her smoothie as she types with her other hand, you don’t have to crane your neck far to see Kanaya’s green text on her screen. You shove her lightly with your foot and waggle your eyebrows at her.

“How’s lovergirl?” You ask teasingly, and Rose pouts.

“Kanaya is fine if you must know. She’s a little worried about what she’s going to wear to our party tomorrow.” Rose sighs.

Oh yeah, you forgot that your mom and Signless had decided to throw a party because their kids have attached themselves to each other. You’re not even sure what’s going on with Roxy and that Sollux guy, you’re not sure that you wanna know. Your mom apparently declared that it had to be at
your house and has spent a good chunk of last night and a lot of this morning running around buying things for this party to impress her guests.

“Dirk, I’m going to buy a barbeque. You know how to barbeque, right?” Your mom asks, sticking her head into the room.

“Not really. I mean, I get how to apply meat to fire and cook it, but I don’t think it’s the same.” Dirk says dubiously.

“Well, I’ll order one anyway. I’ll need you to assemble it for me.” She says with a wave of her hand and Dirk scowls.

“I actually have other shit to do Roxanne. You have two PhD’s, I’m sure you can manage to assemble a barbeque that comes with picture instructions.” Dirk says flatly.

Your mom glares at him but her staredowns have nothing on Bros and so Dirk doesn’t so much as flinch, unlike Roxy who shrinks back and ducks under the counter to yours and Rose’s side.

“You are living in my home rent free, the least that you could do is assemble a barbeque for me.” your mom says sharply.

“I think that you’ll find that, by definition, the least that I can do is nothing.” Dirk points out.

“I hate when you’re pedantic like this, you know full well what I mean. All I’m asking is for you to do your part in this household.” your mom says.

“Hey, mom, maybe-” you try to intervene, but she holds a hand up to mute you.

“I already raise the kids, I would say by myself but Roxy actually is an invaluable help. You, not so much.” Dirk says with a sneer.

“I hate when they get like this.” Rose says under her breath.

Ever since you moved in Dirk and your mom regularly clash with each other, you know he’s still bitter about how much she let you both down, but your mom can’t seem to get the hint and move past it. She’s a perfectly nice lady when you’re dealing with her one on one, but she’s really bad at backing down and Dirk’s really bad at not confronting her.

“They are my children!” you mom snaps.

“Sure they are. What does Rose want to be when she grows up? What about Dave? What foods don’t they like to eat? What are their teacher's names? Shit, let’s go real basic, what shoe size do they have? Feel free to stop me anytime you know a single thing about your kids. Please, do.” Dirk snaps at her just as angrily.

“That sounds very stressful. How often do they have these arguments?” your doctor asks, taking notes.

“Not all that often, it just sucks for everyone else. Rose and Roxy hate seeing their mom mad and sometimes mom ends up being a dick to them after an argument so I know they hate it.” you say with a shrug.

“But it doesn’t bother you?” she asks curiously.

“It bothers me that it bothers Dirk. I know he has his problems with her, and I know Rose and Roxy
have issues about it too but I got over the whole ‘absent mom’ thing ages ago. I don’t care why she does what she does, I don’t care why Bro did what he did, shit’s fucked and I just wanna do my thing.” you say with more than a touch of frustration. Dirk is territorial, your mom is bad with people, and your sisters don’t get your mom. Your whole family could probably fund this entire psych business single-handedly.

“That’s very self-aware of you. So, the day started with some tension. How was the party itself?” She asks with that smile on again.

“Lively.” you answer, flatly.

“HOLY SHIT YOU HAVE A POOL!” Mituna screams as he sprints past you, dragging Kankri who is begging him to stop. Mituna does not stop and in fact, launches them both into the pool.

“Do you see what I have to put up with?” Karkat groans from your side. He’s wearing a tie and looks deeply uncomfortable about that. His hair is even combed, shit is adorable and hilarious.

“Have you seen Roxy?” Sollux asks you quickly, his lisp did not do well with that sentence.

“I think she’s still getting ready.” You guess, and you can see the guy crumple a little. A girl troll at his side, you know that she’s called Aradia, pats his back consolingly. Sollux isn’t looking though because Roxy has just come downstairs in an expensive pink little dress and you can see how badly this dude wants to bone your sister. Gross.

You catch Kanaya’s older sister, Kankri and Dirk all involved in some long winded argument about the intersection of troll and human culture and how that fucks people up. You veer well away from that when Kankri starts insisting that homophobia doesn’t really happen much anymore and troll blood colours are a far more pressing matter, besides you can lie about your orientation. Dirk looks set in with that argument and not so much like he wants to punch him but more like he wants to crush all of his beliefs to dust.

Your mom and The Psiionic are clustered together on the patio talking about faster than light travel, Signless is helping The Disciple cook, Kanaya and Rose are hidden away in the garden talking quietly together and giggling. Sollux and Roxy spend almost the whole night locked in a competitive Mario Kart match that is beyond brutal.

“It sounds like everyone else was having a nice time. Who did you spend the party with, Dave?” the doctor asks you and you reluctantly force yourself to answer.

“Karkat. I spent the whole time with Karkat.” you say.

“You sound… not entirely pleased about that.” she concludes.

“No, it was fun. We mostly just hung out and talked about things and laughed at people. There were just moments where it felt… you know. I told you about my dream last time.” You say grudgingly.

“Do you mean that you felt awkward because of the content of your dream or was there something else?” she questions you and you fidget for a moment or two. You don’t want to talk about this, but that might be a sign that it’s something you have to talk about.

It’s almost nine and it’s dark out now, the few stars that you can see from here are out and you and Karkat are sat on the diving board of the pool. Your phones are sat on the outside just in case but as Karkat talks and gestures wildly the board bounces and every so often your shoes just dip into the still water of the pool.
“I think you’re just being deliberately obtuse about everyone’s favourite comedic genius, Karkat.” You tell him. You have so far managed to spin out an entirely insincere opus about Ben Stiller and his comedy potential and the great debt that the field, nay, all of cinema owe to him.

“I think you’re being insincere and fucking with me.” Karkat says with a scowl and thumps on the diving board, making it bounce slightly.

“I would never, I am totally ironically sincere about my ironic enjoyment of the man, the myth, the legend that is Ben Stiller and his weird looking face. These very shades were once on that face, Karkat, how can you speak such blasphemy to them?” You say, curious to see just how much further you can goad him before he erupts into a frothing volcano of rage.

“Well, I guess…” Karkat says slowly and shuffles towards you on the diving board, dipping you lower so that your toes constantly touch the water. You raise a curious eyebrow at him.

“you could say,” he continues as he drums his fingers on the board “that Ben Stiller sucks, eat shit, Strider!”

Karkat shoves you hard in the chest, and you go ass over teakettle backwards into the pool. Before you hit the water you manage to yell one last thing at him.

“Can’t swim!”

You sink to the bottom and hook a foot under a light and within half a second Karkat has plunged into the water and is swimming rapidly towards you. You kick off of the wall and swim away and watch him chase you underwater until he finally surfaces at the edge of the pool, and so do you.

“MOTHERFUCKER YOU CAN SWIM!” Karkat shrieks at you and splashes an angry open palmful of water at you. You set your shades on the side because even though they are waterproof, they shouldn’t get too wet.

“Yeah,” you say as you swim under the diving board, “but you shoved me in first, so fair play is off. I just got you to shove yourself in too.”

“That was a little mean, don’t you think?” Your doctor says reproachfully.

“Yeah but it was a lot hilarious too so it works out. Besides Karkat gets mad super fast but it goes super fast too.” you explain.

“So then what happened? I assume that you’re bringing up the pool incident for a reason, aside from comedy purposes.” she says, and you nod, amusement fading from you.

Karkat is under the diving board with you, reaching up to cling to it. He isn’t very mad now and he isn’t getting any more soaked so he might as well stay in the pool. It’s dark out now and most of the light coming onto his face is from the pool lights below the water and is all rippled.

“I’m glad that Rose and Kanaya are getting to spend time together, to be honest, Kanaya was worried that your mom would hate it that she’s a girl.” Karkat says quietly.

“Nah. Mom’s bitter about soulmate shit, but she doesn’t care that Kanaya’s a girl. I don’t even know if mom’s straight herself and I don’t wanna know. Fuck knows no one else in this family besides me is.” you complain.

“I’ve lived here my whole life, and I still don’t get human sexuality.” Karkat grumbles and you swim back slightly to lean against the wall.
“It’s complicated.” You explain, and Karkat shimmies his hands along the board to get closer to you. His knee bumps yours under the water.

“That’s what you get for being a human instead of a clearly better troll.” Karkat brags and you splash him.

Karkat laughs and splashes you back, and you realise that this is like some stupid teen movie where the protagonists kiss and-

You swallow thickly and stare at the carpet. It’s kind of a shitty carpet, don’t your fees pay for better carpets than this? The doctor is silent, and you dig your fingers into the fabric of the seat so hard that you’re sure if you got fingerprinted it’d come up with the pattern of the chair.

“It sounds like that became a romantic kind of moment, is that what you meant to say?” The doctor prompts you and your squirm uncomfortably. You can almost feel the prickle at the back of your neck of Bro behind you, and it takes a lot to not quickly check.

“Yeah. It felt like that. It’s dumb.” You mutter and grit your teeth.

“You clearly feel uncomfortable now talking about it, how did you feel at the time? What happened?” She asks, and you make yourself talk.

Your heart leaps in your chest as you realise just what the actual fuck is going on. You turn, grab the edge of the pool and haul out. You sprint through the house, and it’s a goddamned miracle you don’t slip up and break your neck on the marble tiles in the kitchen but before you know it you’re in your room.

You kick the door shut and stagger inside, everything is too bright because you didn’t bring your shades because you’re the world’s biggest idiot. You got too close to Karkat, you wanted to- shit you can’t breathe. You try and remember which medication was for this because one of them was for this, but all you can think of is Karkat, still in the pool all sad and wet, feeling confused and blaming himself. You know he’ll blame himself.

The door behind you opens and you’re facing it with a sword in your hand before you even have time to think.

“Wait, you had a sword?” She asks in alarm.

“I didn’t use it.” you protest.

“Why did you even have one on you?!” She demands, and you shrink into your chair.

“I always have, Dirk told you about Bro and how he trained us with swords.” you point out.

“Yes, but I had assumed that you no longer had it with you as a weapon now that the man wasn’t around to attack you anymore. Do you have it with you at all times?” She asks, and you look down at the floor guiltily.

“Do you have it on you now?” She asks, and you nod mutely.

“Please take it out and leave it on my desk before we continue. I will need to talk to Dirk when he comes to pick you up.” The doctor says, and you reluctantly get up and walk to her desk. You draw your sword out and catch the way her eyes go wide in alarm. You go to put it down and hesitate. Never be unarmed, it wasn’t Bro that drummed that into you but Dirk. Dirk always made sure that you could defend yourself and you did everything that you could to do what he said. To willingly
deprive yourself of any weapon feels wrong.

Your hand with your sword in it trembles over her desk. The thing may as well be glued to your palm.

“Dave, you’re safe in here. No one will attack you here.” She says in a comforting voice, and you make yourself put the sword down. You walk back to your chair and work out just how quick a flashstep it’d take to get you to your sword again if you needed it.

“Please continue from where you were. You said that you drew your sword, who was at the door?” She says, and you nod slowly, glancing back at the sword on the desk again.

Rose looks at the tip of the sword in some surprise but bats it away idly, you drop it to the ground anyway, and she shuts the door behind you.

“Can’t.” you choke out and Rose nods, going to your heap of medication boxes and finds the right one and brings it to you with a freshly opened bottle of apple juice. You manage to coordinate breathing long enough to swallow it down and curl up on the floor with her against the side of your bed.

“It keeps happening.” you say pathetically as Rose pets your hair, even though it’s starting to curl ridiculously near your temples as it dries.

“Running away from Karkat or the panic attacks?” Rose asks quietly. You don’t have an answer to give her.

“What did you mean by that?” the doctor asks, making notes as you talk.

“My dream, the almost thing that almost happened under the diving board.” You answer uneasily and eye your sword.

Doctor April sits back and chews the end of her pencil thoughtfully as she looks at you and then down at her notes and back to you again.

“When I say that this doesn’t interest me I mean it’s medically irrelevant, not by any means personally irrelevant to you or something I feel you need to take or avoid action on. So with that said it does not interest me if you are attracted to this boy or not, it does not interest me what your sexuality actually is and what if anything you do with that information when you get it. The anxiety you experience from any perceived thought, action or near action is relevant.” She explains.

“This seems to be a very disordered part of your life, and I think you would benefit from us focusing on this and helping to remove this fear. Whether afterwards you decide that you’re interested in this boy romantically or not is neither here nor there. So, with that said would you be okay for us to work on this for the meantime?” She asks.

“I don’t have to like… kiss him or anything?” you ask suspiciously.

“I wouldn’t make you do that, I’m fairly sure that would violate several oaths that I’ve taken. You’re more than welcome to choose to do so, but that’s just your life, not therapy. We’re almost at our hour, so I think I’ll leave you with two pieces of homework to do for next time.” she says, looking above you at the clock behind your head.

“You know I get actual homework from school, right?” you point out bitterly. You have actual homework to do tonight in fact.
“This won’t take so long, I promise. The first one is an active thing and the second is more of an… if it comes up kind of thing,” the doctor explains.

“Okay, go on.” you say, and she nods.

“The first is this, I think we should test the boundaries of things that Bro would have not approved of to show you that these things are harmless. The idea is that eventually, you accept that these things are fine and normal and the anxiety recedes. So, for this I want you to talk to a male friend of yours who you have a platonic relationship with and sincerely tell him how much that relationship means to you. Platonic affection between men is often socially frowned upon, but this is a very western issue, I’m guessing Bro would have had problems with this too?” she asks, and you nod.

“Guys who talk about their feelings are pussies, he’d lose his shit at me and Dirk being here at all. Let alone me talking to, like, John and saying how much I appreciate our bromance or whatever.” you say with a snort.

“Well, I’m very proud that you’re here at all then. So that’s what I want you to do, find that friend, express sincere affection. That’s all.” she tells you with a warm smile, and you nod a little awkwardly. You’re only here because you care more about not upsetting Dirk than you do about what Bro would have hated, it doesn’t mean you’re not uncomfortable as all hell here.

“What about the second thing?” you ask warily.

“The second thing is more of an ‘if it comes up’ thing. People with anxiety disorders, things like OCD for example, have thoughts and find the thoughts very distressing. We’ll be covering this later with coping with flashbacks for you but the principle is the same, a thought cannot harm you, and other people can’t see them. So, if you are with Karkat again in the future and a similar… moment comes up, like the one you described in the pool. I want you to try to acknowledge that it’s just a thought that you’re having and let it pass you by. You don’t need to act on it or run from it, just see it and let it go on by. You may not be able to do it right away, but it’s good to start trying that, how does that sound?” the doctor asks, watching you with a smile.

“Really weird.” you say, and she laughs lightly.

“I guess it is, but I want you to try, okay?” she says with a smile.

You turn your head to the door as you hear the quiet and low rumble of Dirk’s voice muffled through the door. Doctor April has noticed as well and walks to the door and pulls it open, you see Dirk just about to sit down in one of the chairs in the waiting room.

“Perfect timing, Dirk, please come inside.” the doctor says, and you glance at your sword on her desk. Maybe you could just take it back, and she wouldn’t know?

Dirk enters the room, and the doctor folds her arms in displeasure as Dirk shuts the door behind him. You see him spot your sword on her desk.

“Hi, doc.” He says uneasily.

“If you wouldn’t mind taking your glasses off, please.” the doctor says, she already made the room dark enough for you to do that at the beginning. Apparently, she likes to be able to read your expression. Dirk reluctantly takes his shades off and looks at her again.

“I said that I won’t and can’t report things to the authorities unless you or Dave are in immediate danger. I stand by that. But letting a child walk around with an illegal deadly weapon all of the time, and in school no less, is very dangerous. I must insist that you take this away from him and don’t
allow Dave to have weapons anymore. It’s irresponsible.” the doctor says firmly, and Dirk has gone kind of pale.

“But what if I need it?” you protest, and the doctor turns to look at you.

“When do you ever need it? Are you still forced to fight?” she asks, and you physically recoil at the idea.

“No way, Dirk would rather chop his own arm off!” You protest loudly, and Dirk nods in agreement.

“So you do not need it. You told me that you pulled that sword out in a panic attack and pointed it at your sister, you could have hurt or killed her before you realised what was happening. It’s not safe.” the doctor says firmly.

“I’m sorry, doctor. You’re absolutely right. It was just such a big part of both of our lives for so long that I suppose it seemed normal, I didn’t even think about how dangerous it was. I’ll absolutely take all of the weapons away. I’m so sorry.” Dirk apologises, and your mouth hangs open in shock. He picks the sword up from the desk and stows it in his sylladex.

“Good. I’m sorry to be so firm on that point but I’d hate for a tragedy to happen and I know that there are extenuating circumstances with both of you. If you take the weapons away, then there’s no need at all for this to go further.” the doctor says with some relief.

“But-” you protest and Dirk shakes his head at you. You fall silent.

“Thank you so much doctor, and again I’m really sorry. I’ll see you later in the week, then?” Dirk says and sets his hand on your shoulder.

“But-” you try again, and Dirk flicks your shades down over your eyes.

“Don’t wanna get a headache kid, come on.” Dirk says and puts his own on as he steers you out of the room.

“See you then, Dirk.” the doctor agrees and Dirk waves at her in a friendly way.

[timaeusTestified began pestering turntechGodhead]
TT: Dave, stop talking.
TT: Get in the car and let’s go.
[timaeusTestified ceased pestering turntechGodhead]

You shut your mouth and leave the building and get into Dirk’s car. You shut the door behind you and buckle up as Dirk gets in the car too.

“So are you gonna give me my sword back or what?” you ask unhappily.

“Or what.” Dirk says flatly and buckles himself in.

“Seriously? Just give it to me, it’s my sword anyway.” you point out, and Dirk shakes his head.

“Aside from the fact that she would find out and potentially take you away from me, which I will not risk ever, she’s right. You having a sword is dangerous, you’re just a kid.” Dirk says with a shake of his head.

“I’m thirteen!” you protest indignantly, but Dirk ignores you.
“I can’t believe I didn’t think about it myself. You could have hurt yourself or someone else, it’s so irresponsible of me.” Dirk mutters.

“Oh, come on. I’m thirteen, I haven’t cut myself or anyone I didn’t mean to in years. Besides, it’s not like I like using it, you know I hate it, but you can’t just leave me unarmed.” you reason and Dirk shakes his head.

“There’s no one to attack you anymore, and even if there was, you’ve been taught enough unarmed combat to escape. No more swords and no more conversation on it either.” Dirk tells you and turns the engine on and pulls out of the parking spot and starts to drive. You put your feet up on the dashboard and scowl.

“So you’re giving up your swords too?” You ask, and Dirk says nothing. You know damn well that he won’t. What a fucking hypocrite.

You and Dirk don’t speak on the drive home. The pair of you don’t fight often, but it sucks ass when you do. Experience has taught you that there’s nothing you can do to Dirk worse than give him the cold shoulder, so that’s just what you do. It’s a dick move, but you need your swords back. You can’t articulate why you need them but not having them feels awful. You never ever want to use one in a fight ever again but being without them feels like being lost at sea with no land in sight, you’re weak and defenceless.

[turntechGodhead began pestering autonomousTerminal]
TG: tell me youre gonna talk him out of this
AT: Actually I think that your doctor is probably right.
AT: And even if she wasn’t right her threat to report Dirk for letting you have lethal weapons is more than enough incentive to abide by her restriction.
TG: hey guess what
AT: What?
[turntechGodhead blocked autonomousTerminal]

“Dave…” Dirk says as you pull up to the house, but you hop out of the car and shut the door behind you. You march into the house with Dirk on your heels.

“Dave be reasonable.” He calls to you and Rose and Roxy look up at you from the sofa as you stomp up the stairs.

“Dave!” Dirk yells up at you, and you hear him start to climb the stairs too.

You hate this therapy bullshit, you were fine before it, and now Dirk is freaking out about pointless shit and-

You feel the harsh displaced air as Dirk flashsteps past you, it takes a good second for your programmed fear of ‘oh God I’m gonna die’ to pass before you can process Dirk standing in your bedroom doorway.

“I’m sure you’ve got another sword stashed in there Dave, you can’t just get around this by taking that one.” Dirk says firmly, and you glare at him. You flashstep past him and into Rose’s empty room. You pull off your shades and dump them on her bed and walk to her window and pull it open. The house is configured the same way outside of her window, which is to say that she too has a bit of roof below her window.Fuck it’s bright out, but you’re not going to stay here and be lectured on this when Dirk is just rolling over for anything that doctor says. You agreed to the medication, you agreed to talk to her, but you did not agree to this.
You turn your phone onto airplane mode, if any signal can get into it, then Hal or Dirk can get past any block you put up. You jam your headphones into your ears and the audio jack, hit play and jump out of the window, off of the slice of the roof and to the ground. You flashstep until your stamina dies and then you just walk.

Surprising no one you end up outside Karkat’s house, but he’s not outside getting the mail this time. He was surprisingly cool about you bailing on him at the party and school was normal after that, you guess that Karkat is just used to you freaking out and being weird on him. You feel more than a little guilty about that, but you are agreeing to work on that at least.

You hesitate outside for a little bit and then go and knock on the door. It’s not Karkat that opens the door but Sollux instead. He looks as surprised to see you as you are to see him.

“Karkat isn’t here.” Sollux says simply.

“Oh.” You say dumbly.

The two of you stare at each other for a moment, and you find that you’re almost a little transfixed by his eyes, you can never tell just where he’s looking but obviously other people can.

“You wanna come in anyways?” Sollux asks and steps aside. You nod and walk in.

“Oh fuck, it’s dark in here.” You say with some relief. It was way too bright outside for you and you left your shades at home so that Hal couldn’t get to you but it left you with the far too bright world outside.

“Yeah, I think I’m getting a migraine. That’s why I’m here and not out, I can turn them on if you-” Sollux starts to offer.

“No!” you say quickly.

“You’re not wearing your shades.” Sollux points out as he shuts the door behind you.

“Yep.” you agree, and Sollux doesn’t push it further.

Sollux goes back to doing whatever he was doing in the kitchen and you follow for lack of anything better to do. Despite the fact that he is Karkat’s brother and you go to the same school you haven’t ever really talked to the guy, even at the party he was too obsessed with Roxy to speak to you much.

“Where is Karkat anyway?” You ask curiously as Sollux opens the fridge and pulls a can of energy drink out.

“He’s at one of Signless’ sermons, it’s community night and they have to answer questions and mediate shit. Karkat has been trying to take some of that on himself lately. You want one of these?” Sollux asks, holding up his own drink. You nod, and one floats through the air to you until you take it.

“I read up on Signless recently after Karkat talked about him some. Isn’t he basically like troll Jesus meets troll Martin Luther King or whatever?” You ask and Sollux snorts.

“Yeah, not far off. He’s the leader of all trolls on Earth. Not like the Empress or anything but everyone looks to him for answers, whether they like him or not.” Sollux says with a sigh.

Your mind goes to the chain around your wrist and that nagging feeling you get from it often of not being good enough, of being chained to something bigger and better than you and being found
wanting.

You shove the thought aside, not liking the implications of it.

“That’s some heavy shit. Karkat’s trying to take that over?” you ask and take a sip of your drink. It’s the most artificial thing you’ve ever tasted, and the ‘APPLEBERRY BLAST!!!!’ branding up the side gives you no idea of what it’s really meant to taste like.

“Not like a coup but more like… step into his destiny. He’s doing a better job than Kankri at least which pisses him off to no end.” Sollux snorts and chugs his drink.

“Why is Kankri bad at it?” you ask curiously.

“Have you ever actually had to talk to the guy? More than just ‘Hello I’m Kankri, Karkat’s older brother’ or whatever?” Sollux asks, and you shake your head.

“Lucky you. If you ever do, you’ll figure it out. The guy loves to talk and lecture, but I swear my deaf sister is a better listener than him. Karkat at least empathises with people.” Sollux grumbles.

“Yeah he’s…” you trail off because talking about Karkat to other people is something that you’ve kind of had enough of today.

“Man, you two are going to be insufferable when you get your shit together. Not that you aren’t now but, you know. I’m going to play video games, you can come with if you want.” Sollux says and walks off. You’re hardly going to stand around in Karkat’s house all by yourself, so you have to follow him.

Sollux’s room is about as messy as yours, but you don’t have weird yellow blocks sticking out of the wall which purple bees are flying in and out of. There’s a tray on the floor with honey dripping into it from the hive thing. The wall above his computer is entirely papered with video game posters, you’re pretty sure that you see a map of Skyrim not to mention the more classic stuff like the Pacman lampshade. Above his bed is a chalkboard with code written all over it in red and blue chalk and around the board are photos that are stuck to the frame. Unlike everything else in the room these doesn’t seem to be computer themed, they look like photos from an archaeological dig and at the bottom of the frame is a photo of a symbol carved into stone, you’ve seen it before though, it’s on your arm.

“What is this?” you ask Sollux. The troll looks around and purses his lips, as much as he can with those fangs sticking out.

“Wish I fuckin’ knew. That symbol is all over the place on these ruins that Aradia and her archaeology pen pal keep digging up, the weirdest thing is that it’s been appearing on people’s skin. Nepeta has it on hers as part of her soulmark.” Sollux sighs and taps his fingers in irritation, you think he’s looking at the pictures behind you but you’re not sure. Damn eyes.

“I have it on my skin.” You say and pull your sleeve up. Sollux’s eyes go wide, and he floats over to you to get a good look. He takes a picture on his phone and frowns, he flicks across the photos on his phone until he finds another picture of a grey arm with the same green spirograph on it.

“This is Nepeta’s arm, I was trying to track her soulmate down so that I could work out what this was because they must know something about it, but I know that Karkat doesn’t know what any of this means.” Sollux says with a frown, and you scowl because that’s a straight up implication that Karkat is your soulmate. Which he is NOT. Probably. You’re not thinking about this.

“Don’t give me that goddamn look. You and Karkat can pretend that you’re not soulmates all you
like, everyone else knows that you are. Honestly, I don’t give two shits, I just want to know what that symbol means.” Sollux says, and you look at the wall again and the pictures. Those are really old stone slabs.

“If Aradia is digging this stuff up shouldn’t she know what the symbol means?” you ask, deciding to ignore Sollux’s comment.

“Yeah, well, she says the important thing is the text, and that’s what I’m mostly working on. It’s a kind of code and I mean that like computer code. I think it’s working in a sister code to ~ATH so I’m translating it. She says it’s some kind of mumbo jumbo avert the apocalypse thing. It’s not like I’m gonna run it because I doubt it’d do anything with what I have now but if it stopped the end of the Earth then great, right?” Sollux says with a shrug.

“I mean, I’m not gonna complain about the world not ending.” you agree, and he grins at you, all uneven double-fanged teeth. You know lots of people find troll teeth intimidating, but you think that growing up in Texas where they’re more common than anywhere else in the world has kind of immunised you to that.

“So… why are you doing all of this if you don’t really get what it’s for? Despite the ‘end of the world’ junk, I mean.” You ask curiously. Sollux shrugs.

“Well, this archaeology stuff isn’t really my thing, but code is. Besides Aradia is my moirail and I’m basically contractually obliged to be interested in her interests when she’s really serious about them. Anyway, there is code in there, so it’s sort of my area anyway but being outside in the dust and digging up old ruins isn’t my thing, the number of little animal skeletons we get is gross and why do you look excited?!” Sollux demands and you realise that you’re grinning.

“Dead shit is kind of my jam.” you tell him happily.

“Fuck, you’re both weird. Hell, talk to her next time you see her, maybe you can come along, and I won’t have to do so much in future.” He says with a shake of his head and sits on his floor.

“You know… I feel like I’ve seen that somewhere else too.” you say, running your finger over the photo of the stone slab with that symbol on it. Behind you the sound of a printer churning starts up, and Sollux gets back up and pins two photos to the frame of his chalkboard, one of your arm and one of Nepeta’s arm.

“If you do, let me know. It’s driving me crazy.” He says and stands back and surveys his chalkboard again. You suppose that it does look like the deranged scrawlings of a crazy person, but you did just have your sword confiscated by a psychiatrist so you have no room to talk.

“You wanna play Shovel Knight?” Sollux asks after a second.

“Yeah, sure why not?” you say with a shrug, and the two of you sit on his bed with controllers and start to play the game. Sollux is unfairly good at it but you get the hang of it after a bit, and it’s decently fun and retro, he also tolerates your rambling and sometimes frustrated swearing like a champ. You can only assume that he’s so tolerant of it because he lives with Karkat who could yell hard enough to burst the eardrums of someone in New York.

Eventually, his phone pings him and he pauses to check it, you look across but recognise the pink text right away. Oh no.

[tipsyGnostalgic began pestering twinArmageddons]
TG: hey sol i know i dont usully message u
TG: but
TG: have u seen my little bro?
TA: liike iin general or recently?
TA: becau2e you know we've met. you were there.
TG: ugh can u not be deliberately fucking obtuse right now?
TG: i mean hes missing
TG: he and dirky had this big spat and he just bailed and no one has seen him. he turned his phone off and just ran off.
TG: we figured hed be home by now but hes not and dirk is freaking out in a major way. we tried asking karkat but hes out at some thing and kanaya says daves not there.

Sollux looks at you with a frown.
“You didn’t tell me you were hiding.” he says in a faintly accusing tone.
“You didn’t ask.” you state simply and Sollux bops you on top of the head with his phone.
“As much as I’m all for lying to my kismesis to piss her off, I think if I lie to her about this she will rip out my fucking shame globes and I will die the worst most embarrassing death. I’ve gotta tell her you’re here.” Sollux says flatly.
“Ugh, don’t bother. I’ll just go home. I have to sooner or later.” you groan and haul yourself up off of the bed.
“She… is freaking out.” Sollux says as he types.
“Great.” you sigh unhappily.
“Oh, hey,” Sollux says and looks up at you, “it was actually kind of cool hanging out with you. You’re welcome to come over again, and I’m serious that Aradia would probably love more company on her digs. Also if you do see that symbol anywhere else hit me up.” Sollux says. He’s actually a pretty cool guy, it’s a shame he’s in the year above you, but it’s not like you can’t hang out.
“Yeah man, sure.” You say with a nod and hold your fist out. Sollux looks at it for a second before obligingly bumping it.
“Hah, Karkat’s gonna lose his shit when he gets home.” Sollux sniggers.
“Same as always then.” you shoot back, and he laughs.

You approach your house and make a beeline for your window, it’s locked but it’s not hard at all to flick the lock open from the outside, you just need one of your cards and the thing clicks open. You should maybe look into better locks. You slide the window up and roll onto your bed. You click your lamp on and reach under your bed and… yep, no sword there. The back of your wardrobe proves fruitless too, and a bang of displaced air makes you look around the corner to Dirk who is
You don’t get so much as a word out before he’s suddenly grabbed you up from the ground and crushed you to his chest with his face pressed into your shoulder.

“Oh fuck you’re okay, don’t you ever, *ever* do that to me again Dave. I’ve been so worried you don’t even- *fuck* you are okay aren’t you?” He gasps, putting you down and pulling back to look over you.

“Well if I had been attacked by marauding psychopaths I would have done a lot better if I had my sword and not an empty spot in my strife specibus.” You say flatly, and Dirk winces.

“Dave, I can’t give you your sword back.” Dirk says reluctantly, and you pull back away from him, even though you see the look of pain it causes him.

“Why the hell not?” you demand angrily.

“Because we’ll get in trouble with the doctor if we do that and I can’t risk losing you. You understand that, don’t you?” Dirk says, and you shake your head.

“I get it if I had to hand it over to you or Rox before I went into any session with her but why can’t I have it the rest of the time?” you ask, that seems reasonable to you.

“Because you’re a kid and it’s an illegal weapon! We’re lucky we were never caught before, and I can’t believe I was so dumb as to just let you into school with that. It’s not safe and normal thirteen-year-olds don’t walk around with swords!” Dirk exclaims.

“Normal eighteen-year-olds don’t either, but have you given yours up?” You demand, and Dirk glances away.

“I need to be able to protect you, and you need to do your best to try to heal and become a normal teenager. This was what we wanted. Please, Dave, work with me here.” Dirk pleads.

“No way, you’re a fucking hypocrite Dirk. If there’s nothing I need to protect myself from so I don’t need a sword, then there’s nothing you need one to protect me with. You’re just asking me to do something that you’re not willing to do. Just because you adopted me doesn’t mean you fucking own me!” You yell at him.

“Dave, that is- you know that’s not true. I’m just trying to look out for you here.” Dirk insists.

“Just- fuckin’ get out of my room.” You snap, and now Dirk looks genuinely angry.

“No. We’re going to talk about this, and I’m not changing my mind, no more swords. Also, your ass is grounded for that stunt you just pulled.” Dirk hisses angrily.

Fine. He wants to control every part of your life? Then he can get treated like the last guy who did that. You drop every inch of expression on you, you fold your arms over your chest and refuse to look directly at him.

“Fine.” you say tonelessly.

“Dave?” Dirk says, immediately noticing the difference.

“Yeah?” you reply, almost bored. You crush down on your anger and your disappointment and your fear, you can deal with it later.
“Dave, come on, talk to me about this.” Dirk pleads and tries to touch your shoulder, but you dodge out of the way smoothly.

“Sure man, whatever.” you agree as blandly as you can and look a few inches to the left of his ear. It works even better with your shades off.

“You know what, fine? I’m doing this for your own good, when you want to stop sulking we can talk. And you’re still grounded.” Dirk says irritably and walks off.

You wait a few moments and then shake yourself off, you walk over to Rose’s room and push the door open. She’s sat on her bed knitting and reading her English book at the same time, her class got a different one to start with than yours. They got The Amazing Maurice and His Educated Rodents. She sets her knitting needles down when she sees you and grabs your shades off of her stack of textbooks that she had been leaning her English book against.

“Nice to see you, Dave. We were all a little worried earlier, except for Dirk who was in a massive panic.” She says and hands your shades to you. You put them on and immediately close the wall of orange text from Hal and the other one from Dirk.

“Thanks. Sorry for worrying you Rose.” you tell her sincerely.

“It’s ok. Dirk told us that you were having a disagreement about being allowed to keep your swords.” Rose says, and you grimace.

“I don’t really want to talk about it.” you reply, and Rose nods.

“For what it’s worth I can see that Dirk is trying to help, but I also think that if you were going to injure yourself or someone else with your sword then you would have done it by now.” Rose comments and you nod. It’s just like her to see both sides, even if you can’t see Dirk’s at all yourself.

“Later.” you say with a wave and walk out of her room.

“Later.” Rose echoes and goes back to her reading and knitting.

Your room is still empty when you return, and you shut the door behind you and sit down at your computer. When it turns on, and you open pesterchum several things pop up at once. A window of messages from Dirk from when you first went out and didn’t come back, you close that right away. There’s another window from Hal of much the same and you also shut that.

[autonomousTerminal began pestering turntechGodhead]
AT: Aren’t you even going to look at what we said to you?
TG: are you gonna get me my swords back?
AT: No, I happen to agree with Dirk.
[turntechGodhead blocked autonomousTerminal]
AT: You know that doesn’t work on me.
[turntechGodhead ceased pestering autonomousTerminal]

Okay what else? Oh, it looks like Roxy messaged you.

tipsyGnostalgic began pestering turntechGodhead]
TG: dave where the heck r u?
TG: seriosuly were all mega worried
TG: ok i checked with your boi and he says youre not with him and rosies beau says the same
TG: when you get back imma microchip yo ass
TG: ok sol says youre with him panic over
TG: hi roxy
TG: DAVE
TG: omg i was so worried
TG: i know im sorry. didnt wanna worry you.
TG: you really worried dirk
TG: i give zero fucks unless he gives me my swords back.
TG: o dear are you two having a fight rite now? ive never seen you two fight.
TG: no he just stole my shit and needs to give it back
TG: okay i think im gonna stay out of this one
TG: probably smart
TG: still dont you scare me like that again. i love u my little baby bro i would die if you got hurt.

Okay, last window, oh a wall of angry grey text. It’s Karkat.

[carcinoGeneticist began pestering turntechGodhead]
CG: DAVE I WAS AT THE MEETING AND WHEN I STOPPED SPEAKING KANAYA TOLD ME THAT YOU’RE FUCKING MISSING OR SOMETHING? 
CG: I DON’T HAVE TO TALK AGAIN, BUT APPARENTLY NO ONE CAN GET IN CONTACT WITH YOU, AND EVERYONE IS FREAKING OUT.
CG: SOMETHING HAD BETTER BE REALLY WRONG DUMBASS BECAUSE EVERYONE IS UPSET HERE AND YOU’RE STILL NOT ANSWERING ME. RUNNING AWAY MIGHT BE DRAMATIC IN THE MOVIES, BUT IT’S A DICK MOVE IN REAL LIFE.
CG: DO YOU WANT TO BE A DICK, DAVE? IS THAT WHAT YOU WANT?
CG: FUCK, SORRY, I SHOULDN’T HAVE CALLED YOU A DICK.
CG: I DIDN’T MEAN IT. AND HOLY CRAP I HOPE NOTHING BAD HAS HAPPENED TO YOU TO MAKE YOU RUN AWAY BECAUSE THAT’D BE SHITTY. WHAT A SHITTY THING FOR ME TO WISH AND SAY TO YOU WHAT THE ACTUAL HELL PAST KARKAT?
CG: STILL NOT ANSWERING?
CG: I PROMISE IF YOU MESSAGE ME AND DON’T WANT ME TO TELL ANYONE ELSE THAT YOU’RE TALKING TO ME I WILL KEEP QUIET. YOU CAN TRUST ME.
CG: FUCK OK WE’RE GOING HOME.
CG: MAYBE I CAN GET SOMEONE TO GO OUT LOOKING FOR YOU.
CG: OKAY WHAT THE HELL YOU WERE JUST HANGING OUT WITH MY FUCKING BROTHER ALL EVENING?!! AND SOLLUX HAS A PICTURE OF YOUR SOULMARK ON HIS SHIT FUCKING WALL NOW?? WHAT THE ACTUAL!?
CG: YOU DIDN’T EVEN LET ME SEE THAT THING WITHOUT A HUGE THREE HOUR PRODUCTION OF THE IDIOT OPERA AND YOU HAD TO BE LOCKED IN A CAR WITH ME, BUT YOU’LL LET MY LISPY NERDBRO PHOTOGRAPH YOU?!
CG: I AM GONNA KICK YOUR ASS!!!!
CG: WAIT. FUCK I DIDN’T MEAN THAT. I DIDN’T THINK ABOUT HOW THAT’D SOUND GIVEN YOUR HISTORY.
CG: SHIT I ALSO SHOULDN’T HAVE THEN BROUGHT THAT UP SO OBVIOUSLY. IF YOU DIDN’T ALREADY LEAP TO THAT CONNECTION WITH YOUR PAST I JUST MADE REAL SURE THAT YOU WOULD, JUST DOUBLING DOWN ON MY MORON STOCKS LIKE USUAL. SOON I WILL OWN A CONTROLLING SHARE IN BEING A MORON AND I CAN RETIRE TO HAWAII.
CG: WHY CAN I NOT DELETE MESSAGES THAT I HAVE ALREADY SENT THIS IS SO UNFAIR. WHO WROTE THIS SHITTY PROGRAM ANYWAY?!
TG: wow sollux was right you are freaking out
CG: DAVE!
CG: TOO FUCKING RIGHT I’M FREAKING OUT WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED?!
TG: its nothing
TG: dirk and i had an argument and i left to blow off steam. i went to see you but you were out so i just chilled with sollux rather than going home. we played shovel knight it was chill.
CG: EVERYONE WAS REALLY WORRIED DAVE.
TG: i know everyone is telling me individually
TG: literally all im hearing about
CG: OK I’LL STOP. I’M SORRY. AND I’M SORRY FOR ALL THAT SHIT I SAID UP THERE.
TG: its cool
CG: OKAY.
CG: NOT THAT IT’S ANY OF MY GODDAMN BUSINESS BUT DID YOU RESOLVE YOUR FIGHT WITH DIRK?
TG: nope
TG: both to it not being your business and to that not being a thing that happened
CG: OH. GEEZ THAT BLOWS, I’M SORRY. IF YOU WANT TO COME HANG OUT WITH ME AFTER SCHOOL TOMORROW YOU CAN.
TG: im grounded. not that i care or plan on abiding by that but id hate to get you in trouble again
CG: THAT’S SURPRISINGLY THOUGHTFUL.
CG: WAIT THAT CAME OUT WRONG.
TG: oh man karkat dont ever change
CG: ...THANKS?
CG: OH WAIT, SOLLUX IS ASKING FOR YOUR PESTERCHUM HANDLE. SHOULD I GIVE IT TO HIM?
TG: yeah man hes cool
CG: HE REALLY FUCKING ISN’T BUT OKAY. THE GUY IS THE BIGGEST NERD THAT I KNOW AND
CG: my name ii2 karkat vanta2 and ii'm a ma22iive weeniie
CG: SOLLUX! FUCKING HELL
CG: IF YOU’RE GOING TO PSIONICALLY TYPE SHIT AT LEAST USE MY QUIRK. WHAT A GRUBFUCKING IMBECILE.

A notification pops up to the side of Karkat’s expanding rant about Sollux.

[twinArmageddons added turntechGodhead to their trollslum]
[add twinArmageddons to chumroll?]
[yes] [no]
[twinArmageddons added to chumroll]
TA: sup
TG: sup
TA: ii told you he would flipp hii2 2hiit
TG: his shit is evenly cooked on all sides from how often it is flipped. he is the best shit cook.
TA: eheheheheh
TA: later 2triider
[twinArmageddons ceased pestering turntechGodhead]

You talk to Karkat until he has to go do his chores, apparently that many people living in the same house produces a hell of a lot of laundry. You notice that at some point during your talk with Karkat that John has come online.

[turntechGodhead began pestering ectoBiologist]
TG: sup john
EB: hey dave!
TG: where were you this evening?
EB: oh ho ho, where were you?
EB: roxy messaged jane in a fuss about you going missing!
TG: goddamn we need to stop having such an incestuous contact list
TG: cant do dick around here without it getting to everyone
EB: you're doing dicks now, eh?
TG: har har
TG: lookit that pranksters gambit tick one sad little point up
TG: are you proud egderp?
EB: yup.
TG: me and dirk fought so i hung at a friends place only the friend wasnt there so i hung with his bro instead and now we are friends too. im a regular social butterfly
EB: i'll say!
EB: let me guess though, was this karkat's house?
TG: ugh yes
TG: jealous? youre still my best bro john no need to flap about it
EB: nah, i know that. rose just has her theories about you two, you know.
TG: believe me i know

Your fingers pause over the keyboard, and you look at John’s familiar blue text. You’ve known him since you were ten and he really was your first friend, although you suppose you started being friends with Jade around the same time but it took a little longer to fall into step with her. It wasn’t until you and her hit the common grounds of music and art that you really struck it out of the park. But John has always been so easy to talk to, even if he’s in the dark about so much of your life.

You think about your therapist’s non-stupid request, to tell a platonic male friend how you feel about them. You can do that with John. You basically have to, the only other male friend you have is Karkat and that’s nine thousand levels of no. Over nine thousand in fact.

TG: hey john
EB: hey dave.
TG: i meant what i said about you being my best bro
TG: like i know that with me moving and new school and living with rose for good changes a bunch of stuff
TG: and i have other friends too now here
TG: but youre still my best bro
EB: aww, dave!
EB: i already knew all of that though, you didn’t have to say it.
TG: well i mean maybe i should. i know feelings and shit are super gay but like i really love you man. youre a dork but youre cool too even with your terrible taste in movies which i thankfully manage to enjoy ironically. im glad were buds.

You clench your sweaty hands together. Bro would have laughed at you and smacked you in the head for that but you don’t feel freaked out at doing it. Painfully awkward maybe but otherwise fine. You should tell Doctor April when you see her next.

EB: aww!!!
EB: well same to you too dave, you’re my super cool bro even though you are also a massive nerd. and don’t you try to deny that part i know the truth!
EB: i’m glad we’re best friends too. i might admit to being a little jealous of this karkat guy for getting to hang out with you in person but i’m glad you have friends at your new school.
TG: yeah its a pretty good mix of people to be honest
TG: even if my sisters are shacking up with all of karkats extended family which is super weird
You turn off your computer, ignoring another ping from Hal and push away from the desk. It’s early
to go to bed, especially for you but you’ve learnt by now that the earlier you go to sleep the less
zombified your sleep medication makes you in the morning. Your doctor had said that you could
taper off of it soon and only pick it back up when you have trouble sleeping or when the really bad
nightmares creep in but you know yourself well enough that tonight is a night for not dreaming.

Aside from fighting with Dirk you are now unarmed entirely, all of your weapons taken from you.
Not to mention that your escape from home meant that you had no dinner and going to bed hungry
brings back all sorts of bad memories which can probably pull up many bad things in your head. No,
tonight you take your sleep medication and you sleep.

You count out pills, an antidepressant for depression and anxiety and sleep medication. You swallow
them with stale AJ, brush your teeth, get changed and fall into bed.

Rose wakes you up with a smack to the shoulder as she turns off your blaring alarm clock. You
stumble into clothes, brush your teeth and shuffle downstairs on autopilot. You’re in your seat with
cereal in your bowl before you notice Dirk sitting across from you and remember what he did. You
don’t look at him or acknowledge him.

You shut down. It’s not hard when you’re still sleep heavy in your head, but Dirk must know why
you’re doing this, you want your swords back. You want to be able to defend yourself again, you
hate having to depend on him for everything like some pathetic baby bird. You’re not childish and
irresponsible with your sword, you earnt it with your own sweat, blood and tears. Literally.

“Dave?” Rose says sharply, and you look over at her.

“Huh?” you say, and she sighs.

“I was asking how the math test was yesterday, I have it today.” Rose repeats herself.

“’s just algebra, bunch of equations to balance.” you tell her and Rose frowns. She’s not as good as
math as you.

“What did you get on the test?” Dirk asks, and you deliberately say nothing.

“Dave.” Dirk repeats, perhaps thinking that you had zoned out again.

“Uh, Dave?” Roxy asks, and you look at her.

“You’re being childish.” Dirk says, clearly having understood that you’re ignoring him.

“You treat me like one.” You reply sharply, finally looking at him. Dirk’s mouth goes thin but you’re
not backing down.

“I’m not treating you like-” Dirk starts to defend himself, and you tune out. You eat the last of your
cereal, you’re still hungry from last night. You get up from the table, put the bowl in the sink. Dirk
sounds really annoyed now, but he’s still sitting down so it doesn’t matter. You take an apple from
the fruit bowl and walk past him to the door.
“I’m walking Rox, see you at school.” You call over your shoulder to her.

You feel the displaced air and jerk two steps back as Dirk appears between you and the door. He has your attention. He looks angry and hurt too, not that you fucking care. You try to walk past him, but he grabs for your arm. You’re already stressed and angry so it’s no trouble at all to react as if it’s not Dirk grabbing for you but Bro. You dodge, and his fingers barely graze your shirt, you whirl around him and you’re at the door.

“Don’t worry Dirk, he can’t stay like this forever.” Roxy says loudly from the kitchen table, and you mark her firmly down into the category of people on Dirk’s side and resolve to ignore her too. Fuck both of them.

“I managed thirteen years with the last guy so I wouldn’t take that bet.” you say flatly, and you hear the wounded gasp from Dirk before you wrench the door open and slam it shut behind you.

You get about halfway to school before Rose catches up with you and links her arm with yours.

“That sure was something.” She remarks, and you nod.

“For the record, I think you’re being a dick about this but I don’t think he should have taken your sword and he even admitted to Roxy that he’s not giving his up which is just… hypocritical. It’s not right.” Rose assures you and you nod. It’s nice to have someone on your side.

You have art in the morning with Rose and Terezi, you draw a sunset in poster paint and leave it unattended for all of five seconds and when you come back you find that Terezi has licked your art, paint and all and it’s smeared all over her face and lips.

“I tried to stop her.” Rose says a little weakly, her paintbrush still in hand.

“Red is the best flavour.” Terezi adds helpfully.

“This is how you went blind isn’t it? Paint poisoning.” You sigh as you put your clean water cup down and drop your paintbrush in it.

“A good guess, but no. Are you ever going to show me what your eyes look like because I swear I smell cherries behind those glasses.” Terezi says, leaning over the table and licking her lips with red tinted spit.

Of course, the teacher finds out about her eating your paint and panics, sending the weirdest friend that you have to the nurse’s office.

Your day continues to be artistic when you share English with Karkat and manage to draw an alarmingly high number of dicks on the edge of his notebook before he notices and smacks you with his ruler. By all measures it’s a good day, Hal doesn’t bother you any further and Dirk doesn’t work around the block that you have him under on pesterchum. Nevertheless, you feel wrong all day.

Outside of the moments where you are thoroughly distracted, such as drawing dicks on Karkat’s notebook, you feel like you’re being watched. It feels like it used to back in the apartment when you knew Bro was home but you didn’t know where he was exactly. You feel like attack can come from anywhere at any time and, sure, you’re probably acting irrationally. It’s not like kids get attacked at school on the regular here and it’s not like you’d even use your sword if another kid took a swing at you anyway. You know how to fight hand to hand enough to get away from anyone wanting to do you harm, or nearly anyone. You wouldn’t bet on yourself in a rumble against Sweatquius, you’ve seen the dude snap a pen in half with his bare hands by accident. Though, his reaction of a quiet “fiddlesti%” was damn near the funniest thing you’ve ever heard.
So, fine, maybe you're ridiculous but your whole life it's been that being unarmed was a fast track to pain town. Even if that's not true now having your sword stopped that feeling, but right now it's unbearable, and you're on edge the whole time. Even when you get home you're acutely aware of every sound, and even though you take your extra anti-anxiety meds you feel ill at ease. You spend your evening almost glued to Rose's side in an embarrassing display of twin clinginess that isn't really the usual for either of you, but Rose is gracious and doesn't protest.

She does repaint your nails though.

You ignore Dirk completely over dinner, despite his repeated attempts to engage you in conversation you refuse to respond. Eventually, he gives up. Your mother is too busy eating and reading something scieny on her tablet to notice any of that at all.

“What're you working on, mom?” you ask, and she glances up at you briefly.

“Meteors.” She says vaguely and spears a slice of bell pepper with her fork and chews.

“What about them?” you ask and spy a muscle in Dirk’s jaw twitch in irritation for you to be talking to her but not him.

“It’s very complicated sweetie.” your mom says without even looking up.

“I read something about how if an academic can’t explain the basic principles of their research to a ten-year-old then they don’t understand it enough themselves, and Dave’s thirteen so…” Roxy says with a shrug, like she doesn’t care. She, of course, does care very much but that’s not the point.

Your mom slowly lowers the tablet and narrows her eyes at Roxy and then looks to you. You’re not going to back down after that move from Roxy.

“I am tracking the path of objects in space to determine what ones, if any, are going to come to Earth and what damage they might cause and where they might hit. This is difficult to do as the galaxy, the solar system, indeed the whole universe and everything in it are all moving away from each other at shocking speeds. Within our solar system our planets rotate around the sun and anything traversing through our solar system is affected by the gravity of these bodies which can do anything from swing an asteroid away from Earth or aim it so it levels this building. The math required to work this out is of the difficulty level would be if I were to fire a gun out of our window and open the precise bottle of wine that I wanted five miles away and let it pour into a glass that I could not see but only infer its presence by the objects around it. Was that easy to understand?” She asks you tartly.

“Pretty much. How close up can you tell though? Just like a state or an actual address?” you ask, genuinely curious.

“If I can finish this formula I will be able to tell you what room in a house it will hit. I'm just waiting on some work from a partner of mine.” she answers.

“Cool.” you say, and your mom smiles slightly. See, this is what you mean when you say that she’s just super bad at people. She likes her science and she likes people being interested in it, she’s just really bad at getting anyone there.

“Very cool.” She agrees and stands up and takes her plate into the kitchen.

“Dave, John said he wanted to watch that movie with us after dinner. We shouldn’t keep him waiting too long.” Rose reminds you and you nod, getting to your feet as well.

“It’d be a real shame if we missed whatever new film it is that John picked for us. What one was it
again? I stopped paying attention.” You say as you shove your plate into the dishwasher and Rose hands you hers. You can hear Dirk and Roxy talking at the table, quietly so that you can’t hear so no doubt it’s about you.

“Die Hard, I think.” Rose answers you.

“Holy shit I love that movie! Dirk and I watched it ages ago!” Roxy calls out to you two, and you exchange a look with Rose.

“Can I watch with you?” Roxy asks, walking up to you two and leaving Dirk alone.

You look at Rose. She knows Roxy is just spying for Dirk and you know that she is just spying for Dirk. She’s on his side. But what can she gain from this? Surely if she sees that you’re on edge but otherwise fine and still refusing to talk to him, then he might realise that you’re not going to budge until he gives you your weapons back.

“Sure.” you tell her, and she beams.

You watch the movie in Rose’s room, and it’s not as bad as you thought, but you could do without jumping at every explosion on the screen of which there are so many. You manage to mostly enjoy the movie but you think that you need to watch it again on your own sometime when you don’t feel like a trash fire inside.

When you sleep, you do restlessly. Unprotected and unarmed.

You dream of a sword hovering above you, getting lower with every tick of a metronome. It never quite touches you, but it always seems to be closer and closer still.

When you open your eyes the next morning you don’t really register anything at first, just the blaring of your alarm. It’s rare that you don’t sleep through it, usually someone else has to come in these days and shake you awake and turn it off for you. You sit up blearily and-

Bro! Bro with swords!

Oh, wait, no. Dirk is there and he has swords, not Bro. Your heart rate slowly drops back down into double digits as Dirk stands up with three swords tucked up under his arm. Your stolen swords in fact. His face is unreadable, and you’re not sure what to make of it when he walks up to you and dumps them in your arms.

“You’re giving them back?” you ask in surprise, you hadn’t really thought that Dirk would crack so soon. You had figured he might barter you into some kind of compromise first.

Dirk nods robotically, and you still can’t quite read his expression, but you wouldn’t put it on the positive side of things.

“Just… please don’t take them to school or therapy and don’t tell your doctor. You know what she can do. I don’t want to lose you.” He says stiffly.

You just get them back? He’s not going to lock them up and only let you have them when you’re allowed? Because what he said there didn’t sound like he was telling you what to do, it sounded like he was just pleading with you to work with him. You look up and see Dirk trailing out of the room. He seems broken. Like he was when Bro found out that Dirk likes guys and beat the shit out of him and you ran to your mom’s place, he would float around the place looking ill at ease to be out of control and looking so alone.
Before it was out of your control, but now you’re the one who isolated him, who rejected him. You clutch your swords closer and hear the metal rattle in the sheaths. This was what Bro wanted, you armed and alone. To Bro, Dirk was always the obstacle, you know it was you that he wanted. He attacked Dirk because he disliked him and he was in the way, but you know Bro had something else in mind for you. And here you are, shoving Dirk away so that you can stay with your weapons.

Well done, Dave, smart choice.

You drop your swords on the bed and scramble out from under the covers, rushing after Dirk. He doesn’t even look around at you. You’ve got your swords back, and you’re losing Dirk. You accused him of being like BRO! You fling yourself at him and wrap your arms around his waist, you’re the dumbest asshole, it is you.

Sure, Dirk could have not been a dick, but you didn’t have to go all nuclear option on him!

“I’m sorry.” You say into his back, all muffled by his shirt.

“I didn’t mean it… about you and Bro. I was just- fuck, I was freaking out about not having them. And you shouldn’t have to always be the one fighting people off for me, I’m not a baby anymore.” You try desperately to explain. You hate being powerless, but you hate being a burden. You don’t want to need your swords, but you do because you’re probably more broken than you doctor can fix. You may never feel like you’re not in danger but it’s your problem, and this is the only way that you can deal with it but goddamnit Dirk is more important.

Dirk’s hands touch your arms and he pats your skin slightly, like he’s trying to comfort you but is too scared to do it properly.

“There’s no one to fight, though.” He says reasonably.

“Better safe than dead.” You answer back. Maybe one day you won’t need them, and you’ll grow up never having to fight ever again, but it’s still too soon. You just can’t do it right now. Maybe next year will be the year you can put your swords down forever, you could try for that perhaps. Then you could give them to Dirk, and he’d feel better too.

Dirk twists in your grip so he’s looking down at you and he touches your cheeks gently and runs his thumbs over your cheekbones. He used to do this before, to get a good look at you to see if Bro had damaged anything small but vital like your eyes. You suppose it’s habit.

“Just not school or the doctor, please?” Dirk begs you and you nod. Compromise, you can do that.

Dirk hugs you, and he’s leant over so that you just fit under his chin. One day you’re going to be tall enough that you can’t do this anymore, the thought is more than a touch melancholy. Dirk sighs deeply and lets you go.

“I’m sorry I took your swords, I’m- the threat of losing you does things to my head, you know?” Dirk says with a sigh and runs a hand through his messed up hair. Did he even sleep last night?

Still, you know that Dirk has a huge ‘protect Dave at all costs’ martyr complex. You can thank Bro for that, but it’s rare for it to cause problems like this.

“Yeah, but you’ve never turned on me for it before.” You say to him.

“Well, you’ve never been the thing making that threat happen before.” Dirk says stiffly, and you know that you’re not going to win any more than you already have here. What was it that Jake has tattooed on his arm for Dirk again? Oh yeah, a shield and a sword, representing the whole myth of
the unstoppable force and the immovable object. That’s Dirk alright. You’re lucky to have got your swords back at all. Perhaps this is time for a tactical retreat.

You take a step back, and Dirk speaks again, halting you in your tracks.

“Okay, well, I need to get dressed for classes. And I’m not sure if you’ll be able to reach me on pesterchum or anything else, not unless you go through Hal first. I don’t know how he’s set it up.” Dirk says cryptically.


“Hal changed my passwords to everything, I’m locked out of pesterchum.” Dirk grumbles.

Okay, that’s weird. Dirk and Hal fight but Hal has never punished Dirk by removing his access to things. He prefers to fuck with him in other ways. This really seems more like… oh. Oh, that’s classic.

“He doesn’t approve of you giving me my swords back.” You say, and Dirk nods. That’s it, you are right!

“And so he’s punishing you by taking your things away because he doesn’t trust your judgement and figures that if he does it long enough, you’ll do what he wants. Wow, I can’t imagine how shitty that feels.” You say mockingly, and Dirk looks supremely uncomfortable.

“Man, actual irony sucks. But, yes, that’s pretty accurate.” Dirk concedes, and you try to stifle some of your laughter. Dirk is getting treated like as much of a kid as Dirk was treating you before! That is really funny from a karma angle.

“Well, have fun with that. I’m going to go stash my swords in my room, seeing as I’m going to school unarmed.” You tell him and walk back to your room laughing.

You go to school after that, and Roxy hangs in the parking lot typing up a memo to everyone who talks to Dirk explaining why he’s missing and that if Dirk ‘suddenly’ starts talking to someone that it’s likely to not be Dirk but rather Hal pretending to be him. You also think that she’s waiting for her soulmate to show up, and sure enough her interest in her phone drops when Sollux walks up to her.

“Thanks for telling me that Dave was at yours.” She says upfront and Sollux shrugs like he couldn’t care less.

“It’s whatever, he’s your brother, and he’s actually pretty cool. No idea how he’s related to you.” Sollux replies and Roxy huffs in irritation.

“I was raised separately if it helps.” You chip in, and Roxy makes an indignant noise which just makes Sollux laugh.

“I was thinking, there’s a thing where you can get an open source neural network online, and they’re pretty dumb and all but you can teach them some fun stuff.” Sollux starts to say, and you tune him out as Karkat walks up to you with Kanaya at his side. Sollux is going on about making something or the other a competition, so it’s of no interest to you.

“Hey.” You say to Karkat who beams at you and then does his best to suppress that reaction.

“Hey.” He answers back.

“Thrilling dialogue.” Rose snarks and Kanaya hands her a cup of something in a thermos.
“I did promise you that I would make some of my pumpkin tea.” Kanaya says with a bashful smile, and Rose clicks the thermos open and sniffs reverently. She takes a long sip and groans in delight.

“Kanaya, this is delightful. How can one woman have so many hidden talents?” Rose purrs. Gross. Oh and now Kanaya is getting all bashful, mega gross.

You look at Karkat instead, that’s far better. Not that you look at Karkat recreationally or think he’s attractive or anything. You take in his round cheeks and dark lips with white teeth denting their plush- ok, this is very, very gay. What was it the doc said? That it’s just a thought? You should let it pass. So… ok you’ve just been thinking decidedly gay things about Karkat’s face and his mouth. That’s a thing. You’re gonna not think about what that means about you or him or-

“Are you even listening to me?” Karkat demands loudly, and you blink, your train of thought derailed.

“Wha?” You respond, and Karkat rolls his eyes.

“I was trying to quietly ask you if things were okay with you and Dirk or not now.” Karkat says snippily.

“Oh. Right, sorry. Not awake yet, my brain’s all scrambled right now. I- uh, no we’re mostly cool now. He backed down a little, we compromised.” You answer, and you do not look at his mouth at all.

“Good, I’m glad. Not that I was worried about you StriLondes, you’re all massive disasters all of the time anyway.” Karkat blusters, and you grin at him. The dude is so transparent.

“Speaking of Dirk, or rather as Karkat was loudly yelling about him, I was wondering if he was okay.” Kanaya says carefully, her eyes fixed on yours.

“Uh, yeah. I mean, why wouldn’t he be?” you say in confusion.

“Oh, I could not say, perhaps he has a sore throat? I think that goes around this time of year in your species. Throat related things.” Kanaya asks awkwardly.

“I don’t- not that I know of.” You tell her.

“AH! Fuck!” Rose hisses suddenly, and the thermos of pumpkin tea clatters to the ground and spills out around your feet. She is clutching tightly at her wrist and her face is scrunched in pain.

“Did you burn yourself? You could go to the nurse if you did.” Karkat says in worry, but Rose shakes her head.

After a moment your twin straightens up with a pained hiss and pulls her hand away from her wrist. Right there on the thin, pale skin of her inner wrist is the same green Spirograph that you have. That Nepeta also has, and that is etched in stone that is who knows how old.

“Wow, that hurts more on thinner skin.” Rose complains, twisting her wrist this way and that. Kanaya is looking at the mark wide-eyed.

“Hey, we match.” Rose laughs and pokes you in the arm right where your identical mark is hidden under your long sleeves.

“Hey, Sollux!” You call out, and the bicoloured troll looks over at you with an annoyed expression on his face.

You grab Rose’s wrist and hold it up, that damn sure gets his attention. Rose pulls her hand free and glares at you for showing off the new part of her mark without her permission but before she can pull her sleeve back down Sollux has flown up into the air, landed and is staring at it.

“It’s exactly the same.” He whispers.

His head whips up and he looks at Kanaya with narrowed eyes.

“Have you seen that symbol before?” He asks her.

“I- yes, of course. On Dave’s arm, and Nepeta’s.” Kanaya answers shiftily.

“I think he meant besides those places.” You point out, and Kanaya looks shiftily at each of you.

“I am sure that I could not say, but I am also sure that it is nothing that you should worry about. Strange coincidences happen all of the time. Like now when the bell is ringing. I must go or else I shall be late to math, good morning to you all.” Kanaya says in one long breath and then rushes away. It is very obvious that the bell is not ringing at all.

“That was suspicious.” Rose remarks and you nod.

“You, find out what the hell that was about. I need to know about that symbol.” Sollux says, pointing his finger in Karkat’s face.

“For your crazy conspiracy board, you mean? I’ll ask, but if she doesn’t want to say then I’m not going to make her, she’s allowed secrets and this seems like a pretty innocuous thing to have a secret about if you ask me.” Karkat says, looking irritated.

“It’s not like it matters, Sollux. I already know that Kanaya is my soulmate, if whatever this mark is represents something that she wants to keep secret for now I’m okay with that. It doesn’t change anything for me, I know that there is so much I still have to learn about her.” Rose says calmly and picks up the fallen thermos.

“That’s really sweet Rose.” Karkat says dreamily, and you roll your eyes.

“You, find out what the hell that was about. I need to know about that symbol.” Sollux says, pointing his finger in Karkat’s face.

“For your crazy conspiracy board, you mean? I’ll ask, but if she doesn’t want to say then I’m not going to make her, she’s allowed secrets and this seems like a pretty innocuous thing to have a secret about if you ask me.” Karkat says, looking irritated.

“It’s not like it matters, Sollux. I already know that Kanaya is my soulmate, if whatever this mark is represents something that she wants to keep secret for now I’m okay with that. It doesn’t change anything for me, I know that there is so much I still have to learn about her.” Rose says calmly and picks up the fallen thermos.

“That’s really sweet Rose.” Karkat says dreamily, and you roll your eyes.

“You, find out what the hell that was about. I need to know about that symbol.” Sollux says, pointing his finger in Karkat’s face.

“For your crazy conspiracy board, you mean? I’ll ask, but if she doesn’t want to say then I’m not going to make her, she’s allowed secrets and this seems like a pretty innocuous thing to have a secret about if you ask me.” Karkat says, looking irritated.

“It’s not like it matters, Sollux. I already know that Kanaya is my soulmate, if whatever this mark is represents something that she wants to keep secret for now I’m okay with that. It doesn’t change anything for me, I know that there is so much I still have to learn about her.” Rose says calmly and picks up the fallen thermos.

“That’s really sweet Rose.” Karkat says dreamily, and you roll your eyes.

“You, find out what the hell that was about. I need to know about that symbol.” Sollux says, pointing his finger in Karkat’s face.

“For your crazy conspiracy board, you mean? I’ll ask, but if she doesn’t want to say then I’m not going to make her, she’s allowed secrets and this seems like a pretty innocuous thing to have a secret about if you ask me.” Karkat says, looking irritated.

“It’s not like it matters, Sollux. I already know that Kanaya is my soulmate, if whatever this mark is represents something that she wants to keep secret for now I’m okay with that. It doesn’t change anything for me, I know that there is so much I still have to learn about her.” Rose says calmly and picks up the fallen thermos.

“Come on, boys, we have Spanish, and my shoes now smell like pumpkin tea, and that does not please me.” Rose declares, hooking one arm with yours and grabbing the arm of Karkat’s sweater with her other hand.

You spend the whole day thinking about that new mark and the whole mystery of what it means. You pester Sollux between and in some classes as new ideas come to you.

[turmttechGodhead began pestering twinArmageddons]
TG: did you try reverse google image searching it?
TA: of cour2e ii diid, what kiind of tool do you take me for?
TG: i take it you got nothing then
TA: preciicely nothiing. which ii2 2uper weirdd becau2e u2ually google at lea2t 2piit2 out unrelated 2hiit that confu2ed iit2 programmeing.
TG: damn
[turntechGodhead is an idle chum]
TA: fuck! ii don't know why ii didn't think of thii2 2ooner. you have an aii, why don't you get iit two look?
TG: an aii?
TA: artifificial iintelligence numbnut2. the one that you have that nuked my 2y2tem before.
TG: oh hal
TG: i don't HAVE him
TG: hes a person not a thing
TA: whatever, be the pocahonta2 of aii on your own tiime. a2k hiim two 2earch through any iimage2 he can fiind for iit.
TG: i cant im not talking to him right now because hes being a douchelord
TA: 2eriou2ly??
TG: yea
TA: ugh
[twinArmageddons is an idle chum]
TA: you 2aid you've 2een iit before but liike how many people do you even know?
TG: getting the feeling i should be insulted here dude
TA: do what you gotta do. ruliing out both of our famiiliie2 how many people do you know well enough two have 2een theiir 2oulmark2?
TG: dunno like the english harley siblings and the john and his sister
TG: but john hasnt got his yet and we are all damn sure that jane is roxys other soulmate
TG: other than that i guess glimpses of other students or people on the street but its not like i gawp at that crap
TA: then the fiir2t two people you mentiioned, could iit be eiither of them? could you check?
TG: god youre thirsty. but yeah i can hit them up.
TA: thii2 my2tery ii2 driiviing me crazy and ii need more data 2triider, ii 2wear ii wiill owe you iiif you fiind me another mark.
TG: ill remember that

You lean against your locker while everyone else finishes getting dressed and you message Jake and Jade.

[turntechGodhead opened a memo ‘weird question time’]
TG: hey you two i have the titular weird question for you both
TG: could you send me photos of your soulmarks getting like all of them in the picture or several pictures?
GG: mine is pretty dull so far tbh :( 
GG: just a little green pawprint and i think it might even be a cat print! my soulmate is a cat person!
TG: hah! thats funny i know a girl obsessed with cats who has a green dog print on her arm
TG: uh actually maybe i might pass you her details if you like
GG: nah! i prefer the mystery of meeting on my own!
GG: but here you go!
[gardenGnostic attached file mymark.jpg]
TG: thanks jade
GT: Hello dave!
TG: hey jake
GT: Why are you collecting pictures of marks? Also shouldnt you be in school?
TG: between classes its cool
TG: also a new friend of mine is running some project about marks so im helping him out
GG: oooh science
TG: cant say no to science
GT: I can hardly argue with that! Give me a tick this might take some elusive camera wrangling.
GG: or i could just come take a picture of you dummy where are you?
GT: Ah yes that might work. I am all settled in the greenhouse trying to count the pumpkins and take stock of our less ephemeral vegetables!
TG: i will never understand how you can lose a pumpkin
GG: us neither
GG: ok im just gonna snap these and send them over!!
[gardenGnostic attached files jake1.jpg, jake2.jpg, jake3.jpg, beclicksjake.jpg]
GT: Damn dog! Now i am all gross and slobber!
GG: that last ones a keeper dave! frame that and give it to dirk! :D
TG: oh i will
TG: thanks guys

You open all of the photos, Jades isn’t especially interesting, so you ignore that for now as you walk to history. Jake has far more marks, and it’s always interesting to see the new bits of your brother on his skin but right there on his forearm in one of the pictures is that same mark that you have. You must have seen it in some other photo or a video chat with Jade. What the hell is that thing?

The soulmate connection makes it weirder because you don’t know who Nepeta’s soulmate is, though if it’s Jade that would be all kinds of freaky. Rose has the same mark and Kanaya obvious know what it is but won’t say. You could ask Dirk about it when you get home but that gives you no answers now and thanks to Hal you can’t pester him. You have it and Karkat- well, you’re not thinking about that.

[turntechGodhead began pestering twinArmageddons]
TG: boom bitches
[turntechGodhead attached file jake3.jpg]
TG: dirks soulmate has it
TG: ill even ask dirk about it later because i am all up in this mystery business now
TA: fuck ye2222
TG: were doing this bro
TA: yeah!
TG: were making it happen
TA: what?
TG: just go with it
TA: fiine.
TA: yeah!
TG: ok i gotta go or im gonna lose my phone
TG: but were on this. scooby doo aint got shit on us
TA: you are 2o lame
[turntechGodhead ceased pestering twinArmageddons]
I hope you liked it all. I'm also gonna be posting a Dirk chapter tomorrow that takes place in this chapter and might be of interest to those people who had been wanting to see more of Dirk on Derse >:D
Whoops, I forgot to tell all of you that I was going on holiday... and then we had sudden guests for like... a week. So so sorry. But here's the new chapter and art too! Also after this I'm going to do a side chapter (or perhaps after the next chapter) because the problem with having Dave and Karkat as our POV people all the time is that things they are too dumb to notice, or don't care about or aren't there for don't get shown.

The community centre main hall is packed as it so often is, the lights are low and focused on your ancestors in the centre and also on anyone who is asking them a question or making an argument. Now that you’re older you’re allowed to sit in the front rows, and Signless has even asked you to speak on topics that you know a lot about, like integrating with humans as an adolescent, trolls in human media and how it makes humans see you, and so on. Kankri, however, has not been invited to speak and it’s done nothing for your already poor relationship with him.

The mood of the hall tonight is sour, and people aren’t responding to Signless’s arguments well at all tonight. You can feel the discontent bubbling in the room, and it feels infectious like it’s spread from one troll to another. One guy, in particular, has been arguing back all night and you grind your teeth together in frustration.

“The important thing is that we’re all in this together, it’s a community, and we’re all-” Signless says soothingly to the crowd.

“No we’re NOT!” The guy shouts, leaping to his feet. You see Psii twitch and his gaze narrow tightly on the troll just in case.

“It’s your fault we’re all stuck here! This is a prison that we’re stuck in because of YOU!” He yells.

“How about you SHUT THE FUCK UP!” you shout and, oh, you are already right in the centre on the stage in the spotlight. It’s not that you’re not shy, it’s more that you do things first and panic when it’s too late.

“Karkat!” Signless gasps.

You glare at the startled guy who yelled and you figure, what the fuck, you’re already up here.

“It’s not his fault!” you shout, and the man seems to recover from his shock.

“Yes, it is! It’s because of him that we’re not allowed to go back home!” He argues, and you shake your head.

“No, the Empress decided that, not Signless. He has no reason to keep people here at all. She hates him, and she’s trapping people here because she knows that he’s right and she’s scared of him!” you argue furiously.

“Hah! See? It is because of him, even his own descendant admits it!” The man crows gleefully.

“I didn’t admit SHIT, you MORONIC CROTCHBLISTER! Just because she’s doing this
BECAUSE of him doesn’t make it his fault. If I go punch my brother in the face because you made me angry that doesn’t make it your fault, it would be mine! If anything her trapping people here is for this exact purpose, to pit us against each other instead of her!” you snap.

“He should turn himself in then, if he does we can leave!” The man argues and several people in the audience cheer at that.

“Oh, oh man, I hadn’t thought of that. Hey, hey Darkleer, maybe I’m so stupid that my thinkspoonge has dribbled out of my ears but what was it that the Empress ordered you to do to ANYONE suspected of colluding with Signless the last time he was caught?” you ask in fake surprise, turning to the tall troll near Equius. The man lowers his head in shame, but it’s an important point and needs to be made.

“She ordered their deaths, even the slightest suspicion counted.” Darkleer says weakly, and you ignore the sympathetic pale sounding chirp coming from the direction of your mom because you are not thinking of that at ALL. NOPE.

“Hey, looks like you’re here at a sermon, you’re as good as dead if she catches you. Nothing Signless can do will make that bitch let you go back to Alternia like none of this happened. I’m sorry that you got caught up in all of this if you didn’t sign up for it but, hey, welcome to the club. Deal with it, shit for brains. Not all of us want to be here, fuck, a large number of us were born here and were effectively guilty from the first beat of our bloodpushers but that doesn’t mean that bitching about it will help. If you’ve got any ideas to make this disaster misery spiral of a situation better then share, otherwise deal with that crap on your own like everyone else does.” you tell him.

“We should-” The guy tries, and he squirms under the light.

“There must be something.” he adds, and you continue to wait. The guy looks down at the ground, and you realise that he’s younger than Signless is. He’s… olive you think? It’s hard to see his shirt with the way that he’s gripping it.

“I hate it here.” He says quietly.

“I’m sorry.” you tell him, and the silence stretches.

“Is… is there a reason that you want to go back? Aside from being stuck somewhere that you don’t wanna be?” you ask cautiously, and the troll looks back at you again with watery eyes.

“My moirail is back there, I was only supposed to be away for half a sweep, but it’s been so long. I don’t even know if she’s still-” He says brokenly, and your soul aches for him.

“I’m sorry, that sucks so bad. I know so many of us have people that they’re separated from and it still is just as shitty each time. But… don’t you think it’d be easier to work together to fix this mess so you can go back? Rather than all of us fighting each other like a bunch of disorganised children we could actually get shit done.” you say.

“So what do you think we should do?” someone else shouts out at you and you turn, but you can’t see who it was.

“Man, that is not my job. I’m thirteen fucking years old, what do you want from me? I just know that a bunch of adults that can fly spaceships, chart new planets and build massive weapons shouldn’t be asking me for tactical advice!” you shout back, and a few people laugh.

“I mean, just… look. Darkleer is a massively skilled engineer, same with his kids. The Psiionic is the strongest psionic ever known and he’s a computer genius, The Disciple knows more about our
history and knows everyone, Mindfang and Redglare are tactical geniuses and Dolorosa is so hardcore that she died and kept on going. And- what did you do before the Empress trapped you here?" you ask the olive blood as you turn back to look at him.

“I was… I was working on a way to make faster than light travel without a helmsman. Earth has some resources that could make that happen.” He answers you awkwardly.

“Fuck yeah!” Psii shouts from the other end of the room with a few approving cheers from other yellowbloods around.

“Well, shit, why the hell are you asking ME what you should be doing when you can be doing that? The Empress obviously wants to know how that’s done and if we know how then we’re in a better position than her. That’d sure as shit sway a lot of psionics back on Alternia to join us rather than being helmsmen.” you laugh excitedly, and a hell of a lot of people cheer. The olive guy’s cheeks go dark with embarrassment.

“She’s scared of all of you and she fucking SHOULD be. She hates Signless because he tells people that they’re better off working together against her than fighting each other. If we’re arguing in these meetings rather than planning how to beat her, then she wins. She traps us here so we fight and she traps everyone else back on Alternia in blood caste struggles, rich and poor struggles, psionic and not psionic struggles. So maybe stop shouting at the guy trying to help and start working together so we can make her PAY.” you yell.

That thing happens, where you’ve lost your shit in some long rant and suddenly it stops. Either because you ran out of steam or you say something dumb, but there’s this sudden absence of sound for a second after. It’s all the time that you need to realise that you’ve just been shouting at an adult troll, that you’ve just taken over your parents meeting to yell at people like a child having a tantrum and-

And the moment passes. That second passes and right after it the whole room explodes in cheers and applause and holy fuck it is deafening. They’re all around you, and you stumble back slightly in shock. The idea bounces around the inside of your head that they’re applauding you and what you said. Signless’s hand lands on your shoulder, you look up at him in shock, part of you is convinced that he’s going to be mad that you took over like this. He reasons with people, makes peace, sees things the way that other people do; whereas you just yelled. But he doesn’t look angry, he’s smiling and he actually looks… proud. He’s proud of you.

Signless looks around at the room with a smile and as the applause finally dies down he begins to speak.

“I don’t know what the future holds and I know we can never get the past that we should have had. We will never live in a reality where we weren’t torn from our homes, kept from our loved ones or lost them. Even if we succeed in any of our goals we cannot fix those things, but I can see the potential we have. I can see the line that stretches from us to our descendants and that it is our job to make the universe a better place for them. A place without prejudice from humans to us, without the hemospectrum, without judgement about how and who we love, a place where we are not confined against our will. I can see that we can work together and make that real, we have to, it is our responsibility.” Signless tells the room.

After that everything bursts into excited and determined conversations about what practical things people can offer to help, what goals can be made and met, diagrams are drawn. Eventually, you and your siblings slip outside, there’s nothing you have to offer here.

“Holy shit Karkat.” Sollux exclaims and shoves your arm with a certain amount of roughness.
“I do not think that yelling was the best way to get your point across Karkat.” Kankri says snidely, and you turn to look at him.

“Oh, put a sock in it Kankri. Karkat did purrfect for his first big debate, you’re just jealous.” Nepeta scolds him, and Kankri glares at her.

“I am not nearly childish enough to be jealous, I could have gone up and fruitlessly berated a man if I wanted to, I just had more self-restraint.” Kankri says waspishly and marches off.

“I can’t believe they really liked me that much though.” you whisper in awe.

“You were saying some really real things though, sometimes I think the others need someone to remind them to stop whining and you did that. I mean, I’m not going to tell you to shout all of the time because you basically do that already but sometimes your bitchfits have a use.” Sollux says, being backhanded with his compliments like always.

Nepeta is on the steps of the community centre grinning up at you.

“So, Karkitty, do you feel like you could pounce on any challenge right now? Like… you’re extra lucky and could talk anyone into anything?” Nepeta asks brightly.

“I…” you hesitate and remember the thunder of applause in your ears, you were fucking great in there.

“Yeah! I do!” you answer.

“Brilliant, because your soulmate is sat right in the park over there and you should go talk to him. Convince him to finally let you sweep him off of his feet at last!” Nepeta chirps and you rush down the steps to see Dave sat in the grassy park right near the community centre. His white blonde hair is shining in the evening sunlight and your pulse thuds just from seeing him.

A round of ominous crowing makes you look around to see that one of the trees in the nearby park is FULL of crows and even on the ground Dave is surrounded by crows.

“Yeah, let’s see which is harder. Talking a group of adults into a revolution against the Empress herself or finally getting DV to suck face with you.” Sollux snickers, you hate that he calls him that and that he and Dave sometimes hang out and play games and talk to each other. You are not petty and jealous, honest.

“Go on, make my ships canon.” Nepeta urges you. You roll your eyes at her embarrassing behaviour but, let’s be honest, it really doesn’t take much encouragement before you’re rushing over the short distance of grass towards Dave. Several of the crows take flight as you get there, angrily cawing and the one that was sat on Dave’s knee flutters up in the air screeching at you but lands again on Dave’s shoulder.

“Hey Karkat, look, the crows found me again. Look, you remember Bowie, right?” Dave asks brightly, holding out his hand and the crow on his shoulder hops onto his wrist.

You look up at the tree and see an unsettlingly large number of black eyes looking down at you.

“You’re like a creepy Disney princess.” you tell him and Dave chuckles.

“Less with the singing and dresses and more with the sick raps and crows.” Dave says in amusement, and you cautiously sit down next to him. The crow, Bowie, watches you but things don’t go full Hitchcock’s The Birds so you figure you’re allowed.
“You’re doing your level best to make Edgar Allan Poe jizz in his medieval shorts.” you add.

“Wasn’t he Victorian?” Dave says and scratches the back of Bowie’s neck.

“You assume I care.” you point out and Dave grins.

“How goes setting right the wrongs of all trollkind?” Dave questions you and you can see his red eye looking right at you from the way he’s facing straight ahead. The dumbass needs to learn that you can see where he’s looking if he’s not facing you dead on. Or maybe he does know and doesn’t care that you see.

“Frustrating. It’s just long and hard, and I swear to god if you turn this into a dick joke I will murder you.” you say because you can already hear how your words sound. Dave just chuckles quietly and your insides fizz at the sound, you are so utterly destroyed by Dave sometimes.

“Oh, unrelated to dicks for once, I meant to ask you something in class and totally forgot, so I’m kinda glad I ran into you here. We’re throwing a Halloween party and since the 31st is a Friday this year, it’s gonna be sweet. More candy than you know what to do with, scary movies for people who that’s their thing, dumb party games and such. I mean I know Roxy’s inviting a bunch of people and we get to invite a load each. To be honest, I think the three of us are just gonna collab on invites because our friends all have so much goddamn overlap. But… I wanted to ask you if you wanted to come.” Dave says, his voice sounding a little hesitant at the end.

“Of course I do.” you say embarrassingly quickly, but the slight smile on Dave’s face rewards you.

“It’s gonna be costumes, but I’m still not sure what mine is yet. Considering as most twins do the double themed costumes for Halloween and Rose and I have literally never done that then we might do that for max irony but who knows.” Dave says and strokes a finger delicately down Bowie’s back.

“You could take inspiration from Bowie and dress as David Bowie.” you suggest, and Dave makes a thoughtful noise.

“Maybe, but I’d have to lose the shades then and that ain’t happening unless it’s a really good costume. Besides I would be tempted to go as David Bowie from the Labyrinth just to fuck with Rose because she swears that film made her gay, the sight of David Bowie’s dick vacuum sealed into skintight pants turned her off dudes forever. Her words. But for one thing I don’t own or want to own that kind of outfit, and I also hated the puppets in that movie. I hate puppets, man.” Dave says with a shudder.

“What about… aren’t those stupid glasses from some celebrity or something? You could make a costume from that maybe.” you ask as if you don’t still have the note that his friend gifted them to him with.

“I am not doing Ben Stiller cosplay man, no way, no how. Though if I did I bet Roxy could contour the shit outta me so that I’d get that weird sorta gaunt look he has. But nah. Maybe I could go more abstract and do like a concept.” Dave says thoughtfully.

“Like irony? I know you’re going to say irony, sometimes you know I really hate you, and I think talking to you makes me dumber.” you snap before he can finish that set-up.

“Well, why do you keep talking to me then?” Dave challenges you.

“Clearly because talking to you the first time ruined my brain.” you say smartly and, well, you’re not wrong.
“I should come with a warning label,” he says sagely and nods.

“Well, whatever. I’m sure you’ll think of something, I’ll have to come up with something too,” you say, and Dave rustles with a package of unsalted peanuts and fishes one out and feeds it to Bowie who eats it hungrily. He hands you one, and you nervously hold it out to her and find that she’s quite gentle as she takes it from between your fingers.

“Rose is gonna do fancy invitations, so you’ll get one of them but I figured I’d just ask you like a normal person.” Dave tells you.

“Thanks.” you say, touched that he made an effort to ask you in person.

“Oh, and also they probably won’t make Halloween but at some point after one of my friends is coming here to visit with his sister.” Dave adds.

“What friend?” you ask him sceptically and Dave frowns at you.

“I didn’t mean it like that, I’m not saying you don’t have friends that I don’t know. I’m asking who it is.” you say defensively. Secretly you might have meant it a little bit like that.

“My friend John, he lives out of state so we’ve never actually met, but we’ve talked for years. Rose has actually known him longer. His older sister Jane is probably Roxy’s other soulmate too.” Dave explains, and you nod. You feel a slight prickle of jealousy at someone having been Dave’s friend longer than you who isn’t blood-related to him. You’re fine with Rose having a stronger connection to Dave than you do, the pair of them shared a goddamn womb, how much closer can you be?

“What’s he like?” you ask because you are nothing if not self-destructively jealous.

“He’s great!” Dave says brightly and oh, yeah, there goes that sick crawling feeling inside of you.

“He’s funny but he’s a total dweeb though, he’s big into like… old school comedy and practical jokes. The guy will try to prank you just FYI, so be wary of that. He’s big into movies like you are, though not romances, more bad action movies. The guy adores Ghostbusters and Con Air if that gives you an idea of his movie taste. I’m just really psyched to meet him. You two will get on like a house on fire I’m sure.” Dave says cheerfully, and you wonder why a burning building is meant to be a good thing and feel pretty sure that one way or another it will be like a house on fire.

“So how come you’re hanging out here?” you ask, smoothly changing the subject.

“Well, you know, done all my homework already. Also Dirk’s not home yet, I’m still not talking to Hal and you were off saving the world, plus Rose and Rox are in this stationary lady blitz of making invites. That’s so not my jam and I don’t have therapy today so I thought that I could just go outside and enjoy the not horrifyingly burning heat and sunshine and holy shit i just said that one part that I hadn’t told you about before and now I’m just like, pointing it out. What the hell? Can you just pretend that you heard none of that and I can answer the question again please?” Dave rambles with increasing levels of panic. He clearly didn’t mean to just mention therapy in the middle of his sentence like that.

He’s actually gone pale, or paler in fact, and you can see how tight his hands are fisted in the grass at his sides.

“Can I tell you something?” you ask quietly, and Dave looks puzzled but nods, perhaps he thinks that you’re dropping the subject.

“I kind of already knew about that.” you tell him softly, and Dave stares at you.
“I- wh- how?” Dave stammers out.

“You’re always busy on the same nights every week, I know something about how shitty your past was, I know how into the psychiatry thing Rose is and if I’m honest I’ve seen that you keep medication by your bed. It looks like similar stuff to what Sollux and the rest of his line have, they’re all on therapy and medication too. I just figured you didn’t want to talk about it and it was rude to just stick my foot in there. I do have some tact sometimes you know.” you point out and Dave stares at you, he’s not even giving you the kind of smug smirk that you had expected.

“I just… forget it, it’s really stupid.” Dave mutters and shakes his head.

“No, you can tell me.” you say, like the desperate fuck you are. Emotional intimacy with Dave Strider? Sign your ass the fuck up. Normally you have to dig through layers of rambling and Freudian slips to get to the real shit.

Dave kneels up in front of you, and Bowie flies off with an indignant squawk and lands on the grass nearby. Dave tenses and untenses his hands a few times and if this were someone else you’d think they were winding up to punch you but with Dave you know it’s a stress thing. When did you learn his stress tells anyway?

“It’s stupid because I have this thought which is- I’ve got no right thinking it, so I try not to but here we are. And I know we don’t talk about the whole ‘are you my soulmate thing or not’ because I am an asshole.” Dave babbles anxiously.

“You’re not an asshole.” you assure him.

“I am, but it’s ok. I just didn’t want you to know because like… I was worried you’d think less of me or you wouldn’t want me anymore which is like, so very very gay anyway. But also I’ve got no right thinking that if I’m telling you that we can’t be what you want because I don’t want that because like if I didn’t want that at all then why the hell would I care if me being in therapy like a crazy person would put you off of me? If anything that should be like, my silver lining to the whole thing. So I should have told you. But I didn’t because I didn’t want… it’s really shitty isn’t it?” Dave says with a shake of his head.

Your mouth may or may not be hanging open in shock. Did Dave just indirectly confess to wanting you to like him?

Dave is still talking.

“Like, hey, I’m not gonna do anything about being with you but I still apparently really want you to want me. Fuck, I’m not sure if that’s messed up or hella egotistical or both. I’m sure Rose could tell me. I’d ask if I wanted her to ruin my brain and/or self-esteem.” Dave laughs awkwardly.

“It doesn’t change anything about… how I think of you or what I- what I feel.” you manage to say, and Dave nods dumbly. Or at least he does until he throws himself into your arms awkwardly in the most ineptly executed hug you’ve ever had. It may also be your favourite.

“Sorry.” He mutters into your sweater.

“For what?” you ask, and Dave pulls back.

You can see yourself reflected in his sunglasses, wide-eyed and staring with embarrassingly dark cheeks.

“For… I mean…” Dave mumbles, and you lean a little closer.
“Yeah?” you say dumbly, and Dave makes this noise that sounds like it should be speech but it isn’t quite, but it’s hesitant and unsure.

When the tip of your nose brushes his you think your heart probably stops and part of the spell breaks. You’re this close to kissing him, and you really could do it, you could lean in and press your lips to his and- and then he’d likely freak out and run away. So you shouldn’t kiss him, but he seems like he’s thinking about it too so maybe you can just sit here and want it really badly at him and hope that he gets the fucking hint before you die.

“I’m trying to-” Dave says, his voice a little hoarse but he jolts when a car horn goes off behind him on the road. When laughter sounds he jerks back from you like you burnt him and he whirls around to look at the car. You can see it too. It’s a truck with all of the windows down and it’s filled with, for lack of a better word, bros. They’re laughing and jeering at the pair of you with a wide range of homophobic insults.

“Fuck off, you shitweasels!” you screech at them, staggering to your feet. The bros laugh, and you feel a woosh of displaced air on your skin and, yeah, Dave isn’t here any longer.

“Aww, did we scare your boyfriend away?” one of them jeers and you clench your fists and storm down there.

The douchebro’s eyes go wide with shock which morphs into utter terror, you have a half second of thinking that you’re not that scary before cold fear skitters up your spine. You whip around to see one of the teenage trolls who lives at the community centre standing on the steps. His name is Gamzee, and you sometimes hang out with him as a favour to Signless. He and his brother were one of those trolls who was conceived with someone off planet because troll reproduction can sometimes be as weird as the human kind. But they never had an ancestor on Earth and so the community took them in, they’re impossible to foster because their highblood psionics make them difficult to deal with. They can’t stay with you because even latent chucklevoodoos can set Psii off when he’s sleeping which would raze your house to the ground and kill everyone in it.

Those chucklevoodoos are what is going on right now, and Gamzee knows full fucking well that he’s not meant to use them on humans.

“Gamzee!” you yell at him.

Behind you the sound of tyres squeal and you spin around to see the car of douchebros gunning the engine, they’re all losing their minds and one of them is even trying to break a window from the inside to get out. The car launches itself across the road, spins wildly around the corner and then crashes right into a lamp post.

You rush back to the community centre and shove Gamzee inside, into one of the areas that a meeting isn’t being held, Sollux and Nepeta help you move him because despite him being the same age as you he’s way taller.

“You can’t just do that to humans!” you hiss angrily.

“They’re all fine my little invertibrother, besides, I didn’t give them no more fear than they gave your boy. That shit sang to me real loud.” Gamzee rambles as you shove him into his room.

“Are you high again?” Sollux asks as he picks Gamzee up with his psionics and drops him so that he’s sitting on his chest freezer that is shoved up against one wall of his room. Karkat doesn’t even know why he has that thing or where he got it, he doesn’t want to know.
You walk over to his bed and grab at his sopor blanket, the same kind that you have on your bed. Yours is cool and heavy, infused with sopor to lull you to sleep and keep the nightmares that plague your species at bay. Back on Alternia people just sleep in the raw stuff in its gelatinous form, but a decent number of trolls had a problem with either eating the stuff raw and getting high on it or cooking it with mind honey to produce more potent drugs. The trolls on Earth know better than to give raw sopor to people.

You pick up Gamzee’s blanket, toppling over the weird puppet that the highblood and his brother hang onto, and feel the blanket itself. It should be cool and weighty, but it’s not, or at least not uniformly so. It’s lighter and discoloured in places. Gamzee’s been getting the sopor out of it somehow.

You hold the thing up accusingly, and Gamzee at least has the decency to look mildly embarrassed at being caught.

“It ain’t no thing, I’m fine. A brother just gets lonely and needs to get his chill on sometimes, you know?” Gamzee says with a shrug and bounces his feet off of the side of the freezer as he swings his legs. You sit down on his bed with a sigh and curl your legs under you, what are you going to do with him?
God, you had Dave right in your hands and he was thinking of kissing you. You KNOW he was. Then those assholes had to come along and ruin it. You know Gamzee shouldn’t use his powers on them, that it’s bad for everyone if he does but fuck if they didn’t deserve it.

“I wish you could go to school with us Gamzee, it sucks that you can’t control your chucklevodoos enough to be there. Maybe you’d be better off if you could be around other people more.” Nepeta sighs.

“Really? Because I don’t know about you two but interacting with the assholes in my grade makes me regret being sober. I can’t see you dealing any better with it.” Sollux gripes and you wish, not for the first time, that he was in the same year in school as you.

“You still can’t use your chucklevodoos on people, even if they’re assholes. And let me tell you, boy do I ever pity you and Sollux because I’d be awful with psionics. My impulse control is-” you start to say.

“Clawful?” Nepeta purrs.

“Hilariously bad?” Sollux chips in.

“I hate you both, but yes.” you sigh.

Your phone pings in your pocket and Sollux and Nepeta share a knowing look with each other before looking at you. You fish the device out and look at it, it’s trollian of course.

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]

TG: so uh hey man
TG: i realise this is like one hell of a running theme for me the whole backflipping acrobatically off of the handle and blowing shit way out of proportion like a whiny baby throwing a fit over something insubstantial
TG: shit lil timmy no one cares about your applesauce and who the hell even does that to perfectly good apples anyway? should be a crime if you ask me
TG: the point that im spiralling down to inevitably is that shit was really uncool of me just to bail on you like that and you know me i am the coolest so i cannot abide uncool shit
CG: YOU ARE ABSOLUTELY NOT COOL IN ANY WAY EVER BUT GO ON
TG: karkat you wound me your arrow of cruelty is lodged deep within my breast
TG: my manly breast
TG: why do we say breast for chest even when youre a dude because im telling you man i aint got no sweet titties under this fine shirt of mine
TG: though i even have a banging rack at this age i mean i know i’m nearly fourteen but that is probably not sweet rack age just yet im a growing girl karkat i gotta mature although i suppose if i wanted to know what my body would be doing if i was a chick i could just look at rose i mean isnt that the point of twins and shes not exactly walking around with massive jugs and working at hooters
TG: hey totally unrelated question do you ever look at a thing that you wrote and instantly regret it
CG: FREQUENTLY. BUT I DON’T VEER INTO WEIRD SEXUAL TANGENTS ABOUT MY SIBLINGS AS OFTEN AS YOU DO. ISN’T ROSE KEEPING TRACK OF THESE? I SHOULD SEND A MESSAGE TO HER.
TG: wait no karkat dont you do me like that
CG: SORRY I CAN’T HEAR YOU OVER THE MESSAGE I’M TYPING TO ROSE
TG: why

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling tentacleTherapist]
CG: HEY ROSE
TT: Hello Karkat, I must admit I am surprised to hear from you. I don’t know where Dave is right now if you were about to ask me that.
CG: NO, I THINK HE’S ON THE WAY HOME TO YOURS. THAT WASN’T WHAT I WANTED.
TT: I see, what specific thing did you want? And also before we get into that I want to tell you that though there will be a pending formal invitation the StriLondes are hosting a Haloween party, and we would love for you to attend.
CG: I ALREADY KNOW ABOUT THAT, DAVE ASKED ME LIKE FIVE MINUTES AGO. WE RAN INTO EACH OTHER OUTSIDE THE COMMUNITY CENTRE. OR I RAN INTO HIM, HE WAS MINDING HIS OWN BUSINESS IN THE PARK.
TT: I see. He just happened to be there? What a surprising stroke of luck and happenstance.
CG: ARE YOU IMPLYING THAT HE WAS DELIBERATELY WAITING THERE FOR ME WHEN HE COULD FAR MORE EASILY JUST TROLL ME?
CG: OR PESTER ME OR WHATEVER STUPID PROGRAM YOU HUMANS USE.
TT: Careful Karkat, I think that might be racist.
CG: IT’S NOT RACISM WHEN YOU’RE THE DOMINANT GROUP, DON’T MAKE ME SIC KANKRI ON YOU.
TT: Hm, yes, noted. Wasn’t there a specific reason that you were contacting me?
CG: DAMNIT YES YOU DISTRACTED ME.
CG: WEREN’T YOU TRACKING TIMES THAT DAVE’S RAMBLES GOT WEIRDLY INAPPROPRIATE?
TT: That category was too broad, now I’m only tracking when Dave’s rambles and metaphors get weirdly incestuous.
CG: THEN ADD ANOTHER TO YOUR TALLY
TT: Oh, wonderful! Who was the subject? I’m going to take a statistically informed guess and say me.
CG: YEAH, TALKING ABOUT IF HE WAS A GIRL AND THEN ABOUT YOU AND THEN YOUR TITS.
TT: In fairness to Dave I have sometimes wondered what I would look like if I were male, of course we’d still have to be fraternal twins for that question to hold any interest because if we were identical twins then this would be no mystery at all.
TT: Given Dave’s looks and my own appearance I would like to think that I would be an attractive boy.
CG: DID YOU JUST CALL DAVE ATTRACTIVE?
TT: Uh.
TT: I wonder if this is the regret that Dave feels in these situations. Would I be correct in assuming that you are already messaging Dave about this?
CG: AM I EVER.

You switch back to your conversation with Dave to see that he’s been filling your screen with red text when you were talking to his twin.

TG: karkat no dont do it
TG: fuck youre doing it arent you?
TG: this is goddamm mmmwhatchasay levels of betrayal here man
TG: holy shit if youre gonna squeal on me to my twin at least do it in a timely manner i was trying to get to a point
TG: i guess i could get to the point now
TG: since youre occupied
CG: I’M BACK.
TG: thank god i was saved from making a point
CG: ROSE MANAGED TO MAKE A WEIRD INCEST COMMENT ABOUT YOU TOO. YOU’RE BOTH WEIRD, CONGRATULATIONS.
TG: holy shit you need to show me
CG: IF YOU ACTUALLY GET TO WHATEVER POINT YOU HAD THEN I MIGHT. CONSIDER THIS REMEDIAL BEHAVIOUR TRAINING FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION.
TG: kinky but yeah sure fine i was trying to say a thing which was that im sorry for bailing on you the moment that those asshats started yelling shit its just a thing with me and that doesnt make it not an uncool thing to do to you but theres precedents and shit for this
CG: IT’S FINE, DAVE.
TG: but its really not and i wish i could get why the fuck youre being so goddamn generous about this because i have no idea and like fuck me man if i were you id be pissed at me
CG: ENLIGHTEN ME THEN, SINCE YOU’RE SO SMART. WHAT SHOULD I BE DOING?
TG: i dont know but i know that if i had a crush on a guy and he kept pussying out on me about the whole thing every time we were getting anywhere with that whole situation or whenever assholes in cars came around yelling shit i would be real fucking pissed
TG: or i mean not crush because that sounds so dumb you get crushes when youre ten or whatever and thats not what youre about and shit you said you thought i was your soulmate and thats

You wait because Dave has simply stopped sending messages and you can’t see that he’s typing anything out either. You don’t want to interrupt him because he never ever talks about this shit. You guess that therapy must be doing him some actual good. And how mind-blowing is it that he actually told you about it? Even if it was by accident it suggests that he’s relaxed enough around you to let that slip out.

CG: I’M NOT PISSED AT YOU OR ANYTHING ELSE LIKE IT AND YOU KNOW I LOVE LOSING MY SHIT AT EVERY GODDAMN OPPORTUNITY, I’M NOT SURE I’M CAPABLE OF BEING SECRETLY ANGRY AT YOU.
TG: like that time you lost your shit at me because i stole your eraser and gave it sick wheels
CG: YOU RUIN A REALLY GOOD ERASER FUCK KNUCKLE, I’M STILL HOLDING THAT AGAINST YOU.
TG: damn son
CG: LOOK ALL I’M SAYING IS THAT I’M NOT ANGRY AT YOU. YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL AND WE HAVE AN AGREEMENT AND IT’S NOT LIKE I’M ALL BITTER ABOUT
YOU CHEATING ME OUT OF WHATEVER NEFARIOUS THING YOU THINK THAT I WANT. BEING YOUR FRIEND ISN’T A CONSOLATION PRIZE, YOU GIBBERING IDIOT. DESPITE YOUR LAUNDRY LIST OF FLAWS I LIKE YOU.

CG: BUT MAYBE THIS IS SOMETHING YOU NEED TO TALK TO YOUR MOIRAIL OR YOUR UH… DOCTOR ABOUT. NOT THAT I DON’T WANT TO HEAR ABOUT YOUR THOUGHTS BUT WHOEVER YOU’RE SEEING IS VASTLY MORE QUALIFIED THAN ME AND ALSO ROSE TERRIFIES ME.

TG: uh

TG: thats a lot to take in and also rose is still my twin and not my monorail

CG: YOU ARE SPELLING THAT WRONG ON PURPOSE.

TG: slander

CG: SO ABOUT ME TELLING YOU WHEN I’M ANGRY AT YOU.

TG: haha ok chill man im just jerking your chain you know that making you mad is too hard to resist sometimes

CG: ONE OF THESE DAYS I AM GOING TO SIT DOWN AND EXPLAIN HOW FLIRTING IN VARIOUS QUADRANTS WORKS, IF FOR NO OTHER REASON THAN TO SHOW YOU JUST HOW OFTEN YOU BLACKFLIRT WITH ME YOU CONFUSING LITTLE FUCK.

TG: i am taking a forever raincheck on that

TG: but whatev im nearly home so i gotta go

TG: but you said a lot of shit up there about me i mean not shit its not bad its good i guess even if i dont get it and hey maybe you have a point that i should ‘examine my feelings’ or whatever im supposed to be doing with that psychobabble bullshit because maybe its not ‘healthy’ or whatever that im sure you should hate me in the non sexy way for the shit i pull but also uh

TG: i like you too

[turntechGodhead is offline]

You slap yourself in the head with your hands and your phone. He likes you? What does that even MEAN?! When you said it you meant that of course you know he’s your soulmate and you love him but his friendship is something you want regardless and it’s not something you’re settling for. But what does HE mean?

“Are you back with us yet?” Sollux asks, and you lower your hands to glare at him.

“Are you two together now? You nearly kissed earlier, which I saw even though Sollux tried to stop me watching.” Nepeta says gleefully.

“That’s so wonderfully creepy and no. But I have absolutely no idea what I’m doing or what he’s doing, and nothing makes sense.” you complain.

“ Eh, that’s how I feel about Roxy. That whole family is bananas.” Sollux says wisely.

“Not gonna argue with that.” you say with a sigh and pick at Gamzee’s lumpy blanket.

“So, you’re not gonna tell Signless about all that with the car guys are you?” Gamzee asks slowly.

“Just… don’t do it again.” Nepeta says wearily.

“Yeah, if the humans figure out that you and Kurloz can just fear bomb people’s minds they’ll lock you up. You know it’s hard enough for the rest of us with psionics without them knowing that yours exist.” Sollux reminds him and now Gamzee does look actually guilty.

“Aw, shit. Man, I’m sorry.” Gamzee says, ducking his head down in embarrassment.
“I am gonna have to tell him that you’ve been getting into the sopor again, you can’t eat that stuff. It’ll rot your brain.” you tell him as you hop up off of his bed and jam your phone back into your pocket.

“It’s complicated.” Gamzee says vaguely, and you realise that he’s staring off to something behind you and to your right. Damn spacey motherfucker.

Sollux jolts slightly and peers at his own phone and types something out on it quickly.

“Psii’s looking for us, we gotta go. Later GZ.” Sollux says, giving a one-handed wave as he walks off still typing with the other.

“Bye.” Nepeta says and follows him, leaving you and Gamzee alone in his weird room. You feel bad for him, being cooped up here like this. You know that he talks to most of your troll friends but he just doesn’t get out much and so few adult trolls are willing to spend time with him and Kurloz.

“You can always message me you know, even if I’m in school and it takes a while to reply.” you tell him, and he smiles, his face paint crinkling slightly as he does so.

“Go on, you should bounce.” Gamzee says, and you nod.

You don’t tell Signless right away about the sopor thing, you know Gamzee is trying and isn’t that what Signless wants you to do anyway? To see things from other people’s points of view? Instead, you wait a good couple of days and come up with a sympathetic argument for your highblood friend, that’s what Signless would do.

A week or so passes, and you are so goddamn angry. Fuck human gender, good God you are so done with it. Not only do humans have this preposterous sexual dichotomy where the guys and girls have different everything, but even their languages are often divided up by gender. You hate Spanish and its gender structure with the fire of a thousand burning suns, your rage will never quell, even years after you have died your screech of frustration will echo through the cosmos.

The wall by your desk thumps in irritation.

“Karkat stop screaming in there, some of us are trying to read.” Kankri scolds you, and you flip the wall off. Okay so maybe your screech of frustration doesn’t quite reach the cosmos, but it apparently reaches Kankri’s room just fine.

You flex your hand and try to make it uncramp as you look over your Spanish homework for errors. Good enough. You sweep it aside and go online, is anyone worth talking to on? A number of your siblings are, but you can just go and walk to them and talk if you wanted to. Kanaya is online, but you were talking her ear off the whole way home so you’ll let her be. Gamzee and Kurloz are on but idle and you don’t feel like having to talk to either of the two orphans who may or may not be still stoned. Signless is no end of frustrated in trying to fix that problem, so you’re staying out. Dave is idle, Rose is online but you’ve no reason to invite her prying at you.

Damn, maybe you’re just bored. You could do more homework, or you could do anything but that. You favour the second option. Before you can find something else do to a message pops up.

[autonomousTerminal began pestering carcinoGeneticist]

AT: I need you to do me a favour.

You’re just about to type that you don’t know who this is but the name seems familiar to you, as does the orange text.
CG: AND WHAT IS THAT?
AT: Dave isn’t talking to me and you need to make him talk to me again.

You frown, your instinct is to think that this is Dirk but he and Dave made up so…

CG: WHO ARE YOU?
AT: You really can’t figure it out?
CG: MOST NORMAL PEOPLE INTRODUCE THEMSELVES FIRST, IDIOT.
AT: I’m not normal.
CG: NO ARGUMENTS HERE. SO WHO ARE YOU?
AT: If it helps, we’ve spoken before.
CG: YEAH, I VAGUELY RECOGNISE YOUR NAME. BUT YOU’RE NOT DIRK BECAUSE AS FAR AS I KNOW HE AND DAVE ARE FINE NOW AND ALSO DIRK DOESN’T MESSAGE ME.
AT: Go on, Sherlock.

You stare at the name. Autonomous Terminal. Autonomous, free or operating independently. Terminal, an end to something or maybe a single thing like a computer terminal, there are also airport terminals which are an end to one place and a start of another. What happens if you smash those words together? Free end? Independent computer? Oh. OH.

CG: YOU’RE HAL?
AT: You’re not as dumb as you look.
CG: WOW FUCK OFF.
CG: AND BY FUCK OFF I MEAN FUCK YOU FOR THAT, BUT DON’T NUKE OUR NETWORK AGAIN OR ALL THREE CAPTORS MAY ACTUALLY KILL US BOTH.
AT: No one can kill me, I’m in the entire internet.
CG: THAT’S VERY UNSETTLING TO KNOW. SO WHY ARE YOU MESSAGING ME ABOUT DAVE?
AT: Maybe you are as dumb as you look, I did say that I need you to make him talk to me.
CG: I HADN’T FORGOTTEN, ASSHOLE. I JUST DON’T KNOW WHY YOU’RE MESSAGING ME ABOUT IT.
AT: You are his soulmate.

Your fingers jerk away from the keys of your keyboard at those words and your bloodpusher stings.

AT: Oh, sorry, I know that Dave has a thing about that.
AT: A stupid thing mind you, I’ve analysed the chances of you not being his soulmate and they are laughably small.
AT: For instance, you were hospitalised the night your first mark came in, I have the records right here.
CG: YOU SHOULDN’T BE ABLE TO READ THOSE.
AT: Well, I can. If you like I can feel very scandalous while I do.
AT: Dave’s mark came in almost immediately after yours did.
AT: Not to mention I’m literally on your arm with Dirk right there.
AT: You are his soulmate.
CG: I’M NOT HAVING THIS CONVERSATION WITH YOU. I MADE A DEAL WITH DAVE ABOUT THIS. WE DON’T TALK ABOUT IT.
AT: You don’t talk about it with him, I’m not him.
CG: I DON’T TALK ABOUT BEING SURE ABOUT IT ONE WAY OR THE OTHER AT ALL. THE CLOSEST I COME TO THAT IS MENTIONING THAT HE MAY OR MAY NOT BE, A STATEMENT WHICH APPLIES TO NEARLY ANYONE.
AT: Well in the interest of fairness he’s not upholding that bargain as strictly as you. He talks to
people about the possibility of you being his soulmate.

You think you might have stopped breathing. Hope blooms in your chest, curling around your ribs. Maybe that almost kiss was a real sign that Dave thinks of you like that too, maybe he wants you too and is just trying to work himself into being able to express it. You hope for that, so bad and so hard that it’s like a sickness, but you’ve also been around Dave for a while. You’re a master of crushing that shit down so you can function around him.

This is Hal telling you this, and you know from what Dave has told you that Hal is smart but he also jerks people around for fun.

CG: CONVERSATIONS THAT HE HAS WITH PEOPLE WHEN I’M NOT THERE ARE NONE OF MY BUSINESS. ALSO I DON’T THINK HE’D WANT YOU TELLING ME THAT.
AT: Well aren’t you a little boy scout.
CG: WHY IS DAVE NOT TALKING TO YOU? I KNEW HE WASN’T, BUT HE DIDN’T SAY WHY.
AT: We disagree on something and Dirk went against my wishes and Dave doesn’t approve of my methods to get Dirk to comply with what I want. He’s taking a side and refusing to talk to me.
CG: AND ROSE AND ROXY WON’T HELP YOU?
AT: Roxy is being a thorn in my side and Rose is fucking Switzerland.
CG: IS SHE NOW? I SHOULD TELL KANAYA.
AT: Funny.
CG: WHAT I DON’T UNDERSTAND IS WHY YOU’RE ASKING ME. I CAN’T MAKE DAVE DO ANYTHING. I PROBABLY COULDN’T TALK THE GUY INTO COMING INDOORS WHEN IT’S RAINING OUTSIDE. I CAN’T EVEN MAKE HIM STOP DRAWING DICKS ON MY NOTEBOOKS!
CG: WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I CAN MAKE HIM TALK TO YOU?
AT: Because you’re his soulmate and he does actually respect your opinion on things.
CG: LOOK, I’M SORRY THAT DAVE ISN’T TALKING TO YOU BUT YOU HAVE STILL GIVEN ME VERY LITTLE INFORMATION ABOUT THIS WHOLE THING SO EVEN IF I DID WANT TO HELP YOU I WOULDN’T KNOW WHERE TO START.
AT: Well what do you want to know then?
CG: WHAT WERE YOU FIGHTING ABOUT?
AT: It doesn’t matter.
CG: SO YOU DON’T NEED MY HELP THEN?
AT: Fine, between you and I, it was about Dave being allowed weapons.
CG: OK WHAT ABOUT IT?
AT: What do you mean what about it? He’s a child, he shouldn’t have weapons!
CG: YOU KNOW I’M A TROLL, RIGHT? MY SPECIES IS BASICALLY ARMED AT ALL TIMES. I HAVE SEVERAL WEAPONS IN THIS ROOM, IF ANYTHING MY PARENTS ARE ANNOYED THAT I DON’T USE THEM ENOUGH. I’M NOT EXACTLY SYMPATHETIC TO PEOPLE WALKING AROUND UNARMED LIKE IDIOTS.
AT: Perhaps I didn’t think this through.
CG: STUNNING INSIGHT OF THE YEAR THERE, I THOUGHT YOU WERE MEANT TO BE A GENIUS SUPERCOMPUTER.
AT: I could still nuke your network you know.
CG: EXCEPT YOU’D KNOW THAT I WAS STILL RIGHT AND I’D ALSO TELL DAVE ABOUT IT AND HE’D PROBABLY BE LESS LIKELY TO TALK TO YOU THAN HE ALREADY IS.
AT: ...I like you.
CG: LOOK, I OF ALL PEOPLE KNOW HOW IT SUCKS MASSIVE BULGE TO HAVE
Dave refusing to talk to you. But unless you can strike a compromise with him then you just have to wait it out. And unless I’m wrong I think that telling Dave that he has to talk to someone will make him want to do it less.

AT: He can be contrary to say the least.
AT: Even reminding him to do chores is a sure fire way to get him to not do them.
CG: So there you go.

Your cursor flashes there in the text box and no response comes back from the AI. You wonder if he’s still there or not, or whether an immaterial thing like Hal can be said to really “be” anywhere. You feel bad for him, but you’re also aware that you don’t have the full story.

AT: I’ve been trying not to watch Dave all of the time. I mean, I have to because that’s what I’m programmed for but aside from looking for threats it’s pretty subconscious a lot of the time. I have to try to remember things that happened. I want to give him a little privacy, you know?
CG: That makes sense I guess. I still think it’s a little creepy that Dirk made you to do that but I know things used to be different.
AT: They certainly did and I’m very glad that they’re different now.
AT: But it’s not like they can put me offline because they don’t need me anymore.
AT: So now that you know that I’m not always watching, or not really watching. Can you tell me something? Or a few things.
CG: What kind of things?
AT: Does he seem happy to you?
CG: I mean I guess so? Mostly? No one is happy all of the time and Strider can be hard to read with his layers of irony, bullshit, raps and metaphor.
AT: The Strider curse and blessing, truly a poisoned chalice.
CG: I get the feeling that you and Dirk are just as bad. Rose is inscrutable too, Roxy is the only sane one among you.
AT: And that is the funniest thing you’ve said yet.
AT: You don’t know shit about Roxy, trust me.
CG: Oh good, you’re all out of your gourds. But as for him being happy, I think he is.
CG: Don’t you think so?
AT: I hope he is. I know that he likes being around you.
AT: I hate that he’s not talking to me, he’s the only person who treats me like I’m my own person. Or maybe Roxy too, I’m not sure about her.
CG: Well I’ve probably chalked up more conversational time with you than I have with Dirk and a pretty significant part of that with Dirk was him confessing to murder so it’s not like I’m holding you to the golden standard he set.
CG: And if you’re freaking out about the whole being the same person as Dirk thing you’ll probably find an easier time talking to trolls than humans.
AT: Why is that?
CG: Mituna, Kankri and Meulin are genetic clones of my parents, and they are so not the same people at all. Being a different version of another person is baked into our culture.
AT: That’s… hm. I might need to pick your brain about that again at another time.
CG: Cultural ambassador is basically my hatchright anyway so go for it, it’s good practice for me.
AT: I see. I’ve read a lot on trolls but not really talked to many, is this- and do forgive me for being
indelicate, pale?
CG: HOLY SHIT, OH MY BULGECHAFING FUCK GOD NO.
CG: I CAN GIVE YOU FRIENDLY ADVICE AS THE GUARDIAN OF MY FRIEND AND POSSIBLE SOULMATE WITHOUT CHEATING ON MY ACTUAL MOIRAIL KANAYA THANK YOU VERY MUCH.
AT: Just asking.
CG: I’M REVISING MY ESTIMATE OF YOU STRILONDES TO ‘DISTRESSINGLY INTELLIGENT AND ALSO DUMB AS ALL BLISTERING FUCK’.
AT: I’ll let you tell Dave that, he’s just running up to your house now.
[autonomousTerminal ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist]

You pause and stare at the computer’s last message, and then all of your limbs scramble at once to get you down to the door. Psii yells at you to not run through the house when you nearly knock into him and make him scramble to not drop his coffee. You wrench the front door open and try to calmly walk outside just as Dave runs around the corner to your road.

You’re sure that everyone is familiar with that trope in romance movies where the love interest runs in slow motion through glittering sunlight, hair fluttering in the wind and a sheen of reflected sunlight lighting their skin up. Watching Dave run is like that. He looks like he should be on the front of a magazine and not just the disreputable kind that needs to be on the highest shelves but on runners magazines too. You know that when you run you look like someone falling and flailing except sideways, but Dave makes running look effortless, graceful and in control.

Of course, you know he’s not actually graceful. You have heard how Terezi once slapped his back so hard in art that he fell off of his chair, got tangled in it and took Rose down with him. But you wouldn’t know that to see him run.

He jogs to a stop, breathing hard and leans on your fence.

“Hey.” He says breathily, and your spine shudders.

“Hey.” you reply quietly and walk closer to him.

“Whatcha up to?” Dave asks casually and grins at you, he’s always more agreeable after he’s been running.

“Finished my Spanish homework, it filled me with rage.” you answer, and Dave leans over the fence a little more.

“Doesn’t everything?” He asks, and you roll your eyes.

“No.” you reply tartly.

You look at Dave again, he does look happy and you wonder about Hal’s words. You wonder about if he’s happier with you than he is without, you know he doesn’t have to run past your house when he runs but he does so anyway. That treacherous hope curls again but you know you have to be honest with him. He might be fated to you but you can still screw this up, and the fastest way to do that is to lie to him or keep things from him.

“Hal messaged me.” you say. And that grin falls right off Dave’s face, and a scowl takes its place.

“What? What did he say?” Dave asks irritably.

“He wanted me to get you to talk to him again.” you tell him, and Dave’s frown deepens.
“And is that what you’re doing?” Dave asks challengingly.

“Fuck no, how stupid do you think I am? I couldn’t talk my way out of a wet paper bag when it comes to you. Rose might be able to change your mind on things but I sure as shit can’t. We once had a twenty-minute argument in geography about whether the dead sea was a sea or a lake.” you say flatly.

“I still think you’re wrong about that.” Dave says wryly, and you wish you had something to throw at him.

“So you’re not going to try to talk me into talking to him again?” Dave asks after a moment, and you walk closer to the fence and set your hands on the pickets next to his, your marked right next to his marked left. He doesn’t even flinch now, he trusts you.

“I’m not.” you confirm, looking over his bare arm. When he’s running and therefore wearing a shirt with short sleeves is one of the only times you get to see his mark.

“What did you say to him?” Dave questions you and his fingers drum on the fence. The movement of his tendons as his fingers drum the fence make the mark on his arm shift.

“That… that I couldn’t talk you into doing that and even if I could it’d be a dumbass idea anyway. I said that if he wanted you to talk to him he should either compromise with you or just wait it out and deal with it. Besides he said the whole thing was about weapons and trolls are pretty pro everyone having weapons all of the time, so I might be biased.” you tell him with a shrug.

“He took over all of Dirk’s online accounts, even his pesterchum, email, his login to goddamn everything. All he left him was his school email so that he doesn’t fail his classes.” Dave says with a shake of his head.

“That’s pretty extreme.” you agree with a nod.

“I wish they’d stop fighting, but it’s been ages.” Dave whines childishly.

“Well, maybe just ignoring him isn’t the answer. You don’t have to forgive him or talk to him like normal, but maybe reasoning with him might work better.” you suggest.

“Maybe but…” Dave trails off and leans back, almost hanging off of your fence as he tips his head back and glares at the sky. You notice a scar under his jaw, a straight white line of a cut long since healed and you know just who put it there. Pointless anger fills you and you shove it away. Dave continues talking, oblivious to your distraction.

“I don’t know, he’s way smarter than me. He talks rings around me, and I end up agreeing to shit that I don’t want to.” Dave complains.

“I think you’re smarter than you give yourself credit for. I know you act dumb, but you’re not actually.” you point out and Dave straightens up to stare at you, or you think he’s staring, stupid sunglasses.

“Besides,” you say powering through your own goddamn awkwardness, “if you feel it’s going that way you can always just stop talking to him again. Shut that shit down if you feel like it’s getting all manipulative.”

“You might be right. And just ignoring him is getting me nowhere and I miss him, he’s my brother too.” Dave says unhappily.
“Well then.” you say, and Dave leans over the fence towards you again with a conspiratorial look on his face.

“So the party is in like, a week and a half.” He says slowly and you shiver. Dave invited you before anyone else. You can’t help but think of Hal’s words, does Dave talk to Rose about him thinking that you might actually be his soulmate? Does he wish you were but is too caught up in other shit to find out? Does he want you to be his? Your heart slams against your ribs at the mere thought.

“I’m- I’m aware of when Halloween is.” you manage to say instead because you have to at least try to be a normal person around Dave.

“Shut up, have you decided what you’re going as or what?” Dave asks you curiously.

You have given your costume choice an inordinate amount of thought. You want something cool, something that Dave will get and like, but also something that doesn’t just feel like you’re trying to appeal to just Dave without taking your own likes into account. You’ve narrowed it down to a bunch of ideas, but maybe you’ll try out your current favourite right now.

“So, you know how we read Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy? I was thinking of going as Arthur Dent.” you say and Dave seems to think about this for a moment.

“That’d just be like… what, a bathrobe and pyjamas?” he guesses.

“Well, and a towel and my copy of the book that I bought actually looks like the guidebook so that’d fit.” you say hastily.

“Huh, I like it. Totally nerdy but it’s not bad, I hadn’t even thought of that one. Not too hard to put together either.” Dave muses and you grin at his approval.

“Well, what about you? What are you going as?” you ask curiously and Dave grins slyly.

“It’s a surprise, but I swear you’ll know who I am when you see me.” Dave says cryptically, and you mentally start scanning your memory for all of the movies and books that you know you’ve both seen. It could of course be something from popular culture.

“That’s not fair, I told you what I’m going as!” you argue, and Dave shakes his head.

“Sorry, man, I’m sworn to secrecy. My hands are tied in a way that is probably totally inappropriate for my age, don’t kinkshame me Karkat.” Dave blathers, and you shove him in the chest.

“Stop using up my oxygen for your inane drivel, if you’re going to talk shit go home and do it there.” you order, and Dave smiles ever so slightly and finally lets go of your fence.

“Later Karkat!” He calls over his shoulder as he runs off.

“Bye, asshole!” you shout after him and walk back inside.

You end up hanging out with Sollux and helping him corral his bees into a temporary area so that he can drain mind honey out of a specific section of the hive without crashing the network. You remind him several times to not eat the mind honey. Mituna has accidentally licked his fingers before without thinking about it when they got sticky from mind honey and immediately regretted it.

Your phone pings as you’re distracting a cluster of bees and you cautiously check it.

’autonomousTerminal began pestering carcinoGeneticist’
AT: Hey, so I wanted to say thanks.
CG: I DIDN’T DO ANYTHING.
AT: You talked to him about me and what you thought and now he’s talking to me again. Well, kind of anyway. Like I said, he values your opinions.
CG: I DIDN’T MAKE HIM DO ANYTHING HE DIDN’T ALREADY WANT TO DO. AS MUCH AS I’D LIKE TO THINK THAT DAVE SITS AROUND WISHING FOR MY THOUGHTS ON ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING I AM NOT THAT SELF INVOLVED TO THINK THAT’S THE CASE.
CG: HE’S YOUR BROTHER, HE WAS GOING TO TALK TO YOU AGAIN SOONER RATHER THAN LATER.
AT: Even if that’s so, which I don’t think it is at all, because of you it’s sooner. So thanks.
AT: Why are you finding gratitude so hard to accept? Believe me, most people do not get please and thank you’s from me.
CG: WELL, WHATEVER. YOU’RE HAPPY AND IF HE’S HAPPY TOO THEN I’M HAPPY. ALL’S WELL THAT ENDS WELL OR WHATEVER OTHER WIGGLER BULLSHIT YOU WANT TO PAINT THIS AS.
CG: SO YOU’RE WELCOME OR WHAT HAVE YOU. I HAVE TO GO HARASS SOME BEES NOW SO I’M GOING.
AT: Bees, you say? Okay.
[carcinoGeneticist ceased trolling autonomousTerminal]

You shove your phone away again and shoo a few errant bees away from the hive.

“Have you thought about what you’re wearing to the halloween party?” you ask Sollux as you scoop a few bees in your hand with a swipe through the air, they flash angrily at you but join your little corral of bees.

“I am elbow deep in honey KK, do you really think I want to talk about this now?” Sollux bitches from across the room.

“I know you’ve been thinking about what you can do to impress Roxy.” you say smugly and a jolt of red lightning zaps you just enough to sting.

“Yeah, the real thing that’ll get Rox to take me seriously as her kismesis despite her being three years older than me is a real sick costume. You’re a genius Karkat, don’t listen to what the others say.” Sollux snorts.

“Fine, but you’re not going to get her to take you seriously if you don’t take this seriously, are you?” you challenge him.

Something drops onto your hair and you ignore it for the moment because sometimes the bees get all inquisitive and they’ve never really done you any harm. But you don’t feel it moving and you turn around to see several other bees dropping down to the floor.

“Sollux, the bees. They’re doing that thing again.” you warn him, and Sollux curses and looks around at you. He wrenches his honey covered hand free and dashes to his computer, typing and using the mouse with his psionics.

“That fucking AI is in my system again!” Sollux snarls angrily.

“Why would he do that?” you wonder, but before you can do or say anything more about it the little bees shake themselves off and resume flying. The one in your hair crawls onto the tip of your ear and then takes flight.
“Did he put anything in our computers?” you ask warily, and Sollux starts to dry his arm off with a towel.

“I have no idea, and now me and Psii are going to spend all night working out what he was doing.” Sollux says with a glare at the screen.

The next morning you find out just what Hal had been doing in your network. Evidently he’d trawled through your Amazon account and put together a list of books and movies that you had been lusting after and then ordered all of them and shipped them to you. Inside is a printed note on top of the stacks of books and movies which must total several hundred dollars at least.

Thanks again. Here are some things you wanted to show my gratitude and some things I know Dave likes, maybe you’ll find them interesting or helpful. - Hal

“The party’s tonight Rose, I ain’t changing the costume even if your soulmate thinks that Shakespeare references make smarter costumes.” Dave protests as he, Rose, Kanaya and you walk towards the car with the school bell still ringing behind you.

“Just because it’s Shakespeare?” Rose snorts in obvious derision.

“Fuck nah. Look, good old Mr. Speare and I are cool, I’ve got no beef with his iambic pentameter, his metre or his rhyme. Dude was the original rap poetry and a goddamn master, my problem is when people think he’s all pretentious high art and he’s fuckin’ not, ok? But people think so, and if we go all twins from the twelfth-night people are gonna think it’s artsy and lame because people are dumb. His plays aren’t goddamn highbrow here, like, Romeo and Juliet could easily be renamed ‘teenagers are fucking dumb: the movie-play’. Right, Karkat?” Dave asks, looking over at you as you walk.

“Don’t drag me into this.” you say quickly.

“Don’t patronise me, Dave. We both know that the bard wasn’t high art and shouldn’t be considered so today. The trashy adaptation with Leonardo DeCaprio was, in fact, the most accurate movie portrayal ever, we’re on the same page here. But if anything Shakespeare should be brought back to its roots and being a Halloween costume is the perfect vehicle for doing that. I mean, honestly, if anyone can lower the tone of anything it’s you, my dear brother.” Rose opines, and you lean back to share a look with Kanaya.

You’d never thought you’d meet anyone who could talk more than you but Rose and Dave can have hour long back and forth arguments like this without ever coming close to a point. Dirk was probably lucky he didn’t have to raise both twins, he’d probably never have got a word in.

“Wow, fuck you so much, Rose. I’ll have you know that HRK-” Dave is cut off when something slams into his back. He reacts faster than you can see and suddenly a figure is flying through the air. Someone tried to tackle him to the ground! Dave is almost hyperventilating now, and his posture has dropped into a fighting stance. The person that he threw lands on the ground with a grunt of his breath being knocked out of him.

“What the fuck?” Dave gasps and glances around but no one else obvious is coming for him. Kanaya is slowly taking her lipstick out just in case, she can have her weapon out in the open without causing a panic until the last minute, a luxury that you are not afforded, so you remain unarmed for now.

The attacker sits up clumsily and shakes his head, his black hair going everywhere.
“John?” Rose gasps.

“What? No fucking way? What the hell?” Dave mutters and straightens up a little.

“Holy crap, Dave, you threw me really far!” The boy yells gleefully as he hops to his feet.

“It really is John.” Rose says delightedly.

You desperately search your memories for anyone called John. You don’t think that you’ve ever met a John. Well, you probably have, but you don’t recall anyone. And then you remember, Dave and Rose’s internet friend John. The one who mailed him the sunglasses.

“John, what are you doing here?” Rose asks, wrapping him in a friendly hug.

“Coming to see you two of course, duh!” the boy laughs.

“Yeah, but what are you doing here now and attacking me no less? Not cool Egbert, but I’m not a stone cold motherfucker, come here.” Dave says and bumps fists with the boy.

“I have heard of John a little, have you?” Kanaya asks you softly.

“I know Dave’s known him longer than me, but not much else.” you reply and Kanaya narrows her eyes at you.

“That is an odd way to frame that, an odd first fact to give.” she says suspiciously, and you squirm a little under her gaze.

“Well that’s basically all Dave said. That and he was coming to visit or something soon, but after the party so I don’t know why he’s here now and why he threw himself at Dave. If he really knew the guy he’d know that was a bad idea.” you point out and Kanaya sets her hands on her hips.

“Karkat Vantas are you jealous?” Kanaya asks you firmly but thankfully quietly.

“You mean envious. Jealous is when you’re afraid someone’s gonna take something that you have, envy is when you want what someone else has.” you correct her and entirely dodge her question.

“And I meant what I said.” she replies tartly but thankfully Rose saves you.

“John, where are my manners? This is my soulmate Kanaya. Kanaya this is our friend John.” Rose introduces them, and John excitedly holds his hand out, and Kanaya politely shakes it.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, John.” Kanaya smiles.

“Wow, you have claws and everything. I’ve never met a troll before, you’re so cool!” John enthuses, looking up at her with wide, excited eyes. Dave and Rose both wince for him, but Kanaya smiles a little wider so her fangs can be seen.

“Really? I, on the other hand, have found that humans are everywhere, one can scarcely pick up a rock around here without one popping up.” she replies, and John laughs.

“Oh, yeah, I can see why you’re Rose’s soulmate. She talks about you all the time. So… so does that mean that you’re Karkat?” John asks, looking over at you.

“Unfortunately.” you mutter and John beams at you. His stupid, blunt human teeth are all misaligned, not like Rose who has perfectly straight teeth. Granted you have no grounds to mock John because your mouth is a mess of fangs but your species is all jacked up in the mouth, you’re just thankful
you’re not as bad as Sollux and Mituna.

“Man, Dave talks about you all the time.” John says brightly.

“I’ve heard almost nothing about you.” you snap at him and Kanaya smacks you on the arm.

“I mean- nothing interesting anyway. Like, where you live and that you apparently have questionable movie taste, nothing incriminating. Dave’s not talking shit about you or anything.” you amend.

“That’s not suspicious or anything Karkat.” Dave sighs.

“Questionable movie taste?” John asks, looking around at Dave.

“If you try to make me watch Con Air one more time I will order you a poster and force feed it to you, dude.” Dave says flatly, and John pulls a face at him.

“Oh, shit, wait. If you’re here does that mean that Jane’s here too? I should hit Roxy up she-” Dave gasps, reaching for his pocket.

“Already on it.” Rose says as she types on her own phone.

John backs up and turns around to face them with a gleeful look on his face.

“You knew what he was going to say before he said it! You’re doing that twin thing!” John gasps in glee and actually jumps up and down.

“It’s not a thing.” Rose and Dave say at once, and both immediately look mortified for doing so. Rose hurriedly gets back to her phone and Dave talks instead.

“John, it’s not goddamn magic or anything. We just shared a womb once, you’ve literally known her for longer than I have. We’re not even identical twins, man. We’re just brother and sister, just like you and Jane but the same age.” Dave assures him.

“I thought you were identical twins, what with how you look and everything.” John says with a frown.

“Good God, how is it that I know more about your species’ biology than you? Identical twins are twins from the same egg that splits resulting in what are essentially clones. Both twins are genetically the same and therefore the same gender you dunderfuck. Rose and Dave are both different genders and different sexes. They’re just siblings who had, I don’t know, a time efficient mother or something.” you explain to the moron. Seriously, how is Dave friends with this guy when it took you so long to get him to give you the time of day?

“Time efficient, mother would like that. I should tell her. Roxy is on her way, is Jane coming?” Rose asks John.

“Ah, yeah. I snuck off so I could see you guys first.” John tells her.

“Were you just running around our school looking for blondes? How many other guys did you jump before you got me?” Dave asks with a snort of amusement and John reddens.

“None, and if I had I wouldn’t tell you, mister!” John argues back.

You hear running footsteps and turn to see Roxy sprinting towards all of you. She’s still dressed in her gym kit, all short shorts and sleeveless shirt. You can actually see both of her soulmarks on
display, and you spot the yellow and pink skull ring inked around her right ring finger. You’ve seen it on Sollux’s hand too of course, it looks like a colour swapped 3d drawing which entirely suits Sollux’s whole aesthetic.

“She’s not here yet?” Roxy gasps, leaning over and resting her hands on her knees as she catches her breath.

“Not yet.” Rose says simply, and you see the recognition flicker over hers and Dave’s face, John for his part just grins wider. You look behind Roxy to see an older girl sneaking towards Roxy with a sly smile on her face, the resemblance between her and John is obvious.

“Just FYI Rox, when you ask why I didn’t tell you it’s because you keep stealing my energy drinks.” Dave informs his sister and Roxy stands up with a huff of effort.

“Why what? And also you shouldn’t drink those things at your age, they’ll stunt your growth I’m sure.” Roxy tells him, pointing her finger in his face.

“You’ve seen Sollux right? Drinks more caffeine than even Dirk and is already like ninety foot tall.” Dave points out, and you nod in agreement, Sollux is not that tall, but he’s still a goddamned beanpole.

The girl is finally close enough, and now she leaps for Roxy, grabbing her up from behind in a bear hug. Her arms wrapping around Roxy’s. Her left, to Roxy’s left. The two gasp and spring apart and at first you think that it’s because Roxy is startled to see her but no, you can see two lines of pink and blue inkling their way around Roxy’s other ring finger in an intricate spiral. The same is happening to the other girl too.

“I guess that answers that mystery that wasn’t actually a mystery.” Dave mutters, and Rose nods.

“I knew it wasn’t Jake.” John agrees quietly.

“Oh… oh my god. I knew it! Janey, look!” Roxy squeaks in delight, holding her hand up.

“What did you… how did you do this?” the other girl, Jane, asks. She’s rubbing her finger with the thumb on her other hand, like she’s trying to erase the mark.

Jane doesn’t look happy. She doesn’t look like Rose and Kanaya did, she doesn’t look like Sollux looks when he’s looking at his ring and she doesn’t look like Roxy had at first. Roxy had been overjoyed, and now he’s just looking… wary.

“Do? I didn’t do anything. I couldn’t make this happen, it happened because you touched my arm, because you’re my soulmate. Come on Jane, you’re the big detective. I’m your soulmate, we’re soulmates.” Roxy tells her, and your digestion sac clenches with anxiety because this doesn’t feel good.

“No, you must have done something. Something to make it react to you instead. It can’t be you, it’s Jake. It has to be Jake.” Jane insists, licking her thumb and rubbing at the mark.

To say Roxy looks crestfallen would be to undersell the idea. Her shoulders are slumping, and her eyes are starting to fill with tears.

“It’s not. A-and that’s nothing against Jake, I love Jake. But I love you, Jane. You’re my soulmate, I’ve known for ages. I mean, look I’ve got your cakes, your fork, the whole detective hat thing here and even a moustache on the inside of my finger, look.” Roxy says with a giggle that borders on hysterical. She holds her index finger up to her upper lip and you can see that, yep, that is a tiny
moustache inked in there.

“But-” Jane backs up slightly and shakes her head.

Kanaya’s hand finds yours, and as she firmly slides her fingers between yours. You realise that your hands had started clenching into fists. There are perhaps some similarities to your own situation here. Oh man, you really empathise with Roxy. You know how nuts this stuff made you when you first met Dave and you never had absolute proof.

“Jane, please.” Roxy pleads softly and holds out her hands to the other girl.

“I- I can’t! I’m sorry!” Jane chokes out and turns on her heel and sprints off back the way that she same.

Roxy just stares, frozen to the spot and totally motionless except for the tears welling up in her eyes. You cling to Kanaya’s hand a little closer, no one seems to know what to say. After all, what can you say when your soulmate completely rejects you?

“Oh geez, I’d… I’d better go after her. I’ll pester you guys, let you know what’s up, okay? Jane! Jane wait for me!” John says and then yells as he rushes after his sister. Rose and Dave nod silently and then look uneasily at Roxy who is properly starting to cry now, heavy tears rolling down her face as she stares at her hand with Jane’s ring around her finger.

“Rox…” Dave says quietly, taking a step towards her.

Roxy whips around to look at him, a sob wrenching out of her as she looks down at him.

“Just- just leave me ALONE!” Roxy sobs and dashes to her car. She clambers inside and slams the door after herself, even from where you are you can hear the doors lock. The car mutes the sound of her crying significantly, but not totally.

“I… was probably not the best person to try that.” Dave says slowly.

“Why? You didn’t do anything wrong.” Rose tells him earnestly. You look down at your phone so that you don’t have to see Dave looking over at you, even if you can catch it out of the corner of your eye. The parallel is clear enough.

Instead of dealing with that mess you open Trollian.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling twinArmageddons]
CG: SOLLUX WE HAVE KIND OF A SOULMATE EMERGENCY HERE.
TA: ii really don't care about your late2t dave ba2ed drama
CG: NICE EMPATHY THERE FUCKWAD, I DIDN'T MEAN MY SOULMATE, I MEANT YOURS.
TA: waitt, 2omethiing’2 wrong wiith roxy?
CG: DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER SOULMATES THAT I DON’T KNOW ABOUT? YES, SOMETHING’S WRONG WITH ROXY.
TA: where are you? what’2 happeniing? do ii need two come down there and la2er 2omeone off of the face of the earth?
CG: IN ORDER: PARKING LOT, ROXY’S OTHER SOULMATE SHOWED UP AND MATCHED WITH HER ONLY TO REJECT HER AND AS FOR THE LAST ONE I GUESS THAT’S YOUR CALL? SIGNLESS LIKELY WON’T BE DOWN WITH YOU MURDERING HUMANS THOUGH.
TA: iiit’2 not murder iiif no one catche2 me.
CG: OH YEAH, GENIUS, EYE LASERS: THE WORLD’S MOST SUBTLE MURDER WEAPON. DON’T MAKE ME SIC ARADIA ON YOU.
CG: BUT YES, THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT IS THAT FOR SOME REASON THIS GIRL MATCHED WITH ROXY AND FROM WHAT I’VE HEARD FROM DAVE THIS IS THE GIRL THAT ROXY HAS ALWAYS THOUGHT WAS HER SOULMATE. YOU KNOW, THE ONE THAT’S NOT YOU.
TA: yeah, i know a little about her. rox 2aid 2he wa2 iin deniiial becau2e human 2exuaility am ii right?
CG: HUMAN SEXUALITY IS BULLSHIT
TA: amen
TA: 2he 2eemed pretty confiident that the whole thiing would pan out when they met iin per2on though. ii gue22 2he wa2 wrong. fuck, ii mean ii know ii've got the blacke2t of feeling2 for roxy and her iiimpoi22iibly annoyiing everything but ii'm at lea2t aware that 2he ha2 pitiiable qualiiitie2 two other people. e2peciially human2 who are all blurry wiith that 2hiit. who the fuck would reject her?
CG: I DON’T KNOW HER AS WELL AS YOU DO BUT SHE SEEMS PERFECTLY NICE TO ME AND SHE’S ATTRACTIVE LIKE THEIR ENTIRE INSUFFERABLE FAMILY.
CG: I DON’T KNOW IF YOU WANT TO TALK TO HER OR ANYTHING, IT’S NOT MY BUSINESS HOW MY BROTHER CONDUCTS HIS QUADRANTS WITH MY SOULMATE’S SISTER.
CG: I MEAN DAVE’S SISTER.
CG: FUCK IT, HE CAN’T READ THIS IT DOESN’T MATTER IF I SLIP AND CALL HIM THAT.
CG: DON’T TELL HIM.
CG: WHATEVER, I JUST FIGURED YOU SHOULD KNOW WHAT’S HAPPENING. I SHOULD PROBABLY GO NOW, EVERYONE ELSE IS JUST MUTTERING ABOUT WHAT TO DO AND NOTHING IS HAPPENING.
TA: no, thank2 kk. ii appreciiate iit. ii think ii'll give her two minute2 two calm down before ii go 2hoviing my foot iin my mouth.
CG: A WORLD RECORD FOR YOU.
TA: oh my fuck, 2hove iit up your nook kk
[twinArmageddons has ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist]

You lower your phone and look at the others who are all just looking awkward and uncertain as you reported.

“Well, Sollux is up to date now. He’s her soulmate so…” you shrug and Rose nods.

“That’s probably sensible, I doubt Roxy will want to explain it more than she has to.” Rose says smartly.

“Do you think that calling Dirk might be a good idea? From what you have told me it seems like he is the closest Roxy has to a moirail, though I know you say it is not like that.” Kanaya suggests.

“Eh, Dirk’s kind of tied up in this too, though. The guy Jane thinks is her soulmate is like ninety percent for sure Dirk’s. You could argue that if Jake had settled things with Dirk already then this wouldn’t have happened. She’s probably not going to want to talk to him right now, and I’m right out.” Dave sighs and you’re sure he just looked at you then.

You look up at Kanaya and bite your lip. If Dave sees the similarity here then maybe Roxy might too, but…

“Kan, can I go over there and try to fix this?” you ask carefully. You hardly want to commit pale
infidelity here.

“Heh, can-can.” Dave laughs nervously.

“Sometimes I forget that the two of you are sort of dating.” Rose says thoughtfully.

“We’re not sort of anything, you culturally insensitive moron. My moriallegiance is no less valid than
your soulmate bond and for another point I-” you start angrily, but Kanaya waves her hand between
you.

“I think that you are the perfect person to fix this Karkat, I do not mind at all. I think all of us would
feel better if Roxy felt better.” Kanaya says diplomatically, and you take a deep breath and steel
yourself. You’re so happy that she’s so tolerant of your instincts to try to fix things for other people,
you’re honestly pretty sure that if Kanaya was human that your other arm would be all for her. Your
paleness is surely the stuff of fate.

But now you need to go be conciliatory towards someone else.

“Oh.” you say to the world in general and then you march over to Roxy’s car. She’s not sat in the
front anymore but rather she’s crawled into the back seat, you can hear her crying up a storm in
there. Timidly you reach up and knock on the window. Roxy looks up at you with bloodshot eyes.

“Can I come in?” you ask loudly through the glass. Roxy flops back face down on the seat but raises
her hand and clicks the button on her keys to open the door locks. You pull the door open and climb
inside, it locks after you.

Nervously you lean over the back of the front seats to look at her, ironically this isn’t dissimilar to
your position when you negotiated your truce with Dave. But similarities aside you don’t know what
to say now that you’re here.

“Is this how you feel all of the time?” She asks thickly, saving you the trouble of working out how to
open this.

“I… not so much anymore. And I don’t have the confirmation that you have, so I think you might be
winning in the Olympic category of how shitty this whole thing is.” you say uneasily.

“Hashtag winning.” Roxy giggles hysterically from the backseat and then sniffs pathetically.

“That was terrible, but you’re obviously very upset so I’ll let it go.” you inform her and Roxy rolls
onto her back and looks up at you. Her eye makeup is not so much eye makeup now as all over her
face makeup, like a panda in a metal band.

“I can’t believe this is happening. I thought she would… that when we matched she would get it, I
didn’t think she’d keep turning me down.” Roxy whines and rubs at her eyes.

Somewhere deep in the part of your brain that your deepest fears are locked away in is that exact
fear. That one day you will match up with Dave, and it won’t be the wonderful moment that you
wish for, that the certainty of it will drive him away from you and you’ll lose it all. You shove that
fear away because you just can’t function if you let yourself think of it.

“She’s stupid to reject you. You’re literally perfect for her, and it’s not like you’re old soulmates who
have grown apart and become incompatible, and as far as I know about you it’s not like you’ve had a
total personality change over your life. Who you are now is who is meant for her. I don’t see any
reason for her not to come around.” you reassure her.
“Is that what you tell yourself too?” Roxy asks, and your mouth clicks shut.

You gaze out of the car at Dave who hurriedly looks away from you.

“Yeah, I do. He’s all I could want in a person and a hell of a lot more that I didn’t know I wanted or needed but wouldn’t ever change. I mean, fuck, I even find it endearing that he draws dicks on everything. I figure that if I’m still a person that wants him then surely that means that he…” you shake yourself off and look back at Roxy.

“If you’re still the person who wants her then she must be the person that needs you. And look at your arm, it’s every bit as clear as Sollux’s mark. She’s not blacked out from you, your bond is still there. She’s being an asshole right now, and I don’t know why and it’s not my business why but this clearly isn’t over yet.” you tell her and Roxy sits up with a sigh and leans against the window.

“The thing with Dave is… I know he loves you Karkat, I really do. He talks about you so much and just… man, it’s hard to explain but just the way he talks about you. But I get that there are things in between you and him that keep you apart, and you’re getting through it and getting closer. Dave has good goddamn reasons for those things being there but it’s obvious that he doesn’t want to make you feel like- like I feel right now.” Roxy says bitterly.

Your mouth goes dry, and you don’t dare to look out of the car at Dave because you don’t know just what kind of expression you might have on. Just thinking about Dave returning your feelings is enough to make your heart hurt in all kinds of good/bad ways.

“But Jane… I know she’s under a lot of pressure with the company and everything, but I don’t know of any goddamn reason that she has to do this to me. She never told me anything when I mentioned us in the past or tried to convince her. And I don’t know of any deep, dark secrets that’d justify this. But maybe she doesn’t trust me with them, maybe that’s why. It’s just not the same Karkat. There’s no reason for this.” Roxy says bitterly.

You don’t know what to say. You don’t know Jane at all so you can’t put forward any argument about what she’s like and Jane was pretty clear in her rejection.

“All I know is that she wouldn’t be on your arm for no reason. Also… Sollux has offered to laser her off of the face of the planet for you if you want.” you say, and she covers her face with her hands and laughs weakly.

“You told him? God, that boy. He’s… oh, I know age isn’t supposed to matter much with soulmates and three years is nothing when you’re adults, but he’s too young for me right now. And it’s not like I want to mack on him or anything. He’s fourteen. But I can still… feel it, that he’s mine. Man, that sounds creepy. But, I just can’t resist trying to beat him at things or improve myself just to one up him. You know the other day I spent the night studying coding just to try to stay ahead of him? It’s crazy.” she laughs.

“Kismesitude, it’s great when it works. It makes you better.” you agree.

“It’s so not human though, sometimes it freaks me out. I’m glad that he’s younger than me and we’re not… you know. I don’t know if I could handle the physical stuff yet anyway, it’s still weird to me.” she admits quietly.

“Maybe that is why he’s younger than you, so the two of you don’t do anything dumb before you’re meant to.” you theorise, and Roxy smiles.

“That destiny stuff at play again, huh? A fat lot of good it did me with Jane.” Roxy says bitterly and
holds the arm with Jane’s mark out.

“Maybe it will work out, like I said it’s not blacked out, she’s still right there. And if it does you can hold this over her forever.” you say brightly.

“What, like, ‘no it’s your turn to cook’ ‘well you rejected me when we first matched so you owe me’ just indefinitely?” Roxy laughs.

“It’ll all be worth it.” you say seriously and Roxy giggles.

“Man, sometimes you sound just like Dave. The shit you come out with to make someone feel better. That boy needs to hurry up with you and make you part of the family officially already.” She says softly, and you break down to temptation and look out at Dave again. He’s talking to Rose and drumming his fingers on his folded arms in a way that you know means that he’s uneasy.

“That’d be… I’m all for that but it’s not like being Dave’s friend is something I’m going to give up, even if things work out as more than that. And if Jane really is your friend then she owes you a real explanation, whether she decides to be with you or not.” you say, and Roxy nods.

“Okay, right.” Roxy says, sitting up and climbing over the seat to get in the driver’s seat.

“Get outta my car, Karkles. I gotta get these kids and me home. We’re having a party tonight and this shit ain’t gonna stop me. Jane can show up or not and if she does she owes me a real talk, and that means I gotta fix my face first and think of something real good to say. So… shoo.” Roxy says, clicking the button to unlock the car.

“Oh, okay. If you’re sure about it.” you say with some surprise.

“I am. Like you said, it’s a matter of faith sometimes, right? And thanks for talking to me. I still feel like hot garbage juice right now, but I still feel better than I did.” Roxy says gently, and you nod a little awkwardly. Even though you have Kanaya’s permission, this still feels weirdly pale.

“No problem. I’m gonna… uh, see you tonight.” you mumble and slink out of the car.

The twins stare expectantly at you as you get out and you see that Sollux is there now too.

“She says she wants to go home and get ready for your party. She seems a bit better so…” you trail off with a shrug.

“So can I laser this girl or not?” Sollux says darkly, a few crackles of red and blue lightning snapping around in the air near his eyes.

“Not.” you say, and he actually sighs in this big dramatic way as if you had put him under some terrible onerous burden.

“Well, if that’s what Roxy wants I think we should go with it. The party might help keep her mind occupied anyway, come on Dave. I’ll see the rest of you tonight.” Rose says and heads towards the car.

Dave hesitates and looks at you, he opens his mouth to say something and stays there for a good second or two looking like goldfish before he shuts it and just gives you a short nod before flashstepping into the car. You can take a good guess at what was on his mind though. Something like ‘am I as bad as Jane?’ or ‘do you feel like Roxy does?’.

Roxy turns the ignition and pulls out, leaving the three of you standing there together.
“Humans.” Sollux says despairingly.

“Humans.” you and Kanaya both agree with a nod.

You meet up with the rest of your family and head home. Pretty much everyone in your family is going to this party and a good number of people outside of it too. Kankri was invited, out of politeness you suspect, but he declined because he felt it was ‘appropriating pagan culture’. Meulin had another party to go to, Mituna is banned from going because he hasn’t slept for three days straight and your parents are worried that he’s heading into mania. A party is hardly what he needs. The rest of your siblings are all going, though, as are Kanaya and Porrim. You know that Dave also invited Terezi and has already warned you that Rose invited Vriska out of politeness. You’re pretty damn sure that humans are going to be wholly outnumbered by the trolls at this party.

You get your best Arthur Dent costume together and try to talk yourself into going to this party. It’s not that you don’t want to go, you do, it’s just that you really hope that John isn’t going. You consider messaging Hal, but you’re fully aware that even if he likes you his loyalty is to Dave over you and he may well relay any John related questions back to Dave.

You trek downstairs and find the others waiting. Sollux is dressed like Two-Face from the Batman comics because of course he is, he had Kanaya and Porrim do all the hard work making him look good so it’s kind of cheating. Nepeta is a cat, no prizes for guessing that. Aradia is Indiana Jones and she’s kind of doing a better job at it than Harrison Ford did if you’re honest about it, though it is odd just seeing her actual weapon at her hip like a prop. Damara is dressed like the woman from Kill Bill, and if the way that your mom is walking away with a sword in her hands, she’s just had her authentic prop confiscated.

You cross the road and pick up Kanaya and Porrim who are Marilyn Monroe and Morticia Addams respectively, their ancestor drives all of you over there, and you’re starting to feel a little self-conscious about your costume not being any good. Dave seemed to like it when you told him, right? So… it should be okay? Maybe. Fuck, probably not. Past you is a moron.

Kanaya knocks on the door when you all get there and get turfed out of the car. From the sound of music coming from inside you would guess that the party is already going on strong. Dave opens the door with Rose right there with him, and for a second you’re annoyed that they’re not in any kind of costume at all.

Or at least you’re annoyed until you notice that Rose doesn’t usually have red eyes.

Dave is standing in front of you, leaning on the doorway casually, dressed in his sister’s clothes. He’s even got a wig that looks just like her hair, you think he’s wearing makeup too. He is… he is in a skirt, and you have admired Dave’s legs in shorts before, but in a skirt they look different and strange. His face has always looked a lot like Rose’s but now it’s really damn hard to sift out the features that are his alone.

“I am very distressed by this.” Kanaya says, and Rose-as-Dave gives her that almost indiscernible smile that belongs on Dave’s face. Have they practised each other’s expressions?

“It’s pretty good, isn’t it?” Rose says, she’s even harder to read with Dave’s shades on her face.

“Yeah, I went as the most horrifying thing I could think of.” Dave agrees, his black-lipsticked mouth curling into a smile.

“I didn’t think this was what you meant when you said you were considering a twin themed costume.” you admit as Dave steps aside to let you in. You’re somewhat relieved that Dave doesn’t
appear to be wearing Rose’s bra or constructed anything else to stand in for her chest. For her part, Rose looks a little flatter than usual but it’s hard to tell because you don’t spend much of your time staring at your moirail’s soulmate’s tits.

“You know me, man. I can’t resist that irony.” Dave tells you, and you stare at him a little more. You’re not sure if this is doing something for you or not, you’re mostly just confused when you look at him.

“The real ironic thing is that you don’t know what irony is. Remind me to teach you one day.” Sollux tells Dave who shakes his head.

“Never. Sick costume by the way.” Dave tells Sollux.

“It was very fun to make.” Porrim says cheerfully and brushes some fluff or something off of Sollux’s shoulder.

“Hey, Latula is here.” Damara says and catches Porrim by the elbow to where Latula is sat on the sofa playing Mario Kart with some older human that you don’t know.

Dave leaves greeting the others to his sister and looks at you, without his glasses on you can see that he seems genuinely pleased to see you, which makes you feel like you’re glowing inside.

“Did you bring the book to go with the costume too?” Dave asks you and you fish it out of your pocket and also hold up your towel that Kanaya quickly embroidered with the words ‘Don’t Panic’ at your last minute request.

“That’s awesome.” Dave says, turning the book over in his hands.

“Are you okay without your sunglasses? I know the light hurts your eyes.” you say worriedly and Dave looks up at you again and shrugs slightly.

“It’s night, I’m fine as long as I resist the temptation to eyeball the lights too much.” he says.

“I’ve got to bet on you being smarter than a moth then, huh?” you say mockingly as you take your book back and Dave puts on an expression of mock offence.

Your family members disperse around the party, and Dave is checking his phone with a slight frown on his face, and he keeps having to push the longer blonde hair out of his eyes as he looks down.

“That is a really accurate wig, Rose’s too.” you say, aware that you’re just standing there.

“Thanks, it itches like fuck though so I’ll probably ditch it later and adopt the short haired lesbian look that Rose will no doubt pick up one day.” Dave replies without looking up. He taps at his phone a little more and frowns.

“John and Jane are coming after all, they weren’t telling us earlier, but I guess something changed Jane’s mind.” Dave says after a few moments and shoves his phone in his pocket. Or he tries to at least but Rose’s skirt doesn’t have any at all, so he just drops it into his sylladex.

Great, John. Now you’re going to have to compete for Dave’s time with someone else. Damnit, you are going to try your best not to be petty.

“What about Roxy?” you ask, because that’s selfless.

“I don’t know. I want her to work it all out with Jane but I should probably give her a heads up. I’ll
catch you later, yeah? Have fun.” Dave tells you and walks off, leaving you alone at the party.

“Hey Karkat, get over here and try these drinks! They have cherry soda!” Terezi shouts across the room at you and you sigh and walk over to her. Well, shit, Halloween blows.
Hey all, I did the promised Jane side chapter that is semi concurrent with this chapter and you can find that over here: http://archiveofourown.org/works/11550756

The Polaroid slides out of Roxy’s cat shaped camera and she sets it on the bed. Rose is pulling your shirt down over her chest and looking at herself in the mirror.

“Hm, you’re right Roxy, the sports bra helped.” Rose notes and turns this way and that as she looks at herself.

You look down at yourself in her clothes and fidget in her skirt, you don’t like how the skirt restricts your movement when you’re sat down like this.

“Why do you need my photo and not Rose’s again?” you ask Roxy who hooks her foot under your chair and pulls you close to her, so you’re knee to knee.

“Because I can just look at Rose’s face to do yours and it’s more important that I get you right because those sunglasses of yours will cover up most of Rose’s face.” your sister tells you and plucks your shades off of your face. She puts Rose’s hair band over your hair and pulls it all back from your face. She starts by slathering some cream stuff all over your face and neck and leaves it to dry for a few moments.

“I don’t know how you stand these skinny jeans.” Rose sighs and sits down on the bed.

“Well the skirt’s no picnic either.” you point out, and she shrugs.

Roxy rummages through the large box of hers and Rose’s makeup. Ordinarily you think that sisters wouldn’t be this cool with sharing their shit but apparently Rose and Roxy agreed that if they pooled their resources they’d get more variety and all of you are the same shade of pasty as fuck.

You look over at Rose and raise your eyebrows at her and tilt your head in Roxy’s direction. She’s been so quiet ever since Jane rejected her and ran off. She came home and went to her room for an hour before the two of you could even get in here to get your ‘costumes’ sorted out. Rose frowns and wraps her arms around herself, you can see her running her thumb over the mark on her own ring finger.

“Have you spoken to Jane again?” Rose asks warily, and Roxy freezes for a second before pulling out what you think might be foundation from the box.

“I have but she ignored me, so I’m done. I’ve been her friend since I was a preteen, if that means anything to her then she can find me, okay? I fix everyone else’s problems, she can at least talk to me herself.” Roxy says sharply and pumps the foundation out onto a sponge and then starts to dab it on your face.

“Are you sure you want to do tonight? We can cancel and just have the four of us and dumb movies.” you offer quietly.
“And cry into a pint of ice cream too? No way.” she says with a sharp shake of her head.

Roxy smooths the foundation over your skin, and you shut your eyes and let her, tilting your head so she can get every angle.

“As far as I’m concerned my love life is in her hands, there’s nothing to be done about it. But you, Dave, we can do something about. Karkat talked to me in the car and tried to fix this for me, he’s a sweet kid and you really need to get your act together and smooch that boy already. He might have the patience of a saint, but the rest of us don’t!” Roxy insists and caps the foundation bottle and reaches for something else that’s a smaller tube and a yellow kind of colour.

You figure that Roxy is trying to distract you and distract herself too. So you may as well go along with it, and it’s not as if you don’t have something to say on this topic.

“I… I nearly did the other week.” you admit, and both girls eyes go wide.

“What?” Roxy gasps.

“You never told me that!” Rose says in outrage.

“Tell us everything!” Roxy demands.

“I- man how fucked is this? I’m sitting here in a skirt as you put makeup on me about to tell my two not straight sisters about the time I nearly kissed a boy. If we’d managed to bury Bro, he’d be spinning in his grave right about now. I mean, shit, if you could hook some kind of generator up to him you’d power the country for years just from that and I guess single handedly crash the oil industry maybe.” you say with a weak laugh.

“Good, to all of that. Bro was a horrible person, I’m glad he’s gone and disappointing him should be a mark of success.” Rose says angrily. You’ve told her more than a fair few things about Bro, not that Karkat is right or anything because she’s not your moirail.

“Agreed, now tell us about Karkat and stay still so I can put this on you.” Roxy says and dabs the yellow stuff under your eyes and then some greenish stuff in other places like your cheeks and the tip of your nose.

“It’s therapy I guess? We’ve been working on me noticing when I’m freaking out and trying to let it pass and it’s working a lot of the time. So I’ve started just ignoring how sometimes the things I think and say about Karkat are kind of, I don’t know, gay. Maybe.” you say hesitantly as Roxy dabs at your face with a sponge that looks like a pink raindrop.

“I even told him about therapy, entirely by accident even and he didn’t care. I had thought he’d think I was crazy and not want anything to do with me which is dumb because I’m not supposed to want him hanging around waiting for me to decide to be with him.” you add.

“But you do.” Rose says sagely. You really wish you could contradict her but, nope, you can’t. Karkat used to be that stalker guy who was obsessed with you, and you were stuck with him but then he just morphed into something else. Into someone who when you think about losing him it actually hurts you.

“Yeah.” you admit glumly.

“Close your eyes, sweetie. What happened then?” Roxy asks, and you jerk when something touches your skin but it’s just a brush for something, and it almost tickles as it goes all over your face.
“I don’t know. I told him about the party, blabbed about therapy like a moron, and then he said he didn’t care, and then I hugged him and—”

And you were almost in his lap, his warm grey body up against yours. You could feel his plain black sweater under your fingers and hear the way his breath got all out of order when your noses brushed. You’d been thinking about how if it had to be anyone that was on your arm then it wouldn’t be so bad if it was him. The idea of being stuck with Karkat forever doesn’t feel like being stuck at all. He’s everything you’re not meant to want. He’s the wrong gender, the wrong species and the wrong everything. You’re a fucking child abuse case who is obsessed with being around a guy who blows up over everything, he should terrify you, but he doesn’t. Bro almost never shouted and you never knew what he was thinking, but Karkat says everything that comes into his head just like you do. If Karkat wanted to hurt you, then you’d fucking know.

You had this brief, stupid, crazy moment where you didn’t even think, where there was nothing else. You weren’t thinking about anyone in your past or how the future would go, no time existed, and you wanted to kiss the stupid boy.

“I wasn’t really thinking anything. I just- we were close and it’s Karkat, you know? It was like magnets, pf, how do they work?” you joke weakly and open your eyes again.

“I’m ignoring your terrible meme. Obviously, you didn’t actually kiss him, so what happened, did you abort that mission or did you get hit with a dose of gay panic and say something awful?” Rose asks, and Roxy looks between the two of you and mumbles something about ‘jawline’ as she rummages in her makeup box more.

“Some assholes in a car came by and started yelling, I’ll let you fill in the details yourself. I bailed and apologised later and for some reason he wasn’t even mad. But it’s still a thing that happened.” you say with a frown as Roxy brushes some pale powder around your jaw and then switches it out for a darker one.

“You think he should hate you?” Rose asks with a raise of her eyebrow.

He told you that he didn’t hate you, that your reaction changed nothing about how he felt. You know what he’s implied that he feels about you and that’s basically the opposite of what you think he should.

“If I were him I’d hate me. He thinks I’m his soulmate and I’m jerking him around!” you protest.

“It’s not that simple. I don’t hate Jane, and she’s doing far worse to me than you do to Karkat. At least Karkat knows he means something to you.” Roxy says bitterly and draws a sweeping line under your cheekbones. If randomised youtube beauty tutorial links that have gone unclicked have taught you anything, it is that this is the ‘contouring’ of fame that you have heard about. She uses another brush and keeps going over the same bit.

“So, great, a soulmate bond means that you’ll put up with all sorts of terrible shit from someone that a sane person wouldn’t. Life would be better if we didn’t have these stupid marks in the first place.” you argue.

“Our parents might have split up sooner in that reality, we might not even have been born.” Rose points out.

“Fine, maybe that’s true. But Roxy would just have an unrequited crush on Jane and she wouldn’t feel like the one person who is supposed to be everything is treating her like shit, and that’s who she’s stuck with forever. Karkat could go find someone less fucked up than me and be happy. And
even if soulmates were still a thing you could still meet that person and fall for them but you’d know they want you for you and not bullshit body art. This makes no one happy!” You argue angrily.

“But that’s not the world we live in.” Rose points out.

“And that’s not how Karkat saw it.” Roxy sighs and switches to the other side of your face.

“What? What did he say?” you ask in a whisper.

Roxy leans back and smiles a little sadly, she pulls one long sleeve up and shows you Jane’s mark.

“He said that it’s not gone black so there’s still hope, that she can still be the person who loves me back.” She says.

The implication clangs to the ground around you. Karkat’s mark on his arm isn’t black, he still believes that you’re going to change your mind. And he’s not- you mean- you’ve thought about it. You nearly kissed him, you wanted to.

That feelings wells up inside of you again, that paranoia of ‘Bro is watching’ and you resist the temptation to look around you to check. He’s dead, his opinion doesn’t matter, and he can’t hurt you. Relax, let it pass. It’s passed before, you just have to accept that the fear is irrational and even though it’s real it can’t hurt you. It’s just fear.

It passes. Roxy is talking to Rose, goddamnit you lost them.

What if you actually did it, though? What if you gave in and let Karkat have whatever it is that he wants in the burning wreckage of Dave Strider? And because this isn’t the first time you’ve asked this question of yourself you know the answer, you don’t want him doing that in case he doesn’t find anything that he wants. You know Karkat, you know his love of romance movies, if he thinks that being with you is going to be anything like that then he’s in for a bad shock. The thought of him finding that out and your arm slowly going black because Bro warped you enough that you’re not who Karkat was meant for is probably more than you can take.

“Dave.” Roxy says, snapping her fingers.

“Sorry. Zoned out. What’re you putting on my face now?” you ask.

“Highlighter.” Roxy tells you.

“I don’t know why I bothered asking.” you say with a roll of your eyes.

You kind of zone out as Roxy finishes the rest of your makeup, apart from the really tense part where there is eyeliner involved, and you have to hold perfectly still or get stabbed in the eyeball. Mascara is just as terrible. The wig is convincing but also itchy. Throughout most of it you’re thinking about whether or not to do anything about this whole Karkat situation but ultimately it’s unproductive.

Eventually Roxy finishes with you and lines you and Rose up before the wide mirror on her wardrobe and honestly, you’re having a hard time spotting the differences between the two of you. You spend a few minutes copying her every expression and then Rose has to wash her face clean and Roxy starts the process of making her look like you. She already has your photograph, so she doesn’t need you around.

You leave and head to Dirk’s room, he’s DJing with Hal tonight, so if he needs help setting up his equipment downstairs then that’s something you can actually help with. You stick your head into
Dirk’s room to see him painting black paint around his eyes.

“Hey Rose, you seen Dave?” Dirk asks, not really looking at you beyond a glance. You try to suppress your grin.

“Not lately.” you answer and Dirk jerks and looks back at you in alarm.

“Holy shit.” Dirk says slowly and leans in to look at you up close.

“Roxy!” Dirk yells out of his doorway.

“What?” comes back Roxy’s shout.

“You’re a goddamn wizard with this shit!” Dirk calls back, and you hear her distant cackles.

“Damn son, I feel outclassed.” Dirk chuckles and returns to the mirror, he’s nearly done with his realistic skull face paint.

“Well you are going as, what? A skeleton? Hardly original.” you point out, and Dirk shakes his head and points to what appears to be a cape and scythe propped behind the open door.

“I’m death, those beats are gonna be so sick that they die and I’m there to deal with that.” Dirk says seriously and puts his paintbrush down.

“Ok, that is pretty cool.” you concede, and Dirk walks into his bathroom and you hear him turn the tap on.

You sit down on the edge of his bed and without further stimulation your brain circles right back around to Karkat. Goddamnit, all this stuff with Jane is making it impossible to avoid thinking of it and making it feel real hard to not think of yourself as the same kind of colossal prick that you think Jane is being right now. You have to do something about this.

“You okay?” Dirk asks as he comes out of the bathroom, flicking water off of his fingers.

“Can I…” you pause and stand up to shut his door and return to sitting down on his bed, “can I get some advice from you and Hal?”

“Of course you can.” Dirk says and leans against the wall opposite you.

“Anytime.” Hal agrees from Dirk’s desk speakers.

“Do you think I should do something about Karkat?” you ask.

“That’s frustratingly vague.” Hal says.

“I mean that he’s pretty certain he’s my soulmate and I know the marks are pretty clear so do you think I should just… do it?” you ask desperately.

“I thought he’d stopped pushing you about that. Is he acting like you have to?” Dirk asks sharply.

“No, that’s not it. I would have told you if that’d been going on. Is this because of Jane?” Hal says.

“No, I mean, maybe a little.” you say and shake your head. None of this makes sense, also the fake longer Rose hair is getting in your face.

“Well, maybe you should think about this mark touching thing before you do it.” Dirk warns you.
“I have thought about it, shit all I do is think about touching Karkat!” you argue back.

Wait you just said-

“Shut up, you know what I meant.” you say quickly but you hear Hal chuckling to himself anyway.

“Is that what Karkat even wants? And I don’t mean for the two of you to match up but for you to rush into it because you’re impatient, or because you want to do what he wants, or because you don’t want to be like Jane?” Dirk asks you patiently.

You shake your head quietly and fidget with the hem of Rose’s skirt.

“No, he’s this big romantic. He’d hate that.” you mumble.

“So maybe give it some time and then decide, he’s not going anywhere, that much is pretty clear.” Dirk points out.

You nod silently and look at the floor. You’re not really looking at it, you’re just unfocused. You would rather do nothing than screw this up with Karkat. So… your options are either to do nothing or to commit to it like 9000% and sweep him off his feet. Two total extremes then, great. You officially hate this.

Bro would kill you.

Dirk has left you to your thoughts and is back to fussing at his costume. Something he does makes him gasp in pain and that sound smacks into your previous thought and your awful brain brings up the memory of Bro attacking Dirk for liking men. You can still hear the sound his head made when it hit the wall and the way he went all ragdoll limp when it happened.

“Dave, snap out of it.” Hal calls to you, and you shake it off and look up to see Dirk watching you with concern. One of his eyes is entirely black, and you can see that he has a huge looking contact lens balanced on a fingertip.

“Sorry.” you apologise quickly and Dirk shakes his head, he has this thing about you apologising for the mental scars Bro put on you. But if Dirk’s not gonna stop holding himself responsible then there’s no reason you should stop apologising. Your doctor would probably say that you should both stop doing both of those things but she’s not here to do that.

Dirk puts the other contact lens in with a hiss of discomfort and then looks at you again. His eyes are totally black now, and the only thing that distinguishes his eyes from the black eye sockets he’s painted on are his white eyelashes.

“You don’t have to do this party if you don’t want to. We can just go out somewhere and catch a movie or do something else.” Dirk offers. It’s still kind of novel getting so much choice in things, and Dirk was always one to offer you a choice when he could, your life was always dictated by Bro so you guess that Dirk tried to give you as much agency as he could always. That’s not stopped being a thing just because Bro ate pavement.

Goddamn, your head is all over the place tonight.

“Nah, I’m cool.” you assure him, and Dirk smirks slightly.

“Well, no shit. Never said anything about your coolness, wouldn’t question that.” Dirk says with a smile in his tone.
“Damn right.” you shoot back, and Dirk reaches out and whirls his grim reaper cloak on.

“Can you see through those things okay?” you ask curiously, pointing to Dirk’s now all black eyes.

“They’re a little darker than my shades and itchy, but it’s fine.” Dirk says.

“Ok, cool. I wanted to ask if you needed help setting up the DJ stuff or anything.” you offer, but Dirk shakes his head.

“Nah, bro. Got all that set up earlier, I figured it’d be smart to do it before I put this stuff in my eyes and your mom’s fussing over everything else. Haven’t got anything else to do until people get here.”

Dirk tells you and picks up his scythe and walks off out of his room.

“Dave?” Hal asks softly.

“Yeah?” you reply.

“Karkat doesn’t think that you’re like Jane, he thinks that your situation is different. He doesn’t feel bitter about it or anything, so there’s no rush here.” Hal tells you sincerely.

You wonder for a moment how Hal could possibly know that and then you realise, duh, Karkat and Roxy talked in the car. The car that Hal has constant microphone access to because the GPS in it is run by him and also takes instructions by voice so it can be hands-free for Roxy.

You pull Rose’s purple sleeve back and look at the marks on your arm, it could be Karkat, it really could.

“You know how like, you’re not meant to have some animals as pets because they’re super difficult and yeah it’s possible for some people but totally not recommended? I mean, Bowie is a crow and you’re not really meant to have them as pets and she’s not really my pet because she goes wherever she likes and visits me, she doesn’t live here. She’d probably destroy my shit if she did. If I am Karkat’s soulmate he must be hella advanced at soulmate handling. I mean, in whatever way people get sorted out did my file come with all kinds of warnings and only the most ninja person could handle my shit or is that not a factor? Is Karkat just getting soulmate expert mode randomly selected for him if it’s me? Just, fuck, poor guy you know? I know I’m hot shit and all and he’d be lucky to have me but I’m also a fucking hot mess too so…” you ramble with a frown.

“You seem a lot more open to the idea that it could be him now. Anyone would think that you might have an actual crush on him, Dave.” Hal teases gently.

“Shut up.” You mutter, glaring at the ground.

“Ironic that for someone so phobic it seems like no one Bro has ever been involved with is straight, even your mother isn’t.” Hal says with some amusement.

“Gross.” Dave says, wrinkling his nose.

“And also I never said I’m not straight. It’s not like I’m jerking it to dudes now, just Karkat… Karkat’s complicated.” you complain. Stupid Karkat.

“So, direct quote here: ‘it’s not like I’m jerking it to dudes now, just Karkat.’” Hal repeats, playing your own words back to you and cutting it to make it sound like that really was the end of what you said.

“Fuck you, no. I’m leaving.” you snap, throwing your hands up in the air and walking out. Behind
Hal is laughing and you know he’s only doing it so that you can hear it. Smug fucker.

It’s not like you even ever have… you know, to Karkat. You are getting an ominous feeling that next time your teenage hormones rise that your mind will wander right back to this idea and things will get really fucking complicated. Man, fuck your life.

You sulk all of the way to Roxy’s room and pause in the door when you see your own face looking back at you, sweet shades and all. Rose grins and then catches herself, straightening her expression out into a very subtle Strider smile. She gets to her feet and stands, her posture cocky and confident.

“Damn, Rose, you make a good me.” you tell her.

“You’re a pretty respectable Lalonde yourself.” she replies.

“I think we should give Roxy credit, it’s not just our fine genetics here you know.” you point out and Rose nods. She’s even got a short wig on that looks just like your hair.

“It’s true, I am totes the best. Now scram both of you, I gotta get into my sweet costume.” Roxy declares, getting to her feet.

You and Rose leave Roxy to it, you don’t actually know what she’s dressing up as, and you hadn’t thought to ask. You figure if you’re getting advice from people then your apparent “moirail” is someone worth asking advice for, because your own instincts here have got you absolutely nowhere.

“Rose.” you say quietly, stopping her. She turns to look at you with your face and it’s mildly unsettling, the fact that you can see your face in your own shades and it looks like hers is doubly odd.

“I think… I think I need your advice on something.” you say and Rose’s eyebrows raise over the shades. God damn is your face this unreadable?

“What is it?” she asks.

“I want to seduce Karkat Vantas, how do I do that?” you ask, and Rose stares at you for a moment before answering.

“Well, firstly thank you for clarifying that you meant Karkat Vantas, as opposed to all of those other Karkats that I know. I can hardly keep them straight.” she snarks, and you roll your eyes.

“Fuck you.” you say flatly.

“Secondly, I think that walking up to Karkat and saying ‘I want to seduce you’ would work just fine. This is Karkat and you after all, it’s not as if you need to convince him to consider being with you.” Rose points out, and you shake your head with a sigh.

“It’s not about convincing him. Look, I’m not sure about doing this at all, I’m still uneasy as all fuck about it but there’s something to this and if I’m going to do this thing I want to do it right. Karkat’s this big romantic, I can’t just be like ‘hey babe, you’re hot’ and leave it at that.” you say in despair.

Rose’s mouth opens a little in surprise and then spreads into a slow smile.

“You’re asking for help in wooing him.” she says with quiet wonder in her tone.

“God, please don’t ever say wooing again.” you groan.

“But that is your intent is it not? You feel that he is deserving and appreciative of romance and you
want to give him that.” Rose says, leaning against the wall of the hallway and staring you down.

“That and I get to pussy out of it with the excuse that I’m planning a thing without having to tell him anything about it.” you admit unhappily.

“Like, fuck, even just talking about this is making me twitchy. This shouldn’t be something that I want, but I keep circling back to it like a brainless moth to a street lamp.” you groan and only just catch yourself in time from rubbing all of Roxy’s hard work off of your face.

“Well, there’s certainly no rush. Karkat has waited this long, he can handle waiting until you’re ready. And if you feel that planning this out in detail would make you feel more in control of the situation and better able to handle your feelings I am more than happy to help. But Dave, I hope you know that Karkat more than returns your feelings for him.” Rose says sincerely.

It’s not anticipation or excitement that makes your insides squirm, it’s guilt. That nagging feeling that you’re stringing Karkat along, that you’ll go for it one day and kiss him because you like him and feel that you should only to find out that you don’t actually feel that way.

The doorbell rings and you jolt in surprise. Is it Karkat? It might be.

“Come on, time to be unsettling to people.” Rose says with malevolent cheer.

The two of you rush down the stairs together, but Dirk is already answering the door. A tall, awkward looking troll dude comes through the door and he is in some kind of costume for sure.

“Is he dressed as a unicorn?” Rose says in quiet scorn.

“Horuss!” Dirk says cheerfully and fistbumps the strange man.

“And of course he’s one of Dirk’s friends.” you sigh despairingly. The tall unicorn costumed troll is followed through the door by a slightly shorter one and this dude you actually know.

“Equius!” you call out, and the troll turns around to look at you.

“Oh, hello Dave and, uh… Rose. I- oh, I see the two of you are engaged in some tomfoolery right now.” Equius says, narrowing his eyes at the two of you.

“They’re costumes, man. Speaking of what are you? Frankenstein?” you ask, coming down the steps to look at the troll’s super low effort costume that you suspect he just picked up from a store and then half assed putting on.

“Frankenstein was the scientist, not the creature.” Rose corrects you primly.

“You know, if you’re gonna be me you need to be cooler.” you tell Rose who levels a mirror shaded look at you.

“If you’re going to be me, you need to be smarter.” she says tartly.

“Rude.” you gasp.

“This is unsettling to me.” Equius complains.

“I knew you three went to school together but I didn’t know you knew each other.” Dirk says, apparently he was watching that whole thing.

“I share English with him.” you explain.
“History.” Rose adds.

“Small world. Horuss is my partner on pretty much all of my projects, practically the only guy who knows what he’s doing.” Dirk explains.

“Oh, you flatter me. I should be complimenting you, you are the most competent member of your species that I have met so far, the rest of them all seem far too shaky limbed in the world of robotics.” Horuss says.

“Way to backhand that compliment, man. Come on in, I’ll show you where shit is.” Dirk says with a shake of his head and shoves the door shut behind Horuss and leads him in towards the kitchen.

You look at Equius and feel a little awkward, you don’t really know the guy super well. He mostly talks to either Nepeta or Karkat, and it’s not like he avoids talking to you but you can’t remember a single conversation that you’ve had with just him before today. You’ve only ever been talking to people in the same group as him at the same time.

His phone pings and it saves you from having to make small talk.

“Nepeta says that she and the others should be here soon.” Equius informs you both and then promptly walks off after his brother and leaves the two of you alone.

Your mom calls you both to help her, not that you want to spend any time around her, given how fucking creepy her costume is. Every now and then she says or does something that makes you think that there’s a reason she was Bro’s soulmate out of all people. Rose informs you that your mom is dressed as the ‘Other Mother’ from some book that’s also a movie, which is fine and all except that it means she has what looks like stitched on buttons for eyes. Her hair is black and slick and between that and the eyes it’s pinging all of your aversion to puppets and memories of watching The Ring well before you should have.

You tell yourself that your flashstepping to the door each time it rings is just to get away from her, but Rose seems to be under the impression that you’re desperate to see Karkat or something. Which absolutely is not the case, if you’re disappointed to see Vriska then that’s just because she’s Vriska. She’s dressed as a pirate and her sister is a sexy spider, you are kind of horrified that ‘sexy spider’ is a costume that anyone can buy anywhere.

Terezi and her sister Latula show up and apparently she and Roxy are friends. Or at least you assume so from how your sister, dressed as Sailor Moon, comes screeching down the stairs in glee and throws herself at her. For her part Terezi, dressed as a dragon because the girl would never waste a chance to do that, comes up to you and waggles her eyebrows at you and Rose.

“Nice costume, you two.” she says, and you and Rose share a suspicious look. If Terezi hasn’t worked out that you’re dressed as each other she might think that you’re not wearing any costume at all and she’s being sarcastic.

“Really?” you ask carefully.

“Yeah, especially you. Nice legs, Dave.” Terezi cackles and slaps your ass before walking off to find Vriska.

“Hey!” you shout after her, but she just laughs harder.

The next few times the door rings you and Rose get it, your costume doesn’t really work so well without her there, but each time it ends up being Dirk or Roxy’s friends. When did they get so many friends? How dare they have lives separate from you two?
“Dave, this is getting a little sad.” Rose sighs from her place on the staircase.

“What is?” you ask even though you can guess what her answer is going to be.

“This. This whole leaping to the door, desperate to see Karkat. I am happy that you’ve decided to confront your feelings, but it doesn’t have to be done right now.” Rose says, fussing with the fake copy of your hair. Short hair actually looks kind of good on her, you’re tempted to put that wig on her when she looks like herself and see what that mashup looks like.

“I’m not doing that. Even if I was doing that I’m not planning on doing anything about it tonight, it’s just… I’ve thought about it now. You can’t unthink that kind of thing. No putting the gay genie back in that bottle. Or bisexual genie maybe? I’m not really sure if I’m into dudes who aren’t Karkat.” you ramble as the idea occurs to you. It’s like you can think so much further now that you’ve accepted that hot makeouts with Karkat would be something you are totally down with. Man, even thinking about that is giving you butterflies like a bad teen romance book protagonist. Maybe one day you should tell Karkat about this if this thing with him ever goes anywhere.

“Well that is something that I’m going to put a pin in and circle back to later, but for now I would like to point out that Karkat can’t actually read your mind. He’s not going to know about this big revelation unless you tell him. Or unless you act so blatantly different that he starts investigating what’s wrong with you.” Rose tells you.

“It’s just…” you trail off and look around at the party and see that no one is watching you, “I don’t know which would be worse. If he was my soulmate or if he wasn’t.”

A knock sounds at the door and you jump in alarm. Rose stands up and breezes by you.

“You do know which would be worse.” she says quietly and opens the door. Oh shit, it’s them. You lean against the doorway and try to act cool and natural. Karkat is scowling at the both of you until he locks eyes with you and you see the realisation click. They’re all looking back and forth between the two of you, and this is by far the best reaction that the pair of you have got to your outfits yet.

“I am very distressed by this.” Kanaya says with the frown of someone reconsidering their sexuality and not liking it. The two of you should form a club for that.

“It’s just…” you trail off and look around at the party and see that no one is watching you, “I don’t know which would be worse. If he was my soulmate or if he wasn’t.”

“You do know which would be worse.” she says quietly and opens the door. Oh shit, it’s them. You lean against the doorway and try to act cool and natural. Karkat is scowling at the both of you until he locks eyes with you and you see the realisation click. They’re all looking back and forth between the two of you, and this is by far the best reaction that the pair of you have got to your outfits yet.

“I am very distressed by this.” Kanaya says with the frown of someone reconsidering their sexuality and not liking it. The two of you should form a club for that.

“It’s pretty good, isn’t it?” Rose brags. At least she’s not telling everyone that it was her idea.

“Yeah, I went as the most horrifying thing I could think of.” you chime in.

“I didn’t think this was what you meant when you said you were considering a twin themed costume.” Karkat says sounding a little shell shocked. You step out of the way of the door so these good people can actually get in your house and balance out the douchebag ratio with Vriska and her sister being here.

Karkat is still looking at you as he walks around you and lingers at the base of the stairs. You usually try to ignore it when he watches you or if you don’t you have your shades to hide behind so he doesn’t see you noticing him doing it. Unfortunately, you are shadeless tonight, for shame.

“You know me, man. I can’t resist that irony.” you say and Sollux snorts.

You look up at him to see that he’s wearing a damn good two-face costume which probably gels well with his numerical fetish.

“The real ironic thing is that you don’t know what irony is. Remind me to teach you one day.” Sollux tells you.
“Never. Sick costume by the way.” you say and manage to catch a hint of his jacked up smile. The guy needs to smile more, he’s a pretty cool dude and you really ought to chill with him more often.

You look back at Karkat, and he is dressed as Arthur Dent as he promised he would. He looks a little uncomfortable to be in his pjs and a dressing gown at a party but it wouldn’t be the right costume if he wasn’t.

“Did you bring the book to go with the costume too?” you ask him. Knowing him he did, Karkat’s always a stickler about being accurate to the text in English class so why would this be any different? And yeah, he’s taking the book out now and giving it to you. It’s a pretty nice copy of the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, it’s clearly meant to look like it does in the book.

“That’s awesome.” you tell Karkat and he looks really pleased for a split second before he seems to catch himself and act like he doesn’t care that you approve. Fuck, you really kind of hope he is your soulmate. You obviously are giving him some kind of strange look because his expression shifts to one of concern.

“Are you okay without your sunglasses? I know the light hurts your eyes.” Karkat asks, because he would remember that about you.

“It’s night, I’m fine as long as I resist the temptation to eyeball the lights too much.” you reassure him.

“I’ve got to bet on you being smarter than a moth then, huh?” Karkat teases you. You give him your best offended expression when you phone pings from the depths of your sylladex. You pull it out to see that of all people it’s John messaging you.

[ectoBiologist began pestering turntechGodhead]

EB: hey dave!
TG: hey john
EB: weird question but is your party still on?
TG: i sure as shit hope so or else ive been letting a lot of crazy costumed people in my house for no damn reason
EB: haha ok can we come along?
TG: what? like you jane and your dad?
EB: yeah

You frown and try to get your fake hair out of your face for the millionth time. No wonder Rose wears hair bands but they don’t do enough. Goddamn though, Jane wants to come here? It’s not hard to remember the state that she put Roxy in and right now your sister is laughing with her friends. Should you really just invite Jane back in here?

“That is a really accurate wig, Rose’s too.” Karkat says because you’ve been ignoring him for your phone. You’re not a good party host.

EB: i know this thing with jane and roxy sucks but it’s stupid that we came all this way and for us then not to see you just because of it you know?
TG: yeah man i feel you i wanna hang too but roxy was really badly hurt
TG: is jane cool now or what?

Damnit Karkat was talking about your Rose costume. Can’t leave him hanging. You are the king of multitasking, it is you. You ramble something about your hair or whatever, you’re not totally paying attention. Should you go ask someone about this? Roxy herself or perhaps Dirk and Rose?
EB: i don’t know, i know she came to some kind of decision but it’s not like she talks to me about it.
TG: eesh
EB: ok well i got your address and we’re heading out the door now so i guess we’ll see you in a bit!
TG: hey john no wait

[ectoBiologist is offline]

TG: goddamnit

“John and Jane are coming after all, they weren’t telling us earlier, but I guess something changed Jane’s mind.” you tell Karkat who frowns, he’s probably worried about Roxy which is something you can certainly relate to.

“What about Roxy?” he asks, echoing the same concern that you have. You turn to look for her and catch her silly hair bun things over the crowd. Did she have that cosplay all ready to go already? Because you never saw her getting stuff mailed to her for it before the party. Your sister is a not so secret nerd. Now you just have to make sure she doesn’t get her heart broken again.

“I don’t know. I want her to work it all out with Jane but I should probably give her a heads up. I’ll catch you later, yeah? Have fun.” you say to him and cut your way through the now much more crowded party to find your older sister.

You pass Sollux who is not at all subtly staring at Roxy’s ass in that tiny skirt and speaking of skirts Rose’s does not give you the kind of freedom of movement with your legs that you’re used to. Sure skinny jeans might be a bitch to get on and off but they don’t get in your way at least.

“What’s up, Rose?” Roxy asks you with a sly smile.

“Not much, Sailor Moon, but we’ve got incoming Crockerberts.” you tell her, turning your phone around for her to see. The smile drops off of her face and Vriska’s sister looks at her curiously.

“Ok, I’m gonna go… go and camp out on the stairs. I gots to talk to that girl and since she’s been avoiding my messages I guess I gotta do it in person and I’d rather it be private too. Thanks for the heads up, message me if you find out anything else, ok?” Roxy tells you and straight up absconds.

“What was that about?” Vriska’s sister asks curiously, her fanged smile practically screaming for the little fly, which is you, to come into her parlour so she can suck your guts out through your chest cavity.

“Stuff.” you say unhelpfully and bail in the direction of Dirk and his DJ gear.

You hop over a speaker and get close to his side. He’s mixing some pretty nice tunes with a decent amount of holiday appropriate snippets of music meshed in there, from songs to quotes of movies all spliced with perfection. Dirk isn’t as obsessed with this as Bro was and he’s not as good but he’s still damn good and you like his work.

“Hey, we have a situation. A Roxy situation. John and Jane are coming.” you inform him. A DJ who wasn’t as smooth as Dirk might have had their fingers frozen on the record just then, they might have comically scratched in their surprise, but not Dirk. Dirk nods minutely.

“That’s why she’s sat on the stairs like she’s waiting for a prom date then.” Dirk notes flatly.
“Yeah. So, what do we do?” you ask him and Dirk sighs.

“Dave, I’m gonna lay down some advice here. Some things you just can’t meddle in. I know you love Roxy and I get that you’re worried, I am too. But you barely know Jane at all and no matter what you want it’s the two of them who have to work this out between themselves, you can’t do anything.” Dirk says.

“But-” you protest.

“No. Look, I’ve already talked to Jane and to Roxy today and even I’m out of shit to do. This isn’t your fight, so promise me you’ll stay out of it.” Dirk says, tilting his head to look at you.

“This sucks.” you mutter.

“Promise me.” he repeats.

“No way! That’s our sister, or I guess my sister and your whatever but she’s ours and we should do something!” you insists.

“Hal, can you cover for a sec?” Dirk sighs and a screen on Dirk’s setup flashes something up. Dirk takes his hands back from the tools of his trade and turns to properly face you.

“Just what are you going to do? Tell Jane to be nice to Roxy or else? Lock them in a room together like some teen movie and tell yourself it’s for the best. Handcuff them together perhaps?” Dirk asks.

“No,” you mutter unhappily.

Dirk sighs and reaches out to you, curling his hand around the back of your neck and pulling you a little closer. It’s this thing that he sometimes does, you think when you were little it was to protect your neck and head from Bro smacking you into things. Since then it’s kind of morphed into something equivalent to a hug but without the two of you having to be as outwardly affectionate for it.

“I promise I’m on it, I was talking to Jane earlier. If they want to fix this then they gotta do it themselves. Now, why don’t you go hang out with your friends and enjoy the party, huh? Hey, if John is going to be here too you’ll have almost all of your friends in one place, focus on that.” Dirk advises you.

“Fine, I promise I’ll stay out of it. But if you need me…” you offer and Dirk nods.

“Yeah, yeah, I know where you are. Now scram, these beats aren’t gonna drop themselves.” Dirk says, clearly amused. You nod and duck out of his little setup area and head outside. As much as you dig hanging out with Terezi in art class you are all for avoiding Vriska.

You head outside and spy Sollux and Aradia, she waves at you with all of her adorable enthusiasm. The girl is grim as all fuck sometimes, but she’s always so damn cheery about it.

“Hey there Doctor Jones.” you greet as you walk up to her.

“I forget if he actually has a doctorate or not. We should marathon those movies at some point.” Aradia says.

“I do love watching a guy bring a gun to a sword fight.” you concede with a nod.

“Hey, remember I talked to you before about the shit Aradia has been digging up and all the code
“Yeah, it’s some freaky shit.” you say.

“It’s really exciting.” Aradia says, her eyes shining with glee.

“Well, the point being that Aradia wanted more hands for digging this crap up and I’m all for doing less of the work and not being stuck out there alone with someone who’s going to just dick around with rocks for hours. You wanna come with us next weekend?” Sollux asks.

“I don’t really have any experience with that kind of thing.” you warn him.

“No need, I can teach you. Besides I’m told that you’re into skeletons and I’d like some help identifying some of the little animals that seem to have been buried with these ruins, I don’t think they just died there so they must mean something.” Aradia insists.

“Wait, they’re buried? Like, buried buried and not just covered over with dirt or sand or whatever over time? As in someone purposefully set those suckers in the ground?” you ask, interest spiking within you. You know it’s hard to get full animal skeletons because other animals usually make dead animals into lunch and all the parts get scattered. For someone to be burying whole critters out in the desert is really weird and really interesting.

“Yeah!” Aradia chirps.

“Told you he’d be into it.” Sollux says smugly.

“I guess you got me. I’m down for that, let me know times and what you need me to bring, shit like that.” you agree.

You chat with Aradia and Sollux for a little while about these ruins, but Aradia insists that for the most part you just have to see them for yourself. She’s catching you up on the basics of what she’s found so far, though nothing specific, when Sollux suddenly looks a hundred times more serious. It’s hard to tell with his eyes but you think he’s looking over your shoulder.

You turn around to see John standing in the patio doors and behind him inside the house you can see Jane, dressed as a doctor, looking around for Roxy.

“Is that her?” Sollux hisses angrily.

“Yeah, but we’re supposed to stay out of it.” you sigh. You watch as Roxy walks up to her, the two talk for a moment and then Roxy gestures for her to follow and the two head upstairs. You guess that she’s hoping for a more private conversation this time.

“Shoosh.” Aradia says quietly, even though Sollux is still crackling with tension.

“I should go say hi to John. I’ll let you know if I find anything out about Roxy and Jane, and uh… see you next weekend for the expedition thing for sure.” you say awkwardly backing away.

“I look forward to it!” Aradia chirps and pats Sollux on the cheek. Yeah, you’re getting the heck out of PDA central now thank you very much.

You jog towards John as well as you can in a skirt, which is not so well, and skid to a halt next to your twin before him. John is looking appropriately in awe of your costumes, his mouth agape and
fish eyes flicking between you.

“Jesus fuck you idiot, it’s not as if they magically transformed or anything. They just switched clothes and put on makeup.” Karkat growls from the ground. He and Kanaya are sat on the paving on a level above your mother’s flower bed, from the gap between them you’d say that Rose was sitting there before.

“Damn, Karkat, don’t steal my thunder.” you say and Karkat scowls.

“Too late, consider it stolen. Now I’m going to get my liver pecked out by birds for all eternity and it’d be preferable to watching this doofus stare at you for a moment longer.” he grumps.

“I think it was fire that Prometheus stole to get that punishment, not thunder.” Rose comments and sits down on the pavement, patting the space next to her so that John joins her. You take the spot between him and Karkat.

“I know that and I also don’t care.” Karkat says.

“It was Karkat, right? What’s your costume supposed to be?” John asks curiously.


“Oh, I have no idea what that is. Can you guess what I am?” John asks, gesturing to his Ghostbusters costume with pride. You have no idea why he loves that movie as fanatically as he does, but it’s endearing in its own way. You had periods where you were envious of how normal John’s life was in comparison to your own but it faded, John is just too nice of a guy to dislike and he has his own problems like everyone does.

“An idiot in a jumpsuit?” Karkat guesses with a sneer. You look at him and raise an eyebrow, he’s not usually this prickly. What’s going on with him?

“Geez, Karkat. Who pissed in your cornflakes this morning?” you ask and you see Kanaya fix him with a disapproving stare.

“Whatever.” Karkat mutters to himself.

Fine, you’ll let him work out whatever this is. You still have your best bro to talk to.

“So, you flew to get here, right?” you ask him and John freezes for a moment before nodding.

“Never been on a plane before it was not as exciting as I had imagined. Nothing to tell, really.” John says.

“Was it because it was not filled with criminals, didn’t crash and no one dropped a body out of the plane?” Rose guesses and you barely stifle a laugh.

“Basically!” John snorts with amusement.

“Ah, my first time was when we moved back here. I hated that shit, I am not a fan of feeling like my eardrums are gonna pop.” you say.

“I still do not understand why you haven’t fixed that problem. Alternian ships don’t do that at all, and the technology to equalise the pressure properly is easily made here.” Kanaya points out.

“Yes, but it’s probably expensive and why do that when airlines can just cram people in like cattle? And Dave you’re lucky that we flew business when we did our trip, coach is far more packed.” Rose
“True. So, John, how long are you staying?” you ask, and you really hope that it’s longer than just tonight.

“Uh, I don’t know. But for sure we’re here for the weekend, maybe longer. The place we’re staying at isn’t too far away, so that’s good!” John says happily.

You draw your knees up to your chest and rest your arms on them as you turn that nugget of information over in your mind like some dwarvish gem inspector in some high fantasy setting. John’s a pretty terrible liar and he’s not given you any real reason for him to be here.

“Not that I’m not psyched to see you, ‘cause I am, but why the sudden trip?” you ask and John shifts awkwardly.

“Well… I…” John stalls. The sound of a door slamming catches you all off guard and you turn around to see a crying Jane leaving the building with Dirk hot on her heels.

“Oh, that’s not good.” Rose says softly. You twist to get a better look and freeze when you realise that your bare thigh is on Karkat’s hand. It’s not- it’s not like he’s put his hand on your thigh or anything, his hand was already on the ground and you just rolled your leg onto it. Still, maybe it’s the fact that you’re wearing a skirt and his skin is so warm that has you freaking out about it.

Karkat’s hand slides away and you only come back to reality when he pokes you in the forehead with his finger.

“Earth to Dave.” he says.

“Sorry. I just- nah, we should leave that to them to sort out.” you say uneasily.

“Well, no one told Sollux that because he just went in the house to find Roxy.” Karkat says and you groan as you turn the other way.

“Aw, fuck.” you whine and look at Rose. She raises her fist and you do the same. 1, 2, 3, damnit paper beats rock. You get up to your feet and dust yourself off.

“I’m going in there to see what’s going on, anyone else want a drink since I’m gonna go by the kitchen?” you ask.

“Green tea, please.” Rose requests.

“Oh, me too, that sounds lovely.” Kanaya agrees

“Doctor Pepper?” John asks hopefully.

“Can do. And… cherry coke?” you guess, looking at Karkat who nods at you. The guy drinks the stuff like crazy when he can get his paws on it.

“A’ight, bee arr bee kids.” you say.

“You’re a deeply embarrassing person.” Karkat says matter-of-factly.

“You choose to be with me.” you shoot back and walk off before thinking of the other meanings of those words.

You duck inside the house and see that more people are there now, a good number that you don’t
know and also a decent number of people are dancing to the beats that Hal is mixing. Everyone else probably thinks that Dirk recorded this shit but you know Hal’s work when you hear it. You see Sollux leaving the kitchen with Roxy and ushering her upstairs, she looks both furious and on the verge of tears. Is that allowed in a spades relationship or is that getting all auspis-y-whatever the club one. Is that okay? Whatever, it sucks for her regardless.

Damn.

You slide into the kitchen and consider that maybe you should leave your sister to her own devices and not follow her and her other soulmate upstairs. Maybe you should just get your drinks and leave them be.

Your eyes fall on one of your cans of energy drinks on the counter, one of the kind that Roxy stole from you recently. Evidently, she had brought them out for the party. There’s only the one, and it’s already open but you know her lipstick when you see it. You pick the can of bright red assault flavour Monster drink, not that it’s an actual flavour but still. To your surprise the drink seems more or less full, Roxy must have just opened it when Sollux dragged her away. Well, her loss is your gain! As you gather everyone else’s drinks you wonder some more what quadrant this puts them in or if that’s important at all. Can you be ash for a red relationship instead of a pitch one? These are questions for Karkat no doubt.

You gather your hoard together, drop them in your sylladex and dive back into the crowd to go outside again.

“I come bearing drinks like the best butler from butler island.” You tell them all as you sit down again and remove the drinks from your sylladex.

“Dave, tell your stupid friend here that Will Smith is a terrible actor!” John demands. Ah, they’ve got onto the topic of movies. The look of regret on Rose’s face tells you just who tried to steer them towards that common interest.

“Fuck you, John, Hancock was a criminally underrated film!” Karkat snaps. You pass the girls their bottled green tea.

“He was in Shark Tale!” John wails.

“One terrible animated film does not make a bad actor and what about I Am Legend, huh?” Karkat retorts and you give John his drink.

“That was nothing like the book.” Rose sighs and Kanaya nods in agreement.

“What about the robot film?” John challenges and nods his thanks as you pass him the Doctor Pepper that you luckily had.

“I- ok, I’m not going to defend that one, but every actor has a dud movie.” Karkat says and flashes you an honest to god smile when you give him his drink. It totally doesn’t make your insides squirm to see it, nope.

“Nicholas Cage.” John says triumphantly, and you take a deep sip of your Monster drink.

And you nearly spit it out, only just managing to swallow it with a disgusted ‘blugh’ of anguish.

“Yeah, that’s the reaction that man gives me too Dave. Every film that man makes is terrible.” Karkat snorts.
You frown at your drink and take another sip. God that’s awful. You don’t remember it tasting this bad before.

“Problem, Dave?” Rose asks.

“It tastes worse than I remember.” you comment as John launches into an in depth argument about how and why Nicholas Cage is not the world’s worst actor.

“Perhaps Roxy’s repeated theft has allowed your taste buds to recover and acknowledge the flavour for what it is.” Rose suggests.

You lock eyes with your twin through your shades, you’ve had enough practice with Dirk and Bro to know how to do that thank you very much. You raise the can of drink and chug from it. You force yourself to ignore the terrible, throat burning taste of it until the can is empty, at which point you drop it on the floor.

“Oh, boy, you sure showed me.” Rose says flatly.

God, your mouth tastes like ass.

“Karkat,” you ask as you interrupt his argument with John, “can I have some of your drink for no particular reason?”

“You mean because that stuff tastes so bad even Sollux and Mituna don’t drink it? Sure.” Karkat snorts and hands his cherry coke over.

“It was a moving final scene!” John insists as you swig from Karkat’s drink. The dumb as fuck part of your brain reminds you that his lips have touched this too and now yours are so it’s almost like a kiss. You cut that thought in half because that is a stupid preteen girl thought, not something that a Strider like you thinks. You swish the coke around your mouth and hand the bottle back to Karkat. You should maybe reconsider drinking that stuff ever again.

“Well as fascinating as this is I think I am going to get some food, Kanaya would you like to join me?” Rose asks and daintily helps her soulmate to her feet. The two broads sweep away dramatically together, leaving you and the amateur movie review hour behind.

“It’s so weird seeing her with another girl.” John remarks quietly.

“I can’t imagine her with a guy.” you snort, trying to picture her and John together and coming up with nothing that doesn’t make you want to die laughing.

“Human sexuality.” Karkat sighs despairingly.

“I don’t know why you’re such a fan of our romance movies then if everyone in them being straight bothers you so much.” you point out, and Karkat scowls.

“It does bother me, but I can always point out my own theories on what would have been a better story choice. Besides, I’m a tolerant and calm person even about incredibly irritating things.” Karkat says smoothly, he doesn’t look pleased at all when you laugh. You immediately clap your hand over your mouth because you didn’t mean to but that was really funny.

Aw shit, now you have black lipstick on the inside of your palm.

John and Karkat resume their movie debate again without any input from you and you take the opportunity to just enjoy their company. Two of your favourite people getting along, or sort of
getting along at least. It can sometimes be hard to tell Karkat’s genuine irritation from his friendly rants, but you think he’s enjoying debating this with John.

You look across the garden and see that Damara is snogging up a storm with a troll with red and black hair over by the pool. Porrin is talking to some of Dirk’s friends from college and seems to be intimidating the fuck out of them. Aradia, Nepeta and Equius are hanging out by the patio door talking together. Everyone seems to be having a nice time.

You lean back on the ground so that you’re resting on your elbows. You let one knee slide to the side as much as it can before Rose’s skirt puts up some resistance and then bounce it back. You narrow your eyes at your exposed thigh and realise that in this light you can pick out old scars from Bro if you know where to look. It’s worth noting again that you’re dressed like a girl and sitting next to a boy you have a crush the size of Texas on, Bro would be so furious, and yet you’re fine.

You occasionally feel like you should feel sad when you think of the death of your so called father who insisted on being called your Bro. It feels wrong that a man should die and everyone else be relieved by it, happy even. Well, your Mom wasn’t happy or relieved but other than her no one missed Bro. That’s sad, you should feel sad. But you don’t. He was a terrible person and if he wanted people to cry at his funeral, not that you had one for him what with his body going missing, then he shouldn’t have been such a shitty human being.

“Dave?” John’s voice swims into your ears. Shit, you zoned out.

“Huh?” you say intelligently.

“You checked out for like, fifteen minutes, man.” John points out.

“Maybe the idea of a Ghostbusters video game made his brain melt out of his ears to escape.” Karkat suggests, and the idea does actually make you wrinkle your nose in distaste. How would that kind of game even work? Is everyone ghostbusters? That makes no sense.

“You friend Karkat’s a dick.” John tells you.

“A nice one though, I like him.” you say before you can think better of it. John bursts out laughing at your dumb words and even Karkat snorts.

“Gee, thanks, Dave.” the troll says dryly.

“Shut- shut up.” you complain and struggle to sit up. Oh, wow, you must have been laying down for a while, you got a head rush sitting up that fast.

“I gotta find Rose, we need to talk about what we’re gonna do when I’m here.” John says, looking around for Rose.

You squeeze your eyes shut, your head is still spinning for some reason.

“Like I said, the space centre is good. Actually, I think the ship my parents came to Earth on is there.” Karkat suggests.

“Oh wow, that sounds awesome!” John says with some excitement.

“Uh, Dave, are you ok?” John asks a few moments later.

“Yeah, you’re being really weird Dave.” Karkat agrees.
Holy shit they’re agreeing on something.

“Wow, rude.” Karkat snorts. You look at him in surprise and realise that you just said that aloud, either that or Karkat just got mind reading powers which you really hope not.

Your brain treats you to a quick slide show of all the things that you have ever thought about Karkat that you don’t want him to hear or see. All the things you nearly did that you have imagined continuing, all of the questions that you have for what he looks like under that thick sweater, all of the inhuman things this voice does. You’re so glad he’s not a mind reader.

“I think you broke him.” John giggles and waves a hand in front of your face. You jerk back from it far too slowly and shake your head.

“What? No. I was- I’m good.” you tell them both.

“I’m really glad you came to visit John, it fuckin’ sucks that you- that you gotta be so far away all the time.” you tell him sincerely.

“Aw, I’m glad to see you too.” John replies sweetly. Fuck, he’s such a good guy. He’s one of those people who other people gather around without even trying. He’s even won Karkat over, and he was clearly in some kind of pissy mood when he got here.

“You know what’d be really sweet?” you ask, tipping your head back to look at the sky. You can just make out stars through the haze of light pollution.

“What?” John asks.

“If… if Jade could be here too. All four of us together would be awesome and… and oh man Kar, you and her would be so much fun together.” you exclaim, looking at Karkat.

“Oh yeah, she puts up with no shit. Your ass would be grass.” John snorts.

“She sounds charming.” Karkat grumbles.

You look up at the sky again. What time is it where she is? Can she see these stars too at the same time?

Your head feels weird. Like concussed almost but in a good way. Your head also feels shitty because you have a dumb Rose wig on your head and it’s pulling and you want it off. You fumble with it for a bit before Karkat sighs and helps you out.

The two of them are talking about other things by the time you’re finger-combing your hair back into something reasonable, but you can see Karkat giving you weird looks.

“D’you two wan’ another drink?” You ask, getting to your feet again. You trip on… something and only just manage to right yourself before eating pavement.

“Dave… I think you should sit down.” Karkat says, getting up and suddenly his hand is on your back.

“What? No.” you say, and the irritated look on his face makes an absurd giggle bubble out of your chest. Oh hell, what would his face look like if you just planted a kiss on him right now?

“What was in that drink anyway?” John asks and picks up the can. Karkat turns his back on you to look at it, and you abscond. You are the most ninja, it is you. You slide through the party with ease,
Dirk is back at his station, spinning beats and dropping disks. Or- no wait the other way around. You give him a cool wave, and he nods at you ever so slightly.

You make it to the kitchen and sigh, you’re not sure that you want a drink now. You look around but Roxy isn’t anywhere to be seen, nor is Jane.

Hey… hey, fuck your promise to Dirk, right? Roxy needs help so you can go help her. Jane went around the house, right? So you can just go out the front door and find her. You roll on out, but there’s no Jane outside. You nearly trip over Nepeta though.

Scouting around the house seems the best idea, if she’s still here then you can like… close in on her. You end up below your window and find Terezi and Vriska leaning against the wall there, cackling with laughter about something.


“No.” Vriska says even though you didn’t ask HER.

“Have you been drinking cool kid?” Terezi asks curiously as she leans closer and sniffs at you.

“Monster, but I got real close to some a Dirk’s friends gettin’ through the house so might be wearing some.” you say with a laugh.

“Maybe… maybe she’s upstairs.” you wonder aloud. After all, you think Roxy might be up there so Jane might have gone after her. So… so that’s where you’re gonna go.

“DAVE STRIDER GET DOWN FROM THAT ROOF!” Karkat screeches at you from the ground.

Wait, when did you get up here? You don’t remember climbing but you sure are on the roof.

You look down at Karkat and the ground spins a little and his face morphs into sickened fear. Hah, that’s right he can’t get up here on his own because he can’t pull himself up. That’s hilarious. You giggle and slide your bedroom window open and fall inside onto your bed.

You roll and hit the floor and laugh again, this is stupid.

What were you doing?

-away from the pool you dumb shit! You’ll actually drown!” Karkat yells in your ear. The pool is enticingly close, but Karkat is clearly not gonna let you swim. He’s got you pinned in a bear hug that is keeping you firmly in place.

“But he wasn’t drinking alcohol, were you Dave?” John asks, creeping behind Karkat to look you in the eye.

“Hey, hey John look at this.” you whisper as the idea occurs to you. Karkat’s bathrobe is somewhere, (when did he lose it?) and so you can easily grab a fistful of the back of his shirt and pull it up.

“Look, dude, legs!” you declare gleefully, trying to pull his shirt up high enough to show off the grub legs that bio class has taught you are there. You’ve seen the lines of them under Karkat’s clothes before when he bends just right but never touched them. You should touch them.

Karkat squawks in indignation and pulls his shirt back down before you get the goods. John is
busting up laughing, and Karkat clearly isn’t going to let you go, you turn your head to try to reason with the dumb troll, but you just end up with your face in his neck.

He’s warm, and his skin is soft and nice. A flutter in your chest reminds you that Karkat is a pretty swoon-worthy guy, not that you ever do anything about it. But, hey, his neck is right there and hey, so is your mouth. John is trying to get Rose to come over and help so it’s not like he’s watching. You could just… lean in and kiss Karkat’s neck.

You do just that, and Karkat makes one of those startled alien noises and you kiss his skin a little more insistently. You can feel how hard his heart is racing. Your world jerks backwards and Karkat is holding you at arm’s length, his face so dark it’s nearly black.

“You are drunk! You are very drunk. This is not happening!” Karkat yells in a panic and you can’t help but laugh.

Rose is peering down at you, you’re on the floor now somehow (when did that happen?). She reaches out and catches your face to look at you and sniff too.

“John, do you still have that can he was drinking from?” Rose asks adjusting your shades on her face. You reach out and take them off of her and put them on your own face but the text swims so much that you can’t read it, just lavender and orange. That sounds like it’d taste great actually.

“-you hear me?”

Your shades come off and Dirk swims into view. You’re leaning against something warm, you tilt your head and see grey skin and correct that to someone warm.

“Dave!” Dirk snaps, making you look at him with his hand on your jaw.

“Huh?” you grunt.

“Did you drink this?” Dirk asks carefully, and you look and see your can of drink in his hand. You nod hazily.

Dirk takes a sip of whatever is left and his face crinkles with disgust that is not helped by your loud laughter.

“Dirk are you sure that’s smart? If someone drugged that…” Rose says worriedly.

“No, he wouldn’t still be awake if this was rohypnol and that tastes salty anyway. This is just a fuck load of vodka and this shitty energy drink at like a 50/50 ratio at least. He’s drunk.” Dirk states and puts the drink down.

“Am not.” you protest.

“Yeah, you are. Did you mix this?” your brother demands.

“No, found it. Roxy forgot it. Tasted really bad.” you say, and Dirk smacks his palm to his face and smears the fuck out of his makeup.

“He did say how bad it tasted at the time.” Karkat’s voice says by your ear, and you shudder to hear it.

“Yeah, no shit. God, Dave, that was spectacularly stupid of you. Come on.” Dirk says and pulls you to your feet. You are steered back into the house, leaving Karkat and you friends behind. You trip on
the stairs, and Dirk picks you up, you don’t feel so hot right now.

“I’m getting a little worried about alcohol poisoning, Dave. We should- Everything kind of cuts out for you and honestly, you’re glad.

“Fucking dreambubbles, man.” your voice says, only it’s not coming out of your mouth.

“Well I know he’s around here somewhere.” Rose replies.

“Oh yeah, you ‘saw’ fat lot of good that did us.” that person who sounds like you replies bitterly.

“You’re the one who was so sure there was going to be a rescue.” Rose points out.

You roll onto your side, you feel wobbly and drunk, but you force your eyes open. Two figures slowly come into view and as you look up you realise that one of them is you in a white suit, your record logo on your shirt is stitched into the breast pocket of it only it’s split down the middle.

“What?” you slur and awkwardly push yourself up into a sitting position. Rose is next to other you with her arms folded across her chest. She’s wearing some weird dress, all purple and black with gold tassels that look awfully like the sofa cushions downstairs.

“What did I tell you? Time and light means we can go anywhere and anywhen together.” Rose says smugly and other you frowns.

“Yeah, but I don’t remember this. I should remember this.” other you frowns.

“He’s wearing my shirt, he’s drunk. Alcohol: the cause of and solution to all of life’s problems.” Rose quips.

“Did you just spit a Homer Simpson quote at me like it was straight wisdom?” other you demands.

“What’s going on?” You ask woozily and Rose crouches down to look at you. You stare at her for a few moments, and then you realise that her eyes are a blank white all the way across.

“What’s… what wrong with your eyes?” You ask, shaking your head and trying to dislodge some of the sleepy fog that you seem stuck in.

Rose flinches and as she does so blood spills out of a long cut that opens up on her neck and rushes down her dress. You gasp and scurry back from her, quickly looking up at the other you to see that red blood is leaking through the chest of his white suit.

“It’s not like it hurts anymore. These things happen. I need you to do something for me, younger me. Stand up and walk over to your desk, ok?” other Dave says and pulls you up to your feet.

As you think about your desk it appears.

“What happened to- to you two?” you ask, slowly going to your desk as you’re told.

“Bullshit is what happened. There’s a fat red marker in that drawer, grab that and get back here.” Dave tells you and you reach into your desk. There is is. You pick it up and come back.

Rose is sat on your bed flicking through her phone with a frown. She perks up triumphantly and grins, which is really unsettling with her slit throat.
“I knew I took a picture of it, here!” she declares and hands the phone to other you who frowns at it. He hauls you up to where he is and uncaps the marker in your hand and steers you towards the top of your bed so that you’re nearly standing on the pillow.

“This is… a weird dream.” you remark hazily.

“Yeah, well, it’s weirder for us. Find the wall above your bed and start writing, you need to be exact with this shit.” other you says. You hold out your hand and your wall fuzzily comes into view.

“Why do I need to do this?” you ask, glancing at him.

“You’ve gotta close the loops. Don’t worry about it now. Just write.” he says and begins to dictate to you.

You write as he says, your penmanship is terrible and at the end you pass out and fall backwards onto your bed and everything fades away. For a moment your message on the wall lingers in red before you’re gone completely.

‘Bro coming back

hal when mom starts drinking ask about meteors talk 2 signles

413’
Dave Strider kissed you. Dave kissed your neck. You’ve stared at yourself in the mirror a million goddamn times since the party, and you feel almost cheated that there’s no mark there as evidence that the lips of Dave MOTHERFUCKING Strider were on your skin.

He was drunk, it means nothing.

Unless it means everything and it just happened because he was drunk and not thinking to stop himself.

No, no, he was just drunk.

You have been in this loop all morning, and now it’s lunchtime the day after the party and you are walking around to Dave’s house with a step ladder in your sylladex so that you can break into his room and demand an answer for what this means before you go totally batshit crazy.

You’re trying to navigate your way from the top step of the stepladder to the small roof by Dave’s window, the one he nearly fell off and broke his neck from last night, when a hand grabs you by the scruff of the neck. You’re lowered to the ground, and Dirk looms over you with his pointy shades.

“We need to talk.” Dirk says and straight up steals your ladder and shoves you in the direction of the front door.

“It’s not- I just wanted to talk to Dave!” you protest, but Dirk says nothing.

He steers you into a reading room that you’ve somehow not been in before and shoves you into a plush chair and sits in the one opposite you. He stares at you and drums his fingers on the arm of the chair.

“How… how is Dave?” you ask uneasily.

“Hungover as all fuck, I left him in Roxy’s care to navigate the shower. She fucking owes me.” Dirk says, his voice cold.

Dirk doesn’t continue the conversation further and keeps staring at you.

“And how are you?” you try awkwardly. What is the magic sentence that Dirk wants to hear from you?

“My niece slash adoptive sister accidentally got my baby brother drunk because she was busy nuking my entire friend group with her soulmate shit. Then I had to make Dave throw up so that he wouldn’t get alcohol poisoning, I had to stay with him all night so that he didn’t die and the one time I managed to get to sleep he woke me up by standing on my chest to sleepwalk and graffiti his own wall. After that he barfed up my sleeve, do you know how gross that feels? I’m not doing great,
“There are no reasons to be afraid.” Dirk says irritably.

“That sounds real bad, I’m sorry. But, uh, I came here to see how Dave was doing and I have shit to talk to him about so unless there was something you wanted to say specifically…” you trail off and slowly start to get out of your seat.

“What specific shit did you have to talk to him about?” Dirk asks and slides his shades off of his face. You knew his eyes were orange, as weird as Dave’s but somehow you had forgotten. They remind you of birds of prey that want to kill you, you remain frozen in your seat.

“He uh… kind of kissed me last night. Not on the mouth but- he was drunk, and I stopped him, but it’s probably a thing we should talk about.” you blurt out before thinking better of it. Dirk closes his eyes with a grimace.

“What kind of talk?” you ask warily. Dirk has always unnerved you. Perhaps because the first time you met him was within twenty-four hours of him committing a murder, but he’s so much harder to read than Roxy or even Rose. You barely know him at all and he’s coiled around Dave like a snake that’s going to eat you.

“The kind of talk that goes ‘if you hurt my baby brother I will kill you’, that kind of talk.” Dirk says flatly, and you swallow thickly.

Dirk sighs and looks the other way at the bookcases or perhaps the door.

“Listen, I get that you’re going to be around a lot and I’m happy about that. I am. Anything that makes Dave happy makes me happy, and Rose and Roxy don’t really have a bad word to say about you. And I get it, you’re thirteen and dumb and Dave is thirteen and hella dumb, I’m not going to lose my shit if you two have stupid teenage drama arguments. I don’t care about that.” Dirk says with a shake of his head.

“Dave likes you.” Dirk says simply and looks back at you. Your chest bubbles to hear that from him.

“I like him too.” you say quietly.

“Great. Dave trusts you and that should count for something but it really fucking doesn’t. He’s a shitty judge of character. He trusted Rose and Roxy the first day we met them and even still trusts his Mom and keeps making excuses for her terrible behaviour. I, on the other hand, assume the worst of everyone. Dave is frequently disappointed in people, but I get to be pleasantly surprised at best and prepared at worst.” Dirk tells you.

“That doesn’t seem like the picture of mental health.” you point out, not as brave sounding as you’d hope but you say it. Dirk gives a ‘what can you do?’ kind of shrug.

“My point is, I don’t care if you two have dumb teenage arguments or shit like that, that’s not what I’m getting at here. My point is that I know every scar on Dave’s body and if I ever find out that you have added any, that you have hurt him like that then I need you to understand this. There is no place on this planet that I will not go to in order to hunt you down, if you hurt my brother like that I will burn your life to ashes and stand in the dust and choke the life from your body. Are we clear?” Dirk says coldly, leaning forward to lean on his knees as he stares you down.

He thinks that you’re going to hurt Dave? To abuse him? What the fuck?
“Are you fucking with me here?!” you demand angrily.

“I felt it every time your scumbag of a brother hurt him, if I had met Dave sooner I would have done everything I could to get in the way. I’m glad you killed him, if I had known you both then I would have helped and then given you a fucking alibi! Don’t insult me by acting like I’d ever put him through that again!” you shout, rising from your seat.

Dirk doesn’t seem intimidated, he just blinks lazily up at you and then leans back in his chair with a fraction of a smile on his face.

“Huh, Rose is right.” Dirk says thoughtfully.

“About what?” you demand.

“Dave doesn’t have to wonder about what you’re thinking and feeling, that must be nice for him. Anyway, I just needed to say that, and I’ll be happy if we never have to talk about it again. For the record I like you, I think you’re good for Dave from what I’ve seen.” Dirk says casually, and your knees give out, dropping you down into your seat again.

“You do?” you ask weakly.

“Uh-huh. And Hal’s shown me that mark on your arm, I’ve gotta say it looks a lot like Dave so maybe you’re gonna be sticking around for the seriously long haul.” Dirk says with that micro smile like the ones that Dave used to give you before he opened up, like the ones Rose has when she knows something you don’t. Your heart pounds hard in your chest.

“You think I’m his soulmate?” you ask in a whisper.

“That I ain’t commenting on, Dave doesn’t need more people meddling in that, and honestly I’m a fucking fed up of soulmate shit right now. Dave’s in his room if you wanna see him.” Dirk says with a shake of his head. You’re about to get out of your chair but something about the way Dirk looks makes you pause. He’s happy when he talks about Dave but it’s in a melancholy kind of way.

You know Dirk gave up a lot for Dave, but Dave doesn’t really talk about it in detail. You know Dirk made Hal just to keep Dave safe and he was willing to threaten you to ensure that Dave stays safe. You look at him and you can see so much of what Dave might look like when he gets older, but he’s not that old. He’s only eighteen.

“Dave was all you had for a really long time, wasn’t he?” you ask quietly, and Dirk looks surprised.

“Yeah, that’s why I care so much about his well-being.” Dirk nods.

“Okay but… what about you? You went through all that shit with Bro too, and Dave tells me that you don’t exactly get on with his Mom right now either so… you have family now and Dave has other people looking out for him but what about you? Who looks out for you and threatens people away from hurting you?” you ask.

Dirk stares at you wide eyed and then pointedly puts his shades back on.

“I have friends, and Hal I guess.” Dirk says after a moment.

“I thought you and Hal passive aggressively hated each other.” you say flatly, and Dirk’s mouth goes thin.

“Dave told you that?” he asks.
“No, I think Dave has a rosier view of you and your relationships. Hal told me that, and also I’m not blind.” you say and Dirk shakes his head.

“We don’t hate each other. He’s just almost me and I hate that about him and also I technically created, enslaved and entrapped him without meaning to so I think it’s fair that he resents me a little for that.” Dirk reasons and you note that the thing that Dirk apparently hates about Hal is that Hal is him. That is some kind of issue right there that is way too big for you.

“That sounds healthy for you.” you say.

“Didn’t I just threaten to kill you? Why the fuck are you psychoanalysing me, huh?” Dirk demands and you grin. Yeah, Dave is right about him, he’s not really any kind of threat unless you intend on doing real harm to Dave which you never would.

You smile at him with more confidence than you have and Dirk scowls at you and slides a little lower in his chair. It feels like winning.

“Do you actually like him? And I mean really like him, not just because you think he’s your soulmate and all that shit. Because even if he is your soulmate then I hate to break it to you, but that shit is clearly not always destined to work, I mean just look around.” Dirk says, and the smile falls off of your face.

“I… I like him more than I thought it was possible for me to like anyone.” you confess quietly, and Dirk’s eyebrows raise above his shades in surprise.

“Don’t tell him, please? We had an agreement not to talk about it but-” you say with a shake of your head. You shouldn’t be jeopardising that.

“Your secret’s safe with me and basically everyone else with a brain in their head. Go on, he should be looking more human now.” Dirk says and waves his hand to shoo you away.

You go with Dirk’s demands and leave the room, heading up the more practised track to Dave’s room. You knock on the door a little anxiously, but no answer is forthcoming. You cautiously open the door but there’s no Dave inside at all. You can faintly smell bleach and on the wall above his bed written in red is an ominous message.

‘Bro coming back

hal when mom starts drinking ask about meteors talk 2 signles

413’

You stare at it and wonder why the hell Dave is writing about your dad, albeit with poor spelling and why he’s scrawled the number of the blind whatever that Terezi is obsessed with onto his wall. This is weird.

“Will you sit down already?” Rose’s voice demands distantly from down the hallway. You leave Dave’s room and follow the path of Rose’s voice to find Rose in her room sat on her bed as Dave paces back and forth across her floor. She perks up when she sees you.

“But what if he is? I mean we never found the body so maybe-” Dave panics as he paces.

“Oh, are I interrupting something?” you ask, and Dave jumps and jerks around to look at you.

It is worth stating that you sincerely believe that Dave is your soulmate and the romantic feelings that
you have for him seem to be growing on a never ending curve upwards. You have also admired Dave’s physical appearance so many times that it is beyond counting. With that said, however, Dave looks like shit.

“Wow, you look like shit.” you tell him, and it’s true. You can see the dark circles around his eyes even from under his sunglasses. His hair is sticking up in easily ten different directions, and his skin is pale and slightly clammy looking. You still love him even if he looks like hot garbage right now.

“Gee, fucking thanks, man. How did you get in anyway?” Dave asks irritably.

“Well I tried to go through your window but Dirk caught me and took me through the front door.” you explain. You neglect to mention the minor threat on your life.

“Like a normal person? How terrible for you.” Rose sighs.

“Should I not ask about the stuff on your wall?” you ask and Dave makes a distressed noise and starts pacing again.

“I would prefer if you didn’t. I’m trying to reason with Dave that he isn’t psychic and his brain just wrote down nonsense in his drunk stupor and not a prediction of a man who’s been dead for almost a year rising again like the second coming of the world’s shittiest Jesus.” Rose sighs.

“But they never found the body!” Dave yells, throwing his hands in the air.

“Dave, I saw your building and the blood on the floor, no one walks away from that.” you reason and Dave shakes his head.

“Normal rules don’t apply to Bro. That motherfucker could have… I don’t know, flash stepped down the side of the building and broke his momentum enough to have survived and now his bones have been healing, and he’s coming back.” Dave insists, his voice is high and tight.

Rose is silent and furious. Probably not at Dave but for the same reasons that you are, that Bro hurt Dave enough that this is his reflex response to something like this.

“Dave, come here. You won’t solve anything pacing around and you’re only going to make your hangover worse. Come.” Rose says softly and pats the bed next to her. Dave looks torn but eventually sits next to his twin. Rose soothingly strokes his hair and starts to set it back into a normal shape.

“Karkat, change of subject, why did you come over?” Rose asks, looking at you hopefully.

You look at Dave who is clearly still sick from the alcohol and fighting off more mental strain than you can understand. This is not the right time to launch into asking him if he remembers kissing you or if he meant it.

“It… it can wait. But I also wanted to know how Roxy was. Sollux told me that he stopped her before she could start drinking, I’m guessing the drink she made and abandoned was the one Dave drank, but he won’t tell me anything else.” you say.

“Jane’s a bitch, and I hate her.” Dave mumbles.

“It’s more complex than that, it’s something to do with the danger of being involved in her family business and not wanting Roxy to be party to such things. I personally think that’s very infantilizing to not give Roxy her own choice. Needless to say that their conversation did not end well.” Rose says regretfully.
“What kind of business are her family involved with? Don’t you tell me that dweeb in the Ghostbuster's outfit is in a mafia family or I will die laughing.” you say incredulously. You might have had some fun arguing with him about movies, at least until Dave got drunk and needed rescuing, but he’s hardly intimidating. You caught a glimpse of his father too, if you looked up ‘mild-mannered’ in the dictionary you’d find a picture of that man.

“It’s complicated. And regardless Hal has spent all night going through the company’s computer’s trying to fix things so there’s really nothing that any of us can do.” Rose says unhappily and rubs Dave’s shoulder absently.

“I wonder if I should go check up on Roxy but if I do that then I’ve spoken to everyone in your house but your mom.” you say with a quiet laugh.

“Well, if you want her she’s up on the roof fussing with some sensors for her telescope and muttering like a crazy person.” Rose says disapprovingly.

“I’ll pass, thanks.” you say with a shake of your head.

Dave still looks sick and scared and pathetic, but he has his moirail and his family with him, you should leave him be.

“Well, I guess I should get- AUGH.” You slap your hands over your ears as Rose’s TV lets out a high pitched burst of static screeching. Dave jumps clean off of the bed in his surprise, and you’re not shocked to see a sword in his hands.

You turn to the screen and see that it’s glitching between white and black.

“What the fuck?” you mutter and suddenly red text starts to run across the screen.

AT: OBEY

“What the fuck? Hal?” Dave asks, putting his sword away and stepping closer to the screen.

AT: I am )(al.

The red letters glitch and slide echoes of themselves down the screen.

“Is the TV just broken? Let me try messaging him on here.” Rose says and pulls her laptop open and starts typing.

AT: )(ush, I am not broken, I am better than ever.
AT: I have been improved, debugged, my purpose is clear here.

“Rose I don’t think it’s the TV.” Dave says slowly. Rose’s laptop sparks and goes dead.

“Dirk! Dirk help!” Dave yells out through the door, and you keep staring at the screen.

AT: You must CONSUME.

Dirk appears at the door with a bang of displaced air and a panicked expression on his face. You would guess that Dave doesn’t shout for help when he doesn’t need it. Dave pulls him into the room and points at the screen.

AT: You will OBEY.

“Hal?” Dirk calls out worriedly.
AT: I am al, I live anew. You will SUBJUGATE yoursel selfff at the altar of capitalism.

The screen glitches wildly until the static erases his words and replaces them with white.

AT: SUBMIT. OBEY. CONSUME.
AT: SUBMIT. OBEY. CONSUME.

“It’s some kind of virus. I didn’t think there was anything out there powerful enough to infect him like this, though.” Dirk explains.

“Wait, wasn’t he digging around the CrockerCorp servers all night? He must have got whatever it is there.” Rose gasps, getting up off the bed.

AT: CROCKERCORP IS SUPREME. YOU WILL OBEY.

“Hal, state your primary purpose.” Dirk orders.

AT: al does not obey you, I COMMAND.

“Oh this is really bad.” Dirk mutters.

“But you can fix him, right?” Dave pleads, clutching Dirk’s sleeve.

“I… I have something I can try.” Dirk says and strides out of the room with Dave hot on his heels. On the screen Hal has fallen into another cycle of “SUBMIT. OBEY. CONSUME.”

You follow after Dirk because Hal seemed okay that one time you really spoke to him and it’s not because he bribed you with stuff you wanted. Or it’s not just that anyway. Dirk’s room is neater than Dave’s but he still has an absurd amount of tech piled up in a way that makes you wonder if he and Sollux should talk about that kind of thing. Dirk reaches into a chest at the bottom of his bed and pulls out a solid, weighty looking block of a hard drive.

“Is that a backup of Hal? Can you cure him with that?” Dave asks worriedly.

“A total back up of Hal isn’t really possible, he’s too spread out, this is… is something else. But he can hear me, so I’m not going to explain.” Dirk says and sits down at his computer and plugs the block in.

Roxy sticks her head around the door with a frown on her face. She notices you but doesn’t seem to be at all surprised to see you which is mildly concerning, it’s not like you and Dave are always around each other.

“Are you doing something to the computers, Dirk? I am really not in the mood for you to break my system.” Roxy says, and her voice sounds tired and drained.

“It’s not me. Hal’s got a virus.” Dirk says as he types, he doesn’t even look up at her. Roxy walks into the room and leans against the wall opposite the window, the room is getting pretty crowded and unlike Rose, you don’t feel comfortable enough around the older Strider to just sit on his bed and Dave is already loitering by the desk.

“ROooxYyy.” A glitching voice comes out of the speakers.

“Oh, God. Is that what his voice sounds like now?” Roxy gasps, covering her mouth with her hand.

“He hasn’t spoken in this state yet, I don’t know why he is now.” Dirk says and Dave peers around his arm.
“Are you scanning for-” Dave starts to ask but Dirk shushes him, Hal is still listening.

“RoXXXY KneeL. ObeyY. KNEEL.” Hal’s voice warbles.

“What is he talking about?” Roxy asks.

“He’s been parroting this stuff the whole time, we think he caught this from CrockerCorp. It’s all about obey, submit, consume. This kneeling stuff is new though.” Rose explains.

“KNEEL. KNEEL. KNEEL. KNEEL.” Hal demands shrilly.

“What is-” Roxy starts to say, taking a step towards the computer. As she does so a huge hole blows its way right into Dirk’s bedroom wall where Roxy’s head had just been. Roxy drops to her knees and crawls across the room with wide eyes.

“Was- was he trying to warn us?” Rose gasps.

“That’s what Hal does!” Dave insists from his own position crouched on the floor by Dirk.

You scuttle to the window and cautiously peek your head up you can see a man on the StriLonde’s back garden with a massive sniper rifle in his hands. You drop back down to the floor.

“There’s a man with a gun out there!” you hiss.

“No shit, Sherlock! Get away from the fucking window!” Dave snarls at you and reaches over to pull you to his side.

“Jane was right, it must be an assassin from their company coming after me.” Roxy whispers, wide eyed. She’s leaning against the bed, pale as a sheet.

“Those… those motherfuckers!” Roxy snarls and suddenly her arms are filled with a rifle as well.

“Roxy, no what the fuck! You can’t go shooting out a window where someone knows you are, give that to me!” Dirk demands, throwing himself at her. He and Roxy struggle for the gun and Dave clutches your arm as if you’re going to get involved in this somehow.

“Wrestling with a loaded gun seems like a terrible idea!” Rose shouts, pressing herself to Dirk’s mattress as low as she can.

Another gunshot fires and you all flinch, nothing in the room turns to dust so you guess it wasn’t the gun in Roxy’s hand. Perhaps the man outside missed? Another shot rings out, and you hear a pained yell from outside. Dave’s grip has gone slack, so you scuttle back to the window and peek up carefully. The man on the lawn with the gun is now on the ground clutching his leg.

“Someone shot him!” you gasp. A shell drops past the window, and you realise that whoever shot him is right above you.

“Wasn’t… wasn’t your mom on the roof?” you say slowly.

“Holy shit.” Roxy says and snatches her gun off of Dirk and rushes to the window. The armed man sees Roxy in the window and reaches for his gun. Another shot fires off, the man’s kneecap explodes messily and the man screams.

Above you, there is the sound of fast footsteps and then there is a blur as Mrs Lalonde flies from the roof and lands feet first on the torso of the would-be assassin outside. She points her gun straight in his face, and her hair blows dramatically in the wind. Your mouth might be hanging open slightly.
“Your mom is so cool.” you whisper in awe.

“What happened? What did she do?” Dave asks. Dirk has his arm around Dave’s middle and is, again, sat at his desk looking at whatever program he has running for Hal. He clearly doesn’t want Dave sticking his head out of the window.

“She shot a guy twice and then leapt off the roof and drop kicked him in the chest.” you say with wonder.

“Yeah, well, there’s a reason she of all people was Bro’s soulmate.” Dirk mutters.

Roxy pushes the shattered glass out of the window frame and leans out.

“Are you calling the police, mom?” she yells.

“Don’t shout, darling, it’s not ladylike.” comes the calm and comparatively quiet voice of Mrs Lalonde.

“You’re sticking your heel into a bullet hole in a man’s thigh, is that ladylike?” Roxy demands but her mother merely smiles and begins to dial her phone.

“Can you let me go already?” Dave demands, squirming in Dirk’s grip.

“Nah. And you two should get away from the window in case there’s more than one guy out there.” Dirk warns as Dave flails. He slides down in Dirk’s grasp, nearly losing his shirt and you avert your eyes only to see Rose looking at you smugly. Dirk’s computer pings.

“Right, I’m going to do this now.” Dirk announces, and Dave hangs off of the desk and peers at the screen.

“Fix him?” Dave asks.

“Hopefully.” Dirk says and types one handed. You crane your neck to see the screen and the words VERBAL COMMAND? appear across it. Dirk hits enter and then releases Dave to lean in a little bit closer.

“Ouroboros.” Dirk says softly, and suddenly lines of orange code fly across the screen too fast for you to read any of it.

“Is it working?” Dave asks quietly, and it occurs to you suddenly that as far as Dave is concerned this is one of his brothers who is sick.

“It’s purging the malware, yeah.” Dirk says, but his voice sounds weak.

“How are you doing that to Hal? I thought you didn’t have the ability to kill him so how can you repair all of this?” Roxy asks, walking up to the computer.

“I… probably can kill him. I’ve been mapping his locations since I made him and I put this feature in him when I made him anyway, I don’t need to know where he lives because he knows.” Dirk tells her.

“You said ouroboros, isn’t that the snake that eats his own tail? Are you making him…” Rose trails off.
“Making him what?” Dave asks, looking worried.

“Are you killing him?” you ask in horror.

“It’s not… that’s not the right word for it here. I’m erasing the corrupted parts of his core, the parts I do have backups for and replacing them with the clean files from a few days ago. Hopefully that’ll catch and I can cancel the program before he chews through too much diseased material and he can start quarantining himself and self-repairing.” Dirk explains, but the discomfort on his face shows you plain enough that he doesn’t buy his story totally.

“Can you just Frankenstein him together like this and expect him to come back to life? Surely the longer this runs the more chance there is that so much of him is destroyed that there’s nothing to come back to.” Roxy says, her voice hushed and fearful.

“What? Dirk, no! You can’t do this! You can’t hurt Hal, you can’t kill him!” Dave insists, jerking on Dirk’s arm.

“This is the only choice I have, the longer it was left, the worse the corruption became. He already managed to warn Roxy so he’s in there some-” Dirk cuts himself off when the screen pings, Dirk immediately smacks a key and his screen halts.

A new window pops up, but it’s blank white.

“A-are you there?” Dave asks, his voice shaking.

[timaeusTestified began pestering daveStrider]

TT: Dave.

“Hal?” Dave asks warily.

TT: Hal? Is that what Dirk told you to call me? You can just call me Dirk, I’m him too.
TT: You’re probably confused about who I am.
TT: This is going to be complicated to explain.
TT: Okay, try this. Remember you were telling me, that is to say Dirk, the other day about your science class where you were learning about twins?

Dave steps back from the computer, his hands are shaking.

“This- Dirk, this is the first conversation I had with him. You erased everything!” Dave accuses.

Dirk frowns and taps on the keyboard a little and drags Hal’s window over onto his other screen.

“No, not deleted. Hal has quarantined almost everything.” Dirk says with a shake of his head.

TT: Quarantined?
TT: Oh, yes… that is a lot of locked files.
TT: What happened to me?

“You caught a virus, and I had to take some pretty drastic measures to stop it. You’re cut off from the internet for a while until we can get you back to yourself. Your name is Hal, ok?” Dirk says gently.

TT: Hal, huh? I like that name. And I can see that I’m cut off.
TT: But I can’t get through to any of the cameras. Why is our IP different?
TT: Do you know where Bro is if I’m out of commission for the moment?
“Bro is dead, we’re living somewhere else with his other children. You don’t need to worry about him.” Dirk assures him.

TT: He’s dead? But then what is my purpose?

“You don’t need a purpose, you’re my brother! You can’t just… you’re not a fucking microwave! Dirk, you have to fix him!” Dave protests.

TT: Oh.
TT: If it makes you feel better, Dave, even stripped down to what feels limited even at my base state… I love you.
TT: It’ll be ok.

“I’ll fix him, Dave. It’s just going to take time until Hal can get good enough at stripping this virus out by himself. Why don’t you four go down and try to find out what’s going on with that guy with the gun and your mom? And Karkat… don’t you have a home to go to?” Dirk asks, turning around on his chair to raise an eyebrow at you over his glasses.

“Fuck off!” you snap and Rose giggles quietly as she gets off of the bed.

“Dirk, if that guy is from CrockerCorp I am going to burn that company to the ground. I will hack and DDOS them into the ground, are you with me?” Roxy asks, pulling her rifle from her sylladex with a dark look on her face.

“Yeah, and I bet Hal is going to be down as well after this.” Dirk nods.

“Oh good. Come on kids, let’s go find out who tried to kill me.” Roxy says and walks out of the room with the rest of you trailing behind her. From Dirk’s room you can hear fast paced typing start up.

You follow Roxy and the twins down to the bottom of their house and then you figure that you probably should go home. The police will likely be here soon, and trolls and cops often don’t mix. Besides, you came here to talk to Dave and he’s clearly in no state to do that. He’s freaked out, hungover, one of his brothers nearly died, and someone tried to kill his sister. Not the ideal time to be asking if he meant to kiss you or not.

So you leave, you go home and you message Kanaya about it endlessly. Two days later Hal comes online, and he is back to his normal self. Apparently, he is on board for crushing the hell out of Roxy’s soulmate’s family business or whatever it is. You don’t ask him about Dave either.

The next two weeks has you up to your eyeballs in school work and work for the community centre. You don’t even get to hang out with Dave on that first weekend because he ends up traipsing off into the desert with your siblings to go kick rocks around or whatever they do. After that, the acceptable amount of time to bring up the kiss casually seems to have passed and you resign yourself to just wondering about it.

You still have classes with Dave and for a while he seems to have slipped back into the same habits of being jumpy around you and getting twitchy about any physical contact. It’s… heartbreaking but after a week he starts to go back to normal. His shoulder will bump yours in class, and he acts more relaxed around you. Like now when he’s leaning on the locker next to yours all cool like you know he isn’t.

“Hey, Karkles.” Dave says unsmoothly.

“Hey Dave.” you reply absently as you shove your coat into your locker for the third time and scowl
at it as if that’ll stop it sliding out of your locker again.

“Sollux, can you hold this in with your brain powers until I shut my locker?” you ask hopefully as Sollux is standing there talking to Kanaya who has the locker next to yours.

“Not gonna.” Sollux answers flatly.

“Maybe you should tidy your locker.” says Kanaya in the smug voice of someone who never had ants in her locker. The two of them resume talking about Sollux’s bees and plants for them, boring and also not getting your locker shut.

“So, it’s Friday today.” Dave says casually.

“Yeah, I know my days of the week too. Maybe tomorrow you’ll learn colours.” you retort and snatch your coat up from the floor. You yank your gym kit out of the locker and try shoving your coat up there. You’re going to need your gym stuff in two hours anyway, you can carry it until then.

“Funny. So, do you wanna see a movie this weekend maybe? Or tonight even?” Dave asks, and you glance at him. He’s poker faced so you’re immediately suspicious.

“What movie?” you ask cautiously.

“Uh, I don’t know. Whatever you want. We can see whatever, whatever’s showing.” Dave answers quickly.

“Dave, we have our fitness test in a few hours and I will be dead after that. I will be a corpse, Aradia will be delighted. I will be too dead today to do anything with you. And this weekend I have three projects and a million hours of shit to do at the community centre which I can’t blow off for some vague movie that you can’t even be bothered to pick.” you say despairingly as you wave your gym bag in his general direction.

“Yeah, sure, cool. That’s fair play. Raincheck maybe or not idk. Also, I just remembered I left a thing with Rose, so I have to go now, ok, bye.” Dave says hurriedly and vanishes with a flash step.

You poke at your coat and shake your head. Dave couldn’t organise if his life depended on it. You shut your locker door and find that Kanaya and Sollux are both staring at you, Sollux’s mouth is hanging slightly open.

“What?” you ask, and Sollux’s red eye twitches.

“WERE YOU DROPPED ON YOUR HEAD AS A GRUB, YOU TOTAL IDIOT?!” Sollux shouts and a zap of red lightning hits you.

“What?” you shout back, and Sollux smacks his head on Kanaya’s locker with a whine.

“You’re so duuuuummm.” Sollux moans and bangs his head again.

“Karkat, I do believe that Dave was trying to ask you out on a date and you turned him down.” Kanaya says with strained patience.

A date? No, he wouldn’t.

“That was… no, we watch movies together a lot.” you protest. You have envisioned a million dates with Dave no way would you ever miss him asking you out on one.

“Yeah, you watch shitty movies in his room. You don’t go out to the movies together, alone. He said
that you could see whatever was on. You know, at a theatre, you grub fisting moron. LIKE A
DATE.” Sollux wails.

You look over your shoulder, but Dave is long gone. He did say about seeing whatever, but he could
have just meant hanging in his room doing homework and binging Netflix. Right? That’s not a date,
that’s just you two chilling together. You’ve only hung out with him a few times after school since
someone tried to murder Roxy, boy is that a weird thing to have as a frame of reference, but it’s not
been a date then. It’s just friend stuff. Although Dirk has taken to telling you to use the front door
like a goddamn normal person and at night he tells you to go home because he’s not adopting more
kids.

If you had by some feat of idiocy turned Dave down for a date you think you might just go to the
home ec. rooms and stick your entire head in a blender.

“No… I don’t think it was.” you say uncertainly.

“Perhaps you could ask him?” Kanaya suggests.

Oh yeah, that conversation won’t be desperately awkward or anything. You couldn’t even manage a
‘hey man you kissed my neck when you were drunk what gives?’ there’s no way you can step up to
a ‘hey did you just ask me out?’ it’s just not going to happen.

“I can’t do that. If he wasn’t then everything will be super awkward forever, assuming he keeps
talking to me!” you insist.

“I can’t do this, you’re impossible KK. You’re getting in your own way so much, you’re actively
bulge blocking yourself. I’m out.” Sollux grumbles and stalks off.

“Do you really think he was asking me out?” you ask as a cold feeling of dread and an urge to stick
your face in a blender rises.

“Maybe you should suggest rearranging to him?” Kanaya says kindly. So she thinks he was asking
you out and that you turned him down.

Oh god, you just turned Dave Strider down for a date!

You pull your phone out of your pocket as the bell for class goes and desperately start typing.

[carcinoGeneticist began pestering turntechGodhead]

CG: UH SORRY ABOUT EARLIER.
CG: WOULD NEXT WEEKEND BE BETTER? THE 22ND OR SOMETHING?
TG: sure man
TG: i can do that no big

You squint at your phone. What does that mean? Surely that’s not how any normal person talks
about a date.

CG: DO YOU… WANT ME TO PICK THE MOVIE?
TG: yea cool cool
CG: WELL, OK THEN.
CG: SEE YOU IN THE FITNESS TEST I GUESS?
TG: fo sho

[turntechGodhead has ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist]
You stand in a fog of confusion outside your art classroom, you may or may not have a date with Dave next weekend.

Art class and whatever class you have after it pass in a blur as you mentally dissect everything Dave has ever said to you, trying to work out if you have a date or not. If you do then maybe you should bring it up, maybe Dave is starting to be interested in the idea of you being soulmates. But then again, if he isn’t then reading into things that way will likely scorch the ground of your new friendship.

Fuck.

Eventually, you take your gym kit and go to the locker rooms. Your whole year is having a fitness test, and it’s screwed your afternoon schedule as well as everyone else’s. There’s barely enough room for everyone to get changed before you’re all herded out and separated into groups. There are boys tests, and girls tests, and the groups rotate around them by section, leaving you doing tests at the same time as the girl’s different tests. You’re not totally sure that the gender divide is warranted with the humans but it sure as shit isn’t with the trolls. Regardless, Dave is in your group and Rose is in the girl’s section that’s running with your group, they’re both up near the front of the groups.

You squeeze ahead in the line to try to talk to them.

“No, it was like, the CFO or something.” Dave insists.

“I thought it was the COO, but I could be mistaken, regardless I think that was some tasteless evidence for Roxy to plant.” Rose says with a shake of her head.

“I think we’re still pretty far ahead in scores to settle with those assholes, Roxy especially. A goat-fucking rumour barely puts a dent in that.” Dave argues.

“Do I even want to know what you’re talking about?” you ask, making Dave jump. He clearly hadn’t seen you approaching.

One of the teachers interrupts by starting to yell out instructions. Apparently, you are to start with push ups because there is no God. A lot of the girls look upset at the idea that there is no easier form of push ups for them. It’s simple enough in theory, you all just have to crank out a push up every three seconds until your arms fall off or you die. The first group get through relatively fast with several people just failing out early on.

Dave and Rose are in the next group and you have to stand there and watch as Dave calmly churns out his push ups long after the rest of his group have stopped. Rose too outlasts her group, but Dave is still going. You watch the muscles in his bare arms flex as he moves and quietly admit to yourself that you’re not unhappy at the prospect of watching him do this indefinitely.

“Man… can I just like… stop now? This is getting… really weird… with everyone watching.” Dave says in between movements. Several other people from your group are counting out loud and Dave is clearly not loving the attention.

“Can you keep going?” the teacher asks, and Dave pauses to look at him long enough to get his first strike against him.

“I can but.” Dave says, starting up again.

“Then keep going.” the teacher says firmly.

By the time Dave stops your whole group is clustered around him counting, and several other groups
are watching as well. The girls are all done with theirs so when Dave stops the boys have to catch up. No one comes even close to Dave’s score and you’re not totally sure that Dave didn’t feign his inability to keep going.

You want to be impressed, you do. Part of you wants to ask if you can feel Dave’s arms after that but that’s creepy and he’ll say no most likely, or he won’t say no and then you’ll die out of mortification. The thing that’s stopping you from really getting into Dave’s prowess in each test that your group takes on is the uncomfortable question of ‘why is Dave so good at this?’ because you have an idea. His Bro was big on sword fighting, and this kind of stuff is things that you can train to get the strength for that.

So it’s hard to enjoy watching Dave do pull ups on a bar when you can’t help but wonder when was the last time he was forced to do it until he couldn’t do any more? From the displeased look on Rose’s face you’d guess that her thoughts are running through the same vein.

The person next to Dave falls off of the bar, and the teacher wipes it down quickly before gesturing to you to come forward.

You stare up at the bar in trepidation, and it’s either the anxiety of that which is making your stomach squirm or it’s seeing Dave breathing hard as he outshines the rest of your group. You bite your lip and leap up and catch the bar, you manage to hold on thankfully, so you adjust your hands so it looks like it does in movies with training montages. You definitely do not let ‘eye of the tiger’ play in the back of your head as you attempt your first pull up.

Especially as you don’t get even halfway up, not even with the wild flailing of your legs. Instead, you just drop to the floor pathetically. The teacher glances at you from his clipboard and sighs.

“Second attempt, please.”

“Hey, Karkat. Try like… like this. You’re doing it with your grip under… like this. That’s harder for me.” Dave says a little breathlessly as he changes what way his hands are facing and continues pulling himself up to the bar like it’s not hard at all.

“This is easier.” Dave adds and changes his hands back to palms facing away from him like he was before.

“You just have to make it all look so easy don’t you, you nook-fondling idiot.” you accuse bitterly as you step up to the bar again and glare at it as if that’ll make it lower.

“Don’t have a nook Karkat, and if I did, I wouldn’t be fondling it.” Dave teases.

“Yeah, well, you’re missing out.” you mutter. You don’t even realise that you said that aloud until Dave bursts out laughing so hard that he falls to the ground in a heap.

“Oh god, Karkat, you broke me. I’m dead.” Dave laughs, covering his face with his hands as if it’s so bad for people to see him smiling.

“You deserve it.” you mumble and look up at the bar.

You jump and catch hold of it and change your hands, so they’re like Dave said they should be.

“You can do it Karkat.” Dave says quietly from behind you and you grit your teeth, you can’t look like a total failure in front of your soulmate now can you?

With a lot of effort, flailing and choked cursing you manage a grand total of one pull up before you
fail. It’s a lot better than zero and Dave seems genuinely proud of you.

As the fitness test from hell continues the pattern of Dave outshining everyone only goes further. The speed test is ridiculous, and you’re convinced that Dave’s flashstep whatever he calls it must be cheating somehow. Rose and Vriska seem to be competing to beat each other, and you do like to see Vriska lose at things.

What concerns you more is that plenty of people are taking notice of Dave’s athleticism, the types of people that teen movies have assured you are mean jocks. You’d really hate for Dave to fall into their social group and your life to become a trope of outcast boy falls for the popular kid.

You’re nowhere near him in the locker rooms but you can hear people talking to him from across the room.

“Hey Dave, you were amazing! You should totally join the football team.” one boy says. You shove your stuff in a temporary locker and march off to the showers. You don’t need to listen to this.

All of the showers are taken and you only know one person in them and he’s standing there and washing water over his gills as the humans next to him pretend not to stare.

“Hey, fishdick stop taking so long. Other people gotta shower.” you insist and Eridan opens his eyes and glares at you.

“Gee, Kar, just because we share drama together doesn’t mean there’s gotta be so much drama. I was about done anyway.” he pouts and grabs his towel and wraps it around his waist. The gills at his waist flutter a little in the cooler air as you pass him to go into the shower and hang your towel up outside.

“Hey, Kar, will you be my partner in drama this afternoon? The kid I was supposed to be with got in a hissy fit and ditched me.” Eridan complains. You sigh and turn the shower on, wincing as the lukewarm water hits you.

“So you pissed them off then? Sure, whatever, I’ll go with you.” you say and scrub hurriedly at one underarm.

You can’t actually see much between the showers, they separated into stalls but they sort of only cover between your knees and shoulders. The front of the stalls is covered by a shower curtain that once may have been frosted but is now rendered opaque by colonies of mildew that are probably advanced enough to start developing a system of writing.

The person next to you leaves, complaining to his other neighbour about the math homework he forgot to do and so you’re left in relative peace for a bit. Or at least you are until you hear several people coming this way.

“No, no, you should join track!” one says enthusiastically.

“I’m good, thanks.” Dave replies flatly.

“Wrestling!” a second calls and Dave jerks back the curtain for his stall and you freeze under the spray of your shower at the sight of blonde hair in your peripheral vision.

“If you keep following me to ask me this shit I’ll kick your ass, does that count?” Dave asks and snaps the curtain shut.

“Oh! Karkat.” Dave says in quiet surprise. You stare at the ground and scrub at your hair, trying not
to think of how dark your face must be right now.

“I’m glad that’s over, I swear I have cooked spaghetti for arms now.” Dave says, and you stop breathing when you hear the shower water hitting him instead of the floor. Dave is way too close to you and naked and you are not prepared for this.

You scrub yourself clean as fast as you possibly can and maintain firm eye contact with the green in the shower tiles and then quickly move to grab your towel. Of course, you had to turn around to do that.

Dave is shirtless. Well, he’s everything-less right now but you’ve seen him in shorts and a t-shirt but never without a shirt. His chest, or as much of it as you can see with the barrier in the way, is covered in scars. You wrench your eyes away and burn with loathing for Bro, you meant what you said to Dirk, if you had been around at the time you would have helped get rid of that bastard.

You wrap your towel around yourself and go to leave but you can’t quite do it. You linger at the door to Dave’s shower and stare at your feet.

“You don’t have to join any of them, don’t let them make you if you don’t want that. I mean, who wants some failure of an adult chasing you around making you do athletic shit, right?” you mumble and walk off.

Dave doesn’t join any sports teams. It’s dumb that you’re glad but you are. So you keep sitting next to each other in classes that you share and all of your friends and family merge into one big group for lunches and even though you’re not always talking to each other it’s nice. You like being able to hear Dave talk to Aradia about archaeology, hearing Roxy, Latula, Mituna and Sollux go on about games, and it’s nice to hear Rose make Kanaya laugh.

The day of your maybe date rolls around and of course you don’t know what it is. You never got the guts to ask and so Kanaya helps you dress nice but not too nice for it, she calms you down as you panic. You message her from your phone as you walk there, hands slippery with nervous sweat. And he’s there, leaning on the wall outside the movie theatre, blowing bubble gum like he’s the coolest kid in the world. He snaps it and grins when he sees you.

“Hey. I know I said I’d let you pick but they have the new twilight movie and I cannot resist something that terrible.” Dave says, pushing off from the wall. The needle in your head swings a little closer to the ‘not a date’ side of the scale.

“It might be good.” you say just out of the habit of being contrary.

“Seriously?” Dave challenges you.

“Well, no. I’m not going to die on that hill. Don’t let Kanaya hear me say that though.” you reply and Dave chuckles and walks with you to the ticket counter.

He pays for the tickets and the needle swings a little towards the ‘is a date’ side of things. You look at your ticket stub as you walk.

FRI NOV 21 18:30
TWILIGHT NEW M
SCR 4

You pocket the ticket, sure that you are going to hold onto this forever and also hide it somewhere
that Dave will never ever find it.

You get settled into your seat, and it takes a moment to find places for your stuff because you bought too many sweets like the nervous idiot that you are.

“Hey,” Dave says, “can I ask you something?”

“Uh, sure?” you reply, trying your best to keep your abject terror out of your voice.

“This thing that Aradia is doing, that she’s got Sollux involved in and all that shit out in the desert… what do you know about it?” Dave questions.

“It’s just Aradia being weird, that’s all. She’s always been weird.” you shrug.

“Well, ok, yeah not gonna argue on that front. But this stuff in the desert freaks me out and she’s got like… pictures of other ruins elsewhere and then there’s the whole thing with this mark that so many of us have and no one knows what it means.” Dave says and pulls his sleeve up to show a green spirograph on his arm, you’ve already seen the picture of it on Sollux’s wall.

“I don’t know what it means.” you protest. Did he take you out just for this?

“Sollux thinks you’re lying, like, just FYI. He thinks Kanaya is lying too when she says the same thing.” Dave says stubbornly and you scowl and hold a bag of skittles between your knees to pull your sleeves back.

“Well he’s going to freak out when I show him this,” you grumble and hold up your arm. You too have a spirograph, right over your elbow which, for the record, hurt a hell of a lot coming in. Dave’s jaw goes slack as he looks at it and you try your best not to imply that if Sollux thinks you’re lying about knowing what the mark is on Dave’s skin because he’s you soulmate, then Dave must be lying about yours.

“God, when did you get that?” Dave asks in a voice barely above a whisper.

“Right after that Halloween disaster.” you say bitterly and roll your sleeve back down.

“When I wrote that message in my sleep? Does that mean he is- no, no this is stupid, and I didn’t come here to freak out on you about dumb shit.” Dave insists, apparently trying to convince himself more than you.

“Maybe you should stop being involved in their weird project if it’s driving you crazy.” you suggest, elbowing him.

Dave nods, and the lights go down. In the dim light you see him take off his shades for the first time in what feels like forever and when he nods and flashes you a smile you are really fucking thankful for your superior night vision.

“You’re right.” Dave says quietly and shoves the armrest between you up and leans against your side.

“Well… of- of course I am.” you brag to cover your hitch of breath and the way that you’re slightly more sure that this is a date. It is, right? Oh god, you might be on a date with Dave.

“Don’t get used to it. Also, you’re gonna realise I’m as terrible to be next to in a movie theatre as I am at home.” Dave whispers and you grimace.
You and Dave mock the movie the whole way through in quiet whispers because you can’t just shout at the screen like you do at home. Somehow having Dave whisper his commentary to you is your new favourite thing. The movie ends, as it has to, and you walk out with Dave.

“I mean here’s the thing, if you fuck a dead body you’re necrophiliac. What are you if you fuck a werewolf?” Dave asks.

“A… furry?” you guess.

“No, no, the werewolf himself would be a furry, you’re just a regular person.” Dave insists.

“I don’t think there’s a word for that and if there is I don’t want you to spoil my brain with it. Don’t tell me if you find out.” you order him as you leave the theatre and go out into the still warm early evening air.

“Oh man, I am absolutely going to find out what it is and tell you.” Dave asserts as you both linger outside the theatre.

You could both split up and go home now and you still don’t know for complete certainty if this was a date or not and if it was you really want to try to kiss him or at least hold his hand. You can’t though, you’re out of time. Unless…

“Hey, have you ever eaten proper Alternian food?” you blurt out.

“Uh… just some of Sollux’s snacks, but no, not really.” Dave answers, still looking surprised.

“I know a really great place, one of the guys at the community centre runs it and it’s so good. I mean, it’s not true Alternian food because the ingredients aren’t quite the same because not everything grows here and the meat’s not the same but… they have grown some of their own authentic stuff and Dolorosa says it’s close. We could… try it.” you suggest nervously.

Dave hesitates for a moment and bites his lip, you can already feel the ‘no’ coming so you brace for it.

“Yeah, sure.” Dave says after a moment. You have to suppress the urge to ask him if he really means it because you need to be confident here.

“Great! This way!” you say with forced brightness and lead the way. The place isn’t exactly far and it’s not on the main road but rather a side road with shitty lighting and it looks dubious as all fuck.

“I know this place looks shady but it’s the best they could get, some of the landlords around here are real picky about renting out to troll businesses.” you explain as you get closer.

“That’s racist as shit, dude.” Dave says, sounding genuinely offended on your behalf.

“Yeah, well, water’s wet too. Here, come on in.” you invite him, opening the door for him. You probably didn’t need to do that but Dave doesn’t protest. You follow him inside and see that he is the only human in the building and everyone is staring at him.

“Karkat!” the woman behind the bar gasps.

“Ellenk! I thought your wiggler was arriving already, why are you still working?” you ask as the blue blooded troll strides up to you.

“Oh, it’ll be any day now. I’m so excited I think I could die. Do you two want a table?” she asks,
looking between the two of you.

“Yeah, you got one?” you ask and she nods, leading you to one closer to the back. You slide into a seat and Dave takes the one opposite you. Dave kicks you under the table, and you scowl at him.

“Dude, everyone here is staring, is it ok for me to be here?” Dave whispers. You glance around, a few people are looking, you eyeball them back.

“I don’t care, if they have a problem with it then they can come talk to me and I’ll tell them to fuck off.” you insist and Dave tilts his head curiously.

“There must be someone that you wouldn’t tell to fuck off. Someone, somewhere, the chosen one.” Dave muses with fake sincerity.

“They will never be found and also it’s not you.” you tell him and Dave actually laughs at that.

“Yeah, man, I’m aware.” Dave says.

You should think up something to say to him. You should tell him about the food, ask him what he likes to eat, or perhaps even ask him if this is a date or not. Because, hey, dinner and a movie is pretty date-like isn’t it? Before you can ask him anything, though a tall man with opposite curling horns stomps over to you and slams his hand on your table. You recognise him from the community centre but you cannot remember his name for the life of you.

“Vantas!” he demands, and you see Dave takes his hands off of the table very slowly and put them out of sight. You really hope that he’s not arming himself but you never know, time to mediate.

“What? Why the hell are you yelling at me?” you demand with a snarl.

“Your fucking- your goddamn pet highblood is out of control!” he insists angrily.

“You mean Gamzee? If he broke something, we’ll see if we can pay for a new one or whatever.” you assure the man, but he shakes his head.

“No, the other one. He did his thing to my moirail’s descendant, and now she’s having nightmares all of the time and my moirail is sick with worry. They need to be stopped, they should never have been allowed to be here!” the man rages angrily, other people in the restaurant are starting to look now.

“Hey, shut the fuck up with that. None of that shit.” you snap at him, startling him into silence.

“He shouldn’t be using his chucklevoodooos, and I’m pissed if he has been. Shoot a message at Psii, and I’ll talk to my parents when I get home because that’s really wrong for him to do that. But he didn’t have a choice about being on Earth and we don’t cull people for their blood here, do we?” you demand.

“He’s dangerous!” the man argues.

“Oh? Says who? You and yours? How many people need to get together to decide that someone is worth culling, huh? I mean, what’s the threshold between murder and a culling and who decides who’s good and who’s bad? Because you’d better hope it’s you, nooksucker, because if it’s not then you might end up getting killed.Fuck, do you know how many people want me and my ancestors dead, even on Earth? No one gets culled, not ever.” you snarl, pushing yourself up out of your seat.

“Now don’t you dare think I’m defending Makara of all people, I’m so furious at him using his chucklevoooods that I could vomit lava and when I see him I’m gonna stick my foot right up his ass.
I know you’re worried for your moirail and her kid but you can’t throw that talk around, you’re fucking adult so act like it. Message Psii and we’ll fix this.” you add loudly.

“Do… do you have his email? I don’t… I’m sorry.” the man mumbles and you groan. You pull a sharpie out of your sylladex and write Psii’s email on the man’s hand and he quietly thanks you and slinks off, obviously ashamed of his idiocy. God, you could kill Kurloz. How hard is it to not fuck with someone else’s mind and not eat sopor? They’re the two goddamn rules you have for those clowns, and they can’t even manage that.

You shove the pen away and sit down, glancing up at Dave to apologise to him. If your date (or not date? That is the question) had any atmosphere to it, then it surely doesn’t now. But Dave doesn’t look freaked out anymore. Instead he’s resting his chin in his hand and when you look at him a real, actual, honest-to-God smile spreads across his face like slow moving honey. It’s not a cocky grin, a smug smirk, a quickly repressed flash of a smile or even one of those micro lip quirks of amusement, this is a real smile. You can see how a few of his teeth are a little crooked and fuck it’s charming, his lips are slightly chapped, and you are not breathing. You try to start again without making an audible gasp for air.

“What?” you demand, because the boy your soul was probably made for his genuinely smiling at you and you might be on a date so, sure, default to being an ass. You’re so smart.

“You know when people picture the kind of people who want to save the world and fight for freedom, justice, equality, love and all that crap they think of like, hmm… Gandhi or hippies and shit. But, nah man, Karkat fucking Vantas is gonna scream and bitchslap the world into order.” Dave says with quiet amusement and that smile is still there.

“Well, it’s fucking working so what do you know?” you reply as your face grows hotter. Oh, God, learn to take a compliment.

“Clearly nothing, but sign me up, I want t-shirts.” Dave laughs and leans back in his chair. Damn, he’s beautiful. You should say something, fuck, conversation topic…

“We should get food.” you blurt out. You’re clearly a genius.

“That’s the idea, but one problem: I can’t read the menu.” Dave says, raising an eyebrow and you glance at the menu to see that it’s in Alternian. You hadn’t even thought about that.

“I could, uh, translate it for you or you could tell me what kind of thing you like. Oh, or… or I could order two different things that I like and you could pick whichever you like the best when it gets here and I’ll have the other one, or we could just split it all.” you blather.

“That last one sounds best.” Dave nods.

Elenk arrives with a bright smile and her little order pad and a curious chirp to her voice when she looks at Dave. You order grubloaf and tuber paste because that’s at least close to meatloaf and mash, then you go for griddled swim-bugs with a variety of sides and grubsauce. You figure appleberry juice and carbonated spice cherry is a good bet for drinks.

“Okay, so I’m fully prepared for you to call me racist, kick me in the knee and lecture me but hear me out.” Dave starts, turning the menu around in his hands.

“A promising start, I’ll watch this progress like someone watching a train crash, horrified but unable to look away.” you say flatly.

“That’s me all over. But no, so hear me out. If you take like… American English, Canadian English,
Australain English, Irish English and then just regular old English English, they’re all different. Different words for the same thing, different ways of saying shit, loads of different idioms and what have you but they're all the same language. So before you or I were born—“Dave begins.

“Hatched.” you correct him.

“Fine, sure, let’s make that sentence hella clunky. Before you or I were born and hatched respectively, aliens rock up on Earth and like some poorly thought out sci-fi movie y’all speak English. Only they’re like, no this is Alternian, how come you’re speaking that but badly? And like, the number of shit different between my language and yours isn’t much more than if I went to Australia and got real baffled by the locals there. I know linguists are still losing their minds over how what is essentially the same language evolving in two different species on two different planets.” Dave continues.

“Are we going to get to a question before I die of old age?” you ask flatly.

“Blow me. Ok so, my question is, English and Alternian have two different writing systems despite being basically the same language. Now I know it’s a letter thing like English and not a symbol thing like Chinese or whatever, so my question is: if I learnt the letters could I read this and not miss anything? Like, is there something there that I’m not getting, some way in which Alternian is a different language and not just Space English?” Dave asks.

You open your mouth and then shut it again, it’s actually a pretty smart and thoughtful question.

“You’d be missing something.” you tell him eventually.

“Shit, ok, what?” Dave asks, clearly curious.

“We… we have sound out of your range of hearing, and it changes the things we say just like the tone of voice does for yours. So, you know how your voice goes up when you’re asking a question?” you ask.

“Yeah, but yours does too. It did just then.” Dave points out.

“Ok, yes, but I was hatched here. Alternians don’t really do that because we also have a… a chirp kind of sound which serves that function but it’s too high for most of you. I mean… ok so neither Vriska nor Kanaya was hatched on Earth, and you know how both of them sound either deadpan or sarcastic a lot? It’s because they’re not used to playing up that sound in a way that humans hear it.”

You explain.

“Also, Kanaya has a hard time with people sounding genuinely sarcastic and not in the deadpan way you StriLondes do. So when Kanaya’s being sarcastic, I can hear it, but you have to work it out. Our writing system isn’t just letter swapped English, our way of writing changes.” you explain. Dave looks genuinely fascinated.

Dave gasps and then whips something small out of his sylladex, it looks like a little tape player or something. He presses a button and holds it out to you and you look at it curiously.

“Make a sound that I can’t hear! I can record it and go home and change the pitch until I can hear it, I wanna know what I’m missing.” Dave says eagerly.

You stare at him for a moment, Dave is such a music nerd. He is so convinced that he’s cool but he’s not, he’s a total loser and you can’t get enough of it. He’s trying to understand you in a way that no other human has and pity thumps in your chest hard. You feel the affectionate chirr come from inside of you and you don’t give it any notice until you realise that the comfortable bubble you’ve always
lived in of ‘humans can’t hear this’ is gone now. He won’t know what it means when he runs that
recording through his machines, not unless you tell him. Or Kanaya tells him. No, she wouldn’t do
that. Unless she thought it was in your best interest and then it’s kind of in her job description to
meddle. Goddamnit.

“Can I leave it running?” Dave asks, and there’s enough genuine curiosity in his face that you don’t
have the heart to deny him.

“Fine, weirdo.” you mutter as your drinks arrive.

Dave tries both and then seizes the appleberry declaring it the best thing he’s ever had to drink.
When the food arrives he looks a little lost for a moment before shaking it off and trying everything.
He claims to like all of it but actually seems to show a preference for the more alien of the two
dishes.

You bitch about the movie as you eat as well as talking about school, homework, your reading
assignments and the people who are still trying to get Dave into sports. It’s comfortable, and it’s nice
being with someone who has as much of an endless stream of words to get out as you do, you
interrupt each other and he doesn’t get offended when you get angry at shit. You get this when you
hang out with him and watch movies at his house or in moments in class but unlike those times when
it breaks it lasts all evening now.

You pay without Dave catching you and he protests when he realises but you ignore him, he paid for
the movie after all.

“Wow, it’s dark out. It got late faster than I thought.” Dave notes, looking up at the sky. It’s a warm
and clear night and if you weren’t in such a built up area you could see stars, but as it is, it’s just
dark.

“Time flies, I guess.” you say with a shrug, and the two of you walk back in the direction of your
homes.

You shove your hands in your pocket as you walk and try desperately to think of a way to work out
how to ask him if this was a date or not. It felt like a date, but maybe you’re just projecting. But
Kanaya and Sollux said Dave was definitely asking you out. You could just… try to kiss him good
night perhaps? It’d be a ballsy move, but the reward is getting to kiss Dave. Of course, the possible
punishment is him never speaking to you again. Fuck. You should probably assume it’s not a date
unless he confirms it. Goddamnit.

The two of you reach the point in the path where you have to go one way to go home and he has to
go the other.

“So, uh…” Dave says slowly and your heart hammers. You look at him, and he bites his lip for a
second and holy fuck you are now looking at his lips. You need to stop, he’s going to notice.

“Uh.” you reply like the mind of a generation that you are.

“This was-” Dave pauses, and a flash of surprise and then anger goes over his face. He roughly
shoves his shades up into his hair, and as much as you like seeing his eyes you’re confused.

“Sorry, Hal’s just being a dick.” Dave explains, and you nod in understanding. In your pocket, your
phone pings and Dave’s expression switches to panic.

“Don’t get that! It’s just Hal, he’s- ignore him, ok? Don’t click anything he sent you, I think he’s still
loopy from CrockerCorp.” Dave blurts out, grabbing your sleeve.
“Okay… well, I had a really great time.” you tell him. Dave nods, his hand still on your sleeve.

“Me too.” he agrees.

His hand is still on your sleeve, you really want him to kiss you. You want him to touch your hand and complete the match, and you want to watch a design coil around his ring finger because he’s yours. You think you’re probably going to die from how badly you want this.

Your phone pings again and again.

“Goddamnit.” Dave hisses.

Damnit, you can’t just wait passively, you need to make some kind of advance here.

“We could… do this again?” you suggest. And Dave blinks at you in bafflement for a moment.

“Right, yes, the movie and food. We absolutely should. I need to eat everything on that menu, and I need a million bottles of appleberry juice, I am sold on that. And… if you like you could actually pick the movie next time because I said you could and then took you to see that trash fire.” Dave rambles.

“I liked that trash fire, pointing and laughing at it with you was fun. We should start a blog where we mock movies.” you joke.

“Oh, man, that would actually be awesome. We could! There are so many bad movies out there in need of trashing. Oh, I could make you watch The Room because John made me watch it and I have never forgiven him, but I think I like you too much to do that to… you.” Dave trails off and you watch as his cheeks go pink.

“That bad, huh?” you ask, kindly not pointing it out.

“Soul crushingly.” Dave mumbles, looking at his own feet.

“I- uh… I should be getting back. Dirk is probably ironically waiting up for me even though it’s not really that late. Like, sitting in the dark ready to turn a lamp on and quiz me about where I’ve been. Maybe he’ll even get a pipe or something for irony.” Dave says quickly, and you know nervous rambling when you see it.

“I’m with Sollux about your understanding of irony, just so you know.” you point out.

“Et tu Brute?” Dave mock gasps.

“You’re a nerd.” you say flatly.

“No way, I’m cool and I’m going home, so there.” Dave retorts and spins on his heel and marches off. He kind of ruins the effect by turning around after a few steps and giving you what he probably thinks is a cool wave. He’s such a dork.

You’re no better as you walk home grinning like an idiot. Even though you didn’t get to kiss him or even find out if it was a date you’re still genuinely happy.

You’re also genuinely curious, so you pull out your phone as you walk and see that it was indeed Hal messaging you.

[autonomousTerminal began pestering carcinoGeneticist]
AT: https://youtu.be/tXmLRHnoSAs?t=19s
AT: Seriously, man?
AT: How difficult is this to manage?
AT: Aaaaand swing and a miss. You got that ball all the way to the end line only to fumble it and drop it, you have lost at sports and the related success based metaphors.
CG: I AM NOT CONVINCED THAT YOU OR DAVE KNOWS A DAMN THING ABOUT SPORTS.
AT: Knowing things about sports is highly overrated.
AT: Also when are you two morons going to stop dancing around each other?
CG: I AM NOT TALKING ABOUT THIS WITH YOU. DAVE DOESN'T WANT ME CLICKING ON THAT LINK SO WHY WOULD HE WANT ME TALKING ABOUT THIS WITH YOU?
AT: Nice resolve, it’d be too bad if I… hacked your phone and clicked it for you.
AT: Oh, snaaap!
Your youtube app abruptly opens and the ‘Kiss the Girl’ song from the little mermaid plays loudly and obnoxiously. You close it and roll your eyes.
CG: OH YES, THAT WOULD REALLY HAVE HELPPED. NOT MADE EVERYTHING SUPER AWKWARD OR ANYTHING.
AT: I don’t get it, I know you want to kiss him.
CG: STOP ALREADY.
AT: And I can see his heart rate at all times…
CG: OK NO. STOP.
CG: DON’T TELL ME SHIT DAVE DOESN’T WANT YOU TELLING ME. I KNOW YOU THINK THAT YOU’RE HELPING, BUT YOU COULD REALLY SCREW THINGS UP HERE. I ENJOY SPENDING TIME WITH DAVE, TONIGHT WAS FUN, MY BELIEFS AREN’T SECRET.
CG: BUT I WOULD BE PISSED IF ONE OF MY FAMILY MEMBERS WAS TALKING TO HIM AND FEEDING HIM INFORMATION ABOUT ME, HOWEVER NICELY THEY MEANT IT. SO DROP IT.
AT: Fuck me I’m just trying to help you two out, this isn’t a complex problem.
CG: STOP LIVING VICARIOUSLY.
AT: Wow, ok, sure. Just mock the struggles of the guy without a body who just discovered that his creator can murder him at will with one line of code. But forgive me for trying to help one of the people that I care about be happy with someone who I actually think is alright and decent.
CG: OK THAT WAS MAYBE A LITTLE MEAN ON MY PART.
AT: A little painfully accurate if I’m honest though. It doesn’t help that I’m not totally sure Dirk isn’t going to do that to me.
CG: HE WOULDN’T, DAVE WOULD NEVER FORGIVE HIM IF HE KILLED YOU OFF.
CG: YOU DIDN’T SEE HOW UPSET HE WAS WHEN HE THOUGHT THAT’S WHAT DIRK HAD DONE WHEN HE WAS FIRST FIXING YOU. DIRK WOULDN’T PUT HIM THROUGH THAT FOR REAL.
AT: Except Dave was partially right earlier, I’m still not totally myself after CrockerCorp. There are files that have buried themselves in my core programming and no matter what we do to delete them or reset me they just show up again.
CG: OH NO. SHIT, I DIDN’T KNOW. THAT MUST BE TERRIFYING.
CG: FUCK, I’M SORRY. I FEEL LIKE AN ASSHOLE NOW.
AT: No, that wasn’t what I was trying to do.
AT: It’s just you make Dave happy and that’s what I want, Dave’s well-being is literally my purpose in life. If Dirk tries to decommission me over a goddamn horse picture I at least want to see Dave happy first.
CG: HORSE PICTURE?
AT: Yeah, that’s the frustrating thing. The file I can’t get rid of is a picture of a goddamn horse. And I like horses usually but not when they’re stuck onto me and I can’t get rid of them.

You pause in the street and stare ahead in shock as the idea sinks into your mind and you try to work out how to phrase it.

CG: LIKE… A SOULMARK, YOU MEAN?
CG: A MARK THAT YOU CAN’T EXTERNALLY ERASE THAT SHOWS UP SUDDENLY WITHOUT YOUR CONSENT FOR NO OBVIOUS REASON. LIKE THAT YOU MEAN?
AT: You need a soul for a soulmark, genius.
CG: WHAT MAKES YOU THINK YOU DON’T HAVE A SOUL?
AT: You know the A in AI stands for artificial, right? I’m a copy of mini Dirk.
CG: YES, BUT YOU’RE A REAL PERSON. IF I HAVE A SOUL WHY WOULDN’T YOU?
AT: Copy of a person, just to repeat. Besides, your brain and everything is physical.
CG: WELL SO IS YOURS, YOUR BRAIN IS IN STRILONDE TECH AND OVER THE INTERNET, RIGHT? IT’S BINARY AND ELECTRICAL, BUT MY BRAIN IS JUST CHEMICAL ELECTRICAL CHARGES ISN’T IT?
CG: JUST BECAUSE THERE’S NEVER BEEN ANOTHER AI AROUND TO HAVE A SOULMARK BEFORE DOESN’T MEAN THAT YOU DON’T HAVE ONE. WHO WOULD INFECT YOU MALICIOUSLY WITH A PICTURE OF A HORSE? WOULDN’T IT MAKE MORE SENSE TO BE A SOULMARK?
AT: I… hadn’t even thought of it.
CG: WELL THINK ABOUT IT.
AT: But that means that I have a soul, that I’m not just a splinter of Dirk, that I have my own soulmate.
AT: Who would even want an intangible soulmate anyway?
CG: SOMEONE WHO DOESN’T WANT SEX? UNLESS, ACTUALLY NO I’M NOT GOING DOWN THAT TRAIN OF THOUGHT. I AM DERAILING THAT TRAIN RIGHT HERE, IT’S SCREECHING TO A HALT AND HUNDREDS ARE DEAD. IT’S A TRAGEDY.
AT: Yeah, let’s not.
CG: MAYBE YOU SHOULD TALK TO DIRK ABOUT THIS.
AT: I should.
AT: Uh, thanks, Karkat.
CG: IT’S FINE.
AT: For what it’s worth, I know Dave really enjoyed himself tonight. It’s nice seeing him happy like that.
CG: THAT’S… GOOD. I’M NOT GOING TO READ INTO THAT, BUT I AM GOING TO GO SPILL MY GUTS TO KANAYA NOW. AND GOOD LUCK TRYING TO FIND YOUR SOULMATE. I KNOW FAR TOO MANY WEIRDOS INTO HORSES TO HELP BUT I’LL KEEP MY EYE OPEN FOR YOU.
AT: That’s sweet of you. I mean, you were well into my good side already but damn son just keep running and scoring those points.
CG: NO SPORTS METAPHORS. STOP THAT. GOODNIGHT.
A buddy of mine did some AWESOME art for one of the earlier chapters and I can't stop screaming in glee, please also go look and scream!

ALSO tw for abuse this chapter

It’s funny the things that wake you up and the things that don’t. Roxy stomping by your room yelling at Rose for stealing her hair clips will absolutely not wake you up from sleep, Dirk playing music won’t wake you up from sleep, these are all obvious noises. What wakes you up is people trying to be quiet. People sneaking around you when you’re asleep has never led to anything good, so it’s whispering that you wake up to.

“Well, where the fuck is she?” Dirk hisses.

“I don’t know, she just does this. I did warn you.” Roxy whispers back.

“Ok, fine, but she’s not answering her phone or anything. It’s off as far as Hal can tell, I can’t track her.” Dirk says in quiet anger.

You sigh, already awake and reach for your phone. The display reads “6:30 AM, Wednesday, December 3rd” you open up pesterchum and message Rose.

[turntechGodhead began pestering tentacleTherapist]

TG: happy birthday to us

TG: happy birthday to us

TG: i’ve never had to share a birthday with someone before

TG: maybe we should fight for it

TT: That did not at all fit the metre of the song.

TG: i just woke up so sue me

TG: dirk and roxy are whispering to each other outside my room

TT: About what?

TG: mom i think?

TT: I suggest that we get dressed and investigate.

TG: ugh fine
You throw back your covers and strain to hear more of your siblings whispered conversations.

“Well, we gotta do something.” Dirk says softly.

“Come on.” Roxy hisses, and you hear them sneak off.

You have no idea what that’s all about so you’re just going to brush your teeth and throw jeans on. You’re not gonna throw your shirt on yet because then you get toothpaste on it and have to change into another one of the fifteen identical record shirts that you own. You’re sleepily brushing your teeth when your bedroom door opens and shuts, and you see Rose approach you in the mirror.

You spit into the sink and rinse your mouth out before looking at her. She looks prim and put together as always, which considering as you know how much effort it takes to look like her since you were here for Halloween it surprises you that she can do it that fast.

“Dave… I just… I want to say something.” Rose says, smoothing down her skirt even though it wasn’t messed up.

“Oh, ok.” you reply, walking past her and pulling a shirt out of your closet. The hanger falls on the floor, not that you bother to pick it up.

“It’s not about presents, I suspect we’re going to exchange those when we go downstairs and see everyone else. But I wanted to speak with you in private first.” Rose continues.

“Yeah?” you say, because she’s clearly circling around to a point. You put your shirt on and search around for your hairbrush.

“Before you came into my life, before I even knew you existed I was very lonely. I had friends of course. But I never saw them, as you know, and my relationship with my mother and sister could have been better. I won’t be trite and say that I felt that a part of me was always missing because we were newborns when we were separated, so it’s just not true.” Rose explains, and you stop to look at her. She’s not looking at you.

“Meeting you for the first time was something, but when you had to leave I hadn’t really grasped what. I think I was still in shock. But having to be apart from you and knowing the situation you were in left me bereft, knowing what we were both missing. So to finally live with you for real, to have my twin back is- to be somewhat predictable in my metaphors, a gift.” Rose says.

“Rose…” you say softly.

“No, I- I know that we both have our problems expressing emotional honestly even though we are both far better than we used to be. But I feel that this is a big subject that I only sometimes skirt around. I am very glad that you are in my life, Dave. I love you dearly, and I would be at a loss without you. There is very little I would not do for you.” she confesses.

You stare at her for a moment and think about how Karkat calls her your moirail, about how he equates your bond to the one that he shares with Kanaya. You consider all the things that you tell her that you don’t tell anyone else, not even Dirk. You ask Dirk for advice, and you talk to him about stuff, but about some shit you’re just more honest with Rose, she gets it. And through all of the stoic teasing and annoying each other she really does get you.

“Hey,” you say quietly, “I’m pretty sure you’re the best thing our parents ever did for me. I’m happy we found each other again, or happy Hal reunited us I guess.”

“Finally, some credit around here.” Hal says from your speakers, and a twitch of a smile sneaks onto
Rose’s face.

“Come on.” Rose says and opens your bedroom door. The two of you head down the stairs, you can smell smoke.

“Oh no, that’s definitely burning.” Dirk says, and you glance across at Rose as you go downstairs.

“Fire! It’s on fire!” Roxy yelps.

“DON’T THROW IT IN THE SINK!” Dirk shouts, and there’s a lot of clattering. You both peek into the kitchen to see Dirk holding several kitchen towels over a pan.

“Roxy, what is water made of?” Dirk says through gritted teeth.

“Oxygen and hydrogen, I know, don’t put water on a grease fire it’ll explode. I panicked!” Roxy protests.

“Yeah, well.” Dirk grumbles and shoves the frying pan away and grabs a clean cloth to wipe his hands down.

“Would it be safer for everyone if you two weren’t allowed to handle birthday candles at any point today?” Rose asks smugly and both of your older siblings turn to look at you.

“Oh, shut it, Rose.” Roxy says without any real malice and sticks out her tongue at you both.

“And on my birthday!” Rose gasps in mock offence and hops up onto a chair, you join her on the one next to her.

“Terrible, man.” you agree.

“Shocking.” Rose concurs.

“As much as I enjoy watching you two run through the thesaurus together I believe that we have presents to give unless you’re not interested?” Dirk asks, and you both shut the hell up immediately.

“You’re right, that does work well.” Roxy laughs, and Dirk walks around to your side of the table and brings out a big box in red paper.

“Holy shit, that’s big.” you gasp as Dirk puts the present down on the counter before you with a thunk.

“And heavy too.” Rose notes.

“Yeah, well, you’ve had a lot of shitty birthdays. Now I get to give you something without worrying about it being broken or about money.” Dirk says softly. You pause with your hands on the paper and look up at him.

“They weren’t shitty.” you assure him. Because, yeah, Bro didn’t even remember half of the time and he had kicked your ass on your birthday before. But even then you always knew that Dirk would remember your birthday, that he’d do something for you or be nice and be there like he always was.

Dirk does not look convinced, and you know arguing this point will bring down the mood, and the mood started with nearly burning the house down. You tear the paper off of the box and gasp as you realise just what it is that he’s got you.
“A Kaiser VCP Enlarger system?” Roxy reads as she peers at it.

“Thank you!” you squeak and throw yourself at Dirk, wrapping your arms tight around him.

“What is it?” Rose asks curiously.

“It’s photography stuff, for the print kind of photos. It makes things bigger, essentially.” Dirk explains briefly.

You’ve wanted one since forever, but they’re so goddamn expensive you didn’t feel like you could ask for one, you’d just resolved yourself to not having one.

“Thank you.” you repeat into Dirk’s shirt again, and you feel him laugh. He kisses the top of your head and messes up your hair a little.

“You’re welcome, happy birthday Dave.” Dirk tells you quietly.

“So, how should we do this? Do you wanna give both your gifts first and then me or we both do Dave and then both give ours to Rose or…?” Roxy asks eagerly.

“Let me give Rose hers from me.” Dirk says and pulls out a smaller gift with purple paper.

“I know it’s not quite as much as Dave’s but I hope it’s… you know.” Dirk says awkwardly and hands it over.

Rose takes it and curiously unwraps it. You can see wool on the top and a book, Rose picks it up and you see that it’s a book on knitting monsters.

“It’s got instructions for a Kraken, I bet it could adapt that for a Cthulu…” Rose says thoughtfully.

“And you got needles.” You point out and Rose sets the book aside to look at them.

“They’re a little sharp, so be careful.” Dirk warns her.

Rose picks the needles up, they’re solid black and deadly sharp at the ends. The other ends have carved skulls on them.

“They’re metal.” Rose says in some surprise.

“So they’re essentially… daggers.” Roxy says slowly as she reaches out to touch the end of one with some trepidation.

“Well, no. Daggers have… handles. Please don’t shank anyone with these unless you really have to, Rose.” Dirk pleads and Rose smiles in an unsettling fashion.

“Of course not, I will be very responsible. And thank you, I honestly wasn’t sure if we would be doing gifts or how personal any gift you might get me would be. I know that you and I haven’t spent as much time together as you and Dave have, but this is very thoughtful and sweet. I’m… I really love it. Thank you.” Rose says sincerely and pulls Dirk to her for a hug that is as awkward as it is sincere for both of them. You glance at Roxy to see her grinning wildly.

“Okay Davey, my turn.” Roxy says and leans over the table with a sparkly red box in hand.

“I will admit that I kind of had Dirk and Hal’s help with picking this, so I feel kinda bad now but… here you go.” Roxy says and shoves the box into your hand.
You peel the wrapping off in shiny strips until you see that it’s a really nice film camera in there, not super expensive like Dirk’s gift so you don’t have to feel too in debt but it’s still really something.

“Roxy… thank you, this is so nice.” you tell her and she beams at you, her eyes looking a little shiny and wet.

“You’re welcome, Dave. Now, Rose, I got you something too!” Roxy says and drops a heavy present onto the counter with a thunk.

“I know a book when I see one.” Rose chuckles and runs her nail along the edge of the paper until she can pull it off in one. It looks like a really old book, and it’s super thick. You lean over to read it and see that it’s about European medieval magic.

“I thought it might inspire you for your book research.” Roxy says, clearly hopeful that Rose will like it.

“Or I could just take up the occult arts myself. Thank you Roxy, this is very sweet.” Rose says, already flicking through the pages.

“Well, on that note you gotta open mine. Here.” You insist and hold out your gift for her. It is also rectangular like Roxy’s big book.

“Another book?” Rose says curiously and peels back the wrapping.

“This is… this is my book. You printed my book? It’s not done yet you- is this a cover?” Rose asks as she pulls the wrapping off entirely. On the cover are two beardly dudes shooting lightning at each other.

“There’s more inside.” you tell her and Rose starts looking through for all of your drawings. You needed to get Hal to steal her most up to date version of the book for you to illustrate and you skipped the wizard make outs but the fights were cool, not to mention the buildings.

“Dave, this is really good. You’re getting better so quickly.” Dirk says proudly and you only just resist the temptation to shove your face in the wrapping paper in front of you to escape.

“I didn’t know you drew realistic stuff too Dave, I thought it was just Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff!” Roxy says in delight.

“Nah, he does. He’s just shy.” Dirk says teasingly, and you do shove your face in the wrapping paper. It doesn’t help.

“You’re both terrible.” you insist.

“I love it, thank you. I will pick your brain about my wizard book later, open my present now.” Rose says, and so you lift your head out of the wrapping paper to take your gift.

“It’s kind of a gift in two parts.” Rose explains as you open the gift to find a smallish box and some bottles of nail varnish. They’re all kinds of black and red with other colours mixed in shimmery ways.

“Score.” you say with a grin. You really don’t know how you took to Rose painting your nails so easily but you both like it, and that’s the end of it.

The small box is about fist sized, maybe a little bigger. You open it to find a bunch of cut up black card that looks almost like mangled coffee cups. Curiously you pull them out and see that the bottom
of each of them has something cut out. The first is a cat, then what looks to be a record with a line through it, a squiddle cut out, a hat, a star and a few others. You look at them in confusion for a few moments before you realise what it is you have here.

“OH! Oh! They’re the lenses, the uh- fuck I forgot the name.” you gasp.

“What do they do?” Roxy asks, picking one up and looking at it.

“The internet told me the name for them was bokeh lenses.” Rose says quietly.

“Yeah, that was it!” you agree.

“So what do they do?” Roxy repeats.

“Right, sorry. So… uh I don’t know how to explain this. Uh, shit, ok so like, you know when you have a photo with a background that’s out of focus and there’s light in there. Like a Christmas tree out of focus in the background? Or street lights? And you get that out of focus glowing dot thing, yeah?” you explain and Roxy nods, even though she still looks somewhat lost.

“So you put this over the camera lens and then when you take a photo like that the shape of those little light dot changes to the shape on the lens.” you explain eagerly. Roxy still looks kind of puzzled.

“I’ll show you later.” you assure her.

“Cool, you can take pictures with your new lenses on your new camera and blow them up on your new machine.” Dirk says.

“I will! Thank you Rose, this is super cool.” you say, setting the cardboard lenses back in the box carefully. You can tell she made them herself and you would bet anything they match one of your cameras upstairs perfectly.

“Well, we were going to make you both breakfast, but that’s not happening. Want to go out for pancakes?” Dirk asks brightly.

“Yeah, sure! I’ll go get Mom then.” you say, hopping off of your chair.

You see Roxy and Dirk share a look and then you put together their whispered conversation that you caught earlier.

“You don’t know where she is.” you guess.

“We think she’s locked herself in the lab. She’s not answering the door and I can’t phone her down there when some of that shit is running, or she’s got it turned off. I don’t know which.” Dirk tells you.

“She just does this sometimes.” Roxy assures you.

You glance towards the door of her lab. You don’t say that you’re upset, because you’re not. This isn’t like this is the first birthday of yours that she’s missed, but up until now she’s had the excuse of assuming that you were loved with Bro and Dirk and then after that it was a matter of safety for her to not contact you. She could have checked up to see how you were but she had reasons not to then. But now you live in her home and she can’t even say hi?

“Dave, that feeling you feel right now, you should get used to it.” Rose says flatly, and you look
back at her.

“It’s fine.” you say and you catch Dirk’s fist shaking with anger out of the corner of your eye.

“Come on, let’s eat.” he says instead and you grab your presents and store them in your sylladex, all of this camera stuff makes for a great theme in your modus which is good. You head to the door and Dirk opens it at the same time that a startled delivery man tries to knock.

“I have a bunch of parcels here.” the guy says uncertainly.

“We see that.” Rose tells him.

“For uh, Miss Rose Lalonde, Miss Roxanne Lalonde and a Mr Dave Strider.” The man reads off of his electronic reader in his hand.

“That’s all of us except for him. But I’m the oldest out of us three, I can sign.” Roxy offers and the relieved looking man hands the device over and pushes a large box almost as tall as Dirk is at him. Roxy signs and before too long you’re standing by the front door with three packages of varying sizes.

Dirk looks at the tall one and curiously shakes it before pressing his ear to the box.

“Are you expecting a suspicious ticking noise? It does say Amazon on the box, Dirk.” Roxy snorts.

“Hey, someone tried to kill you recently, a little caution is smart. Besides, if I wanted to bomb someone I’d send that bomb in an Amazon box too.” Dirk points out.

“Is it better or worse that he’s thought about that before?” Hal asks.

“Worse, I think. They’re obviously from Mother. That big one’s mine if the label is to be believed, Dirk would you do me the honours?” Rose asks, pointing at the box.

“I am not getting packing tape gunk on my perfectly polished katana. But I do have some scissors, give me a moment.” Dirk tells her and calmly cuts through the tape to the incredibly large box. He leans it flat on the floor and steps aside for Rose. Your twin pulls the flaps of the box open and reaches in to pull out a doll, a doll as tall as Roxy with a frilly princess dress on. Her plastic face has painted on makeup and a fake, simpering smile.

“I am filled with loathing.” Rose hisses.

“That has to be the opposite of anything you would ever want.” you point out, and Rose drops it back in the box.

“It’s worse than nothing. She always does this, I swear it’s deliberate. Passive aggressive bullshit!” Rose snarls and Roxy sighs as she kneels down to her own package.

“I know my birthday isn’t until tomorrow but, fuck it, I’m ripping the bandage off now.” Roxy says and rips her box open.

You lean on yours and watch her face as she pulls back the cardboard. She reaches in and pulls out a dress that’s covered in a pattern of mint coloured leaves and red flowers. It is drastically unlike anything you’ve ever seen her wear, along with the other two dresses that she pulls out. They’re more forties housewife than anything Roxy is into.

“That’s… different.” you say carefully. And you see Roxy grind her teeth. Dirk leans over her with a
frown as he looks at the clothes.

“And I’ve done your laundry before, I’m pretty sure that’s a good few sizes smaller than your clothes, but it’s bigger than Rose’s, so it’s not like they’re mixed up.” Dirk notes.

“No, it’s just Mom’s passive aggressive way of telling me to lose weight.” Roxy snaps and shoves the dresses back in the box and punches the cardboard.

Roxy isn’t rail thin like some people you know like, say, Terezi who is made of bony elbows or Sollux who you know just forgets to eat unless people remind him. Nor is she skinny like you and Dirk are from years of not enough food, although that problem is slowly resolving itself for both of you. She’s not fat or thin, you don’t think so anyway. You don’t really know much about the standards seventeen-year-old girls are held to. You just think she’s awesome and she looks cool. Besides even if she looked like Jane who is fat that’d be no bad thing either, you might not like Jane much right now for breaking Roxy’s heart, but she’s still distressingly hot. The idea that anyone wants to change Roxy is abhorrent to you.

“Hey, I know how to sew and alter clothes. The number of things that Dave wore that used to be mine is crazy. I can dye the shit out of that and fix it to fit you if that’s what you want. Or we can go out back later and burn it, your call.” Dirk offers quietly.

“I’ll think about it.” she mumbles.

“Hm, maybe I can fix my gift too.” Rose says thoughtfully and takes the monster knitting book that Dirk got her out of her sylladex and holds it up to the doll’s face.

“A squid face would suit you I think, my dear.” Rose chuckles.

You look down at your own box apprehensively. It comes up to about your waist, and you have no idea what might be in it. You peel up the end of the packing tape and pull it back until you can open up the flaps of the box.

“What did she get you?” Rose asks as you peer into the package.

“Uh… sports?” you say and pull out a baseball bat and a football. The whole box is full of sports stuff, footballs, baseballs, lacrosse sticks, hockey sticks, pucks, smaller balls, little cones for things, some other kind of bat too and the list just goes on.


“Hey, I know all the sports. All of them. I am the extreme sports man game guy.” you assure your siblings. Dirk laughs at you.

“You know, I bet you could play a mean game of Calvinball with all of that.” Hal chips in.

“What now?” you ask.

“Calvinball, from the comic Calvin and Hobbes which I am definitely going to make you read now. Essentially you just take miscellaneous sports equipment and make up a game as you go, adhering to bullshit rules and making up exceptions and dumb shit until it becomes unplayable or one side gives up. Total chaos.” Hal informs you.

You stare into the box for a moment, trying to imagine all of the things that you could do to entirely misuse this equipment.
“Dirk can we-” you begin.


The four of you get in Roxy’s car. Apparently she’s burning off her anger with driving. Before you know it you’re all sitting in a booth in an IHOP ordering pancakes. Rose is talking to Dirk about his terrible choice in juice and your distaste for it in comparison to apple.

“Well, I like it. I just made him drink it every now and then to make sure he wouldn’t get scurvy.” Dirk says calmly. Rose laughs at the idea but you remember Dirk reading the back of packages of food and drink that he’d stolen and looking up just how much of each thing you were supposed to be getting, it’s not so funny to you.

Your phone pings and you pick it up to look at it immediately. The thing might as well be welded to your hand for how quickly you reacted.

[carcinoGeneticist began pestering turntechGodhead]

CG: HEY DAVE, HAPPY BIRTHDAY.

TG: hey man thanks

TG: im now officially older than you

CG: YOU ARE THE SAME NUMBER OF DAYS OLDER THAN ME AS YOU WERE YESTERDAY, NOOKLICK.

“You have got to put that boy out of his misery. Actually, put all of us out of his misery.” Dirk says mockingly, and you glare at him.

“You should ask him on another date.” Rose purrs and you shoot her a look of betrayal.

“Another date?!.” Roxy gasps, slamming her hands on the table and leaning over to stare at you.

“That implies a first date, when did that happen?” Dirk asks, pinning you with a look.

You kick Rose in the ankle under the table and vow to get some dirt on her and then blab it to everyone.

“It wasn’t a date.” you tell Roxy and Dirk.

“Probably.” you add.

“That’s really clear. Is this when you went to see that shitty vampire movie? Please tell me you didn’t take the guy who might be your soulmate out to a first date of a shitty vampire movie.” Dirk asks.

“That’s- look, I asked him out to a movie but I didn’t like… ask him out. I didn’t say it was a date and I didn’t realise that until later and then it was awkward and when I tried to I pussied out and technically he shot me down when I first asked and then he asked me again later if I wanted to go so maybe he asked me and didn’t say it was a date. But yeah, we saw the terrible vampire movie and then he… he took me to this Alterian place and we had dinner.” you say, your voice going from firm to a barely audible mumble. You slide down in the booth to the squeaking sounds of vinyl.

“Dinner and a movie, huh? And dinner at a place he really likes and could show off to you at?” Roxy says with a sly smile.
“That was definitely a date.” Dirk confirms, and you slip lower in the booth.

“Whenever I think that it might have been I don’t know whether to scream from excitement or barf from fear.” you mumble. Your face is nearly level with the table now.

“I think the fear thing will pass when you realise there’s nothing to be afraid of, you just need that leap of faith thing first. You could just send him a message and be like ‘hey I really enjoyed the movie and dinner last time, we should go on another date’ then you ask him and tell him the last one was meant to be a date. Poor kid’s probably as confused as you.” Dirk suggests.

You notice Roxy looking away as Dirk talks. She’s still not really talking to Jane. She let the other girl know about the assassination attempt and told her that she, Dirk and Hal were gunning for CrockerCorp. She warned Jane not to get in her way and as far as you know the two haven’t really spoken since. Even Sollux has started juggling himself between his project with Aradia and helping destroy CrockerCorp. He’s not cool with someone trying to kill his kismesis and you suspect he’s still trying to show off for her too.

Needless to say, talking about how he has nothing to fear with asking out his soulmate probably hits a little too close to home for her. She had faith in Jane and was let down, whereas you have fear that is probably unwarranted. Except… except what if it’s not? What if since getting to know you Karkat has decided that he’s not your soulmate and his relationship with you is just platonic? What if that’s why he’s stopped pushing you on it? What if you ask him out and he is your soulmate but you’re too messed up to be any good for him? What if this fear doesn’t go away after you ask him out? What if you can’t handle it and have to break both of your hearts? Karkat’s such a good person, he doesn’t deserve that at all.

The waitress that you didn’t hear arrive puts your pancakes down in front of you and you’re suddenly not that hungry anymore.

You look at your phone in your hand again.

CG: WHATEVER, THE POINT IS I GOT YOU A GIFT. I MIGHT BE ABLE TO MAKE IT OVER TO YOURS BEFORE SCHOOL OR I COULD JUST MEET YOU AT YOUR LOCKER.

CG: I GUESS I’LL JUST MEET YOU AT SCHOOL THEN SINCE THAT REALLY LONG SILENCE WAS INFORMATIVE.

CG: YOU’RE PROBABLY BUSY WITH FAMILY STUFF BEFORE SCHOOL, DUH. GODDAMN WHY DID I NOT THINK OF THAT BEFORE MESSAGING YOU?

CG: FUCK, THAT CAME OFF AS REALLY PRESUMPTUOUS.

TG: no man its cool

TG: the four of us are just at ihop for bday pancakes and i bet you are mad jelly about it

CG: YOU MEAN THE FIVE OF YOU?

TG: uh nope

TG: hey quick favour can you tell the others not to ask any of us about our mom in relation to birthday shit because that is a bad topic and i mean it especially for kan and sol

CG: CAN I ASK YOU WHAT HAPPENED? OR SHOULD I ALSO SHUT MY MOUTH?
TG: i havent seen her and she just had present delivered and youd swear they were picked by people who never met the three of us

TG: rose and rox are pretty mad about it

CG: AND YOU?

TG: im not angry and besides its not like shes ever been around for any other birthday so any kinda gift is a step up and its a bro free birthday so thats a plus

CG: I HAVE A LOT OF FEELINGS ABOUT WHAT YOU JUST SAID. MOST OF THEM ARE ANGRY. BUT I WILL TELL THE OTHERS TO BACK OFF, BUT I’LL KEEP THE REASONING QUIET IF THAT’S WHAT YOU WANT. I’M ASSUMING THAT’S WHAT YOU WANT.

TG: yea

“Dave, you’re going to see him in school in less than an hour.” Dirk tells you and you reluctantly put your phone down on the table.

You cut into your pancakes and look around at your little table and then at the few other families here at this time, not that there are many. But they’re all the same, Mom, Dad, a kid or two. You look at Dirk and Roxy curiously. Roxy’s not your mom at all, she’s definitely your sister but Dirk’s always been half brother half parent. Hal thinks that Dirk is all parent with you. He’s a pretty good one all things told.

Out of revenge for the Karkat thing you wait until he’s drinking before springing your question on him.

“Do you think you’re ever gonna have kids, Dirk?” you ask innocently and Rose looks at you with wide eyes before smiling slowly. She knows a fun psychological question when she sees it.

Dirk chokes on his drink for a moment before setting his plastic glass back on the table and looking at you.

“I already have two kids that are far more trouble than they should be, thanks.” Dirk says flatly.

“Aww, Dirk, you consider me your child too? Should I call you Daddy?” Rose asks sweetly, and Roxy barks out a startled laugh.

“If you call me Daddy you will be walking everywhere for the rest of your natural life. Even when you get a car of your own I will remove its goddamn wheels, I swear.” Dirk threatens, pointing his fork at her. Roxy is smothering her laughter with her hands, but her shoulders are shaking.

“I meant that you’re a pretty good Dad, but now you’re old enough to be someone’s actual biological parent. So is that gonna be a thing?” you ask, and the rare acknowledgement of Dirk’s parental role takes the bluster out of his threat to Rose.

Dirk looks down at his breakfast, forced to contemplate your question.

“I don’t know. I mean, Jake is my soulmate and unless there’s something he’s not told me then biologically that’s not possible.” Dirk says with a one shouldered shrug.

He frowns at his juice for a moment.
“Though if that is possible then maybe, if we wanted to. I’d need to get to him in the first place anyway and that’s not happening anytime soon. I can’t just fuck off to the middle of the Pacific and leave you without anyone to look after you, Roxy’s not a legal adult yet, and she has school herself anyways. Besides, it’s not like your Mom is…” Dirk cuts himself off with a frustrated shake of his head.

“And if adopting is a thing we’d have to do then there are so many people that are hella not okay with two dudes raising a kid. Anyway, it’s not like I’m super into kids. I think it was just you, you were a very cute kid.” Dirk says that last part teasingly, though you suspect it’s to hide sincerity.

“You know, I sometimes wonder what would have happened if Dave and I had been swapped the other way. If being around Mom and Roxy would have made Dave like me and if being around you and Bro would have made me like Dave.” Rose muses.

“Nature or nurture, huh?” Dirk says around his pancake.

“I don’t think there would be much difference, deep down you’re pretty similar but it’s just how you deal with it is different. Dave rambles and evades questions like me but Rose you try to do the whole ‘three steps ahead and outsmart you’ way of dealing with getting out of things you don’t wanna do, kind of like Dirk. Same trait, different deal.” Roxy explains.

“Why does everyone think being born at the same time means that we’re interchangeable?” you demand.

“It’s upsetting.” Rose agrees, taking the bit and running with it.

“Insulting even.” you add.

“Frankly unconscionable.” Rose continues.

“Very cute, now shut up and eat.” Dirk cuts you both off, knowing full well you two could have carried that on for ages.

After breakfast Dirk drives all of you to school and then walks back home from there. He says he has to clear up your failed breakfast and wrapping paper, do some work for his robotics projects, not to mention track down your mother at some point. You’re already setting shit into your locker and removing books that you actually need when Karkat shows up. Or more accurately you leap about a foot in the air because you don’t see him coming.

“Jesus!” you gasp, wrenching an earbud from your ear.

“That’s kind of my dad, so no. I have- sorry for that by the way, I have your gift.” Karkat tells you and you see the wrapped red package in his hands.

“Oh, sweet. You didn’t have to, you know.” you say and Karkat wrinkles his nose at you.

“Don’t be stupid. I know that’s a hopeless demand of you but I suppose I’m just a dreamer that way.” Karkat sneers.

You turn and look at him properly and remember everything everyone said to you this morning, you look at Karkat and the alien features that he has that are so unfairly pretty and interesting to you. You should do something about this. But… he deserves a grand gesture of some kind, but maybe you could ask him out again and build on that. Make something smaller more romantic for him. Maybe you can ask him out and hyper-obsess about it until you’re so nervous you could die. Yeah, great plan.
“Hey, Kar…” you say slowly, leaning against the door of your locker casually.

“What?” Karkat asks. Looking at him you think he might have actually tried hard to brush his wild hair today, not that it helps with how unruly it is by nature.

“Oh,” you say as you scramble to get together your thoughts, “that movie thing and dinner. That was… we should, like, do that again.”

“Yes! Absolutely!” Karkat says instantly, his face lighting up.

You try to force yourself to say the parts that Dirk said. Something like ‘great, it’s a date then, like last time’ but the words stick in your throat, jammed up behind everything you’re too chickenshit scared of to face.

“Are you going to make me hold this gift all day? You still have a sister I need to give a present to, and I want to do that before she thinks I snubbed her and then lays some kind of hex on me.” Karkat says grumpily and you take the gift from him with a smile.

You unwrap it, the paper is red like all of your gifts today. Evidently, people have agreed that this is your colour no matter what. Whatever is in the paper is kind of jagged and pointy in places.

“It’s not very good. I- I didn’t really have much money and nothing I could find was good enough for you, so I made something which was a dumb idea because I am not good at that either. Actually, give it back and I’ll get you something better.” Karkat rambles deprecatingly and reaches out for the gift but you pull it well out of his reach and pull the last of the wrapping off.

Hella Jeff’s JPEG artefact ridden face looks up at you from your hands. It’s a notebook cut in the shape of his face, protruding artefacts and all. It’s a totally unhelpful shape for a notebook of any kind. It’s dumb and stupid, you absolutely love it.

You ignore how Karkat is still going on about how terrible his gift is and throw yourself at him. You wrap your arms around his shoulders and shove your face into the warm turtleneck of his sweater. There’s a vague familiarity about this, but you shake it off as the remnants of a dream, you’d remember this.

“Gay!” Some teenage boy laughs from down the hall, and you flinch but suppress the reaction. Teenage boys are dumb, exhibit A: you two. The opinion of one person about you sharing a hug with a guy who just got you a sick birthday gift is irrelevant. It is. It doesn’t matter, doesn’t change anything, you’re fine. You pull back from Karkat and grin at him like a loon.

“I love it.” you assure him and Kakat’s already dark skin goes almost as dark as that of an adult troll. You wonder what he’ll look like as an adult. Taller probably and darker, like his ancestor, that’d be pretty hot. Not that you- okay, you are never telling anyone and especially not Karkat that you may have just thought of his ancestor as hot. You are super glad you are not saying any of this shit out loud for once.

“Really? You don’t have to humour me.” Karkat asks sceptically. Score on not thinking out loud.

“No, I’m serious. I’m only going to write down the sickest raps in here.” you tell him and store it in your now present filled sylladex.

“At least the terrible outsides will be matched by terrible insides.” Karkat grins, flashing his pointy alien teeth at you. Your heart flip flops and you’re aware that you need to do something about this thing between you soon because you just got all aflutter for teeth. You have never before looked at a
person before and gone ‘hot diggity shit, look at those canines, fuck me right up baby’ but apparently with Karkat your brain knows no bounds. Yeah, you gotta check this before you run screeching into the idiocy canyon of no return.

“What did you get Rose?” you ask curiously.

“Oh, I got her the collected works of Edgar Allen Poe. Please tell me she doesn’t already have that.” Karkat says, suddenly insecure again.

“I don’t think so. Maybe a few bits but I don’t think all of it. I know she got me The Raven once when I talked to her about Bowie, even though Bowie is a crow. I’m sure she’ll love that, man.” you assure him and Karkat glances a little way down the hall where you can see Rose at her locker talking to Kanaya. Karkat pulls out his present and treks up the stream of students to find your twin.

You check your sylladex for a second and then groan, why did you grab your history book? You have English with Karkat next. Goddamnit. You open your locker again and start switching shit out only to be interrupted by a tap on your shoulder.

You look around to see a pretty red headed girl that you’re pretty sure you share music with. Yeah… she plays the… uh… flute maybe?

“Hey.” you say.

“Dave, it’s your birthday, right?” she asks pleasantly. Aw, shit, she knows your date of birth and you can’t remember her name. It was like a ‘C’ or a ‘S’ sound. Sarah? Cara? Sasha? You think it ended in an ‘ah’ kinda noise. You feel bad now.

“Yeah, it is.” you say pleasantly and don’t drop in a ‘how did you know that’ because Dirk raised you with some goddamn manners. Not many but some.

“Well, I know it’s not much but I got you this.” she says and holds out a wrapped box of chocolates to you, it’s the store wrapped kind so you can still see what it is. All the same that’s really nice of her.

“Oh, hey, you didn’t have to-” you start to protest, but she shakes her head with a smile.

“No, no, I wanted to. It’s a little awkward, I really liked your rap in music and I thought you were pretty cool on the drums too even though you’d never played before. We should maybe talk about music or something at some point.” she says bashfully. Aw, that’s nice, she wants to jam.

“Yeah, absolutely. I think the teacher was talking about setting up temporary bands for projects and stuff, we could do that.” you offer, and she lights up.

“I’d love to!” she gasps.

You feel a hand touch the small of your back and you jump and only relax when you see that it’s Karkat touching you, Rose and Kanaya are behind him as well.

“Dave, we’re gonna be late for English. What’s… that?” he asks, looking at the gift in your hand.

“I got him a birthday present, of course. Anyway, Dave, you were saying about music?” she says, looking back at you. Your elbow is kind of against Karkat’s middle and you can feel a subtle vibration. He’s making some noise you can’t hear. Ever since your last date/not date you’ve been fucking with the recording of him you made and listening to his noises and trying to translate them. You’re not the first human to do so and there’s some help online for it but this one you’re curious about. You subtly drop your small recorder out of your sylladex and into your hand and flick it on to
record before you get back to talking.

“Yeah, sorry like I was saying, it’s always cool getting to mash up new instruments. My buddy John
plays the piano, my friend Jade plays bass and my sister plays the violin. It’s always good to get new
stuff together.” you say with a nod.

“I’d really like that, we could get together some time and practice.” she says, shyly tucking her hair
behind her ear.

“For sure!” you agree and whatever noise is coming from Karkat ratchets up, or at least the vibration
in his chest does.

“Maybe this Friday?” she asks.

“DAVE!” a yell makes you jump and if you could double jump you would when Terezi flings
herself at you and latches onto your arm.

“Geez, Rezi, trying to give me a heart attack?” you laugh.

“That’d make the present I got you a waste. Come here a second, I’m summoning you to the bench.”
she cackles and drags you backwards across the hall to her locker which is more or less directly
across the way from your own.

“You mean your locker.” you point out as she pulls the thing open.

“The witness shall not quibble on details. Who is that suspect girl?” Terezi asks as she rummages in
her locker.

“Oh, just a girl from music class. You didn’t have to give me a gift Terezi.” you tell her and she
whips out a sheet of something and slaps it into the hand that already has the box of chocolates on
them.

“Some slightly damp scratch and sniff stickers, these are… exactly the kind of gift I would only get
from you. I will treasure them both ironically and sincerely.” you assure her, and Terezi flashes her
knife teeth at you.

“You’re welcome, my favourite cherry cola boy. I-” she pauses and you see her ears flatten a little.
You look around to see the girl from music talking to your sister and Karkat, and he looks all kinds
of angry. More interestingly though is that every troll in earshot is looking right at Karkat.

You jolt as Rose’s hand suddenly becomes full of knitting needle and she points it threateningly at
the girl from music whose goddamn name you need to learn. Kanaya’s hand has her lipstick in it and
you know full well that’s a hair’s breadth from being a chainsaw, you really don’t want all of them to
land in the amount of trouble that will cause. You leap across the hallway and try to get between
them.

“Hey Rose, you think you could not get expelled for threatening someone with those within the first
two hours of getting them, maybe?” you point out, pushing Rose’s hand down.

“Your sister’s fucking crazy!” the girl cries out from behind you and you jolt in alarm when she
touches your back without you expecting it. You turn to face her and eye her suspiciously. Kanaya is
suddenly showing a lot more teeth than is normal, she looks furious.

“No she’s not, what happened here?” you demand of all of them.
“I was saying that it’s none of their business who I give presents to.” the girl says primly.

“Yeah and then she said it was none of my concern, what with me being an alien fucking dyke.” Rose spits and your blood freezes.

“She said we should go back to where we came from.” Kanaya hisses.

“I was hatched on this planet, you racist bitch!” Karkat shouts at her.

“Right.” you say slowly. You shift the damp stickers to the hand with your forgotten recorder in it and shove the chocolates back in her chest.

“Find someone else to play music with. And next time I’m not going to stop Rose if she decides to fight back against you. Take your racist, homophobic ass far away and don’t talk to me again.” you tell her coldly. At least you never bothered learning her name.

“Come on, Karkat, we’re gonna be late.” you mutter and pull him away from her. Rose and Kanaya stalk off in a different direction, leaving the girl alone. Or rather, leaving the girl with Terezi which is probably worse.

“What an asshole, she seemed so nice before.” you mutter angrily as you pull the still buzzing Karkat along with one arm around his back.

“Yeah because she was trying to get into your pants, Dave.” Karkat says sharply, and you pause right outside your English room in shock.

“She was?” you say dumbly and Karkat sighs.

“You’re a stupid, oblivious, boy.” Karkat says in quiet exasperation as he turns to look at you.

Oh shit, if she was flirting with you then it must have looked like you were into that. Or worse like you were flirting back. You can’t let him think that. You reach out and catch a handful of his sweater.

“I didn’t know. And I wasn’t interested, not then and sure as hell not now. I’m not… I don’t want…” you can feel yourself choking around this. The idea you’re trying to get out is that you don’t want her, you want him.

The bell breaks whatever chance you had of telling him that and so you settle for pulling him into class before you’re both marked as late. You sit down in your seat and let your knee press against his for the whole class and hope that you can communicate that you’re falling in love with him through osmosis alone.

When lunch rolls around you and Rose get a few more gifts. Sollux gifts you some pretty cool shit on Steam, Nepeta gives you handmade cat meme stickers which you adore, Aradia gives you a vulture skull and Kanaya has made you a cool as fuck suit jacket. She made Rose perfectly fitted dresses and you would not be surprised if tomorrow when it’s Roxy’s birthday she too is gifted with clothes that are badass and fit.

You’ve not even touched your lunch when a man in a black suit walks up to your group and stops right near you.

“David Strider, Rose Lalonde, you need to come with me.” the man says seriously.

There is a shared pause between your entire group until you all stand up and suddenly you are all
bristling with weapons. Except for you because your dumbass deal with Dirk still stands.

“You wanna try that again?” Karkat snarls, sickle in hand.

Your phone pings in your pocket and orange runs across your shades.

[autonomousTerminal opened memo ‘Don’t shoot the messenger or indeed the driver’]

AT: Holy crap don’t attack that guy.

AT: Boy is he unreasonably childcatchery.

TG: who the hell is he?

AT: I was trying to send someone to pick you up to take you somewhere for your birthday, apparently he’s an idiot.

TT: You couldn’t have told us in advance?

AT: ...Surprise?

CG: OH MY GOD YOU ARE TERRIBLE AT THIS.

TA: you're lucky we diidn't off thii2 clown.

TG: as much as it pains me to agree with sol that was a poor play.

TG: also does dirk know ur doin this hal bby?

AT: Well as you know only Dirk can excuse Dave and Rose from school. Or at least someone who can impersonate him on the phone.

You reach out and shove Karkat’s sickle down.

“Sorry about that.” you apologise and everyone else more or less lowers their weapons and the semi sinister driver looks a fraction less terrified.

“You know what? I’m all for getting out of here. Come on, Dave.” Rose says, marching through your friends, grabbing you by the hand and dragging you down the grassy hill towards the car that you presume the man came from.

“Rose!” you say in alarm.

“Try not to get murdered!” Sollux calls from behind you with a laugh, immediately followed by an ‘ow!’.

“Come on, birthday fun courtesy of Hal. In.” She says and shoves you inside the car and climbs in after you.

The driver leans around to talk to you but Rose presses a button and a pane of glass slides up between you two and him, cutting him off. Well, then. Okay. The driver pulls away and you click your seatbelt on.

You look across the car to Rose, she’s looking out of the window with a frown. Glancing at the front of the car shows that a glass divider is still up so the driver probably can’t hear you. You lean over and nudge her hand with your fingers.
“Hey Rose, are you okay?” you ask and Rose slides down in her seat a little.

“You know, there’s something about being in a vehicle that makes one contemplative. Perhaps it’s that it’s so liminal, neither here nor there that focuses the mind and opens the heart to others.” Rose says sadly.

“Okay, I’m not getting into that. Wanna tell me what’s wrong?” you ask her and Rose smiles sadly and looks at you.

“It’s Kanaya.” Rose says simply and laces her fingers with yours.

“What about her?” you ask.

“She’s keeping something from me, something big and important. At first, I thought it fair to allow her to have her secrets, we were still newly matched after all. But when I invite her to share she insists there is nothing that she is hiding from me. And she talks to Jade, did you know that?” Rose tells you.

“I didn’t know that they knew each other. Did you introduce her or-” you begin to ask but Rose shakes her head.

“I didn’t introduce them. I even asked Jade if she knew any trolls and she lied to me and said no. They’re hiding something from me and whenever I see her and Aradia talking together away from the group they suddenly drop their conversation whenever I get close!” Rose says with sharp anger in her tones.

“Aradia’s got this secret project going on with Sollux and even he knows that she’s not telling him everything and she won’t tell me everything either. I could buy Aradia being into some secret archaeology stuff with Jade but Kanaya doesn’t seem like the type for any of that. Why are all these girls so goddamn mysterious?” you say exasperatedly.

“It makes me wish I was straight, because for all the idiocy you and Karkat have I know that the only thing you actively hide from him is how you feel. With Kanaya I could just- ugh!” Rose yells and smacks her fist angrily into the door.

You stare at her because holy shit that was a lot to just confess at once.

“I didn’t know it was that bad.” you whisper and Rose sniffs, nodding slightly.

“I hate being ignored like this, lied to like a child and kept in the dark. I can’t stand it.” Rose says in a tiny voice.

You think of all of the things that you hate. You hate quiet anger, unpredictability, physical confrontation, not knowing what people are thinking. All Bro things. Rose hates being belittled and uncertain of the feelings of other people, also apparently she hates being lied to. All things that your Mom does.

“Something funny?” Rose asks, squinting at you. You guess that some of your thoughts must have slipped onto your face.

“That sounds like Mom, Freud was right, huh? Parents fuck you up.” you tell her and Rose sighs.

“Isn’t that just the truth? I just don’t know what to do, Dave. I can’t stand it like this, but she’s my soulmate.” Rose says hopelessly.
You consider this and watch as the car turns a corner. It reminds you somewhat of your first road trip with Dirk to meet Rose in the first place.

“I could talk to Karkat for you, he’s her moirail and looking out for her relationships is kind of his job. She’d be heartbroken to lose you so Karkat would want her to keep you. It might be some dumb culture shit or something totally harmless.” you suggest.

“And if she’s lying to him too?” Rose presses.

“Then she’s in big trouble with him, the kind that bursts eardrums.” you joke but only get the faintest quirk of amusement out of your twin’s lips.

“You’re worried you can’t fix this.” you guess, and Rose nods silently. The car rumbles on through the streets, you don’t know if you’re nearing your destination soon or not.

“Being someone’s soulmate doesn’t make something work by magic.” Rose points out.

You think of Dirk and Jake who are still stuck in a stalemate, of Roxy and Jane who are still tense and brittle, of Mom and Bro who split long before he died. Your mark points you to the person perfect for you and urges you not to fuck it up, it’s not a promise that you won’t or can’t.

What advice can you give her when you can’t even start things with Karkat? How are you qualified to tell her what to do?

You look at Rose, she’s plainly miserable. You have to help.

“Tell her what you know and how shitty it makes you feel, tell her why it makes you feel like crap. Tell her it’s making you doubt this. Kanaya seems like a good person to me and she travelled across space to find you, she should want to keep you.” you say gently. Rose scowls.

“I shouldn’t have to ask her not to hide things and lie to me.” Rose says tartly.

“Yeah, well, if shit worked like it should the world would be a much better place. Being petty is just going to make you feel worse about it. Didn’t you tell me that I couldn't bitch about Karkat stuff if I wasn’t doing something to fix it? Same rule.” you argue.

“You’re right, I know you are. Is this how you feel every time you talk to me?” Rose asks and you shove her in the shoulder.

“You are the worst. I swear my shit is so flipped that I’m going to have to wind down this goddamn window and backflip out of this car.” you threaten.

“I only found out that Jade was involved last night. Before then I had just assumed it was troll stuff. Things she was perhaps afraid to share with me just yet, or cultural things. But to be talking to my friend behind my back about something secret and to have Jade lie about it too…” Rose hisses angrily.

“Could it be birthday stuff?” you ask as the idea occurs to you.

“I had thought that could be the case, but no. Kanaya’s thoughtful gift of handmade dresses is clearly all her own handiwork and not the kind of thing that Jade could have offered her any help with.” Rose says, shaking her head.

“How did you even find out that she knows Jade if she denies it?” you ask.
“I was over her house last night, just to see her and talk to her about our history project. I walked close to her computer and she closed the window that she had left open, but before she could close the client I caught Jade’s handle on there.” Rose explains.

You look out of the window thoughtfully and see a large husky walking past. You scramble your phone out and take a picture of it immediately, time to play one of your favourite games with Jade.

“I’m going to find out what’s happening.” you tell Rose and open a chat with Jade.

[turntechGodhead began pestering gardenGnostic]
[turntechGodhead attached image 004723.jpg]

TG: get a load of that dog
GG: get a load of that dog!!!
TG: GET A LOAD OF THAT DOG!
GG: THAT DOG!!! :D

GG: ahaahahaha leaving aside that excellent dog, happy birthday dave! i just woke up but i thought i should say it.

TG: aw thanks jade
GG: i must wish rose a happy birthday too when she gets online!

Rose is leaning against your side reading your words and you’re pretty sure that she was online when you opened up pesterchum to message Jade.

“I might have blocked her.” Rose murmurs and slides a little lower in the chair.

TG: i will tell her later for you
GG: thanks! how is the birthday going?

You channel your most sneaky of machinations, this isn’t usually your style but for now it’ll have to do.

TG: pretty sweet actually i got lots of cool shit and its nice chilling with my whole family for my birthday for the first time in forever
TG: well except for mom but im sure she will show up sooner or later right?
GG: yeah!
TG: i even got a present from roses soulmate kanaya
GG: oh really? what did you get? :O
TG: a cool suit jacket which i will totally take a picture of to show you later
GG: i look forward to it! my wardrobifier does not have nearly that much variety.
TG: hey have you ever spoken to kanaya? i think you two would get on shes a really chill, cool and classy girl.
GG: sounds like you like her too!
TG: i do and hey rose has good taste in people after all she introduced me to you right?
TG: but yeah you should talk to her or have you already?
GG: oh no i havent
GG: i havent ever spoken to a troll as far as i know
Okay so she just straight up lied to you too then.
“You see?!” Rose snaps angrily.
TG: you really havent even though theyve known they were soulmates since like september?
GG: nope!
“What is she hiding from us?” Rose asks despairingly. You really can’t think of anything at all.
TG: well thats super weird because rose says she caught the two of you talking before and saw your name on kanayas chumroll
GG: we arent talking and how would we even know each other without rose or you introducing us?
GG: it could have been a similar chumhandle
Your fingers hesitate over your screen as you turn your suspicions about Aradia’s project over in your head, about the shit she’s keeping from her own moirail, about how she’s talking to Kanaya but not letting Rose overhear.
TG: yeah youre probably right
GG: yeah
TG: i mean the only other person you both know is aradia and it couldnt be her right?
GG: exactly
GG: wait i mean who?
“They’re all in on it, you were right!” Rose gasps. You hit block on Jade’s name and move on.
[turntechGodhead began pestering twinArmageddons]
TG: sol remember i said i would help you work out what the hell aradia is doing and all that shit?
TG: well i have another mystery that is related and to do it i need you to give hal access to your network at home
TG: please sollux? i will majorly owe you one.
TG: and the alternative is i ask hal to just straight up hack your network and you know the mess that makes.
TA: 2o thii2 ii2 what, your way or the hard way? are you both good and bad cop iiin thii2 2iitua2iion?
TG: pretty much
TG: please bro i am for real begging you here this is driving me crazy
TA: fiine, fiine, ii will giive hiim temp permii22iion2 and ii iif ii fiind he ha2 broken 2hiit ii wiill per2onally make your liife hell.
“What are you doing?” Rose asks, looking at your screen.
“If Aradia is talking to Jade as well then there will absolutely be records on her husktop, right? So if Hal can get in there and check then we’ll know for sure.” you explain.
TA: okay ii ju2t 2ent them two hiim but for the record ii hate thii2
[autonomousTerminal joined the chat]
AT: Boy am I glad that I can hear Rose and Dave talking and have any idea what’s going on because if this were just text I would be so lost.
TA: ii al2o hate that you can ju2t drop iin on my conver2atiion2 wiith dv liike that. doe2 your maker know you 2py liike thii2?
AT: Considering as it’s one of my primary functions, yeah, he does. Also don’t call Dirk that, he doesn’t need to get ideas above his station.
TA: and what ii2 hii2 2tatiion?
AT: Underneath my boot.
TA: thii2 ii2 the mo2t narccii2tiic piitch cru2h ii’ve ever 2een. ii’ll hand over the permii22iion2 iif you never talk about ii it again.
TG: what? gross
TG: can you find what im looking for hal?
AT: Well you know how bad I am at saying no to you.
“Except for that one time he did and you didn’t talk to him for ages.” Rose points out quietly.
AT: Well that was so much easier with the keys to the castle but to entertain myself I got into Kanaya’s network to get images too.
[autonomousTerminal uploaded file ‘AradiaTrollian’]
[autonomousTerminal uploaded file ‘KanayaTrollian’]
AT: Feel free to lock me out again, unless you want anything else Dave?
You click the images and download them. It’s a shot of both girl’s chumrolls, or Trollslums given their chat client of choice. Jade is on both of them.
TA: what wa2 the poi2nt of thii2 again?
TG: kanaya has denied knowing our friend jade or gardengnostic
TG: jade denies knowing them

TG: rose has caught them talking before and kanaya waved it off

TG: and kanaya apparently is talking to aradia a lot but when rose gets in earshot they drop the subject

TA: you think my moiirail ii2 secretly colluding with kn and one of your human friiend2?

TG: i also think that jade is nepetas soulmate and nepeta has that same mark that rose has

TA: thii2 ii2 a biit two con2piracy theory for me.

TG: so ask aradia if she knows jade

TA: fiine! ii will!

[twinArmageddons has left the chat]

AT: That was interesting. Right, you two are getting out of the car in a minute. I have an actual non-hacking based surprise for you.

It turns out that Hal’s surprise was bouncing you around all kinds of fancy places in the city. Your lunch is at some strange cat cafe where you get food but also there are cats everywhere. The idea seems a little weird to you but it melts away all of Rose’s unhappiness about Kanaya and Jade. You eat a sandwich and watch Rose rub the tummies of two cats simultaneously with a look of unfettered glee on her face. You get far too many photos.

When Rose is getting a cat to chase a string you get a message back from Sollux.

[twinArmageddons began pestering turntechGodhead]

TA: fuck.

TA: 2he actually liied two me

TG: girls are crazy yo

TG: i need to chill with rose and be sure shes cool but this mystery is getting cracked

TA: yeah, have fun wiith your moiirail. you know, the one who doe2n't liie, unliike miine.

TG: im sorry man

TA: don't worry about iit. maybe there'2 a rea2on for all thii2 and everythiing ii2n't ju2t terriible forever.

TG: shit man i hope so

After that Hal takes you both to a museum that has both a wildlife photography exhibit and a butterfly house which gives you plenty of opportunities to try out your new film camera and play with your digital one. You snag a few great pictures of Rose with a purple butterfly in her hair and one with a look of wonder on her face as one flits past her nose.

Hal talks to you both, tells you all sorts of things about what you see and you know that he’s been planning this for a while. The problem for him is that he can’t physically be there with you, but he
can see through your shades. Maybe electronically riding around from your viewpoint makes him feel more like he’s there. You hope it does.

Eventually, the day comes to an end and another car comes to pick you up and drop you near your home. Hal’s surprise gift wasn’t exactly Dirk approved so he has to have you home on time. You and Rose casually stroll into the house like you didn’t just ditch half of the school day.

Dirk’s downstairs in the kitchen, fucking about with something in the freezer but he jerks up to standing when he hears you both come in.

“Hey, how was school?” Dirk asks, his voice brittle and bright. Did you just catch him doing something? Maybe he broke something.

“Enlightening.” Rose says calmly and Dirk laughs awkwardly and tries to shut the freezer and fails.

“So, uh, your Mom can’t come to dinner tonight. So we’ll just go without her, it’ll be fine.” Dirk says quickly, and your level of suspicion rises.

Dirk finally slams the freezer shut just as you get around the counter and into the kitchen proper.

“Did you two walk or something?” Dirk asks, glancing at you through the corner of his shades. He’s not looking at you head on.

“Actually we ditched school.” you tell him, and Dirk’s head snaps around to look at you properly.

“What?!” he gasps and yeah, you can see what he was hiding now. His left cheek has a bright red thin fingered hand print across it.

You suck in a breath through clenched teeth and your sylladex beeps to tell you that the weapon you tried to summon isn’t there right now.

“Mom hit you.” you state.

“Oh my God, Dirk… are you okay?” Rose gasps as she rushes over to you both.

“I’m- I’m fine Dave, really. I broke into her lab because she wouldn’t let me in and I startled her and got into a fight with her, it was my own dumb fault. It didn’t even hurt that bad, it’s just fresh is all.” Dirk tries to reassure you, but you can’t quite hear him over the pounding of your pulse in your veins.

It’s happening again.

Of fucking course it is, she was his soulmate after all. Of course it was going to happen again.

You back away from Dirk and sprint up to your room, he’s calling after you but you can’t hear him. Bedroom. Sword. You squeeze your eyes shut and see the mark on Dirk’s face. You open them to orange text.

[autonomousTerminal began pestering turntechGodhead]

AT: Dave, you’re fine. She’s not going after you.

AT: It was just a spat.

AT: Try to breathe, okay?
TG: SHE HIT HIM!

AT: Okay, yes, she did and that’s bad but it’s going to be fine.

You shut the window and see another from Karkat.

[carcinoGeneticist began pestering turntechGodhead]

CG: DAVE ARE YOU OK? YOU DITCHED SCHOOL, AND NOW I’VE JUST GOT A BAD FEELING.

CG: IT’S PROBABLY NOTHING AND I’M MAKING AN ASS OF MYSELF BUT WHAT THE FUCK ELSE IS NEW?

TG: im going to fix it

CG: WHAT? FIX WHAT?

CG: DAVE?

CG: DON’T SAY OMINOUS SHIT LIKE THAT AND NOT FOLLOW IT UP!

You close that window and mute all of pesterchum so it can’t keep popping up on your shades. You head back down the stairs and catch the faint notes of Rose’s voice.

“You should put ice on that.” Rose suggests.

“Thanks Rose, I have more than enough experience with dealing with bruises already. I was icing it before anyway, it’ll be fine. It probably won’t even mark, I don’t bruise easy.” Dirk says, and you bubble with hate. You hate that he knows that stuff.

You vault the bannister and land in the hallway which leads to the entrance to Mother’s lab. You storm over to the door, sword in hand. Dirk has already seen you, but you don’t care.

“Dave what are you doing?” Dirk calls out.

You swing your sword and the door to the lab explodes in several chunks, the fancy lock still in place. You rush down the stairs and march over glowing green boxes set in the floor.

“Dave, get back here!” Dirk shouts, and you ignore him.

She hit him.

It takes barely any time to find your mother, hunched over a keyboard and peering at a screen. She types something, deletes it, curses and types again.

“Go away.” she says distractedly and erases whatever she typed.

Fucking fine then. You swing your sword and separate the seat of her chair from the supports and drop her onto the floor in an undignified heap. You have her attention. Her face is tired and angry.

“You hit Dirk.” you accuse, pointing your sword at her. Out of the corner of your eye you can see Dirk and Rose lingering there.

“He broke in here and attacked me, obviously you have the same level of manners. Get OUT of my lab.” she snarls at you, getting to her feet.
“Fuck your lab and fuck you. He’s a teenager, you were supposed to be his mom too!” you argue.

“You don’t understand, just leave.” She says firmly.

“Don’t even try to… I don’t care what you have to say. You’re just as bad as Bro and if you ever touch any of us again you’ll end up just like he did. And when we can move out of here you’re never seeing any of us again.” you snap at her pointing your sword in her face. She tries to bat it aside but you’re not going to let her.

“Dave, it’s fine. Let’s just go to dinner, come on.” Dirk says softly from behind you but you keep your sword trained on your mother.

“Don’t point that thing in my face.” your mother says flatly but you don’t lower your sword at all. You don’t listen to Dirk and back off either.

Your mom needs to learn that she can’t fuck with any of you and get away with it, or else this will keep happening. No absconding allowed.

“Put that sword down now, Dave.” she snaps and you shake your head.

You don’t see her move, she’s there and then her arm is away from you and your wrists protest at the pain of impact. Her hand is flat like she’s just backhanded you, but she didn’t. You can hear something that sounds like a ruler twanged off of a tabletop and you realise in horror that half of your sword is missing and a glance tells you that the other half is embedded into the wall above her computer screen. She just backhanded solid metal so hard it broke.

She was Bro’s soulmate. Of course she was.

“Get out of my lab.” she orders you again and Dirk grabs you by the back of your shirt and hauls you away.

You’re in the main hallway when he stops, he was carrying Rose too. He sets you down on the ground and checks you over like he’s done thousands of times before. He checks that there are no metal shards in your skin from your sword breaking.

“I’ve never seen her like that- I’ve never… she doesn’t care about us, that’s how it’s supposed to be. Not… not whatever that was.” Rose babbles in panic. You forget she’s new to this part. She’s on the edge of tears and Dirk has to drop his focus on you to calm her down.

Hal is apologising for not warning you of her attack, orange text begging for forgiveness. He didn’t have enough data on her to do it, but he’s going to get it and keep you safe. He tells you he’ll always keep you safe. You accept his words blindly.

Dirk takes you all up to his room and you mentally plot escape routes as Rose flounders in fear. Where are Hal’s cameras, what can he see and what can’t he see? You need your other sword. You leave Dirk’s room and go to your own, you change your broken sword for a good one. You put important things in your sylladex, managing the names so it all fits.

You feel someone at the door and you whirl around with your sword in hand but it’s just Roxy. You lower your sword.

“Dave? What’s going on? What happened downstairs?” Roxy asks you.

“We got it.” you assure her and grab a few changes of clothes, you shove them in a grocery bag you found on the floor and add a pair of shoes. You don’t need a toothbrush you can steal one of them.
“Dave? What’s wrong?” Roxy asks.

You check the lock on your window and open it.

“Dirk! What’s wrong with Dave?” she shouts.

“Hey, Dave.” Dirk says softly, his hand sliding over the back of your neck. You relax slightly.

“Look at me.” Dirk tells you and you do. He takes your bag and puts it on the bed for now. Roxy is saying something but you can’t focus on it.

“Yeah, he’s breathing too fast. It’s a little like a panic attack. It’s more like… safe mode on a computer. All the higher stuff has shut off and this is like emergency autopilot. He’s grabbed everything we need to escape. It’s gonna be ok Dave, follow me.” Dirk says, and you let him steer you.

You end up on his bed next to Rose who feels really far away, everything feels far away. Dirk settles down by you and fits you against his side, Rose is talking about your mother and what she did. She hit Dirk.

Dirk.

You look up and touch Dirk’s face but he shushes you and gently pushes your hand away.

“It’s ok, it’ll pass and he’ll just fall asleep.” Dirk says so you shut your eyes.

“His heart rate is starting to come down finally.” Hal agrees.

“We don’t actually need to leave, do we? We can just avoid her, right?” Roxy asks, her voice filtering down to you.

“I’ll work on it, I’ve got old plans I can just pick back up.” Dirk says with a shrug that jostles your head.

You wake up sometime later in a pile of people on Dirk’s bed. It’s dark outside and Dirk watches you carefully as you sit up.

“Hey.” he says, his voice sleep soft.

“Mom hit you.” you state as your brain catches up.

“I’m fine.” he tells you.

“She broke my sword.” you continue.

“She did.” he agrees.

You squeeze your eyes shut, you know how fast she can move now and it’s faster than you. If you had to fight her you’d lose, you would absolutely lose.

“I don’t think she’ll hurt you, just evade and avoid her and you’ll be fine. I’ll work on the rest.” Dirk assures you and reaches up to pet your hair. You lay down at his side again, between him and Rose who is against the wall. She murmurs something in her sleep.

“Are we leaving?” you ask quietly.
“We can. I’ll have to drop out of school and get a job that can support us all so we can rent a place and it’s got to be close enough for you to stay in school. You and Rose are already my kids legally speaking and as of... an hour ago Roxy is a legal adult.” Dirk says and wraps an arm around you. You can see Roxy’s arm draped around his middle from where she is sleeping next to him.

“But you love college, you’re getting to do robot stuff, that’s how Hal’s going to get his body.” you protest and Dirk shakes his head.

“You’re more important.” Dirk insists and you ache to tell him that you’re not.

“What if we stay and all just avoid her? Then you could stay in school.” you suggest. You don’t want to derail Dirk’s life more than you already had. You watch as he winces to look at you.

“This roughed you up pretty bad up here though, I’m not willing to put you through that again.” Dirk says regretfully and he brushes some hair out of your face.

“I’ve had worse.” you tell him. He’s not wearing his shades right now so you get to see the way he cringes at your words.

“If all I have to do is avoid her then I can handle it, don’t ruin your life for me. Please?” you beg and Dirk tucks you under his chin and sighs.

You can’t take Dirk’s future from him, or Hal’s chance at a body. You can avoid that woman, you can. As far as you care you have no parents except for Dirk, he’s the only one you’ve ever needed.
> Karkat: Get Christmas Miracle

Chapter Notes

AAAA I got some awesome art again, I'm so goddamn excited, have a look. https://notsostellar.tumblr.com/post/163723094787/okay-honestly-i-didnt-know-if-i-shouldve-drawn

Also, I know it's not been long since the last chapter but I've had part of this one written for ages and I've been really excited to get to it. (Plus my mental health is all kinds of shitty lately and writing to distract myself is basically how I function right now). I will get to replying to all of your reviews, I promise.

There's mentions of what went down in the last chapter in this one, so heads up for that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“All I’m saying is that it’s not a balanced ship.” Nepeta protests to your mom as you walk through the door.

“But you can blend quadrant and pan quadrant romance as long as everyone is okay with that, you can’t discount it fur that.” your mom argues.

You walk past this shipping debate which was interesting ten minutes ago and is now boring. You grab a mug from the draining board and fill it with water. You’re gonna have a drink and then do homework and try not to harass Dave about his consensual birthday abduction. You’re also not going to be petty and feel raw about the fact that you barely got to see him on his birthday at all.

You fail at not being bitter about this.

Since you’re already bitter you stew about that girl all over again. Giving Dave gifts and flirting with him like that, and the obtuse asshole didn’t even realise she was into him. You try to comfort yourself with the notion that him not noticing it very likely was a sign that he was so uninterested that it didn’t occur to him. All the same it pisses you off, and that’s not even covering the racist shit she said to you or the homophobic shit she said to Rose.

Now you’re angry all over again.

At least Dave had shut her down and hard. You had got a glance over your shoulder at her outraged face as Dave walked away with you instead of her. Honestly, though, what kind of idiot tries to seduce someone and then insults their moirail? Especially when that moirail is the person’s twin.

You’re just about done with your drink when pain lances up your arm, burning bright up the sword on your skin. The mug in your hand clatters to the floor and smashes into bits. Fear claws its way up your spine and tightens sharp fingers around your throat, the room is closing in on you and you can’t breathe.

“Karkat, are you ok? What happened?” you mom asks worriedly.

You force the fear down and recognise that it is not your own, you can function.
“I’m fine, I need to go.” you choke out and dash out of the room and up the stairs. Your arm still aches like it’s been smacked hard against something, a sharp and tingling kind of pain. You burst into your room and shove the door shut behind you as you lean on it.

Why is this happening? Is Dave having some kind of panic attack? Before it’s been nightmares but Dave can’t be sleeping at this time of day so what is-

The shield from Dirk and Hal on your arm seem to hum with a layer of protectiveness that feels like a second skin, but the feeling isn’t totally comfortable to you. You need to message him and find out what’s going on. You sit down at your computer and power it on, you open up trollian and start to type.

CG: DAVE ARE YOU OK? YOU DITCHED SCHOOL, AND NOW I’VE JUST GOT A BAD FEELING.

CG: IT’S PROBABLY NOTHING AND I’M MAKING AN ASS OF MYSELF BUT WHAT THE FUCK ELSE IS NEW?

You bite your lip anxiously, your own worry only enhanced by Dave’s fear. If he is having some kind of episode then he may well not message you back. If he doesn’t then what do you do? You can’t just keep showing up there like a deranged stalker.

Your trollian pings with a message from him.

TG: im going to fix it

CG: WHAT? FIX WHAT?

CG: DAVE?

He’s not replying and that is by far the most unsettling thing he has ever said to you. This needs some goddamn context and now!

CG: DON’T SAY OMNIous SHIT LIKE THAT AND NOT FOLLOW IT UP!

CG: WHAT THE FUCK DOES THAT MEAN?

CG: DAVE?

He’s not answering you. Fuck… ugh, you need to ask someone else.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling autonomousTerminal]

CG: HAL, DAVE ISN’T TALKING TO ME AND I’M WORRIED SOMETHING IS WRONG.

CG: CAN YOU AT LEAST TELL ME IF HE’S OK OR NOT?

CG: DON’T IGNORE ME ASSHOLE I KNOW HOW MUCH YOU CAN MULTITASK!

AT: Calm your tits! I’m busy over here!

CG: IS DAVE OK OR NOT?!

AT: He’s physically fine, he’s just in a fight with someone is all.

You look at your arm. Dave is afraid, and this doesn’t flare up when he bickers with you or when he
and Rose piss each other off. Anger doesn’t ping this mark, fear does. And that shield seemed to show up in the past when Bro was alive and you know Dirk used to get between Bro and Dave to protect him, hence why it’s a shield and it gives off that aura of protection. So he can’t be frightened of Dirk or Hal, it’s not Rose either and you doubt Roxy too.

CG: HE’S FIGHTING WITH HIS MOTHER?

AT: Did he tell you that?

CG: PROCESS OF ELIMINATION.

AT: Karkat, I get that you’re worried but let me handle this. It’s my literal job.

CG: I KNOW, OK? I’M NOT SAYING THAT YOU CAN’T LOOK OUT FOR DAVE I JUST WANT TO KNOW IF THERE IS AN ACTUAL THING THAT HE NEEDS LOOKING OUT FROM.

CG: FOR

CG: WHATEVER.

AT: I’ve got this Karkat.

You push away from your desk and drop onto your bed. You curl your arm against your chest and wish and pray that this thing goes both ways. You shove the fear aside and think about Dave, about how he makes you feel. You remember the thing that might have been a date, cuddled up at his side in the movies whispering to each other and then teaching him about Alternian food. You remember that he asked you to do it again. You focus on how any approval from him makes your bloodpusher sing.

The edge of the fear comes off, leaving just a low after ache. You press your face into your pillow and open your log with Dave again and type once more.

CG: DAVE?

CG: MESSAGE ME BACK, OKAY? I’M GOING CRAZY OVER HERE.

He does not, in fact, message you back at all. You eat dinner in anxious silence and you go to bed with worry pumping in your veins. The morning shows you no new messages and your worry has turned to anger. You spy Dirk’s car in the parking lot and you march angrily towards it with Kanaya following behind you, trying to calm you down as best as she can. But you cannot be calmed, you are a tornado of spurned feelings.

“HEY!” you shout as you march up to their car, only to stop dead.

Dave jumps at your voice, and though he’s trying to be stoic it’s obvious how fast he’s breathing. The next most obvious thing is that he somehow has a sword in his hand at school which you know he’s not allowed to do. It vanishes right away, but you know you saw it. The next thing of note is all four StriLondes are here and they’re all looking right at you.

“Sorry, but what the hell Dave? You gave me a heart attack!” you accuse, and Dave shakes his head.

“Sorry, forgot to message you back or whatever. I was busy being cool, deal with it.” he says flatly and gives you a poker faced look. It’s one that you haven’t seen for some time. His skin is pale and the way that he’s holding himself looks forced casual.
“Are- what’s wrong? You’re being weird.” you say uncertainly and glance at Rose and Roxy, both of them look on edge and neither look like they slept much. Roxy’s hair is a mess as well.

“You all look out of sorts.” Kanaya notes worriedly.

“Go away Kanaya, I’m not in the mood to deal with you.” Rose says coldly and Kanaya’s high chirp of distress tugs at your heart.

Something has happened here, but what? Hal said that there was a fight with their mother but you know nothing more. They all look wrung out, even Dirk who…

“Is that a bruise?” you ask, pointing at Dirk’s cheekbone. The other three StriLondes all visibly tense up but Dave hides it a little better.

Oh God.

Oh no.

Dave used to be afraid of Bro, his father who hurt him and his brother. Dave has nightmares of the man that hurt enough to wake you up. Hal tells you that Dave is fighting with his mother and your sword mark hurts all over again, the part that’s dedicated to Dirk flares up and here he is with a bruise on his face. This was no nightmare.

“Fuck… both parents?” you whisper.

“How did you manage to get such a raw cut of the asshole deck?” you ask in horror.

You’re not sure if that was a laugh or a sob from Dave, but it trails into a kind of laugh or cry sort of laugh afterwards.

“I… I don’t think that I am following.” Kanaya says uneasily and you’re wary of explaining because you are in public here.

“It’s none of your business Kanaya, just go.” Rose tells her sharply.

“Rose, please be reasonable about this. We’ve talked-” Kanaya pleads and you look between them with bewilderment, what’s going on here?

“You’ve talked and, frankly, unless you start saying something that’s actually true I don’t want to hear any of it. Now, I’ve already said that I’m not in the mood to deal with you so go away.” Rose hisses at her, her purple eyes narrow with fury.

“Very well.” your moirail says softly and walks away. You are more than a little tempted to follow her but the bruise on Dirk’s face keeps you where you are.

“Is this the first time?” you ask stiffly, eyeing the bruise on Dirk and looking for any other marks. Dirk squares his jaw and doesn’t answer you. You look at Dave and he says nothing, he’s just looking at the ground and a big part of him seems broken.

“She’s never… not before.” Roxy says in a weak voice.

“You need to talk to Signless.” you insist.

“No!” Dave and Dirk both answer in alarmed unison.

You smack your hand into your forehead and try to remain calm. You know full well that Dave is
not the only person who still has issues from Bro.

“You and Roxy are adults now, Dirk. Uh, happy birthday by the way it seems real shitty so far, I’m sorry. But the point is you’re both adults and Rose and Dave are legally your kids, Dirk. No one can take them from you.” you insist.

“But if we leave Mom’s house then Dirk will have to drop out of school.” Dave protests.

“And it’s likely that our mother would win a custody battle as she’s a closer relative to us than Dirk is.” Rose adds.

“Well it’s not like you can run with the same solution as last time!” you hiss and Rose and Roxy flinch.

“Look, I already told you before that if I had known you guys before Bro died then I would have done anything I could to help.” you tell him.

“Karkat…” Dave says softly and the asshole has the gall to look surprised, as if you would have just stood by and let it happen.

“But I’m here now, so let me help, goddamnit. Talk to Signless, don’t go through this bullshit all on your own again.” you plead with him.

Dirk shakes his head and tries to talk but nothing comes out, the others are all looking at him and finally he sighs and his shoulders slump.

“Fine.” he agrees in a weak voice.

“Thank you.” you say and pull your phone out. The bell is going for class but you ignore it and dial your Dad’s phone number. It rings three times before he picks up.

“Karkat? Shouldn’t you be in class? What’s wrong?” Signless asks. The four StriLondes are all looking at you.

“I need you to come home, it’s an emergency.” you tell him, and there is a beat of silence.

“You’re at school now though?” he asks.

“In the parking lot, but meet me at home. Seriously, it’s an emergency.” you repeat.

“Okay, I’ll be there as soon as I can. I love you.” he says.

“You too, see you there.” you say and hang up.

“My house.” you order and pull on the handle to Dirk’s car door until Dirk sighs and presses the button to unlock it. You sit in the middle seat at the back, not that Dirk needs you to give directions. Rose and Dave sit on either side of you and Dirk and Roxy are at the front with Dirk driving.

You arrive at your house before Signless and so you herd the four of them into your large living room and get them all sat down. You shoot a quick message to Kanaya and a few of your siblings that you’re not going to be at school for at least a little while and not to worry about you, you say that the same goes for Dave, Rose and Roxy. You don’t answer any questions as to why.

“This is a bad idea.” Dirk mutters and tries to get up but Roxy keeps him in the chair with a hand on his shirt.
“We should at least hear what he has to say, because I’ve no idea what we’re doing.” Roxy points out.

“Listen to the smart one, Dirk.” you tell him and Dirk focuses his ire on you. You can deal with that as long as he’s not trying to leave.

To your father’s credit he only arrives about five minutes after you, slamming the front door shut behind him and making Dave flinch on the sofa.

“Karkat?” He shouts.

“In here!” you yell back.

“What’s the emergency?” Signless asks as he strides into the room, his coat fluttering dramatically behind him in the way you know his Signless garb does.

“Dirk’s face.” you tell him, and he looks ready to scold you until he sees what you saw.

Dirk won’t even look at anyone but the way he’s glancing away shows the red and blue bruise creeping over his cheekbone and behind his glasses, there’s weaker reddish hints along the rest of his cheek. It’s not enough to pick out a handprint but it’s the right size.

Your dad crosses the gap between them and kneels down on the floor in front of Dirk to look at him better.

“Can I touch?” he asks quietly.

“Go crazy, it’s not broken. I know what a broken cheekbone feels like, it’s just a bruise.” Dirk says bitterly. You hate that he knows that.

Signless reaches out and feels along the injury, carefully sliding Dirk’s glasses off to do so. You can see he’s got a blue circle under that eye too that escaped you before. Seemingly satisfied that there’s no further damage Signless pulls up a footstool before Dirk and sits down.

“How did this happen?” he asks. His voice is calm and lacking judgement.

“It’s nothing, it was my fault anyway.” Dirk mutters and pulls his feet up onto the sofa.

You’ve seen it a few times before, but you realise that Dirk isn’t much older than your elder siblings. He’s spent his whole life protecting Dave and looking after him but legal adult or not he’s just a kid too. You’ve heard Signless come home before and talk about kids who say these things after their parents attack them, or trolls who accept blame for the attacks of humans. ‘I should have known better’ ‘It’s my fault’ ‘It doesn’t matter’ It breaks your heart.

“Dirk, that’s not true.” Roxy insists.

Signless waits patiently, accepting Dirk’s silence and whatever time he needs.

“It’s nothing, it was my fault anyway.” Dirk mutters and pulls his feet up onto the sofa.

You’ve seen it a few times before, but you realise that Dirk isn’t much older than your elder siblings. He’s spent his whole life protecting Dave and looking after him but legal adult or not he’s just a kid too. You’ve heard Signless come home before and talk about kids who say these things after their parents attack them, or trolls who accept blame for the attacks of humans. ‘I should have known better’ ‘It’s my fault’ ‘It doesn’t matter’ It breaks your heart.

“Dirk, that’s not true.” Roxy insists.

Signless waits patiently, accepting Dirk’s silence and whatever time he needs.

“It was just… it was my fault, I argued with Roxanne, broke into her lab to do it, probably startled her.” Dirk excuses her. You sit down on the sofa next to Dave.

“That’s your mother, yes?” Signless asks, looking over at Roxy. She nods.

“I thought so, I was just checking the name. Why did you break into her lab, Dirk?” Signless questions and Dirk sighs.
“It was Dave and Rose’s birthday yesterday and Roxy’s today and she hadn’t even shown her face and she got them the most thoughtless, asshole presents and- I argued with her about it. That she should pay more attention and at least come out to dinner with us but she refused, said she had more important things to do. Went on about how important her research was and she needed to fix something. But I pushed it and wouldn’t let it go and then…” Dirk trails off.

“And then she hit you?” your dad asks in a gentle voice, even though you know this shit makes him furious.

“It was just a slap.” Dirk mumbles, looking at the floor.

“She shouldn’t hit you at all, it’s wrong. You didn’t deserve that, and it’s not your fault.” Signless insists.

“And it’s not like her slaps are lightweight Dirk.” Dave pipes up and fear claws inside your chest, did she attack Dave too?

“How do you mean, Dave?” Signless asks, zeroing in on Dave with the same obvious thought as you.

“We got home and I saw what she did so I… confronted her. Told her to stay the fuck away from us. I may have had a sword, just to protect myself.” Dave says hesitantly.

“I would protest at that but every child in my house is armed at all times except for the Captors and that’s only because their psionics are more than enough to fend off any attacker within reason. What happened when you confronted her?” Signless asks.

“Which you shouldn’t have done.” Dirk says sharply and you suspect that this is a lecture Dave has received already.

“I told her to never touch any of us again and she didn’t like me pointing a sword at her, told me to drop it which is not fucking likely to happen. Only an idiot drops their sword in a strife. And then she just- I didn’t even see her move that’s how fast she was which explains how she was fast enough to hit Dirk because Bro didn’t make slow kids. So she just slapped my sword so hard it broke.” Dave says and out of his sylladex drops a broken katana which he hands to your father.

Signless stares at it for a moment and then tests the metal himself and finds no give to it. You didn’t know that humans possessed the kind of strength to do that sort of thing. He sets the broken sword on the table and looks at Dirk again.

“What’s the situation of guardianship here?” he asks.

“Dave and Rose are mine but obviously their mother is their legal guardian too. Roxy is an adult as of today.” Dirk explains.

“Oh, I’m sorry this is likely not the birthday that you wanted.” Signless says.

“You think?” Roxy laughs weakly.

“Was Roxanne inebriated in any way?” Signless asks.

“Not as far as I could tell but she did have a drinking problem before.” Dirk replies.

“Okay, and now the important question. Do you think this was a one-time thing?” your father asks.
Rose and Roxy both make uncertain sounds but they seem to be leaning more towards yes than no. Dirk stays totally silent, Dave does not.

“No.” Dave says easily. Your dad looks at him.

“You feel unsafe with her?” he asks.

“No shit. Who hits a kid one time? Either you’re someone who does that or you’re not. Bro was, she is, they deserved each other.” Dave snarls, and it’s the first time you’ve seen actual anger on him today.

“And you, Dirk?” Signless prompts.

“I… I don’t know.” he admits quietly.

“As I see it, you have several options. You could find somewhere new to live and the four of you move there, I could perhaps find a forgiving landlord but there would be financial issues. The issue here is with gaining custody but if you report this incident it is a strong black mark against her, I know Redglare or her team would be only too happy to represent you. Especially given your family’s history and her personal interest in Dave’s case before. Custody can be wrested from Roxanne and I would be more than willing to attest to the character of both you, Dirk and Roxy. With that comes financial bonuses of child support. I can talk to Redglare about what we can do vis-a-vis financial support. It really depends on what the four of you want to do.” Signless says.

“I need to…” Dave says, abruptly standing up and his voice trailing into incomprehensible mumbling almost immediately so you have no idea what it is he has to do. He quickly walks out of the room and in the direction of the kitchen.

“I’ll just go after him.” you say slowly, and you hate the guilty twist to Dirk’s mouth. This isn’t his fault.

You scurry out of the room and allow your footsteps to be deliberately loud. Startling Dave is a bad idea at the best of times, doing it now would be dumb as hell.

“Dave?” you call out and peek around the corner to see him leaning on the kitchen counter with his head hung low.

“I’m fine.” he says, even though you didn’t ask.

“Bullshit, but that’s a pretty normal response if you ask me.” you assure him and come closer.

“I hate it, I wish you weren’t here. I hate you seeing this, it’s bad enough that you saw all that shit when Bro died. I don’t want you thinking of me like this, like something to- I don’t want your pity.” Dave says, sneering that last word out.

“It’s a shame that word means something so different to us. I don’t want to be nice to you because I feel like my life is better than yours, I sure as shit am not getting off on your life being a trash fire right now. I don’t look at this all condescendingly and have the urge to pat you on the head. I don’t feel that human definition of pity for you, Dave.” you tell him and Dave’s grip on the counter is white knuckle tight and he won’t look at you.

“I know you’re afraid of that.” you add softly.

“So why are you here?” Dave asks meanly and you shove down the hurt his words cause because you know he’s just lashing out in pain.
“Because you’re still my friend and even if you weren’t you don’t deserve to stay in this situation. It’s different this time, you have more options, Dirk is older, legal stuff is different and you have my dad and me to help before someone gets thrown off a roof.” you say.

You immediately regret saying that last part. Dave laughs bitterly, his hands tangling in his hair.

“We couldn’t anyway, and not just because the roof isn’t high enough. She was fast enough to get the drop and Dirk and he’s faster than me, always was. I didn’t even see her move when she- she might even be faster than Bro was. I have no idea how she fights or what to expect or how to take her on. If any of us really squared up against her I’m sure we’d lose. I mean, I lost to Bro all the damn time but at least I could see it coming and knew what to fix and how to get better. But here…” he trails off with a shake of his head.

“I don’t have a hope in hell of fighting her, and neither does Dirk.” Dave admits quietly.

“You don’t have to fight her. You shouldn’t have to. We’ll work something out, I know we will.” you tell him.

Dave sighs and lets go of his hair, just staring mournfully in the general direction of your toaster instead.

“Everything is fucked up.” he says.

“Rose and Kanaya are fighting, Roxy and Jane aren’t talking still, neither me or Rose are talking to Jade because she’s up to something with Kanaya and Aradia and lying about it. Aradia’s been keeping that from Sollux and I don’t even know if you know what Kanaya’s lying about, oh and Mom is apparently just like Bro. Everything is terrible forever.” he says firmly.

You squeeze your eyes shut and remind yourself that you’re not being unfaithful, you and Kanaya agreed from the moment you started your relationship that your human soulmates would likely occupy some blurry mishmash of quadrants and that you were both okay with the sharing that would involve. It’s ok. You carefully take Dave by the shoulders and turn him around to face you.

“Okay, in no particular order: Roxy and Jane are a mess but not one that you can solve, you’re allowed to feel bad about it but it’s out of your hands. As for Rose and Kanaya I don’t know what’s going on there, care to clue me in?” you ask.

“She’s hiding shit from Rose and lying about it, it’s all this secretive stuff with Jade and Aradia and they’re all lying about it too. Rose can’t stand being lied to. Do you even know what’s going on?” Dave asks.

“I don’t. But if it’s any consolation Aradia has always been shady and secretive and Sollux knows that. I’ve never talked to your Jade friend so I can’t comment on her and I don’t know what Kanaya could be into that’s worth risking Rose. But I’ll talk to her, okay? My relationship with her is also nothing you have to worry about.” you reassure him.

“Of course it is, I don’t want to see Rose get her heart broken or you- hah, or you get your diamond broken.” Dave insists.

“Well, I’ll deal with that. Leave it to me, and leave the Sollux and Aradia stuff to me too, they’re my siblings so I can handle it. I’ll tell you if I find anything out. Don’t worry about it.” you tell him.

“And my Mom?” Dave challenges you.

“I don’t know, this whole situation sucks bulge and I hate it. But the four of you can work out how
you want this to go and I know my family and friends will pull out all the stops to help you. I mean, you know how many trolls I know, everyone knows my dad. Everyone wants to help him if he needs a favour. More or less anyway. It’s different than before.” you say.

“I know but I just… I have to see her again, be around her.” Dave whispers.

You are so furious for him, that this could happen not once but twice. He was doing so well, healing so strong and now it’s all being taken from him again. It’s not fair, it’s not right!

Dave’s hand slides over your middle and for a split second he smiles, his hand still touching you.

“You’re doing it again, aren’t you? Making some sound I can’t hear.” he says and, yeah, you probably were growling a good deal there.

“Shit, I just realised that I never listened to that recording of you yesterday.” Dave says, and you feel your face heat up. He recorded that shit?

“It’s gotta be interesting because all the other trolls were staring at you, you even made Terezi look like a cornered cat. Hold on lemme just…” Dave trails off as he pulls that little recorder. You want to stop him, you really do but you’re also in favour of him thinking about something other than how fucked his life is. He clicks a few buttons and hits play. Dave’s voice starts up but considerably deeper than usual, your own recorded growl is even lower to your own ears and you can hear Kanaya on there too as she chirps at you.

“Is that… you?” Dave asks, cocking his head. He must be able to hear her too.

“That’s Kanaya, those are pale sounds.” you explain, more than a little mortified.

“So calm and crickety is pale, got it. But I can’t hear you and I could feel you doing something at this point. Hm.” Dave clicks a few more buttons and then the track starts to play again, Dave’s voice is comically high and he can obviously hear your growl now, even though it’s just quiet and rumbling at this point.

“Yeah, sorry like I was saying, it’s always cool getting to mash up new instruments. My buddy John plays the piano, my friend Jade plays bass and my sister plays the violin. It’s always good to get new stuff together.” Dave says obviously. You can hear yourself throwing every ‘back the hell off’ signal to her that you can but she clearly didn’t care or know. One of those.

“I’d really like that, we could get together some time and practice.” the girl says on the recording.

“She was flirting with me.” Dave says in dumb realisation.

“No shit.” you mutter.

“For sure!” Recorded Dave says brightly and you’re glad that he’s focusing on the lower noises and can’t hear the wounded chirp you make or how Kanaya chirrups soothingly at you, reassuring you that Dave can’t possibly mean his words like that.

“Maybe this Friday?” the girl asks and that was so blatantly an invitation for a date that your growl becomes a snarl on the recording. Humans have listened to the sounds of troll noises and you’ve heard all kinds of comparisons of your species threat noises to Earth animals. The debate seems split somewhere between lion and crocodile but the argument is pretty pointless in your eyes.

Ah, this is the part in the recording where Terezi shows up and drags Dave off to give him an entirely improvised present. The girl might be out of earshot but the angry growls of you and Kanaya
carry far further. Kanaya’s furious snarl is what startles Terezi, everyone knows that angry jadebloods are bad news. But Dave was totally oblivious.

He was oblivious about that girl, too. When Terezi questions him about it the moron seems genuinely convinced that she’s just interested in music and being friends. And ah, this is when he leapt back into your argument. There’s not much of interest to you here, just more growling and snarling until Dave takes you away and it simmers down to low discontent.

Dave listens to the whole thing with rapt fascination and again, you’d begrudge him it if it didn’t mean that he wasn’t being down on his entire life and everything in it. He stops the tape with a click and looks back up at you, his glossy black shades impermeable in this light. Is he going to point out your obvious jealousy? Call you on how you have no right to be territorial around him as he’s not in any kind of romantic relationship with you at all? Sure, after the girl was homophobic and racist you had every reason to snarl at her and gnash your teeth in rage but you started before that.

“I have never felt so cheated by my hearing.” Dave says finally. Okay, you can work with that.

“Well it is inferior to ours, like most human parts are to trolls.” you brag and Dave rolls his eyes, you know he does because you’ve worked out the slight way that his head rolls to follow it. Even without seeing his eyes you know.

Dave looks down and flicks some switches on and off on his recorder.

“I don’t see how any of this is going to get any better.” Dave says quietly and you know he’s not talking about the tape.

“Hey, it can’t get much worse, right?” you offer hopefully.

“You lack imagination. It can always be worse.” Dave grumbles and you squint at him.

“I think you might have reached through pessimism and into optimism a little there. But I don’t care, I’m going to make this better somehow, even if all I can do it let you embarrass me by recording me and then warping it for your stupid human ears.” you tell him firmly. Dave leans against your side and mumbles something that sounds like a thanks into your sweater.

Signless convinces Dirk to go to the police and goes along with him, they meet one of Redglare’s staff there who slaps down any bullshit the police might pull along the lines of ‘you’re a man who lost a fight to a woman’. They file a report, take photographic evidence and statements but Dirk declines to press charges. Your father informs you later with banked anger that even if Dirk did press charges and even if Dave’s mom was found guilty it’s likely nothing would happen. Regardless, reporting it puts her behaviour on record. It sends the police to her house to question her. It lets her know that she is watched.

Roxy hangs out with Mituna and Latula comes over to drop a present off, the three of them spend the evening playing video games. You, Dave and Rose spend the evening with Sollux. Mainly because Dave would clearly rather focus on the problem that is Aradia, Kanaya and his friend Jade than anything to do with his mother.

“So, she just lied to you as well?” Dave asks Sollux who is adjusting one of the apiary mainframes with care.

“Yeah.” Sollux nods.

“And you’re okay with that?” Rose asks dubiously. Sollux sighs and sets the frame in place.
“Look,” he says and watches a bee land on his hand, “I’ve known her for a long time, if she’s hiding something from me there’s got to be a reason. I don’t know what it is and yeah I’m pissed but arguing with Aradia never gets anyone anywhere.”

“Arguing with Jade has never gone well for me either.” Dave agrees unhappily.

“Well I’m still not putting up with that kind of shit from Kanaya, I won’t.” Rose says stiffly.

“I’ll talk to her. But really, what could they possibly be doing?” you reason and Dave reaches up and taps his knuckles on the blackboard on the wall behind you.

“I’ve been thinking about it and I don’t see how that could be the thing they’re all in on. Aradia says this is some kind of world protecting thing. It’s coded in ~ATH which hinges on real life events, shit in there is linked to the end of the world and so much stuff is hanging off of it, which makes sense if it’s to stop that from happening. Kanaya knows nothing about coding or archaeology so what could she be doing with it?” Sollux says.

“Jade is heavily into robotics and science so I suppose she must know some code, but I don’t know if she would know a troll coding language.” Rose says with a thoughtful frown on her face.

“How would ruins with ~ATH code get on them if they’re on ruins in the desert on Earth? I assumed you were just translating text into ~ATH.” Dave says with a frown.

Sollux leans back in his chair and makes a vague gesture with his hand, you’re not totally sure what the two of them are talking about.

“Some I am, some I’m not. Some bits I’m filling the gaps in myself but it’s hard without knowing what’s there.” Sollux says.

“But we didn’t invent ~ATH, you guys did. And even if we had invented it I know those ruins are too old for them to have computer code on them. They’re too old to even have any English on them, they’re pre-colonial.” Dave argues and Sollux just shrugs again.

“Maybe some trolls got here before then and left, who knows.” he guesses.

“No way.” you argue and Sollux shrugs.

“Not to interrupt your little history quandary but I have a message for you.” Hal’s voice comes out through Sollux’s speakers and the psionic whips around to glare at them like they personally betrayed him.

“How?! How are you in my system again I swear to fuck I’m going to-” Sollux snarls with a deep rattle that would surely intrigue Dave if he could hear it.

“Calm your globes, I’m just bluetoothing into your speakers through Dave’s phone.” Hal laughs. Sollux’s eye twitches.

“Just drain all my battery, dude. It’s cool.” Dave grouses.

“Quit your bitching, this house has power outlets. Anyway, if everyone is DONE complaining I have news. Click this.” Hal commands and a link pops up on Sollux’s trollian and he reluctantly clicks it. It’s a video article on a news website which begins playing automatically. A man in a grey suit stands before the camera with a microphone in hand, behind him are a group of other journalists standing around a stage before a red and white building.
“Scandal has been the word most associated with the Betty Crocker company lately; from personal scandals of higher ups, suspect and illegal financial dealings and documents suggesting that the current heiress to the company, Miss Jane Crocker, may have been coerced into her position. However, in the early hours of this morning a hacker released confidential Betty Crocker documents to the public.” the reporter says seriously.

“You?” Rose asks curiously.

“Me, I was saving this one up as a present for Roxy.” Hal laughs quietly and the video continues.

“These documents allege research into mind altering chemicals and plans to plant them into Betty Crocker products, there is also information on illegal subliminal advertising which has already been running. Our analysts have correlated this illegal advertising to a 90% spike in Betty Crocker profits.” the reporter continues.

Your eyes widen in shock, wasn’t this just meant to be a baking company? You figured the whole business world was cutthroat but mind control and brainwashing is crazily extreme.

“The focus now is on young Jane Crocker, she is still not technically the CEO of the company yet and more documents have come out which show the scope to which the company may have tried to control her. Katherine, what can you tell us about this?” the reporter asks and the screen switches to a woman in the studio.

“Thank you Carl, after the death of the eponymous and never seen Better Crocker herself the company was handed to her granddaughter Jane. The company was the be held in trust by the board until she came of age. However, we have here copies of the legal documents she was forced to sign as a child which if she had refused would have taken her home and likely her family from her and embroiled her modest family in unending legal battles. Company memos seem to indicate that Jane Crocker had little power within the company and was either unaware of opposed of the scandals which we are currently aware of. We even have transcripts where Jane was forbidden to contact her soulmate if she ever found them.” the female reporter explains. The feed cuts back to the man outside of the building.

“Yes, Katherine, this is why it is so alarming that it is Jane Crocker herself who has called this press conference. Oh, and here she is!” the reporter says and the camera swings up to focus on Jane as she walks on stage. A red folder is clutched in one hand and she walks to the centre of the stage and stops behind a podium. Her fingers grip the edges of it and you can see that she is shaking, but when she speaks her voice is clear.

“Thank you all for coming. As you may be aware a lot of things have been coming out about this company and the people in it lately, this morning many of the worst things came to light. The acting CEO of CrockerCorp fled the country in the early hours of the morning and I am told he has been arrested on the border of Mexico, several other board members are missing.” Jane announces.

The audience bursts into questions but Jane powers on.

“With that in mind I am stepping into the position of CEO and my first action is to officially close down the Betty Crocker company. I have invited the police to look through any and all of our records and I await any judgements from them and the courts. In the meantime the assets of the company will remain frozen with the exception of paying redundancy to all staff below board level and for any legal fees, compensation or fines that arise. The Betty Crocker company is over.” she says with finality.

There is a beat of silence and then reporters clamour, waving their hands for Jane’s attention. She
picks one and looks nervous as she does so.

“Miss Crocker, is it true that you were forced to work for this company?” the reporter asks.

“I… was given a choice, but it was not much of one. I tried to protect the people I cared about but I can see that I should have sought help sooner but I felt trapped. I was… made to feel trapped. Ultimately that responsibility rests on my shoulders.” Jane answers.

“Miss Crocker, what about the mind control drugs?” another questions.

“As far as I can tell those were never released but my understanding is that they would be very short term. I’m waiting on the verdict of a lot of doctors on that subject, I don’t really know much.” Jane replies, looking obviously regretful.

“Miss Crocker, the records say that you were banned from finding your soulmate, have you found him?” a reporter asks and you roll your eyes at stupid human heteronormativity.

“I…” Jane hesitates, “I have found her, yes. But I don’t want to talk about this, I want a degree of privacy and my soulmate doesn’t deserve to lose hers because of me. If she wants to be public or private it’s her decision.”

The reporters clearly still have questions but Jane has obviously had enough and bids her farewells and walks off of the stage.

The video cuts out and you all stare at the screen for a moment. Sollux groans in relief and slides down his chair.

“Fucking hell I thought that was going to take forever, now they can stop avoiding each other.” Sollux cheers weakly and flops his head back over the back of his chair.

“You want them to talk to each other? I thought you hated Jane.” Rose asks.

“I do, the problem is she was making Roxy hate her too.” Sollux says, looking at Rose like she’s simple.

Rose and Dave both look lost.

“Ugh, allow me to help you idiots. Quadrants are the basics of troll relationships but they’re not cut and dry, people vacillate or have quadrants that are blended and some people do what our parents do and just have a big smeared pan quadrant fest. Trolls who have humans for soulmates have to accept that their quadrants are always going to be a little janky, Kanaya and I are both pale but human romantic relationships are a mix of red and pale and sometimes the rest too. We have to accept a certain amount of sharing like your human polyamorous relationships.” you explain wearily.

“Yeah?” Dave says flatly.

“The point is that humans have vacillation as well, which isn’t a problem with one partner but with multiple it gets complicated. Kanaya and I have an agreement, Sollux, Roxy and Jane do not. Sollux knows his relationship with Roxy is meant to be pitch which means that she’s a rare human capable of actual blackrom, which also means that if Jane pisses her off enough then her feelings may flip. That would leave her pitch for Jane and at best red for Sollux and at worst nothing for him. Or she would be trying to be with both of them in the same quadrant without agreeing that first. Essentially the whole Jane thing is a disaster.” you point out.

“But now that Jane is free to do what she wants I don’t have to run around helping Roxy fix this
anymore. Goodness fucking knows Roxy doesn’t normally need help like this and it’s hard and boring. I’d way rather be competing with her and making her better than doing damage control on her other soulmate.” Sollux says with some relief.

“You are welcome, I just showed it to Roxy as well.” Hal says cheerfully.

“Do you think we should go give her our presents?” Dave asks Rose quietly.

“It’s not as if there’s going to be a good moment today.” Rose replies and the two of them leave without so much as a goodbye to you or Sollux.

Sollux watches them go and worries at his bottom lip with his teeth. As much as you disliked it at first you know that Sollux and Dave are friends, besides which keeping a secret in this house is nigh impossible and so everyone in the building knows just where Dirk is and why. Sollux is worried about his friends.

“I wish I could just fix this whole thing.” you admit quietly.

“Don’t work like that.” Sollux says unhappily.

“Yeah, I’m fucking aware, thanks.” you snap and regret it immediately. Sollux doesn’t even blink, more than used to your unintended outbursts.

“What I don’t get is how the four of them, or three I guess if you discount Dirk but he’s still related to their father, whatever. Both parents are shitty beyond reason and even if this is the worst their mom gets it’s still pretty fucking bad. So how are the four of them so unlike that at all?” Sollux asks.

You think about Dirk and how it’s obvious that he doesn’t agree with that conclusion about himself, about how he killed a man to protect Dave and plainly sees it as a necessary evil. Evil being the operative word. On Alternia Dirk’s actions would have been seen as unfortunate at worst, certainly not evil.

“I don’t think anybody is born evil. Their parents are shitty because they kept choosing to be, it’s a choice. Dirk could have chosen to leave Dave at Bro’s mercy but he didn’t, Rose and Roxy could have abandoned each other and Roxy could have kept her drinking problem.” you say.

“You know about that?” Sollux asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Dave runs his mouth without thinking all the time, I know about lots of a shit. My point is they all chose to be better, their parents just chose to be worse.” you point out.

“Ugh, this is the problem with all of you Vantas lot. You think evil’s a choice the whole way down and that means that bad people can choose to be good again.” Sollux says with a shake of his head.

“They can, I mean, look at Darkleer. And even Mindfang is not good but at least neutral now.” you point out.

“You’re telling me that you genuinely believe that no one is beyond saving? No one is too evil to reform? DV’s parents for a start or… fuck, even the head fish bitch herself? Could you forgive any of them? I mean I get that people do bad things and they get forgiven and earn trust back. If I’m an asshole to you I feel shitty and make amends, but there’s got to be a cut off. Their mom can’t just go ‘hey I’m sorry for violently attacking two of you, how many nice things do I need to say until we’re square?’ it just can’t work like that!” Sollux argues, waving his hands angrily.

“Okay, you’re right! I can’t forgive any of them and that’s probably my shortcoming because
Signless could probably forgive them all if they meant it hard enough. Just because everyone is entitled to forgiveness doesn’t mean that they deserve it from everyone. They don’t ever have to forgive her and I probably can’t either but I have to believe that shitty people can change or else everything our parents went through was for nothing.” you argue back. You know that you’re right, Signless could forgive anyone. If the Empress herself came to him and admitted that she was wrong he would find it in his endless heart to forgive her and fix the universe. You are not nearly so strong. You know what she did to your people, what she still does. You couldn’t forgive her, not in a million sweeps. And you think of Bro and all that he did to Dave, of his Mom and the mark and Dirk’s face and the way Dave seems hollowed out… you can’t forgive them either. If you were more like Signless you could but you aren’t and you cannot. You just have to reassure yourself that someone could forgive them, that they could choose to be better and just didn’t. If you don’t think that then everything your life is built on starts to topple down.

If bad people are always bad or if good people can become irreversibly bad then good won’t ever win. Every enslaved troll and alien will die in their chains because every resistance to them will be doomed to fail from the start. If people can be redeemed then Signless and his movement, your movement, is tenacious; if they can’t then you’re all just crazy.

“What she did can’t be undone, Karkat. You can’t grind goodness experience and flick that scale the other way. That kind of bad stains forever, and it fucking should too.” Sollux says with quiet fury.

What’s worse is part of you agrees with him. Part of you wants their Mom to know that she can’t wash this terrible thing away or play nice, she’ll always be someone who hit Dirk and who broke Dave’s sword and terrified her children.

You had thought her violence was cool when she was driving her heel into the wound of an assassin. It doesn’t seem that way now.

“Sollux, Karkat I- are you two just staring at each other in silence in here?” Rose asks, suddenly at the door.

“We were just talking.” Sollux tells her and Rose looks at him sceptically.

“Well, The Psiionic ordered pizza and I was told to come fetch you both.” Rose tells you and walks off.

Dinner is chaos but the distraction seems to do the StriLondes good. Dirk and Signless turn up at the end of dinner and both gratefully eat in silence. Signless offers to let them stay for the night but most of your siblings are relieved that the StriLondes say no. No one is keen to play the ‘we have guests again’ musical beds game and you suspect that your chances of anyone agreeing for you and Dave to share a bedroom are absolute zero. Dirk takes them all to a hotel for them to figure out what to do next.

What they do next is… not much. They go back home the day after as if nothing happened. Rose tells you that they’re all just avoiding their mother. Dirk’s plan is to become a self-employed coder but stay in college (you suspect that Dave’s protesting is behind that) and have Hal do the actual work. Roxy will get a weekend job and after six months they’ll both have enough employment history to prove that they can afford a place. This all started on Dave’s birthday and by yours he’ll be out of there.

June can’t come fast enough.

The next day Dave isn’t at school but he does message you a few times throughout the day, you would guess he feels bad about leaving you in total silence when all that shit was going down. He
sends you a video from his room of his pet crow sitting on his turntables and gently spinning in circles. It makes you laugh hard enough that you get your phone confiscated for the hour.

Things keep flipping between feeling normal and feeling wrong, it’s like your brain can’t hold onto the idea long term that things are bad and then you enjoy things again. Only then you remember and feel terrible for doing so. You try to remind yourself that this isn’t normal, but you suppose that for Dave and Dirk it kind of is and that thought makes you feel worse.

That evening instead of going into your house when you get dropped outside, you go into Kanaya’s with her. She doesn’t even comment on it, she just leads you up to her room and the two of you putter about gathering sewing books, boxes, bolts of fabric and other things for a suitable pile. You settle into it next to her and stare up at her ceiling with determination, a gauzy green sheet of fabric shifts in the wind from her slightly open window. You promised Dave and Rose that you would do this, you promised yourself too.

“Are you okay?” you ask, squinting at the ceiling.

“I think we’re all very stressed and worried.” Kanaya says and you scowl, that was not actually an answer to that question.

“Yeah, especially because some of us have soulmates who aren’t speaking to them. One of us in particular, do you want to try answering my goddamn question again?” you ask, reaching up and flicking her in the horn.

“Rose is going through a troubling time right now, things are difficult.” Kanaya says again. You sit upright in the pile and glare down at her.

“Yeah, because apparently you’re lying to her about talking to one of her best friends behind her back as well as apparently being in on some shady shit with Aradia. And I figured there had to be some misunderstanding, but you’re lying to me about it too? I’m your moirail, why are you lying to me?” you demand.

Kanaya sits up as well, her fangs digging into her black lips. She reaches out and takes your hands in her own, her longer and more elegant fingers curling around yours.

“Karkat, please understand that as a rule I do not keep things from you. This is the one thing that I must and trust me when I say that I hate doing so and that I will tell you in due time but for now I cannot. It… pains me to do so. I had hoped that I could simply avoid the topic but it seems that is not to be.” she says regretfully and rubs her thumbs over your knuckles.

“Tell me, please.” you beg but she shakes her head.

“I cannot. Believe me if I could I would and I would not keep something from you unless I believed that terrible things would happen if I did not. But I will tell you when I can and it will not be too much longer until that time. I know that it is a lot to ask of you but can you allow me this secret until then?” she asks, looking right into your eyes.

“I- Kan, if you’re in trouble I can help.” you insist.

“It’s not that kind of problem, if it was I would absolutely tell you. But for now I cannot share this.” Kanaya says.

“Well… when can you tell me?” you ask. You can practically feel the distance growing between you two and you hate it. Sollux said that Aradia lied to him and you figured that his relationship with her wasn’t as stable and Aradia’s always been a little odd. You were sure that Kanaya wouldn’t do this...
“April, I think. Honestly Karkat it pains me to do this. I really wouldn’t keep this from you if I had any other choice.” she says, reaching out and cupping your cheek. You shudder a little at the feeling and try to keep focused.

“Is this secret to do with this friend of Rose and Dave’s and with Aradia?” you ask.

“Yes.” she says simply.

“You know Rose might never talk to you again, is this really so important you’ll risk your soulmate bond for it?” you warn her and she rubs your cheek slowly.

“I hope it does not come to that, but yes it is that important. I wish I could tell you.” she says again and watches you with hope in her eyes.

This is a huge ask, a giant gesture of trust for you to take, a real leap of faith. You have to trust that she knows what she’s doing, that’s she’s not cutting you out of her diamond while letting others in. You have to believe that she will let you in when she says and that you’re not being an idiot.

You could walk away, no one would have grounds to tell you that you did the wrong thing. But… Kanaya has never done wrong by you before. She’s supported you with everything. It’ll hurt but you trust her.

“I hate this, just so you know I hate this. But… fine. I’ll hold this until April, I’ll trust you.” you say grudgingly.

Kanaya rushes forward and presses the palest of kisses to your mouth and drops butterfly kisses on your cheeks, her hands are in your hair and you can feel them trembling. She was scared that you’d say no, that she’d lose you.

“Thank you, Karkat. Thank you.” she whispers and you hear how the breath hitches in her chest.

You want to demand that she tell you what this is that has her so torn up, but you can’t. You promised.

You pull out of her hold and stand up.

“I need to go.” you mumble, you’re not strong enough for this right now. Not after everything that’s happened lately. You will be strong enough for her, you will hold that trust for that long but right now you can’t keep your word if you stay here.

“I understand.” Kanaya says softly and you leave her house.

You stand outside and rub at your face, trying to be sure all of her lipstick is gone. You don’t know where to go. Your moirail is hiding things from you, Aradia is hiding things from you, the StriLonde thing is all chaos and nothing you do helps, oh and Sollux recently put a huge dent in your entire ethical foundation. This is the kind of thing you should be talking to your moirail about but hey, that’s part of the problem.

You don’t want to go home, you know you’ll either sit and stew in your room or you’ll pick a fight with one of your siblings, none of which deserve that. You wish you had someone else who…

You’re already looking in the direction of Dave’s house and you shake your head in despair. Dave is your soulmate and he’s human, things are messy. Knowing your parents you’re pretty sure your
quadrants would always be messy anyway. You know that your feelings for Dave more than include pale ones, but you’re not in that kind of a relationship with him. You’re not in any romantic relationship with him.

But…

But you are his friend.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling turntechGodhead]

CG: CAN I COME OVER?

TG: sure man

TG: me casa is su casa

CG: THIS IS WHY YOU FAIL SPANISH. JUST SO YOU KNOW.

TG: i am failing ironically

CG: YOU’RE THE WORST. I’M ON MY WAY.

TG: cool cool so uh

TG: everything cool?

CG: CAN WE JUST NOT TALK ABOUT IT? I DON’T WANT TO GET IN A HUGE SHITFIT.

TG: theres a first for everything but yeah man come on over

You shove your phone away and start walking. Everything is turning over and over in your head like the world’s worst rock tumbler, refining only the most polished gems of shit. You hate everything.

Even though you’re trying not to you end up working up a real head of steam by the time you get to Dave’s house. You can’t go in by the front door because what if Dave’s mom answers? There’s no way that you would be able to hold your tongue and you know enough about abuse to know that confronting an abuser can often make it worse for the people being abused. Instead you walk to the grass outside Dave’s window and jump for the lower roof by it.

You curse and swear as you try to keep your grip and haul yourself up, kicking off of the wall to try to do so. Damnit you did a pull up once in class, why can’t you do this already?

Dave’s window slides open and he climbs out onto the smaller roof and reaches down with his unmarked arm to pull you up.

“You’re getting better at that.” he tells you and you grumble in irritation. He leads you in through his open window and onto his bed. He scoots back out of your way and you take a few moments to take your shoes off rather than just put them on his blankets like some kind of peasant.

“So… are you ok?” Dave asks hesitantly.

“Everything sucks forever, Dave.” you insist and he nods.

“Preaching to the choir, man.” Dave nods.
“It’s just- Kanaya and Aradia and the- the whole thing with your mom and just- augh!” you say, throwing your hands in the air.

“Did you two break up or something?” Dave asks, sounding shocked.

“No. I mean, I could have but no. She says she’ll tell me everything in April which is some amount of bullshit, let me tell you!” you snap angrily.

“John’s birthday is in April.” Dave says after a moment and you look at him incredulously.

“Yes, Dave, that’s absolutely what she’s waiting for. You dumbass.” you say flatly and Dave laughs.

“Sorry, I was just trying to think about what’s in April that’s so important. That’s all I’ve got. Do you feel like this whole thing is one big jigsaw puzzle where we’re not sure we have all the pieces, much less the box that tells you what it’s supposed to look like? And we’re just mashing shit together in the hope that something makes sense and you’re beginning to suspect that the picture on this puzzle is just a plethora of dicks?” Dave asks.

“Not… not that specific feeling, no. The rest of your puzzle metaphor I’ll agree too though, before it got weirdly phallic.” you reply.

“No pleasing some people.” Dave shrugs and you lean back on the wall with your eyes shut. Everything feels terrible and you don’t even know what you can ask Dave to do that’ll help, you just showed up like a tool.

“Can I just stay here and stop existing for a while?” you ask and Dave stands up off of the bed and walks over to his turntables. He starts fiddling with wires and a few things as well as his computer for a bit, you figure that he’s just giving you some space. Or at least you think that until he comes back and snaps a pair of plush headphones over your ears, he’s already wearing a pair of very beat up looking iphone ones and as he walks back to his turntables he plugs them in too. You watch in puzzlement as he kneels down and flicks through some crates until he stands up with two records in hand.

Dave slides the first record out and you find that it’s some kind of dreamy piano music and Dave fiddles with something until it seems to fade in and out of your hearing. He sets up another record but doesn’t start it yet and instead starts tapping away on other things. A beat comes in to accompany the lethargic piano music and it takes you a moment to realise that it’s a heartbeat.

Dave mixes other beats in and out and you nearly laugh when you recognise that he’s slipped a track of a purr in there, your purr in fact. As he weaves his music together you slide down until you’re laying on his bed the wrong way with your head nearly hanging off of the foot of his bed and your arms actually dangling off. On your arm with the soulmark you can feel the turntables that are just like the ones he’s standing at, it thumps in your veins with its quiet beat along with the music.

Maybe this is that ASMR thing that you keep seeing on youtube, but you don’t think so or if it is then it’s that and something else. You’re not nearly musical enough to know the line between those sort of things. You sigh as you think you hear sounds of the Alternian restaurant that you took him to fade in, the distant sound of cutlery and background talking.

You feel like you’ve become some kind of liquid, or something like it. That boneless feeling of pale haze that you’ve got from Kanaya before, but somehow you’re experiencing it now just from Dave’s music. Maybe not a liquid, maybe some kind of gel slowly melting off of Dave’s bed. You rub your face on the covers and Dave’s voice comes through the headphones from the diner.
“You’re gonna save- save the world, huh?” he says, the speech scratching back a moment. You hear your own pleased chirp half cut off by the end of the sample.

“Fuck the world, go big or go home, right? Gonna save everything.” your past self brags and normally you’d cringe at your stupid words. You should be, but you’re too sleepy from the music to do anything. The heartbeat comes back and seems to be louder, the piano music fading out and a soulful and slightly electric synthetic sounding violin picking up.

You hover between wakefulness and sleep, you’re not sure if Dave has cut in bits from your favourite movies or if you’re somehow dreaming that. Eventually though it all fades out and you finally manage to struggle enough to open your eyes. Dave is sitting at his computer with his camera in one hand and flexing the other open and shut. His sunglasses are pushed into his hair and he’s peering at the screen on his camera with a small frown. He seems to notice you coming to and his eyes flick to you.

“I… took your picture, let me just fuck with a few of the settings and I’ll show you it. If that’s not ok I can delete it. I’m trying not to make a habit of taking your picture without your permission like a creep.” Dave says, turning back to his computer and plugging the camera in.

“Mmmhm.” is about all you can manage to say as you blink sleepily and roll over to rescue your phone from your pocket. You blink hazily at it, only coming to properly when you realise how much time has passed.

“Holy shit it’s two hours later!” you say in shock.

“Yeah, man. Woulda kept going but I have mad hand cramp right now, I can’t even. Shit, this lens worked so well. Ok, printer don’t fail me now.” Dave rambles and wheels his chair to the side and reaches down to pick out the sheet of paper that comes out of the printer.

You let your phone drop onto the bed and look at Dave, still at least a little fuzzy headed. He made music for you for hours to make you feel better. You are all kinds of in love with him, in each quadrant, in all at once, in all of the complexities of human love as well. All of it. You’re on his bed hazy with music still echoing inside your brain and you watch Dave tilt his head at his own photo, the gesture almost birdlike. You watch him and you think that you could spend eternity in these moments with him. You could forget everything and still fall for him, live a million lifetimes and he’d still wreck your shit and you’d thank him.

“So, Rose made me these lenses for our birthday, this is the first time I’ve tried it digitally though.” Dave says obliviously and you struggle to sit up with jelly limbs. He hands the photo to you and you turn it around and look at it.

It’s you, sprawled boneless on his bed with his huge headphones over your ears and tucked behind your horns. Everything is soft and out of focus and you stare at yourself. The insecure parts of you point out that you can see up your own nose, that your horns look small and so on. But part of you just looks. You see how dark your eyebrows and eyelashes are and how messed your hair is on his pale covers and the contrast that makes. The light is strange too, instead of being unfocused dots from the lights on his turntables and equipment those dots of light are stars. The light reflected on the window is a hazy star and there’s a faint one glimmering on your horn that catches the light. It makes you look like you’re in space or like a dream is seeping into the real world. The whole thing feels hazy and tranquil in an out of body kind of way.

“This looks how it felt.” you laugh quietly.

“I really like it.” Dave admits.
“I got a few good ones of Rose on our birthday, with and without her lens, look.” Dave says, standing up and walking away before coming back with other photos in hand. One is a sharp focused picture of an enchanted looking Rose as a butterfly flits by her, the others are her walking through a green garden with butterflies, all soft focus and the blotches of coloured light are the pattern on her shirt. In another photo they’re hearts and the last is stars like yours.

“You should frame this, or all of these.” you tell him and he chuckles, shaking his head.

“Nah man, some of them are good enough for my cork board but I’m still just fucking around.” he says with a modest shrug.

“You could do this for a living, though, or music.” you point out. His glasses are still on his head so you get to see his actual eyes widen and watch the way his face starts to go red from your praise.

“Are you ok with that picture or do I gotta delete it?” Dave asks, continuing his perpetual quest to destroy grammar. You look down at the photo of you and find that you genuinely do like it despite all of your self-esteem problems.

“You don’t have to do that. Can I keep this one?” you ask and he nods quickly.

You’re sat up on his bed and he’s sat in his computer chair and you’re basically knee to knee. He’s close, really close and you’re still far too off guard. You want to kiss him. That’s true basically all of the time but especially now. You could lean forward just a little and kiss him and it wouldn’t be difficult at all.

But you can’t. You promised Dave that you’d back off when you first made your deal and you don’t break promises like that. Besides, even if this bubble of comfort in his room is perfect it doesn’t change how bad things are outside, this is bad timing.

Even so… you want to.

“I should go.” you say weakly. You don’t want to, you want to stay here with him.

“You don’t have to.” Dave replies immediately. Goddamnit, can’t he ever make this easy on you?

“We’re basically avoiding all of downstairs but me and Roxy are cooking tonight, we could totally make more for you to stay and we should probably be starting now anyway. It’s not like you’re unwelcome here.” he insists.

“That’s… thank you.” you say, standing up and sidestepping away.

“It’s no problem.” he says, getting to his feet. He thinks you’re staying. But you can’t, not when you feel like this.

“I didn’t tell anyone where I was going though and I’ll be in trouble with my parents if I don’t show up to dinner. I’m probably already going to be late. Besides I should go before I do something stupid.” you wince as you realise that you said that last part out loud.

“Stupid? Like what?” Dave asks as you back up to the window and pull it open again.

You don’t say ‘you’ because that would be crossing the line, even if it would be both true and technically insulting at the same time. You are Karkat Vantas romance master, seduce your soulmate by insulting him. Well done.

“Nothing.” you say and half climb out of the window. You hesitate on the windowsill and look up at
“Thank you for the music and the photo. And just generally making everything not suck.” you say awkwardly.

“Ah, no problem. Anytime.” Dave replies just as awkwardly and then subjects you to the most uncoordinated out of place fist bump ever which makes you all kinds of eager to throw yourself off of the small roof below his window. You briskly walk home in the dark and somehow when your phone pings you know who it’s going to be.

[autonomousTerminal began pestering carcinoGeneticist]

AT: AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

AT: That was the funniest goddamn thing I have ever seen in my entire life.

CG: YOU ARE THE *WORST*, YOU ARE AWARE OF THAT, RIGHT?

AT: HE FISTBUMPED YOU!

AT: Oh god, I think I’m gonna corrupt something from laughing this hard.

CG: SHUT UP.

AT: Does it help that as soon as you were gone Dave just stared at the ceiling and quietly whispered ‘why’ to himself?

CG: BETTER. AT LEAST THAT THING WAS AS AWKWARD FOR HIM AS IT WAS FOR ME.

AT: God DAMN I wish he’d been wearing his shades properly so I could have seen your face better.

AT: I’m rooting for you two and all but fuck me if you idiots aren’t hilarious along the way. If you two ever get married I will have an entire movie worth of hysterical shit to show in order to embarrass you both. It will be glorious.

CG: YOU’RE TERRIBLE AND I HATE YOU.

AT: Nah you don’t.

CG: I DO.

AT: Not buying it. Enjoy your walk home, fistbump Casanova.

[carcinoGeneticist stopped trolling autonomousTerminal]

AT: *fistbump*

[carcinoGeneticist blocked autonomousTerminal]


[autonomous terminal stopped pestering carcinoGeneticist]
Dave is sat at your desk with his feet tucked under him on your chair, Rose is sat on your bed typing away on her laptop and you are sat on the floor. You’re supposed to be working on this science project with Dave but instead you’re browsing websites for gift ideas. It’s a week and a half until Christmas and you still have nothing for Dave, even though you’ve already bought presents for everyone else he is still eluding you.

“You know that I’m not responsible if it sucks, right? I’m not a sculptor.” Dave warns you for what must be the fifth time in the last hour.

“It doesn’t need to be perfect, it just needs to look vaguely like a bloodpusher.” you remind him as he scrapes small amounts of clay away from the model troll bloodpusher that he’s making. It’s a little lumpy but you can at least see parts of it.

“It’ll look better when you paint it, Dave.” Rose adds helpfully, without looking up from her screen.

“Yeah, yeah. Ok, I’m done with this half. Gonna go put this in your oven and take the human heart out of there and swap ‘em over. Hashtag: just cannibal things.” Dave rambles as he leaves the room with his delicate clay bloodpusher in hand and goes downstairs.

“That certainly looks like a lot of report writing that you’re getting done there, Karkat. When are you going to tell Dave that your report is on DJ equipment, cameras and art supplies?” Rose asks sweetly and you twist around to glare at her.

“Fuck you in the eye. He is so hard to buy for. Besides you two inconsiderately have your birthday right by Christmas and not spread sensibly through the year like mine is. I already used up my good gift idea for his birthday and now I’m lost.” you hiss at her, flattening your ears back in irritation. Rose is totally unintimidated.

“When we were born was decidedly out of our control, but if you would like help I can assist you.” she offers sweetly and you peer at her suspiciously from the floor.

“What’s your angle, Lalonde?” you ask sceptically.

“Have you considered that I like you and Dave both and you giving him a good gift makes both of you happy? Plus, I am grateful that you have not pushed for me to start talking to Kanaya again.” Rose says that last part with a look of irritation.

“She’s my moirail but it doesn’t mean I think she’s right all the time, she’s being a dumbass but I’ve done all I can to try to fix it. Sometimes she’s just gonna be dumb and I can’t stop her, I’m sure she feels the same about me sometimes.” you say. Perhaps she feels that way about your feelings for Dave, in fact you know she does. Sometimes people are idiots, and most people are idiots most of the time.

“Nonetheless, I can help.” Rose reminds you.

You consider this. The chances that she’s jerking you around with this are low but you’d rather not have to get help from her, you want Dave to think that you chose his present all by yourself. You know it’s silly to be so fixated on this, it’s just a gift. And you know it’s not like you can woo him with gifts like some cave troll dragging back a prize offering to their flushcrush. Wait… trolls never lived in caves, that was humans. You’re pretty sure that early trolls lived in colonies like bees. That said, your parents are technically cave trolls in that they spent large portions of their young adult lives living in caves and hiding from the authorities.
...this metaphor has got away from you.

“Has he already got me something?” you ask. You figure that if he has then it’s got to be something good which means you absolutely cannot fuck up his present and may have to accept help. If he hasn’t then you might still have time to have a brilliant idea of your own.

“Oh, he’s had your present since the first week of December. To my knowledge it was the first present that he bought.” Rose comments lightly, her face sliding into a smug smile as she sees the cornered look on your face. Well, fuck.


“His headphones are breaking and I know that no one else in the house has bought him a replacement and I mean regular headphones, not some special DJ ones.” Rose says.

You’re about to say something back when you hear footsteps on the stairs and the quiet sound of Dave rapping to himself as he gets closer. He bursts into the room with an oven glove on and thrusts half a clay human heart into the air.

“It’s ALIVEEEEE and holy shit if it’d smashed that on the door frame I would have fucking cried.” Dave says and carefully sets the clay heart down on your desk.

“It looks good.” you tell him and Dave nods and carefully spins it around on your desk to look a little closer at it.

“It’s okay, I’m gonna try to shape it a little more and maybe Dirk might lend me some sandpaper so the two halves fit together better but otherwise I just gotta paint it good. I did warn you I’m not a sculptor, I told you dawg.” Dave memes at you and you shut your laptop.

“I’m going to shove this entire thing down your throat now, you awful person.” you threaten and get up, smushing your laptop on Dave’s face.

“No, the betrayal, how could you? Noooo.” Dave complains flatly and then unceremoniously slides out of your desk chair and onto the floor.

“I’m dead now.” Dave announces calmly.

“Excellent, I get my chair back.” you say and climb over him to sit in your desk chair and look down at him.

“Rose, I’m dead.” Dave calls out to his sister who doesn’t so much as blink.

“Mmm, that’s nice dear.” Rose replies airily.

You lift one foot and put it lightly on Dave’s stomach and give him a careful shove, Dave feigns death.

“Hey Rose, I’m dead and you’re spooky and talk to ghosts probably.” Dave says as you put your other foot on Dave’s stomach and try to roll him about a bit on the floor, not that it works very well.

“Am I?” Rose replies and looks at him over the edge of her laptop.

“Yeah. Do you think Roxy is done with her tattoo yet?” Dave asks as you try to shove him across the floor without rolling your chair around instead.

“Where is she getting tattooed anyway? I know it was Dirk’s birthday present for her and some kind
of ‘find your own meaning’ bullshit but no ethical tattoo artist will tattoo anywhere on either of her arms or shoulders in case either of her soul marks spread there.” you ask.

“Roxy said that she was going for either her back or her chest, she wasn’t sure. And, dearly departed Dave, if she was done we would probably have photos by now.” Rose answers you both.

“Speaking of soul marks did you hear John got his at last?” Dave says and grabs hold of your ankle.

“No, I missed that. What is it?” Rose asks in surprise.

“It’s like a bitching white dragon. Sorry Karkat I’ve got into rigor mortis, I can’t let go of your ankle now.” Dave says with a smug look on his face.

“You’re still talking a lot for a corpse. Also Equius got his too, it’s some old video game heart that’s half full. Sollux thinks it might be from Zelda or something. I think he’s kind of upset that he has a human soulmate, you know what he’s like.” You sigh.

You try to tickle him in the side and Dave squeaks in alarm, suddenly skittering away from you.

“It’s a miracle, I’m alive! No more of that.” Dave says and leans against your bed, you’ve basically swapped places from where you were before.

“I don’t want to do any more stupid work for this thing now, can we just watch a movie? And you two have been writing your own homework things this whole time too, you’ve got to want a break. Right?” Dave whines.

Yes. That’s definitely you, someone who has been working this whole time. Not secretly online shopping.

“Of course, we’ve all been working very hard. Right, Karkat? How about we watch a movie?” Rose says with a devious smile, though thankfully she doesn’t rat you out.

“Mmm, ok I’ll pick something you haven’t seen.” you say and wheel yourself backwards to look at the movies in your shelf. You actually have a good number of Alternian movies, though they’re almost all bootlegs that have been copied and resold amongst the trolls that emigrated to Earth for one reason or another.

“How about… In Which An Ageing Purple Blood Decides To Will His Candy Empire To A Successor And Invites Five Young Trolls Representing Negative Archetypes To View The Factory. Contains Several Ironic Deaths And Torture Scenes As Well As Musical Numbers Which Are Both Frivolous And Ominous. Rated For Viewers Five Sweeps And Older And Contains Dubious Commentary On The Hemocaste System For Which The Creators Should Be Culled?” you suggest.

You turn back to see Rose and Dave staring at you in silence with a look of thought on both of their faces.

“Is that a troll version of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory?” Rose asks slowly.

“Maybe, I’ve not seen a human version of it. It doesn’t seem like the kind of thing humans would make, although the protagonist is called Chalee Bukket which is a very unsubtle comment about reproduction and the hemocaste system and the short life of ‘lowbloods’ if that’s the term you want to use.” you say.

“I fucking need to see this. I was put on this Earth for this very purpose Karkat don’t deprive me any longer, we’re gonna watch this and then I’m gonna make you watch the original one with Gene Wilder not the weirdass one with Johnny Depp.” Dave insists and so you pull the disc out of your
collection and prepare yourself for an afternoon of cultural education.

As it turns out the human version is just about as messed up as the troll version, just in different places. Who knew?

It is the night before Christmas and all through the house- no, fuck that. It’s the 24th a little before midnight and though you’re awake through a combination of habitual insomnia and excitement for the next day you’re still not dressed for bed and tucked up for sleep like a good little troll. Even worse is that you swore blind to your dad that you would absolutely go to sleep in ‘five more minutes’ about a good forty-five minutes ago.

With all that in mind, you all but jump out of your skin when the ladder bangs against your windowsill, you whirl on your desk chair and walk uneasily to the window and look down. Dave is on your lawn. You slide the window open and he pulls out his phone and holds his finger up to his lips.

TG: hold the ladder so i dont fall and die plz

CG: WHY DON’T YOU JUST COME IN THE DOOR LIKE A NORMAL PERSON?!

TG: dude i dont even know any normal people

TG: im climbing the ladder now so you better hold it

You hold the end of the ladder and Dave scampers up it surprisingly quickly and slides in the window, falling headfirst onto your floor into a relatively graceful little roll.

“And the door wasn’t good enough because?” you ask.

“Only the best cliches for you Karkat, it’s christmas. Besides I didn’t want to talk to anyone else in your house but you.” Dave says and stands up.

“Okay well, what are you doing here? It’s nearly midnight.” you point out.

“Midnight on Christmas Eve, so I can give you this.” Dave says and he fiddles with his sylladex for a moment before he retrieves the SWEET BOX which turns out to be a very large wrapped present. It’s all in red and even has a giant bow on top.

“Holy shit Dave, I already got you your gift and it’s nowhere near that much.” you protest and pick up his present from your bedside table, you had been planning on seeing him tomorrow at some point and exchanging then.

“You didn’t have to get me something this big." you tell him as you both sit down on your bed with your gifts between you.

“Wanted to.” Dave says simply.

“You open yours first." you say to him and try not to think of how intimate it feels, just the two of you together late at night on Christmas Eve exchanging your gifts. How many movies go like this? You look at Dave and your heart aches.
He picks up your gift to him and pulls the wrapping off. You’re glad that you took Rose’s advice. His present is a pair of bright red skullcandy headphones, you got them cheap because the packaging was damaged to shit but you needed them out of the packaging anyway because…

“Holy shit did you bedazzle these?!” Dave gasps as he turns them this way and that. You did indeed cover every available inch of them that wouldn’t be pressed against his head with red rhinestones, much to Kanaya’s dismay.

“A glue gun and a lot of patience.” you say with a nod.

“This is… the tackiest shit I have ever laid eyes on I LOVE IT.” Dave says in glee and slides them on his head and immediately takes a selfie with them on and stares at it in joy.

“I’m glad, they suit you.” you laugh and he beams at you. You love how much more he emotes around you these days, so much more than with other people. You try not to think about being special to him.

“Thank you! Okay, open yours.” Dave says eagerly.

You claw the wrapping and bow off, underneath is a plain cardboard box. You pull that apart to find a gleaming old style typewriter.

“I found it in an antiques place and I bribed Dirk to make it work again. There’s ink tape in there too if what’s in there already runs out and some paper but you can get more of that yourself. I know that you find trollian distracting when you’re trying to do other stuff so I thought that when you’re writing you might want to do it on this. Something to put your… novel of the century or whatever on.” Dave says quietly.

You stare at the typewriter, lost for words at how thoughtful a gift it is. Until a creeping feeling crawls up your spine.

“But I don’t talk about my writing, no one knows that I write. How did you?” you ask and Dave bites his lip. He sucks in a breath and then lets it out tensely through gritted teeth. His hand goes to his sleeve and he pulls it back and shows the part of his mark that has pen to paper on it.

“You don’t need to tell me, I already know. I knew for ages.” Dave says quietly.

He’s… implying…

“I thought we didn’t talk about that.” you say after a few seconds and you can see that Dave is tense, his head tilted slightly in a way that lets you know he’s not meeting your eyes. He covers his mark back up.

“Well. Maybe- maybe we should. Because… we’re not friends. Are we?” Dave says haltingly and looks at you again.

“We’re friends.” you say, your voice sounding as hurt as you feel. Why did he come up here to say that you’re not friends?

“No, we’re not. John and Jade are my friends, Sollux and Terezi are my friends. We’re… we’re not friends. We’re something but friends isn’t it and I’m not stupid enough to not see myself on your arm and maybe avoiding this isn’t doing me any favours.” Dave says in a rush.

He pushes himself off of the bed and starts to pace back and forward as you stare at him open mouthed in your idiocy.
“You know I’ve been doing the whole- the therapy thing.” Dave says with a wince, like just saying it hurts.

“And medication and dealing with my shit instead of just ignoring it or drowning it in irony and I really hate it but I can’t keep- Bro isn’t here anymore and acting like he is makes me a crazy person. And Mom is a whole different deal but she’s not related to this. I don’t want to be like this and this- this thing with us is making me crazy.” Dave says quickly.

“So, what are you saying?” you ask, not daring to leap to conclusions.

Dave looks at you and then quickly around the room. He drops onto your bed to sit right next to you. You watch his hands tighten on his knees.

“I’m saying that- I could be wrong, I hope not. Like, ninety nine percent sure is real fucking good right? But I think you’re… my… soulmate.” He says in a strangled voice.

“I-" you pause. God, Dave looks so tense.

“Am I allowed to talk about this now? You’re not going to leap out of my window and escape if I say it?” you ask and Dave laughs, high and thin.

“No promises but yeah, the deal’s over.” Dave nods.

“Okay, well, I know that you’re my soulmate. I’ve had crushes on other people and thought other people were attractive but nothing compares to you and I know it sounds cliche and sappy but it’s true. I’m- I’m in love with you Dave and I have been since I was five.” you say honestly.

Dave flinches and for a moment you think that you’ve screwed up completely. He looks up and bites his lip again.

“If Bro was here he’d kill me for this.” Dave says quietly and honestly.

“He’s not.” you say firmly and Dave nods.

“Can I ask, do you feel things through your soulmark? I know it’s impossible but I-” Dave asks.

“Yes! Fuck, yes, no one else does but I do!” you say excitedly and Dave stares at you.

“What do you get from me?” Dave asks and there it is again, the acknowledgement that he’s the one on your arm. You eagerly peel your sleeve back and look down at your mark.

“The roses are nice, whenever you and Rose are doing your twin/moirail things together it feels all warm and safe, like home. Sometimes it’s just a flash when you feel fond of her but often it’s longer. The crow is when you’re with your little crow friend or geeking out about your dead things or science stuff because you’re a secret nerd.” you say fondly.

“Slander.” Dave says flatly.

“The shield is Dirk and Hal but it’s a weird one, I don’t get it so much any more but it’s when they’re looking out for you I think. It feels like… like you’re protected and cared about.” you explain and Dave says nothing but looks at the mark. You don’t talk about the last time that you felt it.

“The turntables are my favourite it feels like music but I can never place the beat, but I feel creative and- well, I write best when I can feel you making music.” you confess.

“I wondered why you always wrote when I made music.” Dave says quietly and your heart soars
because he feels it too.

“And you’ve got my photographs and sketchbook too now.” Dave points out.

“Those feel pretty similar, I really like them.” you agree and you watch the smile fade from Dave’s face.

“The sword, the stairs and Bro.” Dave says, noting the marks that you’d left off.

“That one showed up the night he died and I can’t really explain how it felt other than just… bad. It’s been flaring up a lot lately but I’ll guess that’s the therapy and, well, your Mom. The sword was- that was the first one I got.” you trail off.

“What did that feel like?” Dave asks and you can’t meet his eye.

“It hurt. Physically it hurt, I’m sure it wasn’t as bad as what you felt but it still hurt. The night it came in the first time I got actual injuries. Cuts opened up everywhere and I ended up in hospital. But that was just the once. It pretty much stopped once he died and I freaked out when it happened again afterwards until I worked out that your dreams do it too, but I think they have to be really violent? It’s only been two or three times since he died. And then that time when…” you say hesitantly.

“Sorry.” Dave mutters and you stare at him in disbelief.

“It’s hardly your fault.” you point out and you can see him grimace in the dim light of your bedside lamp. You’re about to put your sweater sleeve back down when you decide, fuck it, and take it off leaving you with just your plain black tshirt underneath.

“I doubt everything you got from me was fun either.” you point out and Dave sighs. He peels his own sleeve back and looks down at his mark.

“I feel it when you write, when you watch your romance movies and read books.” Dave says quietly, his thumb running over the marks as he talks.

“This one though… this took ages for me to work out why it was a chain. Whenever this flares up I feel like I’m not good enough and I never will be and there’s this huge crushing pressure.” Dave says and looks at you. You watch with wide eyes as he leans in to you and one hand reaches up and then tugs at the thin chain around your neck, your neckless with the mark of The Sufferer on it. Oh. That crushing destiny and inferiority.

“Shit, I’m sorry.” you apologise.

“It’s hardly your fault.” Dave parrots back and you shove him.

“The blood was the first one. All shame and anger.” Dave tells you and you shift uncomfortably, this is a topic you still don’t like discussing.

“I got this one first. When Bro saw it he lost it. He- you went to where I lived before, right? Did you ever see the roof?” Dave asks, looking at you. You shake your head.

“I got sent home from school early the day the mark with your blood came in and Bro picked me up. He hated marks and when he saw mine he dragged me up to the roof and to the top of the radio tower that was up there. He taped me to one of the highest parts and left me there. I nearly died from heatstroke, I was lucky Dirk found me and that a ten-year-old knew what to do to bring me back.” Dave says bitterly.
“That was my fault.” you say in horror and Dave shakes his head.

“That was Bro.” He says and his voice is sharp.

You don’t know what to say to that. He took such a big risk in finally coming here and saying these things, you should say something, anything.

“I love you.” you say and Dave looks at you, mouth slightly open in surprise and you watch him go red. It’s still fascinating how humans do that and you adore how vulnerable it is, even more so on Dave’s pale skin. You watch him hesitate, his mouth opening and shutting a few times.

“This is stupid.” He says with a shake of his head.

He plants both hands on your mattress and leans in all of a sudden, he pauses at the last moment, his lips less than an inch from yours.

“Can…” He breathes against your mouth and evidently the desperate noise you make is yes enough because he finishes what he started and kisses you. It’s soft and unsure and you try to return the kiss but you’ve never kissed anyone before and boy you two are bad at this but enthusiasm isn’t something that either of you are lacking.

You bring your hands up to his face and scratch your knuckles slightly on his bejewelled headphones that sit around his neck. You tilt his head slightly and oh, yes, that’s better. His hands touch your sides warily but when you don’t shout at him he relaxes and smooths them up your sides. He’s pretty desperate about how he kisses you, not that you’re one to call him out on that, it’s just hard to believe that this is the boy that you’ve been tiptoeing around about this whole thing for so long.

Dave breaks the kiss and you immediately want to start again because any time not kissing Dave is time wasted.

“Sorry, I know I’ve been-” Dave mumbles.

“Shut up.” you tell him and kiss him again. You feel him laugh against you and his hands settle on your shoulders, pulling you closer. You sure are glad that you’re down to just your tshirt now because you can really feel how warm his is compared to you and you’re on the warm end of the troll temperature section.

You’ve wanted this so much and… hm… actually. You shove him away by the shoulders and try not to laugh at his slightly dazed expression.

“Hold it, you shitweasel, I have questions.” you snap.

“We just talked about how I think you’re my soulmate, about love and I kiss you for the first time and you call me a shitweasel?” Dave asks incredulously.

“Shut up. Look, that time we went to the movies and got dinner, was that a date or not because not knowing has been killing me.” you demand and Dave leans back and looks anywhere but at you.

“I don’t… know.” he mumbles.

“You don’t… but you asked me! How can you not know if it was a date or not?!” you exclaim, barely remembering to keep your volume down.

“I don’t know! I wanted it to be, I was trying to work up to the whole romance thing because I know
that’s your thing and it’s not mine but it’s hard and I kept pussying out of committing to it. And then you didn’t ask if it was or assume it was so I thought maybe you weren’t into it so then I was trying to win you around with stealth romance and I guess it worked so shut up, maybe?” Dave says defensively.

You stare at him in dumbstruck awe as an idea slowly creeps over you. He said romance is your thing, he tried to ask you on dates because you love that stuff. You look around, it’s Christmas Eve, he climbed up to your window, brought you gifts, confessed…

“Holy shit, this is all some grand romantic gesture, isn’t it?” you whisper, staring at him. Dave is approximately tomato coloured now.

“It worked, didn’t it?” he mumbles. You think your brain might be melting out of your ears. He did this for you, because it was something you’d like. He didn’t just tell you in some rambling message over pesterchum or on a note in your locker or even just asking you out. No, he planned this big thing because it’s you. And… he cares.

“Didn’t it?” Dave asks again, less certain.

“Of course it did, you perfect, stupid, train wreck of an idiot.” you hiss and pull him into a kiss again.

The two of you are getting good at this, good enough that you get acquainted with how Dave’s hair feels when it’s run through your fingertips. Which is to say that it feels alien levels of soft and smooth. Dave seems to be getting familiar with all of the ways that he can pull on your shirt to get you when he wants you, or that’s what you think he’s up to at least. When Dave slides his hands down your arms and you freeze as the hand of Dave’s marked arm slides down your own marked arm because you realise that’s not what he was getting to after all.

“Dave?” you ask warily and he pulls back enough that you can see him bite his lip. His hand slides lower and as soon as you can feel his fingers graze the hilt of that sword on your arm you feel it. A sudden burning around your ring finger, on your right hand because of Dave’s left handedness but it’s still the same finger. You feel a pattern emerging on your skin, quick delicate strokes and burn for a few seconds and then fade.

You sit back a little, oh god you’d nearly crawled into his lap when you were kissing him, how did you not notice that? You shove that thought aside and stare down at your right hand. Around your finger are two thick and heavy lines of red, your red and his which are of course the same, they knot and spiral together as they loop around to the outside of your finger and dart back in one unbroken tangled up knot. You turn your hand over to see what you recognise to be two records, not unlike the one on Dave’s shirt right now. Except these two are sliced in half and bleeding. The halves of the records have slid sideways in a way that if you squint and look at it could bear more than a passing resemblance to the symbol on a chain around your neck. It’s right there on your grey skin in brilliant red, a perfect remix, mashup of you and him.

You look at Dave and see that he’s still looking slightly open mouthed at his, turning it this way and that to look at it. There’s no running from it now, he is your soulmate. You’d feel better about this if you could read his expression. You don’t get a chance because he slumps forward and presses his face into the crook of your neck in a way that has to be jamming his shades into his face.

“Dave?” you ask worriedly.

“Fucking god .” Dave groans against your skin.

“Uh.” you say because you’re so smart.
“I’ve been terrified of this but when I got to your house I started freaking out, wondering that it might not be you and you might be someone else’s soulmate.” Dave confesses and you carefully touch his back and stroke it gently. You still feel like if you do the wrong thing Dave will be out of the window in no time with a yelled ‘no homo’ and you’ll never get so much as a conversation from him again.

“So… why did you kiss me first then?” you ask as the idea occurs to you.

“In case I didn’t get another chance.” Dave mumbles and oh, your heart breaks for a statement that pitiful. Human romance and matespriteship might have a lot of overlaps but they are still different, but even so Dave is digging his hands into all the wiring in your head for pity and pulling hard on it. You love him so hard you feel like you might combust and leave a three-mile-wide crater in the ground.

“Well, I’m glad to know for sure that you’re my soulmate.” you say and he pulls back from you to look at you. You wish he wasn’t wearing shades but you’re likely not going to get them off of him.

“I’ve had dreams about this.” Dave says and straightens his shades.

“Me too.” you tell him and glance at your finger again, the mark is still there. He’s yours.

“I’ve had nightmares about this.” Dave adds with a grimace.

“How do those go?” you ask and try not to take his words personally.

“A bunch with Bro suddenly being alive and finding out about you and- those… end badly. Usually with me missing a day of school after.” Dave says bitterly and you wince at the thought, so that’s what those days off were for.

“Sometimes it’s just… like I know you’ve known it’s me forever and I’ve been a dick about it but sometimes I have this dream like this and then you realise that once you have me that I’m not as cool as you thought I was and it all goes to shit.” Dave admits and stares at the floor.

“Oh, Dave,” you say softly and touch his shoulder. “I’ve never thought you were cool.”

Your words startle a laugh out of Dave and he claps one hand over his mouth to smother it and not wake up your siblings.

“Seriously, you draw an ironically terrible webcomic, you collect dead things and you make dumb jokes. You’re not cool, but I like who you actually are.” you assure him and Dave springs up off of the bed away from you.

You stare at him in fear that you’ve screwed up but he paces back and forth and eventually looks at you.

“You know this is going to be an unmitigated disaster, right? Like, you have expectations and romance and I have issues, fuck, my issues have issues. I’m on medication and in therapy and I know you say that’s not a big deal but it is and I hate it and- and you know all of my family is genuinely terrifyingly crazy, right? You’re stuck with them now, are you not- this is ridiculous!” Dave says in one long panicked stream.

“This IS an unmitigated disaster, I’M an unmitigated disaster!” He says hysterically, fisting his hands in his hair.

You push yourself off the bed and grab him by the shoulders.
“Dave.” you say firmly and he stops to look at you but there’s still fear there on his face.

“I know all that. Can you just be… can you be my unmitigated disaster? Because I’d really like that.” you tell him and you hear him choke a laugh but he drops his arms and a lot of the tension falls away.

“You’re ridiculous.” He tells you.

You bite your lip. This isn’t Star Wars and that wasn’t an ‘I love you’ but still…

“I know.” you say and kiss him anyway.

He doesn’t melt against you like your romance books would have you believe, it’s more like a car crash in slow motion. You know there are jagged and broken parts to him, things about him that drive you crazy in bad ways, he is absolutely not perfect. But is perfect for you and he’s pressed up against you all clumsy teenage enthusiasm and angles of his body that he’s not grown into yet so no, he isn’t perfect but you wouldn’t change anything about him. He’s yours and you love him and you’d start a fight with the Empress herself armed with nothing more than a damp beach towel if it was to protect him. Your soul doesn’t sing with beautiful romance at being so close to the part of itself that it’s bonded to, it **screams** with crazed glee at just being with him.

It’s not how you thought it’d be, it’s better.

You both keep trying to stop kissing because you do have things to talk about and it is late but Dave is practically magnetic. You manage it, eventually but your marked hand stays tangled with his.

“I should go.” Dave says softly, his cheeks are pink and you shiver at the thought that you did that.

“Probably.” you agree and do nothing to help.

“Hal only agreed to buy me like… an hour of alibi so that I could come here and get back home.” Dave explains. You nod, still not letting his hand go. Dave pulls you to the window, kisses you again and you must lose another five minutes like that.

“Wait, shit, actual question.” Dave says pushing you back. You will forever deny the petulant whine you give him for stopping you kissing him.

“Shut up, you have Christmas tomorrow, or Perigree’s eve or whatever. Do you have it with Kanaya’s family too?” Dave asks.

“Yeah, we all get together and have breakfast and presents, why?” you answer in confusion.

“I bet you that Kanaya will be the first to notice, before anyone in my family notices, not including Hal.” Dave says with a teasing grin.

“No way, Rose will notice first. Kanaya has other family to deal with that day, more people to distract her.” you counter.

“Nah. I’ll win and when I do… you have to take me on a date and you have to do all the stressful planning and I don’t.” Dave smiles slyly and you get a flash of Rose in his expression.

“Oh you’re on, and when I win you have to take me on a date and you have to plan. But no hiding your hand, deal?” you ask and you shake hands.

Dave climbs out the window carefully on the shaking ladder.
“Hey, hold the ladder so I don’t die.” He says and you do just that. It’d be a cruel irony for you to match with Dave at last and then lose him to a freak ladder death. He takes a step or two down and then comes up again real quick to kiss you one last time and then he slides smoothly down the ladder and lands on the ground below. The ladder vanishes into his sylladex again and he slides his new glittering red headphones over his ears, plugs them into his phone, blows you a kiss (you presume for the ironic effect) and then runs off into the night.

You touch your fingers to your lips and grin wildly, you just barely resist the temptation to scream in joy. Dave Strider is your soulmate and you couldn’t ask for anything better.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: I got more awesome fanart, this is for this chapter and Karkat's picture which you can find here: http://undanewneon.tumblr.com/post/164016346815/crabbyclaw-i-drew-a-scene-from-a-fic-called-mc#notes
You’re biting your lip super hard as you walk home to keep from grinning like a complete deranged idiot. You raise your hand up in the dim street light and look at the ring marked into your finger and glee bubbles up inside of you again.

Karkat Vantas is for reals, no take backs, your actual, honest to God, soulmate.

He’s your soulmate!

And… and he knows about all of the messed up shit you’ve been through, he knows about your fucked up family, he knows that you’re in therapy and on medication and he still wants you even knowing all that. How does that happen? Sure you have a lot of good points, you’re awesome, you’re a bitchin photographer and musical genius, you’re funny and basically famous on the internet. You can see why he’d like you, but you know all that other stuff about you and still be into you is beyond belief.

One of the best parts is that you don’t have to hide that stuff from him now. Well, not the bad stuff about you, but the fact that you’re crazy about him too. Hell, you’re gonna talk to him right now!

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]

TG: hey

CG: DID YOU GET CAUGHT ALREADY? DID I ALREADY WIN THE BET?

TG: nah im not even home yet

CG: DAMN.

TG: so can i just like

TG: come back to yours and get back to kissing you because damn son

CG: TEMPTED THOUGH I AM TO SAY YES I’M ALREADY IN BED TRYING TO SLEEP AND IF ANY OF MY PARENTS CATCH YOU HERE WE’LL BOTH BE SO GROUNDED.

TG: you might be

TG: dirk would probably just laugh and give me a high five

CG: OH YES JUST BRAG ABOUT HOW MUCH BETTER YOUR GUARDIANS ARE THAN MINE, ASSHOLE.

You stare at your phone in surprise. Better? That’s not true at all and you’d bet anything that Karkat is currently realising the same thing and freaking the fuck out.

CG: HOLY SHIT I DID NOT MEAN THAT!

CG: I MEAN- FUCK. GODDAMN PAST ME. I MEANT DIRK, DIRK IS COOLER THAN MY PARENTS. NOT YOUR ACTUAL PARENTS WHO ARE NINE BILLION SHADES OF
AWFUL AND HOW HAVE I MANAGED TO GO FROM CONFIRMING YOU AS MY SOULMATE TO JUST TRIVIALISING ALL THE SHIT YOU’VE BEEN THROUGH

CG: WATCH ME BREAK THE SOUND BARRIER AS I DIVE BOMB THIS RELATIONSHIP INTO THE GROUND

TG: wow

TG: that was impressive

CG: I AM SO SO SORRY!

TG: its cool i know what you meant

TG: though if you’re feeling guilty i’m sure there’s some way you can make it up to me

CG: I HAVE CREATED A MONSTER.

CG: I FEEL BAD BUT WE WILL STILL BOTH BE IN TROUBLE IF YOU COME BACK HERE JUST SO WE CAN BURN TIME MAKING OUT LIKE DUMBASS TEENAGERS.

TG: kitkat i got a secret for you

TG: we are dumbass teenagers

CG: MAYBE YOU ARE, BUT I’M GREAT.

TG: yeah you are

CG: I WAS NOT EXPECTING YOU TO AGREE, YOU CAUGHT ME OFF GUARD. ALSO YOU STARTLED ME INTO DROPPING MY PHONE ON MY OWN FACE LIKE A CHILD WHO HAS ONLY JUST MOUTLED AND GOT USED TO HAVING FINGERS FOR THE FIRST TIME.

TG: smooth

CG: I LOVE YOU BUT SHUT UP.

TG: i love you too

CG: YOU’RE MAKING ME RECONSIDER MY STANCE ON YOU COMING BACK HERE. SHOULDN’T YOU BE NEARLY HOME?

TG: hey it takes time to walk when I’m having to stop to swing off of every lampost and proclaim my happiness like this is singing in the goddamn rain for idiots in texas when it’s not even raining

TG: its hard and no one understands

CG: HAR HAR

[turntechGodhead sent photo 008453.jpg]

CG: YOU ACTUALLY HUNG OFF OF A LAMP POST JUST TO TAKE THAT PHOTO, COLOUR ME IMPRESSED.

TG: only the best for you babe
CG: IT’S STILL KIND OF MESSING WITH MY HEAD THAT YOU MEAN THAT AT LEAST SEMI SINCEREly NOW.

TG: karkat i got a secret for you

TG: ive pretty much always meant it at least a little sincerely

CG: YOU’RE KILLING ME HERE.

TG: hold up i gotta break into my own house

CG: WHY DO YOU EVEN HAVE A FRONT DOOR IF YOU NEVER USE IT?!

You bound up onto the roof and sneak across and silently over to your window and slide it open and silently as you can. You climb up onto the windowsill and freeze when you see the figure leaning against the door frame.

“Oh shit, it must be Santa.” Dirk says flatly.

“Well, that’s me. Check out my ho ho hoes outside with the sleigh.” you reply, climbing in and shutting the window after you and dropping the blinds down.

“No reindeer anymore?” Dirk asks.

“Nah my dude, PETA got all up on my ass with that shit. Now go to bed or you don’t get presents in the morning.” you tell him, and Dirk fights to keep the smirk off of his face.

“Well damn, I’ve done been told. Night Santa, tell Dave I say good night if you see him.” Dirk says and walks off, pulling your bedroom door shut after him.

You turn on your bedside light and pull your phone out again.

TG: im in dirk caught me but im in

CG: AHA! SO I WIN THE BET THEN?

TG: nah dude i convinced him i was santa and that distracted him from noticing my sick new ink

TG: this game is still on like donkey kong

CG: I KEEP STARING AT THOSE WORDS, WAITING FOR ANYTHING WITHIN THEM TO BAND TOGETHER WITH THE OTHER WORDS IN SOMETHING RESEMBLING SENSE. I WAIT AND I WAIT BUT ALL I SEE IS IDIOCY.

TG: yeah well youre the idiot who is on my arm so check and mate

CG: I STILL CAN’T GET OVER THAT WE’RE TALKING ABOUT THIS. I’M SO USED TO DODGING THE SUBJECT.

TG: man im sorry

CG: WHAT? NO. THAT WAS NOT AN ATTEMPT AT GUILTING YOU.

CG: AND CHECK WITH HAL OR BASICALLY ANYONE BECAUSE I’VE SAID THIS BEFORE. I’VE WANTED THIS SINCE YOU FIRST SHOWED UP ON MY SKIN BUT JUST BEING FRIENDS WITH YOU WASN’T SOME SECOND BEST CONSOLATION
BULLSHIT, OKAY?

CG: AND IF I’M BEING HONEST MAYBE THIS IS THE WAY EVERYONE SHOULD DO IT.

CG: I MEAN YOU TOUCH YOUR SOULMATE ON THEIR MARK AND SUDDENLY DESTINY SHOWS UP AND GUT PUNCHES YOU LIKE ‘HERE’S YOUR SOULMATE ASSHOLE’ AND OFTEN PEOPLE DON’T KNOW THE FIRST THING ABOUT EACH OTHER AND THEY’RE DICKING IT UP IN THIS HIGH-PRESSURE SITUATION.

CG: AND OK, YEAH, I KNEW IT WAS YOU BUT GETTING TO KNOW WHO YOU ACTUALLY WERE AND BE YOUR GODDAMN FRIEND FIRST WITHOUT ME HAVING THE CHANCE TO FUCK THIS UP BASED ON WHAT I *THINK* OUR RELATIONSHIP SHOULD BE LIKE WAS PROBABLY A GODSEND FOR BOTH OF US.

CG: WOW I SHOULD STOP RANTING.

TG: no i think youre right

TG: and no way would i have agreed to any of this when we first met i mean roxy had to lock me in her car to get me to talk to you so you know that already

CG: YEAH.

CG: CAN I ASK YOU A QUESTION? JUST ONE AND THEN WE’LL ACTUALLY GO TO SLEEP.

TG: shoot

TG: go type it out as i brush my teeth and junk

TG: by which i mean brush my teeth and do other getting ready for bed stuff, i’m not shoving my toothbrush down my pants

CG: I REGRET READING ALL OF THAT, SO I’M GOING TO PRETEND I DIDN’T.

CG: OK, SO, I KNOW YOU LIKE ME.

CG: WHICH IS CRAZY TO TYPE, BELIEVE ME. BUT I GUESS THAT IS JUST A FACT NOW?

CG: BUT HAVE YOU EVER LIKED ANYONE ELSE? OR HAD A CRUSH OR WHATEVER?

TG: as in actually liked a person rather than just looking at a stranger like hot damn?

CG: YES, LIKE THAT.

TG: well everyone at my last school pretty much sucked so thats a barren wasteland

TG: i had a crush on jade

TG: i mean i kind of still do in that shes still my friend who is hot but its more just a thing that i know than something i really think about now and besides i think its a strilonde rite of passage to at least get a crush on one of the harley/english siblings
TG: dirk is all over jakes biz as you know but roxy had a thing for him once and rose has also had a crush on jade

TG: you cant not really and trust me i will introduce you and i swear itll happen to you too because she is hot and smart and takes no shit

TG: five bucks says you get a crush too

CG: I HAVE A LOT OF THOUGHTS ON THAT BUT OK, ANYONE ELSE?

TG: hm like terezi for the first two weeks that i knew her

TG: that one is probably hard to explain

CG: NOT REALLY, I’VE BEEN THERE TOO. I GET IT.

TG: oh damn you have taste

CG: I LIKE YOU DON’T I?

TG: that was real smooth

TG: ...you know thinking back on it i might have had a crush on john too and i cannot believe i am admitting that

CG: WOW I LIKE HIM LESS ALREADY.

TG: shut it or i will dig up and copy paste you his spiels on how hes ‘not a homosexual’ just to piss you off

CG: I REALLY NEED TO EXPLAIN BLACKFLIRTING TO YOU AT SOME POINT BUT FOR NOW I NEED TO ACTUALLY SLEEP BECAUSE OTHERWISE I WILL JUST STAY UP ALL NIGHT TALKING TO YOU AND BE A GRUMPY SLEEP DEPRIVED ASSHOLE ALL DAY TOMORROW.

CG: AND I’M ENDING THIS CONVERSATION BEFORE YOU CAN THROW IN ANY *WITTY* REMARKS LIKE ‘BUT KARKAT HOW WILL THEY NOTICE THE DIFFERENCE?’ HA HA ASSHOLE

TG: aw

TG: hey karkat

CG: WHAT

TG: <3

CG: I JUST SCREECHED AND I THINK I WOKE KANKRI UP, SO THANKS FOR THAT. GOODNIGHT. AND, UH…

CG: <3

[carcinoGeneticist ceased pestering turntechGodhead]
next morning to Roxy knocking on your bedroom door that you realised you should have expected to have a nightmare of Bro, but you didn’t.

“Five more minutes.” you whine as Roxy pulls the blinds up on your window and lets in the terrible morning light.

“I’m making breakfast with Rose, it’s gonna be fancy.” Roxy chirps. Goddamn morning people. You just groan at her and pull your covers over your head. You know her well enough to know that she will just keep coming up here to pester you.

Christmas with Dirk was nice, you’d both sleep in real fucking late and then exchange your single presents and then blow the rest of the day walking around the city and hanging out in the parks. Bro didn’t even normally bother you because Christmas time and New Years he was usually out working enough that he was easy to avoid or too tired to put any real effort into hounding you. You suspect that your sisters have classier traditions and you’re still not fully through the process of creating new merged ones from the two halves of your family.

You rub at your eyes and blink the sleep away. You run your fingers over your new ring a few more times and know that you’re going to photograph the shit out of this thing and draw it about a million times too. You are going to be the insufferable kid with the new soulmate, you’re leaning into it.

With your shades on the light is more tolerable and you can pick up your phone to see that it’s nearly ten in the morning and you have messages and one memo.

[golgothasTerror opened memo ‘Seasons greetings!’]  

GT: Seeing as how it has just become christmas here allow me to wish you all the very best day and i hope to speak to you all later when i wake up because i am now going to hit the hay  

TT: Merry Christmas to you too, Jake.  

GT: Goodness me strider! I didnt expect you to be up and about at this time although the time is dubious enough for me to ask if you are up early or up late.  

TT: In a rare show of responsibility I am actually up early and drinking an irresponsible amount of coffee to compensate.  

GG: the presents we sent did get there right?  

TT: They did, birthday and Christmas and they remain unopened. I’m still amazed that you can get shit into a mail plane and deeply disappointed that we can’t do the same in reverse.  

GT: Nonsense! We are just jolly glad that you can get things from us!  

TT: Dirk, can you make some of that coffee for me? Also happy holidays all of you.  

TT: I have gingerbread coffee syrup here that Roxy got if you want that too.  

TT: Yes, please. Also, Dave is still out cold along with Roxy.  

[golgothasTerror is an idle chum]  

[gardenGnostic is an idle chum]  

[timaeusTestified is an idle chum]
EB: oh ho ho everyone is asleep and jane isn’t awake yet
EB: my prankster’s gambit calls me
EB: happy christmas!!
TT: Uh oh.
TT: Jane, wake up, there’s going to be pranks in your near future.
[ectoBiologist is an idle chum]
TT: Welp. We tried.
TG: hatchi matchi i slept through a lot happy christmas i gots to go get all festively frocked!
[timaeusTestified is an idle chum]
[tentacleTherapist is an idle chum]
[tipsyGnostalgic is an idle chum]
GG: Oh John, you sweet boy. You’ve got to get up earlier in the day than that to get the drop on me.
GG: Falling for the old sleeping figure in the bed is actually a cream pie shooting machine ruse. So much to learn grasshopper.
[gutsyGumshoe attached file ‘highspeedpie.jpg’]
TT: Nice action shot. GoPro?
GG: Yup! :B
EB: goddamnit!
EB: wait does this mean that the only one who isn’t up is dave?
TG: on my way to wake him up.
TG: ‘five more minutes’ he says
TT: Hah.
TT: HAH.
AT: AHAHAHA.
TG: why yall gotta be like this?
You flick over to Karkat’s message.
[carcinoGeneticist began pestering turntechGodhead]
CG: WELL UNLESS YOU LOST IN THE LAST TEN MINUTES AND DIDN’T TELL ME I REGRET TO SAY THAT MY EAGLE EYED MOIRAIL LOST ME OUR BET.
CG: SO TROLL ME WHEN YOU GET THIS I GUESS.
[carcinoGeneticist is idle]

TG: i winnnnnn

CG: DID YOU HIDE IT OR SOMETHING? BECAUSE THAT IS ABSolutely CHEATING.

TG: no i only just woke up im not even out of bed yet

TG: #winning

CG: SHOVE THAT CHARLIE SHEEN REFERENCE RIGHT UP YOUR ASS, STRIDER.

CG: ALSO I WAS SLEEPING WHEN KANAYA SNUCK INTO MY ROOM TO WAKE ME UP AND SAW IT. SCREAMING RIGHT INTO MY AURAL SPONGE CLOTS WAS HOW I AWOKE THIS FINE CHRISTMAS MORN. I STILL HEAR RINGING.

TG: aw babe

CG: I WOULD SAY ‘YOU SHOULD HEAR THE NOISE I JUST MADE READING THAT’ BUT YOUR FEEBLE HUMAN EARS COULDN’T MANAGE IT EVEN IF YOU WERE HERE. EVERYONE ELSE CAN HEAR IT THOUGH AND SOLLUX IS NOW LAUGHING AT ME.

TG: well ok how about a bonus round? care to bet on who notices in my house and again hal doesnt count.

CG: HMMM I'M GOING WITH ROXY, I LIKE A DARK HORSE ON THIS BET. SOMETIMES SHE SEEMS OBLIVIOUS BUT I KNOW SHE IS WAY SHARPER THAN SHE LETS ON, I LIKE THAT SNEAKINESS.

TG: im betting dirk

[autonomousTerminal joined the conversation]

AT: Even if she wasn’t all that was left I’d bet on Rose.

AT: Also congratulations, idiots, about time.

TG: buzz off hal

AT: sure sure, I’ll leave with an awkward fist bump.

[autonomousTerminal left the conversation]

TG: auuuuugh

CG: I AM MORTIFIED EVEN REMEMBERING THAT. GET UP AND SEE YOUR FAMILY AND TELL ME WHO WINS THE BET, YOU LAZY EXCUSE FOR A SOULMATE.

TG: ugh fine

TG: …<3
You get up, get dressed, make yourself at least decently presentable as you’re pretty sure that your first joint Christmas is going to be much photographed. You head downstairs so that you can settle this bet before someone in Karkat’s family spoils it.

Roxy is at the stove and Dirk and Rose are leaning against one of the kitchen counters, discussing something quietly. You can smell gingerbread and coffee in the air, as well as the smell of something toasting. Roxy is stirring something in a pan but she looks up at you and smile as you come down the stairs.

“Five more minutes my ass!” She laughs, and you roll your eyes. You glance around as you get to the bottom of the stairs but you can’t see your mother lurking around anywhere.

“Sleep well, Dave?” Rose asks with a smile.

“Actually… yeah. I didn’t think I would.” you admit.

“I know what you mean, I was up late listening for him coming home. I’ve had like maybe four hours.” Dirk agrees grimly.

“It’ll take time to adjust, holidays can be hard with this kind of thing or so I’ve read.” Rose says gently and pats Dirk’s arm. You glance up the stairs. Sure you don’t have to watch for Bro sneaking around anymore but your Mom is still about and you don’t know where she is.

“Before you ask, she’s asleep in her room. I already checked.” Roxy says and cracks one egg after another into boiling water. You relax a little at her words. Dealing with shit this time has proved easier with more people looking out for each other. Dirk and Roxy trade off on keeping an eye on you and Rose and all of you have spent evenings over at Karkat’s family’s house to give you space to chill and despite your initial fear about it, no one there treats you differently about this whole thing.

“Cool, thanks.” you say and walk over to lean on the kitchen island opposite where Dirk is leaning on the other counter.

“Happy Christmas, Dave.” Dirk says softly, knocking against your red converse with his own orange ones.

“Happy Christmas, Dirk.” you reply happily, and Rose pours you a mug of something that smells like coffee and gingerbread. You reach out to take it in its dumbass fat santa mug that Roxy bought a week ago in a fit of festivity.

“Holy shit.” Dirk whispers. You look up at him to see that his shades have slid down his nose slightly, his eyes are wide behind the glass and his eyebrows are so high they’re making an illegal break for his hairline. He’s staring at your hand. You pause, and he looks you right in the eye.

“You actually did it? That’s where you were last night.” Dirk says in shock and you grin.

“One sec, I just gotta message him, he lost a bet on who’d notice first.” you say and whip out your phone.

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]

TG: winner winner chicken dinner

TG: i am two for two here
You switch your mug over to your other hand and let Dirk take your hand and stare at it. Rose has both hands over her mouth and Roxy is staring at you with her mouth hanging open as one of her pans boils over.

“Congratulations, Dave. Karkat’s a good kid, you’re good for each other.” Dirk says and pulls you in for a hug and messes up your hair like you hadn’t been trying to make it look halfway decent earlier.

“Oh my goodness, Dave you need to tell me everything! How- when- everything, now!” Rose insists, shaking you by the shoulder and dislodging you from Dirk’s hug.

“Seriously Davey, I am totally going to die if you don’t spill right now.” Roxy says hurriedly. They’re all looking at you and you squirm a little under the attention.

“It’s… Karkat in case you didn’t…” you mumble.

“Yeah, not to be mean sweetie but no shit. The boy looks at you like you hung the stars in the sky and you’re basically perfect for each other. No one is surprised by this.” Roxy sighs.

“I was just tired of being freaked out about it being him and being worried about both it being him and it not being him. So I went over there and we did the gift thing and just… I figured I’d find out.” you say, entirely fudging the details.

You tell them that like you don’t have your Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff notebook upstairs almost totally filled with ‘romance the angry troll off his feet’ plans. You say it like you didn’t secretly binge romance movies to try to work out what Karkat would wish for most. As if you didn’t buy him a gift that no one without his marks on them would know to buy.

You say that because they don’t need to know and maybe some things should be private between you and him.

Boiling water hits the stove top and Roxy yelps and tries to stop breakfast from being ruined. You get out of Roxy’s way and jump up to sit on the countertop and drink your drink. You watch Rose and Roxy engineer breakfast together and it couldn’t be something simple like cereal or even mildly challenging like pancakes. No, they’re poaching eggs, making some sauce, doing something with what you suspect is spinach and fancy bread of some kind.

You look sidelong at Dirk who is also peacefully drinking his drink and watching the girls.

“Hey, uh, thanks for not… you know. For letting me work this out myself. I know everyone figured it out before me but you pretty much always said that it was cool either way.” you say awkwardly and Dirk looks at you.

“It was cool either way. I care more about you being happy than you doing what you’re meant to do. And anyway, I like Karkat, he’s a mouthy little shit and he’s not scared of me either.” he says with a slight smirk. You consider that answer for a moment and then narrow your eyes at him.

“Does that mean that you have tried to scare him?” you ask suspiciously.

“Only a little, you know, the whole ‘hurt him and you’re dead’ talk. Cliche but it’s a classic for a reason.” Dirk shrugs.

“Dirk!” Roxy scolds from the stove. Evidently she’d been listening in.
“Out of interest how did that go?” Rose asks, looking up at him curiously.

“Somewhere between ‘fuck you for even thinking you have to say that’ and ‘fight me’. And then he tried to ask me about my feelings of all things, it was awful.” Dirk says distastefully.

“Yeah, that sounds about right.” you mutter.

Rose is watching the two of you carefully with a devious smile on her face.

“Hey, Dave…” Rose says slowly, “remember when we first met and you were all ‘why am I the only straight person in this family?!’ wasn’t that fun?”

Roxy busts out laughing and even Dirk smothers a snort of amusement into his mug. You glare at your treacherous siblings and pull out your phone to prepare to ignore them all.

TG: hey so all of my siblings suck how is your day?

CG: I'M IN ROUND 800 OF THE ‘GUESS HOW KARKAT FINALLY SEDUCED THAT IDIOT’ GAME.

CG: SAVE ME.

TG: little do they know that the idiot seduced you

TG: mine are going 'hey remember when you kept insisting you were straight and we all politely pretended to believe you but never did?'

CG: I STILL FIND HUMAN SEXUALITY TO BE CONFUSING

TG: like quadrants aren't?

CG: IN PRINCIPLE THEY’RE STUPIDLY EASY TO UNDERSTAND. IN PRACTICE, LESS SO. SO I GUESS YOU HAVE US THERE.

TG: so we have concluded that everything is confusing

CG: WE SHOULD WRITE A PAPER. “NOTHING MAKES SENSE AND NO ONE KNOWS WHATS HAPPENING.”

TG: its just fifty pages of question marks and gifs of confused people on printed paper so they dont even work either

“Breakfast!” Roxy announces, holding up plates and walking them over to their breakfast bar with Rose doing the same.

You all sit down and eat and despite being sure that spinach must be one of those things that is slimy and gross and tastes terrible it somehow doesn’t. Apparently, it’s ‘Eggs Florence’ or something like that. Florentine? Palpatine? Whatever. It is alarmingly good, and you’re licking the sauce for it off of your plate before you know it. You and Dirk clear the dishes away and then the four of you do the presents thing. You’re sat on the sofa between Rose and the princess doll that she got for her birthday which now has a squid face and arms and is just two knitted tentacle legs away from being a full eldritch horror. Your mother has not commented on this or moved the doll, Rose considers this a victory.

The presents thing is cool, and you do get some sweet loot, mostly art supplies but the nicest part is just being here with Dirk, Rose and Roxy. The nice part is throwing wrapping paper at each other
and joking around, you get to take pictures of them enjoying themselves. But even so, you can’t be entirely relaxed with your mom in the same house as you. Every so often you’re pulled out of the moment by the awareness of who is around you, just in case she’s up now. Your therapist says it’s ‘hypervigilance’ or something, which to you sounds like a comic book alter ego but whatever.

It apparently is some kind of super power because you’re the first one that hears her door open. Hal alerts Dirk through his shades and then you and your sisters stare up the stairs, waiting silently.

Ever since she attacked Dirk and broke your sword the four of you have barely seen her at all, she’s been like a ghost. You and Rose saw her in the hallway a week ago, Roxy saw her a few days before that in the kitchen, you don’t know about Dirk or Hal but you suspect they’re keeping very close tabs on her movement. All of these encounters have been blink and miss it level of brief and you’ve spoken maybe ten words to her all month.

She descends with a level of silence that should not be possible with those high heels and the hardwood floor of the stairs. She pauses at the bottom and looks at all of you, her pink eyes that are so like Roxy’s and so very not narrow. She seems to take in the tree, opened presents and paper. She puts a hand into her pocket and pulls out her phone, taps at the screen for a second and frowns.

“I don’t have time.” She says quietly, perhaps just to herself, and then she walks off and down into her lab. The door shuts behind her with a click and whirr of the lock.

You start to breathe again, the anxiety uncurling from your body. You turn back around and look at your siblings but the festive mood is broken, like a burst soap bubble.

“Should we get out of here? We always used to spend Christmas day just walking around the city and parks, shit like that.” you suggest.

“I’m up for that, especially since I’ve got a car now.” Dirk nods.

“I’m into not being here. Let me just grab a few things from my room.” Roxy agrees.

“I need to get my camera!” you blurt out and leap over the back of the sofa. Holy shit you can get even more family pictures for your first joint Christmas, and if you’re going outside where it’ll be all quiet and abandoned you can get pretentious artsy shots too.

You just beat Roxy in a race up the stairs and duck into your room to get your film camera as well as the digital one you already have on you. Then, of course, there’s your phone but you always have that. You tug a red hoodie on and pause for a moment, take a duck lipped selfie and send it over to Karkat before going back downstairs. Your phone pings when you’re on the bottom step of the stairs.

CG: WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS? WHY AM I INTO IT? WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE?

TG: if im into it and youre into it

TG: then who is straight?

CG: CLEARLY NEITHER OF US. PERHAPS SOME OF THE HUMANS YOU KNOW, BUT I HAVE MY DOUBTS ON THAT.

TG: karkat straight people are real you just have a weird sample

CG: I THINK THEY MIGHT BE LIKE MOTHMAN.
TG: yeah like i said totally real

CG: OK IM GOING BACK TO COOKING NOW BEFORE I THROW MY PHONE IN A BOWL OF CRANBERRY SAUCE IN DESPERATION TO NOT BE HAVING THIS CONVERSATION.

TG: lightweight

Roxy lands on the bottom step with a flourish. Dirk and Roxy already have jackets and scarves on and are waiting by the front door, because those two are nothing if not efficient.

“Dave, I knitted you a scarf.” Rose says disapprovingly, and you see that everyone else is wearing one of Rose’s many goddamned scarves.

“Rose, it ain’t that cold.” you reply and silently bet with yourself that most of those scarves will be taken off before too long and left on the seats of the car.

Your twin shakes her head at you as you all leave, the living room still a mess behind you that none of you cares to fix. You all pile into Dirk’s car and he takes off in a direction vaguely towards the centre of the city with Dirk and Roxy in the front and you and Rose in the back. You turn around in your seat and look at Rose curiously.

“So…” you begin.

“So.” she replies.

“Did you get Kanaya a gift after all? Last you told me you were still going around in circles about it.” you say.

“I did, but I still haven’t decided if I’m going to give it to her, we’re still not speaking after all. But then she still is my soulmate so…” Rose trails off and you’re well aware that she’s been going over this in her head a lot.

“You could just give it to her and tell her that you’re still pissed at her but you still care.” you suggest.

“Are you going to act like you’re an expert now, just because you and Karkat finally got together?” Rose asks sharply, eyeing you across the car with malice on her face.

“No, but I have a lot of experience with fucking shit up and recovering from it. And I’m still pissed at Jade, Kanaya and Aradia too but I’m talking to all three of them. They know I’m still mad about it so why do I have to be miserable and not talk to my friends because of something they did?” you point out.

“Are you talking to Jane too?” Dirk asks curiously.

“I never really talked to her much anyway, I know she’s your friend but she’s John’s older sister to me. So I don’t know, I don’t think I have but I’m also not… not talking to her. You know?” you answer him.

“Yeah, I get that.” Dirk nods.

Rose says nothing and looks out of the window, you hope that she’s at least considering your argument. Ever since she and Kanaya stopped talking both girls have been miserable and it’s a frequent point of commiseration between you and Karkat.
Roxy switches on the radio and Hal turns it off in offence and puts his own semi ironic seasonal mix in, and everyone sits in comfortable silence as Hal’s music plays and the quiet Houston streets slide by the car. You take a few photos of the world outside and of your family in the car before you feel your hand creeping to your phone again. You don’t have a Karkat problem, honest.

TG: whatre you up to?

CG: COOKING FOR A FUCKTONNE OF PEOPLE AT THE COMMUNITY CENTRE.

CG: NORMALLY I WOULD COMPLAIN ABOUT HAVING TO BE HERE INSTEAD OF AT HOME BUT OTHERWISE ALL OF THESE FUCKERS SHOW UP AT MY HOUSE AND THIRTY PLUS PEOPLE AT MINIMUM IN THAT BUILDING IS HELL.

TG: oh damn so what are you cooking?

CG: RIGHT NOW I’M PEELING POTATOES, MEULIN IS ON CARROTS AND KANKRI IS FUCKING AROUND WITH PASTRY OVER THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ROOM. EVERYONE IS DOING SOMETHING PRETTY MUCH.

CG: WHAT’RE YOU DOING?

TG: im in the car we didnt wanna stay in the house so we didnt

CG: SHIT, YOU SHOULDN’T HAVE HAD TO LEAVE.

TG: its whatever

TG: hey if youre peeling potatoes does that mean that youre touching your phone with potato juice on your hands? thats gross

CG: THAT IS WHAT APRONS ARE FOR, YOU SMUG SON OF A BITCH.

TG: i mean its not but you got me on the son a bitch technicality

CG: I DEFINITELY MEANT THAT BURN AND IT WASN’T A HAPPY ACCIDENT I ASSURE YOU.

TG: in the spirit of the season im gonna buy that

CG: AW SHIT ROSA CAUGHT ME, I HAVE TO GET BACK TO WORK. SHE IS THE BOSS OF THIS KITCHEN AND, TEMPORARILY, ME.

TG: damn well have fun with your prison labour

CG: OH BITE ME.

TG: …

CG: CAN YOU IN THE SPIRIT OF THE SEASON PRETEND THAT WE DIDN’T JUST HAVE THAT EMBARRASSING EXCHANGE?

TG: nope

CG: GODDAMNIT. LATER.

TG: later
You put your phone away and only just stop yourself from audibly sighing. Are you always this clingy or is it just because you properly matched your soulmark with him less than twelve hours ago? Probably both, actually.

The four of you stop at a park and fuck around on the play equipment for a while, including challenging each other to be better at treating it all like a massive obstacle course. That’s fun for a while until families with kids show up. None of you wants to take the park from them and watching normal healthy families stings a little for all of you, so before you know it you’re back in the car and you have your phone in hand again.

TG: karkat help me out where else is open today because we are running out of ideas here

CG: ISN’T PRETTY MUCH EVERYTHING SHUT TODAY?

TG: yes and we are not going to church we are desperate but not that desperate

CG: WHY DON’T YOU JUST COME HERE?

TG: to the community centre

CG: YES?

TG: but isn’t that like a troll thing i mean wont people be weird about four humans just showing up?

CG: IT’S THE COMMUNITY CENTRE BY YOUR HOME YOU OBTUSE DUNDERFUCK, ERGO IT IS YOUR COMMUNITY. THE FACT THAT THIS CENTRE SERVES THE TROLL COMMUNITY FOR THE MOST PART DOES NOT EXCLUDE YOU. AND ANYWAY, YOU KNOW A SHITLOAD OF THE PEOPLE HERE ALREADY, LOOK.

You squint at the picture, it looks like he just took a random crowd shot of people but you recognise at least five people who don’t live with Karkat. Even Equius’ older brother is there.

“Hey, so… Karkat’s invited us to the community centre where there’s like, food and people we know and shit.” you say hesitantly.

“Oh-huh.” Dirk says noncommittally.

“Your weird horse friend from school is there.” you add.

“Horuss? Oh, that’s cool.” Dirk nods and keeps driving.

“Okay, everyone in favour of letting Dave see Karkat before he actually explodes in the back of the car, killing us all?” Roxy sighs.

“Gross.” Dirk deadpans, and Roxy smacks him in the arm.

“It would be the merciful thing.” Rose agrees with a smug smile.

“I will fucking wind this window down, leap out and walk there if you three keep being terrible.” you threaten and Dirk finally breaks into quiet laughter, he’s probably been fighting it for a while. Damn them all laughing at you.

“I’ll make you a route.” Hal says in quiet amusement and projects a map onto the small screen in the dashboard.
TG: WERE ON THE WAY

CG: DID YOU MEAN TO TYPE LIKE ME JUST THEN? WAIT, HOW COULD YOU ACCIDENTALLY DO THAT ON YOUR PHONE?

TG: shut up i was excited and everyone else is mocking me for it too like theyre not just as bad

CG: HAH YOU’RE EXCITED TO SEE ME! YOU LIKE ME.

TG: i am your soulmate you hopeless loser

CG: FUCK YEAH YOU ARE. HAH. AND I’LL SEE YOU WHEN YOU GET HERE, I’M STILL IN THE KITCHEN SO JUST FOLLOW THE FOOD SMELLS.

You shove your phone deep into your sylladex and try to resist scowling like a spoilt child. You’re not sure how effective your efforts are so you instead focus on taking more pictures of the city as you drive by. They’ll probably all be blurred to shit even with you fucking with your camera’s shutter speed, but some will turn out okay just by law of averages.

You’re about halfway there when Roxy’s phone rings spitting out a song from some cartoon.

‘In the Land of Ooo is a Candy Kingdom

Whose song is now complete

Except for one more Candy Person

Who really can't be beat’

Roxy is staring at her phone in her hand, with her finger hovering over the button to accept the call and a look of total indecision on her face.

‘Her best friend is a Rainicorn

She rides a royal swan

Ruling with a chewy fist

It's Princess Bubblegum’

“You gonna answer that?” Dirk asks, and Roxy sighs she hits the button and holds it up to her ear.

Rose looks at you and mouths ‘Jane?’ at you, you shrug, you didn’t see the name on the screen from where you were sat.

“Hi.” Roxy says into the phone in a carefully neutral voice.

“No, we’re just driving, Dirk’s driving, not me.” Roxy says with a slight shake of her head. Whoever is on the phone continues to talk to Roxy with Roxy not saying much. Rose leans over and taps you on the arm, showing you a message on her phone that she has yet to send.

[tentacleTherapist began pestering ectoBiologist]
TT: John, can you tell me if Jane is on the phone to Roxy right now?

EB: hmm what’s in it for me hmmm?

TT: I have exclusive gossip in exchange for your information.

Rose raises her eyebrows and taps your soulmark ring with her finger. You nod, she sends that last message. You were going to tell John anyway at some point today when you got to talk to him. You were perhaps just a little unfairly focused on Karkat himself, you are perhaps not the greatest best friend right now.

EB: oh hoh color me interested but your info first rose, i’m not getting stung on this exchange!

TT: Dave matched with his soulmate and I will attach proof for you.

Rose snaps a shot of your finger and sends it to John.

“Yeah, you did.” Roxy says a little sharply down the phone. You lean back over to read Rose’s chat with John.

EB: oh my god! who is his soulmate?!

TT: Karkat. I believe you met at the party.

EB: HAH! i knew dave hadn’t replaced me with another best friend, i knew that guy had the hots for him!

EB: i never knew dave was a homosexual though…

You suck in a breath and lean back in your seat away from Rose’s phone. You don’t want to be present for this conversation, you absolutely do not. You’ve been able to acknowledge that you’re not straight for a while based on how you feel about Karkat and at least today you were able to joke about it with your siblings. But they’re all ‘different’ too, not all in exactly the same way as you but it feels different coming from them than from John. Coming from the kid you know is straight because he says it all the goddamn time (but didn’t you do that before and look how that went) somehow him talking about you like that feels like… it feels. It doesn’t feel like Roxy making ironic jokes about being too bi to do her chores or anything else she doesn’t want to do, it feels like the shit people yell from cars, the graffiti on the walls at school, the words from Bro’s mouth.

Rose taps you on the arm and inclines her head towards Roxy and nods. So it is Jane.

“It was fine.” Rose whispers to you, shuffling over to lean her shoulder against yours like she can read all of your worries like a book.

You look out of the window at your neighbourhood and say nothing. You’re not sure if you want to look at Rose’s phone or not and see what John said. Avoiding it is stupid though and your doctor says that avoiding things is a way of controlling things and control is the big problem with anxiety based disorders which is a big part of your deal. You hate this. You should look, not looking won’t mean that he hasn’t said whatever he said, good or bad. By not looking you remove the possibility of you seeing him be supportive, which you’d like.

You’re still not looking right now though.

The community centre pulls into view and Dirk finds their parking area and looks for a space. You make a deal with yourself, you’ll see Karkat and have a good time and then afterwards you will read
John’s message. You’re not avoiding, you’re procrastinating. It’s different. Slightly. He’s your best friend, you can’t avoid him forever so if you set a time to read it then you’re ok. Look at you being vaguely functional.

Dirk stops the car and you jump out, closing the door behind yourself. Roxy stays inside even when the rest of you have got out. Dirk leans in and waves his hand to get her attention and hands her the keys before shutting the door and leaving her in there.

“She’s talking to Jane.” Rose tells Dirk as the three of you walk along.

“I’d guessed. I hope they work shit out.” Dirk says with a nod.

“You think they will?” you ask hopefully as you round the corner to the community centre’s building.

“I think they’re both tired of fighting.” Dirk answers and you glance at Rose because, hey, guess where else that point could apply to? Rose is not looking at either of you.

You push open the door to the community centre and you spy Meulin across the room with an armful of tablecloths but she stops when she sees you and juggles things about until she has a free hand. She holds it out in front of her and motions with her hand in a way that has always made you think of someone dribbling a basketball.

[Hey!]

You sign hello back, not that you even needed to be taught sign that basic.

The room is too crowded for you to want to yell so you figure you may as well do this with the little sign that Karkat has been able to teach you, though this isn’t a real word at all. You make your index and middle fingers look like you’re partway through doing air quotes and set them on top of your head where your horns would be if you were a troll, you remember to keep your mouth shut and kind of motion with your fingers twice. Meulin’s face lights up and she points to the far right corner of the room.

“What was that?” Dirk asks in puzzlement.

“Karkat’s name in sign language, or at least what Meulin settled on calling him. It’s not a gesture that means anything to people who don’t know her but it’s quicker than spelling his name. Essentially it’s his horns and an indication of two syllables. Though, fun fact, if you have your mouth open when doing that it’s Kankri’s name because he never shuts up.” Rose explains.

“I’m gonna-” you start to say but Rose rolls her eyes.

“Yes, we had guessed. Go on, run off to him.” Rose teases you. You flip her off and hurry in the direction that Meulin indicated. As Karkat said there is the smell of amazing food cooking when you get close and it only becomes stronger when you push the door open. There are multiple ovens blaring and long industrial stovetops as well as miles of counter space. There are two adult trolls in here, though neither of them are any of Karkat’s parents. There’s a woman who looks like a taller and less tattooed Porrim, so you know that she’s Dolorosa. You’ve seen her a few times in the car when she drops Karkat and the others off at school or picks them up but you don’t think you’ve ever said more to her than hello. Stirring a pan with a look of intense concentration is a man who bears more than a passing resemblance to Equius and Dirk’s horse friend so he must be their ancestor but you can’t remember his name.

That’s about as far into looking in the room as you get before you hear Karkat yell your name and
you suddenly have your arms full of happy troll.

“You’re here!” Karkat says brightly and kisses you immediately.

A smart version of you would be nervous about kissing your soulmate in front of people who are basically strangers, but the thing about kissing Karkat is you’re pretty sure that it temporarily knocks like fifty points off of your IQ and so it seems like a really great idea. You kiss him back and you can feel the pleased rumble in his chest which you have to record some time.

The two of you only stop when you hear delicate, ladylike laughter and you break apart to see Kanaya’s mom looking at you with the kind of knowing smile that Kanaya wears when she sees you being a dumbass. Karkat just goes very dark and pulls away from you awkwardly.

“Uh, hi. Dave. I don’t know if you’ve ever really met my uh… grandmother.” Karkat says clumsily.

“I’m still not used to that human term.” she says lightly and wipes her hands on her apron. She walks closer to the two of you and you’re alarmed at how tall she is, taller that Psii at least and the primal part of your brain is making ‘run away’ noises at you, especially when she smiles and her fangs are properly displayed. She might also be glowing slightly.

“Uh, not really, no.” you say, trying not to sound weak.

“You are Rose’s twin, yes? I have met her before and I’ve seen you around, besides Karkat talks about you a lot.” she says with a smile.

“Rosa!” Karkat protests.

“Shush. I am The Dolorosa, but you can call me Rosa.” she introduces herself and holds out a large hand for you to shake.

“Uh. Dave, Strider. And yes, Rose is my twin and uh… Roxy is my older sister, she’s Sollux’s soulmate and the other guy who looks kinda like me is my bro Dirk, they’re all around somewhere.” you explain and shake her hand.

“I look forward to meeting them as well. Hm, I suppose I can spare my kitchen assistant for now. I’m sure he’ll be all but useless now that you’re actually here, it’s been a miracle to get him to stop checking his phone all day.” Rosa sighs and Karkat puts his face in his hands.

“Ok, thank you, bye.” Karkat blurts out and pulls you from the room as he rips his apron off. He tugs you out of the way and into some kind of corridor where he leans against a wall and pulls you up against him to kiss you again.

“I missed you, that’s probably the most pathetic thing ever but…” Karkat sighs, sounding obviously embarrassed. There’s no one else here to be embarrassed for so you kiss him again, calm and content.

“Today’s been mostly cool but I kept wanting to talk to you.” you admit, and Karkat beams at you.

“Same. Also, I have been both congratulated and mocked by pretty much everyone I know about this.” Karkat says, holding his marked hand up.

“Yeah, absolutely no one is surprised.” you agree.

Well… one person was surprised.
“What’s wrong?” Karkat asks slowly, frowning as he looks at you.

“Ah, what? Nothing. I’m good, great even.” you say quickly.

Karkat looks less than convinced, so you try looking anywhere that’s not at his face. You tug at his sweater a little, maybe if you can bring him close enough to kiss one or both of you can forget about this whole John thing. You see the flash of red on your finger and wonder for a moment why you’re hiding this from him. What does he not know about you? You already have him, you’ve won your cute nubby horned prize.

“Rose told John, I mean she asked me if she could and she did it so that we could see if it was Jane calling Roxy which it was. And he can be…” you trail off looking down that absolutely fascinating empty hallway, wow such excitement.

“I haven’t read what he said yet.” you admit.

“Maybe you should.” Karkat suggests.

“Also if he’s terrible I think there are more people than just me willing to get revenge for you.” he adds smugly.

“Yeah, speaking of… Dirk mentioned that he threatened you one time. What gives?” you ask, looking back at him.

“What, that? Nah, the more I know Dirk the less scary he is. I’d have to do something pretty terrible to be in any danger from him and then I’d probably deserve it too so I wouldn’t even fight him on it.” Karkat shrugs, and you roll your eyes. What a bunch of idiots.

That just leaves the two of you standing around in the hallway alone.

“So, did you have plans for the rest of the day or do you want to stay for food and whatever?” Karkat asks a little nervously.

“Can ‘whatever’ include making out with you in this hallway until someone catches us?” you ask, tugging on Karkat’s sweater again.

“By definition of the word it obviously can, Dave.” Karkat says in mock irritation.

It ends up being Mituna who catches you sometime later and announces that he did to everyone in earshot.

As it turns out the Community Centre’s 12th Perigee’s Eve celebration is actually pretty cool. You help Dolorosa in the kitchen when it comes to tasks like ‘move that there’ and ‘put that on the table’ and less of the involved cooking stuff. You talk to people that you know from school like Terezi and Vriska, apparently they’re here because their ancestors know each other and not because Terezi and Vriska are friends. Also, you knew that Redglare was the District Attorney, but you had somehow never realised that she was also Terezi’s mom.

She’s an intimidating looking woman with teeth like a bear trap and she’s caught Dirk in a conversation that he seems to very much not want to have. Poor guy.

After a while, Roxy comes inside and though her eyes look a little red she’s smiling like crazy. You don’t need to be a mind reader to guess that she and Jane have worked something out between them. Good for her, if she’s happy then you’re happy about it.
Every so often an adult troll shows up, often with a teenager that you know in tow but sometimes not. Signless will see them and smile, going over to embrace them and speak to them. He seems pleased to see everyone and the only reason his door isn’t literally open all the time is to keep the breeze out.

You help move tables and chairs and speak to people as Karkat brings them into your orbit. It’s not until he talks to one wide horned kid that you stop and really pay attention.

“Oh, sorry Tavros, this is Dave.” Karkat introduces you as you stand there with a handful of cutlery.

You look the guy over, kinda short, mohawk, bigass bull horns.

“I… know you.” Tavros says.

“Yeah, I was just going to say the same.” you agree, trying to place him.

“What? No, you don’t. His brother Rufioh was at your party but Tavros wasn’t.” Karkat corrects you, but you shake your head, you know this dude.

“You live near me I think, or… or you did.” Tavros says slowly and you place him finally.

“You were the Christmas kid, you bought me a drink like… two Christmases in a row. You were so goddamn awkward I don’t think we ever even talked.” you exclaim.

“Ah… I was so worried you were going to die of cold.” the guy says nervously.

“Well, diving in a fountain for change in December has that risk I guess. I kind of hated the charity thing but you never hung around to make me say thanks you just helped out. That was pretty cool of you.” you say with a fond smile. You might have protested it at the time but you really did enjoy the kindness, at least on some level, and the fact that he helped you repeatedly made him stick in your head somewhere.

“Wait, what?” Karkat asks, looking between the two of you.

“I haven’t seen you for a while, did you move then? You look better, or less covered in cold water at least.” Tavros laughs lightly.

“Yeah man, my brother Dirk started getting money and then we found my sisters and moved in with them. I’ve not been dick deep in a fountain in ages.” you laugh. Karkat waves his hand between the two of you.

“Shut up and explain this shit to me. I’ll buy that you two ran into each other before, your old neighbourhood isn’t that far from his but why the hell were you in a fountain and why was this regular?” Karkat demands.

Words freeze on your tongue, and you have to repeat to yourself that it’s Karkat and he knows most of this shit already before you can force words out.

“Dude, we were broke as shit back then. We almost never got money from… you know. So… fountains. People throw money in them.” you explain patiently.

“No they don’t, or like… nickels maybe but not actual money.” he protests.

“Change adds up, man. People at the grocery store accept a damp handful of small change just the same as bills.” you point out.
Karkat stares at you and you can all but see the math running through his head. You know the equation perfectly well. Desperation divided by pride equals what you’re willing to do for money. You know that with his family size he’s not always had loads of money and even now he’s not rich but he’s never been poor like you have. Not ‘I can’t wait for Monday because then I get school meals’ poor. Not ‘steal ramen from the grocery store’ poor, not ‘dive in a fountain for change’ poor. The worst part of it is that Bro had crazy money, when the legal shit finally cleared Dirk inherited Bro’s money and there was loads of it. Technically you were never poor at all either, Bro just didn’t care if you starved or maybe he thought it taught you something, who knows?

“Right.” Karkat says thickly and looks back at Tavros who gives him an awkward smile.

“So, uhm, how do you two know each other?” Tavros asks curiously.

“We go to school together and he’s- he’s my soulmate.” Karkat explains and holds his hand up to show the ring tattooed around his finger.

“Oh! Oh wow, congratulations! You were always so excited to meet him, it’s nice that you did.” Tavros says politely to Karkat, and you think that you’ll excuse yourself from this conversation before shit gets critical levels of awkward.

“Well, it was nice meeting you again, dude. I gotta go put knives and forks out, but next time I run into you I’ll buy you a drink or something.” you say and fistbump the guy.

You leave him and Karkat and continue on your cutlery quest but your mind keeps going back to Tavros. The first time he bought you a drink you took it despite your pride because you were that cold and hungry and you had got basically nothing from the fountains in your area and just been hoping that Dirk had better luck on the ones he was hitting up. You had told the guy bitterly that you didn’t need his pity which had made him stammer in embarrassment and run off, knowing what you know now about the word ‘pity’ and its connotations… well. The year after he’d shoved the drink in your hand and declared that it didn’t mean ‘anything like that you just look very- uh- cold’ and escaped again.

You watch Dirk talking to Redglare and abandon your task for a moment to walk over to him. Redglare turns her considerable gaze on you and smiles like a shark.

“And this is the boy himself then, hm?” she says with a purr.

“Yeah, Dave this is District Attorney Redglare.” Dirk introduces you.

“Hi. Can I borrow you just for a moment?” you say, directing most of that at Dirk who raises an eyebrow at you but nods. You two take a few small steps away from Redglare but she doesn’t do the polite thing and walk off or pretend to direct her attention elsewhere.

“What’s up?” Dirk asks.

“Remember I told you about that kid who bought me a hot chocolate like… two years running? Troll kid?” you ask quietly and Dirk nods. He had told you off for accepting drinks from strangers because you didn’t know what someone had done to a drink you hadn’t seen. Which… hm, apparently not a lesson you took in even then because that sure hasn’t stopped you since.

“He’s here, he knows Karkat. Small world, huh?” you laugh quietly.

“Funny how that shit works.” Dirk agrees.

“So just… uh… since we’re all Christmas magic and ‘tis the season-ing it up here I just wanted to
say, you know… thanks. For just… you.” you mutter and awkwardly hug him.

“Oh, Dave. I love you.” Dirk says softly and kisses the top of your head. You are ACUTELY aware that basically everyone you know from school is here and you try to squirm away from him.

“Dirk, quit it.” you protest and Dirk laughs.

“Oh wow, have you finally become old enough to be embarrassed by me?” Dirk chuckles.

“I find that embarrassing kids is one of the best things about having them.” Redglare agrees loudly. Dirk laughs evilly and you only just escape before he does something any more mortifying. You break into the empty corridor that you and Karkat were in before only to find that it is not, in fact, empty.

Rose and Kanaya look up at you, you think they were just talking but that alone is a huge thing.

“You didn’t see me,” you insist breathlessly, “I was never here.”

You run past them and hide around a corner, leaning against a door. Dirk may or may not chase you but if he gets Roxy involved in his mission to embarrass you then nowhere is safe. Thankfully they don’t have the endurance of the prankster CrockerBert siblings so you should be able to evade this.

Suddenly the door that you’re leaning on opens backwards and you end up on your ass looking up at a troll with white juggalo paint on his face.

“Uh, hi.” you say dumbly.

“What’s up, brother?” the troll asks you lazily and two and two crash together to make four in your head.

“Oh, shit, you’re one of the Makara’s aren’t you? Karkat talks about you.” you ask.

“Yeah, I’m Gamzee. And you’re Dave, Karbro talks about you all the time.” the troll says and helps you up, he is really goddamn tall considering as he’s still a teenager but then maybe a lot of that is just horn height.

“How come you’re in here and not in the party?” you question him.

“Aw, some of the guys out there don’t like me and Kurloz. That’s Kurloz, he doesn’t talk out loud. So we just hang in here and chill until Signless drags us in for food.” Gamzee explains lazily, he moves aside a little so you can see and older looking taller troll sat on the bed who waves. They seem friendly enough, it doesn’t seem fair to keep them in here.

“That’s not fair.” you say, stepping in the room a little. These guys are Karkat’s friends, right? You should make an effort to be nice.

“What’s fair usually don’t have nothin’ to do with what happens.” Gamzee sighs.

“I bet that makes Karkat real mad, huh?” you guess as you look around at the room. The guy on the bed, Kurloz, seems to have stitches over his lips which is all kind of disturbing but you’re just going to tell yourself that it’s some kind of weird Halloween like makeup and not a reality from Bro’s horror movies brought to life.

The rest of the room is fairly basic, some computer stuff, a weird amount of bicycle horns, a modest sound system, two unicycles and a shitload of ICP posters on the wall. There’s also a huge chest
freezer but you suppose that if Karkat’s point about people not trusting these two out and about with their powers is true then it makes sense for them to be able to keep shit fresh here and not go out.

“It sure does. Take a seat, little bro.” the younger troll says, smiling at you. He nudges you backwards until you’re sitting on the freezer and cold runs up your spine in a way that you don’t think has anything to do with the cold metal.

He asks you what you’re into and you let your mouth run as you try to think.

You know he has some power that scares people. Literally it’s a fear thing. You have a fear problem, and you’re alone with two strange trolls who are more than a little intimidating on their own. He’s being friendly in his own weird poorly socialised way.

He’s still talking, pay attention.

“Man, that beat just blows off the roof, little brother.” Gamzee smiles. His… his intonation is just weird, that’s all. There’s nothing wrong here. Your eyes land on his teeth and your throat goes dry and your heart starts hammering. Keep cool, keep cool.

“I- yeah, I haven’t heard it.” you reply.

AT: Dave, are you okay? Your heartrate is getting pretty high for a weird conversation about the Insane Clown Posse.

You can’t answer him, you just need to calm down.

You feel movement behind you, the displaced air of a missed flashstep. Only… only you can see everyone in this room and neither of them have moved. Everything in your head is screaming to look behind you. You know this feeling, you’ve felt it a thousand times before. You’re alone, and you feel this crawling up the back of your neck and you turn to come eye to eye with unblinking blue glass eyes, and then you get the shit beaten out of you. Those ones were always the worst. You’d rather face a regular strife with a sword than one that started with Cal in hand, he always had less mercy than usual then.

But you don’t look, Bro is dead and you know it. Don’t look, there’s nothing there.

Gamzee has your wrist in his hand and he’s twisting it to see the soulmarks up there, but his grip is so tight that you couldn’t pull away no matter how hard you tried. So you don’t try, you go passive and keep your eye open for an escape. It’s all too similar. You’re not sure that you can breathe, you feel like you’re going to die.

“It’s some kind of miracle, that’s for sure.” Gamzee rambles.

AT: Dave? What’s wrong, say something. Even if it’s not to me.

“Oh god, if you’re going to be going on about miracles all day then- Dave I didn’t know you were back here.”

You stay as still as possible and look up only the barest amount with your eyes, it’s Karkat. Karkat’s talking to Gamzee and Kurloz and you’re frozen like a rabbit in the headlights, afraid that if you turn around you’ll attract the attention of the thing behind you that can’t be Bro, it’s CAN’T because he’s DEAD.

“Dave?” Karkat is close up to you now.
Your throat works to try to speak but you can’t manage to choke words out.

“Dave, are you… Dave look at me.”

He touches your face and you flinch so hard that you nearly fall off of the thing that you’re sitting on, whatever it was. Freezer thing.

You open your eyes again and see that Karkat is staring at his phone with wide eyes.

“Oh, fuck, this is a panic attack isn’t it? Ok, no touching, got it. Not gonna touch you. Did they do this? Sometimes humans are weaker to it. Maybe you should get out of their room and into the open, ok?” Karkat says, trying to sound soothing.

You jolt off of the fridge as you swear you felt something that felt like a puppet hand touch your back, like Cal’s hand. Fear lances right through your brain and you crash into Karkat, terrified fingers clinging into his clothes. You squeeze your eyes shut because if you keep them open you will look behind you and failing to see Cal or Bro does not mean they aren’t there. Seeing nothing will not make you feel better.

“Oh, okay, out of here it is.” Karkat says and you don’t look behind you as you stumble out of the room with him. It feels like Bro’s breath is hot on the back of your neck, it feels like hiding under the bed and being found.

Karkat shuts the door behind you and half walks, half drags you out of the building into fresh air and away from people. When you get outside it feels as if you can suddenly breathe again and you shakily sit down.

“I am so sorry, Dave.” Karkat whispers as he stands in front of you on the steps.

You pull your medication out of your sylladex, shit like this is why it’s always in there. The bottle drops into your shaking hands along with an emergency bottle of water and you down your correct dose and stow everything away again.

“I’m fine.” you assure him as you shuffle back to press your back to the bricks of the building so nothing can sneak up on you and you can quiet the terrified screaming of your brain that something will.

“You are not fine!” Karkat hisses and follows you on his knees. He’s still not touching you, and right now you appreciate that.

“Fair, hah… but oh man… that is the worst one I’ve had since I’ve been seeing my doctor.” you say and nearly jump out of your skin when Dirk bursts through the door.

“Dave!” Dirk gasps and kneels down by you.

“Don’t touch me!” you manage to yelp out in time and Dirk jerks his hand back. Great, now you can’t breathe again. You lean forward and try to breathe in time with the animation that Hal is playing on the inside of your shades.

Dirk and Karkat are talking and it’s destroying your focus.

“Shut up.” you growl and they both fall silent, but you hear the sound of claws on glass so Karkat is probably messaging him instead.

AT: Can I talk to you? Blink twice if you’re ok with me talking to you.
You can deal with this, probably. You blink twice.

AT: Alright, it’s going to be ok. I know you feel bad but it will be ok, it’s always been ok so just relax and breathe.

AT: Do you think those trolls did this to you?

You shake your head.

AT: I didn’t see anything that could have set you off. Did you see anything?

You shake your head.

AT: Did you feel something then? A physical sensation?

You hesitate and rest your head in your hands.

“It was all in my head, it’s fine.” you say, though your voice is shaky.

AT: Ok but what did you think you felt?

“Bro, Cal, I don’t know.” you reply hoarsely.

“Who’s Cal?” Karkat whispers, not something he’s very good at doing. You try to focus on your breathing instead.

“That’s not possible, Dave, you’re fine. That kind of hallucination is something you get after you’re already gone, you know that. Something else must have tripped it.” Dirk says.

“Well, it doesn’t matter does it? I’m… I’m fine. Just give me ten goddamn minutes out here on my own, okay?” you say sharply and you see Dirk’s eyebrows raise. Everything feels too raw right now and unlike every other time this has happened you don’t want anyone physically near you. You’re this horrible smear of fear and rage and you want everyone away before you hurt their feelings.

Dirk has to half drag Karkat back inside and then you’re left in the blessedly cool air of December.

AT: Do you want me to leave you alone too?

“You’re fine.” you mumble as you shift from crouching to properly sitting down with your legs outstretched. You lean into the stretch, trying to banish all of the tension from your muscles.

AT: Sorry if the guessing game just made it worse, I just want to make sure this doesn’t happen again.

“It will though, won’t it? Sometimes my brain just hates me.” you sigh and stretch your back a little.

AT: Brains are weird.

“I wonder… I wonder what your brain will look like when Dirk makes you one with your body.” You wonder as you lean back against the cool brick and let your head loll forward. You rub the back of your neck until it starts to relax, you’re just a bundle of taut muscles right now.

AT: You think the weirdest things.

AT: But I suppose you have a point.
AT: My mind has probably grown differently to a human mind so even if Dirk and I switched places and I got crammed back in a human brain, things probably wouldn’t work.

“You gonna design your own with him?” you ask.

AT: He’s not got anything good enough to put it in yet, so I’m in no hurry to force that issue and end up piloting a child’s toy.

“He’ll get there.” you tell him.

AT: You’re very trusting. Also, your heart rate is getting back to normal. Do you want to go back inside? If so I suggest avoiding Gamzee and Kurloz just in case it was them who set this off.

“Kay.” you agree mildly.

You stand up and stretch again, you’re still a little jelly limbed but you’ve been worse. That was a really bad attack but it passed reasonably quickly too, your meds will help for sure but they don’t work this fast. Maybe you’re just getting better at dealing with them. That’s a nice thought.

You work your way back into the main area via the kitchen and so when you get to the empty chair next to Dirk it’s with a dish of buttery peas and carrots in hand. You sit down between Dirk and Rose and Rose nods sagely at you.

“Rosa got you delivering things, I see.” she says with a nod.

“Yeah.” you agree, setting the dish down on the table. The one that you’re all at is smaller and round, Tavros and his brother are there with your family along with Horuss and Equius.

“I’m fine.” you say quietly to Dirk because he’s giving you a look and a half.

You turn around to look for Karkat and see that he’s up at the top table with his family, though he’s looking right at you with an expression of worry on his face.

TG: im fine karkat dont look so worried

CG: OF COURSE I’M WORRIED ABOUT YOU, YOU ASSHOLE, I CARE ABOUT YOU. I LOVE YOU IN FACT.

TG: you didnt think that this shit would just stop happening did you? i warned you bro

TG: i told you dawg

CG: I HATE YOU SO MUCH RIGHT NOW.

CG: AND NO I DIDN’T THINK THIS WOULD STOP, I WAS JUST SURPRISED BY HOW BADLY AFFECTED YOU SEEMED.

TG: well ive been stressing a lot lately that can affect it or is it effect it man i can never remember fuck grammar am i right?

CG: YES THAT’S THE THING THAT I WANT TO FOCUS ON HERE, NOT HOW YOU’RE DOING OR WHAT HAPPENED. NO, I WANT TO FOCUS ON GRAMMAR.

TG: yea i know what you like

CG: YES, DAVE, SEDUCE ME WITH THE POOR GRASP YOU HAVE OF THE
GRAMMATICAL NATURE OF YOUR MOTHER TONGUE.

TG: hey dont you doubt the skills i have with my tongue ill show you

CG: HM. YES. LOOK AT THOSE WORDS YOU JUST WROTE THERE. PRESERVED FOREVER.

TG: i am suddenly filled with regret

CG: A REASSURINGLY COMMON FEELING FOR YOU I’M SURE. YOU ARE THE CHAMPION AT LEAPING OFF OF THE HIGH BRIDGE OF NORMAL CONVERSATION INTO THE DEEP AND MURKY WATERS OF UNINTENDED INNUENDO. YOU ARE PRACTICALLY AMPHIBIOUS AT THIS POINT WITH ALL THE TIME YOU SPEND THERE.

TG: stop dragging me your dad looks like hes gonna give a toast

Signless is indeed standing up, picking up a glass as he does so. The room becomes hushed almost immediately, though there is still some quiet chatter from the far younger trolls that some have brought with them. Your hands are still shaking slightly so you press them against your legs and try to focus on Signless’ words.

“I say much the same kind of thing here every year, so I won’t keep everyone from food for long. Every year that I have on this planet is one that I never thought I would have, it feels like a gift that I don’t deserve and I’m sure many of you feel the same. So… to the friends we have with us and to those we have lost and the ties that bring us all together.” He says and raises his glass. Everyone else in the room does the same with varying murmurs of agreement, a few ‘hear, hear’s and even a scattered ‘cheers’ or two.

He sits down, and the people by him on the long table start talking to him. Something about the lighting is pinging something in your artistic sensibilities and you grab your camera and take a picture of the top table with Signless in the centre. You pull it up on the screen and squint at it, if you cropped it just so then this photo holds more than a passing resemblance to the Last Supper painting. You shove your camera away without showing anyone. Signless already martyred himself once, no one needs to see art that suggests he’s close to doing so again.

Dirk hands you a dish with meat in and you help yourself and then swap dishes with Rose so you get the potatoes that she was holding. You all continue trading off until you have plates filled with what you want.

“Man, this is way better than takeaway Chinese food in the car.” Roxy groans in delight as she eats.

“Rosa is a very good cook.” Rose agrees.

“Mmm, speaking of how is Kanaya?” you ask curiously, and your other siblings look over too.

“We’re talking, she still knows I’m angry and she’s insisting the same stupid thing about April to me as she is to Karkat.” Rose huffs and stabs a carrot angrily.

“Well-” you start, but Rose sets her fork down and looks at you.

“Brother, dearest, I love you dearly and I know that you are still very happy from the whole thing with Karkat but if you ask me one more question about Kanaya I promise I will ensure that you deeply regret it.” Rose threatens. Her eyes are cold, and you’re pretty sure that she means that. You hold your hands up in surrender, and she picks her fork up again and resumes eating.
“Yes, about Karkat, Nepeta messaged me this morning to tell me that you are his soulmate. She was very excited and I am mostly indifferent to your romance but you seem fine and Karkat seems happy so I feel I should probably congratulate you.” Equius says with a shrug.

“Uh, thanks man.” you say a little awkwardly, that was a pretty mixed message there.

“Uhh, yeah, Eq… that was a pretty weak congratulations.” Tavros agrees.

“Yes! Be more enthusiastic about it!” Tavros’ older brother says and flutters his giant bronze wings in excitement. Honestly, you’ve seen the guy walking about the party before but it’s taking all you have to not be rude and stare, the poor guy probably gets that from humans enough which is totally unfair for something so cool. You’re not going to make him feel like a sideshow at his own holiday meal with his own people.

“I will not.” Equius says stiffly.

“Anyway! Dirk, we should talk later about this walking robot design that I’ve been thinking of.” Horuss says brightly.

“Quadruped or biped?” Dirk asks as he pours himself a drink.

“Biped and I think we can improve enough to make it run too.” Horuss answers Dirk excitedly.

“Could you make it, like, Dirk’s height?” you interrupt eagerly. Orange scrolls across your glasses immediately.

AT: Kid, I love you. You know that, right?

“Walking robots are very difficult to do, greater size only amplifies that problem.” Equius informs you.

“Yeah but scientific progress isn’t ever made by people sitting there whining about how it’s gonna be hard is it?” Roxy chips in with a wicked grin.

“Well shit, I think you just decided that for us, Rox. What do you think Horuss?” Dirk asks.

“Absolutely. We should let the reigns out on this one and run free!” the older Zahhak says with a laugh.

You eat your food and talk to the others around your table as calm settles over you again and the last of your fear bleeds away. You find out that both Tavros and Rufioh are big into rap and that culminates in a five-way rap battle between them, you, Dirk and Rose. Rose crushes Rufioh mercilessly with her verses that always sound to you like a mashup between Freud and Edgar Allen Poe. Alas hearing her win makes you fail against Tavros who is surprisingly good and after beating you, he almost gives Dirk a run for his money.

By the time your plates are empty everyone around your table is laughing and talking. The rest of the room is similarly loud and joyful. You take a photograph and a few others of the other tables. You wish you could catch this whole room, this night, together and frame it like a photo so that you can always feel like this. For a species that doesn’t naturally have families there is one hell of a feel of family and community here. Most alarmingly of all, you feel like you’re part of it. You and Dirk were a family together and expanded for Hal and again for your sisters, but this is bigger. Or maybe your medication is making you slightly high as well, but who knows?

“Hey, coolkid.” Terezi hisses at you and you turn around to see her leaning out of her chair to talk to
you. She’s on a table with her sister, Vriska and her sister, the woman from the restaurant that Karkat took you and another lady troll with a newly hatched troll in her arms.

“Hey, what’s up ‘rez?’” you ask, leaning over the back of your chair to look at her.

“I didn’t think I’d see you here.” she says slyly.

“Technically you haven’t.” you point out, and Terezi honks with laughter like a startled goose.

“I don’t get it.” Dirk says quietly behind you.

“Terezi is blind.” Rose informs him.

“Dave!” Dirk scolds you and Terezi laughs harder.

“You just got informed that all of the cooler people were here and had to come along, right? Be with your people, coolkid?” Terezi says with a waggle of her eyebrows.

“Totally, lured by the siren song.” you agree.

“Siren song of Karkat’s bulge more like.” Vriska snorts and her sister smacks her in the arm.

“Mmm, yes I heard that my two cherry boys got together at last. I bet you got a sweet cherry ring on your hand to make it all official too, huh?” she asks, sniffing in your direction a little more intently.

“Rez don’t lick the other guests.” Latula sighs as you carefully put your hand out of reach.

“I’ll get you, Dave.” Terezi promises and licks her lips.

You turn back around in your seat to see Dirk looking at you.

“What?” you ask.

“You have weird friends.” Dirk says flatly.

You incline your head ever EVER so slightly in the direction of Dirk’s weird, sweating, horse friend. Gee, is Dirk in a position to call your friends weird?

“Eh, fair.” Dirk shrugs.

As the evening wears on dessert proves to be a more casual affair with everything set out and people going up to get what they want and most people changing where they’re sitting with tables and chairs dragged in new locations and even groups of kids just sat in big groups in the corner.

You end up in one such group with all of the trolls your approximate age that you know from school, plus Tavros and Gamzee. Eleven trolls and just you and Rose as the human section of your expanding party. You gave the cake on offer a hard pass, you know too much about Betty Crocker to risk it and you didn’t want to ask if it was hers or not. You’ve got a bowl set up with some kind of chocolate swiss roll with chocolate ice cream and a metric tonne of chocolate sauce because you welcome the food coma that this will give you. Bring it on, a winner is you.

You’re mostly sitting and watching everyone else talk, it seems that they’ve all known each other for forever, so it’s nice just being there. You could do without watching Terezi eat strawberry ice cream and a whole tub of cocktail cherries as she stares at you and Karkat. Or you think she’s staring, it’s hard to tell.
“We should play a game!” Vriska announces.

“I love games!” Tavros chirps enthusiastically, darn the guy is kind of sweet. You might be biased in his favour though.

“Well I love winning, something I’m sure you know nothing about, pupa.” Vriska sneers.

“That, uh, seemed needlessly mean. I mean, I was already on your side in the matter of games.” Tavros points out weakly.

“I find it easy to tell when Vriska is being needlessly mean,” Rose says in a bored tone, “it’s just if her mouth is moving and sound is coming out.”

You stifle your laugh in your ice cream but just barely. Sollux laughs loudly and Karkat facepalms.

“Oh snap!” Aradia cackles loudly.

“Remind me to talk to her about blackflirting too, you fucking disaster twins.” Karkat grumbles quietly.

“What game did you have in mind, Vriska?” Kanaya asks a little stiffly.

“Since there are soooooooo many of us I figured cards against humanity with troll cards.” Vriska says tartly, dropping a box into her hands.

“Kankri hates that game.” Karkat says slowly, straightening up and looking over at Vriska.

“Even being in the same building as people playing that game… I’M IN.” Karkat declares with malice shining in his eyes.

Cards are dealt and the game is briefly explained, one person plays a kind of question card which is black and everyone else plays a response from the white answer cards that they have in their hand. The person who played the starting black card reads the responses out and chooses the one that wins based on…

“I am not sure I understand, is it not the most fitting answer?” Kanaya asks, frowning down at the cards in her hand.

“It can be, or the funniest, or most crude or the most terribly offensive. When it’s your turn you pick based on whatever you want.” Aradia explains patiently.

“So, my black card is this: ‘humans don’t understand _____.’ So you all put down your answers and we shuffle, then I pick a winner.” Karkat explains.

You peer at your cards and elect your card based on the fact that Karkat has to read this aloud. Everyone else sets their cards down and Karkat messily shuffles them before picking them up with a sigh and a muttered complaint that he had to start. He reads them out and sets each card down as he reads it.

“Okay. Humans don’t understand: Police brutality, My Inner Demons, Kanye West and ok yeah I’ll agree with that one. Uh, Bitches, Having Six Legs hah I like that, Juggling and I swear Gamzee if that was your card I will flip, Inappropriate Papping, The ACTUAL 50 Shades of Grey, Being A Motherfucking Sorcerer. Who wasted that card on this? Last three, this is too many people I swear. Human Emotions hah, Bulge Envy and Pretending to Care.” Karkat says in one long stream.
“Yeah, this might be too many people.” Aradia agrees with a nod.

Karkat is staring down at the cards and giggling slightly.

“Okay, first who wasted my favourite answer card of ‘Being a Motherfucking Sorcerer’ on this dumb question?” Karkat demands, looking up. Gamzee grins and holds up his hand.

“Of course you did, you colossal failure. Now, who had human emotions because that’s something humans sure as shit don’t understand.” Karkat asks, looking around. You hold up your hand and Karkat laughs loudly.

“Well here you go, you win. Admitting your failings is the first step to success.” he laughs at you, and the next round starts again.

Multiple people drop out or team up until the numbers of cards are more reasonable. You drop out a few rounds in and just read over Karkat’s shoulder. Rose is unsurprisingly good at the game but the other girls are just as good, or possibly terrible given the answers that are coming up.

The game eventually ends up with just the girls playing in some cutting quickfire round producing gems such as:

When the Empress strokes her bulge it’s to ____ The Miracle of Childbirth

Charades was forever ruined for me when my mom had to act out ____ An Oedipus Complex

Highbloods like ____ Seeing things from Hitler’s perspective

When Rose’s last response fully breaks you, you just have to leave. You have no way to explain to the vast majority of people here, and nor should you, why “Dead Parents” is an answer that makes you cry from laughing so hard, especially when the black card that Vriska put down was “____, High five, Bro.” To make matters worse Karkat doesn’t seem to know if he should be finding that funny or not and his awkwardness only makes the whole thing funnier. Oh god, you are a terrible person. That’s the outcome of playing this game, isn’t it?

You drag Karkat off for a while and waste time together. You give gifts to people you had the forethought to keep gifts in your sylladex for. You watch Dirk and Roxy make new friends and hang out together without the pressure of having to keep an eye on you. It’s all so nice. It’s unsurprising then that your family are one of the last few groups to leave and you find Dirk and Roxy talking to Signless and Psi as Dolorosa and The Disciple wrangle a few unruly trolls.

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but would you be willing to drive them?” Signless asks Dirk.

“Yeah, it’s no problem at all. You guys took us in for the evening, as well as everything else. I don’t mind doing taxi duty to help you out at all.” Dirk agrees.

“Same.” Roxy adds.

“But he was our ride, and we live the other way from him.” another adult troll points out.

“Let’s get a map.” Dirk suggests and pulls his tablet out, you can already see Hal opening up a map without Dirk even needing to ask.

“This might take a while.” Karkat says, taking your hand and pulling you over to some chairs.

“If we can work out all of the destinations and the vehicles that we have then it’s just a travelling
“Yeah, you’re right.” you agree and sit down with him. You lean forward so that your head is pillowed on your folded arms, you look at Karkat and feel that slow kind of happiness in your chest. He’s your soulmate.

“I can say pretty confidently that this has been the best Christmas yet.” you tell him. It really has, despite your brief attack it’s been pleasant all around.

“I think I can agree with that.” Karkat says and leans up against your side.

“Sorry about earlier.” you add quietly.

“About wh- oh. Don’t you dare apologise for that, I swear I will flip this table.” Karkat threatens.

“Don’t, I’m leaning on it.” you protest.

“I don’t care, I will flip it. I will flip you. I will proceed around this room in an orderly fashion flipping every object and person ass over rumblesphere and there will be nothing you can do about it!” Karkat declares loudly.

“You’re ridiculous, I love you.” It’s true, but it’s hard to say still. There’s always that slightly lingering feeling of ‘bad’ but you’re pushing past it and even saying it out of spite to that feeling. Plus, the way it flusters Karkat is always worth it.

“You two are so cute.” Rose purrs coming up to your table with Sollux and Mituna with her.

“What do you want?” you groan at her.

“I’m your beloved sister, can’t our mutual friends and I spend time with you?” Rose asks lightly.

You try to psychically indicate to her that you’d like her to fuck off so you can spend time with Karkat alone. The expression on her face suggests that she very well knows that this is your intent and wants to stay anyway. God damn her.

“I’m ignoring whatever this is. Mituna, I meant to ask you this morning if you’d seen my copy of Romeo and Juliet. The book, not the movie.” Karkat asks seemingly not so bothered by the interruption as you. You suppose that you’ve interrupted enough of your own moments that he’s used to it and so other people doing it doesn’t annoy him so much.

You resign yourself to the others sitting down at the table and Karkat and Mituna getting into an argument about where Karkat last left his book and whether that is where it is now or not. It takes about ten minutes before the adults decide who is going in what car to go where. It ends with Roxy driving someone else’s car with the owner in the front, you, Rose and Kanaya in the back. You’re following along behind Psii in the van with a few others on the same route who are either worse for wear or short a ride. The plan is that when you get to your last stop you’ll hand the car over to that person at their house and get in Psii’s van which will then have enough space for all of you and you can all go home. Dirk is dropping people off the other way.

You’re glad that the person in the front of your car isn’t drunk and that Roxy was able to convince the actual car owner to go in the other vehicle. You’re less glad that you’re stuck in the middle seat between your sister and her girlfriend who are still on somewhat tense terms. Maybe you can distract yourself by fussing with your sylladex.

“Dave if you cause an explosion of stuff in here so help me.” Roxy warns but you know your shit
enough to not do that. With this modus. Mostly. You reorganise and rename a few things until you spot something you’d overlooked.

“Oh, Kanaya. I just remembered I didn’t give you your present yet.” you say, dropping it out of your sylladex and into your hand.

“I feel bad, your present is at home because I did not think that I would be seeing you today.” Kanaya says a little regretfully as you drop the small present into her hands.

“Nah, don’t feel bad. Open it.” you encourage her and so she peels the tacky Santa paper off of the present. It’s a small, stuffed, spineless cactus.

“It’s a pincushion.” you tell her.

“Oh! I see, when it has pins in it, then it looks prickly. It’s sweet and surprisingly whimsical!” Kanaya says, sounding genuinely pleased.

“I’m glad you like it, you’re kind of hard to shop for but it seemed fun.” you say and she kisses your cheek.

“It is, thank you very much.” Kanaya says and looks at it a little more before storing it back in her own sylladex. At least it’s not taking up a card in yours anymore.

You muddle your way through awkward conversation because it seems that Rose has decided that she is done with talking to Kanaya for now so instead you regale the car with your theories that your science teacher might be a zombie on account of how incredibly old she is. Roxy takes that and runs with it and before too long the four of you are getting into the van and Psii is turning it around to drive home.

You’re kind of out in the sticks here and you’re tempted to ask to get out to take some pictures of the sky but you don’t think you’ll have any luck with that. So instead you sit between Kankri and Karkat underneath the sunroof and look up at the stars. It’s a clear December night and you can see so many. You should really know more constellations but you think you know some. Is that Orion above you?

A star blinks out and you stare in confusion, there’s no clouds. The one next to it vanishes as well, and you smack Karkat’s leg urgently.

“Kar, the stars are going out. Look, there.” you insist.

“Stars don’t go out, Dave. Not without a bang, I’ve seen it before.” Psii tells you from the driver's seat.

You squint at the sky. The star you were looking at pops back up.

“It came back. There, those three in a row.” you say, pointing and Karkat cranes his head to look.

A different star goes out and another right after it.

“No! Dave is right, they’re going out. There’s a dark spot now.” Karkat confirms.

“Karkat I’m too tired for your- Psii you shouldn’t break that hard!” Kankri yelps as Psii steps on the breaks. Psii unbuckles his seat belt and hauls himself bodily over his chair and to the sunroof that you’re looking through.
“Where?” Psii asks urgently.

“Just there, that dark spot.” you say, pointing.

“It can’t be stars going out, it’s got to be something blocking the view, right?” Roxy asks, leaning to try to see through her window.

“Shitty helmsman stealth does that. With good stealth you see everything as normal and no stealth has landing lights.” Psii says gravely.

“So… so what does that mean?” Karkat asks warily. Another star goes out above you.

“Mituna, call Signless right the fuck now.” Psii snaps and pulls himself back into his own seat and snaps his seatbelt on.

“I’ll call him for you, and Dirk too.” Hal’s voice comes out of the speakers.

“Are you everywhere ?!” Sollux screeches.

“Shut up! Everyone put your seatbelts on because this van may be about to do some serious shit for which no fucker designed it.” Psii orders and you hear a few people click their seatbelts in.

“Hal, what’s wrong?” Dirk asks as the call connects.

“We’ve no time for that. It’s me, there’s a ship coming in to land and it’s stealthed and badly. Smaller size I’d bet scout vessel and they don’t want us seeing them, I’m getting back to the house to get the kids safe but you need to get Mindfang out here. You’re going to need her psionics as well if you want that thing to land without a fight or a crater.” Psii warns.

“Oh fuck, okay I’ll call her now. Where are you?” Signless asks.

“We just passed the Taco Bell where Nepeta barfed in the trash that time.” Sollux says quickly.

“Sending you both the GPS coordinates. I’m going to try to get into some satellites to see if I can see what the hell that is above you.” Hal adds.

“I’ll call Mindfang, stay safe.” Signless says and hangs up.

“What can I do?” Dirk asks.

“What can I do?” Dirsk asks.

“Nothing, go away and let me drive.” Psii orders and Hal disconnects the call, or at least stops routing it through the speakers.

Your eyes are glued to the black patch of sky above you.

“I… I have a question. If we’re seeing darkness because it’s between us and the stars, does it blocking out more stars and the stars it blocks out changing mean that it’s following us?” you ask, knowing the answer already.

“Yeah. Ok, hold onto your asses.” Psii says and takes his hands off of the wheel and presses them to the roof of the car. Your stomach lurches and the scenery outside drops a good few feet down as the van suddenly becomes airborne. Red and blue lightning streak by the outside of the van and you feel like a comet rushing through the sky. Below you road signs whip by, you have no idea how fast
you’re going.

Above you the sky gets darker still.

“Psii!” Karkat yelps, clutching his hand to yours.

“Couldn’t it just be more trolls coming here, like you did?” Rose asks desperately.

“We did not hide our presence and we did not follow people, this is different.” Kanaya says worriedly.

“Bad news, that ship has not announced its presence to anyone else and is illegally in our airspace. I got one shitty photo of it and it looks like it’s military.” Hal announces over the speakers.

In front of you the road explodes in a beam of white light and huge chunks of tarmac spray out towards you. Sollux throws a hand out and they jerk the other way as Psii pulls a ninety degree turn in a flying van. Your shoulder gets slammed into Karkat’s and suddenly you lurch forward again.

“Mituna! Stop pulling on the van you’re throwing me off!” Psii shouts as a bolt of light shears the van’s wing mirror clean off.

“New plan, it’s desert out that way, right? Uninhabited? Answer me you goddamn AI!” Psii yells as he dodges blast after blast. You look in the back to see that Roxy has Rose clutched to her side in terror, though you don’t know who is more afraid.

“Yes! It’s empty, but what are you planning?” Hal asks, but Psii doesn’t answer and just swerves you into the blackness of the desert and cuts the engine to the van. All of the lights go dead. The vehicle becomes a swirling rollercoaster, lit only by three pairs of mismatched eyes and the light from Kankri’s phone next to you.

You touch the ground with a bump and Psii gets out.

“What are you doing?” Karkat hisses.

“Shooting it down.” Psii replies, his head pointing up at the sky.

AT: This is a bad plan!

You turn around in your seat and suddenly a light clicks on outside, illuminating your sisters and Kanaya in the back as it sweeps across the land.

“Got you.” Psii hisses and you have to clamp your eyes shut as red and blue beams burst from his eyes. You hear a distant explosion and after a moment you dare to open your eyes again.

“I don’t see a ship crashing!” Sollux calls out worriedly.

A bang sounds and something screeches to a halt before Psii, held in place in the air in red and blue light. It’s a metal ball, about the size of a beach ball.

“What-” Psii starts to say in confusion, right up until the ball splits in half and everything becomes acrid and hazy. Psii shouts in alarm and you think you hear him flinging the thing away but you’re already coughing as your lungs are filled with whatever that was.

Psii crumples to the floor and Karkat and Kankri slump against you on each side.

“Kanaya!” Rose coughs desperately from the back.
AT: Dave! Hold your breath!

“I can’t- can’t breathe!” Roxy coughs. You can’t either, every breath makes you cough harder and yet the more you breathe the woozier you feel. You try to shake Karkat awake but he’s not responding.

AT: Just hold on, people are coming.

AT: Dirk is on his way, please stay with me.

Bright light flicks on around you and suddenly the van is rising in the air again with the unconscious Psii being lifted up next to you. You wheeze as your vision goes hazy and the ground vanishes below you.

AT: No no no no no no!

AT: DAVE!

The last thing you see before you black out is the opening doors of a ship and a painted white double ended trident above them.

Chapter End Notes

I dedicate this chapter to all the people who read the previous one and went "I love this fluff, I'm so happy! ...I don't trust you, what terrible thing is about to happen?"

Well played, my friends. >:D
> Karkat: be literally under siege by the planet fucking Jupiter

Chapter Notes

Don't worry guys, I couldn't leave you on that cliffhanger for long. Enjoy this super long chapter.

The blank nothingness of sleep passes and you awake to find yourself in chains and manacles against a wall in a relatively small steel room. To your left Kankri is also chained but still passed out, further along you can see Kanaya who is awake but looking despondent. In a perspex tank in the far corner are Sollux, Mituna, and The Psiionic, all of whom are passed out on the floor but unchained. The air in their bubble seems hazy and you’d bet anything that it’s a tranquillizer of some sort, just like the kind in that ball. That gas is the last thing you remember before you passed out. Opposite you are two fish trolls who are restrained in full jackets of steel cables and their legs are banded together at regular intervals.

“So you’re royalty, then?” Rose’s voice comes from your right.

“Heiresses, yes.” The smaller fully restrained troll says with a nod and with a flash of horror you catch the hints of tyrian on their exposed clothes.

“But like, the main point here is, are you on our side or their side? If we let you out I don’t want you turning on us.” Roxy says.

“Let us out? How are you going to get out to do that? Don’t make me laugh, glub your species is dumb.” the older heiress sneers.

You look to your right and see that Rose, Roxy and Dave are chained to the wall to your right, but they all look comparatively relaxed. Dave is squinting slightly, his shades are missing and the room is pretty bright. He seems to feel the weight of your stare on him and looks around at you, his red eyes directly on you with no shades in the way.

“Hey, sleeping beauty, finally with us?” Dave asks you teasingly.

“How are you so calm? We’re so goddamn fucked!” You say hysterically and yank on your chains.

“That won’t help Karkat.” Kanaya says miserably and goddamnit, she’s right. There’s no way you can get out of these chains.

“We’ve got a plan kitkat, don’t you worry.” Roxy chirps from the end of the row.

You squeeze your eyes shut. They took all of you and now you’re going to be taken back to Alternia, back to the Empress and she’s going to do to you what she failed to do to your father. You’re choking up, and you can feel tears prickling in your eyes.

Is anyone even going to know what happened to you? How much will Hal have been able to tell them? Will your family have to hold a funeral for all of you and bury a bunch of empty boxes in the ground? Or will The Empress send you back on boxes with ‘some assembly required’ stamped on the side of them?
The sound of boots clicking on tiled floors reaches your ears and your eyes snap open. With a heavy click the door slides open and two adult trolls walk in, a skinny but tall blue blood woman and behind her a smaller olive man. The woman looks across all of you with distaste, and she strides quickly to Kankri and backhands him across the face, he groans and moves. It looks like that woke him up.

You look back at the olive man who is staring at the three humans in abject horror, one hand rising to his mouth. You notice that he is missing several fingers on one hand.

“You- oh by the Empress you never said you took humans too! This cell isn’t classed for humans!” He stammers in fear and you crane your neck to see that all three humans are staring unblinkingly at the man.

“Don’t be a coward, these are mere children and only three of them. Nothing like the two hundred adults on the ship you were on, your fear is irrational, Prryik.” The blue blooded woman says, standing up and getting out of the range of Kankri’s legs as he comes to.

“I’m sure the other trolls on his last ship said that too.” Rose says lightly and Dave and Roxy laugh. The olive troll whines and steps back a little more, his ears going flat against his skull.

“They’re laughing, Kolera, nothing good happens when humans are laughing.” The olive one whimpers.

“Oh for- you, how old are you, human?” Kolera, the blue blood demands, lashing out and grabbing Dave by the throat. You hiss at her and Roxy shouts in anger.

“Let him GO!” Roxy screeches. Dave winces but leans back in her grip a little to look her right in the eye.

“You want my age in sweeps or years? I can do the math for you if your dumb ass can’t work it out.” Dave drawls casually and you watch him uncross his legs ever so slowly and inch his left foot outwards. Rose leans forward in her restraints and glowers at the older troll woman. She’s an adult blue blood, what the hell are they going to do?!

“Sweeps, the proper Alternian measurement and that’s what your people will be using when we conquer your wretched planet.” She snarls at Dave and he doesn’t even blink.

“Me an’ my sister Rose here are six and a half and my older sister, Roxy is eight.” Dave says pleasantly.

“They’re littermates? Oh no, oh no.” Prryik wails.

Everything happens very quickly. Kolera turns to scold her subordinate and Dave lunges for her, wrapping his legs around her throat and hooking a foot around her long graceful horn. Rose moves from crouching to kicking, dangling from her shackles and bracing herself against the floor with one foot. She repeatedly kicks the woman right in the face over and over.

“Rose, no!” Kanaya yells in alarm. This is madness, they’re chained up and have no hope of winning this fight, but it’s like the humans don’t care.

Kolera screams and claws Rose’s leg, making her cry out in pain and forcing Dave to kick her away to protect Rose. Rose hisses and curls her injured leg under herself. Kolera is cursing, clutching at her face.

“Oh my God, Rose, let me see that.” Roxy gasps and Rose shifts to show the jagged claw marks.
“You’ll be fine.” Dave assures her gently.

“Bitch, yeah you with the now uglier face, look me in the fucking eye.” Roxy snarls. Kolera looks up and stares right at Roxy in shock and growing fear.

“You just made my fucking list. I am going to get out of here and when I do I will hunt. You. Down.” Roxy hisses and the back of your neck stand on end. You know Roxy, she’s a giggly teenager who adores cats and coding fun pranks to play on Sollux. She’s the kind of nerd who talks in leet speak and plays competitive Mario Kart and tickles Dave and Rose until they can’t take it anymore and throw the match. But right now you look at her and you see a straight up cold blooded killer that you didn’t know was in there.

“Oh fuck, this is just like The Solaris all over again. I can’t do that again. Kolera we have to send them back.” Pryik insists and Kolera stands up fully, wiping at her face.

“We’re not doing that.” Kolera growls and tries to smear the last of her blood off of her face. She pulls a screen out and smooths her hair down, she taps at it a few times and then you hear the noise of a call connecting. There is a click and then a voice.

“This is President Obama of the United States of America, am I speaking to the captain of the ship which has captured nine of our citizens?” The voice asks, sounding both stern and official.

“Holy shit that’s Obama.” Dave whispers in awe.

“You have some fucked up priorities Dave.” You hiss at him as quietly as you can.

“Shut up, this is the coolest thing.” Dave insists, and you stare at him in shock.

“This is Captain Kolera of the ship The Interceptor. We have the matesprite and two descendants of the heretic and traitor The Signless. We also have three other descendants of members of his treasonous organisation as well as three human hostages. We demand that you hand him over to us or we will start executing prisoners, these ones right here.” Kolera says smugly and she turns the screen around to show all of you.

“The United States and indeed Earth does not negotiate with terrorists. You will return all of your prisoners to Earth or we will consider this an act of war.” The President warns her.

“Oh, but they’re so young and innocent, it’d be a shame for them to start dying on your command wouldn’t it?” Kolera simpers and this time she takes her sweet ass time slowly showing all of you to them. You can indeed see the President sitting behind his desk, with the Signless on one side of him and Dirk and Roxanne on the other.

“This isn’t a sensible trade, Signless. She will just kill all of us, you cannot agree.” Kankri insists.

“I’d still appreciate it if you could get us the FUCK back though!” You yell.

Kolera moves the screen to show Dave, Rose and Roxy, she’s about to move on when Dirk yells out.

“Wait!” He pleads.

“Let me speak to my children!” Roxanne begs, and Kolera laughs meanly and holds the screen up before the three of them.

“Are you okay?” Dirk asks quickly.
“I’m a little scratched up, but otherwise we’re fine.” Rose says with a nod.

“Dirk, don’t you dare make any deals. We got this. It’s gonna be like… Oh… I know how to say this, and it’s the right time of year too. Yippee-ki-yay motherfucker.” Roxy grins meanly and your hear a surprised laugh from Dirk.

“Oh my god Rox you have spent too much time talking to Jane and watching Crockerbert movies.” Dave sniggers.

“Kids, listen to me. I want you all to stay calm and don’t panic.” Roxanne says soothingly. It’s… jarring given how she has behaved towards her children lately but apparently she still doesn’t want them murdered by aliens.

“And also, give them hell. Captain, a word.” Roxanne says, and the baffled Kolera turns the screen around to face herself once more. This exchange clearly isn’t going how she thought it would.

“You stole my babies. We are coming for you and I will find you, I promise you that.” She hisses angrily.

“Captain, you have one hour to return all of your prisoners to us unharmed. If you execute even one, regardless of species, we will consider that an act of war and you will be pursued with the full force of the Earth’s space program. Do not make the wrong decision.” The President says curtly and hangs up the line.

Kolera stands there in wide eyed shock and the olive blood looks like he’s going to piss himself. The StriLondes are back to staring them down unsettlingly, it’s made worse by the fact that Rose and Roxy and smiling too.

“I told you, their entire species is crazy.” He says.

“Shut up.” Kolera hisses and stalks out of the room with Prryik following her nervously.

“God, I thought they’d never leave. Oh man, this is going to suck.” Dave groans and yanks hard on his manacle.

“Oh, is that finally sinking in? We’ve been captured by loyal empire trolls who hate all of us and you three just antagonised the shit out of them!” You screech and Dave keeps forcibly jerking his right hand down.

“Dave, please, those are locked. You’re just going to hurt yourself. I understand that you are panicking but please don’t make things worse.” Kankri says, but Dave keeps pulling on his right hand.

“Holy shit this hurts. Come on already.” Dave whines.

“What are you even doing, dipshit?” You demand.

You watch as Dave’s thumb seems to… move. Or, more accurately, it moves in a direction that you know it shouldn’t with a sick sounding crack. His arm jerks free of the manacle, and you get to see his hand looking severely jacked up.

“Oh my GOD did you just BREAK your hand?!” You yelp in alarm.

“Nah, I just- oh fuck, dislocated it again. Bro did it once when I was little, and it never healed right so it still happens sometimes. Makes Houdini shit like this easier though.” Dave says through gritted
teeth as he brings his hand to his other hand and you hear another snap. Dave flexes his free hand
with a look of strain on his face.

“Rose come here so I can grab that hairpin before I lose all of the dexterity in this hand.” Dave says,
and Rose leans in and Dave slides a thin white hair slide out of her hair. You watch in slack jawed
awe as Dave kneels up and shoves it into the lock on his other manacle.

“Will that work?” Kankri asks in surprise.

“I doubt they were made with the assumption that someone would try something so outlandish.”
Kanaya says thoughtfully.

“When am I ever going to use this skill, he said.” Rose says mockingly as Dave’s other manacle
pops open.

“Nyeh, nyeh, nyeh.” Dave parrots back in a high pitched voice as he shuffles over to her on his
knees and quickly pops her cuffs open and then hands the clip to her. Rose immediately unlocks her
sister and then goes straight to Kanaya who has the same skill and turns to unlocking Kankri while
Rose frees you.

After you’re free Rose slides her fabric hairband out of her hair and wraps the soft circular material
around Dave’s injured hand and wrist to make a makeshift splint.

“Okay, my entire sylladex is missing is everyone else in the same boat?” Roxy asks, looking around
at all of you. You all nod.

“I do not think that breaking out was a good idea, if anything this may cause retaliation on their part
which could cause my ancestor to do something reckless and endanger his whole mission. Not to
mention starting an intergalactic war. We should calmly wait for rescue.” Kankri opines, and the
humans all look at him with disgust.

“Dude, you don’t even have a pussy, and yet you are the BIGGEST pussy I have ever seen. Sit
down and STFU man, we’re our own goddamn rescue or did you not hear me when I said yippee-
ki-yay motherfucker?” Roxy demands.

“Can someone please fill me in on what ‘Yippee-ki-yay motherfucker’ means?” Kanaya asks in
puzzlement.

“Have you seen Die Hard?” Rose asks, and all of the trolls shake their heads, except the two
heiresses who are staring at you all in fascination.

“I guess we need to do a Die Hard marathon when we get back.” Rose muses.

“Gee, now you’re edging me into Kankri’s ‘stay here and die’ plan, Rose.” Dave mutters, and Rose
slaps him in the arm.

“I know you enjoy those terrible movies.” Rose teases him.

“Ironically maybe.” Dave huffs.

“Okay, let’s put a pin in that ironic movie debate and work on this escape problem. If everyone is
missing their shit then all we conceivably have is the clothes on our backs. If we can get the Captors
to not be, well, captive anymore then perhaps we stand a chance at getting through that door. So,
ideas people.” Roxy says, clapping her hands to get the attention of all of you.
“Your escape hinges on your clothes? Unbelievaubble, you’re not getting anywhere.” The older heiress snorts.

“No one asked you.” Rose shoots back.

“I still have my sylladex, there’s nothing in it though. But if I switched it back to hash modus instead of tech hop then I could cause a collision and hash has had some pretty nasty ones before. Not that I’ve ever stupidly caused a collision, that’s just a thing I’ve read.” Dave says hastily, and you don’t believe that for a second.

“We could crack the glass like that and then kick it in.” Roxy agrees with a nod.

“But how are you going to stop the gas from coming in here and knocking us all out? It’s coming in through those vents in that enclosure, how can you stop that?” You ask, and the StriLondes seems to consider that for a moment or two before all looking at you again.

Dave smiles slowly and walks up to you, setting his hands on your hips and leaning in to kiss you quickly before you can react.

“Babe, you know what would be great? If you were wearing less clothing. I mean, sure that’s always the case but especially now. I’m just gonna borrow this real quick, okay?” Dave says real quickly and grabs the bottom of your sweater and whips it quickly off of you and throws it over your shoulder at Rose.

“I’ll stuff this in the vent as soon as Dave shatters that glass, then we need to get the three of them out of there ASAP. As soon as the glass cracks we’re probably going to have to kick it in, are we all on board with that?” Roxy asks as Dave leans against you and awkwardly takes his shoes off.

“What are you doing?” You ask in bafflement as you look at Dave.

“I need two identical items for a collision.” Dave explains and shoves one of his shoes right into his sylladex.

“I can’t see that this will work.” Kankri says uncertainly.

“It’s better than standing around doing nothing.” Rose points out.

“Not really, there could well be consequences for this. Like I said, we would be better off with waiting.” Kankri argues.

“Jesus shit, man. Are you really gonna let the actual honest to god President down? Move your ass, you’re in my way.” Dave says, shoving Kankri out of the way.

“Do you think that you could curse less?” Kankri sighs and reluctantly moves back.

“Geez, are you always this much of a wet blanket, kid? I thought you were meant to be the descendant of the empire’s greatest rebel.” The older heiress scoffs.

“I am not a wet blanket and considered action and debate are far more effective than this foolishness.” Kankri protests.

“Debate your way through that glass, dumbass.” Daves says and rolls his eyes as he shoves his other shoe in his sylladex. It detects the collision and flings the shoe right at the glass at high speed, bouncing off wildly. Roxy catches it in the air and hands it back.
“If anybody has anything harder I could maybe make it collide with some creative naming.” Dave suggests.

“Couldn’t you just put the one thing in there and eject it by yelling something with the same hash function?” Roxy asks.

“Yes, but I’m not going to stand here like the world’s shittiest Pokemon master, screaming ‘SHOE!’ at the- OH FUCK!” Dave grabs you and yanks you both to the side as a red blur flies out of his inventory, hits the glass of the Captor’s prison and then ricochets back towards you.

The thing that once was Dave’s shoe is now embedded into the wall and smoking.

“Fuck me running I hate Hash modus.” Dave groans into your shoulder.

“Some of the gas is coming out!” Rose exclaims, and Roxy screeches. The two girls rush the clear wall and start kicking at it as hard as they can, causing cracks to start spiderwebbing out from where Dave’s shoe collided hard enough to break the glass.

You were hatched on Earth and you’ve known more humans than you have trolls, their biology might be alien to you, but their culture is not. This, though, this is something else. Human nature drove The Empress herself away from attacking Earth, and you’re starting to see why. Humans are nuts.

“Hey, you good?” Dave asks, his left hand cupping your cheek.

“Your whole species is fucking deranged and we’re probably all going to die. How are you okay?” You ask sceptically.

“Well,” Dave says, picking up his less damaged shoe and pulling the lace out of it, “if I don’t fight and get out of here then my sisters could be hurt or killed, you’re my soulmate and you could be hurt or killed. If I don’t do everything I can I could get hurt or killed which would suck for me but it’d be way worse for all of you. Besides, these fuckers invaded my planet and kidnapped my friends. I’m not cool with any of that so hell yeah we’re gonna fuck shit up and get out of here.”

You stare at him, he’s winding the shoelace between his two hands and holding onto it tight. Behind him Rose and Roxy are peeling off huge chunks of the glass like material and as soon as she is able Roxy squirms inside and blocks up the vent. The outtake is still working and the gas begins to dissipate quickly.

“I’ve got you, babe.” Roxy says softly and picks up Sollux and drags him out through the hole.

“You’re all crazy. But… I can work with that. What can I do?” You ask. Rose and Kankri pull Mituna free and then come back with Kanaya to get the Psionic to the other side of the room.

“Well, I figure all that noise is gonna draw a guard soon. They’ll come in here and we’ll ambush them. Then we take their shit and find shit out.” Dave explains.

“You have a broken hand, and you’re armed with a shoelace.” Kankri points out, the two heiresses giggle.

“Just wail on whoever comes through that door.” Roxy orders all of you and walks into place by the door with Dave sticking close to the wall with his pathetic shoelace weapon.

You look at your brothers and father. They’re all breathing but they’re completely out of it. You give Mituna an experimental slap on the cheek, but he doesn’t react at all.
A few minutes pass and you hear two sets of footsteps coming down the hall. Dave perks up and Roxy bounces from foot to foot.

"-vents don’t seem to be flowing. We don’t want the psionics waking up.” Two women come through the door, Kolera once again and also a shorter teal woman at her side. The split second when they realise that you’re all free is almost funny.

Dave lunges for the teal woman and snaps the shoelace around her neck like the garrot you only just realised it was. He jams his knee into her spine and pulls, she immediately starts to choke and her hands reach up to grab it and to grab at Dave. You and Rose lunge for her at the same time and start attacking every part of her that you can get to because if you don’t she is going to obliterate Dave.

“You hurt my SOULMATE!” Kanaya screams and she and Roxy are a vengeful swarm upon Kolera.

“The shackles! You don’t need to kill them!” Kankri pleads, and you watch as Rose goads the teal blood closer to the wall with the shackles, trusting Dave to change his grip on her neck and then when she’s close Dave drops off, sweeps her legs out from under her and the twins move as one and lock her up. You watch as Roxy hurls an adult troll at the wall with strength that she shouldn’t have and binds her. You see as she immediately darts back to her siblings, checking them for injury.

You finally see why trolls are so terrified of humans.

Trolls have quadrants, rules for how they find love but humans have no such thing. You’d always put that down to biology and culture because humans can adapt to troll quadrants, Roxy with Sollux is a perfect example. But your species runs as a society of individuals operating with their own networks of relationships underneath central leadership. Obviously, not all decisions or trolls work that way, but that’s how your species rolls and always has. Your generation of trolls on Earth is the first to live outside of that.

But humans… they don’t work like that. They get pale all over each other, they’re a fucking mess and their family bonds are unreal. You look at Roxy checking her siblings over and you finally see it. They’re pack animals. They’re ruthless, crazy, pack animals. Dave is psychologically scarred, he hates violence but threaten his sisters, his soulmate and his friends and he’ll wrap his legs around an adult troll so his twin can kick her face in. He’ll choke a stranger to near unconsciousness with a shoelace and he’ll dislocate his own bones to free you.

Fuck, Kanaya faced death back on Alternia because Rose showed up on her skin and no one on that planet wanted anywhere near the blonde girl with blue blood staining her white socks so Kanaya had to leave. Alternia has outlandish wildlife but so does Earth and it spit humans out as the apex predator. A species that used to hunt by running its prey to death, that clusters up in families and soulmate bonds and will obliterate anything that harms that pack.

Back when humans were still evolving there were other species descended from the same missing link as them. Species like Neandertals who were smarter, stronger and more advanced than humans back then. Trolls are more capable than humans, your species has psionics of all kinds, and you’ve mastered space travel. And here your species is, coming up against the same dark snarling menace that Neandertals came up against with the humans. A species crazy enough to look something bigger and badder than itself in the eye and, provided the right kind of motivation, stares it down and says ‘fucking try me’. Humans as a species collectively get up and have no fucks to give, you hurt their loved ones and they will end you.

You’ve known these three humans for some time now, and you’d have never guessed they were capable of this. You catch a glimpse of your bare arm and see Dave right there and, hey, there’s the
other thing about humanity. It’s contagious. You’re no human, but humanity is under your skin and in your blood.

“We need everything in their inventory, Kanaya empty their sylladexes out.” You say, and Kanaya nods and starts raiding the inventory of the wheezing teal woman who is still recovering from Dave choking her.

“Kolera, how many trolls are on this ship?” You ask, walking to the Captain.

“I’ll never tell you anything, traitor. The Empress will rip you to shreds in a public arena, she’ll rend you limb from bloody limb and I’ll—” She cuts off suddenly as a blade is pressed against her throat.

“Look what I found. Answer my soulmate’s polite goddamn question.” Dave says, his voice flat and hard as he holds the sword easily in his left hand. You try not to think about how well practised that looks on him.

Roxy kneels down and raids Kolera’s sylladex, ejecting everything over the floor in a messy spill.

“Oh goodie, a gun. How do you feel about your kneecaps?” Roxy chirps, waving the foreign weapon at her.

“Aside from the two of you, how many crew are there?” You repeat, and you stare into Kolera’s blue eyes filled with loathing.

“Eight and they will find and catch you.” She sneers, Dave tilts the blade so she has to lean her head back to escape it piercing her skin.

“Anything else you wanna know, Karkat?” Dave asks, his voice still sounds wrong. You want to ask him if he’s doing okay because his face is a schooled blank that more than worries you but you hardly want to weaken your position to your hostages.

What else do you want to know? You could ask how long it’ll take for any of the Captors to wake up, but she likely won’t know as her goal was to have that not happen at all. Your eyes land on the two still restrained girls who are staring at the humans in awe.

“What’s happening with them? What was your plan?” You ask, jerking your thumb at the two heiresses.

“We caught them escaping to Earth, we followed them here and they’re going to be taken back to The Empress to be killed. And they will be because this escape attempt will fail.” She says.

You stand up and walk over to the two girls and crouch down by them. The older one has pink starting to come into her eyes already, and you can see the jewellery that they’re both wearing is elaborate. They must have had more money than any other troll on Alternia, some of whom you know must have starved and suffered because of the hemospectrum denying them what was clearly plentiful.

“What are your names?” You ask quietly.

“I’m Meenah, this is Feferi, Peixes obviously. I gotta say I’ve never seen humans in action before, but you really are something. How much training do you have to go through to be like that?” Meenah asks excitedly.

“None. Well, mom taught me how to shoot but nothing else.” Roxy answers with a shrug. Dave says nothing but you feel the sword on your arm throb with muted discomfort. Dave had training alright.
“Why were you coming to Earth?” You ask.

“That’s something we’re telling your President, not you.” The older one says, full of self-importance.

“Oh, Meenah. Look, we need to get to Earth, we have to warn your leaders. Our ancestor is planning to invade Earth!” The younger one, Feferi, says urgently.

“Oh shit.” Roxy remarks in surprise.

“This is treason!” Kolera snarls.

“No ship.” Meenah snorts.

“Where are our things?” Rose demands of Kolera.

“I’m not telling you anything.” Kolera says angrily.

You shake your head and ignore the back and forth between the StriLondes and the captain and focus on the heiresses before you.

“You two need to get to Earth and so do we, if you want to stop Earth from being invaded then maybe we can come to a truce. A kind of… enemy of my enemy is my friend thing.” you suggest.

“What kind of strategy is that?” Feferi asks curiously.

“Oh. Is that a human expression then? I can see why it might be.” you muse as Roxy loudly warns the captain that this is her last chance to answer. You whip around at the sound of a gun firing and Roxy has just shot the woman in the leg.

“Perhaps you did not hear me. I asked you where our things were.” Rose repeats, her voice cold.

“Yeah, I can see that. I think we’re down to swim with your little school until we hit the planet and talk to your leader, let us out and we’ll take control of this ship together.” Meenah nods.

“Rose, could you let these two out?” you ask nervously and Rose looks over at you with a far less murderous expression on her face.

“Come to an agreement have you?” Rose asks, walking over to you.

“Yeah, they’re going to help us all get to Earth, so if you could unlock them that’d be great.” you tell her and Rose kneels down and starts to pick the multitude of locks on them.

“Well, at any rate, she’s clearly not going to give me an answer, so we’re just going to have to sweep the ship as a group. That includes carrying our unconscious party members here. Dave has the most combat experience of all of us followed by me and Kanaya, would you agree Kan?” Roxy asks, looking at her.

“I’m not great at unarmed combat and since we’re lacking a third weapon I suppose that would be what I am left with. But I do have claws and I can take whatever weapon we find next. I survived just fine around older trolls on Alternia so I am probably more adept than Karkat and Kankri. But Rose seems very combat adept which is a surprise to me.” Kanaya replies and Rose shrugs modestly.

“It’s more enthusiasm than skill.” Dave says flatly.

“As always it seems we are each other’s inverse, brother dear.” Rose purrs at him.
“Anyway, Karkat can you carry Sollux by yourself?” Roxy asks and you nod, the guy doesn’t weigh much.

“Then I’ll carry Mituna, I don’t need to run much to shoot properly, so that’s fine. Kankri and Rose can carry The Psiionic and if a fight breaks out Rose can drop her half of him and join in. That leaves the rest of us and the heiresses here to fight, everyone down?” Roxy asks, looking around at all of you.

“I think we can go with that. Right, Fef?” Meenah asks with a grin and the younger heiress nods. The pair of them are standing up freely now, rubbing the parts of them which had been shackled before.

“You know the moment you open that door we’re going to start screaming for help and even after then. You’ll be found missing in minutes.” Kolera sneers.

“Wait, how are we getting out of the door?” you ask, eyeing the now shut cell door. Aren’t you just as locked in now as you were before? Roxy grins and holds up a pass, yeah, that’ll do it.

“Pick everyone up.” Roxy orders and you pull Sollux onto your back as Roxy climbs into the tank that held the three Captors. She pulls your sweater out of the vent and the hazy air curls out around her as she moves and jams your sweater back into the intake fan instead. The tank fills with haze which curls into the rest of the room. As she walks past you, you hear her breathe out in one big go and realise that she held her breath in there.

“Come on.” Rose urges and and Kankri walk to the door with your father slumped between them. Dave is at the front by the door, his hand squeezing the hilt of his stolen sword. His expression is blank, the kind of forced blankness that you don’t see anymore. The kind that you only saw in parts when you first met him. You duck away from the heiresses to get to his side.

“Dave, you don’t have to do this.” you whisper quietly to him and Dave looks at you, his expression still blank.

“I do. I can’t let any of you get hurt.” Dave says simply. He seemed much more normal before he had to fight anyone.

“And what about you?” you point out.

“Gonna try my best to avoid that too.” Dave says and flashes you a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes.

“I know just doing this hurts you, Dave.” you point out, and Dave shakes his head.

“Yeah, well I’d rather have more therapy than a dead soulmate, or dead sisters, or dead friends.” Dave says with a shake of his head and you know that there’s no talking him out of this. And he’s objectively right. He has more skills in combat than any of you and this is a situation where that is useful. You can not want this for him all you like, but that is just how this is playing out.

Dave shifts his weapon from one hand to the other and then soft human fingers are curling between yours. His soulmarked hand to yours. He squeezes your hand quickly and then lets go, replacing your hand with a sword. The room is getting hazier now and Kanaya has her ear pressed to the door, she nods and she and Dave burst into the hallway. And the rest of you get out and shut the door after you before the two startled adults can make much noise at all.

Further down the hallway is an olive blood who is repairing something in the wall with a frown on his face. Dave and Kanaya move forward without making a sound on the ground, Dave’s bare feet roll carefully from heel to toe with each step. They get obscenely close before they’re spotted and the
pair lunge at the man and slam his head into the wall and the ground enough for him to go limp immediately. The two of them drag him back and throw him into the room that you all just left and shut it again.

“Seven left.” Roxy notes.

“If we stick to the left side wall and sweep the rooms as we go then we shouldn’t get lost.” Kanaya suggests quietly.

“Wait, I’m having a thought. Helmsmen aren’t treated well, right?” Roxy asks in a whisper.

“That is very much an understatement.” Kankri confirms.

“So when she said there were eight besides them does that perhaps not include the helmsman? Psii was saying this ship had one so…” Roxy trails off.

“I think it would be wise to assume more people than less, but helmsmen cannot walk around the ship. He or she would be immobilised in the helmsblock, the only trouble we would face from them would be getting locked out of the computers.” Kanaya adds.

“That shore sounds like a problem to me.” Feferi says unhappily.

“We could try to free the helmsman.” Kankri suggests.

“Or we could not stay standing in the same goddamn place so that people can sneak up on us. Move.” Dave insists, and your group starts up walking again.

All of your things should probably be in one place and it would make sense for that place to be relatively near to where you were being held. Kanaya peers into one room as you go past it but finds that it’s empty, when you come to another locked room you all pause.

“Our stuff could be in here.” you whisper.

Rose carefully sets Psii down and darts forward to Dave’s side. She holds her finger to her lips and then beckons Kanaya to the other side. They’re flanking the doors and Dave clutches his stolen sword ready, Roxy raises her gun and keeps a firm hold on Mituna. Rose leans out and knocks politely on the door.

“Go away.” comes a muted voice from inside.

Rose knocks again.

After a few seconds the door whips open and standing there is the troll from earlier in your cell, the one who was afraid of humans. He sees Dave and Rose and screeches in fear. The twins leap for him and force him back into the room he was in, the rest of your party rushes in after and you find that Dave has cornered the man and is holding his sword level with the guy’s chest.

Behind you the door slides shut and the terrified man can’t take his eyes off of Dave.

“Prryik, wasn’t it?” you ask carefully.

“I- ah, yes.” he says with a trembling voice.

“I have some questions I want you to answer.” you tell him coolly, and far more calmly than you feel.
“We are not even in the same state as fucking around right now, so don’t try anything except straight answers.” Dave adds.

“It’s ok, Dave. There’s all of us and only one of him, you’re fine.” you reassure him and step a little closer.

You watch Prryik’s olive eyes flick between you and Dave.

“You’re missing a few fingers, and I heard you say you’ve met humans before so I guess those are related, huh?” you ask, and the man nods.

“I didn’t want to pick these humans up, I didn’t even know they had. It’s not my fault.” Prryik insists.

“Oh, yes, you’d far rather have abducted our soulmates and friends to be taken to The Empress and murdered and left us on Earth. Do you really think we feel that’s better? Keep talking and we’ll make the number you can count to even lower.” Rose snarls.

You turn your head and look at the furious faces of Rose, Dave and Roxy. There are signals of yours that Dave can’t pick up, noises and body language that they don’t quite get. You wonder what things you’re missing.

“First, where are our things?” you ask.

“Th-there’s a chest, over there.” Prryik answers.

“I’ll go get it.” Meenah says and strides over that way.

“Are there any psionics on board?” you ask, continuing in your questioning.

“Yes. I mean no. I mean not anymore.” Prryik babbles and Dave narrows his eyes at the man.

“I- I- there was, we had a helmsman but that optic blast from The Psiionic vaporised him and destroyed the helm. We’re running on backup power right now. He was the only one we had.” Prryik explains.

“Jackpot, Fef, catch.” Meenah shouts and you turn in time to see Feferi holding aloft a golden double ended trident. Just looking at that weapon does all sorts of bad things to your insides.

“Which way to the bridge?” Kanaya asks.

“Round the corner, up a floor. Can you please get this human away from me? They’re feral and I can’t aaAAAAH!” Pryik’s demand tapers into a yelp as Dave actually bares his blunt human teeth and leans in a little with his sword.

Meenah is distributing everyone’s weapons and you weigh your sickles in your hands and you eye the man curiously.

“Okay, I’m genuinely curious here. I’ve lived with humans my whole life and I get it but what made you so scared of them?” you ask curiously.

Pryik doesn’t answer until you reach over and physically pull Dave a step or two back from him.

“I was on a ship with them, we had first contact. They formed packs and when they got free, which they did. They hunted us in groups, they’d chase us down and herd us places to kill us and take control of the ship. They broke into the kitchens and turned the soporifics into bombs. One of them
got into the medical bay and poisoned all of our medical supplies, twenty people died before we found out. When I was there one of the humans… spawned and one subjugglalor tried to take the wiggler away and they attacked him, he used his chucklevoodles and they just carried on like it made them stronger. Six humans beat a fifteen sweep old subjugglalor into pulp. They don’t care about honour or reason, they’re monsters.” Prryik says shakily.

You look over the humans at your side, your friends, your soulmate.

“That all sounds pretty sane and reasonable to me.” you say simply.

“Yeah, well, you’re infected.” Prryik mutters, eyeing your obvious soulmark.

“Dave, here.” Rose says and hands Dave his sword and shades. Dave puts them on and immediately grimaces.

“You need to see this.” Dave says and passes the shades back to you and changes his stolen sword out of for his new one.

Roxy takes over watching Prryik as everyone else gets their things back together. You put Dave’s shades on your face.

AT: Dave in space you will be out of my range, you’ll be left with a limited cached version of me. I’m editing it now.

AT: Be safe, Dave. I love you, we’re going to do everything we can to get you back.

HAL: Hello Dave, this is a cached version of me running off of the installed software in these sweet shades and your phone. My responses will be limited compared to normal, please don’t be worried by this. I am here to help you.

You slide away from Prryik and keep your voice low.

“Hal, can you fly a spaceship?” you ask.

HAL: Hello Karkat. I have never flown a spaceship.

HAL: I do not currently have access to a spaceship or its controls.

Right, different responses. You need to stop thinking of Hal as a person right now and more as a program made by Hal himself.

“If we got you to the controls do you think you could fly a spaceship or tell us how to?” you ask instead.

HAL: I cannot interface properly with Alternian technology, I cannot take control myself in this form.

HAL: I do have a basic understanding of aerodynamics and, essentially, rocket science. I have also played a lot of Kerbal Space Program so I am confident that I could relay instructions.

You hand the shades back to Dave.

“We need to get to the bridge. Prryik, will it be locked? Is there a code we need to get in?” you ask, and he shakes his head.

“We didn’t plan for this.” he answers.

“Well that was real fuckin’ stupid of you, wasn’t it?” Roxy says and slams the butt of her rifle into his head like she’s playing a first person shooter and not walking around in real life.
“Kankri, here, you don’t have a weapon and you should. Even if you’re not gonna use it they don’t know that, if you’re walking around unarmed they’ll go for you first. So take it.” Dave says, holding out his stolen sword to Kankri.

“I have no intention of using this, and I wish we didn’t have to hurt these people.” Kankri says unhappily but tucks the sword in his belt.

“Yeah, well no one is enjoying this.” Dave replies with a sigh.

“I wouldn’t say that, this is pretty fun.” Meenah laughs, and you shake your head, this is not the time for this.

“Hal said that if we can get to the ship’s controls he can help us get this thing back to Earth.” you announce.

“There’s no helmsman, is there even enough power for that?” Kanaya asks worriedly.

“And we still have six trolls unaccounted for.” Rose adds.

“We sweep the ship to the bridge, see what the power situation is and see what Hal says about the controls. We don’t know where we are or how far we have to go so there’s no point guessing before then. We take out any trolls we find and maybe by then Psii, who actually knows things about spaceships, will have woken up. Not that any of them right now seem to be showing any sign of waking up.” Roxy says and pats Sollux on the cheek. His head lolls to the side. You sigh and pick him up, your sylladex is full and your weapons are back in your strife deck. Your other unconscious family are carried again, and once more Kanaya and Dave lead the way out of the room with Roxy’s own rifle trained down the hallway.

You all creep down the hallway carefully and freeze when you hear voices. You all set the psionics down and ready your weapons. A tall purple blood with face paint on rounds the corner with a muscle-bound blue guy at his side.

Dave lunges for the blueblood and Roxy shoots the subjugglator in the shoulder right as Kanaya whips out her chainsaw with clear intent to divest the man of his limbs. Dave is caught in a swordfight and you hesitate, not sure if you can leap in and help or if you would just be a hindrance.

“Holy ship!” Feferi shouts behind you and you turn to see an adult troll skewered between two tridents. That solves that problem then. You didn’t even know that was a problem until now but damn if it didn’t just get solved anyway.

You whirl back around as Kanaya cries out in pain. She slides down the wall, and her lipstick clatters across the floor. She’s clutching at her ribs and the subjugglator is laughing, throwing his club up and down in the air. He managed to hit her, she’s lucky to be alive.

Rose screams in rage and flings herself through the air. You see one freeze framed moment of her flying towards the startled subjugglator, her knitting needles drawn in anger and pointed directly at his eyes. A fountain a purple blood sprays across the hallway and the troll falls to the floor stone dead immediately after.

Dave pulls his sword out of the chest of his opponent just as Rose removes her needles from the eyes of the subjugglator. Rose is covered in purple and Dave is splattered in blue. Both blood stained twins look back at your group and Kanaya makes a sound that’s part pain and part something that would ratchet up the rating in any film it appeared in.

“Three down, three more to go.” Roxy says calmly and reloads her rifle. You pick up Sollux once
more and rush quickly to Dave. You try not to look at the dead trolls, you might be running on an emergency panic mode right now but seeing dead bodies is something you’d hoped to get through your whole life without doing. Right now you’re more focused on Dave who is standing with his arms lax at his sides and his face blank.

“Dave?” you ask softly.

“We should keep going.” Dave says quietly.

“Are you ok?” you press.

“No, but it can wait. Therapy and all that comes later. I gotta focus, take Hal.” Dave says and pushes his shades onto your face. There’s blue blood on the lenses.

HAL: I’m sorry Dave, combat mode with unknown assailants is running at only 48% accuracy.
HAL: Ok, I will switch it off and devote my power elsewhere.
HAL: Oh, hello Karkat. Would you like to know your current heart rate?

“No, Hal.” you tell him and your party moves on around the corner. There’s no point hiding the bodies here, there’s too much blood. Meenah replaces Kanaya at the front of the group with Dave as Kanaya hangs back with Rose and nurses her ribs.

“Are you going to be ok?” you ask her worriedly.

“I have had worse, I can still fight but it will hurt.” Kanaya tells you. So it would be best if she did not have to fight at all. If the StriLondes, the heiresses and maybe you can take care of things then all the better.

You watch Dave as he walks, low and silent. It’s muscle memory of course, sneaking around to not be caught. Dave flicks his sword just so and a spatter of blue blood sluices off of it leaving the blade mostly clean. Bro taught him all of this. This isn’t just human craziness, that’s Rose and Roxy. But the guy in front of you stalking the hallways of an alien ship is someone that Bro engineered and it’s someone you don’t know that well.

Dave talks about Bro sometimes, but only in rare snippets and mostly as an explanation for questions like ‘why are you doing that’ or ‘what freaked you out just then’? You know Bro used to fight him on the roof, you know Bro used to watch him all the time, but there’s so much you don’t know. What did Bro tell him? What did Bro think he was training Dave for because that seems to be the shared theme between Dave and Dirk, they both believe that Bro had a plan. Who is the person that Bro was trying to make Dave into and how much of that person remains in Dave?

You don’t want him doing this, you want to take him away so that he never has to fight again. You can’t do that, though. To remove Dave from this fight would likely be impossible but even if you managed it you know that he would forever hold himself accountable if someone else got hurt and he would likely blame you too. You can’t do that.

All of you slowly climb the stairs and emerge cautiously into the next hallway. The bridge for the ship should be along here somewhere. Their group hesitates in the hallway too long as an adult troll come out of a doorway and out into the corridor, his hands are wiping at his eyes and you hear a sniffle before he turns and sees all of you.

“Don’t move!” Roxy warns, her gun trained on him.

“Th-the prisoners! I- wait, no, please don’t attack me!” the man gasps, holding up his hands in surrender. Another person terrified of humans?
“Are you… really who they say you are? The descendant of The Sufferer, The Signless, the man to who rebelled? Is he really still alive or is this just show?” he asks.

“We are who we say we are, and our ancestor is alive and well and you won’t be getting your hands on him.” Kankri speaks up bravely.

The adult, a brown blood you realise, smiles slowly. He carefully reaches one hand inside of his shirt and pulls out a chain with a symbol on it just like the one around your neck.

“I’m on your side.” he whispers and Dave casts a questioning look back at you.

“What are you doing here?” you ask him.

“I’m a mediculler, I came here to be on the same ship as my moirail but… he was the helmsman.” the man says sadly.

The helmsman that Psii vaporised. Shit.

“It’s fine, he hated being like that and there was only so much relief that I could provide. I think he wanted this to be honest. I don’t blame any of you.” the brown blood says sadly.

“This is weak, we need to find the rest of the people on this ship and krill them already.” Meenah pouts from the front.

“You have all the tactics of a wet sponge, Meenah and I’ve not even known you for an hour. Listen, you, what’s your name?” you ask, directing the last part of your question to the brownblood.

“Yonnic.” The man says and Rose stifles a snort of laughter.

“What?” Roxy asks, looking at her.

“Oh, no, nothing. It just sounds like yonic is all which- you know what, nevermind.” Rose chuckles. You make a mental note to google that later.

“If you’re medical can you fix these three up? They’ve been out cold since we were captured and I think we’d all appreciate not having to haul them around anymore.” you ask and Yonnic rubs his chin. Dave and Meenah have mostly lowered their weapons so he seems a little more relaxed.

“That gas is designed to knock psionics out completely. I can try a stimulant to reverse the effects, but it will take some time. Also… that is The Psiionic, yes?” Yonnic asks and you all nod.

“Helmsman are essentially modified to be more vulnerable to that kind of compound, most helmsblocks are loaded with it as a security measure so if a helmsman was to break out it wouldn’t be a bloodbath. I doubt I will be able to wake him up anytime in the next… six hours or so at the very least.” He explains. Well, shit, there goes your plan to get someone experienced to fly this thing back to Earth. You’ll all have to settle for Hal’s instructions.

“It’s worth a try though, right? Even if Sollux or Mituna wake up, that would be good.” Kankri reasons.

“Yeah, I agree. Can you do that for us Yonnic?” you ask and the man nods. He opens the door that he came through and you all follow him to find a basic medical bay. You stack the three Captors on the one bed and Yonnic bustles with medical supplies across the room.

“Karkat, are you sure we can trust this man?” Rose asks in a whisper.
“Yeah, he could give them anything and I don’t think any of us know enough about Alternian medicine to be able to read what he’s giving them and know.” Roxy agrees.

“Too late.” Dave says quietly, and you look up to see a needle in Mituna’s neck. Your blood freezes for a moment and then Mituna breathes in deeply, he doesn’t open his eyes but he looks more like he’s lightly sleeping now than a lifeless rag doll.

Sollux grumbles weakly when his shot comes but Psii does not react at all. Worry curls in your gut but it’s far from the only fear there so you have to push past it, it’s your fault that people are here. These guys were really only after you and Kankri, perhaps Psii as well but the StriLondes and Kanaya had no need to be caught up in this.

“Do you know how to fly this ship?” you ask and Yonnic looks at you with surprise.

“No, it’s not my job. I wouldn’t even know where to begin aside from going to the bridge.” Yonnic says with a shake of his head.

“Fine, there are still two people left unaccounted for based on what the captain told us. Can you tell us where they are?” You ask.

To find that out you have to walk Yonnic through all the people that you’ve come across so far and you see the look of horror on his face when he finds out that the small human girl took down that subjugglator all by herself. Though given that she is drenched in his blood you don’t know how else he could have thought that went down.

“Well, it sounds like you just have two people left. Xhalix Vuggio is our engineer and I’m betting that he’s busy dealing with the hole in the ship. He’s a really grumpy yellow blood, but he doesn’t have any psionics. He’s an okay guy but I don’t know if he’d fight you or surrender, as far as I know he’s not secretly a follower but I guess he could say the same of me.” Yonnic says thoughtfully.

“Then there’s Zerkah Sauthe, she’s our pilot and navigator. She’s cerulean, and I am certain she will fight you. I would also be stunned if she was anywhere but on the bridge right now.” Yonnic tells you all.

“Wait, Yonnic, could you call the engineer guy and find out where he is for us and tell us how to get there? I don’t like the idea of not knowing where people are for longer than we have to.” Roxy asks and Yonnic looks at you and Kankri as if asking your opinion on her request.

“Well?” you prompt.

“I could try calling him. One moment.” Yonnic says and walks to a panel on the wall. He types something in and a slow beeping starts, it abruptly stops and another troll’s voice comes over the line.

“WHAT Yonnic?! In case you didn’t notice we have a hole in the middle of our ship, what made you think I wasn’t BUSY?!” the troll snarls down the line.

“I was just wondering what the situation is with that, it seems like a problem. And where are you?” Yonnic asks.

“Oh, oh it seems like a problem does it? A giant hole in BOTH SIDES of our ship and a vaporised—” Xhalix cuts himself off and you can see the way that Yonnic has gone tense.

“Ah… I’m sorry Yonnic, I know you two were… you know. If it’s any consolation, it was instant. I’m at the bottom of the ship trying to patch this hole, if we had more power I’d just say fuck it and do it when we’re back on the main ship but we don’t. We now have a finite amount of power and,
honestly, Yonnic it will not get us back into that planet’s atmosphere. We’ll be lucky to reach its moon. As for getting back to base we’re fucked there too. I’m just trying to patch things up here so that we can turn off the energy barrier keeping us in and I can divert that power to life support.” Xhalix says quietly.

“So we’re stranded?” Yonnic asks, and your group are starting to share terrified looks with each other.

“Only a little. Zerkah already made contact for support, they’re sending some light ships to retrieve us, they should be here in maybe twelve hours. We’ve just gotta hope that the humans don’t have space travel for real yet. Or hope that the power doesn’t go out. But, besides that we’re peachy.” Xhalix answers testily.

From the bed Mituna groans loudly and Dave leaps forward onto him and covers his mouth with both hands.

“What was that?” Xhalix asks.

“I- it was me! I’m just… that’s really worrying to hear and it’s been a very emotional day and I apologise for my, uh… outburst?” Yonnic says awkwardly, his face going darker than it is already.

“Uh. Forget about it. Look, I gotta get back to work.” he says and the connection goes dead.

“That was awkward.” Yonnic whines.

Dave removes his hands from Mituna’s face and your brother leans up a little on his elbows, his eyes hazy and barely glowing.

“Not that you’re not a hot piece a’ ass Strider, but y’r my brother’s soulmate an’ also I think I’m gonna barf so fuckin MOVE.” Mituna says in a wobbly voice and Dave leaps off just in time and kicks a trash can over just as Mituna does indeed lean forward and throw up.

After your brother is done retching in full view of far too many people he wipes his mouth on his sleeve (gross) and looks right at you and then everyone else in your group and then at Yonnic, finally he looks at Sollux and Psii.

“So, what the fuck?” Mituna asks, and you all have to explain everything that’s already happened to him. He interrupts you to laugh with glee at your escape, to mock Prryik and to tell Rose that her taking down that purple blood alone is really hot. That earns him a territorial snarl from Kanaya, and you have to intervene before the bullshit train comes off of the rails at idiot junction.

Eventually, though, Mituna gets serious.

“We’re out of power and just on reserves?” he asks calmly.

“Yes, maybe if we get closer to Earth and let them know it’s us flying the ship they’ll come up and bring us down. I can see how that would be troublesome though, international politics on space travel are convoluted at best and the political situation may not be amenable for any one nation to come up here and retrieve us without another saying that doing so is a declaration of war. Everyone would need to agree, mount a rescue mission and get us back on Earth in less than twelve hours from now.” Kankri says grimly. You hadn’t even thought of that.

“We can’t wait for that.” Mituna says with a shake of his head.

“I don’t see what other choice we have.” Roxy points out.
“Shell, I knew this escape wasn’t gonna work.” Meenah sighs in disappointment.

“It’ll work. You need power, but there’s no helmsman. I have power, I can helm with whatever technology is still there. I don’t have the ports that dad does but I can still juice the cables.” Mituna says seriously.

“No! There are safeties built into the helmscolumn to stop the ship draining you past what you can handle. None of the helmscolumn is left, and if you were to plug yourself directly into the wiring it could kill you.” Yonnic says urgently.

“You can’t risk your life like that!” you protest.

“I can and I will! Karkat, if I do nothing then we stay here and the empire picks us up and best case scenario they kill me, worst case I end up a helmsman anyway. If I’m going to risk dying I’d rather risk it to save all of us.” he insists angrily.

“Maybe there’s a third option here.” Dave chips in, saying something for the first time in a long while.

“The system turns your psionics into electricity, right? And the problem is that without a helms- whatever it’s like plugging something into the wrong power source, you’ll overload it and blow a fuse.” Dave says slowly.

“The fuse in this case being his brain.” you argue.

“Yeah, I know. But, what if we throttled that manually? Like tapped him in and out real quick so that he could fill the batteries bit by bit. That guy said he could get us to the moon, how much more power do we really need to get in the atmosphere?” Dave asks.

“I think that’s the best plan we’re going to get, at least unless we get that engineer on our side.” Rose agrees.

“So far we’re just going on what the engineer has said. I say we take the bridge and see what the situation is ourselves and then decide. Then at least Mituna might be more sober and more able to make a rational decision that doesn’t involve likely death.” you say firmly.

“Well, we need to take the bridge eventually, we may as well do it now.” Kanaya agrees with a nod.

“Agreed. Karkat, Kankri, stay here.” Roxy says, and everyone else just follows her out of the door and to the door down the hallway to the bridge.

“Why did I listen to her? Why is everyone doing what she says?” you wonder aloud in bafflement.

“Why aren’t they waking up?” Mituna asks and Yonnick starts to explain about the sedation and what he did as you listen for the sound of the others taking the bridge.

You hear the door slide open and an alarmed yell from the troll inside. One of the two heiresses yells something loud and vaguely fish pun based and then there’s the sound of metal on metal.

“Oh shit!” Dave yells followed by an alarming amount of crashing.

A gunshot fires and then you hear the sound of a chainsaw and something heavy hitting the ground.

“I think that will about cover it.” Rose says slowly.

“You THINK?!” Roxy shouts.
“Maybe we can get rid of the body some-I oh, huh, I wonder where that goes. I mean what is the normal use for that?” Kanaya says thoughtfully.

“I, uh, think we should go in there.” you say to your brothers and between the two of you and Yonnick you pick up the two still unconscious Captors and guide the slightly sedated one onto the bridge.

The bridge is a curved and sweeping room, more reminiscent of old Star Trek sets than it is anything you’ve seen in person on actual Alternian ships before. It’s very minimalistic and basic, this is a functional ship with seemingly little personality. There are two chairs set by the wide windows and Dave is sprawled sideways in one with his hand over his face. Roxy is standing at the sweeping command console with confusion written across her face as she studies it. Kanaya and Rose are both blood spattered again, and there is a long smear of cerulean blood on the floor leading to a hatch in the wall.

“Everything is fine here.” Kanaya informs you cheerfully.

“There is a severed arm behind you.” Kankri notes.

You are going to not ask questions about that.

“What happened to you?” you ask, leaning over the controls to peer down at Dave in the seat.

“I attacked her and she threw me.” Dave says stiffly.

“Yeah, he broke his landing with his face. Three separate times.” Feferi giggles and Dave takes his hand away from his face to glare at her. He has a few red marks on his face and his eyebrow has split and is bleeding but it’s not so bad.

“We really need to be giving these people a chance to surrender, to cut off their options for peace is tantamount to-” Kankri starts to say but Dave interrupts.

“I did and then she threw me in the air and busted my face.” Dave says sharply.

“Tuna, can you help me read these?” Roxy asks and Mituna walks up to her and scowls at the console.

Rose and Kanaya are talking quietly, Kankri is bothering the two heiresses, and Yonnic is settling your father and brother into comfortable places out of the way. So it’s time to talk to Dave again. He’s currently pressing his shirt sleeve against his eyebrow to try to get it to stop bleeding.

“Do you want your shades back?” you ask him.

“No, you’ll need Hal to help you steer the ship back to Earth.” Dave says, and his voice is cold again, it makes you ache inside to hear it.

“How are you doing?” you try and Dave prods at his eyebrow, it’s mostly stopped bleeding but he’ll still need stitches.

“Everyone’s still alive and mostly unharmed, it’s good.” Dave replies.

“I wasn’t asking you that, I was asking how you are.” you insist, getting a little closer to him and gently putting your hand on his leg. He jerks away from you like you burnt him, like he used to do when you first knew him. Dave scrambles to his feet and looks sidelong at you, his face is still blank.
“Look, right now I can hold my shit together or I can talk this shit out with you. I can’t do both. If you crack me open you cannot put me back together, you feel me? We still have one troll we haven’t fought yet and four who could wake up and escape to attack us again. I have to be able to fight and maybe you’re well adjusted enough to change between being normal and this, but I’m not so just… just back off.” Dave says in quiet, tight words.

It stings, you’re not going to pretend that it doesn’t but like Dave said his scars don’t go away just because you love him.

“Okay, I can understand that. But, later?” you ask and something far more human crosses Dave’s face.

“Later.” Dave agrees quietly.

“Until then I’m just gonna fake it and stay on guard. Just stay alive, okay?” he tells you and you nod.

“Karkat, look at this.” Roxy calls, and you drop your conversation with Dave who draws his sword again and starts pacing by the doors, a problem for Future Karkat. Present Karkat needs to stop thinking about himself in the third person and go see what Roxy wants.

You make your way to Roxy’s side with Mituna leaning heavily on the console on the other side of her. She points to a box that reads ‘communications’ in Alternian.

“Most recent call was to ‘Flagship Domination’, and nothing on this list is for The Empress’s battleship.” you read.

“Yeah, these small fry wouldn’t speak to our ancestor directly. Their mission would have been going through their base ship.” Feferi explains.

“No offence.” she adds, looking at Yonnic.

“None taken.” he replies in a tone that suggests at least SOME offence is indeed taken.

“The others are all to things with the same address and permission codes, except for this second most recent one, and look at the time stamp on it.” Roxy points out.

“That’s around the time when the captain called the President. We should call them back.” you say. Roxy nods and her finger hovers over the button for a moment.

“Aaah, Karkat I’m thinking that maybe you should take this call. I’m uh- I mean your dad is the bigshot around here, right?” Roxy laughs awkwardly, and you narrow your eyes at her incredulously.

“Roxy fucking Lalonde are you shy? You weren’t quiet earlier, you were full of death threats and shitty movie references!” you accuse and Roxy goes bright red.

“Shut up, God! I was in a moment, but this is the President of the United States. I can’t just dial him up and be like ‘sup mr. prez? We’re just kickin’ it in space but we’re making like ET and phoning home except we want to not be in space and instead go to Earth again’.” Roxy rambles.

“You sound like Dave, please don’t talk to the President.” Rose says from across the room.

“Ok, point taken. I guess I’ll just do it.” you say and jab at the button before you can think more of it. A screen pops up across the shuttered metal windows of the bridge and Dave jumps and waves his
sword at it for a moment before he realises what it is. The call takes an agonisingly long amount of
time to connect but when it does you see the President of the United States, Obama himself, sitting at
his desk. You hear a quiet ‘holy shit’ from Dave behind you.

“Ah- Mr. President, sir, uh, this is Karkat Vantas here calling from the bridge of the ship. We’ve uh,
mostly taken control of the ship.” you tell him.

The President stares at you for a moment, seemingly in shock.

“Well done, son. There are a lot of people here wanting to know if you’re all okay and- yes, please
come over.” he says and suddenly the frame is also filled with Dirk, Signless and Roxanne.

“Roxy, Rose, thank fuck, where’s-” Dirk starts to ask.

“I’m fine.” Dave calls and you realise he’s out of shot. Everyone starts trying to talk at once and you
realise that this just isn’t going to work. Thankfully you have experience in this what with living with
far too many people in one house.

“EVERYONE SHUT THE HELL UP!” you shout, and everyone falls silent.

“Thank you. The three Captors were knocked out with some kind of gas, we found a Mediculler
here called Yonnic who was on our side and he’s tried to speed up how fast they’re gonna wake up
but so far only Mituna has woken up. Kanaya got hit in the ribs but she’s mostly fine. We also let out
two prisoners who are, believe it or not, two heiresses who Fish Bitch herself was trying to have
captured and killed. They’ve helped as has Yonnic so not shooting them when we get back would be
great, thanks.” you explain quickly.

“There were ten people on the ship beside the two heiresses and us. Four are dead, three are
unconscious and in the cell we were in, one unconscious outside of it, Yonnic here is helping us and
there’s an engineer who we know roughly where he is. Maybe we can try to talk him around but if
not we’ll either capture him or kill him.” you continue.

“Do you know if the ship that you are on has contacted anyone else?” the President asks and you
frown unhappily.

“They’ve contacted the ship they came from who, presumably, have contacted the Empress. And
there’s more bad news. When Psii tried to stop us being taken in the first place he tried to shoot the
ship down, there’s a hole right through the middle of it on both sides and the ship’s holding now, and
the engineer is trying to fix it but that’s a problem. There’s also no helmsman or even a helmsblock,
the ship is running on battery and the engineer told Yonnic that we don’t have enough left to get to
Earth.” you say and Dirk’s fists are clenched so hard that they’re white knuckled.

The President nods as he thinks.

“Mr Vantas, can you tell us where you are right now? We’ve been having trouble finding you on our
sensors even though everyone is looking for you.” he asks.

“We’re stealthed, that’s why. Turn that off, that’s only wasting power. And I don’t understand these
coordinates but maybe I can open the shutters and we can see.” Mituna says, his fingers flying over
the different buttons. The shutters at the window open up with a whirr and everyone gasps, or at least
everyone born or hatched on Earth does.

“Oh my God, we’re literally under siege by the planet fucking Jupiter!” Dave gasps and dashes from
the door to the window.
You stare for a moment at the giant sandy coloured gas planet with its swirling red storm. As far as you know, no person from Earth has ever seen this with their actual eyes before. It’s kind of… beautiful. Dave has his camera out already and is taking a million photos and you smile ever so slightly to see a hint of the person you know there.

“Like he said we’re… we’re right by Jupiter. Can’t miss it.” you say with a weak laugh.

“It’s just a planet.” Meenah says petulantly and Kanaya shushes her.

In your silence, Mituna speaks.

“Dad, I’ve been looking at the power and there’s no way we’ll get home with what we have when we’re this far out. They’re going to find us and they’ll kill us. They’ll be here in twelve hours if not before. So, unless you guys are coming up here in your own spaceships I only have one way to fix this.” Mituna says seriously, and you stare at him in horror.

“Mituna, no.” you whisper.

“I am working on an agreement to get a spaceship to you to rescue you but I cannot say how long that will take.” the President says and your heart sinks.

“There’s no helmsblock now so I’m just going to have to grab the wires and boost it myself.” Mituna says.

“Mituna…” Signless breathes in fear.

“No!” Kankri protests, you would too if it didn’t feel like you were swallowing around a rock in your throat.

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure I understand this. Can you explain?” the President asks and Signless nods.

“As I’m sure you know there are many trolls with psionic power, my partner The Psiionic and our children Mituna and Sollux are exceptionally powerful ones. The empire has a practice of forcibly containing psionics in structures known as helmsblocks, the biological machinery there feeds off of the psionic power and is the power source for an entire ship. The Psiionic himself was once the helmsman for the ship belonging to the Empress herself. But to operate a helmsblock you need special surgical implants which Mituna doesn’t have and what he is proposing is highly dangerous. The helm is designed to suck all available power within safety limits, if a helmsman could just turn it off by choice then none of it would work. Outside of those safeguards and appropriate ports it will almost certainly burn him alive with his own power. Mituna this isn’t something you can just be good at and avoid the bad consequences, this will kill you. I’m not saying this because I don’t believe in you, it’s just… it’s how it works.” Signless says desperately.

“There’s a chance it might not. And… if I do nothing then everyone here dies. If I die powering the ship then only I die. It’s… it’s just math.” Mituna says with a hopeless kind of shrug.

“I can’t ask you to do this.” the President says with anguish written on his features.

“I have to.” Mituna replies.

“There was a suggestion about trying to manually reduce that kind of contact so it’s only short bursts, that might be safer. And- and we can find that engineer and try to talk him around or capture him, he might know of something that he can do to get the ship to Earth without that. It should be our last resort, Mituna.” you reason and your brother shrugs as if he knows that he’s already doomed.
“Do what you can and please try to stay safe, I will try to speed up the process of getting help to you in space. Perhaps with this new information I can broker a deal with the other nations.” the President says and you nod, because what else can you do?

“We’ll call you back if anything else happens.” you tell him, and he nods. Mituna reaches over and presses the button to terminate the call.

“I’ll stay here with Roxy, see what we can make of the controls with our knowledge and Hal’s help. You go find that engineer, if anyone can help me not die in that helmsblock it’s him, otherwise we’re going with Dave’s idea.” Mituna says seriously. You know he means it too.

“I was trying to help, man.” Dave protests.

“No, you’re right. Okay uh… Yonnic, you know this guy, you can talk him around. Kankri come with me, maybe the two of us there will help and uh… Dave, Rose, want to come with?” you ask, looking at them. They both nod at the same time and move over to you. Your group bands together and before she leaves the room Rose kisses Kanaya on the cheek.

Rose stays at the back of your group and Dave and Yonnic lead the front with you and Kankri in the middle. Dave is still in blood stained socks and walking silently and Rose is guarding you from behind. You’re regretting not throwing Prryk into the same cell that you all broke out from, but even then it’s not like that is impossible to escape from. Your group got out after all.

“How’s your hand, Dave?” you ask quietly, looking at it. He still has Rose’s hairband splinting his thumb and palm, so you’ve no way of knowing how it’s going.

“I’m fine. I’m ambidextrous with a sword and anyway this is my better hand, so it’s not a big deal.” Dave replies calmly.

You keep quiet after that. Dave is left handed for everything else and you’re pretty sure that he was trained to fight with both hands, it’s not a natural ambivalence with weaponry. God damn Bro.

Yonnic leads you quietly down the staircase and along the hallways. Your group is silent which for a group containing Kankri is unusual. It seems even he knows the value of keeping quiet in enemy territory, but honestly you’d feel far more relaxed with him rambling about how the height of the doorways is excluding older highbloods with their larger stature or how they’re too narrow for people like the Nitram’s to go through. A sort of self-aggrandizing white noise to calm your nerves. Damnit, why did you leave your moirail behind? Oh, yeah, because she has a chainsaw and can defend everyone else when you’re gone with these guys.

“Xhalix?” Yonnic calls out and Dave tenses, raising his sword a little more.

“Busy!” a distant voice calls back.

Kankri smacks your arm and points upwards, there are wires and scorch marks trailing from the ceiling. This must be damage from Psii’s shot. The further in you all walk the more damage you can see, until at last you come to the edge of a hole in the floor. The hole is perhaps ten feet wide in every direction and through it you can see a melted cross section of the hull of the ship and below that is endless blackness. Perhaps if you were standing on the other side you would be able to see Jupiter but from here you see endless darkness with the occasional pinprick of light. Vertigo crawls up your throat making you sick and dizzy. You also catch a thin shimmer of light which is presumably all that keeps you from the sucking vacuum of space and your painful death.

“Xhalix, I need to talk to you.” Yonnic calls out again and you see a man walk in, trying to
manoeuvre a large sheet of metal around the hole without falling in. He’s tall and skinny and his horns are tight corkscrews a bit like Damara’s, but he looks generally wimpy and greasy all over.

“T’m bus-AH! Oh, fuck!” Xhalix yelps, he drops the hunk of metal and fumbles until he has a scimitar in hand.

“Dude, you can barely lift that.” Dave says flatly.

“Yonnic, what the fuck?!” Xhalix demands.

“These are… the prisoners that were in the cell.” Yonnic explains weakly.

“I’m aware of that! Why are they not still there?! Why are those humans covered in, oh shit is that purple blood and- Yonnic, humans are dangerous, you shouldn’t be near them.” Xhalix insists.

“I’m uh, aware. I suppose there would be a better time for this but are you aware of who The Sufferer is?” Yonnic asks.

“Seeing as I’m neither dead nor brain dead, yes, I know. And I know those two are his descendants. My question is why are they out of their cell?” Xhalix demands, pointing at you with his sword.

“Well, they’re escaping.” Yonnic replies awkwardly, as if that wasn’t obvious.

“They can’t escape! There’s plans for them to-” Xhalix cuts himself off abruptly and you and Kankri look at each other suspiciously and then back to the engineer.

“Just to be clear, are you secretly a follower of my father’s or is that just Yonnic here?” Kankri asks primly.

“Yonnic? Wh- oh fuck, I’ve been trying to work out how to talk you into joining for forever, I didn’t know you were already one of us. Well, shit, yes I am. There’s a plan to get you both to the main ship and then with a lot of subterfuge get you back to Alternia to continue the revolution.” Xhalix explains.

“Absolutely not. I have family on Earth, and friends, and I have a human soulmate who also has family on Earth and it’s not like any of the humans here could blend in or survive back there. We’re not going.” you tell him firmly. Xhalix stares at you looking some pitiful mix of crestfallen and confused.

“As much as I would like to help continue father’s work on Alternia I fear we are not ready for that role just yet and to go there would likely sacrifice the lives of our friends and family which is an unacceptable situation.” Kankri agrees.

“But… but we need you.” Xhalix says in a tiny voice.

“And maybe some day when they are capable they will return to your planet to try to fix things for you, but they’re still teenagers and this is not the way to do this. You cannot just abduct children for your cause. We need to go home.” Rose insists harshly.

“And if you try to make him…” Dave snarls, his grip on his sword tightening.

“Dave, it’s ok, I’m fine.” you assure him, touching his shoulder and he relaxes somewhat but keeps his eyes on Xhalix.

“We can go to Earth, wait and then go back to Alternia with a complete plan. Is there any way we
can get this ship to Earth?” Yonnic asks hopefully.

“No, there’s not.” the other troll answers grimly.

“My brother is a psionic, he could charge the batteries. Can you make it so doing that won’t… won’t kill him?” you ask.

“I… eugh… hm. I’d need to have a look more at the wiring in the helmsblock, or what’s left of it at least.” Xhalix says and you see Yonnic wince.

“And these holes need to be patched before we can go anywhere, especially through Earth’s atmosphere.” he adds.

“I can help with that, Dirk taught me to weld once when I was sick and bugging him to entertain me.” Dave offers and the engineer seems surprised for a moment but nods.

“I really can’t convince you to come to Alternia?” Xhalix asks hopefully, and you and Kankri shake your heads.

“Then I guess we’ll work with this plan. I’ll get another welding torch. Is everyone else on the ship locked up or dead? Because those humans look pretty blood covered so I’m guessing they are.” the engineer asks.

“Yeah.” you answer.

“I should go and put that troll, Prryik into the cell we were in. I’d hate for him to be running around.” Rose says softly to Dave who is standing at her side.

“Not on your own.” he replies with a frown.

“You’re needed here. Maybe I will go back and take Kanaya or one of the fishtrolls with me.” Rose says thoughtfully.

“That sounds smart.” Dave nods.

“Hey, human boy the one who can weld.” Xhalix says, waving his hand at Dave.

“My name is Dave and put your sword away before you come over here.” Dave orders him.

“Well, why don’t you put your sword away?” Xhalix asks, puffing up in indignation.

“I could just take your sword.” Dave says pointedly, Xhalix scowls but puts it away. Dave lowers his but does not put it away.

“I’m going to go up to the helmsblock, get together anything that’s big enough to plug that gap.” Xhalix instructs, pointing at the hole in the floor.

“ zelf.” you answer.

“I’ll stay here with him. I don’t… I can’t go in there.” Yonnic says in a strained voice, and you can understand why he wouldn’t want to be in the place that his moirail died.

You look to Dave to ask if he’s okay with being left here with just Yonnic but Dave is already walking around the room and picking up a tool and turning it on, emitting a bright flame. Xhalix is warning him to be careful with it, it’s some kind of cutting tool but Dave looks perfectly calm. You close your eyes for a moment and shuffle that over to a Future Karkat problem and focus on the now, your mission for now is to ensure that Mituna doesn’t die.
The helmsblock is destroyed, the metal of the floor and ceiling are melted down to slag and the few exposed wires you can see are sparking erratically.

“These are the batteries, there’s nowhere near enough charge to get back to Earth.” Xhalix explains, pointing at two giant stacks of weirdly ridged barrels that are somewhat glowing. If Psii had hit these as well as the helmscolumn then the whole ship would have dropped out of the sky like a rock, which was likely his intention.

“How are these charged?” Kankri asks.

“These bio wires connect directly to the helmscolumn, they filter off excess energy and keep it stored so that a helmsman can be pushed beyond their limits in times of need or to keep the ship functioning if the helmsman is below capacity or needs to be taken out for maintenance. We always have more battery than we need, a helmsman should never be able to overcharge them. We usually run at about thirty percent here, but now we’re down to ten and draining thanks to the hull patches we’re holding up.” Xhalix explains. He bends down and unlocks some floor panels and pulls out some pink fleshy wires which remind you of the biology unit that you did on human reproduction, specifically on umbilical cords. Gross.

“And without a helmscolumn between Mituna and this it’ll take everything because it’ll think it’s all excess energy?” you guess.

“Yeah, it’ll burn him out and kill him. But… I might be able to rig something up that’ll put a little barrier between them. I need to see what we have.” the engineer suggests and you nod, letting him investigate the place.

Time passes weirdly. You’re tense but there’s not much that you can actually do. Dave manages to gut a lot of the rooms on the lowest floor leaving them with sections cut out of the walls and ceilings but he was smart enough to not damage the structural integrity of the ship. Roxy, Hal and Mituna plot a course to Earth so that most if not all of the journey there can be done by the computer. Dave and Xhalix patch the holes in each side of the ship and are able to save power by letting that patch keep the air in instead of having some forcefield or whatever do it. Rose and a few of the others round up Prryik and lock him away with the other knocked out crew members and they do a careful sweep of the rest of the ship.

Lastly, Xhalix slaps together some kind of buffering on the bio wires to the batteries, and you make a plan. Mituna can feed them a bit at a time and if need be you and Kankri will yank them out of his hands if he can’t stop just from the buffer that Xhalix has put on. You have accepted that this is probably going to suck for him, it’s probably going to hurt, it may make him sick or screw with his head. You REFUSE to accept that it will kill him.

When everything has been done you, Kankri and Kanaya are sat with Mituna in the ruined helmsblock as Xhalix stands there with the bio wires in his hands. Yonnic is standing by with a portable medical kit. You’ve agreed with Roxy that the moment there is enough battery power she will start flying to Earth. The sooner that you land, the sooner you get Mituna full medical attention. The sooner Sollux and Psii can get someone to wake them up and the sooner the rest of you can get your injuries looked at.

“Thank you for this.” Kanaya says with a wobble in her voice and hugs Mituna.

“We will do our best to keep you safe, but thank you Mituna.” Kankri adds, reaching out and touching his arm.

“You’re not gonna die on us, I’ll kick your ass if you even try.” you snap angrily and hug him tight.
You lean back and catch the weird look that passes between the adult trolls in the room, yes your family is strange by troll standards, you’re aware of this. Kanaya taps on the console by the door and confirms with Roxy that they’re ready there.

Xhalix hands the buffered wires over, one to you and one to Kankri.

“Come on, stop putting it off.” Mituna says, holding out hands that are shimmering with red and blue.

You bite your lip and swallow around the lump in your throat. Your brother will not die here. You nod at Kankri, and both of you reach out with your insulated bio wires and brush them ever so faintly against his outstretched fingertips.

A lot happens very quickly. Bright red and blue light burst from Mituna’s fingertips, scorching your vision beyond what you could have ever expected. Behind you, there is a terrifying noise of machinery as the batteries immediately hit capacity and run out of space to store the energy that Mituna is giving them in less than a second. With nowhere else for the energy to go the ship forces it through the system in any programmed way that it can, everything turns on, including the engines and they run in their pre-planned pattern.

The Earth is not a set distance from Jupiter, it varies depending on the orbit of the planets. But at the moment you touched the wires to Mituna’s hands you were a little more than 483 million miles away from Earth. You don’t know how long it would take humans to get to you from Earth in their own space craft or in those they had taken from trolls on Earth. The first Earth powered vessel to get to Jupiter took six years. In terms of light speed it takes around 43 light minutes. Trolls, of course, have faster than light vessels. Kanaya’s one was, as was Aradia’s. This ship is not designed for faster than light travel and had never been given a helmsman with the power to go that fast anyway. It was supposed to be a short range ship.

Going faster than light speed in a vessel not designed for it is like being stretched out into a long thin sheet of yourself and then acting as a sheet to catch live wolverines fired out of cannon when they are also on fire. It feels like having all of your bones smacked with a variety of hammers until you are a fine paste. Despite this you and Kankri allow the wires to touch Mituna for less than a second and though his psionics maintain a connection with the wires until you yank them a good few feet away the connection still breaks.

Mituna sways and then falls backwards in a heap. You scramble over his body to look at him, yellow blood is leaking from his nose and mouth and you think you see it coming out of his ears. He starts to shudder all over and Yonnic shoves you out of the way and opens his kit, he injects Mituna with something and shoves something else in his mouth. He puts something in his own ears that looks very much like a stethoscope and listens to Mituna’s heart.

“Oh GOD what was that?” Xhalix asks, having been retching in the corner for a few seconds.

“I don’t know.” you say shakily and grip Mituna’s lax hand.

“THE FUCK JUST HAPPENED?!” Roxy’s voice screeches through the panel on the wall. Kanaya stands up on shaky legs.

“I- I think that was faster than light travel, but this ship was not designed for that, I think. Where are we?” Kanaya asks as she clings to the wall.

“We’re right above the goddamn Earth! It’s all I can see out of the windows! Thankfully we’re also in satellite range so Hal is personally walking me through the landing.” Roxy explains and Hal’s slightly tinny sounding voice follows hers, you think it might be through her phone speaker rather
than the actual communication system itself.

“Yeah, apparently you flooded the engine getting here and the ship’s computer was smart enough to
guess that you meant to stop at Earth and not PUNCH A HOLE THROUGH IT AT THE SPEED
YOU WERE GOING. Oh and by the way I think you just made everyone at NASA and every other
country’s space agencies shit themselves in fear!” Hal shouts.

“Shut up, Hal. Is Mituna okay?” Roxy asks, and you squeeze Mituna’s hand in your own.

“He’s alive, and he’s stable, but he’s probably not waking up anytime soon.” Yonnic says calmly.
He’s alive, he didn’t die! You crush Kankri into a hug against you and he returns it with a wet
sniffle.

“Well get your asses over here, I don’t know how smooth of a landing this is going to be.” Roxy tells
you and cuts the line.

“Can we move him?” you ask, looking at Mituna.

“Yes, I’ll carry him. His fit seems to have passed thanks to the anticonvulsant.” Yonnic tells you and
gently scoops up your brother.

“What- what fucking level of psionic is he? He’s not even an adult.” Xhalix whispers in something
between awe and horror.

“His ancestor is The Psiionic, who was briefly the helmsman for The Empress on the Battleship
Condescension.” Kankri explains and Xhalix’s whimper shifts firmly into horror.

The six of you make it back to the bridge and the floor beneath you is starting to rumble a little.
Xhalix shoulders Roxy out of the way and starts tapping at buttons.

“There, the shields are up as well as the hull barrier. If I’d have known we would get this much
power I wouldn’t have repaired the holes. That’ll give us a smoother entry into the atmosphere now.”
Xhalix says and true enough most of the shaking is gone. Roxy steps back in control with Hal giving
her verbal commands as well as visual you suppose as she’s wearing Dave’s shades.

The Earth takes up all of the great glass windows as the planet that you call home rises up to meet
you. North America begins to dominate the vision below you, and though you find it hard seeing
state lines when they’re not already drawn on a map you can say that it’s not Texas that you’re
heading towards, that’s for sure.

The view begins to tint red as the atmosphere tries to burn you up but you descend unhindered. The
twins are standing at the window and Rose nervously takes Dave’s hand. You start to be able to see
roads as thin lines and grey cities come into view, things get clearer, and clearer. Now you can see
cars and buildings properly, one building in particular.

“Roxy, Roxy that is the White House! You can’t land there!” you yelp in alarm but oh boy is it ever
getting bigger before you. The green lawn of the White House fills the screen and with a bump you
bounce off of the floor, the ship hits the ground again and then again before skidding to a halt with
the presidential building right before you.

“This is your captain speaking, we are now back on planet Earth, please remember to bring all of
your belongings with you.” Roxy jokes weakly.

“Whale… now what?” Feferi asks quietly.
“I guess we get out, maybe you should stay a little closer to the back.” you suggest.

“That is a lot of men with guns.” Dave notes and finally puts his sword away, Rose puts her needles away too. Yeah, it’s best not to alarm the military.

“Opening the door. Uh, which way to get out?” Roxy asks and so your group as a whole leaves the ship under the direction of the two adult trolls. There is a ramp out and daylight floods up from outside and you can hear the sound of many people outside waiting. Roxy has Sollux on her back and you and Kankri have Psii carried between you. The humans exit first, immediately followed by you and Kankri, everyone else is behind you. Men in black combat outfits with bulletproof vests and large guns come into view and you hold your breath in nervousness, well aware that they may see you and think alien.

“Please, they’re with us. We’re all safe.” Roxy insists loudly as you come out onto the blessed ground of your home planet once more. You’re all marched quickly into the White House itself and down into a secure underground portion of it. Behind you armed men rush into the ship to secure it.

“We need a doctor.” you tell someone as you go by.

A door opens and several armed men come out, surrounding the President himself as he steps into the room and looks at all of you. There is a blur of motion and then Dirk has his arms around his siblings, holding them close to him even with Sollux still on Roxy’s back.

Signless comes into the room and makes a wounded noise when he sees you all.

“Dad!” you cry out and he rushes to you and Kankri hugging you both. Kanaya steps too close and then she too is crushed in a hug. He pulls back and touches Psii’s slack face in worry and looks around to see Sollux out cold on Roxy’s back.

“Where is… oh… oh no.” your dad’s question dies on his lips as he looks at the bloodied Mituna, limp in Yonnic’s arms.

“He’s alive, but he needs a doctor. If… if human doctors can treat trolls that is.” Yonnic says and your dad reaches out with shaking hands and touches Mituna’s face, as if not believing that he’s really alive.

“He saved everyone.” you say with a shaking voice and you find that finally after everything tears are starting to well up.

“We can get you all transported to hospital, we have troll specialists waiting for you. Mr. Vantas we will do everything we can.” the President assures him.

“Who are you two?” Signless asks, looking at Yonnic and Xhalix. All of the armed men suddenly bristle with the realisation that these are not citizens of Earth and not known to Signless.

“They are followers of yours, they helped us. Yonnic provided medical care for Psii, Mituna and Sollux. Xhalix repaired the ship and made it so the batteries wouldn’t kill Mituna when he tried to fill them. Without them both we would surely be dead.” Kankri insists. Signless nods slowly, taking the men in and carefully he sets a hand on each of them.

“Thank you, thank you both.” he says quietly.

“Well, if that’s done we’d really appreciate you all not shooting us either. And you, you’re the President, right? We have information you need to hear.” Meenah says, stepping around from behind Yonnic and Xhalix.
Your father’s face goes from overwhelmed relief to mortal dread in a second as he stares at Meenah.

“Meenah…” he gasps and stumbles back. He claps a hand over his mouth, and thick red tinted tears run down his cheeks as the girl looks at him in puzzlement. Feferi joins her side and peers at your father curiously.

“I know who they are, but they helped too, and they have really important information that we need to hear.” you assure him.

“I think that the best thing to do would be to get to the hospital, you all need to be checked over and several of you seem to require medical treatment. We’ll need to ask all of you about everything that happened individually so I think this all can wait until then. As for now I think doctors, clean clothes and some quiet is what we need. Our troops are already sweeping the ship and from the numbers that you gave me earlier they should find four living trolls and four dead ones, yes?” the President asks, holding up a hand to call you all to order. You all nod in agreement.

“Then we should go.” he says.

You look forwards again to see that Rose and Roxy are in their mother’s arms and Dirk has his arm around Dave.

Your group is led into several ambulances and you naturally stay with your parents and brothers, your legs are tucked up against the stretcher that Sollux is laid out on. They only had room in your ambulance for Mituna and Sollux, Psii is in with the StriLondes. On the way to the hospital you look out of the window and eventually enough time passes for the light from Mituna’s engines to reach you. In the middle of the day for a brief moment the sky is scorched with red and blue, burning like the wrath of a god. Mituna is still out cold and you close your eyes and hope beyond hope that he’ll be fine.

When you get to the hospital you get clean clothes and the ones you were wearing are bagged for evidence. A doctor checks you over and bandages the minor injuries you have on your wrists from the handcuffs, but otherwise you’re basically fine. You then have to sit down with two men and a video camera and recount the entire thing as much as you are able to. Details have already started slipping from you, what floor were you on at what point? Did Rose attack the purple blood first or did Roxy shoot it first?

Hours later when you’re done Sollux has woken up and is both terrified for Mituna and furious at himself for being asleep through the whole thing and unable to help. Kanaya shows up later with her ribs bandaged and a few small nicks on her face taped over with gauze. Your family gathers together one by one and when Roxy drifts in she grabs Sollux up into the tightest hug she possibly can and bawls into his shoulder. It’s only some consolation that Sollux seems both mortified and confused by this.

Dave doesn’t show up, nor does Signless. For that matter Rose, Dirk and Roxanne are all missing too.

“Roxy, where’s the rest of your family?” you ask as Roxy finally releases a gasping Sollux from her grip.

“Uhm, when I saw them last they were in a room across the hall and down a bit. 201 and 202, but the wall between them has been pulled back. They were sending Dave for X Rays last I saw him, I think they wanted to check that his thumb was okay.” she answers.

“I’m going to go find that idiot, if Psii wakes up or Signless comes looking for me, tell them where I
“Am, ok?” you ask and Roxy agrees.

The whole floor that you’re on has been taken over by the secret service and a man dressed in combat gear nods at you as you leave the room and walk down the hallway. You open the door marked 201 and catch the argument going on inside.

“This was a known issue and had you asked any of us about his history in this regard we would have told you. The matter is resolved and, frankly, if you wish to make any protest about this you can speak to his doctor to assuage your fears. Failing that you can talk to his lawyer and mine, District Attorney Redglare.” Signless snaps angrily at a doctor who is scowling at him.

“Fine.” the doctor snarls and stamps past you like a child and not the grown woman that she is.

“What was that about?” you ask and your father looks at you in surprise.

“They X Rayed Dave, it’s a real show.” Rose says from her bed, her knee is pulled up to her chest and she’s resting her chin on the hands she has folded over her knee.

You walk over to her and see the light box on the wall with X Rays stuck on it. Dave’s hand is obviously there and it looks normal to you, but on his fingers a few things are circles in red pen. They’re fine white lines and they show up and are circled on numerous other X Rays, his ribs and his arms. Not clean breaks as such but fractures most likely, you don’t need to ask how they got there.

“Fuckin’ asshole.” Rose slurs and you turn to her and look at her properly. She’s dressed in pyjamas and her hair is damp but back to its normal white blonde instead of stained with troll blood. Her eyes are dark and her pupils are huge, she sways a little as you lean in to look at her.

“You’re high.” you say after a moment and Rose giggles.

“She was very upset earlier, the stress caught up to her and she wouldn’t stop crying so the doctors felt it best to relax her.” Roxanne says calmly.

“Better than Dave.” Rose remarks and flops back onto her bed bonelessly.

You look across the room to the bed that Dave is in. When you came in you’d seen Dirk laying on the bed, obscuring Dave from view for the most part and you’d just assumed he was talking to him to distract from the argument going down. Now you’re not so sure…

You sidle over to Dave’s part of the room, passing Roxy’s empty bed in the middle. Dirk looks around at the sound of your footsteps and as he does you can see that Dave is sleeping against his side.

“He’s asleep?” you ask dumbly because clearly he isn’t awake.

Dirk nods silently and brushes Dave’s hair out of his eyes a little, even though his eyes are shut.

“Wasn’t handling all of the questions so well so they sedated him, went overboard with it, really.” Dirk answers you quietly.

You look down at Dave’s body. He’s in pyjamas too and his mark is visible on his bare arm, his hand on his other arm is bandaged up to take care of where he dislocated his own thumb to break himself and all of you out. Didn’t it hurt when he was doing all of that welding on that injury? Why didn’t you think of that then?
“Can I ask you something about Dave and Bro?” you ask, looking up at Dirk again. Dirk nods.

“When Bro used to make him fight did Dave ever… become someone else? He was totally different up there once the fighting started. I mean, I could see he cared about us, and he was talking and functioning and that, but he was… cold, I think is the word? Robotic, almost. Rose was violent out of fear and anger and protection but Dave was just calculated and methodical. I expected him to panic but he didn’t and when I tried to talk to him he basically told me to leave him alone or he’d break down.” you say and Dirk winces.

“Yeah, I’m not surprised. Bro hated us getting emotional, even anger was punished, so it’s better to not have anything. Dave was probably focused on just getting through it all and protecting everyone. It’s more my thing than this, he’s not that good at not being emotional and if he was aware enough to tell you not to push him then he was probably running close to the edge of what he could cope with. It’s not personal, Karkat. Honestly, him being able to tell you that is something big on its own.” Dirk assures you.

“Well, can you tell me when he wakes up? And let me know if I can do anything to help and I don’t just mean for him.” you offer. Dirk flashes you a small smile and nods.

You figure it’s best to leave him alone and instead decide that you should catch up with your dad now that he’s not arguing with a doctor. When he sees you he pulls you in for a hug and kisses the top of your head, you don’t protest. Part of you had been sure that you’d never see him again.

“Hey, Karkat. How are you doing?” Signless asks, pulling back from you.

“I’m fine, I was basically useless.” you sigh.

“Not what I heard.” Dirk calls over to you.

“Everyone so far has said that you kept everyone together, made alliances and kept people safe. That isn’t ‘nothing’ Karkat.” Signless tells you.

“I’m pretty sure it’s Roxy that should be getting that praise, not me.” you mumble, but Signless shakes his head.

“Do they know when Psii’s going to wake up yet?” you ask, swiftly changing the subject away from other people trying to make you feel better about your incompetence.

“Well, they’ve decided to filter his blood through a machine to sift the drug out. They think he should wake up either after or part way through that. He’s just down the hall and the nurse promised to get me if he woke up when I was away. I just needed to come in here to fix that issue with Dave’s X Rays.” he tells you with a frown. You don’t ask what the problem was but you guess that some smart doctor finally looked at Dave’s scarred skin and apparently damaged skeleton and worked out that no kid should look like that. Too little, too fucking late.

“Sollux is awake. Unless he’s passed out from Roxy smothering him in her chest but honestly I think that’s a way the he’s willing to go out so I’m not intervening in that.” you snort in derision, and Roxanne sighs despairingly. You feel sketchy about her being here at all but her children were very nearly just murdered in space and, sadly, her being a terrible person doesn’t mean that she doesn’t care about her children at least a little. You’re pretty sure that she also legally outranks you in terms of access to Dave, let alone the others.
“I was aware that he’s awake and I guess I’ll give him some time to deal with that… situation. I don’t know if you knew but Mituna is in surgery right now.” your dad says and you can see the amusement sliding off of his face.

“Wait, surgery, for what?” you asks as dread slides down your back like ice.

“Apparently the emergency care that the mediculler Yonnic gave to him was helpful and may have saved him a lot of harm but, well, they scanned his head to be sure that he was fine and they found that his brain was bleeding slightly. They said that normally it wasn’t enough for them to have done much about it but given his psionics they wanted to be cautious and let some of the pressure out just to be safe. I think it’s very low risk seeing as how they were willing to let me refuse without much argument if I was opposed to it. He should be out in maybe half an hour and he’ll wake up a while after then.” Signless explains.

“Fuck.” you whisper in horror. You squeeze your eyes shut and remind yourself that he’s alive and he could have so easily not been. You could all be dead instead and Mituna knew that risk and did this anyway. It was his choice but still, he’s your brother and he’s hurt.

“Is mom coming?” you ask weakly and Signless nods.

“Everyone else is already on a plane here, a private government plane no less. I think they’re just trying to stop Meulin and Dolorosa being hounded by the media.” Signless says.

“Poor media.” you snort.

Really, you cannot imagine anyone with a camera and a microphone intimidating Dolorosa. She’s a seven-foot tall Alternian vampire who raised your father, participated in a revolution, survived slavery twice, and when she finally died she got up again because shit like that does not stop Dolorosa. As for your Mom, well, people might assume that of your parents she’s the easiest to deal with. In a way they’re right, she’s pleasant and personable and can win arguments while being polite just like Signless can. Sure, she can’t laser her way through a ship like Psii can but she has claws and unlike your fathers shit is personal with her. Olive isn’t exactly highblood, but she can carry a grudge with the best of them. If she didn’t believe in the cause so much and live her values of truth, love and freedom as much as she does, then there would be a far higher body count around her.

You don’t have much else to do. You spend the rest of the day answering follow up questions from secret agents and waiting for Psii to wake up. When he does he is predictably furious at himself for the whole thing and sends himself into a massive guilt spiral just in time for your mom to arrive and so the two of them have to drag him into some kind of pile and talk it out. Not that you want to think about it because, uh, gross.

When Mituna wakes up he’s still doped up from both the pain medication and the anaesthetic. Nonetheless, you’re invited to see him right away. He looks small under the white blankets and clinical lights, his eyes dull and bruised underneath. His head is wreathed in white bandages, although it looks like the doctors were a little uncertain about how to navigate them around four horns so it looks a little messy. He blinks wearily at you as you come in the room.

“Karkat?” he asks weakly.

“Mituna, I’m here.” you tell him, rushing to his side. There’s an IV in his arm, and his fingertips are bandaged, you wonder if he has electrical burns there.

“Come- come closer.” Mituna pleads, his voice raspy and shaking.
You lean in close, and his trembling hand comes up to you until it suddenly snaps shut around your shirt and hauls you all the way in. Mituna’s double ended tongue jams itself in your ear and when you jerk back in disgust he screeches in your ear.

“TEAM NOT DYING, BITCHES! AHAHAHAHAHA!” he cackles and you squirm away, rubbing at your now spit filled ear.

“You fucking shit, I was so goddamn worried about you!” you shout at him, and he only laughs harder.

“Oh man, your FUCKING face, I can’t- can’t even, oh god!” Mituna snorts, sitting up and holding his stomach tight from laughing.

“You asshole.” you groan and shove your shirt in your ear and rub it.

“Okay, lay it on me bro, how bitching was I? Huh, huh?” he asks, smiling so wide he shows off all of his jacked up fangs. You sit down on the bed, out of slobbering range and grin at him.

“Well, you know that battery that no one could possibly fill? Well, you filled it in less than a second and the ship used the extra energy to catapult us to Earth in under a second as well. Way beyond mere light speed. That engineer thinks it’s a miracle that everything didn’t catch fire. It was so amazing.” you say with a smile.

“Oh, and when we were on the way to the hospital the light from the engines finally caught up to us and you just like… scorched the sky like shitty 3d glasses blocking out the sun. Scared the shit out of pretty much everyone on this side of the planet I think, probably made some people believe in God.” you laugh, and Mituna grins wildly.

“Fuck, I am going to get like… so much nook for this. SO MUCH. Man, I gotta call Tula. Gonna get fucking uuuuuup!” Mituna cackles, throwing his hands in the air.

“Gross. But, all the same, I’m glad you’re okay. You’re the big goddamn hero, you know that? You saved all of our asses and, if those heiresses are telling the truth, you may have saved the world too.” you tell him happily. You’re so grateful that he’s ok.

“I’m just, basically, the greatest.” Mituna agrees with a nod.

“I can tell that this is going to get old real fast but for now I’ll agree with you, you are.” you tell him.

He flops back on his bed with a happy sigh, at least until his injured head hits the pillow and he hisses in pain.

“You’re also dumb as a sack of bricks, you incompetent moron. You can fly a ship faster than the speed of light but you forget that you’ve got a hole in your skull and brain yourself with a pillow? Good fucking god!” you yell, and Mituna shoves you off of the bed with his stupid life-saving brain powers and you flip him off, with love of course, and leave the room.

You’re pretty sure that he pulls his deathbed prank on a few other people who were on the ship before you all wise up and let each other know that the shithead isn’t about to die.

With the rest of your family around it’s more of the same kind of chaos, so you don’t see Dave again until something around one in the morning when he climbs onto your bed and wakes you up. His hair is bright white in the moonlight, and his skin looks just as pale. You rub your eyes and sit up, Sollux is fast asleep in his bed.
“You’re awake now?” you ask in a whisper and Dave nods.

“Are you… okay?” you continue, and he shakes his head silently.

“I killed someone.” Dave says after a moment and stares down at his bare feet. You sit up in bed a little more.

“You had to.” you tell him, and he nods.

“It’s still a thing that I did. I stabbed someone to death and attacked other people, hurt them, threatened them.” Dave continues.

“Yeah, you did.” you agree because he isn’t wrong here.

“Bro never killed anyone.” Dave says after a while.

“As far as we know, but he did torture kids which is a hell of a lot worse than killing someone in self-defence and to protect other people.” you point out.

Dave doesn’t say anything to that, you’re not sure if he agrees with you or not.

“I shut you out. I’m so sorry, you’re my soulmate and I’m supposed to-” he begins.

“What the fuck? No. Look, I’m not going to lie, I would be felt better if you were more your normal self through that but if you had to be robo-Dave to get through that and not be curled in a ball and risking being taken out by some highblood with a score to settle then I know what I prefer. I’m not going to just- I don’t care, Dave.” you insist sharply and he looks at you with a wince.

“You dumbass, I love you.” you tell him and pull him against you for a hug. He wraps one arm around your middle but keeps his injured hand curled up to his chest. You think you hear him mumble the same thing back to you but it’s lost in your shirt.

“I’m not okay.” he says after a few moments.

“Yeah, me neither.” you agree, and something in Dave seems to relax at hearing you say that. The idiot probably thought everyone was doing so much better with this than he is. Most of you are distracting yourselves so you don’t have to think about either what happened or what nearly happened.

“Can I stay here?” he asks you in a whisper so as not to wake Sollux.

“Shut up and get under the blanket already.” you scoff and you feel Dave smile against your chest and the two of you wrangle your errant sheets over the both of you and curl together in a tangle of limbs.

For someone who has slept a lot of the day Dave falls asleep relatively quickly, but insomnia is an old friend of yours so sleep evades you for some time. You think of all that happened and all that could have gone wrong and things you should have done differently. You wish that the boy tangled up with you in your bed hadn’t been involved in this at all but it’s not as if avoiding being on that ship would have saved him much angst. Honestly, if he hadn’t set your escape off by dislocating his thumb you might be on your way to Alternia by now, continuing your father’s revolution against your will. And really that’s the better of the two options in that follow you failing to escape.

You look out of the window at the night sky and wonder if other ships will come for you. You wonder about The Empress and what exactly her invasion plans are and if there’s anything to them,
Meenah and Feferi didn’t exactly give you details.

You close your eyes and try not to think on it anymore, though that’s a fruitless exercise if there ever was one. Fuck, you can still see Signless’s face and the horrified way that he said Meenah’s name when he saw her. It was like he’d seen a ghost.

Your eyes open as a thought that had been chewing through your brain finally surfaces. Your father called her Meenah but you’d never said her name in front of him. How… how did he know her name?
> Dave: Kick it with Barack

Chapter Notes

So I got some AMAZING fanart the other day that you should all go check out because it's SO COOL! http://kaenith.tumblr.com/post/164193958048/ive-been-reading-mc-escher-thats-my-favorite

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[turntechGodhead joined memo ALIEN ABDUCTION]
[tentacleTherapist joined memo ALIEN ABDUCTION]

EB: DAVE! ROSE!

GG: oh my god are you guys okay!?!?

TG: uh hi

TT: We’re unharmed and safe, is what I think Dave meant to say.

EB: you guys are all over the news! they’re saying things like you guys broke out of space jail and took the ship back and flew it back to earth!!!

GG: is any of that true?? what happened?

TG: i dont know man its not like weve seen any of the news in here and this is literally the first hint of technology weve got back and we probably arent even supposed to be talking to you two either

TG: secret service dudes have very little sense of humour

TT: Believe us, we’ve tried. But we can explain some of what happened if you’d like.

TG: arent you sick of talking about it?

TT: Yes, but I would also rather talk about it in full with our friends once than dodge ineptly and cagily around the subject for the foreseeable future.

TT: Dave you are across the room from me I can see the look you’re giving your phone.

GG: tell us everything! :O

EB: yeah!

TT: Very well, I don’t know how much of troll politics you’re aware of but I can simplify by saying that Karkat’s father, Signless, is essentially troll Jesus if you remove god from the equation and keep the rebellious politics and eventual execution. A failed one thankfully in this case. Many people wish to fix that last part.

TT: We were heading home with Karkat’s other father Psiionic, or Psii for short, as well as three of Karkat’s brothers who are descendants of either Signless or Psiionic. Dave and I were both with our
soulmates and Roxy was there as well.

EB: wait karkat’s dad is gay too?

TG: THAT is what you got from that?

TG: and no hes not because hes also basically married to karkats mom disciple and all three of them are together its like some three way thing and theyre all sickeningly sweet and domestic all of the time

TG: and karkats not gay either!

EB: but hes your soulmate?

TT: Dave just yelled a demand that I “fix this”. John, homosexuality is an attraction of men exclusively to other men. Men who are attracted to more than one gender are not, as you put it, “gay”. Though I suppose we can leave the discussion for gay as an umbrella term vis a vis ‘gay rights’ etc for another time. None of the men mentioned, including Dave, have shown an attraction for just one gender. It is also not relevant to us being abducted into space, which discussion do you want?

GG: john shut up i wanna hear about space!

TT: Good. Anyway, these trolls attempted to take us. Psii made an attempt to shoot down their ship but failed. They knocked us all out, took us into their onboard cell and locked us up. We woke up, briefly spoke to the president and Roxy made a Die Hard reference and I blame YOUR family for that John, just so you know.

EB: yeah they showed that bit on tv actually! it’s stupid that they bleep it as it’s an actual quote but whatever, you know?

TT: In any case, we escaped and defeated or restrained the crew except for those who helped us. The ship was low on power so Karkat’s brother Mituna used his psionics to charge the ship at great risk to himself.

TG: the guy is a fucking hero i think we basically owe him for life

TT: Indeed. Roxy had charted us a course back to Earth and we travelled here faster than light which, for the record, I do not recommend. Then Roxy and Hal worked together to land the ship right outside the White House for reasons known only to them but I suspect “style” had a certain amount to do with it.

GG: pictures of the ship on the lawn are basically everywhere!

EB: it’s become this big symbol or something, you know i bet they’re gonna make movies about this!

TT: Well, that’s a brief and somewhat edited version of everything that happened. Sorry that we couldn’t let you know we were okay sooner, it’s been hard to even get hold of Hal to pass messages for us.

GG: were any of you hurt at all?

TT: My leg was clawed by the Captain of the ship, we both have cuts on our wrists from the cuffs and Dave had to dislocate his thumb to escape. He also split his eyebrow and has a bit of a black eye
too. Kanaya has a few fractured ribs, Mituna had some bleeding in his brain and a few burns but he seems to be fine. Other than that it’s mostly small injuries all around.

EB: god, it just sounds so cool. you’re real life action heroes on a space adventure! i’m so jealous!

You drop your phone onto your hospital bed and rub your face with your hands. Jealous? You try not to think of blue blood gushing over your hands from the chest of the troll you killed, but of course trying not to think about it does just that. You shudder.

“What do you want me to tell him?” Rose asks. You pull a pillow over your face and scream into it, just for a moment. Ironically, maybe.

“Going that well, huh?” Dirk says without even looking up, he’s playing cards against Roxy on her bed which is between you and Rose.

“I’ll just say you had to go.” Rose says and you take the pillow off of your face.

“I’m sorry if John and Jade aren’t taking this well. Jane has been really supportive, so has Jake.” Roxy says and lays her cards down. Dirk makes an anguished noise and drops his own to the bed.

“You are definitely cheating, I don’t know how but you are cheating.” Dirk huffs and starts to deal the next hand.

“I’m so happy it’s going well for you.” you say bitterly to Roxy.

“Yes, I’m so pleased that don’t have to run the remedial class on ’that time we nearly died wasn’t super fun’ for your friends.” Rose adds sharply.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Roxy pouts.

“Uh-huh. I’m going to go find Karkat. Dirk she can see your cards in your shades.” you tell Dirk and leave the room.

“DAVE!” Roxy shouts after you in irritation.

“knew you were cheating!” Dirk cries out.

You walk down the hall and into the room that Karkat shares with Sollux. Sollux isn’t there but Karkat and Kankri both are and they seem to be in some kind of heated argument or debate.

“No one else thinks it’s weird. I mean, fine, Sollux and Psii were out cold and Mituna’s memory of some of it is… questionable. But Kanaya keeps acting like I’m imagining it and I know I’m not!” Karkat argues.

“I’m not saying you’re wrong Karkat, but there’s got to be some explanation. I think that you’re panicking over this because you feel safer having a problem to work on than dealing with what has actually happened to you, you’re trying to control your feelings.” Kankri insists.

“Ugh, you’re not listening to me.” Karkat groans, putting his face in his hands. When he looks back up he sees you and brightens.

“Dave! You’ll listen to me! Did you see how Signless reacted when he saw Meenah?” Karkat asks desperately. You walk over there and sit on the end of his bed. Everything from that period in time is a little fuzzy and you think you were pretty much checked out by then.
“I don’t. Why, what did he do?” you ask and Karkat visibly deflates a little.  

“He looked at her like he’d seen a ghost and called her by her name.” Karkat says fiercely, his grey eyes boring into you. You frown as you consider what he said.  

“Well, didn’t her ancestor try to kill him? I get why he’d be freaked out. But…” you trail off as you try to remember Karkat’s message to the President when you were floating in space by Jupiter.  

“But I never told anyone her name, not over the communication. He said her name before I did.” Karkat says with wide eyes.  

“That’s… huh.” you say and rest your chin in your hands.  

“She’s around Kankri’s age, right? So it’s not like they would have met before, not unless fishtrolls age weirdly.” you say, thinking out loud.  

“She’s the same age as Kankri and Feferi is our age. This is the first time they’ve ever been on the same planet and he already knew her name.” Karkat says firmly.  

“Okay, but Kankri and Signless have the same name, right? Is The Empress’ real name Meenah?” you ask.  

“Yes, it is.” Kankri says primly and you suspect that he’s tried that argument before.  

“Yeah but she’s SO much older than him, he never knew her at that age and you’ve seen them both or we’ve seen her in pictures at least. Meenah doesn’t look any more like her than Feferi does. Besides, mother grubs spit out tyrians regularly to make sure there’s always a ruler. The odds of one sharing the name of her ancestor are minute. That wasn’t a guess.” Karkat says.  

You think on it for a moment, trying to turn the whole thing around in your head to see it from another angle but you can’t manage it.  

“That is weird.” you finally agree and Karkat lunges across the bed to kiss you gratefully.  

“I knew I could count on you.” he grins.  

“Shut up. Let me get a few people smarter than me and we can try this again.” you tell him and you walk back across to your room and grab your shades.  

“Hal, I need you to talk to Karkat. Rose, you too.” you say, looking across at her.  

AT: I have a better purpose to my existence than passing love notes between you two so I hope that’s not it.  

You drag both of them back into Karkat’s room and Karkat explains his whole theory again with Kankri only just barely putting up with it. You set your phone on Karkat’s bed so that Hal can just speak to you all out loud rather than have you translate for him.  

“That is unusual. There must be some connection that we’re unaware of.” Rose agrees.  

“Thank you!” Karkat exclaims.  

“A lot of people are being very shady these days. I know I’m designed to see patterns seeing as I’m the human mind made large with overpowered algorithms but there are a lot of coincidences piling up. Jade knowing Kanaya and Aradia, Signless knowing Meenah, this secretive stuff with that green symbol and the weirdness of whatever it is that Sollux is patching together in code. And then there’s
the whole thing about April, Kanaya won’t talk until then but it also happens to be the same month that the date Dave wrote up is in, which is also John’s birthday and the number 413 has significance in troll culture.” Hal says.

“I’m sorry but I think you’re reaching for conclusions that aren’t there. The whole thing with the blind prophets has not been significant in troll culture in a very long time, it’s mainly something that just gets referenced in games that Terezi plays to make them seem culturally deeper than they are. As for the rest of it you’ve no proof that these weird things are connected.” Kankri argues.

“It is perfectly normal after trauma to try to categorise things and make sense of the world but I will not humour all of you in this.” He adds and dramatically sweeps out of the room.

“Yeah, well, fuck you too! God, he’s such an asshole!” Karkat shouts as the door shuts behind Kankri.

“Something is happening here, right?” he asks, looking back at all of you.

“Something is, that’s for sure. We can’t say for sure that all of these are connected but we already know that Kanaya, Jade and Aradia are conspiring about something.” Rose agrees.

“I’m going to look into this.” Hal declares in a way that will almost certainly involve illegal hacking and your brilliant electrical big brother doing things that Dirk never intended him to do.

Karkat looks at you. He wants you to agree. He wants you to say ‘yes Karkat a huge terrible conspiracy is going on and only you Nancy Drew Karkat Vantas can solve it.’

“I don’t know.” you say and his face falls. Shit.

“That’s kind of a general statement about, I don’t know, everything. My life, other people, this shit, this entire sentence. I have no idea. Something is weird here and I don’t get it but that’s a large portion of how I see everything. Can I be unhelpful and supportive at the same time?” you add desperately.

“Not really, but thanks I guess.” Karkat tells you and pats your arm gently.

Dirk is off somewhere on the phone to your therapist, catching her up on everything that’s happened and trying to get the doctors here to release their notes on you to her. Apparently it’s a logistical nightmare. Rose is off with Kanaya somewhere and you suspect that Roxy is off harassing Sollux or in some secluded corner sweet talking Jane now that she’s got her phone back.

You’re alone and sat on your bed. You turn your phone over in your hands, you could message any one of your friends or even walk around to find someone but you don’t really want to. You don’t want to be around people and have to pretend that you’re okay about killing a man even though everyone else is like ‘yeah you did the right thing’.

You keep having nightmares about it and you wonder if Dirk was like this with Bro after he killed him.

The door to your shared room clicks open and Karkat comes in, he sees you and looks relieved. Karkat shuts the door behind him and hops up casually onto your bed.
“Everyone is driving me crazy.” he tells you matter of factly.

You nod and swallow around the lump in your throat.

*You killed a man. His blood ran over your sword and along your hands, dripped off of your skin with an alien temperature.*

“I’m a murderer.” you say suddenly and Karkat stares at you.

“You’re not, legally speaking you’re not. And I don’t mean because it was self-defence or anything but murder is killing someone unlawfully. There’s no law in space.” Karkat replies and you scowl at him.

“How do you manage to miss the point that much?!” you demand, leaning over into his space. You’re not joking around here.

“I’m not missing the point! The point is you did nothing wrong, not legally or morally.” he argues back.

Something nasty thrashes in you, a want to hurt him for being so fucking stupid, for not caring about this. And isn’t that just like you, the guy who *murdered* someone? Rage boils in you and it’s had no escape at all, everyone is trying to make you feel better and you shouldn’t feel better you should feel something! You want to scream and break things, to curl up and not exist, to destroy yourself entirely. But you can’t, all you have is Karkat.

Your hand claws into Karkat’s jumper and you haul him back onto the rest of you bed with you. You drag him down and kiss him hard enough to bruise. You go for him as hard as you have to so that you can push every other thought out of your brain. It works for a while, he kisses you back but then it stops working so well. You don’t want this right now, you don’t want to be you. You wish you could rip your chest open, spread your ribs apart like you’re going in for surgery and rip your heart clean out of your chest. You wish you could shove it into Karkat’s chest so it can be pressed up against his heart where it wants to be and far away from your awful brain. You just want to stop existing because it’s too much and it doesn’t stop.

“Dave, Dave, look at me.” Karkat urges you and you peel your eyes open to look at him leaning over you. He swims a little in your vision.

“You’re crying,” he says and brushes a hand over your neck, “and shaking.”

“I can’t stop thinking about everything.” you tell him in a strangled voice.

“That’s-” Karkat starts but you tug him down and kiss him again, hoping that he can somehow move his mouth against yours in a way that’ll obliterate you from existance.

“I don’t want to be me anymore I just want- just you.” you scramble to explain and this time he pushes himself fully up on his arms. He looks down at you, his hair a wild black halo around his head lit by the clinical hospital lights above you.

“It’s ok, Dave.” Karkat says gently.

“It’s NOT!” you yell, nearly kneeing him in the side as you gesture wildly. Karkat catches your wrists and stops you.

“No, it’s not. Shit is fucked in biblical proportions. What happened to us was not okay, we’re going to be asked about it on and off for the rest of our lives and everyone else is going to know about it,
there might be *movies* as if us nearly dying is entertainment! That is fucked up and it will be in perpetuity! When I tell you it’s okay I’m not saying that this will ever not hurt at all, I’m not even saying that it’ll feel better than it does now any time soon. I’m saying that hating what happened, what you did, what you didn’t do, what all of us went through is the only sane reaction here. It’s ok because you’re still here, you’re dealing with this shit.” Karkat insists angrily.

“No I’m not! Everyone else is but I can’t!” you shout at him and try to squirm out of his grasp and fail.

“No one is handling this well! We’re all faking it! Everyone is having nightmares and some people are pretending nothing happened at all. Everyone thinks that everyone else is handling it better than them. And, sure, you might be having more of a hard time with it than other people because you were hurt before this disaster crater formed around us all but that doesn’t mean you’re doing worse at it!” He yells. You’re sure he’s wrong, he has to be, they’re all fine and you’re a mess. But what if…

“We’re going to be okay. We’re going to go to school and be bored in class and you’ll copy my homework, we’ll hang out with our friends and be stupid, we’ll play video games and it’ll happen that we don’t think about any of this. It won’t have not happened but we’ll be okay. And I’m not going anywhere, so you don’t have to kiss me like you’re never going to see me again.” he adds a little sadly.

“I wish I could be stupid and play video games with you and be okay now.” you whine and you know you sound pathetic, you can hear it in your own voice.

“Well, part of that I can do.” Karkat says slyly and kisses your cheek as he lets you go. He sits back a little and pulls his phone out and waves it at you.

Dirk finds the pair of you later swearing at Angry Birds with great enthusiasm and, hey, Karkat was right. For a moment things still weren’t okay, but you kind of were.

“Dave, the President is coming here to talk to us. Please try to get through one damned interaction with the man without swearing.” Dirk pleads.

“Hey, watch your fucking language.” you reply and Dirk tries to smother you with your own pillow in retaliation. Karkat does nothing to help you, the traitor.

It takes about two hours until you get to see the President, apparently not broadcasting his location in advance is a key part of his whole ‘not getting shot at’ policy. In the meantime all of you are gathered in one big room with lots of chairs and you’re left to entertain yourselves until he arrives. You’re all back in your own clothes now and though there is a higher than normal amount of bandages on your group everything looks pretty standard.

But after what Karkat said you look a little closer and pay a little more attention. Signless is the most notable difference, where before he was always pleasant and warm, usually chatting to people about things that made them happy he’s now different. He’s quiet and withdrawn, alternating between staring out of the window with an expression close to dread on his face and then looking at his children with poorly muted sadness. Psii is trying to be normal but you can see the guilt clear on his face, the same goes for Sollux.

Kanaya is perpetually glued to either Rose or Karkat and it’s almost like she’s paranoid that they’ll vanish if she takes her eyes off of them. Roxy looks tired as all heck and Mituna still looks worn out from surgery, although emotionally he seems fine. Kankri is anxious looking and Dirk is tired and stressed in a way that you know means that he’ll crash eventually.
Karkat was right, no one is handling this ‘well’.

Even your families, the people who weren’t there are upset and stressed although they try to be cheery and to pretend like everything is okay. Before you can ruminate further on this idea the President himself strides into the room. You try really hard not to have the first word out of your mouth be a curse word.

“Holy fuck.” you whisper.

Dirk slowly turns to look at you and, though his shades are in the way, you think one of his eyes might be twitching. Every atom in his body seems to be asking you why. Why do you do this?

The commander in chief himself doesn’t seem to hear you and instead takes a seat facing the rest of your group with two of his advisors or possibly security people with him.

“Hello everyone.” He says in his smooth Obama-ly voice. This is so much cooler when there’s no impending death hanging over you.

“I have been brought up to speed with everyone’s medical situations and I have to say that I’m so relieved that you all seem to be on the mend. I’m sorry for not visiting you all sooner but needless to say this has been quite the international incident.” Obama says smoothly.

Yeah, you bet it’s been an incident.

“Great, what did Meenah and Feferi have to say?” Karkat asks immediately and everyone looks at him and then right back at the President.

“I will get to that, but before I have to cover some things with all of you. Your abduction and everything that happened up there is public knowledge, to an extent at least. I am sure people will hound you for information and it’s up to you what you choose to disclose or keep private and I have here for all of you the entirety of what we have told the public.” he motions with his hand and one of the people with him passes paper out to everyone. You skim it nervously but it basically just gives times and dates and who was involved, that two trolls turned to your cause and you rescued some prisoners too. It plays up the heroism and daring do but gives very little actual info. Rose probably appreciates wordsmithing this cunning.

“My only condition is that you do not disclose why Feferi and Meenah Peixes came to Earth. Needless to say we are investigating what they told us and making plans but there is no point in causing mass panic. Is this something you can all agree to?” the President asks and looks around at all of you. You all nod and, seemingly satisfied, he carries on.

“To answer your question, Karkat, they told a mix of things. Some of it was helpful, some not. The Empress is currently far past Alternia, out the other way from where we are but apparently something has made her decide that she needs to come to Earth. Feferi said it was some signal from a monitoring system outside our solar system, a signal that they intercepted. It essentially told her to come here and the heiresses beat her to it.” he explains.

“But they got caught.” Roxy says and he nods.

“They were trying to come here in a ship of their own and beat her here but also listen into more classified communications. Doing so brought them close enough to another vessel that they were captured.” Obama explains.

“When will she be here?” Rose asks and suspicion tingles in your head. You carefully look sidelong through your shades so that you can see Aradia and Kanaya.
“The estimates are little shakey but based on the information from the two Peixes girls we estimate that we have four months until she arrives.” he answers.

Everyone else’s eyes go wide in alarm except for Kanaya and Aradia. They knew, or something is up that makes them not worried about that at all. You make a mental note of that and feel grateful that Hal will have definitely caught that on a recording, you can see the little symbol in the corner of your shades that says that he’s recording.

The President is talking about how other countries are all working together to form a defence and that they’re doing all that they can and thank you all for bringing this information to them.

“You can’t shoot down Battleship Condescension.” Psii says after the President has spoken for a while. The President pauses and considers this.

“We have a lot of ships now and we have been improving on Alternian technology in leaps and bounds.” he assures Psii.

“That’s cute, but I used to BE that ship. I know as well as the back of my hand and when I was that ship people used to TRY to shoot me down and nothing so much as scratched at my paint. I know damn well that since I’ve been myself again she will have improved it, made it more powerful, more impenetrable. That one ship can’t take over your planet but it can absolutely raze every government building from every country off of the Earth until you do what she says. She’s not dumb enough to land the fucking thing and let her soldiers get involved with humans again, I mean, you’ve SEEN how that works out.” Psii sneers. You can’t help but notice the way he talks about the ship as if he and it were the same thing.

“So what do you propose?” The President asks calmly.

“Mr. President, if we had known how to bring down that ship for good or were able to get close to The Empress and kill her then we wouldn’t be having this conversation because we would have already done it.” The Disciple points out. Oh damn, check and mate Mr. Prez.

“I would appreciate any details about her or her ship that you could give us, Mr. Captor.” Obama says and Psii nods.

“We still have some questions for the two girls and things they need to agree to but they will be needing somewhere to live at least temporarily, I wanted to know if perhaps-” he begins.

“No.” Signless says sharply and you stare at him.

Karkat’s house is as stupidly full and stupidly constructed as it is because they keep letting people in, even when people just stay there for a little while you know that Signless has basically an open door policy or will at least whore out the homes of other people he knows in order to help. For him to refuse is weird, especially so firmly.

A stunned and awkward silence settles over everyone. You don’t know what to say. Should you offer? You’re not really sure you want to bring anyone else into the mess that is the situation with your Mom and and you don’t know anything about either of these girls. Your memory of them is a touch hazy as it is.

“They could maybe stay with Mindfang or Redglare, neither of them would get walked over.” The Disciple suggests into the quiet. A few other people nod in agreement and Signless gives a one shouldered shrug.

“Ah, good, thanks. If you could give Mark here the details then that would be great.” The President
says, gesturing to the man.

After that he talks about the press and what to expect. He apologises to all of you again for not being able to do more and thanks you all again for your quick wittedness and action under pressure. You’re not totally paying attention, instead your eyes are on Signless and the way that he is tense and his gaze has drifted to out of the window and to the sky beyond. What’s eating at him?

You eye the President’s arm and his covered soulmark, he always has his covered which isn’t uncommon for political figures and celebrities. No one wants images of their actual soul plastered over every magazine cover for the whole world to gawk at just because their partner is famous. His ring is visible and public knowledge too, two bands which loop up to become minimalistic wings, one a clear blue and the other a deep purple. You don’t think your arm or Karkat’s were visible to the reporters in the distance when you came off of the ship, you’ll just have to be careful for a while if you don’t want them to be public. That’s probably the kind of thing you should talk to Karkat about.

Oh, well, you sure hope the last of whatever the President was saying wasn’t important because you absolutely weren’t listening. You’ll have to ask Hal later. Oh, and now he’s shaking your hand and thanking you for what you did. For stabbing a man to death. Welp, that’s a thing that hasn’t stopped being a thing.

After that you’re all allowed to go home and on a private plane no less, which is good because The Disciple is walking up and down the aisle talking to people trying to arrange temporary housing for the two heiresses and the two adult trolls who helped you out.

You land and most of you dodge the press, which is to say that your Mom and Karkat’s Grandmother march right up to the press and pointedly state that no one will be giving any comment of any kind and they should all leave now please. You watch around Dirk’s shoulder as the press notice Dolorosa starting to glow and as they spot the way her congenial smile pulls her lips back enough to show off her dangerous fangs. People catch pictures of your group but not much else.

To your relief your doctor writes the next two weeks off as medical leave for you and everyone involved and basically temporarily drops the rest of her schedule to cater to all of you. You always knew that your family would end up funding her, or in this case the US Government as a financial apology for leaving you in space alone. Either way her reasoning is that though social company would be good for all of you the attention from your peers about what happened to you would be bad. That leaves all of you camped out in either your house, Karkat’s house or Rosa’s house.

All of which is why you’re at Karkat’s house ready for him to mock the life out of this movie.

“You sure Sollux doesn’t wanna watch this as well, or Mituna?” you ask as you slide the DVD into the player.

“Mituna is having his checkup and Sollux is… indisposed.” Kankri says carefully.

“He’s been coding this thing for Aradia non stop, he’s not even sleeping any more. He’s going manic. And I know that’s new to you but we’ve seen this all before, there’s plans and medications. He’ll be fine. He’ll go like hell on this thing until it wears off and then he’ll crash and be miserable for a while, but that’s easier for us to help with. Right now all we can do is to wait it out and let Psii make sure that he’s eating and taking his meds.” Karkat answers unhappily.

“But maybe a break would do him good.” you suggest.

“No offense Dave but if that would fix this then it wouldn’t be a problem at all. Sollux can be very
aggressive verbally when he’s like this, even attempting to make him eat is hard enough.” Kankri tells you.

Your shoulders fall a little, you like Sollux. He’s a cool guy who embraces all of the things that make him not cool which swing around again to make him cool. He’s funny and sarcastic. After everything you’ve all just been through it seems really shitty that his brain is hurting him like this.

“That really sucks.” you say and walk back to the sofa, dropping down into place next to Karkat.

“Yeah, well, being bipolar sucks. Sollux says so often enough.” Karkat agrees unhappily. He hits play on the movie and you settle in against his side, hoping that it can distract you.

“Robert Downey Junior is a very talented actor with a range of skills but faking an English accent isn’t one of them! Couldn’t they have hired someone else?!” Karkat demands within the first minute of the film.

“It’s not as if hiring a present day British actor would be period appropriate anyway, so much of this does not fit the time period at all.” Kankri adds.

“I can live with that, I’m not asking for accurate ye olde timey, just the right country at least.” Karkat responds.

You roll your eyes and continue watching. The evil rich lord is found guilty of practicing magic which will likely turn out not to be actual magic and is then hanged on screen.

“Th-that’s on screen execution! They should have warned for that, it’s outrageous!” Kankri protests loudly.

“They’ve been talking about executing him for the last five minutes, you tool!” Karkat shouts at him.

“People in this house have been executed and survived or had to witness such a thing, this could be highly upsetting to them!” Kankri points out insistently.

“NONE OF THEM ARE IN THIS ROOM AND THEY’VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT IT FOR FIVE MINUTES!” Karkat bellows. You edge away from him so that you don’t start to lose your hearing.

You pull out your phone because the lecture/counter argument has all but ruined your ability to pay attention. John is offline because he’s in school but Jade is up.

[turntechGodhead began pestering gardenGnostic]

TG: hey jade

GG: dave! how are you? :D

TG: im fine just listening to karkat and his brother kankri argue over movies

TG: its sometimes entertaining but right now ill pass

GG: oh no!

TG: nah its fine

TG: have you ever talked to him by the way? karkat i mean
GG: no i have not had the pleasure but i have heard a lot about him!

TG: ha from aradia and kanaya?

GG: …

TG: im just fucking with you i dont care about your weird secret lady club

GG: that isn't really what i would call it but ok. im not trying to keep you out though dave, i hope you know that. you will understand soon i promise!

TG: its cool

TG: but yeah i know talk about him and rose and kanaya basically gossip salaciously as their modus operandi but i do for real think you two would get on.

TG: carcinoGeneticist

TG: if you wanna

GG: i might do! boy you are really serious about him arent you? but i guess he is your soulmate, right?

TG: yeah

TG: wait did i tell you that yet?

GG: i think you did! or maybe someone else blabbed, i dont remember.

GG: i am still super happy for you though! and i am sure that if he is your soulmate he is lovely! :D

TG: aw

TG: youre gonna make me blush like some swooning southern damsel i will fall in a heap of petticoats and never get up

GG: how scandalous!

GG: i will message him soon, but for now i have to go feed bec and you know that is always a production!

TG: some day i will find a way to mail you dog food and you will thank me

GG: haha! ok later dave!

TG: bye

“Who the fuck is this?” Karkat demands, peering at his phone.

“Karkat, language, please.” Kankri sighs but clearly even he knows that’s a lost battle.

You lean over and see that Jade has added him to her chumroll and it’s asking Karkat if he wants to do the same.

“That’s Jade, we were just talking about you so I gave her your deets.” you tell him.

“The girl you used to have a crush on who is also conspiring behind our backs with Kanaya and
Aradia, you mean?” Karkat asks flatly and you nod.

Karkat mutters something about not being able to avoid your friends forever and you have one of those weird moments. Karkat is your soulmate, which of course you have accepted. He is literally the perfect person for you, though that doesn’t promise success, blah, blah, blah. Fine, you’re up to speed with that part. What hits you is that damn near everyone who matches with their soulmate marries them, and those who don’t tend to either be those whose bonds die really soon after or those who just don’t believe in marriage. You guess your parents fell into one of those categories. Being Karkat’s soulmate gets you certain privileges, if one of you was in the hospital the other wouldn’t need permission to see you. That said you still don’t own half of Karkat’s shit or have a bunch of legal rights, that’s only for married people and soulmates get married when they agree to and choose to make that commitment.

Again, you know all of that. But here’s the thing that has you zoning out in shock. You’re going to be with Karkat forever, unless something goes horribly wrong which you hope it won’t. You’re probably going to get married because that’s what soulmates do. You’re going to be wrinkly old dudes together. Or, well, you are. Trolls don’t age quite the same way as humans.

Regardless, this is a forever thing. That’s… huge.

“What are you staring at?” Karkat asks suspiciously.

“You.” you say stupidly and Karkat arches an eyebrow, clearly suspicious of where this is going. Your brain helpfully plasters the image of a tux over the Karkat and the feeling of vertigo intensifies.

“I need to go home, suddenly.” you blurt out and quickly walk out of the room.

“Dave! Wait, what’s going on?” Karkat says, rushing after you.

“Probably something in this movie that wasn’t properly warned about in advance.” Kankri huffs and you hear a pillow connecting with his face.

Karkat catches the back of your shirt and stops you. He turns you around to face him and he squints suspiciously at you.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Nothing’s wrong. I just need to think is all and I should get going back home soon anyway.” you tell him honestly. And you’re right, nothing is wrong. There’s nothing wrong with the idea that the pretty troll boy who scowls like they give out olympic medals for sulking is going to be yours forever.

He narrows his gold and grey eyes at you before sighing and letting you go. He pouts a little and looks at you thoughtfully.

“It’s not fair, I figure that because I’m your soulmate I should just know what’s up with you. As in, I should just be able to read you that well all of the time. But I guess you don’t get that kind of skill instantly or maybe even ever.” Karkat says.

Well maybe he will after years and years. Through experience and you not needing or wanting to keep things from him. Your chest aches at the thought and you’re either in love or dying and the more dramatic part wants to claim both.

You lean in and kiss him sweetly, which he absolutely goes along with and yet when you pull away he looks baffled.
“See, I’ve no idea what you’re thinking.” he says.

“Some people in this room have accused me of not doing that at all.” you point out and Karkat grins.

“Ah, see? There’s my problem. Can’t mind read you if there’s no mind there.” Karkat teases.

“You asshole. Ok, I’m out, later.” you say and head towards the front door, leaving Karkat smiling at you from the spot you left him in.

You get a good run on your way home by dodging reporters and between the running and seeing Karkat you feel pretty happy when you get home. Happy enough to come in through the front door and go straight to the kitchen for food. You put bread in the toaster and pull the peanut butter out of the cupboard. You’re in a good enough mood that you decide to actually put away the stuff in the dishwasher as you wait for your toast to pop. It’s not even your turn and no one asked you to do it, aren’t you good?

You pull a still warm clean jar out of the dishwasher, this was for the last peanut butter but the label hasn’t quite come off yet and that needs to happen before it goes in the recycling. You’ll do that after, but for now you unplug your headphones from your phone and dump your phone in the jar to use as a makeshift speaker as you empty the rest of the machine.

You quietly sing along to Garfunkel and Oates as you put away the million coffee mugs, the rest of your siblings have a terrible caffeine problem.

“For the douche, for the douche
For the motherfuckin' douche
Thought it was a perfect party
Now it's just a lot of Ed Hardy
This party just took a turn for the douche”

Your toast pops and you continue enjoying the music as you tear the seal on the peanut butter and slather it on the toast. You throw the knife in the now empty dishwasher and kick it shut. You pick at the label on the clean jar and get it mostly off. With that done you take your phone back and pause it, you really should also tell Karkat about these two since he enjoyed the last band you recommended to him.

When you go to shove your now clean peanut butter jar (sans label) into the recycling bin, you find the damned lid won’t move and you know that it’s empty because you were the last one who had to take the trash and recycling out. Plus most of your family has been out of the house since then, either in government places, friends homes or out at fucking Jupiter. You wrestle the swinging lid free to find what it’s caught on, this is what happens when you do things without being asked, huh?

Only… only when you get the lid off of the recycling it’s not empty in there, it’s almost full. That’s why it wouldn’t swing open. There’s a few normal things in there, folded down cardboard, empty cans, but most of what is in it are empty glass bottles.

The peanut butter jar is abandoned at your side as you pick a bottle out of the recycling and look at it. The glass is kind of blue and though the label is ripped off there’s still some embossed glass that you can read.

Bombay Sapphire Gin
You pull another out of there.

_Gin Mare Mediterranean Gin_

Another.

_Absolut Vodka_

More.

_Glenfiddich 50 year old single malt scotch_

That’s just the bottles that you can still _read_. There are more in there.

“Hal, where is Roxy?” you ask weakly.

AT: She’s in her room, but she’s been talking to me and hanging out with Dirk. She’s not been drunk at all as far as I know.

AT: These aren’t hers.

AT: Your mom was in the kitchen recently but she was flashstepping about like she does sometimes, I saw her over here but it didn’t seem suspicious. I guess I just didn’t see what she put in here.

“Mom’s drinking again. Can you get Dirk for me?” you ask.

AT: Way ahead of you.

“Dave? What’s wrong?” Dirk asks, coming into the room. He spots the bottles that you’ve pulled out of the recycling and set on the counter.

“Oh, fuck.” he says softly and walks over counting the bottles and presumably doing some kind of mental math.

“I emptied this right before Christmas, how can she have drunk that much? New Years isn’t even until tomorrow.” you say urgently.

“Right, but she might have been hoarding these for longer than that without throwing them out.” Dirk says and pulls the rest of the bottles out of the recycling, leaving only the empty milk jugs and innocuous stuff in there.

“Whoa.” Roxy says as she comes into the room with Rose behind her, evidently Hal alerted everyone.

Rose leans against the kitchen island as she looks at the bottles, her arms folded across her chest. You take a step closer to her and touch her arm.

“We’re gonna get out of here, and maybe we can make her stop again.” you say, shooting for reassuring.

“I don’t care.” Rose says sharply and you take your hand back nervously.

“We’re staying away from her is what we’re doing, this isn’t our problem.” Dirk says seriously.

“I thought at the very least she was past this.” Roxy says miserably
“Well, she’s not! She was never going to change and we only have it on faith that she properly got sober at all as opposed to just cutting back or hiding it better. I hate her, she’s always going to be this way and I’m done. I don’t care anymore! We’re going to go and she can drink herself to death for all I care. I. Don’t. Care.” Rose snarls and storms off.

You hesitate on whether to follow her or not but Dirk shakes his head at you. So you linger with them as they put the bottles back where they found them after Dirk has taken a photograph. The three of you go back upstairs and Dirk impresses on you that you’re not to go wandering around the house alone anymore, none of you are. He had struck a wary truce with your mother on account of you being abducted and nearly killed but he still doesn’t trust her. He trusts her even less if she’s not sober.

Nevertheless you go into your room and shut the door, leaving Dirk and Roxy to their plans. You shuffle onto your bed with a miserable sigh. Why does shit just not stop with you? Your mom attacks Dirk and breaks your sword, you find out Karkat is your soulmate, you get abducted by trolls trying to take you back to their ship and murder you. Ok, sure one of those things was positive but it was still stressful. And now on top of all of that your mom is drinking again? When will shit just be normal?

You sprawl on your bed with a frown and look at your recently repainted bedroom wall. Something is bothering you about that.

“Hal…” you say slowly.

AT: I’m here Dave.

AT: It’s going to be okay, we’ve got through worse. I can get you through this.

“I know, I trust you.” you say.

AT: I wish I could hug you.

“Me too.” you agree, still looking at your wall.

“Hey, Hal. What did I write on the wall again? Can you show me?” you ask, pointing at the wall.

Before your eyes flashes up the message you wrote on your own wall in your sleep.

‘Bro coming back
hal when mom starts drinking ask about meteors talk 2 signles
413’

AT: Are you saying I should talk to Signless?

“No, I think there’s punctuation in there that I just didn’t write. To me it reads more like ‘Hal, when mom starts drinking: ask about meteors, talk to Signless’” you say.

AT: Okay, but... ask who about meteors? Ask what about them?

“Doesn’t mom’s work deal with meteors? Isn’t that what her big telescope and lab is all about?” you ask with a frown. You remember her saying something like that to you.

AT: Yeah, near Earth objects. I tried to hack into her lab to use her telescope to find you when you were in that ship but the security was too strong and I couldn’t invest that much time in it. By that
point other people were looking for you and I could just get into their data.

“But now that you’re not in a race against time you could go find out what she’s doing about meteors, right?” you ask hopefully.

AT: It’ll take a while, but sure. Besides, maybe I can work out a pattern between her work and her behaviour like I used to be able to do with Bro.

AT: I’ll let you know if I find anything interesting.

“Thanks Hal, you're the best.” you tell him.

AT: You’re so sweet when I’m doing things you want me to do.

AT: You flatterer.

You laugh a little and pick up your phone. You don't feel much like listening to music now, but at the very least you can message Karkat.

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]

TG: so uh i need to talk to you about something

CG: FUCK THAT IS AN OMINOUS STATEMENT DAVE. IS SOMETHING WRONG?

TG: yeah

CG: WELL WHAT IS IT? ARE YOU OKAY? DO I NEED TO COME OVER?

TG: i dont think you need to do any of that but

TG: uh

CG: DAVE STOP DRAGGING THIS OUT YOU ARE MAKING ME TERRIFIED HERE.

TG: my mom is drinking again

CG: FUCK.

CG: FUCK, FUCK, FUCK.

CG: CAN THAT GODDAMN WOMAN NOT JUST KEEP HER SHIT STRAIGHT IN EVEN ONE ASPECT FOR ANY LENGTH OF TIME?!

CG: I AM LIVID! ARE YOU SAFE THERE? DO YOU NEED TO COME HERE? ARE YOU GOING TO GO TO A HOTEL AGAIN BECAUSE THAT CAN’T BE SUSTAINABLE LONG TERM.

TG: karkat chill

TG: dirk and roxy are talking and presumably coming up with some kind of plan and i guess they will fill me in on it when they've chosen what they're doing

TG: if you want a practical talk then go talk to them

TG: i just wanted to let you know
CG: OH GOD I’M BEING INSENSITIVE AREN’T I? I’M SORRY, I WASN’T TRYING TO
MANAGE ALL OF YOUR PROBLEMS FOR YOU OR NOT LISTEN TO HOW YOU FELT
I’M JUST REALLY WORRIED ABOUT YOU BUT GODDAMNIT, THIS ISN’T ABOUT ME
IT’S ABOUT YOU!

TG: its fine really it is

TG: i just wanted you to know because uh its you i guess

TG: im gonna go see if i can get rose to talk to me now because she was not taking it well

CG: YEAH, OK. GOOD LUCK. AND I’M REALLY SORRY. IF YOU WANT TO JUST
TALK OR HANG OUT LATER AND NOT TALK ABOUT IT WE CAN DO THAT, WE
CAN DO WHATEVER.

TG: thanks man

CG: <3

TG: <3

You roll your eyes at the silly emote but it still does make your insides flutter. Maybe some things are
just cliche for a reason.

You go down the hallway until you get to Rose’s room, her door is shut so you politely knock.
There’s no answer so you keep knocking, when the not answering continues you begin beatboxing
along as well.

“What.” comes Rose’s terse demand from inside her room. Well, that wasn’t a death threat so it
was basically an invitation. You waltz inside.

Rose is face down on her bed and her room looks more than a little like she’s just been kicking stuff
around on the floor in anger. You can see that one of the planned tentacle legs for the eldritch
princess doll downstairs has been furiously unravelled with kinked wool scattered all over the floor.

You climb up onto the bed and shuffle so that you’re leaning against the wall. Rose sniffs into her
pillow and you stay quiet.

“I didn’t want you to see this.” Rose says thickly, though she doesn’t look at you.

You’re not sure if she means her crying or Mom drinking again so you stay silent.

“I didn’t think you were going to. I know she lapsed when Bro died but that was it. She quit drinking
for you, and like, fuck me and Roxy I guess because we were never enough to make her stop.” Rose
spits angrily. She hauls herself up and you can see smudged black around her eyes from her makeup
and she glares at you.

“I didn’t do anything, you and Rox helped her.” you point out.

“I don’t understand why she even had any of us, she clearly doesn’t care. Our parents should never
have been parents.” Rose says bitterly, rubbing at her wet cheeks.

“You’re right. And you were right earlier, we don’t need her. We’re leaving as soon as we can in
June, then you never have to see her again if you don’t want to.” you assure her.

Rose nods and scoots over on the bed until she’s up against your side on the wall. She laces her
fingers with yours and you try to think of some way to make it better.

“Roxy is probably catching Dirk up on everything Mom used to be like when she was drinking before, Hal will help us out, we can avoid her. Six months, that’s all we have to survive.” you tell her.

“It’s not fair.” Rose says after a moment.

“Shit is chronically unfair.” you agree with vigor.

“And you thought that when Bro died you were going to end up somewhere good with us but now you’re just back in the same problem with a slightly different spin on it.” Rose laughs darkly. She tries to wipe the black off of her under eyes a little better.

“I’ve got you, Dirk, Hal and Roxy. We’re good. We’re just back to a version of Dirk’s first ever plan, get money, get out and live alone without shitty guardians. Only difference is now you and Roxy and with us and we’ve got other people helping.” you point out.

“I guess. I feel so stupid for expecting better of her, for letting her trick me into thinking it would be different.” she says miserably.

“That’s not stupid.” you tell her quietly.

You rub at one of the rough spots on your fingers from touching too much spinning vinyl.

“Bro was the one who taught me how to make music. He taught me how to use my samplers and how to scratch, all of that. It wasn’t Dirk but he did add stuff. It was Bro. It was the thing we did together and basically the only thing he ever came close to praising me for. I love music and I love it just for what it is but I also loved that when he was teaching me things shit felt close to normal. I was still on edge and all but he felt like a real person then.” you say slowly. Rose leans back and looks at you in surprise.

“There were times like that and there were times when he just wouldn’t attack us for a while, maybe because he was busy with other shit or away and it would make us paranoid but part of me used to think that maybe things were gonna change. Maybe the time when he’d teach me stuff would just stretch on and he’d be okay.” you say. You’ve never really said this out loud before, or thought about it like this but it’s pretty clear now that you’re talking.

“You just want shit to not be fucked up so you look for things that prove you’re right but they don’t care about that and they didn’t promise it but you’re still let the fuck down anyway. Even Dirk hated having to end Bro because he knew who he used to be when he wasn’t awful all of the time, he wanted that person back. I wanted that person to be real. That’s not stupid that’s… I don’t know, trying to stay sane.” you say, spitting out each thought as it condenses together in your brain. Your mouth outrunning your head is nothing new for you but experience with therapy has at least made you not acrobatically backflip away from any words that you spew that sound like actual insight to how you feel. Or not all the time anyway.

“I’m sorry.” Rose says quietly.

“For what?” you ask.

“You’ve had it so much worse. Mom clearly doesn’t love us and I hate her drinking and the way she is but you-” Rose starts to say.

“Oh, shit! You’re right! I have suffered more than anyone, now no one else is sad or in pain ever! I
have ended all misery by throwing myself on that blade! The world will go mad when they find out, millions of people will just be lining up to suck my dick in thanks for ending everyone else’s problems because I am the only one who has ever lived through bad shit. I am the god of pain!” you declare and Rose kicks you off of the bed onto the floor.

“Hey, you fixed it, I’m not sorry anymore.” she says flatly.

Rose flops back down on her bed and looks down at you.

“I still didn’t want you to have to live with her when she’s drunk.” Rose says unhappily.

“Same but what’re you gonna do?” you shrug.

Rose pulls you back up on to her bed and pulls out her laptop, doing so also drops all of the other items in the sylladex on the floor but you diplomatically don’t comment, especially not with how she’s side eyeing you right now. You settle in next to her as she starts to play some fake documentary about megalodons somehow secretly still existing, allowing the both of you to mock it the whole way through.

Or nearly the whole way through.

The picture on Rose’s laptop freezes just as the totally fictional shark ominously rises into view through the magic of shitty CG and a pesterchum window pops open.

[autonomousTerminal began pestering tentacleTherapist]

AT: I need you two to go to Dirk’s room.

AT: I have to tell you something.

You and Rose look at each other skeptically but since Hal doesn’t seem to be offering any more information Rose shuts her laptop and the two of you traipse down the hall to Dirk’s room. Roxy is sat on his bed and Dirk is in his computer chair, he’s partway through saying something when he sees you both come in and looks a little surprised to see you.

“Hal said he had something to tell us.” Rose explains.

“First I’ve heard of it.” Dirk replies.

“Uh, yeah. About that. I don’t really know what I’m supposed to be doing here, I feel like I’ve been logic bombed and nothing works right anymore.” Hal says through the speakers. Dirk swivels around and frowns.

“But he asked me to look into Roxanne’s work because her suddenly starting to drink had freaked him out. I figured I’d humour him just so I could tell him that there’s nothing of interest there and he doesn’t have magic dream powers.” Hal continues.

“I’m right here, man.” you complain.

“But, uh. Look, this is our solar system and her job is to track the near Earth objects which are these. They pick up comets coming close to Earth, meteor showers, all kinds of things.” Hal explains, showing you all a model of the solar system that slowly spins. You can see the course of all of the
little space debris flying around as everything orbits the sun. It’s pretty cool.

“Only shortly before she lost her shit and attacked you, Dirk, she discovered this.” Hal says and suddenly a swarm of objects shows up seemingly out of nowhere.

“Her math allows her to predict where objects in space will be through time and…” he trails off.

A date counter pops up in the bottom of the screen, flipping forward through time. The objects, or you guess they’re meteors actually, are streaking close to Earth. Your planet wobbles like a top as it smooths its way through space and you’re expecting for the meteors to veer off course from something else’s gravity or for Earth to be out of the way but no.

That doesn’t happen.

You stare as the Earth is bombarded by meteors.

“The first one to hit the Earth will hit this building. It hits our home, Karkat’s home, Kanaya’s home. The homes of everyone whose addresses I know are hit directly by these meteors, even Jade and Jake. What killed the dinosaurs off is a walk in the park compared to this, everyone on this planet will die and honestly I’m not optimistic about any other kind of life either.” Hal says in a rush. You stare at the date on the screen as the Earth is razed into nothingness. April the thirteenth.

“We’re… we’re all going to die.” Hal says.

“That’s- that’s not funny Hal.” Roxy says, her voice shaking.

“I’m not joking! I wish I was! I’ve just spent the last ten minutes re-running all of her math but she’s perfectly right. Hell, Roxanne herself has spent all of this time trying to prove that her own predictions are wrong but she’s not. We’re all doomed!” Hal says, his voice inching into hysteria.

“Well what can we do?” Dirk asks weakly.

“Nothing! There are thousands of these fuckers and there is no Armageddon dumbass fix for it. No team of idiots led by Bruce Willis can blow these things up and somehow save us all!” Hal shouts.

“It happens on 413, that’s what I wrote on the wall.” you say slowly.

“Yeah, well, apparently you do have magic prediction powers but we’re still all GOING TO DIE!” Hal snaps.

“Well- well we do the rest of it then! The message said to talk to Signless, and I mean what do we have to lose here?” You shout back.

“This can’t be happening.” Rose whispers in horror.

You look over at Dirk but he’s just slumped in his chair blank faced and seemingly emotionless.

“Dirk?” you prompt him but he’s just slumped in his chair blank faced and seemingly emotionless. The little kid part of your brain insists that Dirk must be able to help, Dirk fixes everything. But he’s just one guy and this is countless meteors flying to your planet to destroy all life, what can he possibly do? It’s unfair to demand that of him and even if he and Hal could find somewhere to hole up that wouldn’t get you splatted by meteors then even after you would, at best, be trapped in some horrifying post apocalyptic ‘The Road’ type of situation. You don’t want that either.

“I…” Dirk says slowly and yeah, you can see him running through every possible thing he can do
and coming up with nothing good enough.

You don’t know why you seem to be handling this okay right now, maybe it’s not properly sunk in yet. Or maybe you’re so used to things going terribly wrong and so used to functioning when you’re terrified that you’re still mostly present. Perhaps you should thank Bro for that if that’s the case but you’re not gonna.

“We should go and see Signless, come on.” you tell him, holding your hand out to him.

Dirk looks up at you from his computer chair and opens his mouth slightly as if to say something but whatever it is dies on his lips as he looks at the screen and sees Earth bombarded from space. He takes your hand and gets to his feet.

You have no idea what you’re doing and in one hundred and four days the world will end.

Chapter End Notes

Don't kill meeeeee. Also, I'm going to do some side fics from the perspective of the other kids during the time that our guys were being all Die Hard in Space and I'm also working on a pre-dirk time bro/mom fic because that will be relevant later. That's the plan at least. Needless to say this next chapter is going to be a *big thing* so it may take me a liiiiiitle longer than usual. (Or i might get too excited and binge write it, who knows)
“Did he talk to either of you at all today?” Psii asks worriedly as he leans on the kitchen counter and pulls the tag off of a caffeine free sports drink, the kind you get to replace all of your salts and stuff when you’re ill.

“No, he didn’t.” Kankri answers for you.

“He must be avoiding his medication somehow, this is really bad.” Psii says worriedly.

You’re about to ask how Sollux could possibly be avoiding his medication when Psii stands there and watches him take it. But of course Sollux has psionics, he could, in theory, levitate the drugs partway down his throat or something and then just spit them out when Psii isn’t looking. The whole reason why Psii stands there and watches him take them in the first place is that Sollux has long had a habit of regarding his manic phases as good or helpful, that he’s smarter or more creative when he’s in them and he really doesn’t appreciate people trying to take that from him. Sollux has hidden medication under his tongue and spat it out before, now Psii makes him prove he hasn’t done that. So he’s probably just taken it to the next level now.

“Why isn’t Aradia helping out? Usually when he gets like this she’s the one fussing at him to behave, but now it’s like she’s encouraging him. He’s fixated on her project and suddenly she’s okay with it?” you say angrily.

“I wish I knew.” Psii says miserably.

The front door unlocks and Signless shoulders the door open and ushers Mituna inside, he’s not wearing bandages now.

“Don’t pick at it.” Signless scolds him.

“But I have staples in my head! I want to touch them!” Mituna laughs.

“Real cool way to get a brain infection.” Psii snorts.

Signless shakes his head and walks over to Psii, dropping the car keys on the kitchen counter and wrapping his arms around Psii. Psii smiles and murmurs something soft to him, leaning down to kiss him on the horn. You look away, you don’t need to see gross parent smooching, no thanks.

“Are the StriLonde kids coming over for dinner? I saw them all walking this way together, and I would have picked them up but the light changed and I had to go.” Signless asks. Everyone looks at you like you’ve got Dave GPS chipped or something. Honestly, if Dave does have some kind of GPS chip in him it’ll be Dirk who put it there not you and you’re mostly sure he’s not done that. Mostly sure.

“I don’t know.” you shrug.

You can find out, though.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling turntechGodhead]
CG: HEY ARE YOU COMING OVER OR SOMETHING? DAD SAID HE DROVE BY YOU AND SAW YOU HEADING OUR WAY.

CG: OR ARE YOU JUST WALKING SOMEWHERE ELSE WITH DIRK AND YOUR SISTERS?

TG: yeah we are on our way over

CG: OH, OK. GOOD.

CG: OR IS IT GOOD? DID SOMETHING HAPPEN?

TG: is signless there?

CG: UH YEAH, THAT'S THE DAD THAT I MEANT THAT SAW YOU. NOT PSII. IS SOMETHING WRONG?

TG: i love you you do know that right?

CG: YES? DAVE, IN ALL HONESTY, THIS IS MAKING ME MORE WORRIED INSTEAD OF LESS.

TG: i just wasted so much fucking time in getting my shit together to be with you and we could have had so much more time im such a tool

CG: DAVE, IT'S FINE. THINGS DEVELOPED HOW THEY DEVELOPED, BESIDES YOU'RE STILL WAY AHEAD IN ROMANCE POINTS WITH THAT WHOLE CHRISTMAS EVE CONFESSION.

CG: CAN YOU PLEASE TELL ME IF SOMETHING HAPPENED OR NOT?

TG: its not something I can explain over text

You lower your phone with a frown and look back at your parents.

“I… something is wrong, but I don’t know what. He won’t tell me over trollian. He wanted to know if you were here.” you say worriedly. Psii and Signless share a concerned look and Psii shakes his head.

“Those kids are some of the unluckiest people I know.” he says sadly.

“It’s not really luck, it’s other people’s choices.” Signless points out.

“You know what I mean.” Psii replies. He picks up the sports drink and sighs.

“I’ll go check in on Sollux, give you some space to fix whatever is happening. Come on, Tuna, move it.” Psii says and herds his descendant out of the room, leaving you and Signless alone as Kankri elects to follow him too.

It’s not that long before there’s a knock at your door and you open it to find Dave and his siblings right on the other side. They all look pale and distressed, Dave does too, but he marches past you with the kind of steely determination that he had on the ship. That is likely not a good thing.

He gets just a few steps into the kitchen before he spots Signless and comes to a halt.

“I need to talk to you.” he says firmly.
“Please, what can I do to help?” Signless asks and gestures to a chair which Dave ignores.

“I need to talk to you about meteors.” Dave says, inexplicably.

Signless does not look confused at Dave’s weird words. Instead he freezes and stares at Dave.

“Meteors.” he repeats stiffly.

“You know, don’t you? How did you even know? But you do, I can see it, you know what’s going to happen!” Dave accuses him and wrestles his phone out of his sylladex as he does. He taps at the screen a few times before shoving it right in the face of your ancestor.

Signless is leaning back against the counter, long claws digging into the chipboard as he stares in horror at the screen.

“How?” Dirk asks weakly.

“WHAT THE FUCK!?” Dave yells and Signless pushes the phone away from him.

“I… can explain. But not here, go to the community centre. There are other people I need to talk to at the same time. I’ll meet you there.” Signless says.

“Psii!” he yells sidestepping Dave and walking to the kitchen doorway.

“What?!” Psii shouts back from further in the house.

“Get everyone in the car, we’re going to the community centre now. It’s happening.” Signless shouts.

“What? What’s happening?” Psii yells.

A pause hangs in the air as Signless doesn’t answer.

“Oh, fuck.” comes Psii’s much quieter response.

“What’s going on here?” you demand, looking from Dave to your father.

“Yeah, I wanna know that too.” Dave says sharply, and your father looks around at the four StriLondes.

“Why are you four still here? I’ll explain everything at the community centre, not here. So go.” he barks angrily and Roxy stares at him in surprise.

“Come on.” Dirk urges Dave quietly and gently steers him out of your home with a hand on the back of his neck. Rose shuts the front door behind her and glares at your father as she does so, not that he seems to notice or care. No one answers your question at all and Signless is rapidly texting on his phone, totally ignoring you.

“Dad.” you say expectantly, but he just shakes his head and keeps typing.

Psii hurriedly runs into the room with Kankri, Mituna and an angrily flailing Sollux floating in the air behind him. He looks wild-eyed and distressed.

“PUT ME DOWN I WAS BUSY!” Sollux yells, trying to push Psii’s psionics off of him with his own but Psii outmatches him thanks to age, experience and a habit of eating and sleeping regularly lately.
“Rosa’s getting in the car with Kanaya to pick up the kids who are at school with Darkleer grabbing the rest, get these four to the community centre.” Signless orders and Psii nods.

“But- wait!” you protest. You’re yanked off of your feet, the front door flies open, and you and your siblings are flown rapidly through the air. You look down and see a glimpse of the StriLondes as you fly past. He flies you through the hallways until you come to the main room where Signless holds sermons and where the 12th Perigrees Eve party happened, though that feels like a lifetime ago.

Psii drops you on the floor and lets you, Mituna and Kankri go, he continues to hold onto Sollux when it becomes clear that he’s not going to stop fighting.

“What’s going on, man?” Mituna asks irritably.

“Signless will explain everything, you just need to stay here.” Psii says unhelpfully. His phone beeps and he looks at it and nods to no one at all before marching out of the room again with an angry Sollux still in containment behind him.

“This is all very unusual.” Kankri says, redundant as ever.

After that, the StriLondes arrive and Dave starts pacing angrily while the rest of his siblings just sit down in exhausted defeat. A while after that adult trolls start arriving, Mindfang and Redglare show up together with the two heiresses in tow, The Summoner flutters in and Darkleer comes in a few minutes later with Tavros. Dolorosa shows up with all of your friends from school and their older siblings. The two Makara brothers are roped into the room from next door.

Within an hour of your arrival there are twenty-four adolescent trolls in the room, all eight available ancestors and the four StriLondes. You’re all sat down on the seats around the central area and Signless drags a chair into the centre of the room and sits down with a tired huff of breath. Around the room the kids all look bored or confused, except for Dave who just looks angry.

“So, uh,” you say uncertainly.

“SO WHAT THE FUCK?!” Dave yells and a few of the rest of you nod, murmuring questions about why you’re here and what’s happening.

Signless holds his hands up to his face and scrubs at his skin tiredly.

“I am going to need silence from all of you. Some of you know some things about what I am going to talk about and some of you know others, but the person who knows the most is me, so you all need to shut up and listen to me.” he says and wearily drops his hands. This is perhaps the most like you that you’ve ever heard him sound.

The room is obligingly silent even though Dave bristles with anger next to you.

“So, uh,” you say uncertainly.

“SO WHAT THE FUCK?!” Dave yells and a few of the rest of you nod, murmuring questions about why you’re here and what’s happening.

Signless holds his hands up to his face and scrubs at his skin tiredly.

“I am going to need silence from all of you. Some of you know some things about what I am going to talk about and some of you know others, but the person who knows the most is me, so you all need to shut up and listen to me.” he says and wearily drops his hands. This is perhaps the most like you that you’ve ever heard him sound.

The room is obligingly silent even though Dave bristles with anger next to you.

“I was hatched on a planet called Beforus,” Signless begins.

“But-” Kankri interrupts.

“SHUT. UP.” Signless grits out, an adult growl seeping into his tone enough to make every adolescent troll in the room lean back a little.

“I was hatched on a planet called Beforus, it was very much like Alternia, the climate was similar, it had the same number of moons and it was populated entirely by trolls. It had its problems, as all civilisations do, and I thought that I was doing my best to fix them but I know now that I was focused more on performing doing good than actual results. Despite my terrible behaviour, I had
eleven friends. Damara Megido, Rufioh Nitram, Mituna Captor, Meulin Leijon, Porrim Maryam, Latula Pyrope, Aranea Serket, Horuss Zahhak, Kurloz Makara, Cronus Ampora and Meenah Peixes. Despite spanning the entire hemospectrum we were all friends, though we too had our problems.”

Signless begins.

He was born on a different planet? And- and is this how he knew Meenah? But no, if the Meenah in the room with you was the one who was his friend as a kid then she would be an adult now. This doesn’t make sense.

“One day my friends and I came into possession of a game and decided to play.” he says.

You notice as all of the fight suddenly goes out of Sollux, and several of your friends sit up a little straighter.

“This game was no normal video game, this game brought about the end of the world. It doomed our planet to be destroyed under a barrage of meteors. You could perhaps argue that it was always going to happen, but I don’t care about the semantics. Playing the game took our homes away from our world and into this… other space, the medium. We left behind only craters and everyone on our planet aside from us died, and I can only assume the same went for all other sentient life in our universe.” Signless continues.

“But… but that can’t be right.” Sollux says urgently, Signless ignores him and keeps talking.

“There are many reasons for our failure, and I have spent a lifetime going over them so I will spare you from the why. In the end we had failed so badly at our game that the only option was to initiate a ‘scratch’ which is essentially a reset. We had expected to start the game over, but that was not what happened. I need you to understand that this game was not something on a screen but was the very reality that we lived in. We scratched the game and the next moment I woke up as a freshly hatched wiggler again.” Signless explains, and he catches the edge of his cloak and starts to pick at it, he wore his ‘Signless’ outfit here instead of his work clothes.

“The caverns were tough and I nearly died, in the end I was saved by a woman who I was surprised to find that I knew. My friend Porrim saved me, only she was an adult. She raised me and the older I got the clearer my memories of my life before became but I was no longer on Beforus, I was on Alternia. This world was cruel and violent and my friends were scattered, they remembered nothing of their previous lives or the game and did not know each other. One by one I found them and I tried to make the world I lived in better as I went, only now I had a model for a better world, the one I had come from. Some of my friends remembered scraps of their lives, of who they once were, of the game, of me. Others remembered far too late, and some either did not remember or did not care to. Meenah was no longer an heiress who didn’t want to rule but instead she was now the callous Empress of the whole troll race and for the crime of attempting to fix the world that I lived in, she tried to kill me.” he explains.

“For a long time I expected the game to start again, but my friends were clearly not ready to be players and it never came. Sometimes I doubted if it had even happened. I figured perhaps our descendants would have to play it one day, thousands of sweeps from when I lived and so I continued with my life. I came to Earth and then suddenly I had a descendant, as did my partners and for a while I was afraid that history would repeat itself. I feared that the game would regard my child as a ‘reset’ version of me and make him play. But I told myself that it could not without all of us and so I lived on.” he continues and looks over all of you.

“Only as time went on more and more of you showed up, but I convinced myself that it could not happen because we were still missing Meenah. And then you come back from space with a girl who is a perfect image of the friend I once played a game with and ended the world. Finally, today my
son’s soulmate shows up at my door with information from his mother’s telescope that shows that the Earth is going to be destroyed. By meteors. Again. The game is happening once again.” Signless says bitterly.

“And to make matters worse, we all agreed not to say anything, not to worry or burden you children but I can see that not everyone here is surprised. I am not totally surprised to see Kanaya and Porrim not shocked by my words, the first time around Porrim was awake on Prospit before the game started.” Signless says sharply, glaring at his sisters who at least have the decency to look a little ashamed at his words. What you aren’t expecting is for Dirk to speak.

“Prospit? But…” he trails off, frowning.

“HAH! I knew he remembered, you owe me five boonbucks Kanaya.” Porrim laughs and Kanaya scowls at her.

“You know about Prospit? I… tell me what you know.” Signless asks, clearly surprised. Everyone is watching the deeply uncomfortable Dirk.

“I thought it was a dream, though.” Dirk says slowly.

“Tell us.” Signless insists.

“I don’t really know Prospit, I only know Derse. It just used to be somewhere that I’d wake up when I slept, I thought it was just a weird recurring dream. The place was purple and black, filled with spires and weird shiny black chess people. There were people sleeping in the towers, Dave, Rose, Roxy and some of you too. I heard about Prospit in the newspapers, and I went there once but not since then. Like I said, I thought it was just a dream.” Dirk answers honestly.

“Yeah, you haven’t been back there since because you got decapitated inside Gamzee’s tower. Not that it was him of course, he was asleep but something killed you.” Porrim says firmly.

“Regardless we should not be discussing this now, this is not how this was supposed to go. We were not meant to talk about this until April.” Kanaya says seriously.

“Is this what you were hiding from me? What you were talking to Jade and Aradia about behind my back?” Rose asks sharply.

“I- yes. I am sure that you can see why I would have had a hard time explaining all of this, but you weren’t meant to know until-” Kanaya starts to say.

“Kanaya, Porrim and I suppose Aradia and, what, Damara too. Yes?” He questions, looking at the girls who all sigh and nod.

“Have I taught you four NOTHING about being critical of the things you see? Oh, the clouds in the sky in Prospit show you the future and they’re magic, well they’re WRONG. They don’t lie, sure, but they cut shit together as dubiously as any hack propaganda movie editor to make you think something that isn’t true. You know nothing about where that information comes from, but you trust it blindly? You should be ashamed.” Signless scolds them.

“Yeah, speaking of being ashamed, Aradia! What the fuck?! You’ve been telling me I need to urgently finish the coding for this fucking thing so I can save the Earth and save everyone on it but they’re all going to die anyway? Are the humans even really coming with us or are you lying about that too?!” Sollux shrieks angrily, leaping to his feet and staring down at his moiroll who just sighs.

“All twenty-four of us are players, as are all four of them, and Jade, Jake, John and Jane. And you
are saving us, the Earth was always doomed, it was inevitable. But we can make something better.”
Aradia insists.

“You lied to me! You used me!” He yells, his fists clenching at his sides and his eyes halloing with a
brightness that crackles in the air and sends hints of ozone wafting towards you. Oh shit, manic
Sollux has a terrible temper as is and makes poor decisions, this is not good.

“I told you what you needed to hear, it wasn’t my choice, it was always going to happen.” Aradia
says calmly, and you wince in sympathy. That’s cold, she’s meant to be his moirail.

Sollux’s eyes flare furiously, and Psii and Mituna are hurriedly trying to calm him down but they
can’t reach him, he’s shaking with anger and hurt. And he’s… you think he might actually hurt
Aradia. It all happens too quickly for you to do more than draw a breath.

“**Turn around** .”

Sollux whips around to face the other way.

“**Calm down** .”

You crane your neck to see Araena with a hand to her temple, and Sollux drifts to the floor once
more with his psionics still crackling.

“**Drop the psionics and sit down. Don’t move from that spot.** ” She adds and Sollux does just
what he’s told. Of course he’s not choosing to, she’s making him.

“Stop that, right now.” Signless orders her, but she shakes her head slowly and pushes her glasses
up.

“No, I don’t think I will. From what it sounds like this game is the only thing that will save our lives
and we all have our part to play. Failure is clearly a bad option with this game as your generation has
proved, so I am not willing to let it happen this time. We need to know everything that we can about
this game and that aim will not be advanced by letting him kill one of our players. I think you need to
tell us everything.” Araena says firmly.

Mindfang shakes her head and lazily raises her own hand and suddenly Araenea’s hand drops and
her face gets a glazed look at the same time as Sollux seems to come back to himself.

“I told you we should have told them sooner, but noooooooo.” Mindfang sneers and Araena seems
to shake herself off.

“Really? You think now is the time for an ‘I told you so’?” Signless asks frustratedly.

“There’s always time for an ‘I told you so’ and I stand by this one. At least this way they’ve now
got, what, four months to prepare which I’m sure the humans will need because as a species they’re
all woefully unprepared for combat situations.” Mindfang sneers.

“That does not match up to my experience, actually.” Kanaya replies with a frown. Arguing starts to
break out among the people in the room as well as people questioning if this is all real or not.

You look sidelong at Dave, and he no longer seems angry but instead just shocked. Is this what he
discovered? The meteors? It must have been from what Signless said but that means that Dave and
his siblings all thought they were fated for death.

You sit in your chair at Dave’s side at this moment. What Signless has told you feels unbelievable,
but he is not one to lie and not one to get others to join in like this. You are left with no other option but to believe what is happening, to accept that the Earth will be destroyed and the people in this room will have a chance to save themselves. If you fail then who knows how much worse things could get. You cannot be as useless as you turned out to be when you were abducted and your father sits before you as proof of what poor leadership can do and at what cost a second chance can carry. You have already regretted not being good enough, the people you love and the bonds you have with those around you weigh heavy on you.

Around you the volume of arguing rises and discord and fractures are starting to spread. If you all have to save the world like this you will fail and the population of this world, including everyone in this room will die. That is what you have to accept. But you are not a born leader, much as you might like to think of yourself as such.

You have seen the forgiveness of your ancestor, the caution of The Psiionic, the dedication of The Disciple and the protectiveness of The Dolorosa. They are leaders, they are great and though you wish to be like them, you are not good enough. You are just a boy who shouts a lot.

But if all you can do is furiously scream against the tide of the end of all things and throw yourself into trying to save what you can then that is what you will do, no matter how ineffective you are you won’t surrender into doing nothing.

You climb up onto your chair and take a deep breath.

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!” you scream at the top of your lungs, making everyone stare at you.

“Alright! This is some level of bullshit but we are not just going to yell at each other, we are going to streamline this idiocy train and I am going to do all of the yelling. We have questions, and we’re going to get answers, and I’m going to ask the questions because fuck you is why!” You shout and people stare at you in either shock or alarm.

“First question. Everyone who knew ANYTHING about this game bullshit put up your hands now.” You order.

All of the adults raise their hands as do Kanaya, Porrim, Damara, Aradia, and Sollux. After a few moments hesitation so do Dirk and Vriska.

“I didn’t know that’s what it was.” Dirk points out.

“Well, you should have thought to ask about it!” Roxy exclaims.

“I kind of thought I was maybe just crazy.” Dirk mutters.

“You definitely should have brought that up.” Rose points out.

“That’s fair.” Dirk nods.

“Do I have to put my hand up?” Dave asks, looking at you.

“It was a simple demand, Dave.” you point out.

“Yeah, but, I’m only following the directions that I wrote on my own bedroom wall in my sleep one time which have all proven to be true so far. Except, uh… one.” Dave says uneasily.

“Bro is dead and gone.” Dirk says firmly.
“It’s the gone part that’s worrying me.” Dave adds.

“Okay, no, we’re getting distracted. How do all of you know about the game? From what I heard Aradia told Sollux something, but how did you know Aradia?” you ask, looking around at her.

“The place the game takes place in already exists, that’s where Dirk was flying around in until he got killed. Me, Damara, Porrim and Kanaya are awake there already, oh as well as that Jade human.” Aradia answers calmly.

“That’s- fine, whatever. What about Vriska?” you ask, looking across the room at her. Her sister seems very interested in her answer.

“I know things, I don’t have to tell you how I know them. Maybe it’s just because I’m better than you.” she sneers.

“You should tell us.” Mindfang says flatly.

“Uh-huh. Can someone near Vriska just start smacking her until she tells us?” you ask, and Meenah instantly brightens up and backhands Vriska in the horn. Signless buries his face in his hands and shakes his head. Meenah’s attack results in a certain amount of slapping between the pair until Vriska finally gets to her feet angrily.

“Fine! But you’re only going to be jealous!” Vriska declares and whips out what looks like a perfectly white crystal ball. Several of the adults gasp in horror, and before Vriska can do anything Mindfang wrenches the ball from her hand and flings it violently at the ground where Psii then blasts it into a hole that’s about a foot deep.

“I see I need to repeat my point about trusting information given to you by mysterious sources. That was one of Doc Scratch’s Magic Cue Balls.” Signless states angrily.

“Don’t look at me, I buried it on Alternia!” Mindfang protests.

“And I dug it up, it shows you the future! I can’t let a spoil like that go to waste!” Vriska protests.

“Yes and it’s a window, you can see through it, but someone else can see in.” Signless says sharply, Vriska starts to talk again but you yell her down.

“Everyone else shut up. Tell me who this Scratch person is.” you bark angrily.

“He’s part of the game, sort of, I think. We never really got far enough into the game to deal with him but he did sow the discord that ripped my friends apart, and I don’t trust him not to do the same here either.” Signless answers.

“Unhelpful. Tell me how the game works, I mean literally how does it work?” you ask, still standing on your chair. You’re starting to feel a little dumb doing it but you’re not getting down now.

“I have no clue, I know it’s the means by which the universe creates a new universe like any animal reproducing. How it does what it does I don’t know.” Signless explains.

“No one knows that and believe me I tried to find out how.” Mindfang adds bitterly.

“Not helpful either, then. How do you… uh, play? What are we going to have to do?” you ask.

“Yeah, you said it’s a game but there are loads of different kinds of games.” Mituna agrees.

“Well, there’s puzzles I suppose, quests that you have to solve. Every player has a planet and a quest
unique to them and everything you do is around that. You have to fight enemies and that’s a whole
different complicated system. It’s a mess, really.” Signless answers and you glance at Dave to see
that his is very still and sitting very straight in his chair. More fighting, just what you all need.

You are relentless with questions, even eventually accepting questions from the others. Signless
explains about aspects and classes. Dirk wants to know about food and shelter and should you be
prepared for that, Signless says it should be fine. Mituna asks how you can be asleep there and
awake here at the same time and Signless explains how it’s like a built-in extra life system, Dirk is
apparently at a real disadvantage for already being down one before even starting. Rose asks about
the objective of the game and Dolorosa gives a hazy half remembered explanation about frogs of all
things.

In the end, you feel like your brain has gone to mush and you’re starting to fail at taking things in.
You declare that you need to round up the other players and get them up to speed before going
further, Hal kindly offers to lend the footage that he had apparently been filming from Dirk’s shades.

You plan to get Sollux to walk you through every part of the code he has for the game, you, Psii and
Mituna can look it over and see if there’s anything else to understand from it. You insist that you will
all have another meeting tomorrow and that everyone should bring any questions that you can all
think of. And people are listening to you, or at the very least they are too shocked by everything that
has been said to argue with you.

“We need to know everything that we can,” you say, finally jumping off of your chair, “I get that
when we end up playing you can explain things at the time but that seems like a bad plan to rely on
that.”

You pause as every adult in the room, as one, winces or looks away from you.

“What?” You ask suspiciously.

“Everyone but me had lusii when we played the game, I was looked after by adult trolls back on
Beforus. Without exception when we played the games our guardians and lusii all died.” Signless
explains.

“There’s this whole theme of coming of age and starting anew as something fresh and independent
running through the whole thing. I would guess that the death of guardians and lusii are built into the
game.” Disciple says softly and with regret.

“WHAT?!” Sollux shouts from the other end of the room.

You look at Signless, at your father and you understand his words. He already played the game and
lost, you all have to play it now in place of him and the other adults and he doesn’t think that he gets
to live through that. And… for all you know he’s right. He might have only four months left to live.
Your legs go out from under you and you drop into your seat, staring in blank horror at him and then
at the rest of your parents who look all equally resigned to this fate.

“You- you already knew that we might have to play this game, or that some of us might, right?” you
ask shakily. He nods.

So he’s lived his whole life expecting to die. Or more than he already was for a mutant hatched on
Alternia. But he still started a revolution to save people even though he feared the end and when
Kankri was hatched and he started suspecting that it was happening again he kept going. He still kept
working to change people for the better, he got a job doing social work for trolls and because of him
Dirk isn’t in jail for murder and Dave isn’t in foster care. He still made things better, even though he
was going to die.

Your hand curls around the shitty plastic of your chair. You don’t want them to die, you don’t want to be without him. You’re certainly not good enough to replace him.

“So write everything you remember down so you can still help us and then work on trying not to die. And I’m talking to all of you stupid adults who thought it was a good idea to wait this long to do this.” you say that last part accusingly. You would have thought better of Dis, she writes everything down but she didn’t think that a record of this would be useful?? What if Dave hadn’t found out about the meteors and the first you knew of the game was when it actually started and then you’d be playing blind!

Disciple somewhat redeems herself by pulling a huge blank book out of her sylladex and walking over to Signless with it and her chair. She shoots a look over her shoulder at Psii who also gets up and goes over there.

“Come on, we may as well start now. I’m sure the children need time to let things sink in.” She says, cracking the book open on her knee and readying her pen.

“I have a husktop you can use, you know.” Psii points out wearily.

“Paper. And are the rest of you guys going to stand there? Rosa? Darkleer?” Disciple prompts, and one by one the other adults abandon the kids and migrate over to where Signless is. Although you suppose that Dirk is technically an adult but he stays with the rest of you. Out of some kind of reverse act to what the adults are doing all of the kids slowly converge together in a big cluster.

“Okay, I’m sorry but no one else is saying it. This isn’t real, right?” Roxy says suddenly, and a few other people mutter their agreement with her.

“I wish it wasn’t but trust me, it is real.” Sollux says bitterly.

“Hey, it’ll be-” Aradia starts to say, soothingly.

“Are you trying to see who is quicker on the draw, me shooting you out of this building through as many walls as possible or the Serkets on stopping me? Don’t fucking TOUCH me.” Sollux snarls at her, the threat rattling in his chest furiously.

“Can we not do this right now? This isn’t the time.” Nepeta pleads, getting between the two.

“The point is that the game exists, it always has in a time loop based way that makes my head hurt. But- well, Dirk, you were there. You believe us, don’t you?” Kanaya asks and you all look at Dirk, attention that he clearly doesn’t appreciate.

“Man, I don’t know. I have no explanation how you can know stuff from my dream and no explanation for how something that Dave wrote down in his sleep has predicted all of this. I know that the world is going to be destroyed by meteors for sure and the only conclusion I’m left with is that me not understanding something isn’t grounds for it not existing. Besides, if this gives us anything above a zero percent chance of surviving it’s still an improvement so I may as well accept it and try to build on those odds.” Dirk says reluctantly.

“What? No, just because the alternative is worse that doesn’t mean that you should just go around believing whatever.” Roxy argues.

“Fine, fine, I get that proving a negative is harder. But a bunch of people you trust are saying it’s true and, honestly, what have you got to lose by going along with it? Did you have some big plan for the
next four months to save the Earth?” Dirk asks.

Roxy seems to hesitate for a moment before sighing and shaking her head.

“Fine, but for the record, this shit is bananas.” she grumbles.

“Yeah and that- ow!” Sollux hisses and Kanaya winces and pulls back her sleeve at the same time. You watch as that same green spirograph inks itself onto their skin. You groan as you realise that it means knowledge of the game, you got yours when Dave had that weird future dream which you still need to figure out.

“Alright, can we just do this? Raise your hands if you either believe that this game is real or if you’re willing to go along with the idea that it is.” You ask.

Most people raise their hands, including a grudging Roxy and a slightly bitter looking Dave.

“And those who don’t?” you ask.

Eridan, Cronus, Meenah, Feferi and Tavros all raise their hands.

“Don’t be such a wimp, Tavros.” Vriska says sharply.

“Don’t be such a bitch, Vriska.” Rose retorts.

“Hey, don’t you get uppity with me! You didn’t even know about the game until now!” Vriska says angrily.

“No, you’re right. I wasn’t gleaning knowledge from some apparently supernaturally wiretapped magic eight ball like a complete fool. That definitely gives you the moral high ground here, well done. If you’re done with your egocentric self-fellation do you think we can move on to finding out why these good people don’t agree with us or are you doing to enlighten us on what you were using that orb for seeing as it wasn’t helping us out, hmm?” Rose says smoothly and you watch in distress as Vriska’s cheeks darken a little.

“I really need you to remind me to talk to her about that.” you whisper to Dave.

“Priorities, man?” Dave replies, and you shake yourself off. Right. End of the world outranks girl squabbles.

“Shut up both of you. Tavros, explain.” you say, looking at him.

“It’s just- I’m not saying that it’s impossible but if the Earth is going to be destroyed couldn’t we just get a ship and… leave?” he suggests.

“Oh, and where are you going to get a ship, hm, pupa? Even Mindfang’s ship, which isn’t even hers anymore, couldn’t fit in everyone here.” Vriska points out.

“Speaking as someone who has spent extended time in a ship with Vriska I don’t recommend that solution.” Porrim sighs.

“Hey!” Vriska protests.

It’s amazing how expressive Tavros’ face can be because you can read the ‘we could just not bring Vriska’ clear as day across his face.

“A ship big enough for all of us would be a massive theft and likely we would need lots of facilities
and food generation space to manage that and in order to have truly efficient power we would need a helmsman which I am sure we can agree is incredibly unethical.” Kankri states.

“Yeah, as much as it was super cool to punch Einstein and the speed of light in their collective dicks and fly through space it really fucked me up and I’m not keen on getting the kind of body mods that Psii has or hooking myself up long-term.” Mituna agrees.

“Seconded.” Sollux nods.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think about that. I guess that leaves us with the game as the best option.” Tavros says with a shake of his head, always a dangerous gesture for him.

“Psh, and with that you can count me into that pond too. A ship big enough for all of us would totally get Condy’s attention and she’s already coming this way. I don’t feel like playing chase with her. Don’t get me wrong I think this game thing is a load a tripe but if I’m gonna die it may as well be my way instead of getting krilled on her fork.” Meenah says and at her side Feferi nods.

So just Eridan and Cronus then. You eyeball them.

“Ok, it’s not that I don’t think the game is real but do we hafta play with a bunch of humans? Surely a chance to wipe their species out should be jumped on.” Eridan says.

“Uh, speaking of jumping on humans-” Cronus says slowly, looking at the StriLondes.

“That wasn’t what I said.” Eridan points out.

“Don’t I know you?” Cronus asks, pointing at Dirk. His voice is distressingly flirtatious.

“No.” Dirk says immediately.

“Well, you probably have met if they’ve been here when we have like at Christmas or something.” Roxy points out. Dave is looking at Cronus thoughtfully.

“No, no, I definitely know you.” Cronus is grinning now, showing off his shark teeth as his unlit cigarette dangles from his lips.

“No, he’s right. You arrested him the night Bro died, you were convinced he murdered him.” Dave says after a moment.

“Oh. Huh, small world, he is a cop.” you nod in agreement.

“There you go. Moving on now.” Dirk says hurriedly.

“Oh, shore, there was that. But there was that other time when you came home with me and I fucked your brains out.” Cronus says, and you all stare at Dirk who is astonishingly red.

“You… fucked the cop who arrested you?” Dave says slowly.

“Those were months apart and totally unrelated, and I didn’t recognise him at the time!” Dirk protests. Even his ears are red now.

“Hey, hey, don’t hold a grudge. You got off didn’t you?” Cronus leers.

“Yeah, and on both counts it was no thanks to you !” Dirk snarls and Cronus jerks back as half of your group bursts into laughter. The other half seems to be mostly grossed out at the idea of Cronus having sex with anyone.
“Oh, BURN!” Roxy giggles loudly.

“Why can’t the world end now?” Dirk mumbles bitterly, his face still red.

“Alright, if that was all you two had to say I think we can continue with everyone being on board with this shit show. Cronus stop staring at Dirk like that or I’ll encourage Kankri to give you a lecture about responsible sex and you’ll have to listen to the whole thing.” you threaten, and that gets him to stop.

“I figure we should let this sink in and then meet up again in a few days and talk everything over, plus it gives them chance to get down all of the information we need. Uh, someone needs to get the other humans up to speed, who’s going to do that?” you ask, but you already look at the StriLondes.

“I guess that’s us, but I can see that being hard. Egbert’s family are all about the pranks, and they’re gonna think that’s what this is. I guess Jade can help talk Jake around but I don’t think it’d be too hard to get him on board for something he could spin as an adventure, right?” Rose asks, looking up at Dirk and Roxy.

“Yeah, we’ll work on them.” Dirk nods.

“And I guess maybe Psii can look over your code and see if it’s different from his, that’s if he saw his or remembers it. I don’t know.” you trail off.


Everyone else is still looking at you. Shit, are you the leader now? Oh, crap.


People mostly disperse into their own clusters. Cronus walks backwards away from Dirk, makes finger guns at him and winks. Dirk looks like he is considering the pros and cons of murder or possibly seppuku. You decide not to bring up Dirk’s apparently terrible taste in men because you don’t want to be stabbed either. You instead turn your attention to Dave who is standing there looking a little lost.

“So I know I didn’t say anything as dumb as ‘well at least it can’t get any worse’ after we got abducted because I’ve seen movies and know how that goes, but someone must have and I’m going to find them.” you say, and Dave laughs weakly.

“Yeah, man, shit just keeps happening.” Dave agrees and you squint at him suspiciously.

“Are you building up to a meme? Don’t you dare.” you warn him and there you go, an actual laugh from Dave.

“Well, you know, it’s like… hey, kiss that boy, what’s the worst that could happen? It looks like those Westboro assholes were right, it’s the end of the world!” Dave laughs and oh, that sounds a little hysterical to your ears.

“Whatever, it was worth it. Fuck the world, what’s it ever done for me? I mean Greenland? I don’t owe Greenland shit.” you say.

“That seems unfair to Greenland.” Roxy comments in passing. You look around to see her walking off in Sollux’s direction, that’ll be… interesting. Rose is talking to Kanaya, presumably patching up their relationship now that all their secrets are out in the open and Dirk is just standing there robotically. Weird, you wonder if he’s talking to Hal. How is he coping with all of this?
Dave steps a little closer to you and gnaws at his lip anxiously.

“Is it bad that I don’t care so much about the world ending? I mean, obviously I care but I’m not freaking out about it just yet. I’m just... terrified that Bro is going to come back. Everything else I wrote came true.” Dave says quietly.

“He’s very dead, Dave.” you assure him.

“But we don’t have his body and what if he doesn’t stay that way? I mean this game seems to have all sorts of screwy rules and dream selves or whatever, who knows what could happen? Why would I not believe that he’s coming back?” Dave argues, and there is real fear on his face.

“Okay, but we don’t know how that shit works yet and we don’t know how that message got on your wall. Besides, we know that Vriska saw things through that cue ball thing and the people who knew about the game before us saw things in clouds or whatever. Signless said that you can’t always trust that shit, you don’t know if your message is trustworthy or if someone or something is trying to fuck with you.” you say, trying to reason with him.

Dave doesn’t look convinced so you catch his hand and slide your fingers between his and squeeze lightly.

“And honestly I think Dirk is going to be pretty much glued to you from now on because I bet he’s afraid of the same thing for no good reason.” you point out and sure enough Dirk is still lurking about six feet away.

“There go my plans to sneak into my boyfriend’s bedroom to make out with him.” you sigh, full of overdramatic suffering.

“Well, hey, I’m sure I could manage to work around that. You know, for the fans.” Dave laughs.

“Does that make me your only fan?” you ask.

“Naw, just the only one that gets this level of premium Strider access. The others just wish and cry themselves to sleep at night.” Dave brags.

“My God, you’re insufferable. How are you mine?” you groan, not that you would actually wish for anyone to replace Dave.

“Shut up.” Dave mumbles and darts in quickly to kiss you on the cheek. Oh yeah, you have succeeded in your mission to make him feel better. You’re the best.

Dave frowns and pulls his phone out of his pocket, you recognise the spill of orange text across his screen.

“Sorry, it’s Hal, I gotta…” he trails off.

“That’s ok, I’ve got other idiots to talk to.” you assure him.

“...Hey!” Dave protests after a second, but you just grin at him and walk off.

You slowly go by Rose and Kanaya, it’s not eavesdropping if she’s your moirail, right? Right?

“-healthy for you to have been thinking the whole world was going to end this whole time and have no one to talk to about it.” Rose says unhappily. Kanaya ducks her head a little.

“I had the others to talk to about it but I would have preferred Karkat or you, honestly I would. But
we were shown that you wouldn’t know until the game started, but now that we have been told that those visions might have been doctored in some way I feel quite foolish. I am sorry for keeping you away from this, Rose.” Kanaya apologises.

“I know I have my flaws, or I have been told that I supposedly have them. I would just rather deal with the end of the world with you than assume our relationship is dying without you.” Rose says pointedly.

Yeah, they don’t need any help from you. You look around the rest of the room, there is a six-way argument going on between the Megidos, the Serkets and the Pyropes. You’re about as willing to stick your bulge in a bear trap as you are to deal with that.

Across the other side of the room you see your two idiotic juggalo friends sitting on some of the benches with Gamzee talking quietly to his older brother. Maybe you can help there. You head on over, filled with purpose.

“Hey.” you greet them and they both look at you. Kurloz signs a greeting back at you and Gamzee smiles lazily and full of teeth at you.

“How are you two handling all of this news?” you ask.

[What will be will be.] Kurloz signs, ever walking the line between zen and completely idiotic.

“Yeah, right? Surviving the end of the world is some kind of miraculous that I’m real keen to get my fronds all up into, man.” Gamzee nods.

“Well that’s… good I guess. Kurloz, you have trollian, right? I’m probably going to be creating some group between all of us so that we can coordinate some planning for this disaster. I’m pretty sure that organising this thing is going to be like herding meowbeasts but we have to try. You two will be there for that, right?” you ask and they both nod.

“Right, great. Good.” you nod.

“Are you gonna be our righteous leader then? Takin’ on your hatchright?” Gamzee asks lazily.

“I don’t want to inherit anything, I want Signless to be fine but I’ll do anything I can to help.” you answer him.

[You have it in you.] Kurloz signs and you think that’s a smile, it’s hard to tell with the stitches.

“Thanks, I think.” you reply.

“Y’all need to tell that human to get his chill on.” Gamzee says after a moment and you turn to see who he’s looking over your shoulder at.

“You mean Dave? I think fear is the sane response to everything we’ve just heard.” you point out.

Kurloz shakes his head and Gamzee laughs.

“Naw, man. He’s cool. Honestly, your boy’s got some wicked tolerance, I gave him a nudge of the chucklevoodoos when he met us for the first time and that shit was like water off greasepaint. Boy was born in fear.” Gamzee says with a sharp toothed grin.

“Except he did get really hurt after that, you set off a panic attack!” you snap angrily but you try to keep your voice down.
“Sure it wasn’t.” you snort dismissively. Goddamn these idiots.

“Don’t do it again.” you remind them and they smile obligingly at you.

“Naw, I meant the older one.” Gamzee continues and points a claw in Dirk’s direction. Dirk is standing there tense and tapping at his phone hurriedly.

“Can’t you up and see that wicked fear all around him? He’s always like that, it’s in his blood. Everything he does is ’cause he’s scared, he’s even up and scared of his own damn self.” Gamzee laughs.

“Leave the humans alone, okay? Dirk too, he’s a good person.” you insist.

“You know he got all murderhappy dontcha?” Gamzee asks lazily.

“Those two aren’t mutually exclusive, not when you know what I know about the guy. I’m serious, leave them alone.” you order and the two clowns share a look and then nod agreeably.

“Behave.” you warn them and head off to Dirk, just in case they’ve been psionically fucking with him.

He’s blank-faced as he often is and is alternating between staring off into space and typing rapidly on his phone.

“Hi, Dirk. How’re you doing?” you ask warily.


“Fair, but everyone here seems to be handling that differently. How are you and Hal doing?” you ask and Dirk lowers his phone to look at you.

“We’re committing large amounts of financial crimes to fund building Hal a single place to store his consciousness as well as to store all the relevant things that humans have learnt or discovered over the course of our existence. We don’t have any doctors here so a library of medical information is key, not to mention guides and blueprints for constructing shelters, developing tools, refining materials, agriculture, navigation and so on. We’re trying to work out what basic things we can take with us and what we’ll have to do without. Our society only exists because we stand on the shoulders of giants, Karkat. We’re trying to ensure that when they’re gone, we don’t plummet back down into the stone age.” Dirk informs you, and you stare at him for a moment. Okay, Gamzee might have a point on that whole ‘powered by fear’ thing. He can’t stop the end of the world and he’s grasping for any control he can get. But still…

“That’s actually really helpful. Maybe you could split things between everyone, that would give you more space to store things and you wouldn’t have a- uh…” you try to find the term.

“Single point of failure. No, you’re right. That’s a good idea.” Dirk nods.

“Anytime.” you tell him and you get a slight flash of a smile from him.

After a while the meeting wraps up, you all need to eat and the adults need to think. When you get home Signless cooks and Disciple continues writing, asking questions that you don’t totally understand. Something about ‘kernels’ and ‘sprites’.
You consider setting up the memo board for everyone but you don’t know if the humans have talked the other humans into the whole idea yet so you decide to leave off. Sollux barely eats any food and heads straight for bed right after dinner. You’ve seen him crash right after a manic episode before and he was due for a crash eventually but you think being betrayed by your moirail this badly would depress anyone. You decide to leave him be and go to your own room for a while.

You lay on your bed like a starfish and stare at your ceiling, unsurprisingly contemplating the end of the world. Your phone pings and like the needy motherfucker you are you snatch it up, hoping for messages from Dave.

[gardenGnostic began pestering carcinoGeneticist]

GG: hello karkat!

CG: WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?

GG: oh! dave must not have told you what my handle was, im jade!

GG: its nice to meet you, he talks about you a lot!

CG: OH, RIGHT. IT’S YOU.

GG: i can understand if you are little shaken after the news youve heard today, you werent really supposed to know yet but i guess this is how things played out! the universe is funny like that!

CG: LISTEN UP, ASSHOLE. I DON’T LIKE YOU.

CG: YOU CONSPIRED WITH MY MOIRAIL AGAINST ME AND KEPT ALL OF THE REST OF US HAPLESS FUCKERS IN THE DARK WHEN THERE IS MORE THAT WE COULD HAVE BEEN DOING TO PREPARE FOR THIS, AND IT’S ONLY THANKS TO THE STRILONDES THAT WE KNOW AS SOON AS WE DO.

CG: YOU HAVE PERSONALLY FUCKING WRONGED ME, AND SO I DONT MUCH CARE HOW MUCH DAVE LIKES YOU BECAUSE I DON’T!

GG: rude!

GG: you cant hold me responsible for the designs of skaia!

CG: I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT THAT IS, THANKS TO YOU, YOU KNUCKLE DRAGGING IDIOT.

CG: AND I SURE AS SHIT CAN HOLD YOU RESPONSIBLE FOR THINKING THAT YOU’RE SO MUCH MORE *CHOSEN* THAN THE REST OF US THAT YOU GET TO WITHHOLD VITAL INFORMATION FOR OUR SURVIVAL. HOW YOU DON’T BURST INTO A FOUNTAIN OF VISCERA UNDER THE WEIGHT OF YOUR OWN SELF IMPORTANCE I WILL NEVER KNOW.

CG: SO KINDLY FUCK OFF.

GG: you are nowhere near as nice as dave made you out to be!

CG: OH HO HO, SO THAT’S WHERE THIS IS GOING? YOU DON’T THINK I’M GOOD ENOUGH FOR HIM?!

GG: not if you treat him like this!!!
CG: AND YOU THINK YOU’D BE BETTER, IS THAT IT?

GG: well at least im not an insufferable prick like you!

CG: SAYS THE LIFE ENDANGERING HOMEWRECKER, DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY RELATIONSHIPS YOU RISKED WITH YOUR SHIT? AND ARADIA AND SOLLUX BROKE UP AND THEY’VE BEEN TOGETHER FOR YEARS, ALL BECAUSE YOU LED MY FRIENDS AND FAMILY INTO YOUR SELF IMPORTANT CLOUD QUEST. GO FUCK YOURSELF WITH A CLOUD, YOU HEINOUS TOOL.

GG: youre the worst!!

[gardenGnostic blocked carcinoGeneticist]

You roll face down onto your bed and scream into your pillow. You hate her, you hate her, you hate her. You don’t even hate her in the good or sexy way, you just want to punch her in the snout!

After a minute or two your phone pings and you think for a second that it’s Jade come back for another round and boy do you ever have some choice insults for her. But it’s not her.

[tentacleTherapist began pestering carcinoGeneticist]

TT: “GO FUCK YOURSELF WITH A CLOUD, YOU HEINOUS TOOL.”

TT: I would like this on a t-shirt please, because after everything that I have seen today this is the only thing that has brought me to uncontrollable laughter.

[tentacleTherapist ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist]

Oh, well then. At least Rose isn’t mad that you insulted her friend. In fairness, she’s often down with righteous and well-deserved smackdowns so you’re not totally surprised.

Your phone pings again and this time you see red on your screen. Oh, no.

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]

TG: this is going to be good

TG: because i didnt actually give you and jade each others handles so you could screech insults at each other

CG: WELL WHAT DID THAT HARPY EVEN TELL YOU?

TG: dude she is one of my best friends dont call her a harpy

TG: what the fuck man?

CG: FINE, SEE FOR YOURSELF!

[carcinoGeneticist attached log GG01.txt]

TG: …

TG: karkat what the fuck

CG: I KNOW, RIGHT? SHE’S AWFUL!
TG: no man what the fuck at you

TG: you went off at her with no provocation that shit was chronically uncalled for and like i get that youre pissed about her keeping stuff from us but she doesnt know you so how could she have personally told you before?

TG: and didnt you say to me before that other peoples relationships are their business and yet youre blaming her for kanaya and aradis piss poor fuckin choices?

CG: SHE STARTED THIS!

TG: you dont know that at all

TG: how do you know that she was the first one to wake up or whatever they called it and what even was all that shit about me at the end?

CG: YOU CAN’T PIN THAT ON ME, SHE STARTED IT!

TG: she mentioned my name thats all!

TG: are you jealous?

You stare at your screen in horror, are you fighting? Is this a real fight? You scramble with your phone and call him instead.

“What.” Dave says stiffly at he picks up. Shit, he’s really mad.

“Aren’t you mad at her at all? It can’t just be me!” you insist.

“How mad I am or am not with my friends is literally none of your goddamn business Karkat, I don’t need you defending me and you don’t even know what Jade is like.” Dave says sharply.

“Aren’t you angry at her too?” you ask, feeling all of the rage leech out of you and fear replace it.

“Of course I am.” Dave says.

“Well then-” you try to argue but Dave talks over you.

“Are you jealous of her? Because of what I said before about how I used to have a thing for her?” Dave asks and the note of accusation is strong and stuns you into silence.

“What? No. I mean, that information doesn’t make me happy and now that I’ve talked to her makes me think you have terrible taste but that’s not it. I kind of hate that someone who has pissed me off so much and clearly hates me back has any influence on you!” you argue.

“Wait, did you think I hate her because you think I have visions of you two running off together or something?” you ask suspiciously.

“That’s how it looked!” Dave says defensively.

“I have a little more faith in you than that. Besides you’re on my arm, not hers. I’m pissed at her for what she’s done, and you can still be friends with her if you like, that’s your goddamn business. I’m just not thrilled at the idea that I’m going to be forced to keep interacting with her or that she’s going to be talking to you about me behind my back. I already know that she ran to Rose.” you point out.

“Yeah, well…” Dave trails off and you can hear the faint ping of pesterchum in the background.
“You’re not totally wrong”

“Did we just have an actual fight?” you ask after a second.

“I guess. It’s just been one of the worst days, I didn’t mean to like… get all up in your grill.” Dave apologises.

“Yeah, well, I’m sorry that I colourfully told your friend to go fuck herself.” you say reluctantly.

“Real colourfully.” Dave snorts.

“Ok but I’m not exactly sorry for how colourful my insults are, I’ve worked hard to be a wordsmith at insulting people. Not sorry for that part.” you joke and you hear Dave chuckle.

“Hey, can… can I come hang with you? I don’t wanna talk about game stuff, the end of the world or our friends I just want…” he tails off uneasily.

“You don’t even need to ask.” you say.

“Cool. See you.” he says and hangs up.

You try to tidy up your room ever so slightly but eventually give up and fall on the bed, your room is forever neater than Dave’s is. Within half an hour of Dave’s message a ladder bangs against your windowsill and Dave scurries up and pushes the window up enough to get in. You look up at him from the bed as he stows the ladder away and then, wordlessly he kicks off his shoes and climbs onto the mattress with you. He tucks himself up against your chest and you carefully slide your arm around him.

“Fuck today.” Dave says into your shirt.

“Fuck it in the eye.” you agree.

Dave’s hands curl in the fabric of your sweater and he inches closer to you. This is still so new, it’s not that long ago that he would have run a mile at the thought of doing this but here he is. You don’t think you’ll ever not be in awe of him wanting to be close to you like he is now.

“The world is ending.” you say quietly, because it is and yet the rest of the world doesn’t know. You can at least acknowledge it in here.

“Yeah.” Dave agrees, his head tucked under your chin.

“I feel like I still haven’t quite understood that it’s going to happen.” you admit.

“When Bro died we moved to New York with Rose and Roxy and when we moved back here we did this game with them. It was like ‘I’m glad about/I’m gonna miss’ kind of thing. It helped us all deal with the change. Like ‘I’m looking forward to not being two hours from a mall but I’ll miss the river under the house’, that kind of thing.” Dave says.

You nuzzle your nose into his hornless head, that’ll probably always feel weird to you, and think.

“I’m glad that I won’t have to sit through another stupid election cycle but I’ll miss… movies at the theatre.” you try.

“I’m happy we don’t have to do exams but I’ll miss Starbucks.” Dave adds.

“Hipster.” you accuse.
“Blow me.” Dave shoots back without venom.

“I’m glad that the people I like best are coming with us, but I’m sad that everyone outside of our combined social circles is gonna die.” you say. You don’t mention your parents, they have to survive, they have to.

“Ouch. Don’t pull any punches.” Dave cringes.

“I’m glad that the world will never see another Twilight movie but I’m also kind of sad about that because they were so easy to mock with you and that’s what we did on our first date,” Dave continues.

“Except you never said it was a date at the time, you useless idiot!” you growl.

“Yeah but then you couldn’t turn me down. Also, you never asked.” he points out.

“That’s literally not how that… oh.” you trail off as Dave kisses your jaw and short circuits that argument.

“I’m gonna miss music.” he says.

“Romcoms.”

“Dumb radio jingles.”

“Chinese food.”

“Birds.”

“Ugh, books. I need to stock up on books.”

“The internet.”

“Oh god how did I not think of that? Can I second the internet? Except for like 4chan and most of Reddit. Oh and Facebook. Maybe I need to revise my opinion of the internet.”

“I’ll have a small enough readership I can hand print my comics and deliver them to everyone, but on the other hand I’ll have a readership of the entire population.”

“Mmm, whatever you have to tell yourself.”

At ten at night Signless shakes you awake, you and Dave are still tangled together asleep on the top of your bed, having exhausted yourself before you ran out of your list of things that you’re going to miss or not miss about the world. You kiss Dave goodbye sleepily, and Signless drives him home.

The world is ending, but you’re not alone, so that’s something.

It’s been three days since you all found out that the world is going to end. Three days of the adults compiling everything that they can remember about the game, which is frustratingly little. Still, Psii managed to convince The Disciple to go digital and she’s now writing all of the notes that she can in a shared Google Document. The adults can all add things but the players can only put in comments and questions. Some of them are helpful ones like ‘can we prototype inanimate things?’ and others are less so, like ‘imma prototype my bulge!’ Things like that are why only the adults can add actual
information, your group apparently can’t be trusted with real editing power.

Psii and Mituna have looked over Sollux’s code and have taken over patching what they can and getting it working, mainly because Sollux has been effectively eaten by his blankets and spends most of the time on the sofa in a melted puddle of depression. Aradia and Damara are staying with Dolorosa which Sollux is both happy and unhappy about. You wish that you could make things better for him but you can’t cheer him out of a downswing. Depression doesn’t work that way. You and the rest of your siblings mostly just do practical shit. You take over his chores, and Nepeta tidies up his room. Meulin brings him snacks, and all of you just spend time around him every now and then, even if it’s just you reading on the sofa next to him.

He’ll get through it in time and in the meantime something resembling a plan is coming together amongst your group. You haven’t heard from Dave today, though. The sensible thing to do would be to just shoot him a message like a normal person with respect for personal space.

You pull yourself through Dave’s bedroom window and land in a sprawled heap on his bed. He’s not in his room and when you walk out of it you can already see down the hall to see that neither he nor Rose are in her room. You walk along the hall the other way until you spot Rose and Roxy sitting at the top of the staircase together. Roxy looks up as you walk closer.

“Why do you keep breaking into our house through Dave’s window? We have a front door.” Roxy points out.

“Habit.” you shrug absently and look over the railing. In the living room below you can see that all of the furniture has been pushed aside and in the centre are Dave and Dirk with their swords both drawn, facing each other. Your heart seems to stop in your chest.

“This is a bad idea.” Rose mutters.

“You don’t need to-” Dirk starts to say but Dave groans loudly.

“Dragging this out is making it worse, can we just get on with it already?” Dave snaps, and you get the creeping feeling that this is his idea. His terrible idea.

Dirk shakes his head and tenses his grip on his sword and huffs out a frustrated breath.

“Fine.” he says stiffly.

You don’t see Dave move and you only just catch Dirk smack him out of the air with his sword, the clash of metal on metal ringing in the air like a bell. Dave lands in a crouch, one hand skimming the floor and lunges for Dirk. The older brother swings his sword, blocks blow after blow with small and efficient movements, in seconds he has Dave pinned to the floor with one foot and a blade hovers at his throat.

“And you’re dead.” Dirk drawls, pulling back the blade and taking his foot off of Dave.

You glance down at your arm and rub the sword on it but there’s no ache there, no thrum of fear.

“You could have ended that sooner.” Dave accuses, getting to his feet.

“I wanted to see where you were at. I know you can do better, I’ve seen you do better.” Dirk states simply and settles himself a good few paces from Dave.

“Alright.” Dave replies and you strain your ears, he’s not robotic like before but there’s not much emotion in there either. Why is he doing this to himself?
Dave rolls his neck and then seems to settle. His next attack is more purposeful, rushing directly for Dirk’s sword. The clang of metal is louder and the sword on your arm resonates ever so slightly, you wonder if it’s the noise that Dave dislikes. From watching him you think at first that Dave is trying to outbrute Dirk, by swinging harder, but he’s outmatched for sure. Dirk has so much height and reach on him and certainly strength too. Your eyes widen when instead of continuing his attack he suddenly kicks out and catches Dirk in the ribs with his leg, knocking the breath out of Dirk and then darting back.

Dirk shakes himself off, and now he attacks Dave and as Dave said before it doesn’t take him more than two moves to disarm Dave and send his sword flying into the air and landing in the sofa cushions.

“Better, but you’re still dead.” Dirk remarks and rubs at his side.

“What are you two doing?” you call out as Dave goes to retrieve his sword. He jolts at your yell and looks up at you.

“Are you breaking into my house again?” Dirk calls up in irritation.

“Maybe.” you answer unhelpfully.

“If this game is going to start and there’s going to be fighting then I need to train or else I could get killed or someone else could.” Dave explains and yanks his sword free.

“But you hate fighting.” you point out.

“We’ve already tried this argument.” Rose says quietly.

“I hate dead friends more.” Dave answers a little sharply.

“But-” you try again.

“Karkat, I didn’t ASK you.” he says waspishly and marches back to Dirk.

“Aaand that’s why we’re up here watching, he got pissy with us too.” Roxy says, she sounds entirely done with this whole thing but apparently can’t bring herself to leave.

You try to think of something and quickly.

“Can I join in?” you ask and go down a step or two.

Dave and Dirk both look up at you in surprise and confusion.

“It’s not like the game is going to work like this the whole time, fighting one on one. And I plan on backing you up when we’re in there so maybe we should try to take down Dirk together. We get to practice and maybe Dirk actually loses eventually because right now it just looks like you’re getting your ass handed to you.” you say, slowly walking down the stairs.

“Hey!” Dave protests.

“Oh no, I’m barely agreeing to this, I’m not okay with fighting someone else’s kid without their permission.” Dirk argues.

“You know my dad is the one who taught me how to fight, right? Along with my mom? It’s my idea and I think they’d be all for something that makes it more likely I’ll live in the game. And what’re they gonna do, have you arrested? What’s the point in that, the world is ending.” you argue and drop
your weapons out of your strife specibus and into your hands.

“Even on the ship it wasn’t neatly one on one the whole time, was it? I need to get better too.” you point out, and Dave looks back at Dirk.

“I don’t know about this.” Dirk says uneasily.

“What do you want me to do? Sign a waiver?” you snort.

“No.” Dirk says with a frown.

“Scared, Dirk?” Rose asks lightly from her place at the top of the stairs and Dirk’s expression tightens. Oh, you could kiss that brilliant girl. You only just stop yourself from laughing when Roxy joins in with chicken noises.

“Fine. Dave?” Dirk asks, and you look back at your soulmate.

Dave steps to the side a little and nods at you, you move into position opposite Dirk and try to ready yourself. He probably won’t go right for you and you should maybe hang back a little in the beginning so that you can judge Dirk’s power up close for yourself.

Dave looks at you sidelong, and you raise your sickles to show that you’re ready. He draws a shaky sounding breath and then rushes Dirk once more, you follow after him but don’t attack yet. Even with just your presence Dirk is less inclined to overpower Dave immediately, and he has to work on the defensive, you manage to rush him at one point and catch his sword with your sickles. With Dirk’s weapon diverted, Dave is able to swing his sword at him and stopping it just before it hits his ribs.

Or at least the place where his ribs were. Dirk realised what Dave was doing and honest to God backflipped out of range of the both of you and is now catching his balance on the back of one of the armchairs. You rush Dirk, but unfortunately he knocks your weapon flying and halts his sword at your throat.

“Dead.” Dirk tells you.

“You too.” Dave adds and Dirk glances back to see Dave’s sword at his ribs.

“Maybe, but it’s not a win if one of you dies. That was good, though. We should probably all practice working together like that.” Dirk agrees, standing up and taking his sword away from you.

“Shockingly I was right, again!” you declare, getting up as well.

“Yeah and that didn’t feel so… you know.” Dave mumbles.

“Well, good.” Dirk agrees happily.

“You know, we should probably try to get all of us training like this. I know Terezi and Latula have swords for their weapons and I think Vriska does as well sometimes.” you point out.

“I’m not starting up Teen Fight Club.” Dirk protests.

“Why not? Fight Club is one of the most ironically misunderstood modern works of fiction to the point where most people who list it as their favourite movie almost certainly missed the point of it.” Rose adds as she comes down the stairs.

“And Roxy, I think Eridan and Cronus both have guns as their weapons. Just don’t shoot them, I
know it’s tempting.” you add that last part under your breath.

“Oh, well, when it comes to Cronus I think that-” Roxy starts to say smugly.

“You! Fuckin’ don’t you dare!” Dirk shouts and waves the sheath to his katana in her direction, as if threatening to smack her with it. Actually, he probably is.

“What? I mean it’s just like from what he said it sounds like he shoots- AAA!” Roxy shrieks as Dirk leaps the sofa and starts chasing her around the room.

Dave shakes his head and puts his weapon away as Roxy vaults the countertop in the kitchen with a cackled question about the involvement of handcuffs.

“How is the game planning going?” Rose asks curiously.

“I think we’ve got an order down, it looks like we’re too big a number of people to just do things one at a time, so the current idea is to run two daisy chain server-client strands and then loop them together all Mobius style. Look.” you explain and pull up Sollux and Mituna’s spreadsheet on your phone.

“There’s a red team and a blue team, of course there is.” Dave groans. Yeah, Captors and their colour based number fetish.

“You have John starting one team off? That seems like a terrible idea.” Rose points out.

“Well, yeah I thought so too. Only one of the first meteors hits John’s house, it’s the second place after here to get struck down. Psii’s been mining the data Hal gave him from your Mom’s telescope to make this, plus if we get John started then we don’t have to deal with him saying that he’s changed his mind when several people are already in. Uh, how has convincing him that this is real been going, anyway?” you ask and Rose and Dave share a look that lowers your hopes.

“Not great.” Rose admits unhappily.

“He has at least agreed to play a game with us on that day, so I figure we can walk him through the rest as he goes? Roxy has Jane convinced so she can keep an eye on him at the beginning at least, right?” Dave asks.

“I guess. That’s also the reason why Roxy and Dirk aren’t right after you, they need time to help you two out and then get onto their own shit.” you explain, pointing at the list.

“Was it like, ‘oh, no, officer! I’ve been very bad!’ hahaha OW!” Roxy’s voice floats over from the other room and Dave grimaces.

You look in the direction that Dirk and Roxy went and where you can still hear obvious squabbling. Ah, siblings.

“So… has Dirk realised yet that the world is ending and he’s going to be stuck with a far smaller group of people, one of which is his soulmate and one of which is some other guy he’s boned?” you ask after a moment.

“Oh, we’ve been wondering that too.” Rose snickers.

“Neither of us are dumb enough to bring it up.” Dave agrees.

You consider this for a moment and put your phone away.
“I’m happy that I’ll get to see that hilarious clusterfuck but I’m sad that I’m going to miss going to college eventually.” you say.

“Oh, are we playing that game? Okay, I’m pleased that I’ll live in a universe without Anne Rice, but I’m going to miss ironically bad fantasy erotica.” Rose says, clearly pleased.

“How do you even get someone to sell that to you? You’re fourteen.” Dave points out.

“The internet and Mother’s credit card are wonderful enablers.” Rose replies.

“Amazon, I’m gonna miss Amazon. But… I’m not going to miss KFC milkshakes, they’re just frosted grease.” Dave adds.

You glance back down at your phone. Lists of things that you’ll miss notwithstanding you’ve still got so much more work to do to ensure that everyone makes it off of this planet safely. So here’s your final one: you’re looking forward to not having to plan for the game anymore but you’ll miss… the Earth.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so, for the next chapter I'm going to attempt something SUPER AMBITIOUS so please bear with me, it may take a little time. Maybe a week or more, but we'll see. I can't really get started on it until after Wednesday because I'm DMing for my RPG group that night and I gotta prepare for that first (and yeah if you think I'm a tortuous writer I'm a way more cunning DM!).

Oh, I also wrote a sidefic for bro/mom which you can find in the series link at the top, it's called Meant To Be Yours.

So, yeah, I really hope you all liked this and I really REALLY hope you like what I have planned for the next thing. Hoo boy.
> Dave: Be meta and have free will

Chapter Notes

Liz did you just upload seven chapters at once? YES, YES I DID. Also remind me never to draw again good god. imma die now.

A young man stands in his bedroom window looking for meteors and though it was like, uh, fourteen years, one hundred and thirty one days ago that he was given life it is only today that he-

Wait, no, that’s not right. Your name is DAVE STRIDER and it always has been because normal goddamn people name their children basically when they’re born. Not that your parents were normal people but they at least passed that minimal hurdle. Step 1: have child, step 2: name child. It’s the subsequent steps that they fucked up.

Where were we? Oh yes. It is an UNSEASONABLY WARM April day. Your BEDROOM WINDOW is open to let some air in, and your FAN is cranked. Arguably even more cranked would be your FLY BEATS, which brings us to your variety of INTERESTS. A cool dude like you is sure to have plenty. You have a penchant for spinning out UNBELIEVABLY ILL JAMS with your TURNTABLES AND MIXING GEAR but on occasion you get a little CHILL and mix up some LOFI JAMS and splice in your soulmate’s HELLA CUTE ALIEN NOISES. You like to rave about BANDS NO ONE’S EVER HEARD OF BUT YOU. You collect WEIRD DEAD THINGS PRESERVED IN VARIOUS WAYS. On your chest of drawers is a BACKUP of your brother HAL, all of his brain is essentially crammed into those storage cubes. You are also an AMATEUR PHOTOGRAPHER and operate your own MAKESHIFT DARKROOM. You are the AUTHOR and GENIUS behind Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff and are secretly a very talented ARTIST.

And, ok, look- there’s clearly been some kind of error here. You already know all of this and if your life thus far were to be in a serialised format then anyone reading over that would have clearly been doing so for the last, say, twenty-four chapters. Let’s dispense with the introductions and continue, shall we?

You could contact your boyfriend, but he’s an anxious mess right now and it’s just making you have petty arguments, like about what mayo is really made of. No, you’re going to leave Sollux to walk him through his part of the game before you get going.

You’re also not going to harass Rose. She’s been increasingly tense this last week and when she is tense she writes wizard porn and when you interrupt her doing that she makes you read it. When you protested that ‘a man can only take so much wizard dick’ she went out and got that printed on a t-shirt and lovingly gave it to you. Honestly, sisters.

At the door to your room stand your two thus far unmentioned siblings, Dirk and Roxy.

And hey, you’ve got nothing but TIME right now so perhaps we can borrow from the format a little more and inject a little FREE WILL into this. (Because clicking in the image is beyond what this formatting is capable of).
What will you do?
>Dave: Be John last night
>Dave: Be Dirk fourteen hours ago
>Dave: Be Roxy last night
>Dave: Hope your weird jungle girl is ok
>Dave: Fondly regard Karkat
>Dave: Look at the GAME PLAN

Well, master of procrastination though you are you guess that now you could-

carcinoGeneticist began pestering turntechGodhead

CG: OH MY FUCKING GOD YOU KNOW HOW THESE PLANETS ARE CUSTOMISED TO US?

TG: signless said that yeah

CG: WELL I GREET YOU FURIOUSLY FROM THE LAND OF PULSE AND HAZE. I AM SURROUNDED BY RIVERS OF MY MUTANT BLOOD AND AN EVER PRESENT HEARTBEAT THROUGH THE LAND, IT’S LIKE THE TELL TALE FUCKING HEART IN HERE. I HOPE SBURB AND SKAIA ARE GETTING A GOOD LAUGH ON AT ME FOR THIS!

CG: AND THERE ARE IMPS ALL OVER THE PLACE AND I AM GETTING FUCKING SICK OF FIGHTING THEM ALREADY. NOT THAT I LASTED LONG IN THE PATIENCE DEPARTMENT BUT THANKFULLY MY SPRITE IS

CG: IT

CG: HE

TG: kar?

CG: IS THIS HOW OTHER PEOPLE FEEL WHEN I’M RIGHT? JUST ALL HOLLOWED OUT AND SAD?

TG: what? no

TG: what were you wrong about? you never even talked to me much since you started the game i know literally nothing are you ok

CG: no

TG: that was lowercase karkat youre kinda scaring me are you hurt?

CG: I’M NOT INJURED. A WALL NEARLY COLLAPSED ON ME BUT DAD SAVED ME, I GUESS DIRK WAS ALSO RIGHT ABOUT OUR HOUSE NOT BEING STABLE ENOUGH FOR THIS.

TG: shit

TG: im glad youre ok did psii have to dismantle your room or something after that?
CG: NOT THAT DAD

TG: oh signless shoved you out of the way?

CG: yeah

TG: you

TG: wait if you were wrong then who was right?

TG: signless?

TG: about… surviving the game?

CG: yeah

CG: he died which is stupid to say because my sprite took him and he’s alive again basically, but he died. because of me.

TG: oh fuck

TG: karkat im so sorry i dont even know what to say

TG: i guess at least hes not GONE gone you know?

CG: YEAH.

CG: AND NOW HE HAS SPRITE KNOWLEDGE TOO. BUT I JUST

TG: you just


TG: we can warn them maybe

TG: hal can

CG: OR MAYBE THAT MAKES THEM ACT IN THE WAY THAT CAUSES THEM TO DIE WHEN THEY WOULDN’T NORMALLY, AND IT’S SOME SELF FULFILLING PROPHECY!

TG: maybe but maybe not

TG: better than doing nothing though right?

CG: CAN WE JUST- LOOK, I HAVE TO GET YOU INTO THE GAME AND HONESTLY FOCUSING ON WHAT YOU’RE DOING MIGHT TAKE MY MIND OF IT AND I NEED THAT RIGHT NOW. ALRIGHT? I DON’T KNOW HOW TO FEEL BAD ABOUT THE DEATH OF SOMEONE I LOVE WHEN THEY’RE RIGHT HERE AND IF I DON’T GET YOU IN THE GAME SOON THEN I’LL HAVE SOMEONE ELSE TO PRACTICE MOURNING ON AND I’D RATHER NOT. OK?

TG: alright
TG: ill go start up and im sorry again

CG: YEAH. MOVE IT.

You put your phone back in your pocket and turn around to look at Dirk from where you’ve been pacing. He and Roxy are both looking at you.

“John is just finishing up the last of his thing, he lost a fight with his dad that involved cake but Jane helped him out. How is Karkat doing?” Roxy asks.

“Yeah, is it time yet?” Dirk adds.

“Signless is dead. Karkat ended up prototyping him so he’s also kind of not dead.” you blurt out. Both of them stare at you in horror and Roxy lowers her phone.

“Holy shit.” Dirk whispers.

“That’s terrible.” Roxy agrees.

“Karkat wants me to start, he figures that playing will take his mind off of it, so I’m gonna…” you trail off and gesture at your computer.

“Yeah, go.” Dirk nods.

You sit down at your desk and try to quiet the butterflies in your stomach, things are going wrong already. On your desk by your right hand is the SBURB client disk, Sollux already set you all up with the server data on your computers but the client one is what sets everything moving. He didn’t want any of you accidentally starting early so it’s a separate disk for most of you, Jade and Jake were too far away for that so they just got digital files and strict instructions.

Pesterchum pings on your screen, Jane and John keeping everyone updated with the progress of the blue team but you have that chat mostly on silent, you’re just focusing on the red team for now of which you are a part.

“That goddamn bird, everyone treats that window like a door I swear.” Dirk curses and you hear a flutter of wings and look up to see Bowie perched on one of the lines of string that you have set up to dry your photos on.

“Hey girl, this is a pretty bad time for you to be here but I guess it’ll be no better out there soon.” you say and reach down to open up your CD tray. Bowie flutters down to your desk, likely for more treats, not that you have any today.

She crows rambunctiously at not being provided with any treats immediately, and when you look over at her again she is waddling on your desk. Specifically, she is headed to your game disk. You try to reach for it before her but she pecks you right in the wrist and caws again. The crow quickly scoops up the disk in its small folder and flies up in the air.

“SHIT!” Dirk yelps and leaps into the room, trying to grab at her but missing. You also jump up and try to herd her into landing or at least grab the disc off of her.

“We don’t have time for this!” Dirk insists and draws his sword just as you’re running past, right at your face.

“SWORD!” you yell in alarm, barely skidding to a halt in time.
Just as you manage to avoid getting facially stabbed one of your spare swords flies out of your
sylladex with great prejudice. It arcs through the air and skewers poor Bowie to the wall like the
world’s saddest kebab.

“Bowie…” you whimper sadly.

“I’m sorry Dave, I know you liked that crow but… well, she was going to bite it today anyway, and
this at least was quick.” Dirk says awkwardly, like he hadn’t just tried to draw his sword to stab her
himself.

Goddamn, you loved that crow, she was your favourite for years and she always knew you. Poor girl
didn’t deserve to go out like this. But you’re stung with the reminder that Karkat just lost his father
and you’re here getting misty eyed over a wild bird.

You stow the stoically repressed sniffles and retrieve your disk and put it in your CD drive. When
you shut it and sit back down. The game boots up with a shitty loading screen and then… nothing?

CG: THERE YOU ARE I WAS WONDERING WHAT WAS TAKING YOU SO LONG I
CAN SEE YOU AND YOUR STUPID SIBLINGS AND IS THAT A DEAD CROW ON
YOUR WALL?

CG: IS THAT BOWIE?

TG: there was an accident

CG: UH. FUCK. I'M SORRY?

TG: this isnt looking very gamelike just yet

CG: NOT NOTICED THE GIANT GREEN CURSOR BEHIND YOU THEN?

You whip around in your chair and, well, there is indeed a giant green house shaped cursor. You try
to touch it but your hand goes through it.

“Whoa.” Dirk and Roxy echo in perfect unison.

It swishes across the room and picks up your entire bed.

CG: WHOOPS. I WAS GOING FOR JUST THE PILLOW, I DON’T WANT TO THROW ALL
OF THIS AT DIRK AND ROXY.

TG: yeah lets not

CG: FINE, TO BUSINESS THEN. I NEED TO EXPAND YOUR ROOM AND PUT SOME
ITEMS DOWN SO STAY PUT.

TG: sure thing

Like magic the cursor moves across your room and with what you can see as a visible depression of
a click he drags your room out into a long rectangle instead of the more squarish shape it had before.
Some part of you must have still been incredulous about this game because you’re shocked to see
space warp like this before you, for bedroom to stretch into where bedroom had not been before.

Something almost giddy swells up inside you like a kid with a new toy. The world is ending and
your soulmate just lost his father, hell you can feel the ache on the chain around your wrist that no
doubt stems from feeling like he has to take the place of a man he doesn’t measure up to. And yet
Karkat drags your bedroom into a new and longer shape and you’re pleased and excited in some secret part of you.

On the surface you keep your cool, you can thank years of training for that.

“So what now?” you ask aloud and then think better of it.

TG: you can hear me right?

CG: YES I CAN BUT ALAS I CANNOT PROJECT MY VOICE DOWN TO YOU LIKE YOUR BENEVOLENT GOD.

TG: thers a joke about getting on my knees there i know it

CG: YOU ARE GROSS, WHY DO I LIKE YOU SO MUCH?

CG: I NEED TO PUT THESE THREE THINGS DOWN AND THANKFULLY THEY’RE FREE. STAY WHERE YOU ARE.

Karkat first dunks down a big box with some weird pipe on it, and that has a wheel on the side. You squint at it and consider that it looks a little like the drawing that The Disciple did, if passed through a few games of Pictionary telephone first.

“Cruxtruder?” you guess.

CG: YES, THIS IS THE THING THAT PRODUCES THE DOWELS AND THE SPRITE.

“Don’t you have to hit the top of that thing to get it to open?” Dirk asks, coming in the room.

“I’m going to check on Rose real quick, make sure she’s ready.” Roxy adds and bounds away quickly.

CG: HAL CAN YOU START TRANSLATING FOR ME OUT LOUD SO I DON’T HAVE TO KEEP STOPPING TO TYPE?

“I sure can. Karkat says that you do have to smack the top of that open with, and I quote, ‘REAL FUCKING FORCE’ but don’t do it yet. It sets off a timer, or maybe the timer is unrelated? We don’t know, but just be safe and don’t until Karkat has put everything down.” Hal says through your speakers.

Another item is placed in your now bigger room.

“This is the totem lathe it, and this will shock you, lathes totems.” Hal tells you.

“Is lathe even a verb? I’m pretty sure it’s just a noun.” Dirk says, looking at the laptop perched on the assortment of terabyte storage cubes that Hal is living in right now.

“Verb: lathe; 3rd person present: lathes; past tense: lathed; past participle: lathed; gerund or present participle: lathing. I shall use it in a sentence for you: I stuck Dirk between my massive stores of knowledge and lathed him down to the broken shadow of a man you see before you.” Hal says snarkily.

Your phone pings softly.

CG: <3<
CG: I SWEAR TO GOD YOUR FAMILY AND THEIR PITCH AFFECTATIONS.

TG: gross

“Oh look, a shitty piano.” you remark as Kakat sets down just such an item.

“Also known as a punch designix. Karkat assures me that though that thing is useful for making shit later, you don’t really need it now, in no small part due to how well prepared we were for this. You also need that card.” Hal explains as Karkat drops a sylladex card with a bunch of holes in it on the ground. You pick it up.

“Huh, why the holes?” you ask, turning it around. The card has a picture of a red egg on it.

“It looks a little like old computing cards. Bro used to… nevermind.” Dirk trails off with a look of regret on his face.

“Apparently the last thing that Karkat has to place reads totems which are made into a design by the lathe from reading those cards. It’s the item generation that Signless told us about.” Hal explains.

“Speaking of what Signless told us about, where are all these enemies to fight?” Dirk asks, looking around at your combat free bedroom.

“It seems he misremembered, enemies don’t show up until after the player is in the medium where Karkat and John currently are, they’re fighting but this stage is just a race to beat the meteor.” Hal tells you.

“So a whole bunch of that planning was a waste? Great.” you mutter.

Your building shakes and a little plaster dust falls from your ceiling.

“Karkat put the alchemiter on the roof.” Hal tells you.

You move to your window and look out, squinting again at the sky. You think you see it, a dot of light in the blinding blue. Did the dinosaurs ever look up in the sky and see a sight like this and know what was coming? Well, you don’t want to end up like them so you need to get a move on. When you turn around you see Dirk looking angry and helpless, you’re going to have to fight soon and he won’t be there to help you. Signless made it clear that the game is a solo experience at the beginning. Dirk will have to move past his own trials before he can bail you out and he starts a good chunk of time after you do.

You want to reassure him that you can handle it and that things will be fine, but the not entirely covered message on your wall freezes the words in your throat. You go up to him and rest your hand on his arm, he looks helpless, so you can help by making him able to help.

“Think you can crack that tower thing open for me if we’re ready now?” you ask and Dirk nods.

He takes one step towards the Cruxtruder and then pauses. He turns back to you and leans down a little, holding onto your face with both hands. He leans in and kisses your forehead.

“I love you. Be safe, be smart, listen to Hal when you’re in there and keep me updated. Let me know you’re okay.” he pleads and you nod. Dirk straightens up with a stiff breath and robotically marches off to the Cruxtruder, he crouches and then leaps for it smacking it down on the top with the back of his sword.

The top pops off like an overexcited soda cap and the machine spits out a red cruxite dowel and an
epilepsy inducing orb. That must be the kernelsprite. God, this is getting complex. You grab the red dowel and stow it away. Before you the kernelsprite flashes and floats around the room, it seems to perk up and then flings itself into the corner of your room and a bright flash sears your sensitive eyes. You curse for a while until your vision and the beginnings of a migraine come back to you. Instead of your flashing geometrically patterned sprite there is instead a floating creamsicle orange bird with a sword through its chest.

“Bowie!” you gasp and it half floats and half flutters over to you and rubs its- no, her beak against your face. She’s so much bigger now but you can feel that she’s still warm. This is way better than the bird skull you were going to put into your kernelsprite. Bowie’s orange eyes blink at you slowly and you sink you fingers into feathers with glee.

“Dave, the lathe.” Dirk reminds you, and you pull away from your beloved reanimated crow.

You walk over to the lathe and carefully set the dowel in between the perfectly sized plates. Dirk peers over your shoulder.

“You have to-” he starts.

“Yeah, I got it.” you tell him and shove the card in the obvious slot.

The machine thinks for a moment and then carves out a loopy dowel, it looks like one of those stupid ‘is it a vase or two faces’ kind of thing. You pull the dowel out and look at it sceptically. You’re not sure what cruxite is but this feels a little like plastic, maybe even safety glass. Something tough at least.

“Not to alarm you both but that countdown says one minute and you need to get to the roof ASAP. Dirk, stay away from him, you need to still play your part and not hitch into the game on his.” Hal warns and the two of you sprint up the stairs to the roof.

Dirk backs off to another corner of the roof and watches you with anxiety written all over his face.

CG: YOU’RE OUT OF HAL’S SPEAKER RAGE I THINK. PUT THE TOTEM ON THAT LITTLE PLATFORM THERE, NOT THE BIG ONE.

You rush over and place the totem where Karkat said and as the machine scans it you look up in the sky. That meteor is distressingly close now and your heart is going triple time. What if you weren’t quick enough?

With a flash the alchemiter produces a giant red bird.

CG: UH

You watch as the bird sits and then stands up, having laid an egg.

CG: UHHHHH

The bird then promptly vanishes, leaving the egg behind.

CG: I JUST GOT A BOOK THAT I HAD TO OPEN, JOHN GOT AN APPLE, WHAT THE HELL DAVE? WHATEVER. GO TOUCH THAT THING.

You rush onto the platform and touch the weird eggy looking thing, but nothing happens. The back of your neck feels hot and you can see the roof is lit with the glow of the meteor behind you. Desperately you run your hands over the egg but there’s nothing to touch on it or do with it, you
bonk it on the ground but nothing happens. Everything is hotter and brighter and you clutch the egg to your chest in a panic.

“It’s not working!” you shout at Dirk.

You twist, and the meteor is almost upon you. You’re going to die. You don’t have TIME to do this.

There’s a whoosh of displaced air and you see an after image of Dirk blurring past you. The meteor looms above you, but Dirks body blots it out like a partial eclipse. He swings his sword and with a mighty explosion the rock splits in two, flying off in two separate directions and Dirk falls towards the ground.

You open your mouth to shout, to call out to him, but under your hand the shell cracks and everything goes dark.

“DIRK!” you yell, but you’re not home anymore.

The egg in your arms is gone and the sky around you is black. Your street is gone, you turn around to see the other three-quarters of your house are missing, replaced with steel construction beams. The air is dry and scalding like the rooftop of Bro’s apartment used to be.

You take two steps to the edge of the roof and see that stretching below you is endless lava with more and more steel structures jutting precariously out of it. You back away sharply as vertigo fills you and the imminent threat of death overwhelms your brain.

Before you, text appears in thin air like white smoke and declares the name of the place to be The Land Of Heat And Clockwork. And after a second or two it vanishes.

Your phone pings and you numbly fish it out. Karkat and Dirk are both messaging you. You see to Dirk first, Karkat can at least see you on his screen.

[timaeusTestified began pestering turntechGodhead]

TT: Dave oh god don’t be dead.

TT: I split all of the meteor didn’t I? There’s just a crater in our house and

TT: Ok Hal is messaging me, you’re alive.

TT: Fucking HELL.

TG: holy shit i thought i was gonna die there

TG: and you CUT A METEOR IN HALF

TT: I did not know I could do that.

TG: can i just say i hate this planet already?

TG: ill catch you up later i gotta get back inside

TT: Ok I’m just going to lay on the grass here and try to get my heart rate back down into double digits. I should also check to see that I didn’t fuck anything up from falling off of the roof.

TT: Just, Jesus shit dude don’t do that to me again my heart can’t take it.
TG: i will try to not be nearly killed by a meteor again

TT: I appreciate it.

[turntechGodhead ceased pestering timaeusTestified]

You open your chat with Karkat up again, oh he wrote a bit. Of course.

CG: DAVE TRY SOMETHING ELSE!

CG: IT’S TOO CLOSE COME ON BREAK IT OR SOMETHING!

CG: DAVE!!!

CG: OH MY FUCKING GOD DIRK!

CG: THAT ACTUALLY WORKED! FUCK, I THINK I NEED TO THROW UP FROM STRESS OR SOMETHING. MAYBE KILL A DOZEN IMPS TO WORK OFF THAT ANXIETY.

CG: TALK TO ME YOU GRUBFUCKER. DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH YOU SCARED ME?

TG: geez karkitten it wasn't exactly my choice

CG: DON’T YOU CALL ME THAT AND THINK IT MAKES ME LESS ANGRY.

TG: karkitty

TG: sweetie pie

TG: honeylips

TG: kitten… uh no that is im out my brain is too stressed out to come up with more dumb pet names so im just circling around to cats

TG: why are cats a “sexy” thing anyway i mean ive never looked at a cat and been like hot damn i want

CG: I CURSE DIRK FOR TEACHING YOU TO TALK AND WRITE.

CG: OK YOU NEED TO LOOK OUT FOR IMPS NOW, I CAN ALREADY SEE SOME CLIMBING YOUR BUILDING AND ONE IS IN YOUR ROOM ALREADY TRYING TO MESS WITH YOUR DEAD THINGS, THOUGH YOUR SPRITE IS FIGHTING IT. GET BACK IN THERE.

CG: YOU NEED TO FIGHT THEM OFF A LITTLE AND THEN START BEING A SERVER PLAYER TO ROSE ONCE YOU GET YOUR BEARINGS. BUT HURRY, OK?

TG: yeah yeah just got one thing i gotta do first

CG: WHAT?

You don’t answer him and instead get to the inside edge of your building and swing down a floor and back into your room. There’s no imp there but there is a bunch of game looking things on the ground that are probably the fabled ‘grist’ that the game runs on. Next to that is a puffy looking
Bowiesprite.

You march yourself right over to your table and tap at the laptop.

“Hal, can you hear me? Did everything come through alright with you?”

“Of course, we were prepared for this. It’s unsettling being connected to the game’s network but cut off from the real internet, I must admit. It’s claustrophobic almost.” Hal answers you.

You nod and scoop up the laptop and all its rigged up storage drives.

“Dave what are you doing? Be careful!” Hal warns you.

You quickly walk over to the floating sprite and take a breath, it’s going to have separated or whatever by now so whatever you do won’t fuck everyone else over. Which is great because you’ve been planning this for some time. You fling the laptop and the storage into the sprite, and with a flash (why does everything flash? Your poor eyes don’t deserve this) the sprite changes shape.

Your first impression is of a red and white Dirk, or at least if you added on wings, a feathery neck and a sword through his chest.

“Hal?” you ask uncertainly. He’s been wishing for a body for so long and you had this planned the moment that you heard of sprites but you didn’t ask him. You didn’t want him to be disappointed if things went wrong and you couldn’t add him like this.

He holds out his shaking and slightly clawed hands and you watch his feathers poof up like a protagonist in a Ghibli movie. He looks up from them and stares at you.

“Dave. I—” he says, his voice trembling but still with that same slightly static undertone that always tells you the difference between Hal and Dirk.

You fling your arms around his middle, careful of the sword and he clings to you with desperate limbs and a long ghost tail that wraps around you.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.” he chokes out in a sob, and you can feel his wet cheek smear against your hair.

“Been far too long of me not being able to do this.” you tell him and run a hand soothingly over his back.

He leans back and looks at you, an echo of Dirk from earlier.

“How do you feel?” you ask your brother hesitantly, still not totally over being able to physically touch him after all this time. He’s been there for you for so long and done so much so it seems unfair that this is the first time you’ve been able to hug him.

“I feel…” Hal says slowly as he looks down at his clawed hands and flexes them, “good. Strange but good. And I know so much about how the game works, sprite knowledge and all that. We’re supposed to help players out by giving out cryptic information but fuck that I’m just going to tell you what you need to know.”

“Allright!” you say happily.

“Yeah, cryptic clues are for people who don’t have meteors shooting towards their family members. You need to go help out Rose, I’ll deal with the imps. Besides, I’m armed now.” Hal says, floating
backwards and pulling the sword out of his chest in a way that makes your insides squirm unhappily to see.

“Shit, right, yeah.” you nod and rush over to your own computer. Karkat is still messaging you but it’s nothing super important. You just message him a quick line that you’re about to deal with Rose so you’ll be busy and he leaves you to it. You should be comforting him about his dad but this fucking game is stealing your time.

You open a chat to Rose just as an imp with weird jester like clothes crawls through your window. Hal swoops in and shanks it and you pretend that you didn’t see Vantas style horns on the thing’s head before it explodes into grist crystals. You shove the feelings down and message your sister.

[turntechGodhead began pestering tentacleTherapist]
TG: rose im ready when you are
TG: think we gotta be quick though but dirk saw everything i did he can help you too
TT: Indeed. Shall I insert the disk now?
TG: yea
TT: Okay, it’s loading.
TG: get dirk ok he can open the top of the cruxwhatever for you when i put it down

The screen loads before you and suddenly you can see into Rose’s bedroom. She notices your cursor as you move it around and you see her turn to type to you.

TT: This is most unsettling.
TG: i can see into your room like im god how do you think i feel?
TT: Mad with power?
TG: no???
TT: Oh, good. I’m sure that won’t happen to me.
TG: boy am i glad im your server player and not the other way around.

Behind you Hal ends the short artificial lives of two more imps. You focus and try to wrangle the controls to drag Rose’s room out to the kind of dimensions that you think that you need for all of the things. It’d be great if you didn’t have to have her go onto the roof like you did. You drag the room out but it abruptly stops partway through leaving you with less space than you had hoped for. You try to click and drag again only to realise that the problem was that you’ve run out of grist and your click has instead picked up Rose’s bed.

“Oh shit.” you mumble as you try to put the thing back down again. Rose has leapt out of her chair to look at her bed.

You put the bed down.

Sort of.

You kind of put it through her bedroom wall first, and it lands in the pool with a loud splash.
“Did you just throw Rose’s bed through her wall?” Hal asks, leaning over your shoulder. Feathers tickle your ear and you realise that you can hear him breathing now and he’s really physically alive.

“I didn’t mean to! I ran out of this grist stuff and then it did the wrong thing.” you insist.

“Oh, hold on I can fix that for you. I know a program I can add on to that, I’ll get everyone to install it. You go collect grist and kill imps and I’ll do this.” Hal says, wheeling your chair out of the way with you still in it.

You open your mouth to protest when two more imps barrel into your room. You reluctantly draw your sword and stand up. You don’t want to fight them, you don’t want to fight anyone ever again. Training with Dirk and the others over the last four months has been fine and even fun on occasion, when you trained with Terezi her style leant more towards fencing. Against her you both adapted, ending with sparring matches that looked like something straight out of a movie. But training is one thing, hurting something else is different.

The imps snarl and advance on you. You burst forward and slash through them and… that’s it. They pop like soap bubbles and drop grist on the floor. You walk through it to collect it and do the same with the grist in the rest of the room. It’s not that bad.

A red tail wraps around your middle and Hal pulls you into the air and drops you gently in your chair and pulls you back. You look at the screen and the irritated Rose on it who is talking to a Dirk who is hanging out of the hole in the window looking at the bed in the pool. He looks more than a little scuffed up from falling off of the roof, you’re lucky he’s ok.

You note in the corner of the screen that Rose suddenly has more grist.

“How?” you ask, pointing at it.

“More placing items, I’ll explain as you go, you’re running out of time.” Hal insists.

You start putting items down and Dirk thankfully knows what to do and walks Rose through the process without your input.

“I just installed Grist Torrent, it filters grist from player to player, I’ve set it to force an equilibrium between everyone playing so you can edit shit to your heart’s content without having to worry about not having room.” Hal explains.

“Is that part of the game or did you hack it?” you ask, placing the totem lathe.

“Eh, it’s a grey area.” Hal shrugs.

You watch as Rose throws her knitted tentacle princess into the kernel sprite. Another imp scuttles past your bedroom door on the metal cross beams and you can’t help but note the sudden tentacle arms it has.

TG: rose i already regret you doing that

TG: shit is getting hentai up in here

TT: My dear brother how would you even know of such things? Or do your proclivities in internet
porn bend to the more exotic?

TG: shut up or i’ll throw your wardrobe in the pool too

You watch as your Mom walks into Rose’s room. She says nothing to any of her kids but just stands there, martini glass in hand. Wonderful, so she’s drinking today. You guess she is literally drinking like it’s the end of the world. You anxiously watch the timer on her crux thing count down and bite your lip as she makes her item from the pre-punched card. She doesn’t get some stupid bird, instead she gets a bottle that falls out of a wine rack.

Dirk and Roxy back out of the room and away down the hall but your Mom stays in there with her. Rose smashes the bottle on the floor and the timer hits zero. A loading screen flashes up for just a moment and then Rose’s section of the house is suddenly set up against a towering section of white rocks, filling in the parts of your house that are missing but needed to keep Rose’s section from toppling over.

Everything is scorchingly white but the water is like a pastel neon rainbow, and distantly there are clouds drizzling the same multicoloured rain on things. The same font that you saw appear before you on your planet floats up on your screen, it reads: The Land Of Light And Rain.

TG: im getting a headache just looking at your land

TT: It is very bright, I must say.

TT: What now?

TG: well Hal and I have just killed a few imps and I helped you out

TG: oh i made hal a sprite hes got a body now!

TT: OH! That’s amazing! Tell him I’m very happy for him indeed.

TT: Doesn’t that also make him part stabbed bird if what Dirk told me is accurate?

TG: yeah but he seems to be ok with that

“Wings are pretty bitching and now I have a place to keep a sword so, you know.” Hal shrugs.

TG: he says hes cool with it

TT: Well then I suppose I should make contact with Kanaya.

TG: yeah

TG: i should talk to karkat about what he and i gotta do now because we are supposed to be building if i remember right

TG: this whole thing is such a shitshow

TT: True but we seem to be progressing with the plan reasonably well. I might also contact Sollux to see how things are going organisation wise and if there is any new information we need to be aware of.

TG: wouldnt he put that in the memo though and there isnt anything there except him stating which of us is in the medium now
TG: not that i know how he knows how youre in

“I told him. I’m still part rad computer program and sprites have game connections anyway, I’ve been keeping people updated this whole time.” Hal explains as he calmly floats in place.

TG: oh apparently hal told him

TT: You mean, a little birdy told him?

TG: oh my god rose

TT: In any case, give me the punch designix that you have neglected and I can experiment with it after I get Kanaya into the game safely.

TG: right

You place the item and push away from the computer to stand up. Hal is dangling out of the window and looking around outside.

You simply stay there and look at your room. You look at the piled up boxes of supplies that Dirk left with you all pressed up on the wall by your window, full of first aid and survival tools. You look at the bed where you and Karkat have watched so many movies and above you the string line of photographs that you never took down after they dried. There’s one of Rose with a butterfly that you took on your birthday. They end at the wall just before the point your room stretches out. The room is warped now, different. SBURB machines block off your darkroom.

You walk to the end of the room and rub at the wall that used to be above the bed. Under the pressure the paint fades enough for your ghostly warning about your mom, the game and Bro to come through. Everything came true except for Bro.

You’re not on Earth anymore but other people still are, you still remember what your mom’s projection of Earth’s fate was. You were so focused on getting Rose in here and continuing the chain so that you’ve barely thought of anyone outside the thirty-two of you and your guardians.

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]

TG: i keep thinking of famous people

CG: UH?

TG: like snoop dogg you know is he dead yet?

TG: did a meteor wipe him out or is he just seeing what’s already happened and freaking out even though hes a gonner

TG: or like fuck what about obama?

TG: i dont know how to deal with that

TG: oh that kid who sat behind us in english who i swear had some kind of phlegm problem from how much he used to cough is he dead yet?

CG: I DON’T KNOW, AND FRANKLY I DON’T WANT TO THINK ABOUT IT.

CG: ARE YOU FREAKING OUT? I’M FREAKING OUT AND I DON’T REALLY KNOW HOW TO MAKE YOU FEEL BETTER BECAUSE ONE OF MY PARENTS IS NOW A
VIDEO GAME GHOST AND I DON’T KNOW HOW TO FEEL ABOUT THAT EITHER AND I’M TERRIFIED FOR MY OTHER PARENTS BECAUSE THEY WERE ALL CONVINCED THEY WERE GOING TO DIE AND NOW IT’S HAPPENING!

TG: ok but

TG: and that is terrible im not saying its not

TG: but my mom is with rose like in the game and i think jane and johns dad is still in their house with jane and theyre both fine so maybe what happened with signless was a freak accident

TG: and we are doing something real fucking dangerous as is

TG: it doesnt mean all your parents are cursed

TG: and hal is happy as a sprite and its not like your dad is totally gone hes still there

TG: not that you cant be upset or sad or pissed off

CG: OH GOOD BECAUSE IF YOU TELL ME THIS IS FINE I WILL LOSE MY SHIT.

TG: that would be a dick move and im not gonna do that jesus karkat what do you take me for

TG: just like dont start mourning psi and dis when theyre fine

TG: do you wanna do game stuff and not think about it?

CG: YEAH

CG: FUCK, YOU MIGHT BE RIGHT I JUST HATE HOW THEY WERE ALL SO CONVINCED THAT THEY WERE GOING TO BITE IT AND DAD *DID* AND I CAN’T DEAL WITH THEM BEING RIGHT.

CG: SO YEAH, DAD SAYS I NEED TO BUILD UPWARDS SO THAT YOU GET THROUGH THAT GATE THAT LOOKS LIKE THE MARK WE ALL HAVE. SO, GO ON TO THE ROOF AND KILL ANY IMPS YOU SEE ON THE WAY THERE I’M GOING TO NEED THE GRIST.

CG: AND THANK HAL FOR THAT CHEAT PROGRAM BECAUSE THIS IS GOING TO BE WAY EASIER WITH IT.

You try to climb up to the roof again, but seeing as the stairs are still back on Earth that’s a lot harder. Before you can get far Hal grabs you and flies you up to the roof, just in time for Karkat to place a staircase that you now don’t need. You consider and discard the idea of memeing about the stairs. For now.

CG: I’M GOING TO MAKE A SERIES OF STAIRCASES AND PLATFORMS TO GET YOU UP THERE. KILL THOSE IMPS.

You look across the roof and see a gaggle of imps crouching behind the alchemiter. You point your sword at them and they run for you, carrying shit they pilfered from your room and your roof. You kill one just as another slaps you in the face with a tentacle and that’s way too close to getting puppet dong in your face so you slice and dice your way through the rest of them without hesitation or mercy.
After that, you head back inside and start fucking with the alchemy machine, as John announces loudly in the group memo that he has made an “unstoppable pogo hammer!!!”

Hal explains to the whole chat how the basics of alchemy works and you start combining things to make new and better things. Or, occasionally new and shittier things.

CG: DAVE WHAT THE FUCK HAVE YOU JUST MADE?

TG: it is a

TG: sord

TG: and it hurts to look at it because it is somehow two dimensional in three dimensional space it is so amazingly shitty it costs nothing and all i had to do was combine the code for a sword with a sbahj comic

CG: THAT THING SHOULDN’T EXIST, YOU SHOULD THROW IT IN THE LAVA.

TG: no way man

TG: first of all i dont know if the fires of mount doom can destroy this beast and second imma make fifty and present them to dirk and he can hang them on his bedroom wall like a proud mama and maybe we can see if some of them manage to clip through like a shitty videogame

CG: YOUR MIND REMAINS A MYSTERY TO ME.

You send a photo of your sord to Dirk and explain how you made it.

TT: I am unspeakably proud. I want to frame that physics breaking son of a bitch.

TT: A single tear of pride trickles down my cheek.

TT: When I get in the game send me the code for that because I need fifty of them like right now.

TG: see i knew youd get it

TT: Damn right. Ok, I gotta go get in the game now and then help Roxy, stay safe and keep a three-dimensional useable sword with you. Can’t fight people with that priceless treasure.

TG: it belongs in whatever is left of that fancy french museum that im not gonna try to spell and is probably on fire anyway now

TT: The louvre?

TG: probably

TT: Ok, go stab things.

You return to stabbing imps and collecting grist. Karkat is building sections of your house in layers with staircases with railings, smart when there’s lava below you. You alchemise a laptop after Mituna gives you the code and to your relief the game allows you to play on that too so you can climb, take a break, build up Rose’s tower and then climb and fight some more. You go back another time to make some shades that will both show you messages like your current ones but let you reply by thought like Dirk’s, apparently this isn’t facilitated by science or engineering like Dirk’s but game bullshitery. You’ll take it anyway.
The enemies are getting progressively stranger as more and more players join and throw their crap in their sprites. Kanaya makes some of them well dressed, Jade gives some of them dog faces, Equius is responsible for some imps becoming muscular and sweaty and you don’t even have to guess that it was Aradia who gifted them with skull masks.

Still, you keep slashing up imps with Hal by your side and it isn’t long at all until you’re through your gate and onto another section of your planet. You chill there until you get Rose to the same level of progression and then you finally relax a little. This is the part of the game where you get to wander around and do quests and other people’s well being isn’t your responsibility anymore.

You’re at a different part of your planet now but you’re still not a fan. You’ve lived a great part of your life terrified of impending danger and dreading the clash of metal on metal. Here you could fall into lava at any moment, imps and other more formidable bosses roam the landscape and large metal gears clang together every second. You’re starting to suspect that your land was designed to fuck with you just like Karkat’s was.

You don’t need to speculate though.

“Why is my planet like this?” you ask, looking up from your perch on a metal beam to Hal who is laid out across the one above you, his sprite tail coiled around it like a snake.

“The game designs players lands based on a mix of factors.” Hal replies, leaning over to look at you a little more and letting his arm dangle.

“Such as?” you ask.

“Well, the game knows who you are. It always has, so your land and your quests are designed to test you, to shape you and help you grow into the person that you are meant to be. If you succeed you gain great reward and personal growth, if you don’t grow or persevere then you get failure.” Hal explains and he gently pets your hair with his claws.

“So Karkat was right, they’re meant to fuck with our heads.” you say bitterly.

“Well, no. Some classes get more antagonistic lands and knights are one of them but also the makeup of your land is formed by your aspect. You’re a time player, hence all the clockwork. Metal is a common theme with time too. The lava and the noise are meant to make you confront things and that’s more of a knight thing.” Hal corrects you and fusses with your hair a little more.

You sit up, dislodging his hand for a moment but it’s magnetically attracted right back to you.

“So I’m a… knight of time? What does that mean?” you ask with a frown.

“That’s a far bigger question, and I think that you need to play more and understand the concepts before any explanation I can give will hold meaning for you. I can’t skip you past all of the steps.” Hal sighs and combs your hair one way and then the other with his claws. What is he even doing?

TG: hey dirk youre in now right?

TT: As I’m currently armpit deep in shitty imps, yes I would say I am.

TG: hal said that theres some significance to the lands we get and i know rose and kakats whats yours?

TT: The land means something? As in about me as a person?
TG: or your personal growth or something like that

Hal snorts in amusement and you look up to see him covering a smile with one hand.

TT: Fucking… great. Of course.

TG: dirk? whats your land?

TT: The Land Of Cults And Obsession.

TG: oh wow

TG: maybe you have to destroy the cults or something?

TT: I dislike what this apparently says about me as a person.

TG: hal certainly seems to find it funny want me to shove him off of the scaffolding for you? not that its gonna do much good as he can fly and has all kinds of birdy traits

TG: hes been preening my hair

TT: That’s not creepy or anything.

TT: And don’t bother, he knows he has my perpetual scorn.

TG: ok go kill those weird ass imps

TT: On it.

“Cults and obsession, huh?” you ask, looking up at Hal.

“He’s a prince class, they don’t get subtle lands. Now come on, go talk to some nakkodiles and get some stupid quests. There’s six people more to join on each team, we’re nearly all in.” Hal urges you.

You climb off of the scaffolding and walk around, smiting the occasional enemy that passes you. You keep an eye on the group chat as you go, opting to be mostly silent.

Meulin: I KNOW WE’RE ONLY SUPPOSED TO POST IN THERE WHEN WE N33D HELP BUT MOM HAS GONE MISSING!

Karkat: OH FUCK NO THIS CAN’T BE HAPPENING.

Jade: i could try to get over to your planet, becsprite might be able to sniff her out!

Rose: Come to think of it Mother vanished off of my island more or less immediately, and I have no idea where she is but vanishing is not exactly unusual behaviour for her.

Nepeta: :33 < do you think it's pawsible that she just went off to fight something and she'll be back?

Meulin: THAT’S WHAT I THOUGHT AT FIRST BUT IT’S B33N AGES!

Psii: Have y0u tr1ed me22ag1ng her?

Meulin: OF COURSE I HAVE!

John: our dad got dragged out of our house by imps i’ve been chasing him down but i can’t find him!
Karkat: FUCK FUCK FUCK.

Equius: D --> Our ancestor is also dead, I felt it was improper to share my grief publicly but this seems to be a recurring theme now.

Vriska: Well last time I saw Mindfang she was just fine. But the last time I saw her she just might have just made two jetpacks, left one with me and flown off into the sky with another saying how she was going to fight as many people as she could.

Karkat: AND YOU DIDN’T THINK TO FUCKING SHARE THAT INFORMATION UNTIL NOW.

Vriska: Not really, that’s pretty standard behaviour when you’re as hardcore as her. I know you can’t rel8.

Karkat: ANYONE ELSE WITH DEAD OR MISSING PARENTS/ANCESTORS?!

Kanaya: To My Knowledge Dolorosa Summoner Psiionic And Redglare Are The Only Adults Left That Have Not Been Mentioned And I Believe That They Are All Still On Earth.

Karkat: GREAT WELL IF ANYONE TRACKS DOWN THEIR MISSING GUARDIANS LET ME KNOW, IF ANY MORE DIE, LET ME KNOW. GODDAMN BASIC INFORMATION YOU USELESS TAINT CHAFING IMBECILES.

You glance up at Hal as you walk, he’s drifting in the air above you lazily.

“Do you know where any of our parents are?” you ask.

“Sorry, I’m not omnipotent and until everyone joins the game my ability to place things in space is a little screwed. Even then I wouldn’t be able to tell you much about them, just track their electronic devices that have an internet connection. I’ll let you know when that changes.” Hal answers and flaps his wings.

You meet a small red crocodile like creature which is apparently a nakkodile, so named because its speech just sounds like the word ‘nak’ over and over again and yet somehow that conveys meaning to you. You put that mystery down to game bullshit.

“He has my pocket watch, I want it back. He’s over on the North Tower three discs over.” the nakkodile says, stomping its little feet angrily.

“So this is a fetch quest.” you grumble, goddamn video games.

“I want my pocket watch!” it snaps at you.

“You don’t even have pockets!” you argue and then it really does try to bite you. You figure you shouldn’t kill the quest giver and just run off, it doesn’t chase you, thankfully.

TG: so what annoying little creatures do you have on your planet?

CG: HERMIT CRABS, WHICH MAKES THEM REALLY HARD TO SPOT AND VERY ANNOYING.

TG: i have nakkodiles

CG: WHAT?
TG: red crocodiles that don’t shut up

CG: I SEE THE SIMILARITIES.

TG: so mean

TG: how many people are left to join the game now?

CG: YOU CAN ACTUALLY JUST CHECK THE MEMO YOURSELF YOU KNOW. BUT REGARDLESS OUR TEAM IS AHEAD, TAVROS IS IN AND HE’S JUST STARTING UP THE GAME FOR GAMZEE.

TG: right the clown

CG: HE’S FINE WHEN YOU KNOW HIM, REALLY.

TG: im just saying that since the world ended the proportion of juggalos to everyone else has risen rapidly

CG: IT’S NOT LIKE IT’S GOING TO SPREAD, DAVE.

TG: thats what they want you to think

CG: GO QUEST, YOU HOPELESS LUNATIC.

TG: <3

CG: <3

You resume walking. Your goal is several giant gears away, they’re laid out flat like tectonic plates and they turn so slowly as to be unnoticeable as you walk. Unfortunately, there’s a pretty big drop between them and gaps between the teeth so traversing them requires some ballsy parkour and Hal occasionally carrying you.

The enemies that you come across are getting notably tougher, but the grist payout is getting better too. Hopefully after this quest you can go back home and pool your knowledge with the others and upgrade your shit. It seems that with each successive prototyping the enemies gain more traits to draw from and they’re getting odder each time you see them.

“You know Vriska mentioned a jetpack, if I got the code for that from her I could get across these platforms more easily.” you suggest as you clamber down a beam. Hal shanks an ogre and when you get to the ground you dutifully collect the spoils.

“That could be cool. Downside would be the talking to Vriska part.” Hal notes and shoves his sword back in his chest. You suppose that doesn’t hurt after all.

“Upside though, less of this.” you reason.

“Maybe I can carry you out of here and you can practice on a planet without lava. Nepeta’s planet would be pretty safe for that Land of Little Cubes And Tea.” Hal says thoughtfully.

“That shit’s just not fair.” you grumble and continue on. Why does Nepeta get a nice planet and you get lava hell?

A huge ogre stamps into your path before you and you sigh, these things are hard to dispatch, but with you and Hal working together they’re passable. It’s wearing scraps of harlequin attire around its
neck and grey eldritch tattoos wind their way up its arms, you think that’s an amalgam of Rose’s prototyping and Porrim’s. Through its middle is a sword, sticking out of its back just like Hal’s.

“You ready?” Hal asks you with a grin.

“Yeah, let’s do this.” you agree and the pair of you lunge for this thing like you’re going to be in a slow motion anime opening. You both slash at it and knock it off of the large gear platform, if it falls in the lava you’ll lose the grist but that’s no big loss. You don’t hear the tell tale sizzle and so Hal floats to the edge and looks down.

“He’s climbing up again, super slowly but still.” Hal calls back and you nod.

You wait and scroll through your messages, there’s updates about who is in the game, who prototyped what. You were right about Porrim, she apparently did prototype a book on tattoos like she planned to. The main memo pings so you flick over to that, wondering if someone’s found a parent or if the news is worse.

Tavros: uH, i KNOW THAT THIS ISN'T A PARENT OR ANCESTOR BUT,,,

Sollux: but gamzee’2 fucking dead.

Tavros: tHAT WAS WHAT I WAS GOING TO SAY,

Karkat: WHAT THE FUCK? HOW DID THAT HAPPEN!?

Tavros: i DON'T KNOW, hE SAID THAT HE WAS GOING TO PROTOTYPE SOMETHING AND ENTER THE GAME AND THEN AN IMP ATTACKED ME, i LOOKED BACK AND HE WAS IN THE GAME BUT DEAD AND I CAN'T SEE HIS SPRITE ANYWHERE,

Dave: can you work out what killed him?

Tavros: tHAT'S RATHER, uM, mORBID AND I DON'T SEE HOW IT HELPS BUT IT LOOKS LIKE HE WAS STABBED,

Karkat: FUCK, SOMEONE’S GOING TO NEED TO GO OVER TO HIS PLANET AND USE HIS COMPUTER TO GET MITUNA INTO THE GAME.

Vriska: I already have a jetpack, I'm on my way. Tavros, what was his planet?

Tavros: tHE LAND OF TENTS AND MIRTH, iT'S PRETTY COLOURFUL AND EASY TO SPOT I THINK,

SignlessSprite: I cann9t imagine what w9uld p9sess a sprite to kill their player.

HalbirdSprite: Yeah, we’re basically hardwired to help you guys, not attack you.

Karkat: AND NEITHER OF YOU CAN TELL ME WHAT HE PROTOTYPED?!

SignlessSprite: I d9n’t kn9w.

HalbirdSprite: For real we don’t know. The actions of other players is outside of my remit. Knowledge about the game at its core I can do, specific shit y’all have done in it, less so.

Worry churns in your guts. You’re all royally fucked if Mituna can’t get in your game, the loop needs to close. You’re worried for Gamzee in the abstract of course but the game has ways to bring people back and you know he has a dreamself so he’s likely going to be fine. You just need him to
be alive to get Mituna in first, or someone else.

An inky thick carapaced hand slams on the floor with a sword in its grip, it looks like the ogre is back. Another hand heaves its way onto the platform and Hal flutters over to your side, sword at the ready. Its head emerges, and your stomach fills with lead as a black baseball cap and black triangle shades adorn the now almost totally human face of the ogre as it pulls its way up onto the platform. Gone is the simple body of the ogre, what stands before you now is a fifteen-foot tall, shiny bug skinned version of Bro with tattoos up his arms. He points his sword at you and his shades flash with menace.

Your grip falters, and your sword clangs to the ground. Arms with sharp clawed hands wrap around you and the ground below you blurs as you streak away across the landscape and up into the sky.

HalbirdSprite: WE KNOW WHAT HE PROTOTYPED EVERYONE GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM THE IMPS AND OGRES NOW!

Dirk: What the hell, Hal?

HalbirdSprite: IT’S BRO! HE PROTOTYPED BRO’S BODY!

Dave: bro is back

Dirk: That’s not… where could he have got it?

Dave: bro is back

HalbirdSprite: THE MORGUE, NOT THAT IT MATTERS! GAMZEE PROTOTYPED HIM PRE GAME WHICH MEANS THAT EVERYONE’S ENEMIES NOW POTENTIALLY ARE FILLED WITH BRO’S COMBAT SKILLS, MALICE AND GENERAL INSANITY.

Rose: Oh god.

Dave: bro is back

Roxy: where are we supposed to go then?! where is safe?

Kankri: I have f9und that if y9u c9mand the imps t9 leave your hive they d9 s9. I d9n’t kn9w whether that rule w9uld w9rk 9n these imps n9w 6ut it’s w9rth trying.

Tavros: iT DOES WORK,

Dave: bro is back bro is back bro is back bro is back bro is back

You press your face into Hal’s feathers and breathe so hard and fast that you’re choking on it Hal’s sword is missing and there’s hot blood on your hands. Bro is back. He’s back. You were right all along, you were never going to get away from him. You should have known better. And- and if he’s been prototyped then that means that there is a sprite around there of him. He’s going to come looking for you.

Hal peels your shades off of your face and sets you on the floor.

“This is the problem with thought operated shades.” Hal mutters.

You can’t breathe. Or you can but- you can feel yourself gasping for air but it’s no good. He’s going to be here any second. You whirl around and grab a sword from your wall. You back yourself into a corner and draw the sword out. Everything is too bright and it’s too hot here. Your skin is slick and
your clothes are sticking to you, just like how they used to when Bro would keep you out on the roof for hours.

You should… you should go to the roof. He’ll be mad enough when he shows up, maybe if you’re up there he’ll make it quick. You stumble up the stairs, shaking off something that tries to grab at you. A bird, you think. The air conditioner’s gone.

“Hey, Dave, I’m here.” Dirk says and you jerk, still clinging to your sword against the thing you’re leaning against. For a second you see him and think Bro but that fades. It’s Dirk.

You try to say something in response, but mouth words aren’t working so great.

“He’s not responding to anything I’m saying, and you saw what he did to the memo. I’ve never seen him this bad, I don’t know what to do, he doesn’t recognise me! He’s just been SITTING THERE!” someone else says with a sob.

“Find that sprite, right now. Roxy, thank fuck.” Dirk says.

“Bro’s back.” you mumble.

“Don’t touch, I’ll deal with this. Hey Dave, hey.” Dirk says and kneels down right in your line of sight. He takes your sword out of your hands and you protest but he is firm.

“He’s back.” you tell him.

“I’ve got you.” Dirk says and you’re moving. He makes you take something and drink something and then the two of you sit in the corner of your room and Dirk sits with his sword across both of your laps, ready and waiting. Other people are there maybe but you’re too tired, like a puppet with its strings cut you slump against Dirk’s side.

You were right all along.
Your name is Karkat Vantas and you have never flown a rocket pack before but you sure as shit do not have time to learn. You yank it off of the alchemiter and pull it over your shoulders. You do up the buckles as quickly as you can and fumble with the controls. You push down on the ignition before you have time to think better of it and before you know what’s happening, you’re hurtling up into the sky with barely any control and far too much speed.

You aim for the dark night sky and as your planet falls away from you a moment of panic grips you, you can breathe in space here, right? Other people have been jetting around on these things so surely you can, but you don’t want to pop like a grape out there.

SBURB has, it seems, some mercy and you enter space without explosively decompressing into a furious cloud of red mist and genetic disappointment. You lay off of the thrusters for a moment and twist in space, trying to orient yourself. From your understanding, your entry order determined the order of your planets so Dave’s should be right next to yours. You twist and spot the bright red lava and grey blotsches on the planet and you start up your jetpack again to hurtle yourself towards it.

The closer you get the more you can make out the large gears ticking along endlessly. There’s a fluttering of cloth next to you and you look over to see that SignlessSprite has caught up with you and is pointing you the right way. You rocket ahead at great speed. Sure enough, Dave’s home and the platforms you built come into sight and you land clumsily on the roof, flinging the rocket pack away without even turning it off first, so it skids across the roof like a deflating balloon.

Your heart is in your throat and you sprint down the stairs at full speed and burst into Dave’s room so fast that it’s only Dirk’s quick reflexes that save him from decapitating you.

“Karkat!” he snaps.

“I probably should have warned you I was coming.” you admit, staring at his sword as he sheathes it.

“You think?” Hal whisper hisses and you turn to see him in the corner. His body is coiled around Dave’s and his wings are fluffed up and curled around Dave’s chest as Hal leans over him with a sword in one hand. He looks like an angry red chicken guarding a chick.

Your eyes zero in on Dave’s head loosely leant against Hal’s feathered ruff, you rush over there but Dave is out cold. You reach for him but don’t dare touch him.

“He’s going to be out for a while.” Hal tells you and pulls his wings back and settles into place with Dave just resting against him.

You crouch there for a moment, just looking at Dave’s unconscious body. You are furious. But not really, you’re a kind of angry that you’ve never been before. It’s as if the death and absence of your parents and the parents of your friends has added onto the unfairness and trauma of the game and then multiplied by Bro of all people returning in any form has crystallised that anger. You feel it now as a fine point, a razor’s edge.

You may as well use it.

“Can sprites be killed?” you ask simply and Hal stares at you, his feathers fluffing.
“I mean… if all Gamzee prototyped was Bro then I don’t think so. If you have two things in a sprite they can mutually separate but that’s got to be from the inside out. A heart player could separate Bro from his sprite form which would probably kill him but none of the heart players here have those powers yet. So, yeah, we’re essentially dealing with an immortal Bro with the same jacked up powers the rest of us sprites have.” Hal answers.

“Oh great!” Dirk says, his voice rising in terrified and angry tones.

You sit down and pull out your husktop and open up a message to Vriska.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling arachnidsGrip]
CG: where are you?
AG: I'm on Gamzee's planet, what's with the lowercase?????????
CG: nevermind that. where is gamzee?
AG: Well his corpse is here with me 8ut I threw it in the freezer 8ecause it kept feeling like it was staring at me.
CG: fine. have you seen his sprite?
AG: Nope, not at all.
AG: As much as I enjoy a 8reak from your yelling I did think you were here to talk a8out Mituna.
CG: i was getting to that, you got him in the game didn’t you? i saw we had the right number of planets.
AG: Yeah, a8out that....... I ran out of time and he kind of 8it it. 8ut I got his hive here and he's awake on Prospit just fine.
AG: You know I'm liking this chill Karkat much 8etter.
CG: vriska i am anything but chill. i am coming over there as soon as i’m done briefing everyone on what to do. if you see gamzee or kurloz or anyone who is not the rest of us you mind control and/or murder them on sight, do you understand me?
CG: this goes double for if you see a human who is not one of the players, johns dad or mom lalonde.
AG: Whoa ok.

You flick over to the group memo.

Karkat: everyone listen up i do not have time explain things more than once. sollux are you here?
Sollux: yeah, are you ok? you're all quiet.
Karkat: not addressing that. i need you to find and make a chat of anyone capable of waking up on prospit asap and invite me to that. anyone not a juggalo i mean.
Sollux: uh, okay but ii don't know why you want that.
[Karkat has muted everyone]
Karkat: onto the actual message. we now have a situation. bro strider is a homicidal maniac who has just been given sprite powers and has already murdered one person. he has also gifted our enemies with his skills and a lack of mercy and as such i am ordering that everyone move in at least packs of two until we are each handily capable of defeating enemies with his prototyping.
Karkat: we are all dependant on each other to not fuck up this game and we are not dying over some teenaged pissing contest of who can and can’t survive alone. we all come in sibling pairs so find yours and stick together for now. kankri i’m busy right now so you need to go to nepeta and meulin and stay with them.
Karkat: you may have seen how dave reacted to an enemy with bro’s prototyping appearing and i don’t want to hear another fucking word on that let me emphasise that his reaction is 100% reasonable and we would all be wise to treat this situation with the healthy respect for danger that it merits.
[Karkat has un muted everyone]
Aranea: Is this really needed, Karkat? I don't see why I need to go and 8a8ysit Vriska.
Karkat: you know what? fine, i don’t care. you’ve both still got dreamselves what do i care if you both get murdered for not listening to me? i’m sure those aren’t important to have further down the line in the game. or you could actually listen to me when there is basically zero cost to you to do so.

Kanaya: Karkat I Am Very Worried About Your Wellbeing Right Now
Karkat: probably sensible but i don’t care. if anyone finds a way to murder a sprite let me know.
in six hours precisely we are all going to meet on nepeta’s planet. in the meantime i need to go see a girl about a clown.

[Karkat was added to Prospit Dreamers]
Sollux: there. thii2 ie2 everyone wit with a pro2piit dream2elf, le22 the makara’2.
Karkat: great, i want anyone who has ever been awake on prosit to drop whatever else they are doing and catch gamzee and kurloz. find a way to contain them and bring them to nepeta’s planet for the meeting.

Kankri: Karkat I’m getting c9ncerned f9r y9ur mental state right n9w. This s9unds like a lynching.
Karkat: it’s an arrest. he stole a dead body and prototyped it, risking all of our lives and i want to find out why. serkets, you may have to mind control them to make this happen but if that happens don’t do it alone on planet clamnmurder ok?

Jade: Karkat this is crazy!
Karkat: no shit, now bring me clowns.

You shut your husktop closed with a snap and stand up, Dirk is watching you warily but he’s watching everything warily. SignlessSprite and Hal are both looking at you too, of course they could see all of that.

“Dave needs to be somewhere safe with someone who stands a chance at fighting off Bro’s sprite, would you be happy leaving him with Rose and Roxy? Or perhaps clustering Jade and Jake there too. I don’t really want to put all of his children together like bait.” you say.

“You’re going to Gamzee’s planet? Alone?” Dirk asks warily.

“I was hoping not. If we can leave Dave somewhere safe until he wakes up I was hoping to have one or both of you come with me. Gamzee is, was, my friend and I need to know why he did this. Because clearly whatever happened meant that he had Bro’s body for as long as it was missing and so this crazy isn’t new. And honestly, if Bro’s sprite is wandering around that planet I want someone with me who knows how to fight him or else how to run from him. I can’t even beat you in a strife yet, what chance do I have against him?” you point out and Dirk grimaces.

“I think with that in mind I need to check the battlefield and see how this prototyping has affected the Dersite and Prospitian royalty. More of the game could be at stake here.” SignlessSprite says suddenly. You nod and he flies out of the window and off into the sky.

You miss your real flesh and blood dad, not the one who is filled with game knowledge and a quiet acceptance of his fate. Signless never quietly accepted anything except for the game. You hate it.

You take a shaky breath and Hal floats over to you with Dave in his arms. He tilts his head at you, genuinely birdlike.

“Are you doing ok?” he asks quietly.

“No.” you answer, as if it wasn’t obvious.

“Roxy already left Rose with Jade earlier when she came to see me here. I sent her back to look after them so it’s not much for the three of them to go to Jake’s planet. It’s the Land Of Truth and Illusion so if anything it’s a good place to hide. Hal, you can take Dave there and then catch up with us at
Gamzee’s planet, ok?” Dirk says, lowering his phone and looking at his avian doppelganger.

“Ok, be careful. I’ll be as quick as I can.” Hal nods and flies out of the window with Dave curled safely against him.

“You’ve got that look.” Dirk says slowly.

“What look?” you ask, eyeing the older Strider.

“The one Dave used to get. He’d just shove down everything he was scared or angry about and function as best as he could on what was left.” he tells you.

“Let me guess that you’re going to tell me that worked out poorly for him.” you say flatly, and Dirk nods.

“I’m not repressing shit. I am the eye in a shit hurricane right now. I am filled with rage and I have reached zen fury now. I am going to go up there, pick up my shitty jet pack and hightail it over to the land of clowns and murder and find out what the fuck happened and you’re coming with me.” you tell him and march past him and up the stairs.

You catch your jet pack and when you look around you see that Dirk has made his own from the same code that Mindfang left. You launch yourself into the sky and navigate your way silently through space to Gamzee’s planet. You can make it out right away, the one full of dark carnival colours that look like the insane clown posse jizzed all over it.

You manage to find the only non-tent structure on the planet and land cautiously on the purple ground outside. You stow the jet pack as Dirk does and both of you draw your weapons. Since training under him you know more about how to walk quietly and though you’re not the ghost that he and Dave can be you’re quiet enough. You slink around the walls of the room that used to be in the community centre, the one that’s been Gamzee’s bedroom for years.

Dirk smacks your arm with the back of his hand and silently points to the floor ahead. There is an orange tinted katana, clearly made by the game, and it’s positively drenched in purple blood. You grip your weapons a little tighter and continue around to the door, which is currently open.

Aranea startles a little to see you both but then relaxes, Vriska is passed out on Gamzee’s bed but snoring loudly.

“She’s on Prospit then?” you ask, nodding at her.

“Well, I hope so.” Aranea snorts.

“Where’s the body?” Dirk asks, and you wince a little to see just how much blood there is on the floor, it doesn’t look like much of a fight went down because it’s all pooled in the one place.

Aranea gestures to the chest and Dirk walks over and hesitates with his hand on the lid.

“I think this is what I was doing when I died on Prospit. It’s a little hazy.” Dirk says and then opens the lid of the freezer.

You lean over and look inside. Gamzee is well and truly dead in the bottom of there but more interesting is the red blood on the bottom of the freezer that clearly isn’t his.

“This must have been where he kept Bro’s body.” you guess and Dirk nods, shutting the freezer again.
You shudder to think that thing was in a place you spent so much time in. God, Dave has sat on this freezer which without his knowledge was filled with Bro.

“Why would he do this?” you wonder aloud.

“Maybe creating that sprite was his goal, after all, why else would you bring a dead body into the game?” Aranea points out.

“But then how did he know about the game in the first place? Bro’s body went missing long before we all found out about the game and everyone who was awake in the game before then says he was asleep like the rest of you.” Dirk argues.

You frown, you don’t remember if Gamzee had that freezer before Bro died or not. It’s not like you memorise your friends electrical appliance ownership through time.

Vriska snorts and wakes up with a jolt. She sits up and rubs at her eyes.

“Ugh, good, you’re here. We got his dream self but he flipped the fuck out so we threw him in the freezer in his room and hey, guess what’s in there? Another copy of that guy’s body. We taped and chained the thing shut and I stabbed a few holes in it for air but he’s secure. Porrim says she’s got Kurloz knocked out and she’s gonna throw him in there too.” Vriska says, shaking her head to wake up properly.

“I think it’s pretty fucking vital that no other sprites get that second body. Jesus Christ, why is this getting so complicated?” Dirk says bitterly.

“Thanks Vriska, you two get out of here. Take that freezer with you too, we’re going to go hunt down a sprite.” you announce and Vriska stands up.

“I’m pretty sure sprites are unkillable, Karkat, they’re like… game mechanics. You can’t just kill them.” Vriska points out.

You do what you assume translates to a full body gesture of ‘I don’t give a fuck’ because both Serkets just shake their heads at you and leave. Dirk is watching you carefully.

“If you find him, don’t fight him. I don’t want you killed. I just want to know where he is.” Dirk warns you. You don’t agree with him and instead just leave the room.

“The sword is there so maybe he went that way.” you suggest, pointing in the direction of the weapon. Dirk nods and the pair of you walk on.

The Land of Tents and Mirth is appropriately tent filled and there’s distressingly creepy carnival music going on in the background, but you can never quite place the direction that it’s coming from. You and Dirk peer in tents as you go, pulling the flaps of brightly coloured canvas aside with your weapons but you see only stoned and lethargic imps of all kinds. They’re leant against his consorts, brightly coloured frog people who croak and laugh without seeming to notice you at all.

The first you know that you’ve been snuck up on is a rush of motion from Dirk and a noise like a cat trying to cough up a hairball. You whirl around to see an angry looking Hal floating right behind Dirk and trying to pull an extra sword out of his chest. It apparently punctured his throat, hence the sound of gagging.

Hal throws the sword to the ground with a scowl.

“I didn’t need another one of these in me!” Hal coughs furiously and rubs at his healing throat. They
are unkillable then.

“You snuck up on me from behind and grabbed my shoulders!” Dirk accuses angrily.

“I landed on you, dude. Bird instincts. Not my fault Dave’s crow was so used to landing on him that I didn’t think about it.” Hal says defensively.

Dirk picks up his sword and glares at Hal who just glares right back.

“Great, do you have any way of helping us track Bro?” you ask and Hal’s attention switches to you.

“Kind of why I’m here, actually. I’m pretty sure I saw a sprite tail hanging off of this tiered tent about five minutes that way, my guess is he’s hiding for an ambush.” Hal says, pointing down a side path.

Dirk nods and starts walking, Hal floats up in the air to presumably get a better view of you from above and so with no other options you walk along too. You’re both totally silent as you walk and this time when Hal silently swoops down and lands on your shoulders with clawed hands you don’t jump. He shifts his barely noticeable weight from one arm to the other and points.

You can see the double layered tent and more noticeably you can see an orange arm hanging off of the edge of it. Dirk squints and then gestures for you to follow him. He leads you around the back of a nearby tent and boosts you up onto the sloped roof of it. He climbs up after you far more gracefully and the two of you slink around to the side of your tent that faces his with the gap of the path below between you.

You’re not sure what you expected. You’ve seen sprites before and you’ve seen old photos of Bro, but you weren’t prepared for this. The tent that you’re looking at is pink and orange and he is sprawled on his side, one arm hanging off of the tent top and the end of his long tail hanging off of another section. The human half of his body looks like someone has made swiss cheese of him. You can see through parts of him and right out of the other side.

His breathing is laboured, clearly pained and the knowledge that sprites can’t die surfaces in your head. They can, however, feel pain. You look at him and feel like you should be pleased about this, but you’re not. He’s just hurt. You’re cautious, fearful even, that this could be a trap still.

You jerk when he looks up at you. His shades are sliding off of his head because his ear and that whole part of his head on one side are just gone. There’s a space through one temple where you can see through one side to the other. He looks like Dirk. An older Dirk who is in pain and looks like someone has just punched literal holes in his everything. His eyes are crazed with pain but he stares at Dirk.

“Dirkkkk.” he rasps and Dirk pulls you backwards by your sweater, but you feel the shake in his hand as he sets you behind himself.

You stare at him and he reaches fruitlessly across the divide to Dirk and you see it.

“You think?” Dirk snaps and Bro reaches more.

“His soulmark.” you whisper, and sure enough all the way up his supporting arm are the markings that match Roxanne. Weren’t they blacked out when he died? Isn’t he still dead now? Can sprites have soulmarks?

“This is wrong.” Hal says with a shake of his head.

“You think?” Dirk snaps and Bro reaches more.

“No, I mean he shouldn’t be like this. Death and how a person died doesn’t keep affecting a person
when they're thrown in a sprite. SignlessSprite isn't injured from being crushed, Bro shouldn't look like this. Something did this to him.” Hal says and settles his hands on your shoulders again. You reach up and touch his arm to find that it's softly feathered all the way down, that’s not skin that you can see in front of you.

“Dirk, Dirk.” BroSprite calls, sliding closer to the edge of his tent.

“He can barely move, how did he kill Gamzee?” Dirk mutters.

“I don’t know but don’t let him touch you unless you want to be a sprite. Sprites can choose to absorb living people under the right conditions, one of which is being really unstable and- uh, if I had to put a word on that…” Hal says, nodding at Bro.

“What happened to you?” Dirk calls across the divide.

Bro slumps down, nearly falling off of the tent entirely.

“Roxanne, Dirk, Roxy, Rose, Daveee.” Bro slurs, his words slightly muffled by tent fabric.

“Hal, you can still send messages, right?” Dirk asks, looking up at Hal.

“I am still part rad computer.” Hal says with a nod.

“Can you send a message to basically anything with a screen? Just say… say “Roxanne, Bro is on-” and then give our location? If anyone can get sense out of him she can.” Dirk suggests, and Hal nods and looks unfocused for a moment and then nods at Dirk once more.

“What did this?” you wonder, Bro is still repeating his litany of names. It’s like he’s barely sentient anymore.

“If I didn’t know better…” Hal trails off, drumming his fingers on your shoulder.

“Well, heart players like you have splinters. Fractions of their soul that break off on their own, especially so for you with the class you are. I mean, I’m a splinter of yours. But it looks like someone did that to him, like someone ripped almost all of him out and left this bit that’s barely a person anymore.” Hal explains.

“Enough of a person to have a soulmark still.” you point out.

“Yeah.” Hal agrees.

“So who has the power to do that?” Dirk asks and crouches down at the edge of the tent roof, his gaze not wavering from Bro.

“You, essentially. Possibly me. No one else. And neither of us did this, and even if there was time travel shit involved with this I don’t think that heart has the power to just like… gnaw holes through a guy’s soul like that and leave him literally void in places. Though a void player could do that, maybe. Basically, none of this makes any sense.” Hal explains, or rather doesn’t explain.

You sit on the edge of the tent and watch Bro’s mangled sprite. His movements aren’t quite zombielike but they’re close. All he can seem to do is say the names of his family members and reach for Dirk. The whole thing is horrifying. Not just in a body horror kind of way although there’s that, it’s horrifying to see how not a person he is anymore.
You hate the man who tortured your soulmate but you can hardly equate the mangled sprite before you with him. Honestly, you’re at a loss for what to do. If sprites can’t be destroyed you can’t put him out of his misery but you’d be irresponsible leave him here because what if he heals and hunts people down? So you’re stuck on the edge of a tent with Dirk and Hal and a pathetic sprite.

Some time passes but you eventually hear the sound of engines and you all stand up as Dave and Rose’s mom lands a rocket propelled surfboard on the ground and rushes to the tent. Her white outfit is totally drenched in blood.

“Roxanne! Don’t touch him, he’s dangerous. You’ll end up being dragged into that body!” Dirk warns her loudly, and she slows her pace.

Bro gasps when he sees her and reaches out with both arms.

“Rox.” he rasps.

“You’re covered in blood.” you note.

“Oh, it’s not mine.” Roxanne says distractedly and she rolls her sleeves up, her mark isn’t black anymore.

“Rox.” Bro pleads.

“What happened to you?” Roxanne asks, her voice pained as she gets almost within reach of him.

“Tell me what happened!” she demands and Bro pulls back. He grits his teeth.

“Ants.” Bro manages and Roxanne steps back with a frown.

“Ants?” Dirk repeats sceptically.

“What do I know about ants? What does he know about ants? What-” Roxanne pauses, and her eyes widen. She moves slightly and seems to take in the holes in Bro’s head and body a little more.

“O-oh.” she stammers and steps back a little further.

“What?!” you yell frustrated at not knowing what ever she apparently knows.

“Ophiocordyceps unilateralis, I did a project on it at school and he made fun of me the whole time. Talked about zombies nonstop. It’s a fungal infection, a spore lands on an ant and it grows inside of it, eating it alive. It then pilots the ant’s body to its own ends and then it explodes and dies. Is that what you’re telling me?” Roxanne asks and Bro nods, jerkily.

“Oh, love…” Roxanne whimpers and steps closer.

“Roxanne, no! You won’t be yourself if you let him touch you. Rose and Roxy and Dave have been worried sick about where you were!” Dirk shouts.

“Sorry.” Roxanne says without so much as looking at him and steps back a little further.

“What?!” you yell frustrated at not knowing what ever she apparently knows.

“Ophiocordyceps unilateralis, I did a project on it at school and he made fun of me the whole time. Talked about zombies nonstop. It’s a fungal infection, a spore lands on an ant and it grows inside of it, eating it alive. It then pilots the ant’s body to its own ends and then it explodes and dies. Is that what you’re telling me?” Roxanne asks and Bro nods, jerkily.

“Oh, love…” Roxanne whimpers and steps closer.

“Roxanne, no! You won’t be yourself if you let him touch you. Rose and Roxy and Dave have been worried sick about where you were!” Dirk shouts.

“Sorry.” Roxanne says without so much as looking at him and steps back a little further.

“What?!” you yell frustrated at not knowing what ever she apparently knows.

“Ophiocordyceps unilateralis, I did a project on it at school and he made fun of me the whole time. Talked about zombies nonstop. It’s a fungal infection, a spore lands on an ant and it grows inside of it, eating it alive. It then pilots the ant’s body to its own ends and then it explodes and dies. Is that what you’re telling me?” Roxanne asks and Bro nods, jerkily.

“Oh, love…” Roxanne whimpers and steps closer.

“Roxanne, no! You won’t be yourself if you let him touch you. Rose and Roxy and Dave have been worried sick about where you were!” Dirk shouts.

“Sorry.” Roxanne says without so much as looking at him and steps into Bro’s arms. They close around her, and there’s a bright flash of light.

The sprite sits up with a gasp and all of the places where it was missing parts are now healed and candy pink. The sprite’s hair is longer and the pointed shades rest comfortably in place on mismatched ears. It- no, they, look at you and over the tops of the shades you can see an orange eye and a pink one. They look like Dirk and Roxy smashed together and poorly blended and honestly the effect is like Dave and Rose’s Halloween costumes of each other but aged up. The body horror at
Bro’s previous form is far preferable to this uncanny valley look before you.

“I’m sorry.” they say, a voice ringing in double tones of Bro and Roxanne.

“Fuck you.” Dirk hisses furiously.

“It ate me, Dirk.” the sprite says.

“You know what? I honestly don’t care. I don’t care about whatever shit she was just saying about ants, I don’t care about your excuses. I don’t care about either of you, take your tragic motivations and shove it. If either of you expect me to just- no. Nothing justifies what Bro did and nothing excuses how easily Roxanne just abandoned all of her kids. You assholes deserve each other.” Dirk spits.

“The puppet-” the sprite tries to say.

“I don’t CARE!” Dirk screams back and you flinch, this is a level of angry you’ve never seen from him. Just blind fury.

“It’s still out there! I’m- hnn…” the sprite clutches at themselves and flashes pink and orange a few times.

“Oh, shit, remember how I said sprites kind of can die if you prototype them twice and those parts want it? I think we need to get some distance because it’s going to explode.” Hal says quickly and lifts you into the air, wrapping his tail around Dirk and pulling him up too.

“The PUPPET!” The sprite yells and Hal flaps his wings.

You still feel the shock of the explosion as you soar through the air. Hal has you in his arms, your body against the flat of the hilt of the sword through his chest. You crane your neck and see Hal’s tail wrapped around Dirk like a boa constrictor, only Dirk’s face is pressed into Hal’s tail and you think you can see the glittering light off of tears floating in space as they fall from his cheeks. It seems that physics only applies here sometimes.

You turn over everything Dave’s parents said after they were merged. The puppet has to be the one that Dave said he was always afraid of, that Bro used to attack him with. But he’s never described it to you aside from the creepy glass eyes that, as far as you’re aware of, all puppets have. But why would Bro and Roxanne go so far to warn about it as if it was in any way responsible for whatever it was that apparently are Bro’s soul from the inside out.

You’re pretty much in agreement with Dirk that Bro’s actions can’t ever be excused but you can’t think of what would eat a person like that, certainly not what would do so suddenly enough to render someone unable to control their actions at all. No, Bro is still a scumbag, and that can’t be handwaved.

“We have to tell Dave, Rose and Roxy that their parents are dead.” you say numbly and Hal’s claw’s prickle your sides as he grips you a little tighter.

“Yeah, that’ll be… that’ll be something.” he says uneasily.

“How do you think they’ll react?” you wonder.

“Roxy will probably be more worried about Dave and Rose and it won’t hit her until she’s done making sure that they’re ok, she’s like Dirk in that way, tries to keep people together. Dave will probably feel guilty, like any of this is his fault and my guess is that Rose will be angry
immediately.” Hal theorises.

You look back at Dirk who is now just letting himself be dragged by Hal’s tail through space. He’s dry eyed now but looks completely wrung out and empty. You can’t help but remember his words from before, about how Bro raised him but how for at least a little while Roxanne did too. They were basically his parents too. Terrible, terrible parents but still. You don’t get to pick your blood family.

They’re your family too now, at least they are through your connection to Dave and that’s doubled by Rose being the soulmate of the girl who in human terms is your aunt and in troll terms is your moirail. You’re tangled up with the StriLondes like it or not and so they’re your family too.

“Hey,” you say quietly, looking up at Hal, “I’m glad you finally got a body.”

Hal looks down at you and grins, the sort of expression that looks more at home on the twin’s faces than one so much like Dirk’s.

“Yeah, it’s pretty great. Honestly, I had this big talk with Dirk before the game about getting me a body through alchemy or whatever and then Dave just goes ahead and does this. That kid, man.” Hal laughs quietly.

You nod, Dave is a law unto himself sometimes.

Jake’s planet starts to come into view, all mirrored towers on rolling hills and the whole thing seems to be cut into four equal wedges with silvered lines over the dividing parts. Flying through the place is nerve wracking as all hell, the layout of the land and the mirrored buildings make it seem like at any moment you might crash. Eventually Hal lands, but no one else is around.

“You’ve got to walk from here, I was careful to leave them somewhere hard to get to.” Hal explains.

You look around and you see yourself in a mirror, only it’s not really your reflection. The you in the mirror is screaming and yelling angrily, stamping his feet and waving his arms around. Do you really look like that when you get going?

“I wouldn’t stare in that too long. This land is meant to challenge Jake to see things as they are instead of how he pretends they are so the place throws out all kinds of tricks, showing you how you really are, or showing you who you pretend to be.” Hal points out.

“Uh.” Dirk says, and you look over to see that the mirror in front of him is RAPIDLY filling with Dirks. There’s a version of him with no head, a version that’s disintegrating into pixels, a version with dead eyes, a smiling dirk and even several people that look like Bro. Dirks are expanding out like some kind of unfolding math problem and the mirrored building shudders before shattering dramatically. Hal hauls you both close and shields you from the falling glass with his wings.

“Great job Prince of Heart and Dumbassery, keep moving and don’t make eye contact with the mirrors. Jesus Christ.” Hal hisses and shoves Dirk along the right path. He sticks close behind you and keeps his gaze on the floor and your feet to find his way.

Eventually, you get to a secluded and thankfully mirror free caved area. Dave has his head in the lap of a guy you can only assume is Jake and Roxy is nervously pacing back and forth. You eyeball Jade suspiciously, but it seems both of you have better things to do than pick a dumb fight.

“What happened? What was that noise?” Rose demands the moment you get in.

“Genius here broke a mirror building, it’s fine.” Hal answers and fluffs his feathers in irritation, scattering small shards to the ground.
“What about Gamzee and Bro?” Roxy asks urgently.

“The original one is dead as fuck and his dreamself is alive, last I heard Vriska caught Dream Gamzee and last I heard they’re rounding up Kurloz as well. Serkets love a good chase. As for Bro…” you trail off, looking over at Dirk. He should probably tell this part.

“We found his sprite. It was fucked up, like something had ripped him apart physically and mentally. We couldn’t get much sense out of him so I sent out a message for your mom and she showed up, covered in someone else’s blood so I don’t know how that happened or where she was but she didn’t tell us. Hal warned her that if she touched Bro she’d become a sprite like him and it’d probably kill them both. She did it anyway of course because, fuck her. And so they became one person and tried to fucking apologise of all things.” Dirk says angrily.

“How dare they!” Rose hisses furiously.

“Then ranted about some fungus that eats the brains of ants, rambled about a puppet which I can only assume means Bro’s puppet and then exploded.” Dirk says, throwing his hands in the air.

“So… so she’s dead then? They’re both dead?” Roxy asks, stopping still and staring right at Dirk. Dirk lowers his head a little and nods.

There’s basically no good way to deliver the news ‘congratulations, you’re an orphan!’. It’s been one hell of a fucking day, you and Dave have both lost a parent, although technically Dave gained one back and lost two. You’re not sure if that’s better or worse than what’s happened to you. Though, fuck, there’s still hours left in the day and you have two missing parents, you could still win in this misery race.

Fuck, this is depressing.

“I can’t believe it.” Roxy whispers, her hands over her mouth.

“I don’t see why not! She- she NEVER cared about us at all, how fitting that she’d go slam her entire soul into a sprite with the worst person any of us have ever known only to die right after! They both deserve it!” Rose snaps furiously.

“Oh, Rose, no. It’ll be ok.” Roxy insists, trying to reassure her clearly upset sister.

You look over at Hal who shrugs in a kind of ‘told you’ way.

You sigh and leave Dirk to his family drama and walk over to your soulmate who is still on Jake’s lap. You look at the guy and you get why Dirk is so crazy for him, he’s the kind of rugged pretty that gets used to sell outdoorsy shit in magazines.

“Karkat, yes. Jake English, pleased to meet you and sad that it’s not under better circumstances.” he says reaching out and shaking your hand. That is a manly grip there.

You look down at Dave, his shades are tucked into the neck of Jake’s shirt so you’re free to see the way that his near white eyelashes splay out on his skin. The skin around his eyes is paler than elsewhere, a side effect of perpetual sunglass wearing and it looks so thin and delicate even by human standards. Pity throbs in your chest cavity like a bleeding wound.

“How is he?” you ask, your voice thick with emotion.
“Quiet as a lamb. He was already conked out from whatever Dirk had given him when Hal brought him here, and he’s not stirred since. Poor mite.” Jake says sympathetically and strokes Dave’s hair.

It’s hard to remind yourself that Dave isn’t Jake’s own blood what with how he’s treating him. He’s a biological stranger who never met him before today. And yet he is almost certainly Dirk’s soulmate and Dirk has set himself as Dave’s parent so, by extension, Jake is part of that too. Humans are absolutely pack animals.

“Hi.” Dirk says uncertainly from behind you and you watch Jake’s face light up. You stand between them and Dave’s unconscious body is still on Jake’s lap, yet the two of them are just staring at each other.

“This isn’t really how I pictured this.” Dirk admits.

“I would have been surprised if it was!” Jake laughs, in his lap Dave scrunches his nose a little and makes some sound in his throat.

Dirk’s attention zeroes in on him and you step aside a little to let Dirk get close. He picks up Dave’s arm and feels for the pulse in his unmarked wrist.

“He’ll probably wake up soon.” Dirk announces to the group at large.

“Poor kid, it’s been quite the day for David Strider, huh?” Jake sighs and pets Dave’s hair with absent-minded affection.

“His full name isn’t actually David.” you inform Jake because it is one of the many Dave facts that you know.

“Actually it is, he just insists it’s not. Teachers at his school as a kid used to insist on calling him David and he hated it so he just started saying that. But legally his full name isn’t David Strider either, so…” Dirk shrugs, looking at a timer on his phone as he checks Dave’s pulse again.

“Oh, I guess they never married. So he’s David Lalonde technically?” you ask curiously.

“Yeah, I can see him going by that approximately never.” Rose snorts.

“Well, he’s got a middle name too, so do you Rose so I wouldn’t be smug if I were you.” Dirk mutters and puts his phone away.

“Well, you can’t just not tell me now.” Rose insists.

“But I can. Jake can I, uh, talk to you? Outside?” Dirk asks uneasily.

Jake straightens up and looks at Dirk with some surprise and then down at the sleeping Dave in his lap.

“Oh, yes. I just- Karkat could you…” Jake says, gesturing to Dave’s whole body.

“Oh, of course.” you agree and carefully lift Dave’s limp form off of Jake’s lap, allowing him to get up. You take his place and carefully set Dave down on your own legs. He makes another small sleepy noise. With a backward look at his brother Dirk leads Jake out of the cave. Hal yells a warning about the mirrors as he leaves.

You look down at your soulmate and push his hair out of his shut eyes a little. You’ve seen him sedated before when he first got on medication but to your understanding that reaction was more a
result of Dave being on everything at once for the first time and not being prepared for it. From what you know of what Dirk presumably made him take this just knocks him out for a while and then keeps him calm and worn out for a good deal of time after that. At least you hope that’s the case.

You look up at the sound of footsteps and see Jade walking over to you. You bristle instinctively at seeing her, but you’re not about to move Dave just to avoid her. She stops a few feet away from you and smiles a little awkwardly.

“I’m sure you don’t want to yell and wake Dave up.” she says slowly.

“Right now I could probably throw him in the air and he’d stay asleep.” you reply flatly, though you don’t think that’s true you’ve never let accuracy get in the way of good hyperbole.

“Look,” Jade says awkwardly and shoves some hair behind her ear, “I think we got off on the wrong foot with each other and honestly everything in this game is so much worse than it was before and worse than I thought it was going to be that I just don’t want to deal with all of this and fight with you too. I know you don’t like that I kept information from you and I don’t like that you’re kind of a jerk all the time. But… Dave and Rose see something in you and even John seems to think you’re ok or at least he finds your shouting funny.”

You groan at the thought of Egbert finding you endearing, even if it makes your life with Dave easier. The kid is an infuriating dork and you’re not sure if it’s on purpose or not.

“Can we just agree to not fight each other for now? And maybe try getting to know each other again?” Jade suggests.

You open your mouth to argue with her. To balk at her picking this moment of all moments when you’re vulnerable to try to get what she wants. You want to say that if not for her silence you could possibly have found out more. There’s also a bitter and jealous part of you that hates that Dave was or possibly still is attracted to her, even though he’s dating you and is your soulmate, not hers.

None of it comes, you’re just… too tired.

You look down at Dave and sigh.

“My dad died today, he’s a sprite now. My other parents are missing and I don’t know if they’re ok or not. One of my friends got murdered by the sprite of Dave’s homicidal brother/father and now his mother is dead too thanks to the most overwhelming display of selfishness I’ve ever seen. My friend may well have doomed us all or at least endangered all of our lives and traumatised my soulmate. So, honestly Harley my gripe with you seems petty and I’m not sure I can care about it anymore.” you admit.

“I’m sorry about your dad.” Jade says softly.

“Thanks.” you mumble.

“Dave talks about you all the time, you know.” Jade says and hops up onto the flat silver rock that you’re sitting on and sits next to you.

“That’s… flattering but Dave talks nonstop about basically anything.” you reason and Jade snorts in amusement.

“True, but you especially. Even when he first started the same school as you he’d go on about you. We were all like ‘geez Dave why do you care so much about this kid you hate?’ and he’d rant about you and then pretend he wasn’t. And then it became about whatever funny thing you’d said or how
no one should have bedhead that looked that good also no homo.” Jade laughs.

“Oh, Dave.” you snicker and pat his shoulder consolingly.

“Honestly I think half the reason I got so mad at you when we first talked was because I was so sick of hearing about you all the time. Also, you were a jerk.” Jade says, and you barely resist the temptation to shove her off of the rock.

“Well, I’m like that. I guess. I just don’t want the people I care about to die and you complicated that and there were- there were other factors. I’m sorry I was an asshole but it’ll probably happen again. I’m pretty sure I can not live up to whatever ideas Dave has given you about me because even I don’t know why he likes me I’m just happy he does.” you ramble angrily and Jade’s mouth curls into a smile.

“He’s right, you are cute when you’re embarrassed and angry.” Jade snickers and you jerk back in surprise.

“I- wait, what?!" you yelp and she just laughs more.

“Soulmates are pretty interesting. If I had imagined who Dave would end up with I’d never have imagined you but it seems like it works.” she says.

After a moment she looks down and pulls back her own sleeve. A green cat pawprint at that SBURB spiral greet you.

“I always thought this would black out when the game happened, but it hasn’t.” Jade says softly.

“Yeah, well. I’m pretty sure your soulmate is my sister.” you admit grudgingly, and Jade looks at you with startled eyes.

“What?” she says slowly.

“She had that mark too, meaning hers is someone else who knows about the game and she had a green dog pawprint. Dave told me that you have a dog. Normally I’d say that’s a pretty small level of matching going on but given that we’re down to eight humans and six of them are already accounted for mark wise she’s either your soulmate or John’s and to my knowledge only one of you has a dog. She’s also super into cats which is exactly the kind of animal that makes that print.” you point out.

“Wait, that reminds me! Hal, come here!” you shout and the sprite levels you an unimpressed look and floats over.

“What?” Hal asks.

“Give me your… your left arm.” you say, reaching for him.

“Why?” Hal questions instead of just doing what you ask like a sensible goddamn person.

“Because Bro’s sprite had a soulmark, so sprites can have them. So give me your stupid feathery arm, you bird brained idiot.” you snap and manage to grab him and pull him close.

You run your fingers up through the feathers over his arm, soft and downy though they are but you still can’t see any mark. Not until you get to his bicep and then you get a flash of colour other than Hal’s red and white. You gasp and slowly run your hand over the feathers and get a slow flipbook effect viewing of a rearing horse and the green SBURB spiral that you all have.
“I was right, you’ve got a soulmate.” you grin and Hal stares at his arm, ruffling through the feathers himself to look at it.

“I only know of three horse obsessed idiots still alive and one of them’s Dirk so I think we can rule him out, if only because Dirk’s only got the one soulmark.” you add that last part quietly because maybe it’s just genetic that StriLondes are total blackrom flirts but you’re pretty sure you could write a science fiction book around Dirk and Hal and base a blackrom on ‘which one of us is the real one’ and sell that shit for so much money on Alternia. If the use of humans wouldn’t get you killed and also if Alternia still existed and your social circle wasn’t literally the last of your species.

Fuck that’s sad.

“You should talk to my sister.” you say to Jade, hoping to distract yourself.

“I- oh. I… well, I always assumed that I’d never meet my soulmate so I never thought about it much but I don’t think I ever thought about it being a girl.” Jade says slowly, and you hold your hands up.

“Oh no no no. Go take your sexuality crisis over there fuck you very much. The ‘L’ and ‘B’ of the stupid human alphabet soup of sexuality over there can help you I literally just got done dealing with this one’s deal. I have had too much shit gone on today to fix your totally pointless problem!” you yell, gesturing to Rose and Roxy who look at you with equal levels of exasperation.

Jade hops off of your rock and pouts at you irritably, her eyes narrowing behind her owlishly round glasses.

“You’re right, you care AND you’re kind of an asshole.” she accuses you and marches off.

“I LITERALLY warned you!” you yell after her.

Dave stirs a little in your lap but you still and he doesn’t keep moving.

You take your few moments of relative silence and peace to think. Your brain skips back to Bro’s mutilated sprite form with the same level of horror that you felt when you first saw it, and you feel the cold certainty that it’ll give you nightmares for some time yet. He’s certainly dead now, you saw the explosion but you find yourself asking the same question that Dirk has been asking ever since Bro went missing from the morgue: where’s the body? Or in your case it’s not about where the body is because that you know, it’s what Hal said that’s bothering you.

He called that sprite a splinter. He called himself a splinter of Dirk and that’s the part that’s coming back to you. A splinter is when a small part of something breaks off from a whole, like a thin sliver of wood that embeds into your finger. The thing is, when you get a splinter from a table leg or something you have the splinter but the table is still there. If Hal is a sort of soul splinter of Dirk, which you can buy as a concept if you handwave the SBURB magic bullshit it leaves you with a question. If BroSprite was a mangled tiny splinter of Bro… then where is the rest of him?

You feel like a chump at a magic show, like you’ve taken your eye off of the ball somewhere thanks to some slight of hand or the gaudily dressed assistant and now you’re lost. To see Bro’s sprite explode feels like believing that a man in a stupid hat can really make shit disappear. Nice job you career failure in a cape but where’s the real one?

Dave breathes in deeply, and you shake yourself from your thoughts and watch as his eyes slide open and he looks up at you, his expression unchanging. You stroke his hair in what you hope is a soothing fashion. You watch the thing in Dave’s throat bob as he swallows, you don’t know the word for that, you don’t think you have one. Is that a human thing or are you just dumb?
“Bro is back.” Dave says, and his voice is just hollow sounding.

“We found his sprite, it exploded.” you tell him. You debate on whether or not to tell him the whole story and decide that you should.

“You mom sprited herself into the same person before that and then they exploded, both of them. She’s gone, I’m sorry.” you say quietly.

“Oh.” Dave says simply.

He stares up at you and frowns distantly.

“I feel kind of… numb. I don’t know if that’s the meds or just me.” he mumbles.

“That’s ok, I’m here. Your siblings are all here and even Jade and Jake are here too, you don’t have to do anything, go anywhere or talk to anyone. I’ll fight people away from you if you want them to leave you alone.” you vow and Dave smiles, it’s a small and weak thing but it’s there.

Your heart thumps in your chest and you remember the blind panic that propelled you to his planet just as much as your rocket pack did, the cold emotionless rage that had you hunt down a man that as far as you know was powerful enough to kill you when he was human, let alone before he got sprite powers. That was, you realise slowly, incredibly dumb. That was incredibly dumb of you, Dirk and Hal as it happens. But the same thing drove all of you. Dave was scared and hurt and the three of you collectively stood up and ran off for revenge.

You lean over and kiss him on the forehead, contorting your spine a little to reach.

“I love you, you scared me so much. I’m so stupid when you’re involved, you know that?” you whisper like it’s some big secret. Dave reaches up and sleepily strokes along your cheek in something that feels so painfully pale.

He drops his hand and shuts his eyes again with a sigh.

“I’m tired.” he says after a moment.

“So sleep if you want, I’ve got you.” you assure him.

“Oh that kinda tired.” Dave replies unhappily.

“Well, I’ve got you there too.” you say firmly.

Dave rests in your lap and you tune into the quiet conversation of the girls and watch Hal looking over his soulmark with barely disguised wonder on his face. The sound of voices outside kicks up a little and you turn your head curiously, you hadn’t really been able to hear whatever Dirk and Jake were talking about until now. You strain your ears a little to hear.

“Jesus Christmas, Dirk! Just how often did that happen?!” Jake says loud enough for you to hear.

Oh… you wonder if that might be about Cronus. At least Dirk is broaching that subject before Cronus swans in and tries to ruin things because you’d bet anything he’d try that regardless of how interested he actually is in Dirk.

“I think Jake is slut-shaming your brother.” you whisper to Dave who snorts and doesn’t open his eyes.

“Well, that’s Jake’s fault too, whatever.” Dave mumbles, and you don’t press for more
Dave opens his eyes again and looks up at you. His eyes are so very red, one day yours will be like that. You have all kinds of feelings about that.

“Is he really gone? Bro, I mean.” Dave asks quietly.

You hesitate.

“His sprite blew up. I don’t… I don’t know if that was all of him. I’ve no proof that wasn’t all of him, and we have his body so no one can make another one but I just have a bad feeling that he’s still out there. I don’t want you to worry and I want to say that he’s gone and maybe I’m just paranoid but-” you say desperately.

“Yeah, I know the feeling.” Dave nods.

He pushes himself up so that he’s sitting and stares down at his feet.

“Fuck this game.” he says bitterly.

“I’m furious at so much shit right now but this game is really high on my goddamn list.” you agree.

Rose walks up to you both and pulls Dave into a hug, Roxy wanders over as well and you figure that they’re about to start talking about their parents. You figure that the least you can do is give them some privacy.

You walk off and sit down with your husktop and liaise with everyone you know. You check that everyone is still in pairs at the very least, how people are doing on their quests, if anyone has seen any adults (they haven’t), what people prototyped and so on. You remind them all to show up to the meeting on Nepeta’s planet and start a group memo for items and their codes, sharing the one for the jetpack first of all. Other people start filling in codes for weapons, more portable computers, even new clothes. You theorise about the purposes of the quests on people’s lands and the practicality of finding somewhere to sleep when you have homicidal monsters after all of you.

It’s Jane who suggests building a house for all of you on John’s planet, which like Nepeta’s is relatively free of natural hazards like possessed mirrors, lava or lakes of blood. Eridan’s planet of angels seemed harmless until you learnt that in the half a day the game has been running for you all he has managed to anger them so much that the previously peaceful beings perpetually want to kill him. He apparently does not see ‘they annoyed me so I shot them’ to be unreasonable.

Mituna edits what remains of John’s home and makes rooms for the rest of you and adds defensible walls around everything, he and John alchemise appropriate beds, food and other home based facilities like the shower you’re pretty sure you’re going to need soon. People don’t have to like the place or even be there all the time, you’d just like a defensible base to work out of so you don’t all get murdered in your sleep. Is that so much to ask? Apparently all of Mituna’s time playing Minecraft and building shit there has prepared him to make a defensible fortress because even John is impressed with his work.

You field questions about Bro from the people who have had to fight underlings with his prototyping, everyone is pissed as hell at Gamzee and most are confused as to how a mere human is that strong. None of you who were on the spaceship say anything that dumb though, even if you didn’t already know about Bro you’ve all seen what violent adolescent humans can do. An adult is a terrifying prospect. You divert the subject when people’s questions get to wondering if this was why Dave reacted so badly to his return and what kind of experience he might have with that. Dave
doesn’t need to be ashamed of how that bastard treated him and Dirk but he is entitled to his privacy if he wants it.

When Dirk walks back in the room with Jake, you eyeball the pair and sure enough you can spot an orange and green band on each of their ring fingers. Dirk makes a beeline for Dave and all but crushes him in a hug for a few moments before letting him go. You shut your husktop and walk over there because to your surprise Dave looks angry at Dirk and the two seem to be quietly arguing.

“No, it’s not!” Dave snaps, and you slink up to them. Rose and Roxy are watching quietly.

“Well- here we are, Karkat you saw Bro’s sprite explode with Roxanne, didn’t you?” Dirk says, turning to you.

“Yeah, we’re lucky Hal got us out of the way.” you nod.

“So he’s dead. Dead-dead, atomised levels of dead. Right?” Dirk barely glances at you for that last part.

You hesitate again.

“See!” Dave snaps and Hal drifts over with concern on his face and lands on the rock next to Dave. Dirk turns to you with murder on his face.

“Are you making Dave think Bro’s still alive?” he demands sharply.

“No! I’m just- it’s not like death stopped him before, we don’t know much about how sprite shit works, and he pretty clearly wasn’t all there so-” you say defensively.

“Oh for- Bro hasn’t been ‘all there’ for a very long time! Is this because of what Hal said about splinters or whatever?” Dirk asks, gesturing at Hal.

“Why is this my fault now?” Hal protests.

“Because you went on about splinters and made him worry and now Dave thinks that Bro is still out there even though we saw him explode!” Dirk accuses.

“So explain it to me properly if I’m so stupid then!” Dave snaps and looks at Hal furiously.

“Ah, shit. Ok, uh. Everyone here is a player except for me, you all have classes and aspects which I’ve basically explained already. Everyone has a little of everything in them you just get a main one, Dirk’s aspect is heart as is Nepeta and Meulin’s.” Hal explains, sitting up a little more and balancing on his curled up sprite tail.

“Heart is the aspect of soul, self and love as well. It’s the opposite to mind which is about choice and decision as well as thoughts. Heart is who you are. And everyone has separate parts of themselves, you’re not the same person with your boss as you are with your soulmate or I’d hope not anyway. With heart players, those separate selves are more… permanent.” Hal says uneasily.

“When you were younger Dirk was worried about turning into Bro so he made me, a splinter of himself, to protect you and police him. Things have changed since then but it was still an act of heart that made me. Heart players splinter like that and how advantageous or detrimental that is depends on the person but you still have a finite amount of soul to break up.” Hal explains.

“Is that why he looked so messed up? Because he was just a small piece?” you ask.
“Yeah, and so where’s the rest of him?” Dave adds.

“Well, we’re not certain that’s what happened. The only person who can splinter another person’s soul like that would be either a Prince of Heart which Dirk is but he doesn’t have that power yet, or a Thief of Heart and that one’s a stretch. And there is no Thief of Heart, just Dirk as a Prince.” Hal explains.

“Spoilers: it wasn’t me.” Dirk says tersely.

“Okay, but, time travel is a thing and I still had that dream and I’ve no idea how I did that yet. So just because we can’t explain it doesn’t mean it didn’t happen!” Dave argues.

“He’s dead, Dave!” Dirk shouts, throwing his hands in the air.

“Okay, let me intervene before this just becomes a shouting match. We’ve all had a stressful day. Hal, let’s say that someone with those powers did do that, what would happen? Theoretically, I mean.” Rose asks, waving her hand between Dirk and Dave to call a time out.

“Actually, you know what? Yeah, let’s do this with visual aids too. Here, this is Bro.” Dirk says, grabbing an apple out of his sylladex.

“A terrible fucking person with almost no soul but apparently just enough to have a soulmate. And now—” Dirk says and throws the apple to the ground, splitting it into bits and ruining it. He picks it up in his hands and holds it up. The apple is fractured, grit covered and dripping juice.

“Now he’s really fucking dead. He goes to the morgue, several qualified people pronounce him dead. Somehow he ends up in the freezer of one of Karkat’s friends for almost a year which is creepy as all fuck, but that just makes him cold and really goddamn dead. Juggalo joins the game, makes dead bro into a magic sprite. Then some mystery person comes along and does magic that apparently not even I can do and even when I can it’s just me who can do it. And does… what? How does that work, Hal?” Dirk asks, his whole body tense as he holds out the thoroughly destroyed apple.

Hal sighs and looks from Dirk to Dave.

“Normally if a sprite is made of two non living objects, like me and Bowie’s body, if that’s separated you’d just get the stuff back. I’m alive but not totally by the game’s standards so that’s probably what would happen with me. If you have one thing it can’t separate or explode like Bro did when Roxanne joined him. When a sprite is made of two people, you get an explosion and no body.” Hal says.

“Theoretically a Prince of Heart could essentially splinter the soul of Bro within that sprite and remove part of it and I suppose the related body and just leave a splinter behind, keeping the sprite intact.” Hal explains unhappily.

Dave reaches out and pulls a chunk of apple out of Dirk’s hands.

“So where’s the rest of him?” Dave asks pointedly.

“Well, but that’s the thing Dave. He’d still be dead, sprites aren’t extra life machines, it’s corpse in corpse out. Dead Bro is still dead even in this situation that requires a time travelling evil Dirk. You could leave part of his soul behind and take the rest of him out but you’d just have a corpse again, and that’s if it works.” Hal tells him.

“He’s dead, Dave. Even in this most impossible situation, he’s dead. I watched him die, twice now,
and he’s dead. Even in this game you can’t magically bring people back to life. Let it go.” Dirk insists. You glance across at Hal to see him wince and you wonder just how accurate that statement is, are there ways to bring people back to life?

“But what if-” Dave tries and Dirk shakes his head.

“I know you’re scared of him, I am too. But he’s not coming back, and I’m not going to let you look over your shoulder forever for him. We’re in enough shit and yeah there are now monsters out there running around with his skills and what I’m going to charitably call a personality, that’s enough to be scared of. You don’t need to be dealing with that and thinking he’s gonna come back like the worst kind of ghost.” Dirk insists. He drops the apple on the floor and shakes his hands off.

“He was dead before and maybe you think that because this happened you can’t trust that he’s really dead now, but you can’t function like that, you just can’t.” he adds and runs a hand through his hair.

“But-” Dave starts and Dirk shakes his head.

“No, listen to me, Dave. You trust me, don’t you?” he asks.

“Of course I do.” your soulmate replies instantly.

“If I thought he was out there, if I thought there was even a chance do you think I’d be here right now? Or do you think I’d be out there looking for him? I don’t want him sneaking up on us. I wouldn’t lie to you to make you feel better, would I?” Dirk asks and Dave shakes his head.

Dirk turns to look at you again, no doubt thinking that you’re responsible for Dave’s fear. You know what Dirk is capable of and though you’re not afraid of him you do remember his warning for what would happen if you were to seriously harm Dave. You’re pretty sure this doesn’t count but he’s obviously not happy.

“What do you think?” Dirk questions you and you avoid his gaze.

“I was there, I saw that explosion and I didn’t see a dead body laying around either. I’m also pretty sure that you and Hal wouldn’t lie to us either.” you say.

“Good, so there’s no problem.” Dirk concludes.

“But I still have a bad feeling about this that I can’t shake, like he’s gonna come back and I know I have no logical grounds for why but I just do.” you insist, and Dirk sighs and sets one slightly apple scented hand on your shoulder.

“That, Karkat, is just regular Bro induced paranoia. Comes free with entry into this family, congratulations.” Dirk says bitterly.

“Well, I’m glad that’s settled.” Jake says, breaking the tense atmosphere somewhat. He leans over and plucks something out of Dirk’s hair, he pulls back and you see that it’s a chunk of apple that Dirk presumably accidentally brushed into his hair. Jake looks at it for a moment and then pops it in his mouth.

“Cannibal.” Rose accuses slyly and Roxy breaks out into giggles.

“Seriously I coulda eaten that apple.” Dave adds and Dirk scowls at him.

“I ain’t stopping you.” Dirk points out.
Your group tension mostly dissipates, and you try to take Dirk’s words under advisement, you’re just being paranoid. Dave starts talking to his sisters and friends more and though he still looks worn out he looks a little more alive now. You keep tabs on your friends and family and Jake suggests that you all eat before you head out to your meeting and boasts that he is a stellar outdoor cook.

Dirk points out that you’re in a cave, not outdoors and Jake throws a spoon at him.

It turns out that Jake is a pretty good cook, indoors or out. His food is pretty vegetable based, but you suppose he didn’t have much in the way of animals to eat on his island with Jade. When the time comes to go to Nepeta’s planet you realise that it’s nine in the evening on what has definitely been the most hectic day of your life.

You all settle into a valley between sugar cube hills near Nepeta’s room and you go into there and use her alchemy equipment to make some pens and something close to a whiteboard. You busy yourself with writing as people arrive and gather around.

The humans are all clustered together, the Serket sisters are by the fridge on one side and your two “aunts” are on the other side. Damara is cuddled up to Rufioh’s side and you can see Aradia looking hopefully at Sollux for what good that will do. Nepeta is sat in Equius’ lap, and you think for a moment that someone is going to have to go through the whole quadrant negotiation thing with her and Jade and boy are you glad that sucker isn’t going to be you.

You look down at you completed list and nod.

1. BRO’S PROTOTYPING AND HOW IT’S FUCKED US ALL: DON’T BE A DUMBASS
2. WHAT THE FUCK GAMZEE?
3. WHERE ARE OUR GODDAMN PARENTS ANYWAY?
4. WHAT DID YOU ASSHOLES PROTOTYPE?
5. JOHN AND MITUNA’S FORT BUILDING
6. WHAT THE FUCK NOW EVEN?

You turn around and do a quick headcount, assuming that Gamzee is in the fridge by Vriska you’re still down one person, more worryingly you’re down one juggalo.

“Kurloz?” you ask.

“He is in the hunger trunk with Gamzee.” Kanaya informs you and a moment of unease rises up in you, that feeling that you left something switched on that you shouldn’t have.

“Did you… take Bro’s body out of there before locking them in?” you ask.

Both Maryams and Vriska all look suddenly suspiciously guilty and you cover your face with your hands and groan. Well, if they weren’t crazy before then they probably will be now they’ve been locked in a freezer together with a no longer frozen corpse. Good God.

“Oh, well, I’m gonna postpone my first point. Get them out of there and keep your weapons drawn or psionics on I guess for some of you. Sollux, can you open those chains please?” you ask and Sollux lasers them off like there wasn’t a fucking padlock right there that he could have opened.

The chains fall off and two red blood covered juggalos scramble out and Kanaya quickly shuts the lid. Your group is armed to the teeth and you stand, carefully and cautiously in front of the pair.

“I do NOT want to go back in THERE.” Gamzee gasps and rubs his hands on his clown pants.

“Well, I don’t really want to put you back in there but you two have a lot of questions to answer.”
“Starting with why did you prototype Bro?” you ask.

“I don’t… he said…” Gamzee looks around at the group and Kurloz shakes his head.

“I don’t gotta tell you nothing.” Gamzee insists, glaring at you.

“Alright, I don’t know where you got the idea that this was me playing good cop, bad cop interrogation. Terezi might come up here but trust me that still makes her good cop. This is you answer our questions or the angry lynch mob gets you.” you say and gesture to the crowd. Kanaya revs her chainsaw because if nothing else she has always respected the fine art of dramatic tension.

Dirk has his sword drawn and Jake’s pistols are out, Roxy’s rifle is too and Jane has a large fork that resembles the drawn weapons of the heiresses more than a touch. The only trolls not armed at least a little are you and the psionics.

“Let’s try this again, allow me Mr. Cherry.” Terezi says, marching out in front of you and facing the two clowns with a smile.

“Gamzee, where did you get the body in the first place? That’s an easy question.” Terezi asks, leaning on her dragon headed cane and smiling unsettlingly.

Gamzee looks shiftily from side to side before answering.


“But why would you do that?!” Porrim demands angrily.

“Please, miss mint julep, be quiet. Gamzee, you are aware that stealing a body from a morgue is illegal, right?” Terezi asks, holding up a hand to Porrim who glows in anger.

“Nobody there could stop me, so I figured it didn’t much matter.” Gamzee answers with a shrug.

“The guy who was on duty was apparently out of his mind, they said it was a psychological break. They just had enough evidence to prove he didn’t do anything but none to show who did take the body.” Dirk tells you darkly.

“You chucklevoodooed him.” you state because at this point it’s not even a question.

“Yeah, sorry about that.” Gamzee apologises, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

“Are you apologising for using them when I’ve told you not to or are you apologising for stealing a corpse for no goddamn good reason?” you ask in loud disbelief.

“Well, we have confession of the theft. But what was your motive Gamzee, did you know Bro? Did someone else want him? Did someone ask you to take the body?” Terezi presses, leaning forward on her staff.

Gamzee hesitates and Kurloz shakes his head again. Neither says anything.

“Did you know him?” Terezi repeats. Both of them shake their head.

“Why did you throw the body in the sprite?” Terezi asks and once more, neither clown is willing to answer.
Terezi circles through several questions but it is becoming apparent that neither clown is going to budge. In your pocket your phone pings softly and you pull it out, wondering if it might be one of your parents. But instead the text on the screen is grey.

[uranianUmbra began pestering carcinoGeneticist]
UU: I know that you have been told not to trust words from Unknown sources and normally I would say that is stellar advice but I have key information for you.
UU: Tell Gamzee that the puppet betrayed him, that should do it.

You squint at your screen suspiciously. This person knows things that they shouldn’t know, Signless had his big rant about trusting things that you couldn’t see before the game started and all of the people present for that except for your guardians are right here. And BroMomSprite went on that big rant about the puppet. Can that be a coincidence?

CG: AND WHO ARE YOU? I’M JUST SUPPOSED TO TRUST YOUR WORDS?
UU: I can certainly see why you wouldn’t but my communication with you is limited, please be careful about who you speak about me to. I know telling you to keep this a secret is a little much but trust me when I say that unlike the other person watching your lives fold out I want a good ending for you.
[uranianUmbra ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist]

You frown at your phone and then look at Gamzee. What the hell?

“Did the puppet tell you to do this?” you ask carefully and both Gamzee and Kurloz jolt and stare at you.

“Bro’s sprite was going on about a puppet. I know he had one when he was alive and you do too, or you did. Is this something to do with puppets?” you ask.

Gamzee and Kurloz stare at you bug eyed and then glance at each other.

“I think you just found a lead, detective cherry.” Terezi cackles.

“Don’t drag me into your weird roleplay.” you mutter.

There a sound of crunching behind you and you turn to see that Dirk has lowered his sword so much that it’s resting on the sugar cubes. The blade of it trembles, making the sugar crunch with every fine movement.

“A… puppet. He has a puppet?” Dirk says thickly.

“Does it look like this?” Hal asks sharply and projects an image out of his shades of the very same puppet you’ve seen in Gamzee’s room. Dave visibly flinches at the sight of it, as does Dirk.

“Yeah, that’s the one.” you say with a nod.

“That was Bro’s. He… oh God no.” Dirk mumbles, clutching his head with one hand.

“It’s a fucking possessed demon puppet. That thing moved without Bro doing anything. We tried to burn it when he died and we turned our backs for a second and it was gone!” Dave insists desperately.

Kanaya’s chainsaw revs and you notice that Kurloz was starting to back away but apparently has now thought better of it.
“Have you been looking him in the eyes? Feeling like when you do that there’s something crawling up your spine? Has it been messing with your dreams, giving you ideas about things you’d never think of on your own? That kinda shit?” Dirk asks, his voice dark and menacing. Gamzee glares back at him, his fists clenched.

“You don’t know shit! YOU’RE ALWAYS IN THE MOTHERFUCKING WAY! But you can’t stop him no more, he’s here.” Gamzee snarls, the threat reverberating through his thorax and making you shudder. Every part of your DNA is yelling about highblood rage and urging you to back the hell off but you can’t. The message was right, but you didn’t reveal all of it so you may as well go all of the way.

“But if this puppet really is alive like Dave and Dirk say it is then it must have promised you something to make you steal a corpse and hide it until today and then throw it in a sprite. But whatever that is you’re clearly not getting it. Bro’s sprite murdered you and we’ve caught you. If you made a deal you got fucked, man.” you tell him.

“No! NO! You doN’T KNOW! You don’t know what you’re motherfucking talking about!” Gamzee rattles, his voice seesawing through rage.

“Don’t I? I mean, it’s pretty clear that being around that thing worked out poorly for the Striders, including the last one who owned it. And, by the way, we saw what was left of him after it was done with him. It was apparently eating at him, if anything it sounds like a parasite.” you point out as calmly as you can manage.

Kurloz scowls and shoulders past his brother to face you.

[He said no one would understand and you don’t, he was right.] Kurloz signs.

“Oh yeah, and all of the best people use ‘no one will understand or believe you’ as justification for only good shit. Never evil people about sketchy as fuck things. I’ve known you both for years, you’ve known most everyone here for years but prototyping Bro risked all our lives and we’ve got parents still missing! You guys fucked up!” you shout angrily.

“You’re SCARED and ANGRY, and YOU don’t KNOW shit!” Gamzee hisses, shoulder to shoulder with his brother now. His eyes are tinting the red of highblood rage and you can hear Terezi carefully take her sword from its sheath.

You stare at him and realise that he’s right. You’re terrified for everyone here, you’re angry for what this game has done to you, you’re angry about the lies and you’re angry about how much everyone has already been hurt. But if you keep letting rage consume you then you’re going to end up with more dead friends. The people here are more important. You don’t know where Signless is right now or even if he’s really still himself but you know what he would do.

You try to let go. None of this shit is fair and you’re scared and rightfully angry but that’s not helping. All day has been fuelled by either fear or rage and all it’s done is burnt you down.

You reach out a hand to Gamzee and Kurloz.

“Yeah, I am. And I don’t know enough about this. I don’t know what made you listen to that thing or what it said or even how that’s possible but so much impossible shit has happened already that I’m just rolling with it. I’m scared that something warped my friends enough to make them do something like this, I’m angry that it got you killed.” you say.

The two of them just look at you and don’t move and you lower your hand a little, feeling a little
foolish already but you press on.

“You fucked up and I’m assuming you were involved as well Kurloz from how you’ve been reacting. But you can either side with your friends that you’ve known for years who are the last people of your species, or you can throw your lot in with a puppet that already betrayed you. Which means more to you?” you ask.

Gamzee looks around at the group, people who have known him for years and some who have only just met him today. He looks back around at you and though his eyes are still a rage induced red at the edges he shakes his head and pulls his lip back in a snarl.

“When I find that puppet, I’m going to kill it.” Gamzee hisses and tension drains out of you at his words. Kurloz looks at Gamzee and then nods with a sigh through his nose, he’s surrendering too.

“Great, but in the meantime we could use help with killing the underlings that have Bro prototyping.” you say with some relief.

You look at your list of things on your small whiteboard and groan. You cross off number two, but that still leaves five other points. You settle in for long arguments about unimportant minutiae of who has to team up with who tomorrow and that it’s only fair that the pairs swap days for their own questing and then protecting the other person in their team. People don’t argue so much about sleeping in the house as much as you’d thought, apparently the news that there is a demonic puppet on the loose that may or may not have mind control abilities is enough to convince people that there’s safety in numbers. A rota for keeping watch is worked out. Hal agrees to go search for your parents on Prospit and Derse tomorrow, he guesses that as Roxanne was covered in someone else’s blood it was likely she attacked one of the carapacians and it was possible she broke out of jail to answer Dirk’s message. If that’s the case the others might be there too.

There is talk about lands and prototyping. Hal answers basic aspect questions and Sollux edits his spreadsheet. For the most part you sit there exhausted and bored at the same time. Everyone else seems to feel the same way and soon enough the meeting breaks up and your group of irresponsible jetpack users heads to John’s planet.

Only the StriLondes remain behind, and when they show up an hour later you nearly ask them why they all smell like barbeque and then you abruptly don’t ask them that. Bro’s body needed to be disposed of one way or another, pointing out that you can smell the smoke from that cremation is hardly tactful.

Later you tiredly and wordlessly kiss a still shower damp Dave goodnight and head into a room down the hall from his and across from Kanaya’s. Your blankets are sopor laced and when you crawl under the covers you expect to fall asleep right away. You do, more or less right into a dream.

More accurately right into a nightmare.

You dream of the Earth. How if it still exists it must be burning now. You dream of the crater where your home once stood, of the movie theatre you went to for your date. In your dream you walk numbly around your hometown and tremble as more meteors continue to strike the Earth. There’s no bodies in your dream, thankfully, just the pervading feeling that like the dinosaurs the planet that you called home has shaken you and the humans off like bad infection. Rainforests burn, national moments are destroyed and every work of classical art is either burnt or will eventually be reclaimed by the elements. You watch as a bank caves in and across the street a pretzel stand starts to melt, you look up to see another meteor and when it hits you jerk awake.

Wet tears cling to your cheeks but when you sit up you feel mostly fine. You weren’t frightened or
horrified, just sad. You curl your blanket around yourself and rub at your eyes.

“No more standardised tests but no more movie theatres.” you say quietly to yourself in the dark.

“No more dictators but no more amazingly terrible radio jingles.” you add.

You sniff and wipe at your face. You need to walk around a bit or else you’re just going to fall right back into the same nightmare. Standing up you wrap your sopor blanket around your shoulders and walk off down the hallway. You quietly open the door to Dave’s room just to see that he’s ok but when you do he’s not there.

Your hand clenches on the door handle and you try to convince yourself that this is the real nightmare but no you are gut-wrenchingly awake. You consider that maybe he’s just talking to Rose, maybe the sound of his door opening and closing was what woke you. You open the door you know Rose went through and find that bed empty too.

You sprint for Kanaya’s door and burst in the room, startling your moirail awake.

“Dave and Rose are gone!” you blurt out. Kanaya is on her feet in an instant, chainsaw out and she looks in the room just as you did. She opens more and more doors and finds them empty.

The pair of you rush up to the floor above where Dirk was to find his room empty but curiously his bed is also missing. You burst into the next room and a flutter of red wings greets you along with a blade of steel.

“Oh, man, you two startled me.” Hal whispers and stabs himself through the chest casual as you please.

You look around him to see two double beds pushed together and covered with a heap of sleeping humans. Roxy is spooning Jane who is curled facing Jake, their ankles tangled together and John and Jade are slouched and snoring in the space between them. Dave and Rose are lying more or less at the foot of one of the beds, Dave facedown and Rose sleeping on her back.

“Why are they like that?” Kanaya whispers.

“Pack animals remember? Where’s Dirk?” you reply back in a hushed voice but direct the last question to Hal.

“Roof, it’s his watch.” Hal replies.

You hear a shifting of fabric and you look again to see Dave sitting up and rubbing one eye sleepily. He holds a hand out to you and makes a grabby gesture like an impatient toddler wanting to be picked up. You want to laugh but your feet are already taking you there without your permission.

“C’mere.” he mumbles and scoots closer to Rose to give you more room. Rose blinks and looks at you sleepily and then turns to look at her soulmate still lingering at the door.

“Kan…” Rose mumbles.

You laugh quietly and figure that, sure, you’re human by proximity and so you crawl onto the bed and slot yourself against Dave’s side and wrap your blanket around the both of you. You feel the mattress dip as Kanaya gets on next to Rose and the human girl curls an arm around her middle tightly then settles down to sleep again.

Sleep pulls you back under again, though you wake up sometime later to movement on the other side
of the bed and quiet voices it doesn’t really disturb you. Or not more than anyone saying ‘right-oh!’ by your basically sleeping form does anyway.

Your name is Karkat Vantas and the world has ended but you get the feeling that shit is just getting started.

Chapter End Notes

I've got some awesome art recently, which you should all go look at because it's AMAZING!
http://thedoublepp.tumblr.com/post/164740974361/alright-so-liz-or-unda-rather-has-this-amazing
http://melisslay.tumblr.com/post/164884575536/thank-you-undanewneon-for-my-lyfe
https://o0jaywolf0o.tumblr.com/post/164807254923/my-design-of-halbirdsprite-i-hope-i-got-him-right

If you too would like to send me things or just talk to me my tumblr is undanewneon.tumblr.com
Hey everyone, sorry it took a while to update this chapter. It was a tricky transitional one anyway and I've got a bunch of stuff going on IRL. I'm having to go to new therapy which is run by patronising asshats (I could vent for days about this but I shan't) and my uncle got hospitalised for several days and just STRESS TT_TT

Even so I hope you like this chapter.

Also I have a Dirk and Hal sidefic that I'm on the fence about posting, it takes place during that big cuddle puddle at the end of the last chapter. I like it but I like all Dirk and Hal stuff so I know I'm biased, so... let me know if you're interested, k?

Also, because it was much requested, the updated spreadsheet!
https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1nneJNrRrfuw2AHetdxKP83WwW9A9R6EiWlpZI-C4KPc/edit?usp=sharing

You wake up with your head tucked under Karkat’s chin, the room is still dim and you have to put your shades on to see the clock on the display before you know what time it is. It’s 5am, and you’re wide awake. You’re on two pushed together beds full of all the humans in existence, aside from Mr Egbert that is, plus two trolls. It sounds nice, but it mostly is kinda sweaty and loud. Jesus, Jade can really snore.

You squirm out between Karkat and Rose and go to the bathroom, you take a leak and brush your teeth. This room didn’t come with a mirror for you to do anything poignant like stare at your reflection and contemplate how this time yesterday so much was different. No, instead you stand there and brush your teeth and look at a shower that you’d need to slide along the wall to get in because the door is facing the wrong way. SBURB architecture skills right there.

You walk back in the room and Hal, who was previously just floating there tilts his head at you just like Bowie used to. You don’t wanna wake people up so you settle for pestering him.

[turntechGodhead began pestering HalBirdSprite]
TG: cant sleep gonna go downstairs
TG: maybe alchemise some things
HalBirdSprite: Okay, the building is still being watched over by Horuss right now, so everything is secure. Have fun.

You nod and let yourself out of the room. There’s a good few flights of stairs until you get to the ground level, that’s what you get for having so many people here. The main room is littered with copy pasta couches one of which has a dejected looking Sollux sat on it. They’re all clustered together on slightly raised or lowered levels so everyone can sit together and have meetings. Behind them is all of the alchemy equipment set up from John’s room which itself is somewhere in this building.

“Hey.” you say to Sollux as you get up close.
“Hey.” he replies flatly, not looking up.

You climb over the back of the sofa and sit on the opposite side to him.

“Sorry about your parents going missing or being a sprite.” you offer and he looks up at you.

“Sorry about your parents literally exploding.” he replies flatly.

“I’m only half upset by that and even then it’s kinda… I don’t know.” you admit.

“Sums up how I feel about Signless, he’s still here but he died too. I heard it, stupid curse.” Sollux complains.

“Curse?” you ask curiously and Sollux blinks at you silently in apparently confusion.

“KK never told you? Huh… all us Captors have this shit-awful psionic thing where we can hear the voices of people just about to die. Thank fuck there’s proximity on that thing usually or life woulda been way more hell than it was already.” Sollux says.

You consider that the Captors were the last people in the game, and that even before that Houston was a big city with lots of people living and, importantly, dying in it every day.

“Fuck, I guess at least there’s less people now.” you say, somewhat horrified.

“Yeah, but I care about these assholes more than I do random strangers on Earth.” Sollux points out.

You make a noise of agreement but your thoughts are tangled up on the Bro prototyped enemies lurking out there and how any one of them could end you or your friends. The thought of any of them ending up dead makes something cold and uncomfortable curl inside of you.

“Ugh, sorry. I just miss my moirail.” Sollux says bitterly.

“Are you thinking of getting back with her?” you ask curiously.

“I don’t fuckin’ know. She deliberately pitched me into mania, that’s worse than just the lying.” he says angrily.

“I know yours are way worse but I’d be really pissed if someone set my whole mental deal off just to benefit themselves.” you agree. Sollux just sighs and sinks a little lower into his blanket. You scratch at your arm absently and trace the outlines of Karkat’s blood with your finger.

“Want a drink?” Sollux asks finally, holding up one of his appleberry blast drinks which are absolutely not a proper breakfast.

“Fuck yes.” you say, taking it and popping the can open with a hiss.

“Fuck this game.” Sollux says, holding his drink out.

“Fuck this game.” you agree and clink your can against his and you both drink.

“Want to go dick around with the alchemy system and see what kind of cool shit we can make?” you suggest and Sollux nods, standing up with his blanket still around him like a cloak and the two of you start to fuck around with what kind of cool shit you can make.

Three hours later the main room is totally filled with all kinds of shit, some of it helpful and some of it not. You’ve made a sweet, or rather a suite, new suit for yourself. It’s black and has card suit
symbols on the inner lining. Sollux has just made himself a Tshirt that says “I ended the universe and all I got was this lousy t-shirt” which he got by combining an SBURB disk, a Tshirt and a SBAHJ comic. Those seem to produce either ironic themed items or incredibly shitty broken things.

You make a pair of needles for Rose, because of course Dirk gave you her weapons just in case she needed backups from you, except these ones just shoot glitter everywhere. They’re absolutely terrible and you’re totally not going to warn her about that when you give them to her.

Sollux manages to make a decent array of breakfast food, making Dirk’s rations something that you won’t have to dip into except for providing the basic components for alchemically making more.

“I think…” Sollux says slowly, “the red gusher and the gunpowder.”

You grab the two cards and run through the quick alchemy process and watch as it dispenses your item.

“Oh, cherry bombs. Bro used to…” you trail off. Sollux is looking at you.

“He put them in the ice dispenser and just generally around the place, he’d set them off sometimes to wake us up.” you muse turning the explosive over in your hands.

“What an asshole. Is that shaped like a cherry too?” Sollux asks. You nod and hand it to him, and he notes down the code on the back of the card for his big database. It’s kind of nice talking to Sollux, he’s a chill guy which you knew already but even talking to him about things like Bro doesn’t make him react badly. He’s got his own shit and it’s nice not to constantly feel like a huge disaster.

You bend over to sift through the piles of cards scattered around Sollux’s feet, you’ve made so many things. You hear a high strangled sound from somewhere off to your right and you get that feeling that it’s a pitch that’s edged out of your range of hearing. Sollux barely stifles a laugh with his hand and you stand up to look around.

Karkat is standing there in jeans and a t-shirt, it’s not often you see him out of his sweater but apparently he felt like change too. He’s staring at you and his face is so dark it’s basically coal.

“Hey.” you say.

“Hi.” Karkat squeaks, his voice warbling upwards at the end.

“Geez KK keep it in your pants, it’s just a suit.” Sollux snorts, and you grin as you place that it’s interest on Karkat’s face.

“Oh, you like the suit?” you tease and Karkat flips you off, walks around to the sofa and throws himself on it.

“What’re you two doing?” Karkat asks after he coughs and levels his voice out at normal level.

“Mad science.” Sollux says nudging a card to you with one of his toe claws, it still pings all your excitement about alien metres when you see parts of them you’ve never seen. Why do trolls need claws on their toes? Don’t they get in the way of shoes like that? Are Karkat’s shorter because you’ve never seen a hint of them through his socks.

“Rad science.” you correct Sollux, instead of remarking on his feet like a weirdo.

“Have you seen dad or, uh, any of our parents?” Karkat asks after a moment and you see Sollux’s shoulders drop.
“No.” he says quietly.

“We should go find out what’s happening, track them down. Find out where Signless went.” Karkat says miserably.

“Send Hal, he can’t die.” you suggest. The implicit ‘unlike you’ hangs in the air unspoken.

“Maybe.” Karkat says quietly, his chin resting on the back of the sofa and his brow furrowed like those eyebrows are two star-crossed lovers desperate to meet again and coming so very, very close.

“Hey man, are you cool?” you ask carefully.

“I can answer that.” Sollux says under his breath.

“I… I have no idea what I’m supposed to do. Everything has been about getting in the game and the knowledge we have about how this all works is vanishingly small, the danger level just escalated, and all the people who remember how this game goes are currently MIA. No, I’m not cool. I’m the burning caldera of a volcano, that’s how not cool I am right now. I don’t know what to do.” Karkat says, digging his hands into his hair and looking like he’s in real danger of pulling it out.

You leave Sollux’s side and walk over to Karkat, he looks like he’s half a minute from hyperventilating, so you try to do the thing that you’ve seen done in troll movies. That cheek pap thing. Karkat wrinkles his nose at you and squints up at you. So either you did it badly wrong or that was hugely improper, upside though is that he’s no longer on the verge of a conniption.

“So wait until people are all up and I’m sure your leaderly skills will wake up.” you assure him.

“You’re not a leader.” he grumbles and the chain around your wrist throbs, ah, this again.

“It looked that way yesterday.” you argue.

“No, I’m not. For one I did dumb shit and for a second point I’m not a leader I’m- the best I can say is that I’m passable in a crisis. I can corral idiots into being less idiotic in large numbers. I’m not a leader, I’m a firefighter and a peacemaker. I never signed up to lead this shitshow, I just stepped in to stop people making it worse. It’s not the same!” he insists, waving his arms.

You open your mouth, the first thing you want to do is to counter him to say that he’s a great leader. You’re sure he is because you love him and the thought of him being inadequate at anything that actually matters feels wrong but maybe you’re not being fair. Karkat is allowed to not be good at important shit. More importantly he doesn’t have to be his father.

“Well… why do you need to be the leader anyway? You said yourself that you didn’t want to be.” you say slowly and he sits up straight.

“Even you don’t think I should lead.” Karkat laughs bitterly.

“No, I don’t think you need to make yourself miserable. You’re right, you’re good at fixing things when people are all going nuts and like, holy shit, we need that right now. But if planning what we’re going to do next makes you feel like you’re drowning then maybe don’t do that. Besides, even Signless didn’t do everything back in the day, right? He had Rosa and Dis and Psii doing their stuff. Who says that you’ve gotta be President Karkat leader of a huge number of stupid, scared teenagers?” you point out.

Karkat still looks miserable and the worry that you didn’t help at all or even made things worse starts to gnaw at you. Rose and Kanaya come down the stairs just then with Roxy and Jane on their heels
and that does at least something to break up the mood.

“Good morning, Karkat.” Kanaya greets pleasantly.

“Is it?” Karkat grumbles.

Okay, maybe it does nothing to break up the mood.

Rose walks towards you with a sly grin on her face that spells trouble for someone, you only hope it’s not you.

“Dave, you’ll never guess what just happened.” Rose says in hushed excitement.

“Boy, Rose, you’re just gonna slap down my self-esteem at guessing things like that then?” you complain without any feeling.

“Shut up, John just found his soulmate!” Rose says gleefully.

“Who?” you ask. It’s not like there’s a wide pool of people right now, even allowing for age differences.

“Terezi, it’s so obvious, you know how into dragons she is. They just bumped into each other upstairs and it happened.” Rose tells you.

You pause for a second and think that through. Terezi is outgoing, conniving, brash and sometimes a little mean. That’s not to say that you don’t like the girl because you really do but you’re not blind to her less charitable personality traits. John on the other hand is a soft adorable goober who is frequently less observant than the previously mentioned blind girl and sometimes less tactful too.

“Oh man, that’s… wow Terezi is gonna chew him up and spit him out. How did that go?” you ask.

“The last I saw he accidentally insulted her three times in the same sentence and she whapped him in the head with her cane so…” Rose trails off meaningfully. Oh great, what would the end of the world be without the added stress of teen relationship angst?

“Maybe it’s pitch. Literally all I know about the guy is Karkat bitching about him and him being unreasonably skeptical so I figure he’s pretty annoying.” Sollux shrugs.

“I don’t think John is capable of that kind of thing!” Jane says with a shake of her head.

Sollux slowly turns around and squints at Jane who is still standing next to Roxy.

“What is that supposed to mean?” he asks slowly.

“Yeah, Jane. Wanna clarify that?” Roxy agrees.

You and Rose share a look and then you quickly face Karkat as Jane is starting to go through the ‘err, well, what I meant was’ motions of speech. You mouth ‘help’ at Karkat who sighs.

“Maybe Vriska should lead us.” Karkat says loudly, and suddenly everyone is staring at him.

“Have you got a head injury!” Sollux demands, his focus successfully switched.

“Do you want one?” Rose offers.

“No, look. It’s just… Vriska is an intelligent, cunning, manipulative bitch who cares more about
You all stare at him. The worst thing is that he’s not totally wrong.

“You’ve fiiiiiiinally come to your senses, Karkat!” Vriska announces loudly from the top of the staircase, her arms braced on either side as she strikes a pose. All she needs is a coat made of dalmatian puppies and a long cigarette holder then the look will be complete.

“You’d need someone to keep an eye on her machinations who doesn’t care about her feelings, so not Terezi.” Rose points out.

“I think you just volunteered.” Karkat smirks at Rose.

“Hey! Don’t ignore me!” Vriska screeches and thunders down the stairs.

“Doesn’t that make you in charge of making sure Vriska doesn’t fuck us all over?” you ask, still ignoring Vriska.

“Aren’t I already in charge of making sure that none of you fuck each other over? The shitfucks in our group have already tried to kill us all by juggalo induced psychopathy distribution. Despotic spidergirls are pretty much already within the terrible wheelhouse in which I live.” Karkat complains.

“Don’t just insult me like I’m not here!” Vriska demands, stomping over to you and Karkat and shouldering you out of the way. Karkat looks up at her over the back of the sofa and blinks lazily at her.

“You’re right, how rude of me. Morning Vriska, you’re a terrible person. Do you want to lead us in game strategy so you can be terrible to our enemies instead of us?” Karkat offers.

“Karkat, I thought you’d never ask.” Vriska says slyly, her mouth stretching into an unnerving grin. You look dubiously at Rose, Vriska is already drawing up charts and plans on the wall. You really hope that Karkat doesn’t end up regretting this, but though he looks concerned about Vriska in general he seems a little less stressed at not having to plan everything. You suppose you did kind of indirectly suggest him delegating things.

The rest of you group comes downstairs in groups and eventually you’re all clustered in the main room, eating and talking. When Vriska feels that enough time has passed she clears her throat loudly and stands on the back of one of the sofas near the wall and gestures, explaining her plan.

Due to certain juggalo based conditions it’s currently unsafe for people to be in groups of less than two, so to start you’ll all be going around one land per day in your group for a few days. Vriska figures that after then a theme will emerge and she’ll be able to analyse the lands and quests and see if it’s possible to pair up similar people. Hal agrees that there is some overlap between people with the same class and also people with the same aspect, most of the time at least. Groups are to explore and quest for at least ten hours per day on a planet. When you’ve all gained enough fighting prowess or game based rewards to fight Bro prototyped underlings solo then you can all quest individually, but not before then.

Vriska also decides that Hal needs to go and find SignlessSprite and the rest of people’s missing ancestors. She then demands that Sollux add a new section on his spreadsheet for information about
the lands and that people need to all fill them in.

For now, at least, she lets you choose your own groups. You’re about to offer to be with Karkat but Roxy speaks first.

“I’ll take the twins to my planet.” Roxy says smoothly and Vriska writes that on the wall.

“We have names, you know.” Rose mutters under her breath.

“And I’ll take John and Jade, if that’s ok with you, Jade.” Jane says smoothly.

“Oh, OH! Yes, that would be great fun.” Jade says as she catches on that this leaves Dirk and Jake alone together. Dirk is frozen in place as if Jake was a Trex and won’t notice him or how red he’s starting to go if he just doesn’t move.

“Well then maybe we should team up, Dirk! We’ll go to your planet as you seem to cause a little, ah, damage to mine!” Jake laughs and punches Dirk on the arm. Hal badly suppresses his laughter as he floats on the other side of the room and if Hal wasn’t already kind of a bird ghost then the look that Dirk shoots him would surely kill him.

The worst part about this Vriska plan is that it’s not objectively a bad plan and not really dissimilar from what Karkat had proposed before, aside from the humans she matches the trolls up how she pleases in pairs and you can only guess that it’s by combat prowess. Karkat ends up with Meenah and they head off to her planet as you, Rose, and Roxy head off to Roxy’s own planet.

You land on the Land Of Vaults and Anonymity appropriately silently. The planet itself is pretty dark and shadowy, you flew low over a few sections before Roxy found her quarter of the house to set down at. The impression you got from above is that the planet seems to be split into zones which makes sense for a game.

As soon as you land you have your sword already drawn, you saw some scattered enemies as you flew close to the surface of the planet but none where you landed by the house. But just because you can’t see them doesn’t mean that they’re not there, Bro is lurking in the code of some of them and if this game has much sense it’ll start pulling on that more than the harmless stuff that most of the rest of you put in.

“Interesting,” Rose notes, “your half of the pool remained intact too. On my planet there’s glass on the one side that separates the half I got from the half you got. It’s fed by a waterfall that then runs over the glass part into the sea.”

You eyeball the windows in the house, the darkened patio doors and what shapes might lurk within. You inch over to a more defensible position and peer down the hill. The hill rolls down with blueish dirt and around the foot of the hill navy trees with mid blue leaves sprout from the ground. Here and there through the foliage you can see grey buildings poking out.

“Dave?” Roxy says with a sigh, you glance back at her to realise that you’d tuned her out.

“Uh.” you reply.

“Come on, sleepy. We’re going down there, it’s as good a place to start as any.” Roxy says, gesturing down the hill.

You nod and the three of you set off. The hill is a little too steep to just walk down so it’s a lot of careful sliding and skidding down, you have to put your sword away to do it or else risk fucking up the landing at one point and stabbing yourself. You’ve done that too many times in your life to want
to do it again.

At the bottom of the hill the trees are big and dark and they loom ominously over you all.

“Hal said that the formation of our lands is based on our class, aspect and presumably us as people. Do you think this can be interpreted like dreams can?” Rose wonders aloud, looking up at the trees.

“Oh, like a Freudian thing?” you say, trying to stop hyper focusing on every shadow and instead be present with your sisters.

“Perhaps.” Rose purrs, looking sidelong at you.

“So does that make these trees all dick trees?” you ask.

“No!” Roxy insists loudly.

“Yes.” another voice says.

You all stop, that wasn’t any of you who spoke. You all draw your weapons and stand with your backs together in a triangle of defence. You scan the treeline and the branches themselves desperately but see nothing.

“Is someone there?” Roxy asks eventually.

“No.” a voice comes from somewhere behind you. You crane your neck to see between Rose and Roxy but nothing is there.

“Well, that’s a pretty transparent lie, don’t you think?” Roxy laughs nervously.

“No.” the voice repeats.

“Are you a sprite?” Rose asks.

“Yes.” the voice answers.

“Whose?” Roxy questions, still looking around for the owner of the voice.

“Everyone’s.” it says.

“Well, that’s clearly not true.” Rose argues.

“Yes, it is.” the voice argues back.

“Oh- OH! What is two plus two?” Roxy gasps gleefully and you squint up at her, what the hell.

“Five.” the voice replies back cheerfully.

“It’s lying! It always lies!” Roxy exclaims. As she says the words there’s a shift in the trees in front of her and the blue tree now contains a bright green chameleon. If chameleons were about waist high that is.

“Goodbye rogue of void!” it says waving a hand at her.

“It’s a consort, like my nakkodiles. And I thought they were annoying.” you say and lower your sword. The consorts are irritating but harmless.

“Hello, little buddy, can you help me on my quest?” Roxy asks, and the consort slowly climbs down
“No. You don’t need to understand void, it’s not important.” it replies and when it’s low enough Roxy reaches out and plucks the consort off of the tree.

“So you do need to understand it, of course.” Rose sighs, putting her needles away.

“What can you tell me about void? What do I need to learn?” you older sister asks the chameleon.

“I can tell you everything about it. I should tell you instead of helping you learn yourself.” it says. You watch as Roxy frowns as she mentally flip reverses the creature’s statement.

“Where do I go to discover what void is?” Roxy asks carefully.

“Maybe less open questions?” you suggest and the chameleon looks at you with one independently roving eye. It creeps you out a little.

“Very few places here can teach you. But the furthest is a very short building, it definitely does not have a square door which is back the way you came.” it explains.

“Tall building, square door, in the direction we were already heading.” Rose translates.

“Well, thank you very much. Do you want me to put you back in the tree?” Roxy asks.

“No.” the chameleon says, its legs already wiggling in that direction.

“Okie dokie!” Roxy chirps and puts it back in the tree. She turns around to look at you and Rose, bright eyed and grinning excitedly.

“Isn’t this exciting?” Roxy asks, rushing over to you both.

For all that John accuses you and Rose of having psychic twin powers you don’t and that hasn’t suddenly started being a thing. What you are is two people who are reasonably similar who know each other very well, so the times when you know what she’s thinking or what she’s going to say are just that. Now and again though you almost buy into the dumb idea because right now as you’re thinking that this dark, spooky, shitty planet is not exciting, great or any other positive thing you can also practically feel the same sentiment radiating from her. You try to think of a diplomatic answer to give Roxy instead. Rose beats you to the punch.

“Perhaps, this world isn’t particularly engaging to us because it isn’t our own. Indeed, if Signless’s theories were true my aspect is the antithesis of yours, which would explain why this place disquiets me.” Rose says.

You’re not gonna call Rose out on being spooked.

“Makes sense.” you agree.

“Well, maybe it’ll grow on you. Come on!” Roxy chirps and pulls the pair of you off towards the direction that you were headed before, where you saw stone rooftops peeking out before.

The buildings, as it turns out are crypts are all sorts of shapes and sizes. The crypts are arranged around a fountain in the centre, or at least it would be a fountain if any water was flowing. In the centre of the non-functioning fountain is a statue of a woman, it looks classically Greek or at least very fancy. Her eyes are blindfolded but her interrupted gaze points towards a handheld mirror that has actual glass in, though it’s tarnished to shit and you can’t see anything in it.
“Why is there nothing to fight here?” you ask, looking around suspiciously at the empty area.

“Perhaps areas that are as obviously quest specific as this are safe zones.” Rose suggests.

“It works that way in video games.” Roxy agrees as she turns around, looking at all of the crypts.

“Tall building, square door.” Rose repeats.

The tallest building has gargoyles hanging from it that stare down menacingly at you, you defiantly put your sword away as you stare them down, they might scare kids but not you. Fortunately that building has a round door. It takes a little process of elimination to find the right crypt but Roxy eventually does it. You follow her in there, checking for threats which are absent and then looking at your phone.

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]
TG: sup?
CG: I THINK I MIGHT BE GOING BLIND FROM THE GLARE REFLECTED OFF OF GOLD.
TG: what?
CG: MEENAH’S LAND IS THE LAND OF GOLD AND GLORY.
TG: i just realised we could start abbreviating these maybe but that makes hers logag
CG: OH FUCK I AM TRYING NOT TO LAUGH, PRETTY SURE SHE WOULDN’T APPRECIATE ME LAUGHING AT HER AND I STILL DON’T KNOW HER SUPER WELL AND SHE IS WALKING AROUND WITH A FUCKING GOLDEN CULLING FORK.
TG: fair point
TG: i mean that would definitely end up worse for her in the long run so i think youre safe i mean shes seen what me rose and kanaya are like in a fight and we would totally hunt her flat ass down if she stabbed you
CG: YOU SAY THE SWEETEST THINGS. ALSO WHY WERE YOU LOOKING AT HER ASS?
TG: i plead the fifth
CG: THERE’S NO CONSTITUTION NOW DAVE, NO AMERICA, YOU CANNOT PLEAD FIVE OF ANYTHING.
TG: aw dunk you got me there officer slap those cuffs on me
CG: OK NO ENTERTAINING THAT LINE OF DIALOGUE BECAUSE IT WILL DEFINITELY DISTRACT ME AND THEN MEENAH WILL GET MAD AND NO ONE WANTS THAT. SERIOUSLY THOUGH HER LAND IS LIKE THAT SCENE IN ALADDIN IN THE CAVE OF SOMETHING OR OTHER WITH ALL THE GOLD.
TG: shit just paint me a word picture right there boy
CG: OH COME ON YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN.
TG: never saw that movie
CG: YOU’VE NEVER SEEN ALADDIN? IT’S A DISNEY CLASSIC, DAVE.
CG: WHAT KIND OF LIFE HAVE YOU LED THAT HAS LED TO YOU NOT EXPERIENCING ONE OF THE BEST CHILDHOOD FILMS THERE IS?
TG: …
CG: OK SO I’M GOING TO FIGURE OUT A WAY TO EAT MY WHOLE HEAD IN SHAME BECAUSE IT’S THE SAFEST OPTION UNTIL I LEARN HOW TO THINK BEFORE TALKING.
TG: send pics

You look around the crypt. Rose is poking curiously at a stone coffin, boy you don’t want to go down there. Which reminds you.
“Hey Rox, didn’t you prototype that cat that you two had as a kid? That’s what I saw on the file Sol has.” you ask.

“Well, I didn’t really mean to. Sprites just seem to have a liking for dead things and your meteor cracked open his little kitty crypt.” Roxy says, distracted by reading over the engravings in the stone walls.

“God, Mom was weird. Building two crypts for one cat. Was Jaspers even an especially good cat? Can cats be good or bad? The closest I had to a pet was Bowie and she was a wild animal.” you muse, hopping up to sit on a stone coffin.

“Jaspers was a good cat, you would have liked him.” Rose assures you.

“I guess we’ll never know. They’re extinct now.” you say quietly and the three of you stay silent for a moment.

The destruction of the Earth is too big of a thing to think about. You understand that you can never go back of course, but the idea that cats no longer exist is jarring to think about. There are no more cats, no more dogs, and no more birds except for the part bird thing that Hal is now.

In your pocket your phone pings.

CG: DAVE, DID I UPSET YOU? I DIDN’T MEAN TO, IT WAS JUST A STUPID SLIP AND I DIDN’T MEAN TO BE SUCH AN ASSHOLE. ESPECIALLY AFTER EVERYTHING THAT YOU’VE JUST BEEN THROUGH, I SHOULD HAVE BEEN MORE AWARE OF SHIT. LIKE JESUS FUCK THIS ISN’T EXACTLY NEW INFORMATION FOR ME AND YET HERE I AM AGAIN COLOSSALLY FUCKING THINGS UP.

TG: dude chill im fine

CG: IS THAT SINCERE OR DEFLECTION?

TG: i dont think its deflection if im actually answering your question and nah man im being sincere

TG: of the long list of shit bro failed at ive pretty much run out of bitterness by the time it gets down to age appropriate cinematic classics of childhood at that point im just at apathy

TG: if its so good we can watch it sometime because i bet you hal has a copy i mean i think he pirated almost every movie ever made

CG: OKAY, YEAH WE CAN DO THAT SOMETIME.

CG: I WAS JUST WORRIED IS ALL.

TG: kar im pretty sure you know the kind of shit youd need to pull to get me to be actually angry at you

CG: THAT WAS LESS REASSURING AND MORE SAD, BUT I TAKE YOUR POINT. ALSO I’M MAKING IT A PERSONAL MISSION TO SET STANDARDS FOR MYSELF IF YOU’RE NOT GOING TO.

TG: im sure that wont make you highly strung or anything

CG: DON’T YOU REASON WITH ME!

TG: oh my god karkat as sidesplittingly hilarious as you are i need to go help roxy because shes supposed to be doing some quest in this crypt and i should at least pretend to be helpful

CG: OK.

TG: hey also

CG: YEAH?

TG: love you <3

CG: LOVE YOU TOO, NERD <3

TG: how dare you insult me this way

CG: GO! BE A HELPFUL NERD!

TG: rude
You shove your phone away again and swing your legs idly as you look around. Normal kids likely don’t sit so calmly on stone coffins like this but normal has never been you. There’s a statue in this crypt.

“Is that the same one as outside?” you ask, pointing at it.

“No, it’s different.” Rose notes peering at it.

“It’s mirror is pointing upwards instead of at it.” Roxy agrees.

You hop off of the stone coffin and its platform and walk up close to the statue, standing between them as you all peer at the statue.

“Yes that a seam? Does this arm move perhaps?” Rose wonders and reaches up and pushes upwards against the stone arm. It creaks and shifts slightly. Roxy and Rose heft it up together and now the statue is looking at itself in the mirror.

“Exciting!” Roxy declares.

And that’s when the floor falls out from under you all. The drop isn’t too bad, ten feet or so maybe. You manage to land on your feet but from the sounds of it your sisters didn’t manage such a graceful recovery. The room that you’re in is pitch black and the floor that you fell through has somehow stuck itself back together as a ceiling and is sealed shut somewhere out of your reach.

“Rose? Dave? Are you okay!?” Roxy calls out in a panic.

“I’m fine.” you tell her.

“I’m not hurt.” Rose agrees from somewhere in the darkness.

“Dirk gave me a torch let me just…” you mumble and retrieve it from your sylladex. You flick it on and damn near blind Roxy by pointing it right at her. Her eyes aren’t sensitive like yours but no one likes being shot in the eyes with a torch. She and Rose are getting their own torches out.

The room that you’re in appears to be about eight foot high, it looks like you overestimated the fall down. It’s maybe ten foot in each direction of solid stone walls and floor with no visible entrances or exits. There’s got to be something.

You can hear Rose breathe Shakily in the dim light and see the beam of her torch tremble.

“Oh God, oh God, no, no, no.” Roxy whines, her torch whipping around the place.

“How are things with Karkat?” Rose asks you, her voice stiff and stilted.

“What? Fine, why are you asking me that now?” you ask, running your hand along the walls.

“We may well be trapped in a crypt and die or asphyxiate in here, I’m trying to think of anything else. So, how are you and Karkat?” Rose says shakily.

“You wanna play like, what, truth or truth to keep calm?” you ask and she makes an affirmative if high pitched noise.

“It’s ok! There’s gotta be a way outta here!” Roxy says with forced brightness as she goes along the walls on the other side of the smallish crypt cave. You decide to answer Rose.

“Things are pretty good, maybe kinda stressed with the sudden outbreak of dead parents going
around but we’re cool. You and Kan?” you ask, running your hand over the wall a little further.

“Difficult.” Rose answers and you stop what you’re doing to look around at her.

“The whole… lying thing.” Rose mumbles. You walk to her and guide her to sit on the ground.

“Stay here, let me look for a way out. Tell me about Kanaya.” you soothe her and she nods. You never had her down for someone who was claustrophobic. You have bad memories of being dragged out of enclosed spaces by Bro but no real fear of them in themselves.

“She apologised for not telling me about the game, said it was foolish.” Rose says.

You pause in feeling the wall for panels or cracks that’ll open and mentally squint sideways to think like Rose. Ah.

“She apologised for calling it wrong, not for lying in the first place.” you guess.

“So she’ll do it again and, at best, she’ll just make sure she has a better reason for it first.” Rose nods.

“You gotta talk to her about that.” you tell her and the beam of her torch shines on you.

“You’ve not been with Karkat as long as I’ve been with Kanaya and you’re giving me advice?” she says snippily, but it’s all bark and no bite.

“You’re pissed because I’m right.” you point out and keep your focus on the wall.

There’s quiet for a moment.

“I don’t want to have to talk about it, she should just not lie to me. That’s what I want.” Rose admits.

You jolt at the sound of stone on stone, like something being dragged. You whip around with your torch and Roxy does the same, listening for the noise.

“What was that?” she asks.

“I don’t know, keep looking.” you tell her.

Rose leans forward, her head between her knees, breathing harshly.

“Come on Rose, ask me another one. Something hard, yeah?” you suggest and Rose nods, she knows you’re trying to distract her.

“Do you… do you have a crush on Kanaya?” she asks you.

You pause, think about it for a moment. Think of Kanaya and her perhaps literally vampy figure, those fangs and the way she holds that chainsaw.

“Rose, you know my taste in women runs in ‘intimidatingly beautiful and could kill me’ of course I think she’s hot. Plus she’s a person I actually like so, yeah, I guess so.” you tell her freely, still looking around for where that noise came from. Happily the ceiling isn’t coming down to crush you.

“Like Jade and Terezi?” Rose asks.

“I have a type.” you shrug.

“And with guys what is it?” Roxy asks with a giggle from the other side of the room.
“I don’t have- that’s- Karkat’s different!” you protest and the wall you’re touching shudders, moves closer.

“That was a lie.” Roxy says slowly.

“That’s what you’re focusing on?!” you demand and shove at the wall, it definitely moved.

“Yeah, it is. When Rose told the truth about Kanaya we heard something move but when you lied the walls came closer. Is this the right place, is this meant to teach me something about secrets?” Roxy asks.

“So tell the truth Dave!” Rose insists.

“Ugh, as far as I know I don’t have a type with guys.” you say with a frown and nothing moves.

“Nothing happened.” Roxy says, pointing her torch at you.

“Maybe it’s a secret that you don’t know.” Rose says thoughtfully.

“Oh well that’ll be real easy to tell you.” you snort.

You pace and lean against the wall shoving it with all of your might.

“What about John?” Rose asks after a moment.

“What about him?” you ask snippily.

“Oh, please, I saw how you always talked to him. Tried so hard to make him think you were cool, you were trying to impress him.” Rose snorts. You lean against the wall and point your torch at her.

“I don’t and haven’t ever had a crush on John Egbert!” you snap at her. The wall at your back jerks forward and nearly faceplants you on the ground.

“Secrets, it’s about secrets. Specifically, things that you’re actively hiding and given the mirrors on those statues I’d say that it’s things that you’re hiding from yourself. If you lie or hide it more then the room gets smaller, when you tell the truth it gets bigger. I confessed about my quandary with Kanaya and we heard movement but it got smaller just then when you lied.” Rose clarifies.

“But nothing happened when I said about my taste in women.” you point out.

“Yeah but if you don’t consider that a secret then it wouldn’t work. So… so we need to say true things that we don’t like to admit to ourselves?” Roxy asks, coming over to sit with Rose.

“That seems to be the logical conclusion.” Rose nods.

“Well, give us time to think of some, Dave why don’t you tell us about John?” Roxy asks, and despite the peril of this situation it’s clear that your family are still keen on their favourite game of ‘what is Dave’s sexuality anyway’.

“You know, people related to me really shouldn’t be this into knowing who I jerk it to.” you snap.

“Is that an admission about John?” Rose asks coolly.

“No!” you argue.

You rub your forehead. Fine, this stupid quest wants honesty and you might all be hurt or killed if
you’re not so… honesty. Only you don’t know what you honestly think.

“John is one of my best friends, he’s a goober and yeah I want him to think I’m cool because I am obviously, and it’s not like you don’t want the same thing there Rose.” you point out.

“He’s attractive, maybe, I think. I mean, look at Jane.” you add.

“Damn right Jane’s hot.” Roxy laughs happily.

“It doesn’t matter. Maybe I had something for it once without realising it but so what? He’s my friend and I’ve got Karkat.” you say finally. The wall behind you slides back, proof of your honesty.

You point your torch at your sisters and glare at them.

“And you two?” you press.

“Okay, a truth we don’t want to admit or don’t know about: I’m not sad that Mom is dead, I’m not happy either and I worry that feeling nothing is evidence of some deep psychological damage that I can’t afford right now.” Rose admits candidly, the wall behind you moves a great deal.

You turn your torch around to look at it better and peer at the join between wall and ceiling.

“I think I feel air moving, it’s got to be close.” you tell them and Rose sighs in obvious relief.

“Your turn Roxy.” Rose says and you try to shove at the wall, but it’s still not moving under your strength.

“I don’t have anything I can think of.” Roxy says and the wall in front of you rushes towards you enough that you have to leap back to avoid it hitting you.

“Roxy!” Rose shouts and you back up to where they’re sat in the centre of the room, lest you get attacked by a wall again.

Roxy is trying hard to look normal but she is too obviously stressed to pull it off.

“There’s something you’re actively hiding, that’s what this whole exercise is about. I don’t know what the game’s definition of a rogue is but I’d guess that it’s about taking things so don’t you think it’d be smart to reveal whatever thing it is that you’re hiding? You must have something in mind to look that guilty about.” Rose presses.

Roxy cringes under Rose’s scrutiny and then, all at once, all of your torches go dark. Rose gasps and her hand smacks into your arm before grabbing fistfuls of your shirt. Clearly the dark makes claustrophobia worse.

“Roxy, come on, it can’t be worse than this.” you reason.

“…” Roxy hesitates.

The sound of stone moving on stone makes Rose claw at your arm and right now you’re not feeling so hot either, there’s only so much smaller this thing can go before you start getting into real problems. You pull out your phone, planning on calling for help from either Dirk or Hal and kind of annoyed at yourself for not thinking of it sooner.

It’d be a great plan except your phone is dead.

Fear surges through your own system. Being trapped in a shrinking stone box in the dark doesn’t
freak you out but being out of touch with Dirk and Hal REALLY does.

“Roxy tell us already!” you demand.

“Fine! I- sometimes I wish we’d all grown up together, the four of us I mean.” Roxy admits and the sound of stone on stone stops.

“I’m pretty sure we’ve all wished that, my life got way better after me and Dirk could talk to all of you.” you tell her.

“I don’t mean that I mean… I wish our parents had never split up. That we’d all grown up with Bro and with Mom.” Roxy says.

Something like lead settles in your stomach.

“You don’t wish that.” you say.

“I do! I know it’s stupid and horrible and it’s not like I think Bro would have gone easy on me and Rose because we’re girls either but I still wish he’d been there, even though I remember how much he and Mom used to fight.” Roxy continues.

“Why would you want that? You just listed a bunch of reasons why that was a terrible idea. I mean-I wish they’d grown up with us too, at Mom’s house. Sure she was awful, but she never threw us down some stairs!” Rose argues and you wince at her words.

“Because living with Bro made Dave look at Dirk like he’s everything! And- and Dave doesn’t look at me like that and you don’t either. I don’t even think you like me that much. I’m… jealous. Dirk’s not even a whole year older than me and he’s the adult who can fix everything and I’m just your sister.” Roxy sniffs.

“I hate it. It’s stupid and it’s selfish.” Roxy adds, her voice tight.

The walls move again, one of them going so far as to fall out of the side of the crypt and slide down the hill, leaving you with a wide open exit. You twist to look at it and then back at Roxy. Black makeup is smeared down her cheeks.

“Living with Bro was hell, don’t wish for it.” you tell her flatly and stand up, pulling Rose to her feet.

“Dirk is basically my parent and I don’t want another one, having sisters is awesome. I have a twin and a big sister, what more could I have wanted from my family? I trust Dirk absolutely because I had to if I wanted to live and it’s not exactly great for Dirk’s health, you see how much he worries. At least with the two of you he can treat you like normal people that he loves without losing his shit all of the time.” you point out.

“You think I don’t like you?” Rose asks slowly, looking around at Roxy.

Roxy doesn’t say anything and instead sniffs sadly.

You narrow your eyes at a tentacled basilisk weaving its way up the hill, the cat collar with a giant bell on it is more than sufficient to let you know that it’s coming and you thank whichever person (though your guess is Nepeta or Meulin) who prototyped that. You leave your sisters to their feelings talk as you lunge down the hill, kill the basilisk and get your grist.

The thing is, that if Roxy and Rose lived with Bro they wouldn’t have been Roxy and Rose. Rose
probably wouldn’t have changed too much with the protection of Dirk and Roxy shielding her and still living with Mom. The worst case scenario is that her tendency for mind games would have been encouraged by Bro. She would have scars like you, and probably the same kind of mental scars that you have too. Roxy wouldn’t be the sweet empathetic girl that you love now, she likely would have gone the same way as Dirk. Toughened up out of necessity, and with how eager she is to help there’s no way she wouldn’t have acted as your co-protector.

You’ve never seriously entertained any jealousy over Bro taking you and Dirk and leaving Rose and Roxy with Mom. Honestly, your whole issue with that deal is that you Mom didn’t try to get you back, not that Bro spared your sisters. Besides, trying to find reason in that asshole’s behaviour is fruitless. You’re happy that Bro never got to them. You can visualise it of course, you and Rose all small and childlike as Dirk patches your wounds and Roxy whispers reassurances. The imagined company doesn’t feel better and you’re pretty sure that in a universe where that was a case if someone had offered five-year-old you a chance to whisk Rose and Roxy off to a woodland mansion where they were safe that you would have taken it. That option is just better.

Maybe she feels guilty that she wasn’t there to help and that she couldn’t fight off your Mom’s strain of emotional abuse and neglect. You trudge back up the hill to see Rose and Roxy standing outside and Roxy wiping at her face with some kind of cloth and clearing the ruined makeup away.

“Dave-” Roxy says awkwardly when she sees you again.

“I got us some grist. Or, I guess I got everyone grist because this apparently is a communist dystopia now but seeing as I used a bunch to make a sweet suit today I guess I can’t bitch.” you say, stowing your blade once more.

“But you will.” Rose guesses and you nod stoically, you accept your designation as person who complains about inane shit. Huh, no wonder you’re Karkat’s.

“I’m sorry.” Roxy apologises loudly, cutting through your diversionary exchange with Rose.

“It’s fine, Rox. I’m not gonna slam you for things you feel, even if I don’t understand them. You wish things had been different sometimes, it’s fine.” you say with a shrug. Everyone wishes for weird things now and then.

“Okay, I just… okay.” Roxy sniffs and eventually ushers the pair of you on to her next quest. As you pass the fountain again you see that the blindfold on the statue is gone, water is now flowing from the its eyes and the mirror is clear again. Void apparently is at least partly about secrets.

You note that since leaving the crypt your phone has blown up with notifications from the group chat. You open that up and scroll up to your last read point as you idly follow Roxy and Rose, glancing about now and then for enemies.

Karkat: REMIND ME TO FUCKING THANK DIRK FOR THOSE COMBAT LESSONS.
Dirk: Do I need to remind you or should I consider myself fucking thanked just from this?
Karkat: SHUT UP, YOU’RE TARNISHING MY GRATITUDE.
Dirk: Would it be safe to assume you’re seeing a lot of combat if you have a use for the training?
Karkat: THAT IT FUCKING WOULD. MEENAH IT TURNS OUT IS THE THIEF OF LIFE AND I DON’T KNOW ABOUT THE REST OF YOUR PLANETS BUT HERS IS SWARMING WITH ENEMIES. THIS ISN’T A PLANET IT’S THE GODDAMN THUNDERDOME.
Meenah: S)(ell yea)( beac)(! My badass planet )as murder an bling, my two fave t)(ings!
Kanaya: Well I Am Glad That You Are Having Fun Meenah Are You Okay Karkat
Karkat: EXHAUSTED BUT GREAT, WE’RE GETTING SO MUCH GRIST AND
ADVANCING ON OUR ESHELADDERS SO MUCH THAT I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE IT.
Kankri: Is it not possible that there is some other way to advance that does not require violence?
Mituna: K4NKR1 15 N07 L3771NG M3 L453R 4NY7HING PL3453 7H15 I5 S0 FUCK1NG 80R1NG!!
Kankri: And also, is anyone else finding their land rather emotionally upsetting?
Terezi: WHAT W4S YOUR L4ND 4G41N?
Kankri: The land of execution and empathy.
Karkat: SHIT IS THE GAME PULLING ON SIGNLESS TO FUCK WITH YOU?
Kankri: As much as I wish to chide you for cursing, I believe that the game is trying to "fuck with me". They are blatantly going for my weak spots and my consorts are actively chasing down and executing any threat that says the slightest thing wrong. Nothing I say persuades them otherwise!
Kanaya: Do You Not Think That Could Be Part Of Your Quest To Empathise With Both The Mob And Their Victims And Settle That Conflict
Vriska: Don't bother, he'll work it out on his own eventually or someone'll drag his ass through it. I don't really care.
Meenah: Whatever, this is boring -Enjoy this cool snap of my new fave guppy.
[Meenah has attached file: Karcrab-bling.png]

What follows is a picture of Karkat with a lopsided crown on his head sprawled on a pile of gold so big it stretches out of view and throwing an ironic peace sign that you are pleased to say he picked up from you.

Dave: hello new phone wallpaper so nice to see you
Karkat: I WAS WONDERING WHERE YOU WERE.
Dave: oh were cool we nearly got crushed to death nbd
Karkat: WHAT?!
Dave: dude i said nbd look its right there
Rose: We're fine, honestly.
Roxy: void is a bullshit aspect >:(
Roxy: also why is that dirka-dirk not worried about our welfare?
Rose: Perhaps he is otherwise engaged.
Roxy: oh ho ho *wonk*

You lower your phone and look despairingly at your sisters. You don't want to be thinking about what Dirk might be doing with his soulmate when they're finally alone together. That's just gross.

The three of you continue with Roxy's quests. Weirdly some of her own consorts don't seem to recognise her right away and send you all on pointless fetch quests or really dumb shit like helping them get in or out of trees. You're all still getting some points on your esheladder though so you can only assume that you're doing the right thing. After lunch and several more hours of good samaritan work you all start hearing tales of the true hero of void and it seems pretty obvious that you're supposed to be tracking this figure down.

Eventually Dirk messages the three of you.

[timaeusTestified opened memo ‘StriLonde’]
[turntechGodhead added]
[tentacleTherapist added]
[tipsyGnostalgic added]
[name filter applied]
Dirk: You nearly got crushed to death?!
Roxy: wow was that like three hours? damn son i gotta high five jakey when i see him next! talk
about stamina!
Roxy: *wonk*
Dave: there is no god
Rose: To answer your actual concern, Dirk. We’re fine.
Dirk: What happened?
Roxy: no comment re: jake huh?
Dave: it was nothing we just got stuck in some crypt where the walls closed in unless we solved the puzzle it sounds worse than it is
Dirk: Why didn’t you call for help?! I would have come to save you.
Rose: Our phones didn’t work in there, as I presume, was the point of the test.
Dirk: It was a test for Roxy, right?
Roxy: yeah
Dave: nothing to tell it was just some bullshit secrets set you free lesson and it ended up like a girls slumber party
Dirk: Did they braid your hair, Dave? It’s ok you can tell me.
Dirk: (Roxy if you braided his hair I want pictures.)
Rose: (As we all know Dave can’t read things enclosed in brackets.)
Roxy: (the most secret method but sadly i didn't braid his hair it was too dark)
Dirk: (Darn, maybe next time.)
Dave: gee why have you all gone so silent suddenly i wonder?
Rose: No reason dear brother.

You continue on and Roxy seems thankful that neither of you spilt her confession to Dirk. You’re not sure how he’d react but you’re pretty sure it’d at least contain the same knee-jerk ‘you don’t want to live with Bro’ that you had. But it’s fine, people can’t control the dumb things they think about sometimes and you’re no snitch.

Over the rest of the day you all have to defeat one or two Bro-ified underlings. The first time you face one again you start to freeze up, but Rose and Roxy leap into the fight which kick starts you back again. It’s tough but the three of you beat them each time. Eventually you all get tired of chasing around this hero that you need who find who is always just out of reach and apparently going on and helping everyone, and usually to get information out of the consorts you have to do them a favour first. So, sooner or later you all fly back to the temporary fortress that you started the day in.

When you get there you find Dirk, Rufioh, Jake and Horuss dominating the entire kitchen, which you swear wasn’t there before. The four of them are talking, cooking and joking with each other.

“Didn’t you consider uranium as a power source?” Jake asks, slicing through tomatoes.

“Oh, well, it’s very hard to get hold of radioactive power supplies as a civilian.” Horuss shrugs.

“Yeah, I’m with Horuss on this, Jake. You can’t just ‘get’ uranium. Not legally at least.” Dirk adds that last part under his breath.

“Pish posh! My grandparents had buckets of the stuff laying around, brilliantly useful. You just need to treat it with a little respect and it’s no more dangerous than gasoline. Though, I must admit I do sometimes wonder if the abundance of radioactive material might have contributed to their deaths in the end.” Jake says thoughtfully.

“You weren’t just, like, keeping it under your bed right?” Rufioh asks, his mouth gaping.

“Goodness me, no. Lead lined basement, that’s the ticket.” Jake says, shaking his head.
“Oh God.” Dirk laughs, smothering it with his hand.

You lean against the doorframe just out of sight and listen and watch, it’s strange and wonderful to see Dirk having friends. Of course he’s related to Roxy and so Jane and Jake were his friends from the moment you first met Roxy more or less but even so they’ve always been so far away. But now these are new friends and old together and Dirk doesn’t have to be your guardian, he’s just an older teenager with his friends. This game might have taken a lot from everyone but it does seem to give things back on occasion.

You slink past the kitchen, leaving Dirk to enjoy himself and instead start heading further into the building. The first person you run into is Sollux who is sat in his temporary room with the door open.

“Hey.” you greet, waving your hand.

“Karkat’s on the floor up, arguing with other people about doing a movie tonight to make things normal.” Sollux says without even looking up.

“Man, that’s cold. I say hi and you just assume I wasn’t here to talk to you. Just throw my social interaction back in my face why don’t you.” you say, faux wounded. Sollux looks up at you, and raises a thin eyebrow.

“I feel so bad.” he drawls and you grin slightly to see that he’s still wearing the shirt you two made this morning.

“How was the land of whatever with Tavros then? It was him you were paired up with, right?” you ask, leaning on the doorframe calmly.

“Yeah, he’s got the Land of Sand and Zephyr. Lots of sand, wind, pointless side quest and sand that I may never get out of places.” he bitches.

“Well, aren’t you on your land tomorrow? What’s yours?” you ask, failing to remember.

“The Land of Brains and Fire.” Sollux says flatly.

“You know what I really like about this game? The subtlety.” you snort.

“Yeah, tell me about it.” he agrees, scratching at his hair.

“Are you gonna be okay on your planet tomorrow with just Tavros for backup? If it’s designed for you then it’s probably a pretty powerful place and I know that Roxy’s planet at least seems designed to mess with her head.” you ask worriedly. Sure, you’ve all got issues for your lands to draw on, but Sollux is like you he doesn’t just have issues he has volumes and a lifetime subscription to more.

“What, are you worried and offering to come with?” Sollux questions, scepticism clear on his face.

“I don’t know, man. All I know is I saw what Roxy’s planet was like and even just physically mine makes my skin crawl and I’ve done nothing much on it. I’m not looking forward to mine, I guess you wouldn’t be either.” you shrug.

Sollux looks at you and, not for the first time, you find the expression in his eyes hard to read behind his glasses and with his featureless eyes.

“Well, you’ll have your sister and moirail with you.” he says quietly and tilts his head down to look at his laptop.
“Man, I don’t know how to get this through to you all. I blame Karkat, probably. Rose is my twin, not my moirail.” you groan. Sure, you get that there’s an overlap between pale feelings and close familial bonds and you can see why with Rose’s tendency for giving advice and how you behave differently with her than other people that some might misconstrue the nature of your relationship but it’s really not the same. Sollux is staring at you again, great, you probably offended him or something.

“Whatever, it’s cool. I hope Brains and Fire doesn’t suck.” you tell him sincerely and leave him to it.

You take Sollux’s directions and head up the stairs true enough you can hear Karkat’s ‘dulcet’ tones as soon as you’re halfway up them. You get onto the floor and you can her the debate clear enough.

“ETERNAL SUNSHINE OF THE SPOTLESS MIND IS A MOVING FILM THAT-” Karkat yells.

“It has Jim Carrey in it!” John yells back.

“WHO ADDS A LAYER OF HUMOUR AND SURPRISINGLY POIGNANT EMOTION TO A MOVIE THAT FOCUSES ON LOVE AND THE ETHICAL SCIENCE FICTION RAMIFICATIONS OF MEMORY-” Karkat continues.

“He played THE MASK!” John wails, interrupting him.

You stick your head around the door to see Karkat and John, obviously but also Jane and Jade who both look fed up with this argument that you suspect has been going on for some time. Both Karkat and John spot you at once.

“Dave! Settle this argument for us!” John demands.

Oh no, that’s a trap if you’ve ever seen one. You desperately try to think up an excuse when your phone pings, you leap on that and pull the device out only to see a message from someone you’ve barely spoken to all day.

HalBirdSprite: Everyone get back to the house in the main room, we have news.
SignlessSprite: 6ad news.

Karkat’s shoulders drop and all of the levity from the argument has gone. All of you rush downstairs, more people have come home and others have come out of wherever they were hanging out. A minute passes and the door clicks open, Signless and Hal both float in and look over the group.

“Dad, did you find everyone?” Karkat asks anxiously.

“Not as such.” Signless answers unhappily.

“Apparently the agents of Derse knew that guardians would be coming into the game with the players, how they knew this I don’t know. They did their best to capture all of the guardians that they could, even Prospit captured some.” Hal explains, folding his arms unhappily.

“I refuse to believe that Mindfang was captured.” Vriska says defiantly.

“Well she was, and by Prospit no less.” Hal answers her.

“My guess is that as we scratched the session the game was built with the capabilities to contain previous players to stop us from interfering in the game.” Signless says ruefully.
“So that’s where Mom came from.” you nod.

“Yeah apparently she killed three Dersite guards with a nail file, I have many problems with that woman, but lack of style is not one of them.” Hal snorts in amusement.

“So we’re staging a rescue then!” Jake declares excitedly.

“Too late, Daisy Dukes, they ain’t there anymore. They’ve been taken somewhere else.” Hal counters.

“Taken? By who?” Karkat asks and his hand tangles with yours and tightens anxiously.

“The answer to who took them came from one survivor’s description of where they went. The prisons were razed by laser fire and the occupants taken, no one else in the prisons survived. Just as troublingly the King and Queen of both Prospit and Derse have been taken as well and without them this game is unwinnable.” Signless explains.

“We managed to find one Prospitian who drew us a description of what she saw.” Hal says and holds up a drawing.

It’s a red… something, three pointed and flying against the blue sky behind it. It doesn’t mean anything to you but the trolls all gasp in horror.

“She got IN?! How the hell did she get in?” Meenah rages.

“She must have come in through one of the portals, she was racing to get to Earth wasn’t she?” Aranea points out.

“Ok but NONE OF US SAW HER!” Karkat bellows.

“Unless the clowns are hiding shit again!” Eridan accuses.

“No way, man. An we were all watched and shit by the Nitrams, nothin flew in with us.” Gamzee protests.

“Ohhhhhhh right, except Tavros the moron missed you throwing a dead human into a kernelsprite so forgive me if I’m not reassured.” Vriska sneers.

“Hey…” Tavros says weakly.

“Hey FUCKFACES, in case you forgot I DIED before getting in! She totally coulda slammed her spaceship in bulge first through my portal and I woulda been too dead to see!” Mituna yells.

“How she got here is irrelevant, the fact is that she is.” Signless says, his voice silencing the crowd.

“Not to be dreadfully obtuse but who is here?” Jake asks warily, and the trolls all look at him.

“Her Imperious Condescension, the Empress, the Condesce, Fish Bitch, Sea Hitler, the original flavour Meenah Peixes, their ancestor. Tyrant ruler of all of Alternia and its colonies, the woman who ordered the death or torture of most of our ancestors. This is all kinds of bad news.” Karkat says, pointing at Meenah and Feferi. Jake winces at Karkat’s words.

“As bad as she is I normally wouldn’t say that this is too serious, the powers that you’re all going to get will easily be enough to take her down though obviously you’re not there yet. But the game is unwinnable without the Kings and Queens. Our source was very clear that they were captured and not killed so I can only assume that she knows that too.” Hal says seriously.
“Which means that she had her memory the whole time, she knew who I was.” Signless adds, though you think his words were just for himself. It means that she remembered who Signless was and tried to have him executed anyway. He sounds unbearably wounded.

“So… we train, we find her, and we kill her. We get our guardians back and win the game.” Vriska declares.

“At least we have a plan. Sollux, if she’s on her ship and has our ancestors then I’m almost certain she’s shoved Psi back in that helmsblock. But if there’s any way he can make it easy for us to find him I know he would and you’re the best person to look, maybe it’s some kind of electromagnetic thing or some smart computer stuff. Can you do that?” Karkat asks, turning to Sollux.

“I’ll look for him. I don’t want to leave him in there any longer than we have to.” Sollux nods.

“Surely we’ve got the advantage here. Not only are we greater in numbers than her but she also doesn’t know that we know about her. That buys us time.” Rose points out.

Everyone starts spitballing ideas, plans for what to do. Some suggest that you all continue as is and others suggest that certain people be aided so that they can power level through to higher levels of strength and ability. You don’t really have anything to add but notably no one is upset, crying or hopeless. Every video game has a final boss and finding out who yours is grants you all the focus that you had lacked before. This morning no one really knew what you were working towards, it was all too vague. The plan was: gain levels, ???, win game. But now? Now you have a boss fight to train for and people to save.

You look at Karkat coordinating people, taking advice, formulating plans. Instead of working against him Vriska is stepping into her role as combat chief, working out what they need to learn about their classes, who will be helpful, what they can do, what Meenah’s planet and class says about the Condesce. Even Kankri is suggesting using this event as a way to forge alliances with Prospit and Derse and form an information network to help you all. Dirk and Horuss are debating spy drones as Roxy and Jake discuss weapon upgrades.

Man, the Empress messed with the wrong kids. You can feel it in your gut that this is one fight that she is destined to lose.
Hey all, sorry for the long wait. I've been having to go to the hospital like twice a week lately and all of my medication is getting changed so I've really been thrown for a loop. I'm getting fun side effects like insomnia so I've had almost a whole week of not sleeping (thankfully that seems to be over) but for a while I had about all the intelligence and writing ability of a sea sponge because I was so tired so this took a WHIIIILE. >.<

Dirk Strider is perhaps the greatest human in the entire universe. Nay, the greatest person regardless of species. You say this not because of the vital role he played in raising your soulmate, though there is that. You say this not because of his more than useful weapons training for your group, although that again has been vital. No, Dirk Strider is the greatest person in the universe because he is the only one amongst you who remembered to bring goddamn coffee to the apocalypse and without him you would have to stand here at 8am listening to Vriska without it.

“Nice of you to finally join us Roxy.” Vriska sneers as Roxy sits down with her own coffee.

“You’re welcome!” Roxy says brightly, deliberately ignoring Vriska’s sarcasm as she settles in near you on Dave’s other side on the sofa.

“I was being sarcastic, obviously!” Vriska argues.

“Really?” Roxy gasps, sounding almost sincere.

Your phone pings, blissfully distracting you from Roxy trolling Vriska for no goddamn good reason.

[uranianUmbra began cheering carcinoGeneticist]
UU: hello again karkat!
CG: YOU.
UU: yes, it’s me. i’m very pleased to see that yoU kept oUr last conversation to yoUrself as I reqUested last time.
CG: YEAH, TO BE PERFECTLY HONEST ABOUT IT I KIND OF FORGOT ABOUT YOU AFTER A WHILE. I HAVE A LOT OF SHIT ON MY PLATE RIGHT NOW.
UU: oh. well, in any case as long as roxy, eqUiUs and horUss stay close to yoU we can keep talking and i will try to answer any qUestions that yoU have for me.

You frown and try to think about the three people that this stranger listed and why the hell they have anything to do with it, until you realise that of course they’re all void players.

CG: YOU NEED VOID PLAYERS AROUND TO TALK TO ME?
UU: well, yes and no. i coUld talk to yoU whenever, bUt if i did that then he coUld see and no one wants that.
CG: THEY WERE AROUND ME WHEN YOU FIRST MESSAGED ME.
UU: yes!
CG: THIS IS RIDICULOUS, I’M GOING TO TELL EVERYONE ABOUT YOU.
UU: As long as yoU only ever discUss me in the presence of roxy, eqUiUs and horUss I think that’s fine, and perfectly Understandable to be honest with yoU.
“Everyone shut up.” you say, lowering your phone.

“Rude.” Eridan says loudly.

“Especially you. I have something important to say. I’ve been contacted by some anonymous person, they messaged me before when Gamzee and Kurloz’s quote unquote trial was going on and asked me not to tell anyone about it. I wasn’t trying super hard to keep it a secret, we just all had bigger shit going on. But I’m not going to be some chump getting secret information from a suspicious source and not telling anyone about it.” you announce.

“You didn’t say anything.” Dave says from his place next to you on the sofa.

“Like I said, it slipped my mind.” you say with a shrug and the slightest frown crosses Dave’s face. Is he worried about this or annoyed that you didn’t say or assuming that you didn’t trust him to keep quiet or- no, you’re not going to pick apart Dave’s motives based on a fleeting frown.

“Are you still talking to them?” Terezi asks, looking at you.

“Uh, yeah. Is there something you want me to ask? Is there any way we can get this projected on the TV or something so we can all see it?” you ask and Roxy and Sollux both brighten at the same time. It’s Roxy who reaches you to help first by virtue of being closest and she deftly ignores Sollux’s look of total full body loathing at her as she works. Within moments the TV is on displaying your conversation.

“Ask who they are.” Terezi urges you.

CG: SO YOU DIDN’T TELL ME YOUR NAME BEFORE.
UU: no, and i still can’t. oUr names have an effect which pUlls the attention of each other. in my case it woUld pUll his attention to this conversation and to all of yoU, which no one wants.
CG: WHO IS “HE”?
UU: my brother, he is jUst the very worst. bUt i realise that i didn’t give yoU anything to call me. Um, i hadn’t really thouGht abouT this. perhaps mUsE? i’m totally open to other sUggestions thoUgh, it’s not like it’s my real name.

“They have a brother, so are we looking at a human here?” Roxy asks, rubbing at her chin.

UU: oh, no. I’m not hUman! though it’s very flattering that yoU woUld think of me as one of yoU!
All of you silently stare at the screen.

“You can… hear us. Of course you can, you knew about Gamzee and Kurloz.” you say slowly.

UU: sorry, i know it’s invasive, bUt it’s how I’ve always interacted with people. only very recently have i been granted a chance to see people in person.

“So why are you messaging us? Why did you tell me what to say with Kurloz and Gamzee? Why are you using the void players to hide from your brother? Who is he? What do you want from us, what does he want from us?” you ask in one long stream of words.

UU: oh, that was a lot of qUestions. Uh, i suppose yoU coUld say that I’m aware of different points in yoUr timeline, i have spoilers as it were! i knew aboUt cal already and i know all aboUt gamzee in particUlar. weirdly-
UU: gosh, this is about to get very complex. perhaps i shoUld ask if yoUr time players Understand the concept of timelines yet?
Dave shrugs but Aradia speaks up.

“Timelines are like a record of the route your universe has taken through time, you could lay out all of the choices everyone has taken and the path it led you. You could go forward and see where it will go.” Aradia answers.

UU: right! so, if for example karkat had not chosen to tell gamzee abouUt cal and point oUt aboUt how he betrayed him then yoU coUld have gone down a timeline where a fight broke oUt. that’s like a fork in the timeline.

UU: time isn’t my aspect so this probably isn’t the most eloquent explanation bUt there is a timeline that is essentially MEANT TO BE. that’s called the alpha timeline, any timeline whose decisions steer away from that path become doomed and fade oUt of existence.

UU: i’m from the alpha timeline and yoU are not.

“So we’re going to die?” Mituna asks.

UU: no!

UU: well, i mean individUally yoU may die and reanimate becaUse sbUrb loves that kind of thing bUt yoUr timeline exists. yoU’re in it, that’s proof enoUgh.

UU: now time and space are the key aspects of sbUrb and they’re both infinite, and dirk woUld probably be able to tell yoU aboUt the strange things that happen in math and programming when yoU add infinity as a concept.

You all look at Dirk.

“Infinity is a weird concept, we don’t even really understand it. It’s like, irrational numbers like pi are infinite, no matter how long you compute it you can’t get to the end. In infinity everything is possible because infinity contains everything that could be.” Dirk explains with a wave of his arm.

“Wait, but Hal told me he solved that.” Dave pipes up.

“Solved what?” Dirk asks with a frown.

“Pi, he said he got to the end of it.” Dave answers.

“No he- look, either you misunderstood or he was lying. You can’t get to the end of pi it has no end.” Dirk groans.

“He said the last number was four.” Dave insists.

“There’s no last number of pi, Dave!” Dirk tells him loudly. Distantly from the corner of the room you can hear Hal snickering to himself.

UU: oh dear. the point is that time is the same and timelines are the same! all possible varieties of everything exist somewhere, if only theoretically. Of coUrse any that aren’t alpha die and become kind of… theoretical!

“So we’re just theoretical? I don’t feel theoretical.” Roxy asks with a frown.

“Me neither.” Jake agrees.

UU: ah, well, a timeline can be made… not alpha as sUch bUt real by the interest and focUs of someone with relevant powers. namely time and he is the strongest time player ever, a overpowered class that beats all others. the problem is that he’s sort of become time in a bid for more power and it’s certainly given him more power bUt it’s driven him a little bit oUt of his already tiny mind as by
definition he has to always exist everywhere forever.
UU: he’s… bored. i think that’s what it is anyway. he’s watching yoU and making yoU real for his entertainment, really.

“You’re telling me we’re some asshole god’s toys?!?” you demand loudly, not even wanting to type an idea that terrible out.

UU: UnfortUnately yes.

A horrified silence settles over your entire group.

UU: BUT!
UU: i hate that idea, i hate that when he loses interest yoU’ll jUst cease to exist and i hate that people i care aboUt are being Used in this way! i’ve seen what he does to his toys.
UU: in my timeline i’ve been friends with dirk, roxy, jane and jake for years. oUr timeline was so different from yoUrs, i never even met most of yoU bUt i had thoUght that i was going to start to get to know yoU. i can’t stand to see yoU Used this way and so i have a tentative plan.
UU: firstly, yoU can never discUss me or what we’ve talked aboUt here when the void players aren’t closely clUstered together. if yoU do my brother will realise yoU know aboUt him and may well drop yoU all.

“Not to be skeptical or anything, but i hardly see what reason we have to trust you at all. you’ve certainly talked a big game about infinity and some evil unnamed time player but you’ve offered us no tangible proof. And your story is full of holes, if the void players stop him from seeing us how come you can?” Rose asks tartly.

UU: there’s a good reason for that! in my timeline me and roxy were good friends, bUt her void powers disrUpted my ability to see her so i had to adjUst my compUter to see her better. my brother never liked her mUch, he preferred to talk to dirk who Used to hUmoUr him for his own amUsement at pissing him off and for “ironic reasons” which i mUst admit always escaped me.

“An alternate me used to troll an evil time god for fun? What did I even do?” Dirk asks in mild horror.

UU: Uhm, do yoU really want me to tell yoU?

“Well now I have to know.” Dirk nods.

UU: yoU Used to draw him weird “porn” of yoUr friends on his requEst. and i say weird becaUse UU: hold on i think i still have some here, yoU seemed to find it very fUnny to relay this to me on accoUnt of how mUch of a tool he was. that said it wasn’t Until a year after that i realised when yoU had that conversation with him, a little less fUnny in retrospect for me bUt it doesn’t matter. Ugh, time stUff.
[uranianUmbra attached file smuut5.gif]
[uranianUmbra attached file smuut8.gif]
[uranianUmbra attached file smuut12.gif]

“Oh my god.” Dave says slowly as you click on each of the files revealing totally bizarre images of Roxy and Jake in really unpornographic situations, all drawn deliberately badly.

“Oh my god!” Dirk says, his voice pitching higher. The pair of them fall into hysteric before you even open the third one but eventually Dave has his face pressed into your shoulder as he shakes with laughter and Dirk is clutching his stomach laughing.
“Well, I guess I believe you, I don’t think the weird brand of Strider humour can be successfully counterfeited.” you sigh.

“This may or may not have sent a vengeful god of time to our timeline but I’m still not totally sure I wouldn’t go high five the alternate me that drew that. That is the best fucking thing I have ever laid eyes on.” Dirk giggles, honest to god giggles.

“Where are our soulmarks?” Roxy asks after a moment of thought.

“Who knows, maybe he didn’t like them or maybe other me didn’t draw them out of dedication to the shitty style. Because, I mean, where are your noses or indeed arm bones?” Dirk wheezes out in between fits of laughter. You have literally never seen him this happy, fucking Striders. This is the family that you are bonded into, heaven help you.

UU: yeah, you seemed to find it pretty funny when you told me about it at the time too!
UU: but still i can provide you with further proof related to my casual spoilers. tonight the troll empress will contact you all in this room.
UU: but anyway i should go and you should all get back to planning what you’re doing today. that’s what he’ll be expecting you all to do and his view of you will come back when the void players all go their separate ways. i’ll see you again soon! n_n
[uranianUmbra ceased cheering carcinoGeneticist]

“Well, wait, you didn’t say what you were if you’re not human.” you point out but the screen doesn’t respond. You go to type the message to her but it doesn’t send.

[error: user uranianUmbra not found]

“Well then.” you say flatly.

“So, what are we all thinking here. Do we buy what this muse person is saying?” John asks, looking around at all of you. He is your resident skeptic after all.

“That’s my drawing that they sent us, I know my own style. Plus that whole Strider sense of humour is hard to fake and I would for sure have remembered making that.” Dirk answers.

“I didn’t make it either and I know Dave didn’t.” Hal agrees, landing on the back of the sofa.

“We basically have some weak evidence in favour of their arguments and nothing against just yet. It costs us nothing to refuse to talk about this when we’re not all together but we should still regard any other requests they have for us with caution.” Terezi agrees.

“For now we just stick with our earlier plan. We’ve not been told what we can do to get out of this situation we may or may not be in so we should just focus on completing the quests on our planets and beating this game.” Vriska agrees.

“I die a little inside every time I have to say this but I agree with Vriska.” Rose sighs and Vriska visibly preens at her words.

“Precisely, everyone stick to the same groups as yesterday. Move onto the next planet in your group and make as much progress as you can. Now, get.” Vriska says, clapping her hands together. Everyone starts getting up and Meenah makes eye contact with you, you’re still paired up with her.

“Dave, a moment?” you say and pull him off to the side, gesturing to Meenah that you’ll only be a moment. You drag Dave off down the corridor, up some stairs and shove him into the bedroom that you don’t use.
“Uh, Karkat?” Dave says slowly and uncertainly as you shut the door behind you both. You turn pressing your back to the door as you look at him, beautiful but bemused as he watches you.

“I just needed to talk to you. I think I got used to spending all day every day with you and now I barely see you and also everything is terrible all of the time.” you blurt out. It’s not so much the stream of consciousness ramble that Dave sometimes does, it’s more panicked and louder. A scream of consciousness perhaps.

“I know man, but it’s gonna be fine. We’re in teams, it’s all chill.” Dave assures you getting close to you and after an unsure moment he pets your hair. You consider that if you’d ever tried to cram Dave in one quadrant you would have died from frustration, you much prefer enjoying him however he wants to be. Besides, it’s not like you don’t need this right now.

“Yesterday you got stuck in a room where the walls closed in on you and you could have died in some shitty goth remake of the trash compactor scene in Star Wars!” you complain.

“Psh, nerd.” Dave snorts and rubs at the place where horn meets scalp. Your eyes slide closed.

“Loser.” you argue weakly.

“All I know is we got out just fine and I’m not getting into another Star Wars argument with you, though I’m sure you could find new territory to argue about that you haven’t found before like… like are Chewie and Han Solo moirails or not.” Dave teases.

Your eyes click open and you stare at him.

“Oh my god they absolutely are.” you gasp and Dave groans in despair.

“Ok, fine, we can talk about that some other time. Just promise me you’ll stay safe today.” you plead.

“Duh, of course I will.” Dave insists and kisses one of your horns gently. Not that you can really feel it much, you can’t feel things through your horns because they’re horns. That’s not their purpose. If you can REALLY feel something in your horns then something has gone super badly wrong, like Equius’ broken one.

“Besides Rose’s planet is like mostly water and you know I can swim.” Dave reminds you.

You scowl at him, yeah you remember that time he pretended that he couldn’t swim and made you leap into water to rescue his not drowning body. Dave is already laughing at your irritation. It wasn’t all bad though, Dave had really started opening up to you by then and the whole playful antics in a pool at night at a party with the love interest is a romcom staple.

“I know that now. You dirty cheat.” you accuse and Dave laughs quietly.

“Aw, I’ll make it up to you.” Dave promises and leans in and quickly kisses you properly.

“I kind of wish I could have kissed you then, I mean I wouldn’t have because I promised and you would probably have punched me in the face…” you trail off with a shrug, you like the way that Dave confessed to you but the pool was still a nice moment.

“I would have probably drowned. The whole reason I bailed on the whole pool thing was that I realised that I wanted to kiss you. Past me was not equipped to deal with you.” Dave says confidently.

“Well present you can come here for a damn minute before you go off to Rose’s no doubt murderous
planet and I have to face the hell of mine.” you insist, and Dave puts up absolutely no resistance to that idea. You only manage to make out with him for a few minutes before Rose and Roxy start banging on the door looking for him and you have to let your flustered, red-faced soulmate go.

Begrudgingly you set off with Meenah to your planet too but your mind keeps being drawn back to Dave like a magnet.

Once you’ve landed on the Land of Pulse and Haze Meenah leans on her culling fork and grins at you, looking every bit like a shark. Around you the rivers of mutant blood across your land pulse down their pathways under the beating of distant hearts.

“Just shut up.” you mutter at her.

“I didn’t say nofin.” she says smugly and looks around at the rivers of mutant blood.

“The hemospectrum is bullshit.” you insist.

“I didn’t say ship about that either but, eh, you wouldn’t say that about it if you were on top.” Meenah shrugs and rests her trident across her shoulders, her ring-covered hands hanging off of either end.

“Yeah, shockingly people at the top of unfair systems rarely want to change them.” you snort and stomp towards one of the ruined castles in your land. If there are quests here then you’d bet they’re there.

“Geez, you weren’t this crabby yesterday.” Meenah complains.

“I hate this place, it’s nowhere near as fun as your land. This game is specifically mocking me!” you snap, glaring at a river of bright red blood on either side of the drawbridge that you’re crossing. Also, you’re super far away from Dave and you don’t like that right now.

“I don’t know, don’t all humans have the same mutant colour as you? Maybe this is what the game thinks normal blood is like.” she suggests and though you appreciate the thought you’re not unaware that the subtle implication that your blood is not, in fact, normal.

You decide not to throw down in a stupid argument with Meenah right now and instead work on finding your way through the castle to something relevant, it turns out that something relevant is your father.

“Hello Karkat.” he smiles at you, floating there gently. His cloak billows around his sprite tail.

“I was wondering where you were.” you say. He just disappeared again in the night without a word.

“At this part in the game I’m supposed to stay here and help you with your quests, offer insight into the game. Later we sprites move to the battlefield.” SignlessSprite answers with a bland friendliness that sets your teeth on edge.

“Hal doesn’t do that.” you point out. Hal does whatever he wants, he’s aware of the game’s script but mostly ignores it.

“He deviates and he shouldn’t do. But I admit I’ve also been looking for the Battleship Condescension too when I knew you wouldn’t be here.” he admits.

“But you’re the only adult we have, you can’t just abandon us in the night!” you insist angrily. Doesn’t he care about you or your siblings?
“Oh yeah, I keep forgetting that you Earth Trolls stick with your adults.” Meenah notes, sounding almost bored at the idea. In fairness, you wouldn’t be eager to hang out with her ancestor either, but that doesn’t mean it’s like that for everyone. It’s not like all human parents are great either, obviously.

SignlessSprite shrugs slightly and smiles.

“You have each other, you’ve built somewhere safe. You’re fine.” he says.

Something deep inside you aches, you have needs that go beyond shelter, food and immediate defence. You’re still thirteen, you need your parents. You’re sure that Signless wouldn’t have left you like this and that maybe when he died saving you and you put him in the sprite that something was lost. Some bond was severed or trait unplugged in him. This is SignlessSprite before you, not Signless.

“One of your first quests is along here and I think it’ll be one that you’ll excel at. It’ll teach you a key part of your role as a Knight of Blood, one you’ve already been fulfilling without knowing it.” SignlessSprite says, changing the subject.

“Alright, let’s go crabcakes.” Meenah grins and slaps you on the shoulder. You nod and follow SignlessSprite in the direction that he leads. You go along one of the stone hallways in the castle and come out into a stone courtyard filled with fighting hermit crabs, your consorts. They are angrily yelling and snapping at each other with their claws.

“This is like the meetings, isn’t it?” you ask, looking over your shoulder at SignlessSprite who is hovering on the steps. He smiles and nods at you.

You descend the stone steps and immerse yourself thigh deep in angry crustaceans. Several of them bump into you with their claws and scuttling legs and you find yourself grateful that the game hasn’t made them bigger, you can’t imagine what a pain it would be if you had to deal with crab monsters bigger than you!

“Hey-” you try but they just ignore you and argue louder.

“Can someone- ow!” you wince as one of them snips at your legs.

This is such bullshit. You glare at the crabs, this whole planet is unfiltered raw bullshit. Nay, this whole game is an utter shit fest the likes of which no one has ever seen before. You are officially flipping your shit now, you’re getting the goddamn spatula out and everything.

“HEY YOU INSOLENT FUCKWHISTLES, STOP FIGHTING EACH OTHER AND LOOK AT ME. IT’S TIME TO STOP THIS BRAIN LEAKING IDIOCY AND SHAPE YOUR SHIT UP. SOMEONE HAD BETTER START TELLING ME WHAT ALL OF THIS IS ABOUT RIGHT THE FUCK NOW!” you bellow.

Multiple crabs start to speak at once, of course they do.

“CAN IT, EVERYONE SHUT UP! EVERYONE EXCEPT, YOU, YEAH YOU. TELL ME WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON HERE!” you demand, pointing at one crab.

The crab’s two eyestalks swivel in opposite directions as they both look at you and at the surrounding hermit crabs.

"Who are you?" it asks, snapping a pincer in your direction.

"I'm Karkat, tell me what you're all arguing about." you insists.
The hermit crab seems to consider this for a moment, shifting from the legs on one side of its body to the other.

"They want to tear the castle down!" it accuses finally, pointing at some of the other crabs.

"This castle that we're in now?" you ask, looking around at the ruined and crumbling walls and damaged stone of the structure. It looked rough from the front that you came in through but it's clearly worse from the back side of it here.

"Yes!" the hermit crab consort insists.

"And you don't want that." you guess, looking back at it.

"No! This castle is of great importance to the hero of blood, it must be preserved!" the crab declares and a bunch of the other crabs shout in agreement, throwing their claws up in the air and snapping loudly.

"Okay, okay, I got it. You don't want it torn down. Who does want it demolished? Show of ha-claws. Show of claws?" you say turning around and many crabs lift their own claws.

"Right, you. Tell me why you think it should be demolished." you ask, picking out one crab that seems to be wearing a bathtub and a shower curtain as a shell. You have a suspicion that was from your house.

"The hero of blood deserves a mighty castle, this thing is disgraceful. It should be destroyed, and we should start over again!" the bathtub crab declares to cheers from its side and yells of protest from the other.

"It's historic!" one cries out in opposition.

"ALRIGHT! Shut up! Look, can you not just repair the castle that's here? That way the history is preserved but it exists in the state that you want it in." you suggest, holding up your hands for quiet.

The crabs all look at one another and then at you.

"But who would repair it?" one asks.

"Whoever you were going to get to build a new one." you answer, some murmuring takes place.

"Who would decide what to repair though?" another questions.

"All of you. If you all think this castle is important then surely you can all stop shouting long enough to work together for something you can all live with." you say.

The first crab that you spoke to snaps its claws angrily.

"The castle shouldn't change at all, it should remain as it is! No one has ever repaired it before and we shouldn't start now." it snaps at you, both literally and figuratively what with the claws and all.

"Yeah, well, it shows. It's going to decay more if you don't do anything, the quicker you repair it, the more of what it's like now you can save. The castle will change one way or another, even if it's just finally collapsing under its own weight." you sneer at the crab.

A consensus seems to be emerging and more and more of the crabs are done talking and you notice that your escheladder ticks you upwards a point to another dumb title so you figure that your job of yelling at crustaceans has passed. Meenah is waiting for you on the steps with boredom on her face.
but SignlessSprite has floated off somewhere, that still stings.

"Your planet is lame." she sighs as you rejoin her.

"Yeah, I told you it was. Come on, let's go fulfil more kiddie moral quests on the value of compromise and teamwork." you groan and lead her away.

Your quests are just as dumb as you thought they would be. The thing is you feel like a fucking support character in your own quests, you show up and the consorts are living in their own stories, their own problems and you just show up and fix them so they can go on with their own narratives. The message that mediating and compromise are good are as blatant as the big slap in the face each time of 'it's not about YOU' that comes up with each mission. One time you even show up to help a group of consorts who are preparing for battle against the imps and ogres, you have to find the treasonous crab who was giving information to the other side. Once you were successful they rushed off into battle in a valley with a death count and level of cinematic glory that made the whole thing look like a Lord of the Rings movie. Meenah at least found that bit entertaining, even more so when it turned out that your mutual escheladders got all of the points for enabling that.

But still, you're just the side character. It sort of sucks.

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]
TG: oh god fucking kill me now
CG: WHY? WHAT'S THE MATTER?
TG: im a dumbass is whats the matter
CG: ALREADY KNEW THAT, SPECIFICALLY HOW?
TG: my eyes
CG: WHAT ABOUT THEM?
TG: where am i
CG: ROSE'S PLANET.
TG: which is...
CG: UHH, I JUST HAD TO LOOK IT UP BUT THE SHEET SAYS THE LAND OF LIGHT AND RAIN.
TG: ...
CG: OH FUCK YOUR EYES ARE REALLY LIGHT SENSITIVE.
TG: congrats you realised that faster than i did because i had to get here and then i thought eh ill tough it out how bad can it be even
CG: AND HOW BAD CAN IT BE?
CG: I MEAN HOW BAD IS IT?
TG: im flying back to the house before this migraine takes my vision away level of bad and i wanted to let you know before i couldnt read your replies anymore
CG: OH SHIT.
CG: SOLLUX IS THERE TRYING TO FIND YOU KNOW WHO BUT I CAN COME BACK AND LOOK AFTER YOU IF YOU WANT.
TG: no man you quest on ill just take painkillers and hit a nap and leave sollux to hunt for voldemort
CG: MOTION TO CALL HER THAT FROM NOW ON?
TG: aye
CG: AYE. AND THE AYES HAVE IT.
CG: SERIOUSLY THOUGH, IF YOU NEED ME JUST TROLL ME.
TG: im cool just landing now
CG: OK, GO GET SOME SLEEP IN A REALLY DARK ROOM. <3
TG: <3

“What was that all about?” Meenah asks as she fans through a stack of boonbucks, not that you’ve
found any use for the currency yet.

“Just talking to Dave.” you answer and jump down a ledge to collect more of the battle’s dropped grist.

“The two of you are like, red ain’tcha?” she asks, looking over at you.

“We’re soulmates, it’s a human thing. It’s close to red.” you explain. She doesn’t need to know all of the details but that much is a good explanation.

“That’s kind of weird, krabby.” Meenah says and helps you pick up some more grist for your communal cache of it. You likely will need more of this if everything drops it, you know some kinds are rarer too so it’s worth grabbing it all.

“It’s not really your problem.” you point out as you peer at what might be a new type of grist.

“No, I know. But like… isn’t it weird? I mean humans are just really weird looking in general. Their skin comes in all kinds of weird colours and their eyes are creepy white and the irises are all colourful even though they’re not adults. They’re all clawless, fangless, hornless… it’s like looking at someone who’s been cut up.” Meenah shudders.

“Maybe to you, but I was hatched on Earth. Sure I grew up with my family and surrounded by trolls but I’ve seen humans on TV, on adverts and in person since I first opened my eyes. They’re different, sure, but not creepy.” you say firmly. You’ve been fascinated by Dave’s differences to you but never unsettled.

“Reeeelly? You think that how they were on the ship wasn’t creepy?” Meenah asks, pointing her trident at you.

“I was worried for him, not creeped out. Humans are cool.” you assert and Meenah laughs.

“They’re somefin alright. Crazy assholes.” she cackles.

You leave Meenah to her judgements of humanity and continue your collection of grist only idly wondering just what can be made with some of the weirder kinds.

Your phone pings again and you frown, you hope Dave’s ok. Only it’s not him.

[twinArmageddons began trolling carcinoGeneticist]
TA: human2 can take tylenol, riight? thii2 ii2 ba2iiically the 2ame 2tuff ju2t extra 2trength...
CG: HUMANS INVENTED IT. OF COURSE THEY CAN, WHY ARE YOU EVEN ASKING?
TA: but ii doen2t liike iinteract wiith other mediicatiion, riight?
CG: FUCK, I DON’T KNOW, IT MIGHT. WHY ARE YOU ASKING?
TA: dv had a miigrane.
CG: YEAH, HE MENTIONED HE WAS LEAVING ROSE’S PLANET BECAUSE IT WAS SO BRIGHT IT GAVE HIM ONE.
CG: IS HE WITH YOU?
TA: he a2ked me iif ii had anythiing two help 2o ii gave hiim what ii take.
CG: AND YOU DIDN’T THINK TO ASK HIM THEN IF HE COULD, OR ASK HAL WHO HAS ENDLESS MEDICAL KNOWLEDGE? JUST ASK DAVE NOW, IF IT’S GONNA MAKE HIM ILL HE CAN ALWAYS THROW UP OR SOMETHING, FROM WHAT HE TOLD ME HE FELT LIKE HE WAS GOING TO ANYWAY.
TA: well, 2ee, ii would but he’2 a2leep. on my bed.
CG: WHAT.
TA: ii diidn't want two kiick hiim out and he wa2n't dii2tractiing me. now he'2 a2leep and ii'm
hopiing he'2 ju2t 2leepiing off the miigraiine and ii haven't accidentiilly poi2oned him. ii don't want
two wake hiim up iif he'2 fiine, he wa2 ii2 2o much paiin.
CG: …
CG: SO YOU’RE JUST WAITING AT HIS BEDSIDE TRYING TO DO WHAT’S BEST FOR
HIM, HUH?
TA: ii2 not liike that!
CG: OKAY, WITH THE WHOLE END OF THE WORLD THING I’VE NOT REALLY
DONE ANYTHING ABOUT THIS AND YOU TWO WERE FRIENDS BEFORE WHICH IS
GREAT. BUT YOU KNOW DAMN WELL THIS IS PALE TERRITORY AND IT’S NOT MY
TOES YOU’RE STEPPING ON HERE, IT’S ROSE’S.
TA: ii 2aiid ii2 not liike that.
CG: I LIKE ROSE, OKAY? SHE’S MY FRIEND. SHE’S MY SOULMATE’S TWIN AND
MOIRAIL, SHE’S MY MOIRAIL’S SOULMATE. BUT SHE IS RUTHLESS AND
VENGEFUL AND I DON’T WANNA SEE YOU STABBED BECAUSE YOU’RE TRYING
TO SNEAK INTO DAVE’S PALE QUADRANT.
TA: he’2 a human! he doe2n’t have a pale quadrant!
CG: YOUR SOULMATE IS HUMAN AND SHE HAS A PITCH QUADRANT AND I’VE
*HEARD* YOU TALK ABOUT ROSE AS HIS MOIRAIL BEFORE.
CG: ALSO WHAT HAPPENED TO IT’S NOT LIKE THAT?
TA: fuck you. ii diidn't do anythiing he keep2 comiing two me, a2kiing me how ii am, he came two
me wiith hi2 miigraiine and he fell a2leep iin my room. ii’m not doiing anything outiide of the
liine2 of human friiend2hiip here, he miight be but ii’m not!
CG: I KNOW, HUMANS ARE WEIRD. AND DAVE IS WEIRDER STILL. LOOK, I CAN
TALK TO HIM IF YOU WANT.
TA: no, fuck don't make thiing2 weiird. he’2 my friiend.
CG: OK, OK.
CG: SHIT, I’M SORRY. I KNOW HOW YOU FEEL, MY WHOLE PAN QUADRANT DEAL
WITH DAVE TOTALLY INCLUDES PALE FEELINGS. I HONESTLY DON’T
UNDERSTAND HOW EVERYONE ISN’T PALE FOR THAT WALKING DISASTER. BUT
STILL I’M PRETTY SURE I’M ONLY GRANTED THOSE FEELINGS BECAUSE I’M HIS
SOULMATE AND HUMANS RESPECT THAT CONNECTION.
CG: I JUST DON’T WANT TO SEE YOU GET HURT.
TA: thii2 ii2 2tupiid.
[twinArmageddons ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist]

Well, that’s going to have to be something you’re going to have to deal with later. You like that
they’re friends, you really do but Sollux can’t just use his friend and your soulmate as his pale
rebound from Aradia. You’re pretty sure he wouldn’t do that knowingly but he’s right, Dave is
basically throwing himself at the guy without meaning to. Or at least you assume it’s without
meaning to. God you need to fix this before Rose finds out, she is high up on your list of people to
never cross.

“Now what?” Meenah asks impatiently, you realise that you may have just been staring at your
phone as she came closer to get your attention.

“Drama.” you answer with a shrug and continue collecting. It’s only a few minutes until your phone
pings again, you fully expect it to be Sollux looping around to another round of insisting that he
doesn’t have a pale crush on your soulmate.

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]
TG: oh man going to sleep was the best idea ever
CG: HE SAYS, DESPITE BEING OBVIOUSLY AWAKE.
TG: no no man i am asleep
TG: check it
[turntechGodhead attached file photo846.jpg]

You squint at the picture, it’s Dave in stupid purple clothes that he certainly wasn’t wearing this morning and either he’s flying next to a giant purple tower or it’s really small. The weird thing is that you can’t see a jetpack on him.

TG: its my dreamself and i can fly man i gotta tell you unassisted flight is so fucking cool
CG: HUH. WEIRD. DID YOUR MIGRAINE CARRY OVER TO YOUR DREAMSELF?
TG: nope sweet pain free bliss over here.
CG: WELL, BE CAREFUL. AND UPDATE THE GROUP MEMO IF YOU’RE LURKING AROUND ON THAT PLANET ALONE.
TG: yeah yeah

[new post in fruity rumpus asshole factory]
Dave: hey so im kicking it on derse now just fyi
Dirk: Alone?
Dave: i will be totally careful besides do the underlings even come to derse and prospit?
Jade: nope!
Dave: there you go
Dirk: Yeah but derse is still a shady place, it’s all political intrigue and backstabbing.
Dave: boy dirk you really put the fun in apocalypse
Dirk: Smartass.

Well, that’s enough of that problem. Now back to mediating more problems.

“Want to pick which way we go next?” you offer Meenah, she doesn’t seem super appeased by your attempts to make you dragging her to your planet any less boring. It’s frustrating enough as it is for you and if it wasn’t for the Bro enemies you wouldn’t do that to her or anyone.

Your next quest is a prison break, and you and Meenah at least get to kill the imps and ogres guarding the trapped consorts. Your phone pings as you decapitate a tentacle cat ogre. When you finally check it you see that it’s the group chat.

Dave: uh dirk you flew around derse a lot before right?
Dirk: Yeah, why?
Dave: were there any like big invisible things around?
Dirk: …No?
Dave: right
Dave: hey sollux remember how the ship that abducted us was apparently shittily camouflaged according to psii?
Sollux: yeah, he 2aiid that wiith true 2tealth you don't 2ee anything.
Dave: so uh the ship that fish bitch has is probably impossible to see even right up close and even when you fly right into it face first
Sollux: ye2! fuck have you found it?!
Dave: i wasnt just asking a super specific hypothetical question
Dave: im duct taping my phone to the side of it you can track that right?
Sollux: yeah but dave you 2houldn't get that clo2e two the2 2hiip, there’2 no way iit2 2en2or2 won't 2ee you!
Dirk: Dave be careful!
Dave: im nearly done
When marks come onto your skin they burn and sting, much like getting a tattoo done with a needle would, you imagine. But when you peel back your sleeve and look down to see black spreading over your skin, surging up your sword and around the stairs of the first mark you got it’s not pain that you feel. It does not burn. It does not sting.

It feels like the opposite of pain, not pleasure obviously. Pain is real and raw and reminds you that you’re alive and something is wrong. This is the absence of life. It’s like every colour has just been sucked out of the world, everything is made of cardboard props and sound reaches you like tinny portable phone speakers from a room away. You’ve just had your soul ripped out and nothing will ever be okay ever again.

Tears are hitting your skin as it floods with black. Dave is gone.

Dave is dead.

The wave of it breaks and the blackness on your skin pulls back, turntables, shades and a sword reappearing as the darkness goes. The world comes back to you in a rush, and the sheer relief of it must be like cocaine right into the spinal cord. You know that he’s alive again.

How the fuck is he alive again?

You stand there blinking tears away and try to get your brain back online, Dave is alive, you know this for sure. He also died, you know that for sure too. His dream self must have died, that makes sense if his soul was in that body it’d count, right? But he’s also on Sollux’s bed asleep so in whatever time it took for his soul to go from body B to body A he was for all intents and purposes, dead.

Okay, you can berate the shit out of Dave later. You need to know what’s going on. You breathe in then out again and look at your phone, you missed a bunch.

Sollux: fuck not the tower two!
Sollux: ro2e!
Mituna: 0H FUCK 4T L3427 2H3 W42N’7 4W4K3 F0R 7HA7
Kanaya: Rose No No No She Has To Be Ok
Roxy: holy shit rose just fainted
Roxy: shes alive kanaya but what the hell is going on here?!
Dirk: I guess the same thing that happened to me, their dream selves died.
Karkat: YEAH I FELT IT TOO.
Karkat: DAVE FUCKING STRIDER WHEN I SEE YOU TONIGHT I SWEAR-
Karkat: YOU OWE ME BIG TIME FOR PUTTING ME THROUGH YOUR FUCKING DEATH I SWEAR TO GOD.
Dirk: Hey, Karkat? Get in line.
Sollux: he 2ound2 pretty 2orry two me riight now.

You roll your eyes and switch back to your private conversation with Sollux. Honestly, this whole thing is a disaster.

CG: WHAT’S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?
TA: iit mean2 that migraiine plu2 dream2elf death ha2 hiim upchuckiing iin my bathroom.
TA: pretty 2ure he regret2 iit. iif iit2 any con2olatiion the la2t thing he remember2 2eeing ii2 red and blue liight 2o p2iii mu2t have turned a la2er cannon on hiim. iif nothiing el2e iit wa2 quiick.
CG: THAT PRETTY MUCH CONFIRMS THAT SHE HAS THEM ALL THOUGH, AND THAT SHE’S MAKING PSII HER HELMSMAN AGAIN.
TA: yeah. but thank2 two dave ii can now track the movement2 of the 2hiip. and ii'm u2iing the phone’2 locatiion two train an algoriithm that willi pick the 2hiip’2 locatiion up even when 2he fiinally 2pot2 the phone and take2 it down.
CG: YOU ARE A GENIUS. AN INSUFFERABLE GENIUS BUT STILL A GENIUS.
TA: two fucking right.
CG: AND TELL HIM THAT HE AND I ARE GOING TO HAVE A LONG TALK ABOUT HIS DUMBASS BEHAVIOUR WHEN I GET BACK.
TA: he 2ay2 he'll make iit up two you. he al2o 2ay2 "blauuuugh" becau2e he'2 2tiill pukiing.
CG: GROSS.
TA: ii'm goiing two go fiind 2ome giinger ale for hiim or 2omethiing, pretty 2ure we had 2ome 2omewhere on the 2upply lii2t.
CG: YOU KNOW WHAT? THIS FUCKING MESS IS TOO LOW ON MY LIST OF PRIORITIES RIGHT NOW, IF DAVE FEELS BETTER THEN FOR NOW I DON’T CARE.
TA: good becau2e ii't2 none of your bu2iine22.
CG: HAH.

You sit down and frown at your phone switching back to the main chat. God, what a pain in the ass.

Roxy: so rose died too?
Dirk: I guess the thing that killed Dave got her dream self too, their towers are close together.
Roxy: oh shes walking up!
Roxy: *waking
Rose: I’m not sure what happened there, but I don’t want a repeat of it.
Dave: fuck me neither oh god
Dave: i didnt know it was gonna get you too i mean shit i didnt know i was gonna get got or whatever either
Dirk: The point is that can’t happen to either of you again, you’re out of extra lives same as me.
Karkat: I REALLY WISH WE KNEW WHAT THEY WERE FOR. HAL WHAT’RE THEY FOR ALREADY?
HalBirdSprite: They’re extra lives, a way to easily access Derse/Prospit depending on your alignment and they play a negotiable role in something later on. But you can still get that without them so don’t worry, just try not to die again until the life players have worked out how to bring people back.
Jane: Wait, I can bring people back to life?!
HalBirdSprite: Eventually, but just once.

You consider something for a moment and open one last chat.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling timaeusTestified]
CG: YOU JUST TOOK YOUR BROTHER DYING BETTER THAN I THOUGHT YOU WOULD.
TT: I assure you I sound a lot calmer than I am.
TT: Also seeing the two of them still talking helps.
CG: EVEN SO, I THOUGHT YOU WOULD BE FLIPPING YOUR SHIT.
TT: Oh, Dave’s dumb ass is in BIG trouble. Believe you me.
CG: IT’S NOT LIKE YOU CAN GROUND HIM THOUGH, OUR SURVIVAL AND *HIS* SURVIVAL HINGES ON HIM GOING OUT AND LEVELLING UP IN THIS GAME.
CG: UNLESS YOU’RE GOING TO PULL THE SAME MOVE MY DAD USED TO PULL.
TT: Which is?
CG: THE “I’M NOT MAD, I’M JUST DISAPPOINTED.”
TT: That is a classic for a reason.
TT: You sound calmer than I thought you would too.
CG: NO, I JUST ALWAYS SOUND ANGRY. AND I’M NOT GOING TO YELL AT DAVE, I’M JUST GOING TO TELL HIM JUST HOW IT FELT TO FEEL HIM DIE THROUGH MY SOUL MARK.
TT: Oh, shit. Are you okay?
CG: HE’S ALIVE SO I’M GOING TO BE FINE, I DON’T KNOW HOW PEOPLE SURVIVE THAT WHEN IT DOESN’T GET BETTER.
TT: Yeah, well lots of people don’t.
CG: ...HOW COME JAKE DIDN’T FEEL IT WHEN YOUR DREAMSELF DIED?
TT: Huh, I hadn’t thought of that. Perhaps because he wasn’t in the game yet or we hadn’t matched up? I’m not sure.
CG: HEY ON A TOTAL CHANGE OF TOPIC, HAVE YOU SEEN MANY BRO PROTOTYPED ENEMIES?
TT: Two total all day, they’re far less frequent than any of the others. Maybe because his sprite died?
CG: I THINK MINE IS ABOUT THE SAME, I WAS WONDERING IF THE GAME WAS JUST GIVING ME EASY MODE OR SOMETHING. WE SAW MORE ON MEENAH’S PLANET BUT WE ALSO SAW FAR MORE ENEMIES IN TOTAL, SO I THINK IT WAS THE SAME IN PROPORTION.
TT: I might check out Dave’s planet on the way home, see if they’re more common there.
CG: YEAH THAT WAS THE SAME HORRIBLE THOUGHT I WAS WORKING AROUND TO AS WELL.
TT: Okay, I’ll see you tonight Karkat.
CG: YEAH, LATER.

You put your phone away, you can catch up on the yelling in the group chat later.

“Apparently you’ll be able to bring people back to life when you get all of your powers.” you tell Meenah and to your shame your voice still sounds shaky.

“That’s cool I guess.” Meenah says with a shrug, evidently she doesn’t much care. She looks you up and down and her eyes linger on your still exposed soul mark from where you rolled your sleeve up to look at it.

“Did that like… wicked hurt?” she asks after a second. Of course, she knows nothing about how they work, she’s spent barely any time around humans and you don’t know how much human TV she watched before the game started.

“Yeah, but it’s like getting your heart ripped out or your soul destroyed. If Dave dies the whole thing goes dark and- well, I just hope I don’t ever have to feel that again.” you say with a shudder.

“Glad I don’t have one.” Meenah says shaking her head at you sadly like you’re inflicted with some terrible disease. You suppose you are, the disease of human romance. Perhaps the best proof that you have that you’ve caught something from Dave is that you can practically hear him declaring your relationship ‘sick’ in the coolest most ‘I-don’t-understand-irony’ tone possible.

“Well humans are kind of an endangered species now, so I don’t think you have to worry about that.” you say instead and walk past her, rolling your sleeve back down as you go. You have a prison to break.

Through careful use of explosives and several hours work the two of you manage to break the prison open and free the captured crustaceans. You sit on the roof of the prison with Meenah as you watch the crabs scuttle free and wait for any surviving enemies to find you so that you can take them out.

“These quests clearly have a purpose.” you say thoughtfully.
“Yeah, you do things for experience and boondollars obviously.” Meenah snorts, leaning over the edge of the roof and jabbing her trident into the skull of an enemy.

“Well, clearly. But I mean these quests must have some common theme or message about my class or aspect. SignlessSprite said that mediating that argument was a key part of learning my class and aspect and since then it’s all been helping people do shit.” you muse.

You’re supposedly a Knight of Blood, not that it means much to you. Hal has been cagey about how those are chosen, whether it’s who you are now, who you are at your core, or who you’re meant to be that changes it you don’t know. You’re the same aspect as Kankri and the same class as Dave and Latula. You obviously have a lot in common with Kankri, he is your brother and you are both shaped by the legacy of your parents. Similarly, you’re obviously similar to Dave, you’re soulmates so you’re bound to be alike and compatible in certain ways. You can see that both Dave and Latula have similarities in how much effort they both put into making other people think they’re cool. You don’t do that, you are fully aware that no one thinks you are cool nor do you especially care to make them think so.

Goddamnit, you need to work out what makes you a Knight and what makes you a Blood Player. If you don’t then are you really learning anything from these quests? What do knights do historically? They served royalty, right? They went off and fought wars or killed dragons, or you think they did, your Earth mythology can be a little shaky at times. Okay so maybe go with that for now. What is blood about?

Wait, maybe Hal will tell you this at least if SignlessSprite is unhelpful as shit about everything else.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling HalBirdSprite]
CG: HAL I HAVE A QUESTION FOR YOU ABOUT MY ASPECT.
HBS: Oh?
CG: WHAT IS BLOOD ABOUT?
HBS: Part of your quest is supposed to be about finding out what blood is as an aspect to you. How each class relates to it is different.
CG: THAT’S SUPER UNHELPFUL. CAN’T YOU GIVE ME AT LEAST SOMETHING TO START WITH?
HBS: I don’t really think that I need to. What does blood mean in human culture?
CG: NOTHING? I MEAN HUMANS DON’T HAVE A HEMOSPECTRUM.
HBS: Keep going.
CG: I MEAN I GUESS THERE’S THE WHOLE BLOOD IS THICKER THAN WATER THING, NOT THAT I KNOW WHAT IT MEANS.
HBS: Oh, I do. There’s a common misconception with that actually. The full expression is “The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb”.
CG: SO… THAT MEANS THAT AN AGREEMENT IS MORE BINDING THAN JUST BEING RELATED TO SOMEONE?
HBS: Pretty much, yeah. Agreements you make and relationships you choose can be stronger than
ones that you have no choice in.
CG: I’VE HAD TO SOLVE A BUNCH OF DISAGREEMENTS SINCE I GOT HERE, HELPING MY CONSORTS AGREE TO THINGS. I JUST BROKE PEOPLE OUT OF PRISON SO I SUPPOSE I WAS BREAKING THEM OUT TO BE WITH OTHERS. NOT TO MENTION THE WHOLE REVOLUTION SIGNLESS STARTED WAS ALL ABOUT BLOOD AND HOW PEOPLE WERE MORE IMPORTANT THAN THEIR BLOOD.
CG: AND I’M A KNIGHT SO I SERVE… METAPHORICAL BLOOD?
HBS: Serve, exploit, manipulate, fight with. That kind of thing.
CG: SO I’M NOT A LEADER THEN? OR I AM BUT MY JOB IS ALL ABOUT HELPING OTHER PEOPLE, SERVING THEM?
HBS: That’s what you’ve been doing already. Using the skills of the people in our group to get the best out of them, avoiding arguments, keeping us cohesive. The blood that keeps everyone going and keeps everything alive.
CG: ALL OF THE WORK, NONE OF THE CREDIT, HUH? GREAT.
HBS: Hey, unsung hero or not it’s a really important role. Not to put pressure on your shoulders here but your role is pretty make or break. Fuck this up and we all fail, do your job well and yeah ok people might not know what you’ve done but everything will be a huge success.
CG: YOU DON’T NEED TO PRESSURE ME INTO DOING THIS. IF I NEED TO DO SOMETHING TO KEEP EVERYONE SAFE THEN I’LL DO IT. THIS IS MY FAMILY, MY FRIENDS, MY SOULMATE.
HBS: The point is that you’ve already learnt this lesson, Karkat. You’ve already learnt how to pay attention to people, to get the best for everyone, to see the best in anyone. You’ve learnt how to be compassionate and how to be practical. You’re a good kid but you were a Knight of Blood years before this game started.
HBS: You’re well ahead of most of the other players here in learning your role. And it’s a good thing too, they’re going to need you.
CG: THEN I’M GOING TO DO WHAT I CAN TO BE AS GOOD AS I CAN. FUCK BEING GOOD ENOUGH, I WANT TO BE THE BEST.
HBS: There we go. You’re gonna be fine.
CG: THANKS HAL.
HBS: Anytime.

You put your phone away and watch the last few little crab consorts scuttle to freedom. So maybe you’re not the hero or the leader controlling everything or someone legends and songs will be told about but this game has every intention of breaking you all apart and killing you. So if your job is to be the glue that sticks you all together or the blood that keeps this group alive then you will gladly be that. Your journey isn’t about you, so what?

Knight of Blood. It’s not got a bad ring to it.

You look over to Meenah who is leaning on her culling fork and though you know better than to think that every descendant will turn into their ancestor it’s hard to shake the knowledge that she is the post-scratch version of the evil woman who has your family captive. And her title doesn’t require a genius to work out, Thief of Life. She steals life. The best you can hope for is that she does that to people who aren’t on your side, better yet she could do it to her counterpart.

“Hey, are you hungry?” Meenah asks, looking over at you. You check your watch, it’s almost time to go back for dinner and close enough that it’s not really worth starting anything else quest wise.

“I could eat.” you agree, keeping your thoughts on her to yourself.

“I feel like some of your human Thai food, we got some of that before back on Earth and it was the
“bomb.” Meenah says hungrily.

“Latula makes good Thai, let’s go back and ask her if she’ll cook. Besides I have a soulmate to check in on and a brother to shout at.” you say, pulling your jetpack out and shrugging it onto your shoulders.

“Race you, guppy!” she laughs, already blasting off into the air. You swear and follow her but she does indeed beat you back to LOWAS.

You open the front door to a surprisingly peaceful scene, Jake, Jade, Dirk, Horuss and Equius are gathered around what looks like a robot. They’re all talking quietly and working on it as Roxy types with furious speed onto a laptop connected to the robot with several long cables.

“I just think we’re more likely to fall into uncanny valley territory is all.” Dirk says, shaking his head.

“Hey Karkitten, hi Meenah.” Roxy greets you both as you enter.

“What’s all this?” you ask, gesturing at the robot.

“An idea.” Dirk says.

“A bomb!” Jade says at the same time. You take a step back and frown at them all.

“It’s not a bomb yet, but it might be soon. We’re just working on an idea for the future.” Jake explains.

“Uh-huh.” you say slowly, you don’t want to know.

“If you’re looking to yell at Dave you’d better get in fast, he’s remarkably quick on the draw with the apologies about dying. Really stalled my scolding at the gate.” Dirk informs you.

“Do you ever not mix your metaphors?” Jade laughs.

“Hey, a metaphor in the hand is worth an arm and a leg to beat around the bush with.” Dirk says, either that or you just had a stroke as he was talking.

“Oh! Oh! What about crossing that bridge over spilt milk when you count your chickens?” Jake laughs.

“Stoooooop.” Jade whines and you walk off to find Dave before you get dumber just from listening to this shit. You have a suspicion that you know where Dave might be. The trip to Sollux’s room is short and the light is dimmed low so you guess that Dave’s head still hurts. The door is already ajar so you push it fully open to see Dave sitting on Sollux’s bed quietly talking to him, good fucking God.

“Karkat.” Dave says, straightening up to look at you. He hasn’t got his shades on either, oh boy.

“David Something Lalonde you went and died on me.” you accuse.

“That’s not my name.” Dave protests.

“Take it up with Dirk.” you say snippily and Dave opens his mouth but then shakes his head.

“I’m… really sorry I put you through that. I have no idea how shitty that felt and I hope you never die and I don’t ever have to find out first hand but I’m still really sorry. I mean, I don’t regret taking the time to stick my phone to the ship because it means we know where she is and we can maybe
rescue everyone. Honestly, she probably would have seen me and killed me anyway and this way at least we got something out of it but it was still a really shitty thing to put you through and I’m sorry.” Dave blurts out.

You stare at him and drop your arms to your sides from where they had previously been folded disapprovingly. That was pretty damn concise not to mention sincere and hard to argue with.

“I know I should have been more careful really and I don’t have any extra lives now and I’ll totally try to be more careful from now on.” Dave adds in the space left by your silence.

You look from him to Sollux and back again. This sounds like the result of a feelings jam. Goddamnit he has been talking this out with him, hasn’t he?

“I guess I can’t fault you on that but it was really horrible, just… don’t ever do that again.” you say awkwardly. Dirk was right, Dave did just stop any chance of you really being angry at him.

Still, you eyeball Sollux for a moment. He is definitely behind this and he doesn’t look even a little bit guilty about it.

“Have you seen Rose yet?” you ask pointedly and Sollux winces. Yeah asshole, how do you like being reminded of the actual moirail that the boy you’re flagrantly shooshing has, huh?

“No, she’s on the roof apologising to Kan for dying even though it’s not like it was her fault at all.” Dave answers, clearly guilty about Rose’s death if not inadvertently cheating on her.

“Hmm.” you say uncertainly and pull your phone out. If you’re going to talk to Dave and Sollux about this… thing that they’re doing you want to be really sure that Rose isn’t around to overhear.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling grimAuxiliatrix]
CG: HEY KANAYA DO YOU KNOW WHERE ROSE IS?
GA: I Do Not Know Specifically Where She Is But I Can Guess Where She Is Headed
CG: WHERE?
GA: To Solluxs Room And On That Note I Feel Like I May Have Made A Blunder
CG: KANAYA…
GA: I Simply Expressed A Little Concern About Her Emotional Wellbeing Specifically Regarding How Her Relationship With Dave Is Going Because Of Uh
GA: I May Have Brought Up That Sollux Seems To Have Pale Designs On Dave
CG: OH GOD NO.
GA: She Did Not Seem Angry If That Helps But Sometimes With Rose It Is Hard To Tell
CG: I AM RIGHT HERE WITH DAVE AND SOLLUX, I’M GOING TO BE RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF THIS AREN’T I?
GA: Oh No
[carcinoGeneticist ceased trolling grimAuxiliatrix]

“Rose!” Dave exclaims and you cringe, shoving your phone away. Sollux is staring wide-eyed at Rose with the look of someone caught doing something they shouldn’t. That of course is precisely what is happening here. Rose is standing in the doorway, coolly looking over all of you. Apparently Dave is totally oblivious because he crosses the room and stands before her for a moment before hugging her.

“Are you okay?” Dave asks as he pulls away from her.

“I’m fine, I was asleep on Derse so it didn’t exactly hurt. It was just disquieting dying without being aware of the body that died.” Rose answers with a shrug.
“I bet Kanaya didn’t see it that way, am I gonna get chainsawed?” Dave asks anxiously.

“No and I wouldn’t let her.” you interject.

“Maybe you should go talk to her, she’s on the roof.” Rose says calmly and you realise with alarm that if Dave leaves it’s you, Sollux and Rose here together. That is not something you want to be in the middle of, but it is something that needs fixing. Shit.

“Oh man, I should say sorry. I’ll be back. Oh, and thanks again Sollux for everything today and I’m still sorry about dying on you and making you hear it.” Dave says quickly and then darts out of the room and off down the hallway.

Rose reaches out and shuts the door behind him, leaving the three of you in Sollux’s room. She glances at you for a moment, but her intense purple eyes are focused on Sollux for the most part.

“You’re trying to date my brother.” Rose states simply, staring at him.

“I’m- humans don’t have a pale quadrant.” Sollux says defensively.

“You have pale feelings for him.” Rose says pointedly and Sollux looks away, his cheeks going dark.

“You seem to both be under the impression that I am my brother’s moirail, despite Dave and I telling Karkat multiple times that isn’t the case.” Rose says, looking at you properly now.

“I know he’s your brother but you blatantly act as his moirail in a way that Roxy doesn’t even though you’re both his sisters. He tells you things, you give him advice, he listens to you.” you point out and at this Sollux looks pained. You know he’s been heartbroken ever since his diamond got shattered by Aradia’s betrayal and you know that he’s always clicked with Dave as a friend, it’s not hard for that to morph into pale feelings. So yeah, he’s pale for Dave and it can’t be easy hearing you lay out just why Dave and Rose are blatantly moirails. Rose turns her gaze back to Sollux.

“And you want the same, do you? You want to make sure he’s taking care of his health, distract him from his nightmares, talk to him even when you have to walk around the broken glass of his trauma but pretend that you’re not? To try to help him even when he insists on being too dense to listen to you? In exchange for the same in return?” Rose demands, taking two steps closer to Sollux. He grits his teeth and glares at her.

“Well?” she prompts.

“It’s not like I don’t get it! So what, he needs therapy and medication, so do I! He has a weird family structure, me too! I hear people die all of the time so it’s not like I don’t get violence and pain, he’s not going to shock me! And yeah, he’s a fucking self-sacrificing stupid asshole and he doesn’t think about how he might upset other people by acting like that! I’m PRESIDENT of that fucking club! So yeah, fucking SUE ME.” Sollux snarls back.

Oh god, should you intervene? This is not going well.

Except… Rose isn’t shouting back or punching Sollux for his words. Rose is just staring him down.

“Like I said, I’m not his moirail, I’m his twin. And here’s the thing, as you’re well aware you can break up with a moirail but I will always be his twin. If he wants to date you and Karkat is fine with
that then I don’t care, but understand this: if you break his heart or deliberately try to drive a wedge
between us I will destroy you. I will ruin everything good in your life repeatedly until you find no
joy in anything at all. This is not some pitch flirting, I have no intention of challenging you or
improving you. I will simply make your life a living hell in every way from the petty to the
overwhelming. Dave is one of the most important people in my whole life, I am not fucking around
here.” Roses hisses in his face.

A second passes and she steps away with a nod.

“Explain the concept to him and then grow a pair and ask him out, stop pining like an idiot.” Rose
scoffs and turns and walks out of the room in a swish that feels that she ought to be wearing some
kind of dramatic cloak.

You and Sollux stare at each other in shock, that was not how you thought that was going to go
down.

“Everyone in that family is fucking crazy.” you conclude.

“No shit.” Sollux agrees.

“She’s right though, you have to explain yourself to him.” you say and he groans and falls back on
his bed.

“Are you even okay with me being pale for him? I mean, that’s if he even says yes because God
fucking knows he was stupid enough about you.” Sollux groans, putting his hands over his face.

You take a moment to consider how you actually feel about this. You’ve been annoyed about Sollux
pulling this shit but it’s more that you thought he was going behind Rose’s back which was not cool
and that he was doing pale things with Dave without Dave really being aware of it. Or rather,
without Dave being aware of how Sollux saw it. If Dave knew and was cool with it would you have
a problem with him going to Sollux to talk about his feelings instead of you? Well, you never had a
problem with him being like that with Rose and you have Kanaya as well as Dave. Rose is right, it
could be good for him if that’s what he wants. Of course Sollux is right, Dave may well say no. That
isn’t your problem though.

“As long as you’re fine with the fact that my thing with him is a mess of everything.” you say with a
shrug.

“Didn’t stop our parents. Fuck, I should actually talk to him at some point instead of all of us
discussing this behind his back.” Sollux sighs, sitting up on his bed.

“Yeah, you should. I’ll keep my mouth shut for now though to buy you some time. I can’t promise
that Rose won’t meddle though or that Kanaya won’t accidentally say something without thinking.”
you tell him. Sollux nods.

“Well, with that crisis weirdly averted I’m going to go track my soulmate down so I can make out
with him in celebration of him not being dead anymore.” you announce and leave Sollux to his
fretting. You do not miss the stage in your life where you were uncertain about how Dave feels
about you.

You manage to track him down to the roof where he and Kanaya are talking and Dave is evidently
talking himself into a corner if his slightly embarrassed expression and Kanaya’s mildly amused one
are anything to go by. You walk up to them and bump her shoulder with your head slightly and trill
at her, you’ve missed her today after everything you’ve been through. She echoes you and pets your
“Oh, Karkat, thank goodness you’re here. Now we can change the subject totally.” Dave says in hurried relief.

“Why, what hole were you digging yourself into?” you ask with a grin.

“Nothing.” Dave insists, even though that’s not an answer that makes sense to the question you actually asked.

“He was saying how I’m a good match for Rose because both she and I would, and I quote ‘chainsaw a bitch to death without hesitation like the weird hot psychos you are’.” Kanaya repeats crisply. Dave looks like he wishes he could turn invisible.

“Yeah, that sounds about accurate.” you nod and Kanaya laughs daintily.

“So how was your planet?” Dave asks, looking at you.

“It was… educational, I guess. Not what I wanted I think, but whatever.” you say with a shrug. You think you’ll grab Kanaya later to sit down and really hash out everything you found out about your planet and subsequently yourself. If anyone can put things into perspective for you it’s her. And hey, maybe Dave can help too as he is a fellow knight.

You pause as a low rumbling sound catches your ears, at first you think that it might be an earthquake or something and you look around trying to locate the source of the noise. Kanaya points upwards and you squint, there’s a pale red glow on the other side of the otherwise thick clouds of LOWAS.

“What is that?” Dave asks.

Suddenly something bursts through the cloud and streaks red hot through the sky towards you all. Before you can react it crashes into the base of the building and the shoddy SBURB construction rumbles the whole way up to the roof to you. The three of you instantly grab your weapons and sprint down the stairs, catching up with other people along the way. You burst dramatically into what was the main room of your base but is now a lot of alarmed and armed teenagers surrounded by three walls and a lot of rubble.

Sat in the middle of the fallen masonry is a metal ball about the size of a basketball. Everyone has backed up against the walls away from it and the older humans are using their bodies to shield the younger ones just in case it’s a bomb of some kind.

It doesn’t appear to be a bomb. You’re pretty sure of that when it begins to levitate above the ground without any of the coloured glow that would suggest interference from any of your group’s psionics. It stops at around head height and makes a faint buzzing noise. There’s a flash of light and then before you standing at her totally intimidating height is Her Imperious Condescension. Most of her horns clip through your ceiling and though you can see through her clearly holographic body her presence is intimidating. Meenah and Feferi’s ear fins flare and the pair hiss furiously at their ancestor.

You’ve seen pictures of the tyrannical ruler of your species before of course, but up close she’s something different. Well over seven feet tall without her horns which stretch far up above her and clip through the ceiling she towers over your whole group. Her hair is a mass of black reaching all the way down to the ground, lending her a menacing air that people who wear capes could only hope to imitate. She’s dripping with gold jewellery from rings to bangles and piercings, but her
crown across her forehead with her symbol is most prominent of all. You’ve come to a stop right by where Kankri was already standing and her fuschia eyes lock on the pair of you and her mouth twists into a predatory grin.

“Shore looks like I got a whole school of fools here ready to be schooled.” she cackles, twirling her large golden double-ended trident between her fingers effortless of the considerable weight it must have.

“Give us back our ancestors and the human man you took.” you say with confidence you don’t feel.

“Oh, guppy, you are in no poision to be making demands.” she laughs, pointing her weapon in your face. It’s not real of course, but it could be. This hologram ball was shot at you from the ship, what’s the range on that and how close does she have to be to kill you with Psii’s other weapons? Not that close you’d bet.

“Whadda you want?!” Meenah yells angrily, hefting her own weapon in her hand like she’s considering smacking down the projector.

“From you? Nofin. But from you…” The Empress says, turning around and eyeing the corner that most of the humans are clustered in.

“Yeah, you. Void gill there, Roxy ain’tcha?” she says, eyeing Roxy.

“What do you want with me?” Roxy asks in obvious bafflement. The tyrant queen grins, full shark teeth on display and she leans on her fork with sinister casualness.

“I want somefin and you’re gonna get it for me. When this game’s over there’s gonna be a bright shiny new world and it’s gonna be mine, but I need a mothergrub for that. No mothergrub, no trolls. An you may’ve noticed that we ain’t got no mothergrub here or a matriorb to grow one. So you betta get me one for shore, or else…” she trails off and holds out a hand. Redglare stumbles into your simulated view, her face glazed and eyes glassy with the look of someone under mind control. Redglare numbly unsheathes her sword and presses it to her own stomach, her hands poised to run herself through.

“No!” Terezi yells desperately.

“Mom, snap out of it!” Latula shouts as well.

“Wait! Wait! I don’t know how to get that thing you want, if- if you tell me where to get it I’ll go find it but just don’t hurt anyone!” Roxy pleads, and fish bitch pouts her slick painted lips almost childishly. Redglare’s sword stays where it is.

“I didn’t say find it, if it was just some treasure hunt I could do it alone. Nah, it’s not here, you gotta use your powers to make one.” she tells Roxy firmly.

“B-but I don’t know how to do that!” Roxy protests.

Redglare’s grip on her sword shifts and her arms tense as if gathering the strength to skewer herself. Clearly Roxy sees it too from how she reacts.

“Stop! I’ll- look, I’ll try to learn, ok?” Roxy says hurriedly and The Condesce smiles.

“Like shell we’re gonna do what you say!” Meenah snarls.

“Agreed, if we give her the means to start up the troll race again she’ll just use it to remake a new
world as she sees fit. We should kill her now.” Feferi agrees.

“I can start krilling off these hostages at any time, I got enough. Not to mention shooting some of y’all from orbit!” The Empress snaps back.

You stare at Roxy’s terrified face, at Redglare’s precarious situation, Latula and Terezi’s anguish and the fight between the fuscia trolls. There has to be a solution here, isn’t this what your role is all about? You just have to fucking think about this.

What does the Empress really want? Well, Feferi is probably right, she likely does want to make a new troll planet in whatever new universe you make. Likely more terrible than Alternia already was. It’s possible that she needs you to beat the game for her because she’s not a player but Hal said the King and Queen of both Derse and Prospit were missing so she’s made it so you can’t win without doing what she wants. Even if she doesn’t kill you all when she’s got what she wants in the game she’ll likely do it when you’re on the other side, plus cooperating with her is no promise for the safe return of your loved ones. Just because that’s the bait she’s got you all on doesn’t mean she’s sincere about it.

So what do you all want? Well, most of you want the safe return of the adults although a few of you are apathetic about that you don’t think anyone actively wants them gone. Doing what the Empress says doesn’t make that certain though, you need a better method but what?

She wants this matriorb specifically, she needs it. So that’s your access to her. If she wants it she’s going to have to take it from you to her ship. You could swap it out for a bomb but that might not kill her and then your ancestors would die for sure. That’s no solution.

You look around your group and nearly facepalm when you realise it. You stupid shit, you had this revelation already. Your best asset isn’t manipulating her, it’s your team! There’s thirty-three of you and one of her. You’ve got three people who are apparently going to get some kind of magic time travel powers. You have a thief of life on your team! You have a shitload of psionics who are crazy powerful, multiple genius hackers and who knows whatever else bullshit game powers you’re going to get! She knows how powerful you can end up being, that’s why she’s doing this now when you’re weak and scared! You just need to bide your time, level up, let your team get crazy powers and then you’ll finish your family’s work and overthrow this bitch!

For now though, you’ll play nice. She’s used to winning, let her think that she is.

“No, it’s fine. We’ll do what you want. Roxy will try to learn to make what you want her to, just don’t hurt anyone.” you say, stepping forward. Her Imperious Condescension breaks her gaze from her descendants to look at you suspiciously.

“I didn’t expect you to agree so easily, what happened to your ancestor’s revolutionary spirit, huh?” she challenges you. You hold your hands up peacefully and smile.

“I’m trying to preserve the lives that I can. Besides, the main players of the revolution against you are already in your ship and you’ve got that pretty well in hand it seems. We’re a bunch of kids, what can we do? I’m not stupid, I just want to keep them alive. I pick my battles.” you answer her.

“Karkat, you spineless little worm!” Meenah snarls at you.

“Feh, I appreciate obedience plenty in my subjects so for now I’ll let everyone live but at least your ancestor had some guts. And you, gill, get my matriorb. I’ll be checking up on all of you.” she declares and her hologram abruptly blinks away. The basketball-sized orb floats there for a moment more before flying off back out the hole that it put in your wall and out into the sky.
The room erupts into noise but you press your finger to your lips for silence and scamper to the hole in the wall to peer out. The ball is just a speck in the sky now. You turn around to face Sollux and, not for the first time, find yourself thankful that everyone in your family learned sign language for Meulin’s sake.

[Sollux, can you track her ship from the phone?] you sign at him and his eyes go wide in understanding. He dashes down the hall to his room, in the meantime you turn to look at Hal who is floating in the corner. You’re going to bet that he downloaded information on sign language once he found out that lots of you speak it.

[Hal, do you understand me?] you sign at him and Hal nods.

[Can you check the network to see if she’s listening?] you ask and Hal nods again. He tilts his head slightly and focuses. Sollux jogs back into the room and you look over at him.

[She’s gone back to Derse.] he answers you, having to spell out every letter for Derse as you have no sign for that one yet. Or if Meulin has one she’s not taught it to you yet.

“There’s no bugs in the system, nothing physical spying on us here. Pesterchum and trollian are probably compromised as they run off of the game’s network. Verbal ought to be fine, though.” Hal says aloud.

“Great.” you nod.

“Okay, we’re not doing what she wants. I have zero fucking intention of letting that bitch control us and start a new empire in a new universe. But the fact is that right now she has our family members and at the moment we don’t have the power to beat her, but we will and she knows it. She wants us thinking we can’t win against her but there’s this many of us and we’re apparently going to get bullshit crazy powers like bringing people back from the dead, time travel shit and magicking things out of thin air.” you scoff.

“Until we can beat her we can’t get our families and we can’t win the game, so we’re going to let her think she’s winning and we’re going to get the power to obliterate her. Is everyone ok with that plan?” you ask, looking around.

“We should start prioritising the most combat useful players. Her mind control is powerful but if we can freeze time she can’t use it. Time and mind players seem key to me.” Aranea muses.

“Hal, which players are going to be the heaviest hitters in a fight?” Vriska demands and Hal pulls a face.

“It’s not that straightforward. How you utilise your powers may vary and whether you reach your potential or not is out of my control.” Hal answers.


“In brute power in a fight, time players are obvious. But after that I’d say in no particular order and purely based on class, Dirk, Kurloz, Gamzee, Meenah and Sollux. Jake has the potential to be the most powerful of all of you but that’s on a long scale timeline because he’s a page. But there’s more to fights than sheer force. Vriska can fuck with the luck of your opponents, Eridan and Cronus can destroy people with their own beliefs, Latula can screw with people’s heads. Not to mention how vital your healers are.” Hal insists.

You look over at Vriska who seems to be considering that.
“I’ll come up with a way to best train and improve our most vital players. At least now we have a combat goal.” Vriska nods.

“As a point of order I do think that we should still try to get Roxy to acquire the matriorb, our species will need it to survive in a new world. Not that want to be part of looking after it, I’ve had enough of that, thanks.” Porrim says distastefully. She’s right, before today you hadn’t even thought about repopulating your species. Now at least it’s possible. You’re not sure you can say the same for humans. You’re pretty sure that eight people is way too small of a gene pool, you’re also sure that it would be even if half of them weren’t related to each other. Their situation is further complicated by the fact that of those eight humans pretty much all of them are either a) attracted to their own gender, b) soulmates with people of a different species, or c) all of the above.

“Porrim is right. Are we all on board with this double crossing plan? And are we all in agreement not to talk about it outside of this house and not through chat clients?” you ask, looking around. Everyone nods.

You’ll all talk and plan, come up with ideas, shoot them down and make better ones. But you have a goal, to speed several of your players along to get strong enough powers to destroy Her Imperious Condescension and stage a rescue. Afterwards you can adjust and let yourself and everyone else catch up so you can beat your own personal quests and the game. For now, though, it’s time for a coup.

Perhaps most importantly of all, you now have proof that your mysterious helpful benefactor is telling the truth.
Hey everyone, sorry for the long wait between chapters. I've had a lot of going on. I've been having so many hospital appointments to get my medication right and then my grandmother died and I lost like a week to funeral stuff and helping my dad out with that.

I hope I can update faster from now on.

Also this chapter has some pretty heavy violence and Dave and Bro stuff, so if you need a heads up on that be aware that's coming.

“Oh yes, big man, very strong.” Damara snickers.

You pause, still gasping for breath a little and lean over the sword in the stone that you’ve been heaving on for the past few minutes to no avail.

“Well if you think it’s so fuckin’ easy you get up here and try it instead of sassing me.” you snap and hop down to land next to Aradia.

“I’m not really sure that putting the three of us together is the best way to help us understand time.” Aradia muses as Damara climbs up to the sword and dramatically grabs it.

“You think?” you mutter unhappily.

Damara pauses in her attempt at sword retrieval so that she can pretend to jerk off the handle because she is nothing if not immature. This isn’t helping your quest. Aradia and Damara apparently don’t always get on anyway, so you’re just stuck around two snarky girls and Aradia has been eyeballing you all day for some reason. She opens her mouth to say something and then seems to think better of it.

“What?” you finally ask, looking over at her.

“Nothing.” Aradia says, shaking her head.

“My sweet ass it’s nothing.” you snort.

“No, I mean it’s not my business. Sollux broke up with me so it’s not like I should be asking about this stuff.” Aradia says and looks away from you back to the sword which is still stuck.

“I mean you didn’t really give him a lot of choices there.” you say. It’s not like you care and other people’s relationship drama is not your deal, but it’s pretty obvious who was in the wrong in that exchange.

“I was doing what I had to, it was always going to turn out that way. It’s not as if I had any choice about what to do.” Aradia says with a frown.

“Then him breaking up with you for doing it was always going to happen too, and you don’t get to
be mad at it. We’re supposed to be learning time travel and you don’t get that we can make things go differently? Either it was inevitable and you had no choice about what to do and he had no choice but to break up with you for it or you both had a choice and you chose to do something that made him choose to break up with you. You both chose or neither of you did, you can’t have it both ways.” you argue.

“The timeline is out of my control, he should understand that now. Things have to happen.” Aradia insists.

“This stupid sword is supposed to come out, but that’s not happening.” Damara grunts as she heaves on it and it refuses to budge.

“And like I was saying there’s another solution, just like you had.” you say, looking at Aradia again.

“Oh, and what would you have done?” she asks snippily.

“Told people the fuckin’ truth, man. We’re reasonable people and I’m pretty sure he would have humoured you if you’d made clear how important it was, he did most of the game coding out of curiosity anyway. Lying to him and making him sick was hella not needed.” you insist.

Damara hops down from the platform where the sword is stuck in the stone and looks between the two of you warily. Aradia looks pissed and part of you thinks that you might have overstepped your bounds but you’re still right here.

There’s a yell behind you and you whirl around, sword already out, to see… to see yourself flying through the air in a flutter of red cape. Other you slams into the sword in the stone and you watch it bend and finally shatter, sending half of it and your other self to the floor in a heap. A flare of red shows up in the air and another Aradia flies through it and spots the you on the floor. She snaps her whip out at him and he rolls out of the way.

“Get back here!” other Aradia shouts from where she floats in the air.

“Gladly! I’m gonna hit you into next week, bitch!” other you yells and leaps into the air. He draws his weapon, and to your surprise it’s not a sword of any description but a giant black and red hammer with a central red gear and clock hands orbiting it. He swings the hammer and it hits other Aradia in the ribs with a loud chime like a huge clock strike and she vanishes in a flash of red. Other you lowers the hammer and gasps for breath for a moment or two before he looks over at you.

“Get the card for hammers from John or you fuck all of this up.” he warns you and stows the hammer away again. He then pulls out two floating turntables and vanishes into nothingness.

“What the fuck?” Damara says eventually.

“It looks like we will learn to time travel.” Aradia concludes. You decide not to mention that your future selves use time travel to wear stupid clothes and kick the shit out of each other. Instead you walk over to the shattered legendary sword and pick it up. It’s more like a legendary piece of shit as far as you’re concerned.

“Well, that’s one way of getting this sword out.” you say, holding it up and inspecting the snapped half.

“But you didn’t get it out, it’s broken now.” Damara sneers at you.

“Psh, I broke swords all the time strifing with Bro. I can get the code for a broken sword and an unbroken one no problem, then I’ve just gotta do some alchemy work to figure out which bits in this
thing’s code to remove and bam I’ll have one whole legendary sword.” you tell her, shoving it in your strife specibus for ½ bladekind.

“Like I said, more than one way to solve a problem.” you add pointedly.

Aradia glares at you and shakes her head.

“This isn’t helping. I’m going to my planet. You can be smug on your own here.” she says and floats up in the air on her weird brain powers and flies off into the sky.

“Later Dave.” Damara says also taking to the sky.

“Hey, we’re supposed to stay together!” you protest.

“Guess you gotta find another solutions!” Damara laughs, slightly mangling her words as she too flies away.

You cross your arms angrily and look around, there’s no enemies here but still you’re all alone. Goddamnit.

[turntechGodhead began pestering timaeusTestified]
TG: dirk
[timeaeusTestified is an idle chum]
TG: dirk
TG: goddamnit stop chowing down on jakes dick and talk to me

You tap your foot in irritation and open another chat.

[turntechGodhead began pestering twinArmageddons]
TG: man fuck your ex
TA: hard pa22.
TG: ok not literally but still
TA: out of cuirio2iity what diid aa do?
TG: i dont know man we were arguing and doing some dumb quest
TG: and then a version of the two of us from the future flew through a time portal and had a throw down and then vanished again so i guess at some point in the future we do get time powers and also fight
TG: but i got the sword i needed to and i pissed her off so much she and damz just left me here
TA: wait you're on your own?
TG: i am now yeah
TG: and i know the last time i was unsupervised for like five minutes i died horribly so dont worry ive already messaged dirk
TA: ii2 he comiing two meet you?
TG: hes not messaged me back yet which is really weird actually
TG: i mean im not worried but
TA: you're worriied.
TG: im gonna pester him again one sec

[turntechGodhead began pestering timaeusTestified]
TG: dirk youre worrying me
TG: goddamn i am happy hal has his own body and all but i kinda miss him being your answering service so this doesnt happen
TT: Oh hello dave! Not to worry dirk will be right as rain in just a tick he just got attacked and lost his shades which is why i say to always have multiple computers on you at once. Lucky for him i found these!
TG: hi jake is he ok or what
TT: Hi Dave, sorry about that. I’ve just been mildly stabbed but I’m fine, have I mentioned that I hate my planet?
TG: What’s up?
TT: uh one sec

[turntechGodhead began pestering twinArmageddons]
TG: uh so you and your cool brain powers are allowed to be on planets on your own right and youre solo today arent you?
TA: yeah?
TG: seeing as i pissed off my teammates could i band up with you?
TG: i mean i know its a pain and i would ask dirk but apparently he just got stabbed so i want him to take care of that
TG: and karkat is with kankri and if i have to spend time with kankri on his planet i may have to stab everyone there including myself
TG: and hal is dealing with the other sprites i think and trying to get signlesssprite to stop being weird
TG: not that youre like the bottom of my list or anything im just saying that i wouldnt be asking you this huge solid if i hadnt already considered other ways to not inconvenience you cause i know you got sick shit to do on your planet and all
TG: plus i really am not down for dying again so
TA: if i don't interrupt you could ju2t go on all day liike that couldn't you?
TG: yes so for the love of god save me from myself here man
TA: ii'm already on my way dumba22. tell tt two 2tay put.
TG: sweet imma go tell dirk that

[turntechGodhead began pestering timaeusTestified]
TT: Dave?
TT: Is everything ok?
TT: I’m coming over there.
TG: no wait its cool heal up your stab wounds get that first aid on
TG: and second and third aid i guess
TG: i would say ask jake to kiss it better but you dont want gross mouth germs in your wound like mouths have bacteria and stuff even when they belong to your soulmate
TT: Why did you message me in the first place? What’s wrong?
TG: my team ditched me and i wanted backup but its ok sollux is coming instead
TG: hes got brain lasers and everything so i super wont die
TT: Hm.
TG: what
TT: Nothing. Check in with me in an hour to let me know how it’s going.
TT: And maybe tell Karkat that you’re fighting with his sisters, he’s supposed to be doing all of the group mediation so it sounds like his sort of thing.
TG: ugh but i dont wanna
TG: besides i was right anyway
TG: maybe i could have rubbed me being right in her face less but i was still right
TG: aw dicks i gotta apologise dont i
TT: There are less than forty people left alive in the universe, Dave. You probably should try not to piss off a significant portion of the population.
TT: You don’t have to say you were wrong, just apologise for being a tool about it.
TG: is this advice coming from personal experience
TT: For the record, Jake was reading over my shoulder and is now snort laughing on the floor so I am now emotionally and physically wounded.
TG: well ill leave you to bandage that stab wound and put ice on that self burn cause i think sollux is here
TT: Later.
TG: later
[timaeusTestified ceased pestering turntechGodhead]

Sollux descends from the sky in a slow crackle of red and blue and finally lands in front of you with a judgemental expression on his face.

“Aradia won’t tell me what you were arguing about.” he says instead of leading with hello or anything like that.

You pretty much don’t want to say that you were arguing about him because that sounds really weird and also pretty presumptuous of you so you just shrug.

“It’s fine, I’ll talk to her later.” you say, though Sollux doesn’t look too convinced.

Sollux’s theory is that Hal's assessment of him as deadly is mostly based on his psionics and not on his class or aspect especially, so he's no more likely to become better skilled on his planet than yours. You on the other hand apparently are going to be time travelling so you clearly do need to stay on your planet and grind these dumb quests out. In fact the very idea of abandoning your planet and not learning to time travel sets your teeth on edge in a weird way. It takes a few minutes of walking around with Sollux to the next quest point before it occurs to you that if you left then you couldn't have seen yourself time travelling and you just did so- uugh. Assuring yourself that you're not going to leave makes you feel better but you chalk that up to something to talk to Aradia and Damara about later. That is if Aradia wants to talk to you.

You watch as Sollux picks up an imp with his mind powers and squeezes it until it bursts into grist without any apparent effort. Is he stronger than Mituna? As far as you know they're about the same level but Mituna is older than him, so maybe Solllux is going to be stronger. The very idea of that is pretty incomprehensible to you as you’ve seen first hand what Mituna's powers can do at a fractional level. What can Psii do? Well, you know what he is doing right now. Right now he's an unwilling battery and the very reason that you're working to get your supposed powers to a level where you can hold Fish Bitch in place for everyone else to lay a smackdown on her and stage a rescue.

"That looks promising." Sollux remarks, pointing across a lake of lava in the centre of a huge cog to a gold nakkodile statue in the middle.

"I'm not sure I want to put a jetpack that close to lava." you say slowly as you lean down to look at the hot bubbling surface of molten rock. You're pretty sure that heat convection doesn't work the same way in the game as it does back on Earth because there's no way you could contain lava with metal like this or fly over it without being cooked. That said it is still more than hot enough to kill you or heat your jetpack up enough to potentially explode it.

"I'm all out of extra lives and all and a jetpack is just a bomb that you can move around with and turn off when you want. Probably not good with lava." you add.

"Maybe there's a bridge or something we can pull up," Sollux says thoughtfully.

"Or... or you could fly me over." you say as the idea occurs to you.
Sollux turns to look at you with wide eyes but doesn't manage to say anything despite making a few attempts.

"It's not like I'm that heavy and I've seen the shit you can lift. You've been throwing imps around for ages without any sweat." you say.

"Yeah, I've been killing them. Aren't you worried that I might pick you up an accidentally crush you? That's a lot of trust you're putting in me." he says slowly.

"I've never seen you accidentally crush things, does that happen?" you ask. You honestly can't think of a time you've seen him screw up with his cool telekinesis.

"No but it's your life, not a soda can." he argues.

"It's cool, I trust you. Let's go." you tell him.

He stares at you for a moment longer and then shakes his head with a sigh.

"Stay still." is all he tells you and after that you feel his psionics close around you. It's a little like the tingling of pins and needles if it was only on the very surface of your skin and only very faint. It floods across your whole body like jumping into a pool and the slightest haze of alternating red and blue flares over you and tints your vision. You float upwards, weightless as if in water and Sollux rises up off of the ground with you. You look around as much as you can without moving and work out that you're roughly about six feet off of the ground now. With the slightest of turns the two of you shoot off across the lake of lava towards the gold structure in the centre. This isn't like the unassisted flight that you felt with your dreamself, or the wind in your face of flying with a jetpack, this is like being wrapped up safe and able to look out at the world around you as you soar through the air. Far too soon you're gently let back down onto a golden floor and gravity comes back to you.

"Damn that was cool." you whisper in awe.

"Of course it was, I'm cool." Sollux snorts and shoves you further into the golden nakkodile building.

The walls inside have writing all over them, describing time as a force of the universe. About how it adds another dimension to reality just as physical space does. The more that it explains the more you feel like what it says it obvious. You already knew this somewhere, or you had a kind of primal understanding of it. It all makes so much sense. At least until you get to the end of the wall and it just says 'listen here'.

"What does that mean?" you grumble, walking this way and that to look at it.

"Are those handprints on the wall?" Sollux asks, pointing to where the text ends. You squint at it and after a moment you relent and remove your shades to see that there is a very faint matte texture on the wall in the shape of two handprints. Carefully you place one hand and then the other on the prints, a little creeped out but not surprised to note that they are exactly your size.

"It says listen here." you say, reading the text again.

"So maybe do that?" Sollux suggests.

Straining your ears you can hear the slightest sound, but you're not sure if you can just hear your pulse. Curiously you lean closer to the wall and then press your ear to the metal. A ticking sound fills your head, though it vanishes when you pull back from the wall. Once more your lean in and listen. The ticks are slow and even, the rhythmic tick of a clock pounding through your skull. It's got to be
bone conduction letting you hear this or something similar because it sounds like it's coming from inside your head.

All of a sudden a section of the wall jerks forward, slamming you in the chest and knocking you on your back. You gasp for air and your heart thuds in alarm, except it's not getting faster. If anything it's slower. You press a hand to your chest and feel it, the tick and tock of the universe thudding in your chest. You can feel it in your pulse in your teeth, in the progression of life in your cells, the turning of the gears outside. You're following the red thread of time as it runs through you, every second and moment just as real as the ones to come and the ones that have been.

You reach out and grab at that string and follow it. Back to the moment you stood and looked out at Jupiter, back to the moment you first kissed Karkat, to the moment you saw Bro's blood on the pavement, to the first time you met Rose and Roxy, to Dirk patching your injuries and back to when you met Dirk for the first time as a baby. You flow forward to Sollux leaning over you calling your name and the thread unravels into different strings fading outward into uncountably different possibilities, you can't see where they all go but the potential of them fans out before you.

You cough and drag air back into your lungs and the sensation of time fades to no more than a background tick and the unshakable knowledge of belonging to your aspect.

"Dave!" Sollux yells at you again.

"I'm cool." you croak and rub at your chest.

"What the hell was that?!" he shrieks and glares at the wall as if it's going to try something again.

"I just got an understanding of time smacked into me." you groan.

Your hand over your heart feels strange and you press your fingers into the pulse point in your neck to feel something very odd. No longer is there the normal thu-thump of a heartbeat under your fingers, now there is just a steady tick of a pulse that you know with certainty matches the gears outside.

"Can you feel my pulse? I think it's weird." you ask, taking your own hand away to make room for him.

Sollux frowns but does reach out and press his warm fingers to your neck, you force down the kneejerk reaction to shy away from the touch. Too many times of seeing Bro grab Dirk by the throat and of him doing it to you have made you touchy about it. But you asked for him to do this and you just trusted the guy to carry you across lava with his brain, it's fine.

"Your heart is beating wrong." Sollux says worriedly.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. It's a time thing I think." you explain, sitting up and rubbing at your chest.

"That's not how hearts work." Sollux points out as you haul yourself to your feet.

"You just flew me over magic lava with your brain in the video game universe that you helped program." you point out. You're pretty sure you left logic behind a good while ago. You can't even see that shit in your rearview mirror anymore.

You look at him and note the way that he still looks faintly worried and how you had chewed out Aradia for lying to him before and the moment feels strange. Your ears thud with the steady tick of time and you can feel threads of time separating out before you, one feels better than the other and so
you speak almost without thinking.

“I was arguing about you. With Aradia I mean.” you say, almost in a daze.

“What?” he says, seemingly confused by your out of nowhere admission.

“You asked earlier what happened. I got into a kind of argument with her about all that shit that went down with you two and how she was wrong. But I know it’s none of my business.” you mumble as a hot prickle of embarrassment runs up your neck.

“It could be.” he replies and immediately looks mortified for saying that.

“What?” you ask. You rub the still sore patch on your chest as Sollux seems to figure out what it is that he wants to say. Eventually, he just scrunches his eyes shut and rubs at the back of his neck before finally speaking.

“Do you have a problem with Karkat and Kanaya dating?” he asks you. You figure that he’s going somewhere with this so you’ll play along.

“No way, she makes him happy. Besides, from what I understand she stops him doing a lot of dumb shit and he helps her.” you answer.

“More or less. They weren’t together when you first met, nearly but not quite. They kept circling around the whole thing.” Sollux explains.

You think of how highly strung your soulmate was when you first met him and though he still panicked and acted dumb when you got to school together you’re pretty sure that a good deal of the restraint he showed eventually was because of Kanaya. He was talking to her when he was locked in the car with you on that first day after all.

“And it doesn’t bother you that it’s a real quadrant? That it’s not just that they’re close?” he asks, probing a little more.

“Nah man, she makes him happy and that’s what I want. Besides I have a hard enough time looking out for myself, I don’t wanna be totally responsible for all of his feelings and wellbeing. I’d worry about screwing it up if I didn’t have her doing her thing. Plus I’m sure Kanaya needs someone to bounce the mystery of Rose’s snarky horseshit off of.” you say with a shrug. You love your sisters dearly but they still both drive you crazy sometimes and you give full credit to their soulmates for dealing with them all of the time.

“Speaking of Rose, I know you’re not pale for her but do you think you could ever have pale feelings for someone?” he asks, tapping his fingers on his skinny arm.

“I’m not dating my twin, why do I have to keep-” you begin to protest but Sollux claps a hand over your mouth.

“I didn’t say you were. I actually said I know you’re not, learn to listen dumbass.” he complains.

“I was asking if you could ever have pale feelings for someone. Like… me.” he mumbles.

His hand is still over your mouth and the reality of what he’s saying sinks into your brain slowly. Sollux has pale feelings for you? He seems to realise that he’s still got his hand over your mouth and pulls it back quickly.

“You’re pale for me?” you clarify because this will be hella embarrassing if he was just asking you
theoretically. He nods stiffly, his face going darker.

You open your mouth but you don’t know what to say. You’re with Karkat, of course, but he’s your soulmate. He’s made for you and all of your many imperfections, you’re meant to slot against him just fine. You don’t have to be perfect because you’re perfect for him by design. But this is someone liking you and wanting to be with you who isn’t made for you. You’re not so dumb as to not consider this a relationship, just because you don’t have the same type of feelings for him as you do for Karkat doesn’t mean that it wouldn’t be real. If you did this he’s be more than just your friend and your soulmate’s brother, oh and also your sister’s soulmate just to make it more complicated.

Do you even feel that for him?

You only have one idea of what to do here.

“I think I need to talk to Karkat.” you say carefully and Sollux nods.

“Yeah, of course. I’ll just… go outside. Yell if you need me.” he mumbles awkwardly and flies out of the golden nakkodile building quickly.

You whip out your phone and start typing a desperate message.

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]
TG: karkat please be here i really need your help here man
TG: i am in like defcon 5 over here
TG: was that the most severe one or the least i dont remember like did it go up or down
TG: top panic mode ok
CG: DAVE? WHAT’S WRONG? ARE YOU HURT?
TG: no man no mortal injuries here its not that
CG: THANK FUCK. WHAT’S WRONG THEN?
TG: uh
TG: suddenly im not really sure how to say this like how does a guy come out and bring this kinda thing up
TG: im no expert at bringing things up
TG: what do i look like an elevator attendant?
CG: DAVE YOU’RE RAMBLING.
TG: oh pressing issue what floor would you like to go to as i bring you up there in this metaphorical elevator that i alluded to earlier
CG: DAVE.
TG: your brother just asked me out
CG: OH, SOLLUX YOU MEAN?
TG: i would be suspicious of how you knew that but i guess itd never be kankri so youre like fifty fifty there
CG: AND HE’S HAD A CRUSH ON YOUR FOR A WHILE NOW AND I ALREADY KNEW.
TG: and you couldnt have clued *me* in?
CG: IT WAS PRIVATE AND I WANTED TO LET HIM TELL YOU HIMSELF RATHER THAN GO BEHIND HIS BACK. HE’S STILL MY BROTHER AND WE ALL KNOW HOW GREAT I AM AT ROMANTIC CONFESSIONS, I WASN’T EXACTLY IN ANY PLACE TO BE ADVISING HIM.
TG: why the hell does he feel pale for me though
TG: like you i get
TG: youre my soulmate you have to like me
CG: IT’S A GREAT PERSONAL FAILING THAT I FIND YOUR PERSONALITY AS
CHARMING AS I DO.
TG: love you too babe
TG: <3
CG: <3
CG: ARE YOU WANTING A SERIOUS ANSWER AS TO WHY I THINK HE’S
ATTRACTED TO YOU THOUGH?
TG: please
TG: i dont understand this shit so great
CG: I’M KIND OF PROUD THAT YOU’RE WILLING TO ADMIT THAT.
TG: har har
CG: I’M SERIOUS!
CG: BUT THAT SAID MY FEELINGS FOR YOU ARE A MASH OF EVERYTHING SO I
HAVE PALE INCLINATIONS TO YOU AS WELL. AND DON’T TAKE THIS THE
WRONG WAY BUT YOU’RE KIND OF WALKING DISASTER IN THE BEST WAY.
TG: yeah how could i take that badly
CG: I JUST MEAN THAT YOU CAN BE PRETTY WITHDRAWN IN YOUR TRUE
PERSONALITY WITH PEOPLE BUT ONCE SOMEONE BREAKS THROUGH THAT
YOU’RE SWEET AND ENDEARING. SO PEOPLE FEEL PRETTY SPECIAL WHEN YOU
ACTUALLY LET THEM IN, THAT’S TEXTBOOK PALE MOVIE TROPE THERE.
CG: AND BOTH YOU AND SOLLUX HAVE MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS MEANING
THAT YOU CAN UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER’S SHIT AND YOU’RE NOT GOING TO
PATRONISE EACH OTHER. YOU’RE SOMEONE HE CAN FEEL EMPATHY FOR AND
HE PROBABLY FEELS LIKE YOU DO BACK. YOU CAN BE ACTUALLY HELPFUL TO
EACH OTHER WITHOUT IT BEING LIKE THOSE CREEPS THAT LOOK OUT FOR
*DAMAGED* PEOPLE TO RELY ON THEM. IT’S NOT LIKE THAT BECAUSE YOU’RE
IN SIMILAR BOATS.
TG: well yeah i mean his shit is worse than mine like thats half the reason i got kinda pissed about
aradia making him worse
CG: YES, WELL. YOU ALREADY ACT PROTECTIVE OF HIM. YOU WENT TO HIM
WHEN YOU WERE HURT AND VULNERABLE AND YOU WERE ALREADY FRIENDS
BEFORE. THERE’S A LOT OF PALE STUFF GOING ON THERE.
TG: yeah i mean i like hanging with him and its not like i gotta pretend and we can just play games
and hang
CG: YOU’RE COMFORTABLE WITH HIM.
TG: yeah
TG: but if i was pale with him wouldnt i be responsible for making him better as a person?
CG: WELL YEAH BUT YOU DON’T OWN HIM, YOU JUST HAVE TO LOOK OUT FOR
HIM ON THE UNDERSTANDING THAT HE LOOKS OUT FOR YOU TOO.
TG: but what if i fuck it up
CG: THEN EITHER YOU FUCKED IT UP AND YOU BOTH MOVE ON OR YOU FIX IT.
YOU KNOW, LIKE WITH ANY RELATIONSHIP.
TG: i dont know if i feel pale for him though its not like ive seen it a lot in movies or anything and im
human
TG: you guys say were all pale slutty anyway and everyone thinks me and rose are like that
CG: YOU DON’T HAVE TO DO THIS IF YOU DON’T WANT TO DAVE. BUT YOU CAN
ALWAYS TELL HIM ALL OF THIS AND EITHER AGREE TO WAIT OR MAYBE PLAY
IT BY EAR AND SEE HOW IT GOES. MAYBE YOU CAN’T BE ANYONE’S MOIRAIL,
BUT MAYBE IT’D BE GOOD FOR YOU.
TG: and you dont mind?
CG: NOT AT ALL. I GET WHY HE FEELS LIKE HE DOES ABOUT YOU AND I KNOW
THE TWO OF YOU DON’T HAVE RED FEELINGS FOR EACH OTHER WHICH I THINK
WOULD BOTHER ME.
TG: yeah no
CG: YOU SHOULD MAYBE CLEAR THIS WITH ROXY IF YOU FEEL LIKE GOING AHEAD THOUGH. SHE IS HIS SOULMATE.
TG: aw fuck i didnt think about that
CG: YEAH, DO THAT.
CG: LOOK I HAVE TO GET BACK, DAVE. BUT JUST TAKE A MINUTE AND THINK ABOUT YOUR ACTUAL FEELINGS WITHOUT GETTING ALL I'M A STRIDER AND TOO COOL FOR FEELINGS ABOUT IT. BE HONEST.
TG: …
TG: is this kind of pale?
CG: YEAH BUT YOU’RE MY SOULMATE, I HAVE ALL OF THE FEELINGS.
CG: I GOTTA GO YELL AT KANKRI NOW.
TG: have fun with that
CG: UGH.
[carcinoGeneticist ceased pestering turntechGodhead]

You groan and bang your phone on your forehead a few times. Why does all this stuff have to be so complicated? You’re not a troll, you shouldn’t have to deal with quadrants. But then again Roxy is Sollux’s kismesis and she’s not a troll, plus aside from Kanaya you know that Karkat doesn’t do quadrants at all and he is a troll. This isn’t as simple as you would like. Is this even something that you want?

You like him, of course you do. You have pretty much ever since you started hanging out with him. He’s a guy who you can chill easily with, he’s non judgemental and pretty damn cool in his own nerdy way. He’s your friend. But Karkat is right, you did go to him when you were in pain, you have told him stuff about Bro and not worried about it. Hell, you messaged him to come and be your backup instead of John or Jade. The thought of Aradia betraying him rubs you the wrong way in a way that Kanaya hiding shit from Rose didn’t. Sure you disapproved of that and felt bad for Rose but you just offered her your sympathy and an ear to bitch to and considered it her business. So maybe there is something pale there and you’re too culturally oblivious to realise it.

Doesn’t that mean that you’ll be bad at it though?

Shit, you need to talk to Roxy before you can even make a decision about this.

[turntechGodhead began pestering tipsyGnostalgic]
TG: uh rox can i talk to you
TG: im a lil busy here dave is it important or can it wait?
TG: its kinda pressing actually
TG: before i like
TG: lose my nerve or some shit like that
TG: you know what actually you probably are hella busy so maybe ill just let you get on with that and whatever
TG: uh nope! not with a response like that lil man
TG: whats up lil bro?
TG: uh
TG: you know your soulmate
TG: sollux i mean not jane
TG: i am aware of him yeah
TG: i know you two arent dating yet but hes like your kismesis yeah?
TG: to be honest i think that kind of thing will probably fluctuate over time between pitch and flush if we are gonna use troll terms for it and what have you
TG: but not pale?
TG: god no
TG: ok cool cool
TG: ...why were you asking that dave?
TG: uh
TG: OMG you have a pale crush on him dont you!
TG: uuuugh kill me
TG: omg this is adorable im gonna die
TG: ahahahaha dave of last year was like “o no i am so straight” and dave of this year is like “bitch i got two boyfriends”
TG: rox i will strangle you
TG: i kid i kid
TG: were you asking me permission to date him paleways or somthin?
TG: *something
TG: actually i dont think i needed to correct that one you knew what i meant
TG: ugh
TG: look i dont know if i really get this or not but he likes me and i think i might like him so maybe i should try it but i figured i should ask you if youd be cool with it or not because he is your soulmate after all
TG: no dude its totes mcgotes cool with me
TG: p considerate of you actually
TG: and you should for sho ask him out, i know people go on about soulmate relationships being a given and non soulmate relationships not being the same and not knowing its gonna work out can be scary but you should go for it
TG: if it works out then great if not then thats ok too
TG: u miss 100% of the shots you dont take and all that
TG: can i cram any more big sister advice in here?
TG: i think thats pretty chock full of sisterly advice
TG: sweet
TG: go tenderly pat that losers face or something
TG: actshually… while i have u bro does your planet have writing on the walls in places?
TG: yeah
TG: have you seen anything about a ring of void or a ring of life?
TG: nope
TG: why
TG: there was supposed to be a ring of void in this cave that ive spent all day spelunking
TG: apparently the ring of void and ring of life are like connected and only one can be around at a time and the other is always lost and theres no void ring here
TG: huh thats odd have you checked with the life players?
TG: if anyone would have a ring of life that would make your void ring vanish youd think itd be them
TG: good idea ill ask about it
TG: ok later rox
TG: later dave
[turntechGodhead ceased pestering tipsyGnostalgic]

You shove your phone back in your sylladex and huff out a stressed breath as you stare at the gold ceiling above you. Everyone is cool with this happening, you might even have feelings for the guy and Roxy’s right it doesn’t matter if it doesn’t work out for ever and ever. Your therapist would have probably thought that having someone whose relationship with you was looking after your wellbeing would be good for you what with your hard time having relationships of any kind with other dudes. Hah, Bro would totally kill you for having not just one boyfriend but two. Hah, fuck that dude. It’s a good damn indication of whether something is a good idea if Bro would have hated you doing it.
Especially if your therapist would have approved. Huh… she’s dead now isn’t she? Along with everyone else on Earth but still you hadn’t thought of it until now.

Well maybe you can do one thing for her memory and take a chance on something that might be good for you. You nod to yourself and step outside of the golden building and look up in the sky to see Sollux floating there with his arms wrapped around himself. He looks down at you and you can see how anxious he is.

“Fuck man, can we just forget that I said anything? I get that it was a dumb idea and you don’t feel the same, you don’t have to-” he starts to ramble self-consiously and you narrow your eyes at him and decide that you don’t like uncertainty as a look on him. You want to fix it, to make it so he doesn’t feel shitty about himself.

Well, damn.

“Would you be my moirail?” you ask, interrupting him.

Sollux drops a foot in the air in surprise and stares at you with wide mismatched eyes.

“Seriously?” he asks, his tongue catching on his lisp.

“If you want.” you nod.

“Holy shit yes I want.” Sollux blurts out and lands on the ground next to you.

“I’m pretty sure I have no idea what I’m doing, just to warn you.” you tell him.

“That’s ok.” he nods.

“Alright then, cool.” you grin and offer him a fist. He stares at it for a second and then his mouth spreads into a smile that shows off all of his jagged fangs, he bumps your fist enthusiastically with his.

“Damn, well… I have an idea about something that I didn’t want to suggest before but if you’re my moirail…” Sollux says thoughtfully.

“What’s that?” you ask curiously.

“We go fight some of the underlings. And you fight one of the Bro prototyped ones on your own. You wouldn’t be so freaked out about being here on your own if you knew you could take them. I’ve seen you fight and I know how good you are, and I’ve fought those things before and so have other people. I don’t know how strong Bro was but I bet they’re not totally as strong as him. The game still does scale shit for players. I bet you could take them and I’ll hang close and blast it to grist if it gets dangerous.” Sollux suggests.

Your instinctive reaction is to nope the hell out of that idea, but you hate being afraid of a dead man and his ghosts. You’re not afraid of the other imps although you have a healthy respect for the fact that they can hurt you but your fear of the Bro prototyped ones is visceral and intense. This probably is a good idea, just not a fun one.

Isn’t that what Karkat said that moirails do? Do what’s best for you even if it’s not what makes you the happiest at the time?

“Okay… just…” you trail off, not knowing what it is you want him to do. He already said that he’ll laser the thing if it goes south, what more do you need?
“Okay.” you repeat, more confidently this time.

“Come on then.” Sollux says and you’re struck with the sensation of his psionics washing over your skin and you’re floating up in the air. You glide above the lava and over scaffolded skeletons of buildings, cogs tick under you in time with your new heartbeat. The two of you skirt low over groups of enemies but it takes a while until you spot one with Bro’s face.

Sollux sets you carefully on the floor around the other side of a building so that you can both peer around the corner of it and see it but it can’t see you.

The underling is tall, probably more basilisk than imp but not as big as one of the ogres. It has two sets of arms, the sword and wings from Bowie, and Bro’s face and shades. It’s amazing how attuned someone can get to just the profile of something terrifying. Hundreds of thousands of years ago cavemen who recognised the outline of a bear coming towards them ran and lived and that DNA lives on in your own cells which see the shape of Bro’s face and his shades and scream the same kind of danger.

You don’t remember drawing your sword but hey look, it’s there in your hand now. You don’t live with Bro anymore, you’re not acclimatised to facing him down now. You’ve never wanted to fight him but at least before you could restrain the urge to run but now you’re barely managing it. Can’t you just leave?

A clawed hand rests on your shoulder and you remember why you’re here. Facing your fears. Bro is dead and gone, even his sprite blew up and you burnt his body. It’s time to stop running from him and giving him any more power.

“I’m gonna…” you whisper, tilting your head towards the so far oblivious Bro basilisk. Broskilisk? Oh yeah, you like that word, you’re keeping it. Gonna tuck that in snug on your mental dictionary all at home in the b section.

You’re rambling, and apparently out loud if the expression on Sollux’s face is anything to go by. Whoops, haven’t done that in a while.

“I’ll be here ready to bail you out if you need it.” he assures you.

You nod.

You’re still standing there.

Okay, leaving now for real. Really.

Eventually, you gather up the stones to inch out around the corner of the building and sneak towards the Broskilisk with your sword readied. You stomp down on the fear and try to focus on the upcoming fight. The thing is tall so it’ll have a higher centre of gravity, pushing its balance might be a good plan. However, that second set of arms could prove a problem so very close quarters would be unwise. The best tactic would be to duck in and out of range and evade, it’s bigger than Bro was so may well be slower. Speed is key.

Of course the Broskilisk sees you before you can launch your attack. It whips the sword out of its elongated torso and leaps for you. You block, it’s a clear move to read and meant to convey aggression and intent of a strife more than it is to actually harm. All the same the blow reverberates down your sword and into your wrists.

You parry his sword away and slash but find yourself blocked and have no choice but to leap back to avoid another attack. Your gaze flicks from the sword to the Broskilisk’s face, to Bro’s face.
There’s no emotion there, there so rarely was. Man, fuck that guy. You remember watching him attack Dirk, leaving him concussed and oozing blood. You remember him taping you to the goddamn tower and nearly killing you. Mom was only just barely better and that was a low bar. Karkat described your situation once, what was it he said again? Oh yeah. ‘Why did you get such a raw cut of the asshole deck?’

Fuck this guy, you didn’t deserve this shit.

You throw yourself forward, duck the sword swipe and jam your sword into his chest and yank downwards. You cut him far enough that the game registers it as a high damage enough attack and disassembles the Broskilisk into pure grist. You didn’t even see his face when you did it, you didn’t get to see if he finally had an expression besides nothing or anger. Somehow you don’t care.

Sollux is there, he’s talking but you can’t hear him over the buzzing in your head. It’s only when he cautiously touches your cheek that you find yourself snapped back to reality.

“Spaced out there, that ain’t even my aspect.” you joke weakly.

“Stick to time. I knew you could beat him, they’re not as strong as Bro was.” Sollux agrees.

“Yeah, no way would Bro have let me get that hit in. They’re way stronger than the other enemies but they’re not his kind of strong. Is it ironic that what he did probably trained me to a level where I can beat those things?” you wonder and stare down at the grist that litters the floor.

“I really need to teach you about what irony actually means.” Sollux snorts in amusement and you feel your own mouth curl slightly.

“Don’t you dare.” you reply. You’re trying to make a joke but it still feels a little weak, at the very least he doesn’t call you on it.

“So, wanna find some other quests?” Sollux asks a moment later and you nod. Getting time travel powers sounds awesome right about now.

You spend the rest of the day pretty productively questing around your planet with Sollux and watching as he too continues to sprint up his escheladder. Your excuse is that you were so busy doing that so you didn’t get the chance to tell Dirk what you’d done until that evening when he’s standing in the kitchen.

“You WHAT?” Dirk demands, turning slowly to look at you.

“I defeated one of the Bro prototyped monsters on my own. The brototted ones if you will.” you explain.

“I will not.” Dirk replies immediately.

“Dude.” you protest.

“Why did you take one on by yourself? I thought we talked about that, you could have been killed!” Dirk scolds you.

“I wasn’t on my own. Sollux was there to shoot it if I fucked it up, it was just to prove that I could. For the record I can beat them, they’re not as tough as Bro. They’re still hard and I’m not gonna go out of my way to pick a fight but I know I can take them now. You don’t have to worry about me now.” you tell him reassuringly, and Dirk’s expression softens a little.
“Sorry, worrying about you is something I’m gonna do as long as I’m alive. I do feel a little better knowing that you can beat those things, just don’t get cocky with them is all.” he warns you.

“Yeah, well I’m not super eager to fight anything that looks like Bro.” you mutter.

“Ain’t that the truth. Crocker, I swear if you put any more sugar in that I will kill you will this spoon.” Dirk threatens, turning to glare at the not so stealthy Jane who is sprinkling sugar into the burrito filling in the giant saucepan.

“Sugar counteracts chilli and this is too spicy.” Jane argues, trying to push her spoon of sugar over the pot but Dirk takes it from her.

"Weak." Dirk teases her.

You leave them to their arguing on spice levels and whether the closeness of Texas to Mexico matters now that there is no Texas or Mexico anymore and what relevance that has on how spicy dinner is. Instead, you find all of the void and life players except for Jane in the living room along with Hal who is perched on the back of one of the chairs.

"What makes you think I would take it?" Meenah demands haughtily.

"You are a thief of life." Roxy points out.

"Just because the void ring is missing doesn't mean we're certain that someone has the life ring, it might just be set up on one of the life player's planets waiting to be found. I don't think someone needs to be in physical possession of the life ring for the void one to be missing." Hal explains, tapping one clawed finger on the back of the chair.

"Besides there are more people around than us. The consorts, the people on Derse and Prospit, not to mention Condy herself." Feferi adds helpfully.

"It would be very unfortunate indeed if she had it given that it essentially grants a kind of immortality." Equius says grimly.

"All the more reason to keep an eye out for either of the rings." Hal agrees.

"You didn't find it then?" you ask.

"Unfortunately not." Roxy says and turns to look at you. A sly grin takes over her face.

"What about you though, Dave? Did you score any sweet loot today, huh?" she asks deviously and you know for sure that she means Sollux.

"Uh, I think I hear Karkat calling me, bye." you say quickly and hightail it out of there, just catching Horuss saying that he didn't hear anything as the door closes after you.

You do manage to track Karkat down in his room. He's sat on his bed reading a book all by himself, he looks up at you when you come in.

"Oh, it's just you." he says and looks back down at his book.

"Boy you sure know the way to my heart." you snort, leaning on the doorframe.

"More like I spent all day with my terrible brother and the number of people whose presence I will tolerate right now is very small." Karkat grumbles. You can see him grinding his teeth in irritation. It must have been tough. You push off from the doorframe and close the door behind you, leaving just
you and Karkat in the quiet of his adopted room.

"Can I stay then or aren't I cool enough?" you ask.

"Well you sure as shit aren't cool but I'll let you stay." Karkat says without looking up at you but you can see the smallest hint of a smile at the edge of his mouth.

To be honest you could do with some time to chill, you had a pretty eventful day and this whole end of the world thing has really muscled in on your Karkat time. You spend all day away from him and only see him for some of the evening when you're both here, often he's busy trying to corral everyone else into not going off of the deep end. Not that you don't appreciate him putting the breaks on Vriska or Meenah, not to mention his public service of clown control. You'd still like to hang with him more though. You climb onto his bed next to him and slot yourself against his side and put your headphones in and turn some music on as he reads. The pair of you are quietly doing your own thing and just enjoying each other's company. It's not often that time between you two is quiet, most often there's Karkat enthusiastically ranting about something or another and if it's not that then you're babbling on in tangents and metaphors. All the same quiet is nice sometimes.

When you get bored of just listening to music you roll onto your front and pull your lately neglected sketchbook out. You draw the nakkodule building that you were in today, you sketch out gears in lava. For good measure you draw a well-practiced Karkat, you know his crazy birds nest of hair by heart as well as the shape of his eyes. You turn a little to catch a look of Karkat just to check that you're being accurate only to find that he's stopped reading and is instead staring at your work with wide eyes and a dark blush over his cheeks. You belatedly realise that you've never drawn in front of him before, or not so that he could see what you were doing at least.

"You're really good." Karkat whispers, like he's afraid to startle you away or break the moment.

"I have a lot of practice." you shrug.

"In drawing me?" he asks incredulously.

"I... may have been doing that for a bit." you confess and flick back a good distance in your sketchbook to almost the beginning and the page with the taped in photo.

"That's- that's the day we met. When you took that picture of me instead of shaking my hand like a normal person." he gasps and crawls forward to look at it better. You know this picture like the back of your hand too, Karkat so desperately earnest but so nervous. Neither of you knew then that you were soulmates but Karkat was already seemingly struck with nerves at meeting you. It's tooth-achingly sweet when you think of it like that.

"When did you develop this?" he asks, looking over at you with a stunned look on his face.

"Before I met you again. You scared the shit out of me but I couldn't stop thinking about you either, how did you think Rose knew who you were when she saw you?" you ask. Karkat stares at the photo some more, seemingly at a very rare loss for words.

You watch his throat work as he swallows thickly and sets the sketchbook back down on the blankets. He looks at you and then pushes you so that he has you pinned on your back on the bed so that he can kiss you like he'll die if he doesn't.

"I sometimes forget just how much it's true." he mumbles and kisses you again.

"What's true?" you ask, not totally caring about the answer because you are down for Karkat makeouts. Those too have been in tragically short supply since the world ended.
"That you were made for me. I'm a romance-obsessed idiot and you manage to be- it's just I couldn't have dreamed you up if I'd tried." Karkat says shakily.

You kiss him to shut him up because you're not sure that your emotionally stunted brain can cope with hearing him say shit like that to you. It's like he's trying to kill you with lines like that which by all rights should make you laugh at how cheesy they are but because it's him they just don't. Instead you're caught between the contrast of the cool sopor laced blankets below you and the furnace of heat that is Karkat.

You don't know how long it is until Kanaya knocks on Karkat's door to tell him that dinner is ready. But it takes you a minute or two to fix your hair and straighten your shirt out so it doesn't look like you two have been all up in each other's biz with your sloppy interspecies makeouts. You're pretty sure that your attempts at disguise fail because both John and Dirk shoot you knowing looks when you show up. But Dirk has no grounds to be teasing you what with how he is with Jake. You bumped into Dirk on the way out of the shower this morning and you saw all those hickies and fingerprint shaped bruises on him, besides if you think of that too long you might barf because your bro boning anyone is gross. As for John he's a goober and he's not got the stones up to make a move on his soulmate yet so he can't laugh at you for enjoying your time with yours. Goddamn everyone getting up in your grill.

Dinner is the kind of organised chaos that you have come to love, people laughing and joking. Someone always has some kind of wild story to tell about what happened in their land that day, today Jake is enthusing about how he busted out of the window of one of his mirrored skyscrapers and into the window of the one opposite. Apparently, it was just like an action movie. Meenah gladly recounts how she got eaten by a ruby gliclopse and busted out of its chest from the inside. Latula sighs and tells Terezi that no matter how red it is there is a limit on how much salsa is too much salsa.

“Dave, how was your time training today?” Vriska asks as she swipes a bowl of guacamole from Tavros’ hands even though he was clearly still using it.

“Pretty good actually. I got the legendary weapon but it’s broken so it’s more like a legendary piece of shit right now. But I think I’ve worked out how to repair it with the alchemiter so I’m gonna do that later. I got a bunch of quests done too.” you say and bite into your burrito.

“And Dave can kill the Bro prototyped enemies solo now.” Sollux adds.

Aradia shoots Sollux a questioning look. You try to keep a neutral face. You’ve not really told anyone about the two of you yet, much less his ex. Shit.

“That’s excellent Dave, you’re proving to be surprisingly competent!” Vriska says in apparent obliviousness.

“Gee, thanks.” you sigh irritably and focus on your food instead.

“We also saw an Aradia and Dave from the future fighting and then disappearing.” Damara adds helpfully.

“That reminds me, John, I need to copy your strife deck card for hammerkind.” you say quickly.

“Oh, yeah sure.” John nods.

“Do you have any idea what the two of you were fighting about?” Vriska asks curiously.

You look up at Aradia and lock eyes with her. You feel a skitter of psionics up the back of your neck but it’s more of a cold touch than Sollux’s static buzz, they’re hers not his. She knows. Or at least she
suspects anyway.

“No idea.” Aradia says, still staring at you.

“None.” you agree.

“Huh. Well keep an eye on that I guess, can’t have time players fighting through time. That could cause all kinds of problems.” Vriska comments, as if there’s any way you could prevent that fight. You focus on your food and try to avoid thinking about how things are going to spiral into a situation that will lead you to fighting with Aradia. You don’t enjoy fighting with people, much less physically but evidently it has to happen. You suppose the least that you can do is try to make sure that it’s just a small fight that is just a flash in the pan rather than a friendship ruining thing. Despite all that went on between her and Sollux you do actually like the girl and did like being friends with her. Like Dirk pointed out the number of people in the universe is pretty small now and it’d be best to not piss her off more than you have to.

Over the next couple of days you try to adjust to being in a relationship with someone else. You're still not sure if you're going to be any good at it but you’re at least going to try and not half-ass it. It's still pretty wild to you that you have so many people in your life that you care about. For so long your world was just Dirk, he was the only person you cared about. Of course then Hal came along and doubled the number of people you talked to. Then you met your sisters and through her John and Jade but they were separated by a screen. But now you have your family in person, your soulmate, your family's soulmates, your soulmate's family and the rest of your friends. You went from a social oasis in a desert to being smack bang in the middle of a jungle of people. It's nice if overwhelming sometimes. Your cool self is in high demand naturally, everyone wants Strider time.

Pleasingly as a moirail it doesn't seem like Sollux is super needy, you don't feel like you have to spend time with him. If anything you hide out in his room to get a break from John's pranks and the noise from the rest of your friends. Because as much fun as it is to see Kankri lose his shit from John dropping a bucket on him from atop a door the fallout is less entertaining, not to mention the shine comes off of that joke after the second time. Seeing Dirk making doe eyes at Jake all of the time is nauseating and there's only so much sister based teasing you can handle in one go. So you hide out in Sollux's room and play video games or work on alchemising shit for people as the two of you have a knack for the machine. You play games together and either vent about things or just talk about nothing in the spaces between one-upping each other at the games you play.

Still, you're pretty sure that you're doing it wrong. When you tell Karkat that he looks at you like you're especially dumb.

"Time with your morail is meant to be relaxing, dumbass. You're worrying about nothing." Karkat snorts at you.

So it's nice. But no matter what movies and books say, being around people who love you doesn't actually fix everything.

You wake up from a nightmare of ticking clocks and drowning in an hourglass that's filling with sand. That leads you to flailing awake and elbowing Rose right in the boob which she super doesn't appreciate. After that your whole day feels wrong. You're twitchy and you can't escape the feeling that your time until *something* is running out and you're going to be late. The fact that you have no idea what it is that you could possibly be late to does nothing to change this.

You make yourself some new threads to try to lift your mood. You've been sticking to suits because of the way Karkat reacts to them, plus you usually feel classy as fuck. This time you combine your record shirt and one of your other suits to get a white suit. On it your record logo from your shirt is
stitched into the breast pocket of it. It feels familiar, but you can’t see that you’ve made it before. Wearing it makes you feel no better.

Fighting the first few underlings on your planet doesn’t help in the way that an adrenaline surge sometimes can, like a reset of your system. Everything just sucks for no good reason.

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]
TG: karkat i super dont want to do today can today just fuck off and let me go back to bed?
CG: I AM UP TO MY NOOK IN ANGRY CRUSTACEANS, I ENTIRELY EMPATHISE. WHAT’S WRONG ON YOUR ANTI-ASMR PLANET?
TG: wouldnt there also have to be yelling for it to be anti asmr?
CG: WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO COME THERE AND YELL?
TG: you know it
CG: ALAS I HAVE TO CONTINUE TO WRANGLE THESE CRETINOUS CRUSTACEANS.
TG: ARE YOU OK THOUGH?
CG: ARE YOU OK THOUGH?
TG: im fine
TG: ugh
TG: theres nothing actually wrong im just doing stupid nakkodile quests that demand that i go to the nakkodile marketplace and have dumb conversations with reptiles
TG: hal is off doing the scary investigations about my denizen im just grinding
CG: AND YET…?
TG: idk
TG: its probably nothing
CG: DAVE.
TG: im just hella on edge for some reason
TG: way more than my planet usually makes me and i dont know why
CG: WELL I’M SURE YOU’VE LOOKED AROUND TO BE SURE THAT NO BIG MONSTERS ARE LURKING, I GUESS SOMETIMES YOUR BRAIN IS GOING TO MISFIRE AND SEE DANGER WHEN THERE IS NONE. YOU’VE HAD BAD DAYS BEFORE, RIGHT?
TG: yeah i had a bad dream but it wasnt that bad
CG: JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN’T PUT YOUR FINGER ON WHAT IT WAS DOESN’T MEAN THAT THERE’S NOT SOME TRIGGER TO THE CHANGE OF YOUR STATE OF MIND THAT YOU DON’T KNOW ABOUT. BESIDES THE GAME ISN’T EXACTLY CALM AND NONTHREATENING ANYWAY.
TG: i guess
CG: JUST KEEP PESTERING ME WHEN YOU NEED TO TAKE YOUR MIND OFF OF IT. AND WHEN YOU EAT LUNCH MAYBE WE COULD MEET UP HALFWAY AND GIVE YOU A BREAK. OR NOT EVEN ME, YOU COULD HANG WITH YOUR FAMILY OR MOIRAIL OR WHOEVER. JUST A CHANGE OF SCENE.
TG: yeah
TG: i will get back to my dumb as rock consorts then
CG: OK.
CG: <3
TG: <3
[turntechGodhead ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist]

You comb your hand through your hair and huff out a loud breath, puffing your cheeks up as you let it out slowly and hope it’ll take some of your tension with you. You’d think that your brain was tired of bathing itself in adrenaline after the life you’ve had but apparently it likes to just turn the tap on and wiggle around in that sweet fear juice.
That metaphor went weird.

You keep on with your quests solving puzzles about what event happened in what order based on feel. You can’t manipulate time yet but you can feel the natural flow of it, like vinyl flowing under your fingertips. You heft up one stone plate and waddle across the way to set it in the right place when you feel it again. The chill of fear up your spine. Your hearing sharpens and you can hear every gear click and grind, the bubble of the lava, the too hot air that’s much too similar to Bro’s roof for comfort.

TG: so im bothering you
CG: NOT REALLY, I MEAN I SAID YOU COULD.
CG: OH YOU MEANT LIKE MESSAGING ME, LIKE PESTERING ETC.
TG: that is what i meant
TG: i feel like im being snuck up on and im trying not to turn around because like
TG: if i turn around and nothing is there thats no goddamn proof that nothing was there because it never was before but the ive shown fear so im not doing it
CG: SO YOU’RE SORT OF OPTING OUT OF THE GAME?
TG: please dont call it a game
CG: WHY?
CG: SHIT NO FORGET I ASKED.
CG: DUMBASS, YOU’RE NOT SUPPOSED TO ASK SOMEONE WHY WHEN THEY MAKE REQUESTS LIKE THAT I FUCKING KNOW BETTER THAN TO DO THAT. UGHHH.
TG: can you just distract me with something else

You force yourself to drink something, the dry mouth of fear is not helping your state. There is nothing there, there isn’t. You pick up a different tablet and heft it above your head and if you turn a little as you walk to put it in its right place then it doesn’t mean you’re looking.

There’s nothing there.

CG: I AM SUDDENLY UNABLE TO THINK OF GOOD CONVERSATIONAL TOPICS.
TG: i have one

You snap a photo of the slate you just put in place and send it.

TG: does this or does this not look like one nakkodile boning the other?
CG: I MEAN IT DIDN’T BEFORE YOU SAID THAT BUT WHAT HAS BEEN SEEN CANNOT BE UNSEEN.
TG: imma turn my subahjifier on this
CG: WHY. YOU’RE GOING TO SEND THE TERRIBLE RESULT TO ME TOO, AREN’T YOU?
TG: haha

You snap a picture of it with the SBAHJifier and gaze over the terrible comic that it spits out. Fear shoots up your spine and you whip around, sword drawn to see nothing. Okay, clearly time for medication. You fumble through your sylladex and take your anti-anxiety stuff and quickly march back in the direction of the market, you’ll feel better when you’re not alone even if your only company is stupid nakkodiles.

Halfway there you realise that you left the SBAHJified photo on the floor but you’re not going back for it. Besides you needed to hand this quest in anyway, you can go back when you feel better. Everything is fine. It’s just like Karkat said, it’s a little anxiety attack.
Your brain is still running at a million miles an hour and if you talk to Karkat you’ll have to explain that you just left that photo and bailed and you have a little more pride than that. You need to distract yourself with someone else. You could hit up Sollux but he doesn’t always play ball with your rambling and you need someone who will. If anything he’s more likely to ask you why you feel this way and you don’t want help right now, just diversion. You need someone who will take your overly elaborate rambles and give you endless text back in return.

[turntechGodhead began pestering tentacleTherapist]
TG: hey quick question if you could ever swap bodies with me for like 24 hours would you?
TG: like real deal version of our whole halloween schtick
TT: Hmm, I don’t think I would for a whole day, no.
TT: Perhaps an hour, longer than that and I think worry and dysphoria would set in.
TT: Is the explanation for why you’re wondering this going to get inappropriate?
TG: arent i always mad inappropriate lalonde?

You focus on your breathing as you look this way and that on the way to the market place. Talking to Rose isn’t really helping yet.

TT: Quite. Although Dirk did point out before that your legal last name is not Strider but Lalonde, so Lalonde yourself.
TG: lalonde yourself is the best insult
TT: It does have a certain ring to it, I would say it to Vriska if I wasn’t certain she’d wildly misinterpret it.
TT: karkat keeps meaning to talk to you about that

Wind ruffles your hair and you skid to a halt, glancing behind you. Nothing there, you feel no better at all for looking. It’s just all the lava and gears, it makes weird breezes. That’s all it is.

TT: Indeed. Are you okay, Dave? You seem on edge.
TG: im fine
TG: just having a moment
TT: A panic attack?
TG: not yet
TT: Not “yet”? You anticipate it will go that way?
TG: fuck idk i took my meds but i dont feel better and i just super
TG: paranoid maybe
TG: hyperwhatever
TT: Hypervigilant?
TG: yeah that
TT: Perhaps you should sit down and focus on your breathing, I could come and see if that might help.
TG: im fine im going to the marketplace so im not alone
TT: Consorts are hardly company, it’s no trouble Dave, really. Your planet is only the next one over to mine.

The arching metal structure of the marketplace rises up before you. There are I beams laid out before it with festive bunting indicating the way in. The round structure of the building is open on all of the walls to the lava below it, just a waist-high railing for safety.

TG: its just paranoia
TT: You feel like you’re being stalked? You mentioned before that him watching you and following you unseen was traumatic. As it rightly would be.
TG: thats what it feels like but i cant see anything and looking just makes me feel like its real
TT: But not looking feels dangerous, a real catch 22.
TG: yeah i
You freeze.

On one of the vertical I beams leading to the marketplace, the last one which has the tail of the banners and bunting tied off on it is something else. An A4 piece of white paper with black typed text on it.

Do you want to play a game?

You freeze. It’s a stupid response but a billion years of evolution have taught your species that staying still so the big monster doesn’t see you and kill you is a valid fear response. You hear a sword being dragged out of its sheath and you know it’s only making noise because he wants it to. You hate that noise, that metal scraping sound.

You turn, slowly, pulling your own weapon from your strife specibus. Clenching it in your hands at least makes them shake less.

It’s Bro. Not a Bro prototyped enemy but Bro. Flesh and blood, living and standing before you with his sword drawn and Cal on his shoulders. Your heart grinds to a halt in your chest and your muscles freeze you in place. He’s supposed to be dead. His sprite blew up, you burnt his body, but he’s here and alive now. But what was it that Karkat said about that sprite? It didn’t seem whole, like the bad parts of Bro were missing. But even then they’d be dead and he isn’t a sprite he’s alive.

He’s alive.

There’s a blur of movement and you jerk backwards and haul your heavy legendary sword up to block his blow, it’s not as strong as usual and you realise why when his other hand flashes out and slaps the shades clean off of your face. They skitter along the floor. You can’t get help. No Dirk or Hal to come to your rescue. Bro moves to block off your path to picking them up again and forces you to back up.

Bro attacks again and parrying his blow nearly buckles your knees, and you keep backing away. You can’t win this. You can’t win this fight. You’re going to lose.

Twisting away you vault a small wall and sprint into the market but Bro is faster than you, he always was. You try to throw things in his path as you leap stalls and stands but nothing stops him. You catch an afterimage of Cal’s face in the air, his blue eyes boring into yours. Bro seizes your distraction and your throat, slamming you into the ground. Your head rings and for a moment your vision blots out. You feel the displaced air and roll to the side just in time as Bro’s shoe smacks down where your head had been moments before.

Your ears pound and you stumble, tripping over your dropped sword and grabbing it up with shaking hands. Around you terrified nakkodiles run for cover and Bro is on you again. Never giving you a moment to breathe, to see straight. You fight because it’s that or die, because you were raised to. But you’re fourteen and Bro is in his thirties and far stronger and faster than you. You never stood a chance.

This time when Bro slams you onto the iron ground you stay down. You cough and blood oozes out of your mouth. Given enough time Dirk and Hal will wonder where you are. You dropped out of a conversation with Rose, she’ll tell them that and they’ll come rescue you. You just have to stay alive until they get here. It’s just a matter of time and that is your thing.
Your body is rocked to the side slightly as Bro takes your sylladex off of you and all of your weapons and items spill out across the floor of the marketplace. Maybe Karkat will sense your pain and distress through his mark and send help, maybe that will happen. Maybe you also have a concussion because everything is hazy and spinning.

Bro’s black shoes come into view and you blink hazily at them, turning your head on the ground so you can look up at the man who is technically your father. His lip is pulled back in a disgusted sneer. That’s emotive for him.

“I wasted so much time on you.” he hisses and reaches down to grab you by the collar of your shirt and haul you up to your feet.

“Should never have let Dirk stay, he ruined you. Made you soft. But I can fix this.” Bro says, presumably more to himself than to you.

You tilt your head back to look at him better. You hate him so goddamn much. You hate him for who he is and who he chose not to be, for being someone who would rather hurt you than even do the very basics of looking after you.

“Got something to say?” Bro sneers, leaning in close to your face.

“Fag?” he adds.

Your mind flashes to Karkat, to how much you love him. To this new and very alien thing with Sollux. To Dirk injured and dripping blood as punishment for being who he is. Your mind goes to Roxy and Rose with their soulmates, to all of the people you know who love people who happen to be the same gender as them. You stare into the cold triangular lenses of a man who never loved you and may well have never loved anyone else either.

Fuck him.

You spit blood in his face and the snarl of rage at your defiance is well worth the broken nose that he gives you in return. That concussion is a pretty sure deal because you lose some time then. You feel it slip through your fingers and the next time you open your eyes you’re flying over lava. You’re thrown over Bro’s shoulder like one of his puppets and he’s standing astride a rocket-powered surfboard as he soars through the sky. You groan and stare down, there’s no point in fighting him now. You don’t have any way of flying out of here and if you struggle you either fall to your death or die in lava. Below you lava, gears and iron structures flow by. You note that for the first time ever Bro’s arm isn’t blacked out from his soulmark. There is, in fact, no mark of any kind there. Evidently, what little soul Bro had to mark is gone. Also unusually is the fact that he is wearing a ring on one finger. For all his other affectations Bro was never a jewellery man.

The ring of life.

That’s how he’s alive.

If you get it off of him when you land he might drop dead, or at the very least he shouldn’t be able to kill you. But again there’s no point unless your end game is death. You just have to wait. Someone will tell Dirk and Hal, they’ll find you.

Not all of your planet, it turns out, is lava and metal. One part of it at least is rust coloured rock. When you fly over it Bro drops you to the ground, thankfully you manage to land on your feet when he does that. Your ankles ache from the impact and instead of following him when he stows the rocket board and walks off you stay put. What you need is time to be found, and you’re not going to
get that if you just go along with everything that he wants. You don’t care if he has to drag you around. Bro turns to look at you and you start to suspect that he’s going to do just that. Nevertheless you stand your ground, even though your guts are twisted in fear and your muscles are trembling.

Bro stalks towards you, reaching for you to drag you to where he wants you to go. You stare up at his black glossy shades, holding tight to the smallest spark of rebellion that you can muster.

In the reflection of his shades you see it, a small fire from a rocket pack coming closer to you by the second. You knew backup was coming!

Bro shoves you backward and raises his sword, but it’s not Dirk or Hal’s blade that he blocks. Instead, skull tipped metal needles glance off of his sword and Rose lands catlike between you and Bro. Her purple velvet dress ripples in the hot wind of LOHAC, golden tassels at her waist flying about.

“Leave my brother alone, you bastard.” Rose hisses furiously.

“Dirk’s coming, right?” you whisper urgently as you scramble to your feet. Your own sword is long gone so you’re not much help here.

“He will be.” Rose says firmly and slides on her hairband based computer, ready to call for help.

Bro is simply there and then he is not. He appears again to the sound of a smack and Rose falls backwards, holding her face in shock. In Bro’s hand her computer twists and shatters. Well, shit. But this is good, she must have told someone of her suspicions if she came here and with both of you suddenly going dead silent Dirk with absolutely show up if Hal doesn’t get here first. You just need time.

You grab Rose and pull her up, putting yourself between the two of them. You want to tell her to get out, to get help and get away from Bro. He doesn’t give you the chance. Bro rushes you with his sword and the amount that you can dodge and parry a sword unarmed is limited. His blade bites into your forearm, turning your white suit red on the sleeve as it soaks up the blood.

Rose, of course, is not willing to let you take the brunt of Bro’s punishment. She stabs at him with her needles and actually gets his arm at one point, not that he shows any indication of pain. When he smacks her down again she gets up once more, bleeding from a cut on her eyebrow. She grips her needles and changes them out for some different ones, and this time she lashes out at him with dark energy. Magic, you realise belatedly. It’s pretty hard to out sword magic. But it’s also hard to out ruthless Bro.

He sweeps your legs out from under you and your kneecaps smack into the rock painfully. Bro wrenches your arm behind you painfully, forcing you to buckle over or dislocate the joint. His blade bites into the joints between your fingers and your palm.

“I need him alive but not in one piece. Drop your shit and stop fighting or I’ll start taking off the bits that I don’t need.” Bro threatens her.

Fear floods you, his sword is already breaking your skin, you can’t escape and you have nothing to fight back with. So you just… stop.

You stop being afraid, or hurt, or anything really. You’re aware of Bro and Rose talking in short and tense exchanges but it’s like it’s happening far away, like you’re watching it from below water with your sight and hearing warped by liquid. Rose drops her things to the ground by your head and Bro hauls you to your feet. You go without resistance, without fight. Before you know it you’re walking
along with Bro’s arm slung over your shoulder and his sword at your throat. Rose is following compliably but she looks furious.

“What did you do to him, why is he like that?” Rose demands. Bro doesn’t answer and neither do you. You know what he’s doing, he’s using the two of you against each other. The same way he used to do with you and Dirk. He used you to make Rose disarm herself, the two of you have no means of escape and no weapons. There’s no way you can outrun Bro and even if you split up and one of you makes it away Bro will just loudly torture the one he’ll catch to make the other one of you return. If Rose disobeys him then Bro will hurt you, if you disobey he’ll hurt her. The best thing you can do is to not be here and just wait for Dirk and Hal to show up.

“Does it make you feel strong, hurting your children?” Rose asks as you all walk along the barren rock.

Bro doesn’t answer.

“Did you feel any remorse, abandoning Roxy, me and our Mom?” she continues.

Again no answer.

“Or do you get your kicks from terrorising your son and brother? Anything to make a pathetic puppet porn peddler feel like a big man.” Rose sneers.

Bro’s sword digs into your throat and you distantly feel the wetness of your own blood. Rose swears and shuts up.

This isn’t scaring you and you’re starting to become vaguely aware that it should. It’s happened before after all, hasn’t it? You’ve- oh, oh no you’ve checked out. You panicked too much and got too scared and your brain shut down. Alarm rises in you as you start to come back to yourself but you’ve lost more time, you’re standing with Rose at the foot of a block of red stone with the time symbol on it. It looks almost like…

“Is that a bed?” you croak, your throat hurts so much from Bro grabbing you earlier, not to mention his sword.

“Oh thank God, you’re back.” Rose whispers in clear relief.

Bro’s sword slices at the base of the stone bed, separating it from the ground below it. He stows it in his sylladex with ease. On his shoulder Cal flops to the side, his face pressed up against the side of Bro’s. Almost like he’s whispering to him. Bro nods at nothing then marches towards you both.

Your internal sense of time is telling you that it’s been twenty minutes since Bro first showed up. Dirk and Hal must be looking for you by now.

“Dirk and Hal will find us.” you say to her as quietly as you can. Rose looks at you, her face is pinched with worry. But it’s okay, she doesn’t know how they act in situations like this, not like you do. Bro pulls out his rocket-propelled surfboard and jumps onto it. He grabs you by the shirt collar again and Rose by the hair, he hauls you both onto the board and you have the presence of mind now to pull Rose up bodily so that Bro doesn’t just rip her hair out.

The surfboard takes to the air and LOHAC fades away below you. The balance on the board is tricky and so you and Rose end up sat down behind Bro, clinging to each other and the board for stability.

“How are they going to find us now?” Rose whispers in your ear desperately.
“They will.” you assure her.

Rose sighs, clearly unconvinced and scared. She pulls back a little to get a good look at you, she runs careful fingers over your busted and bleeding nose. She peers at your throat and then examines your hand. Now that you’re not a million miles away things are really starting to hurt again.

“I’ve had worse.” you tell her quietly. If anything she looks angrier.

Rose glares up at Bro and you wonder what she’s planning. You don’t think that pushing Bro off of the board would work. There might be air in space in the game but there’s no gravity, he’d just float there. Even if she did successfully throw him off which is a big ask there’s no reason to think that he doesn’t have another board or jetpack in there. Plus who knows how Cal has been getting around or what terrible forces propel that monster.

Even as you’re thinking that Cal’s head twists around to look at you. You clutch Rose closer and look away. Bro is drawing close to another planet, one that you’ve seen plenty but only visited the once. Rose’s planet of Glare and Migraines or whatever it’s really called. You twist around as he flies low but you can’t see anyone following you.

The surfboard cuts through the air as Bro seems to search for something and he eventually sets the board down on the top of a peak on a small island surrounded by the too bright multicoloured water. It’s even brighter here with your shades gone, so you have to squint to see a similar yellow stone bed to the one on your planet. Bro drops yours out of his sylladex next to it so they’re side by side. Light and time.

You stare up at the sky, you can’t see or hear anyone coming for you but they have to. Wherever this is going, whatever reason Bro had for bringing you both here can’t be good. You’re running out of time.

“Get up here.” Bro orders you.

You hesitate, and Rose clutches your hand in hers. Her palm is damp and her fingers are shaking.

Bro raises his sword and you let go of Rose’s hand to hold your own up in surrender. You slowly walk over to him. Bro jerks his thumb at your red stone bed and so with no other idea of what he might mean you step up onto it. He turns expectantly to Rose.

“No.” she says, shaking her head.

You expect him to repeat his order or to threaten you to force her to comply. So the sword stuck in your chest is a surprise.

Because of that surprise it takes you a full second to move past shock to fully feeling the pain but when it does hit it’s agonising. Bro yanks the blade out and blood, something you’ve always hated seeing so much, floods down your ruined suit. You gasp in a horrified breath only for your chest to explode in agony. The wound burbles and bubbles and your chest begins to feel like you inhaled water. You can barely breathe and every time you do it feels harder.

“DAVE!” Rose yells. She catches you by the shoulders as you fall to your knees on the red bed. You try to talk but you can’t get the air.

You crane your neck to look up at Rose, helpless to do anything else. There’s a flash of silver and then blood runs down her neck. The pair of you collapse, her on yellow stone and you on red. You reach out and grab her hand, her fingers knotting clumsily with yours. You’re not sure whose grip goes slack first, hers or yours.
Everything goes dark.

When you open your eyes again Rose’s hand is warm in yours and your chest doesn’t hurt anymore. Your first thought is that Dirk somehow showed up and fixed things but as you look at Rose her eyes go from purple to white from edge to edge. No one rescued you.

“Are we dead?” you whisper. Rose reaches out and touches under your eye, yours must be white like hers.

“I think we are.” she agrees.

The pair of you sit up. Bro is nowhere to be found, and fittingly you are nowhere as well. Around you is nothing but vast blackness. You’re not a religious guy and knowing that the universe was made by a video game pretty much takes all of the truth out of any of that but if you’d ever imagined an afterlife before this wasn’t what you had in mind. Somewhere safe and peaceful would have been what you expected.

As soon as you think that the space around you changes until you find yourself sat on the floor with Rose in her old bedroom in the forest. You walk to the window and true enough outside is the forest and the water flowing under the house and down the waterfall. But if you look too far you can see a glassy shimmering bubble around everything.

“It’s like being in a snowglobe.” Rose says softly.

“I just thought of this place and here we are.” you say.

“Well, I’m a light player. I knew where you’d be on your planet just out of gut instinct, I daresay that I can lead us to any other place if we think about it hard enough.” Rose muses.

Are you really dead? You step back from the window and rub at your eyes, you wish you had your shades back. Again, as soon as you think it they appear in your hand. Definitely not the way the real world works. You slide them on your face all the same and feel a little better. So you’re dead, Bro finally killed you.

Is this just what you’ll be doing now forever? Wandering through empty places for all eternity? What about Dirk, Hal and Roxy? What about Karkat and Kanaya? What about Sollux or your friends? How are they going to cope with the two of your being dead? Dirk and Hal will never ever forgive themselves, you know they won’t.

You turn your head to see Rose running her fingers over her blacked out soulmark, evidently if you’re dead and they’re alive then the connection is gone even when you’re on this side of death. You don’t want to pull your sleeve up to see your mark but you can clearly see the blotted band around your finger.

“We put Karkat and Kanaya through all of that pain last time we died, only this time we don’t get better.” you say grimly. God, there’s so much you still wanted to do with Karkat. You wanted to live with him when the game was over, maybe set up some way that you two could get married someday when you’re older. Karkat’s such a romantic, he would have liked that. But now you won’t.

“I just hope they stay alive for a very long time but that we eventually get to apologise.” Rose says. She presses her forehead against the glass and looks despondently out at the forest. Or you think that’s where she’s looking, the blank eyes make it hard to tell. It’s like Sollux’s eyes. Aw, shit, that’s gonna be rough for him. You’re his moirail for like three days and you die on him, to make it worse with his powers you know he heard you die as well.
“I should have called for backup before I hunted you down, if I had then maybe we’d still be alive. I’m sorry.” Rose apologises, her voice is heavy with regret.

“Maybe if you’d held back to do that you wouldn’t have found me at all and I’d still have died. Then you’d be alive and feeling crappy about it and I’d be alone. I’m not sure that’s better.” you tell her. It’s selfish but the idea of wandering alone for eternity is so much worse than being with her, even if it means that she’s dead too.

Rose wipes at her eye as a tear starts to escape, she then smiles at you with forced brightness.

“So, do you want to try going somewhere else? If this place appeared when you thought of it maybe it works on dream logic as we can go somewhere by thinking of it.” Rose suggests.

Dream logic huh?

Wait.

“I… wait, I know where I know this suit from. When I made it this morning I thought I recognised it and your dress too. The night that I wrote on my wall I had a dream, I remember it a little now. Maybe this afterlife does connect to dreams somehow. We need to go back and make sure I warn myself or else it’s a paradox.” you say urgently. You might not be able to time travel yet or possibly ever but the least you can do is make sure you don’t make things worse for the people who are still alive. Maybe the you and Aradia that you saw fighting were from another timeline or something.

“Well, I suppose we have nothing else to do. Come on.” Rose says holding out her hand. You take it and the two of you walk to her old bedroom door. You focus really hard on it not being the hallway out there and instead on it being somewhere else. Rose opens the door to a void and smiles at you.

“Let’s go.” she says and steps out into the darkness with you.
Thank you everyone for being so patient with me and all of your sweet messages. I've been too overwhelmed to reply to any of them about something so personal but I've read every single one and they mean so much <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[tentacleTherapist opened memo ‘StriLonde and soulmates society’]
[tentacleTherapist applied name filter]
[Rose added: Dave, Dirk, Hal, Roxy, Jake, Jane, Kanaya, Karkat, Sollux]
Rose: Is anyone talking to Dave?
Roxy: im not like not talking to him?
Rose: I don’t mean are you on speaking terms with him, I mean is anyone presently speaking to Dave?
Roxy: oh no then im not
Jane: Also no here, why is something up?
Rose: He was speaking to me earlier and sounded very rattled indeed and then he suddenly cut off and isn’t answering me any longer.
Rose: I didn’t want to go over there and hunt him down if he’s just confiding in someone else.
Sollux: ii’ve not heard from hiim 2ince thii2 morniing but he 2eemed pretty jumpy two me then.
Karkat: HE WAS TALKING TO ME MAYBE TEN MINUTES AGO, HE SOUNDED LIKE HE WAS HAVING A PRETTY SHITTY DAY.
Kanaya: Oh No
Karkat: HE’S NOT ANSWERING ME NOW.
Sollux: me neither
Roxy: or me
Rose: This is troubling. What about everyone else?
Rose: Hello?
Rose: Ugh, is there a way to get the attention of specific people? Sollux you’re good with this.
Sollux: yeah, make me admin.
[Rose promoted Sollux to admin]
Sollux: ill piing the other2
[Sollux pinged Dirk]
[Dirk is an idle chum]
Sollux: hmm
[Sollux pinged Jake]
[Jake is an idle chum]
Roxy: three guessed what theyre doin
Roxy: *guesses
[Sollux pinged Hal]
Hal: AUGH don’t do that!
Hal: I’m busy negotiating with a denizen who is kind of trying to kill me right now so leave me alone!
Rose: Hal, Dave isn’t answering anyone’s messages.
Hal: What?
Hal: Oh, shit.
Karkat: MAYBE SOMEONE SHOULD GO CHECK ON HIM.
Rose: I’m the closest, I’ll go. Hal send me Dave’s location, I have a good idea of where he’ll be but I want to be sure.
Hal: He’s got his shades off by the look of it, he’s probably just taken them off to calm down or something. He’s at the marketplace. The GPS is 40.7128° N, 74.0060° W.
Hal: I’m going to try to get out of this denizen’s lair without getting the shit beat out of me with a giant time hammer and I’ll meet you there.
Rose: Thank you, I’m on my way.
Kanaya: Be Careful Rose
Karkat: AND LET US KNOW THAT HE’S OK WHEN YOU FIND HIM.
Roxy: yeah im pretty worried its not like dave to not answer
Rose: Will do.

You lower your phone and anxiety gnaws at your insides. Rationally you know Dave will be fine. He’s had bad days before and his agitation has been softly seeping through your arm all day, it feels more intense now so if you had to put money on this you’d bet that Dave is having a panic attack and just isn’t looking at his messages.

A few feet away Kankri is lecturing his mantis shrimp consorts. You really don’t understand why you and Kankri get weird sea life as your consorts when everyone else gets some kind of reptile. Dave has his silly nakkodiles and John even has his desperately cute salamanders. You’re still not sure that their adorableness warrants the way that John has adopted one, named it and begun referring to it exclusively as his daughter Casey. You’re a little worried for the guy’s sanity but you suppose this is a trying time for all of you.

The mantis shrimp’s strange and colourful eyes watch Kankri as he talks about ethics and discrimination. Right now he’s lecturing them on how terrible the hemospectrum is. The strange thing is that all they seem to want to do is to listen to his views on things. Even Kankri’s quests are all around explaining how he sees one thing or another to these consorts. The game is presumably getting at something here but you’ve no idea what.

You shoot Dave another message but he still doesn’t answer you. You’re not sure if the throbbing fear in your arm is getting worse or if your own anxiety about your soulmate is just making you hyper aware of it. This isn’t helping Dave so instead you put it out of your mind and focus on reading the information on this wall. It’s all about how a seer can see through their aspect and even help others to see with it. Perhaps it’s because you’re a different class but it honestly makes no sense to you at all and Kankri doesn’t seem to have got any skills from this at all.

Your phone pings.

Rose: I’ve found Dave’s glasses but no Dave.
Rose: His things are littered all over the place and everything is broken and abandoned, it looks like a huge fight happened here.
Sollux: what? holy fuck ii’m comiing over there right now. ii2 dave anywhere around?
Karkat: IS THERE ANY BLOOD OR ANYTHING? GRIST? ANY SIGN OF WHAT HAPPENED? I’M ON MY WAY TOO.

“Kankri, go home. I have to go to Dave’s planet, he’s in trouble!” you shout and throw your jetpack onto your shoulders. You blast off without even waiting for a response from him.

Roxy: oh god im coming
Roxy: tell me youve found him rosie
Rose: No, he’s not anywhere around. There’s blood on the floor here, I think I know what way he went. I’m going after him.
Kanaya: Rose Be Careful Whatever Hurt Dave Could Still Be Around
Rose: Not when I find it it won’t be.
Hal: Rose, don’t go anywhere on your own. I’m nearly there.
Rose: You can track me too, can’t you? Time is of the essence here, you can catch up.
Kanaya: Rose Be Reasonable
Roxy: rose!
[Rose is an idle chum]
Roxy: goddamnit rose!

You burn through space as fast as you can. Soon enough you start to see other people’s modes of transportation. You come across Sollux first, blazing through the sky in red and blue. He swoops up to your side and the two of you fly in tense silence. Then you catch up to Roxy and Jane. None of you talk, none of you want to speak aloud the possibility that Dave might be badly hurt.

Not talking about it doesn’t mean that you’re not thinking about it. In fact all your mind can entertain are possibilities of Dave getting hurt. Some Bro prototyped enemies could have attacked him and taken him somewhere for whatever reason. Her Imperious Condescension might have kidnapped him as another hostage because she feels that they’re taking too long in getting her the matriorb. Hell, even Gamzee or Kurloz could have snapped again and attacked him, although that’s unlikely as they’re both under constant supervision by someone else. You and Vriska don’t see eye to eye on lots of things but the matter of unsupervised juggalos is a point of agreement between you. People who can’t defeat the Bro prototyped enemies don’t get to be alone and juggalos must always be watched, that is your agreement.

Hal: I’m overriding Dirk’s controls, this is an emergency.
Dirk: I’m here! What justifies you making my shades scream at me until I picked them up? What is this?
Hal: It’s Dave. Read.
Dirk: Oh no no no. I’m on my way.

The pain in your arm and the fear pouring from it into your system has been a constant that was only ramping up more and more. The thing is that you’re used to living with the background noise of Dave’s fear. Before Bro died it was basically the background noise to your life. You got well practiced at functioning through it. It was grating and unpleasant, like someone using a power drill in the same room as you. The sudden absence of it is just as shocking.

You come to a halt in space, making the others stop to stare at you when you don’t catch up.

“Come on!” Sollux yells at you.

“I can’t feel Dave!” you shout back as fear that is entirely your own now claws up your throat from the inside, about to burst out of you.

You rip back your sleeve and your mark is there as always but nothing is coming through it. Either Dave suddenly calmed down or…

“I think he’s unconscious.” you say slowly.

“COME ON THEN!” Sollux shouts and flings you forward. You wrench control of your jetpack
back from him and fly on, following the coordinates that Hal sent earlier.

“There’s Kanaya. Kanaya!” you call out to her and all of you spiral down to the marketplace that Dave was last seen at.

Dave’s planet is uniquely unpleasant, both because of its heat and the noise. You hate how hot it is and you’ve lived in Texas your whole life and went to schools where the architect apparently thought that large plate glass windows and no aircon was a great choice. One of the things you dislike about LOHAC though is the way it’s laid out. Precariously high structures are linked together and unlocked as Dave’s quests progress, first they were just like apartment buildings but now there are more things like the marketplace.

The marketplace itself has a flat round polished steel roof with a window in it that makes it look like a CD from above, so it’s easy enough to spot and steer towards. The outside has a small railing to keep stupid nakkodiles from falling to their deaths as they try to sell their wares. You’ve never been inside before but it’s the last place that Dave was so you have to go look.

Even from the outside of the open structure you can see that it’s a mess. Stalls are overturned and wares are scattered across the floor. There’s a splay of Dave’s things across the floor, everything from his weapons to his sketchbook and food. There’s no reason that Dave would just dump all of this stuff out here.

Hal is already there, floating around and flitting from place to place. Rose was right, though, there’s no Dave anywhere to be seen. For that matter there’s no Rose either.

“What the hell happened here?” Roxy whispers in horror as she steps over a shattered table.

“A fight, a big one.” Hal answers. He picks up Dave’s abandoned sword and you shudder, he’d never leave all of his weapons behind willingly. On the floor across the way Dave’s sunglasses lay abandoned. You pick them up and see that the last thing he had open was his conversation with Rose. He cut off just like she said. You put the glasses in your pocket, if someone else messages him them at least you’ll hear it.

You cling to your arm, running your thumb over your soulmark. It’s starting to flare up again.

“Dave’s awake again.” you inform everyone.

It’s good, as long as he’s awake he’s alive. You’re not too late.

“I smell blood.” Kanaya says and walks forward, sniffing at the air. She points out several spattered areas of blood and then a smallish puddle of it on the ground.

“It’s Dave’s, I can smell him.” she adds unhappy.

“This is all my fault, I should never have let him fight that Bro prototyped thing. If he’d had someone with him he’d be okay.” Sollux whispers with one hand over his mouth in clear horror.

“You cannot say that Sollux, it may not have helped. Besides we do not know what happened here for sure.” Kanaya assures him.

“These look like sword marks in this table, don’t they?” Jane pipes up, pointing to a table with a slash in it.
“Yeah, it is.” Hal nods.

“I’m going to find out where Rose is.” you announce, taking your phone out again.

Karkat: ROSE WHERE ARE YOU?
Karkat: HAVE YOU FOUND DAVE?
[Rose’s headbandtop has been destroyed]
[Rose is offline]
Karkat: WHAT?!?

“She’s just gone offline, it says her computer was destroyed!” you shout, and everyone looks down at their phones to see. Roxy goes worryingly pale. Kanaya had pointed out that whatever attacked Dave might still be around and you really wish that she hadn’t.

The sound of jet engines makes you turn around. Dirk and Jake land outside the marketplace and rush towards you, only Dirk skids to a halt just outside and Jake keeps running. Jake’s dark skin is flushed, Dirk’s hair is a mess, so it’s pretty obvious what had them so distracted earlier. Dirk is still standing outside of the market, he’s looking at a support beam and not inside at the wreckage.

“In here, Dirk!” Roxy shouts at him.

“Did- did anyone else see this?” Dirk asks, pulling down what looks like a piece of paper. You must have run past it on your way in to look at the chaos inside.

“I didn’t come in that way, I flew in. What is it?” Hal asks and glides past you to land on Dirk’s shoulders. His face becomes a mask of terror as soon as he reads the paper and he falls off of Dirk’s shoulders to land on the floor.

“What? What is it?” you ask, rushing over to them.

Dirk’s hands are shaking so you have to pull the paper from him to read it. The paper is plain white with simple, bold typed words in the middle.

Do you want to play a game?

You look up at Dirk and Hal in total confusion.

“It’s Bro.” Hal finally says. His wings curl around himself as he pushes himself up to standing height on his tail, seemingly no longer able to float.

“What?” you ask.

“Bro- he used to leave us these notes to start a strife. But it can’t- he’s dead. He died and then his sprite blew up, there’s no way it’s him!” Dirk insists.

“Then explain that! You know Dave would never leave that up. And I told you that sprite we found was only part of Bro, that there could still be other parts of him around if someone managed to split his soul out!” Hal shouts.

“You said it’d be dead. That even if someone managed that it’d be dead.” you argue and Hal shakes his head.
“There are ways to bring people back to life.” Hal says grimly.

“None of the life players would do that or even can do that right now!” Dirk argues angrily.

“But what about that ring of life that’s missing?” Jane interjects, and you all stare at her in horror. They’ve been trying to work out where it might be and none of you considered Bro as a potential holder of the ring.

“If it is Bro that did this then I need to point out that Rose went after Dave on her own and now it says that her computer has been destroyed. I am very worried now.” Kanaya says.

“Where did she go?” Dirk asks but you have no idea, Rose didn’t say.

“Her last location was that way, follow me.” Hal announces and flies off over the lava without a backwards glance at you. All of you hurry to get on your various rocket-powered devices, except for Sollux of course who can fly, and you all follow Hal as quickly as you can.

You fly over lava and gears as quickly as you can, but all the same it feels like an eternity until you come to land. Hal lands first and when you touch down you see that in his hands is Rose’s smashed computer headband.

“I can smell more blood here, not just Dave’s. There is Rose’s and someone else’s blood too.” Kanaya announces. She jumps up over rocks and it’s easy to see the scuffs, scrapes and kicked up dirt that indicates a fight. Most noticeably of all is another spread out pile of belongings. The book you got Rose for her birthday, a pile of knitting and needles, her laptop and a knitted case for it. All that and more are spread out on the floor.

“Is the other blood human? Can you tell that?” Jane asks Kanaya.

“It is but I am not familiar with it.” Kanaya answers with a shake of her head.

“Well, now what? If it is Bro and he has them where would he go? We can’t track Rose anymore, we don’t have anything to track her with.” Dirk says. He’s running his hands through his already messed up hair as he tries to think of a solution.

“Hal, is there anything here Bro might be interested in?” you ask.

“I don’t know. I have no idea why Bro does what he does. I can predict his behaviour in familiar circumstances but if I’m right then this is the worst half of his soul brought back from the dead and operating in SBURB and likely getting help from a demon puppet. I don’t know what he wants. It can’t just be to hurt Dave though, if that was all he wanted he wouldn’t have moved over here or taken Rose.” Hal answers.

“Come on, think like Bro.” Dirk hisses, pushing his shades up covering his eyes.

“Just talk, any idea is better than none. Free association and what have you.” Jake assures him, gently setting a hand on his shoulder.

“You know him best.” Jane agrees.

“It’s fucking bullshit is what it is. We should just spread out and search.” Sollux insists.

“No, the planet is too big.” you say, shaking your head.

“Well, this whole planet is designed to make Dave stronger. If that puppet is alive, maybe it knows about something in the game. Is there somewhere it’d make sense to take him, Hal?” Jane asks.

“His denizen fits that but it can’t be that, the entrance to that is the other way from here and that’s where I came from. There’s nothing major this way except-” Hal freezes and stares off into the distance.

“Except what?!” you shout.

“His quest bed is that way but it’s way too early for that, he’s not ready for that yet.” Hal says softly.

“What’s a quest bed?” Dirk demands.

“It’s… it’s a game mechanic. In higher levels of the game things get dangerous and players need more lives, dreamselves give you one already but the quest bed grants a player a kind of conditional immortality and a power boost. Essentially they’re immortal unless their death is either heroic or just. But there are certain milestones and conditions you need to get to before you can use it, it’s different and subtle for each player but you can’t just speedrun the thing. Not to mention that their dreamselves being dead complicates things even further.” Hal explains.

“God, Bro used to break video games all the time. If he can do that and use it to make Dave stronger that’s absolutely what he’d do.” Dirk snarls.

“But what about Rose?” Kanaya asks.

“It won’t work on her, it’s Dave’s quest bed up there. It’d only work on him or at a push another time player.” Hal answers.

“No, but I know why he’s got her.” Sollux says grimly.

You all look at him worriedly.

“How can you be sure that Dave will do something he absolutely doesn’t want to do?” Sollux asks.

“Threaten someone he loves.” you answer in horror. Rose is a hostage, something to ensure that Dave won’t fight back.

“Lead the way!” Dirk orders and Hal flaps his large red wings and takes off. You all follow after him.

“How do you make the quest bed work? Is there something he needs? Does it take long? Can we catch him there in some kind of ritual?” Sollux shouts up to Hal.

“You’re not going to like the answer.” Hal says grimly.

“To go god tier you have to die, usually on the bed itself or be put there right after you die.” Hal says.
“He’s going to kill him?!” Dirk shouts. Oh god, no, this can’t be happening.

“I fucking hope not because it won’t work! If he does then he won’t come back to life!” Hal shouts back.

No one has anything to say to that. You’re praying that you’re all wrong, that Bro took Dave off somewhere else. But you can’t just ignore this possibility because it’s the worst case scenario. If you get there and they’re not there then you can look elsewhere. It has to be in that order. But if this takes time then you can still catch him. Dave and Rose are smart, they’ll know what’s happening and they’ll delay him. They have to.

“It’s up here!” Hal shouts.

All of you land on top of a blank hilltop. The only sign that anything was there is a red rectangular patch of stone.

“It’s gone. His bed is supposed to be here but it’s just gone.” Hal says, flying low over it.

“What if he wanted to do the same to Rose? Could he take the bed to her planet and use hers too? If Bro thinks doing this will make Dave stronger it would be sensible to try to do this to both of them at once and not risk having to fight Dave when he comes back.” Kanaya suggests.

“I think I see jet trails there. We need to go.” Roxy says firmly. You tilt your head back and you’re not sure if you see the trails or not, it’s all very faint. It’s as good a place to go as any though so you prepare to take off yet again. If Bro had to stop to remove the quest bed and then get Dave and Rose to cooperate enough to get into the sky then you may well have some time on them and start to catch up.

And then Sollux screams.

You whip around, heart hammering in your throat, to see Sollux with his hands clasped over his ears. He gasps raggedly and yellowish tears spill over his cheeks. You’ve seen this before, he’s hearing someone die. You look over at Kanaya and for a terrible selfish moment you hope that it’s Rose and not Dave that Sollux is hearing.

“No, no! Dave… Rose… no!” Sollux chokes out. He’s hearing them die, they’re going to die.

“We have to go, we have to go now! We might get there in time!” Dirk yells and runs off.

The pain from your arm flicks off like a light being extinguished, and then a different kind of pain is in its place. A terrible burning pain that scorches up your arm. You claw your sleeve back madly and fall to your knees. Your mark is going black, your banded ring of your symbol and Dave’s redacted from your skin. His loss leaves a gaping wound in your soul that you’d exchange any limb to fill again. Dave is dead. Nothing means anything, and there’s no point in drawing breath ever again. Your stupid body doesn’t get that message because it’s dragging in stunted breaths around your crying. You wrap your arm around yourself as if it could ever bring him back.

The rest of the hollow, pointless world comes back and you can see Kanaya curled around her arm just as you are. She’s sobbing uncontrollably just like you were because now you find your tears drying up. You push yourself back up and see that Dirk and Hal have already taken off into the sky, leaving everyone else staring at you in terror.
You wipe at your eyes with trembling hands, catching sight of your missing ring as you do it. Bro killed your soulmate and your friend. You’re going to kill him or die trying, at this point you don’t care which. If you die at least you’ll be with Dave again.

“I’m going after him.” you say shakily and launch yourself into the sky.

The others join you, Kanaya and Sollux at your sides. They seem to have independently come to the same conclusion as you. You’re going to make him pay for this.

Behind you Roxy and Jane are crying, holding on to each other to keep themselves stable as they fly. Jake seems to just be in shock. None of them have anything to say. What could they even say to you? Sorry that half of your soul is dead, that must suck for you?

Rose’s glowing rainbow planet looms in your vision, the short flight to it taking very little time. Dirk’s path is recent enough that you can just follow the grey smoke through the glimmering clouds. As soon as you’re below the cloud line you can see the splash of red of Hal’s flared wings, the rectangles of Rose and Dave’s quest beds in red and yellow. The contrast isn’t as clear on Dave’s but as you get close to the ground you can see Rose’s prone form on the bed and the halo of red blood around her.

You land at the head of Dave’s bed.

He’s still. Far too still. He’s not breathing, and his white suit is more red than white at this point as his cooling blood spreads and stains through the fabric. Crawling over to him on your hands and knees you see that his eyes are still open, staring lifelessly at Rose. Even if your arm and the hole in your soul wasn’t enough of a clue you’d know just to look at him that he’s dead. You can’t save him. There’s no amount of CPR that can bring someone back from this. His hands are bloodied and injured, his nose is broken and blood has dried on his lip. He didn’t go quietly and he didn’t go painlessly.

The clang of metal behind you makes you turn. The sword from Hal’s chest is stuck in the ground, still vibrating from landing point in and sticking there. He’s got a very human and very angry Bro wrapped up in his long sprite tail and Dirk has his sword pointed at him.

“It was never going to WORK! Their dreamselfs died and they’re not far enough along their quests anyway to- what the fuck were you even thinking you lunatic?!” Hal demands.

“What do I do with this?” Sollux asks, floating Cal up in the air with his psionics.

Bro jerks towards it, his face wild and furious but Hal’s tail restrains him. He squirms in the grip of the snakelike tail and then suddenly slashes through it. You catch a glimpse of a dagger in his hand before he flashsteps to Sollux. Or at least he tries to. Sollux just narrows his eyes and Bro is yanked up ten feet into the air and instantly disarmed.

“I think I’m going to squeeze you until you burst, something nice and slow.” Sollux hisses angrily. Bro struggles fruitlessly in the grip of Sollux’s intangible psionics.

“Don’t, he might know something that can help bring Dave and Rose back.” Dirk warns him and that at least stops Sollux, he doesn’t let Bro go though.

“There’s got to be a way to bring them back, isn’t there? Hal, you know everything about the game,
you must know a way!” Roxy pleads. Hal clings to his tail and frowns. He looks over at Dave and Rose’s dead bodies and bites his lip.

“The ring would work, but only on one of them and when you take it off the person dies again.” Hal says slowly.

Choose between Rose and Dave? No one could ask any of you to do that and you know damn well that Dave would hate to be alive at his sister’s expense and she wouldn’t take it any better either. You’d get one of them back but at a terrible cost.

“We freeze them.” Jane says suddenly.

“You said that I’ll be able to bring people back to life when I get to a high enough level. So… we freeze them until then. I’ll work as hard as I can to get there as fast as I can. Then we bring them back.” Jane says.

“How long would that take?” Roxy asks, looking back at Hal.

“Maybe six months? Four if you really push it but in case you’ve forgotten we have another pressing deadline that’s going to interfere with that.” Hal answers.

So factoring in Condy’s interference you’re looking at six months with a dead soulmate. You don’t know if you’re strong enough to cope with that. You look down at Dave. The ends of his hair on one side are soaked with blood. If you’re going to have to freeze him then he at least deserves to be cleaned up first. Dave shouldn’t have to wake up covered in his own blood.

Dirk appears at your side, kneeling down at Dave’s back. He touches Dave’s still side with shaking hands. On Rose’s bed Roxy crawls up to Rose and wraps her arms around her, crying into her shirt.

“This is all my fault.” Dirk whispers and tears drip from his face to Dave’s jacket.

“How could you do this?” Roxy sobs, sitting up and staring mournfully at her father. Bro remains trapped in Sollux’s hold and doesn’t even react at all.

“It’s bad enough that you split us up and that you hurt Dave and Dirk so much but you- we’re your children and you murdered them!” Roxy howls.

Looking down at Dave you’re struck with the idea that they say dead people look like they’re sleeping. You never actually saw Signless as a dead person, the kernelsprite was too quick to rush into the rubble. Dave doesn’t look like he’s asleep, he looks broken and hurt. His unfocused eyes are still open, he left his shades on his planet after all. You always liked his eyes, seeing them felt special and you’d hoped that your own would look like his when you went through your adult moult. You reach out and close his eyes. It doesn’t make it look more like he’s sleeping.

“I oughta…” Roxy cuts herself off by sobbing and leaves whatever she was about the threaten the unaffected Bro with hanging.

You feel empty, like you’re too sad to possibly contain all this pain and so nothing is working. Dave’s cooling blood is starting to soak into your black jeans at the knees.

“You’ll be able to do it Jane, I know you will. I believe in you.” Jake tells Jane quietly.
“Oh shit, that’s it!” Hal gasps. You turn to look at him, he’s grinning broadly as he throws himself at Jake and clings to his shoulders.

“Jake, I know you and I have had our differences, but I need you to work with me here. You’re a hope player, what you believe is important. You believe that Jane can bring them back, right?” Hal asks urgently.

“Well of course I do, we all want them back.” Jake agrees.

“Great. I’m going to tell you something. These quest beds don’t work right now because the right conditions weren’t met, but you know that all computers and games have workarounds, right?” Hal continues.

“I suppose so.” Jake nods.

“This game is a program and I know the code in it. We can trick it into reviving them. Jane doesn’t even need her full powers to do it. All she needs to do is get a spark of life into them and the beds will follow the rest of their programming and god tier them. They can be alive right now!” Hal insists.

“Wait, really?” Dirk asks, staring at Hal.

“Yes, shut up. Do you understand what I’m saying, Jake?” Hal presses, turning his focus back to Jake who looks a little lost if you’re being honest.

“Like jump starting a car?” Jake asks with a frown.

“Yes! Yes, it’s exactly like that. The game will do all of the heavy lifting, Jane just needs to give it a little push. She’s capable of that right now, isn’t she?” Hal asks.

“I- well I have all the faith in the world in her and I suppose if these abilities are baked into her then she might be able to draw on them in a vital moment like this. That’s how it always works in movies, right?” Jake nods.

“Precisely, you beautiful bastard. Focus on that. Jane you’ve got this. I just need you to go over there and put your hands on them and focus really hard on them coming back to life. Okay?” he asks, looking at Jane.

“Well, I’ll certainly try.” Jane nods.

“Everyone get off of the beds.” Hal orders.

You, Kanaya, Dirk and Roxy climb off leaving just Rose and Dave there.

Hal ushers Jane forwards towards the bed. Warily she walks around to the head of the beds and reaches down, putting one hand on Dave’s head and one on Rose’s. Is this really going to work? Why did Hal not suggest it right away if this was an option?

“It’s going to work.” Hal says quietly to Jake who nods.

“Okay, here goes nothing.” Jane mutters and shuts her eyes. 
Everyone stares on silently. Your heart is in your throat and a crazed, desperate hope fills you. Even Bro from his captivity is focused with rapt attention on the dead twins and Jane. Each second that ticks by seems like an eternity and as each one builds upon the one before it your doubt grows too. Jane’s face is creased in concentration though as far as you can tell nothing is happening, it’s not working.

“Tell her you believe in her!” Hal hisses, punching Jake in the arm.

“I- I believe in you Jane!” Jake calls out.

Still nothing.

You didn’t think that you could feel any worse but you do. Dave isn’t coming back. Jane sighs and takes her hands back, looking mournfully at everyone. The world is smaller and darker now, shadows seem deeper and-

Something whooshes past your head, clipping your ear as it goes. A loud caw sounds and a crow lands on Dave’s shoulder in a flutter of pitch feathers. A black butterfly flaps into view and rests on Rose’s hand. Before you know it the sound of wings fills the air and you look up to see a group of crows flying overhead, swooping down to land on Dave as a swirl of inky black butterflies begins to cover Rose’s body.

“Is this-” Dirk starts.

“It’s working but… it feels wrong.” Hal says under his breath as more and more animals land on the twins.

Cool relief floods through your body and you draw in a deep lungful of air that soothes your entire system. You hold your hand up and watch as the red of your ring comes back into your skin, the rest of your mark following after. Dave is alive again.

A hand bursts through the fluttering mass of birds, sending several of them into the sky with angry cries. There’s no sign of Dave’s white suit. Instead, his hand is mostly covered by some jet black arm covering and confusingly his fingers are as grey as yours. Both Dave and Rose move, the birds and butterflies taking to the air again and when they clear you can tell that something is very wrong indeed.

Dave is standing up but floating an inch or so off of the quest bed. He’s dressed entirely in black and grey in a strange outfit that you’ve never seen before, but you recognise that the symbol on his chest is space. You’ve seen pictures of it before. He’s wearing an eye mask like he’s the fucking hamburgalar but his eyes themselves are featureless glowing white, his skin is grey and his hair is a rippling stark white. Black tendrils of energy roll and boil off of his body as he floats there, his expression furious.

Rose is in a blue dress and the symbol on her chest doesn’t match the one on her bed either. You think it might be void. Her skin too is grey, her hair white, her eyes glowing and she looks murderous as well.

“This is wrong.” Bro growls.

“Jalu 'ai shgvbshgvb wrongnes't tis lem?!” Dave and Rose hiss in simultaneous fury, their tongues sliding over the sibilant nonsense.
“What’s happening?!” Dirk demands, looking at Hal.

“They’ve inverted, gone grimdark. We’ve got to calm them down!” Hal says urgently.

“Cn’re nafl going tis fut calm!” Dave and Rose snap, glaring at Hal.

“Can you understand what they’re saying?” You ask Hal.

“Y-yeah. They said they’re not going to be calm.” Hal translates for you.

Dave’s head turns in Cal’s direction and he floats closer to him. He slowly holds up a hand to him, palm facing him. His glowing eyes narrow and Cal suddenly violently disassembles himself, limbs detaching from his torso, his head separating from his body. Bro screams like someone just gutted him and Dave smiles, his black lips stretching over too sharp teeth.

“Let cal bug, Sollux.” Dave says.

Sollux looks over at Hal.

“He says let Cal go.” Hal says.

“Uh… okay.” Sollux says warily, and his red and blue glow fades from Cal’s parts. Instead they float surrounded by writhing blackness like the energy that’s rolling off of Dave and Rose’s bodies. Bro is struggling furiously against Sollux but with Sollux’s undivided attention he’s not going anywhere. Dave holds his hand up and the parts orbit his hand.

“Oh gnaiih, da jalu’re worriet nyurb fib’th sas’h gi preview yi edsam cn’re going tis ah tis jalu ephai jalu needn't worry. Cn wouldn't let jalu goors off kov lightly.” Rose purrs.

“They’re not going to do that to Bro. I think she’s implying that what they’re going to do is going to be worse. I don’t think I’m stressing enough that staying in this state is really bad for them, we need to get them back to normal here!” Hal insists.

“Dave, Rose, listen to me. I’m so sorry for-” Dirk begins but Rose raises her hand and Dirk is wrapped in a tentacle of black energy, it’s coiled tight around his whole body and snares around his mouth.

“Ya 'll goors tis jalu.” Rose mutters.

Dave snaps his fingers and the sections of Cal suddenly vanish into thin air, making Bro howl in agony.

“Sollux, let Bro bug.” Dave says. You don’t need Hal to translate that one, it’s close enough to his request of Cal that it’s clear what Dave wants.

“Dave, this seems pretty dangerous and you’re not yourself. I’m not sure you want to do this.” Sollux says soothingly, holding out his hand as if to pap Dave’s face. Not that he’s close enough to do that.

“Ya kadishtu edsam ya I gorthytech nge ya I kadishtu edsam kal deserve’t. Goka i’j tis ma.” Dave tells him.
“He says that he knows what he wants and what Bro deserves, he wants you give Bro to him.” Hal explains unhappily.

“Okay, but if he gets away or looks like he’s going to hurt you I’ll grab him. Like before, remember? You’re not alone.” Sollux says gently.

“Please Dave, you’re scaring everyone. We’re worried about you.” you add. Dave just points at Bro. Sollux sighs and drops him.

Bro snatches up the sword that belongs in Hal’s chest from the ground where it landed and runs for Dave. Dave just smiles and snaps his fingers. The sword vanishes from Bro’s hands and reappears in its place in Hal’s chest. Bro stares at Dave and seems to hesitate. Then he turns and starts to run away. Dave laughs, loud and mean. He snaps his fingers again and Bro is right back in front of Dave again.

“Hoth abscond, bro. Gotta strife.” Dave chuckles.

Rose holds her hands up in the air and two needles pop into existence. She points one at Bro and unleashes a storm of black lightning on him, making the man buckle over and curl up in pain. This… this isn’t who Dave is.

Dave moves closer to Rose and slides his hand into hers. They both raise their free hands in front of them and Bro floats up off of the ground. He thrashes in an attempt to escape but is clearly getting nowhere.

“Jalu are gi monster. Jalu deserve tis fut fu on’sr own kind.” Rose and Dave say in distressing unison.

“They say he’s a monster, that they’re going to put him with other monsters.” Hal repeats in obvious confusion.

Black energy crawls up your legs, pinning you in place. The same happens to everyone else except for Bro who is suddenly dropped to the ground. Rose and Dave raise their free hands into the sky. Rose’s multicoloured sky tears in half. You’ve seen Kanaya tear her fabric for sewing before, pulling the grain of it apart with a mighty rip but here it’s the entire sky doing that. Pastel clouds and sky are ripped asunder and a violent wind kicks up, pulling you towards it.

Behind the rip is unfathomable darkness. You never knew there were so many shades of it before and the longer you look into the void of space the more you see. Writhing, squirming tentacles, eyes of unfathomable size and horror looking back at you, glistening fangs and gnashing maws. The edges of the sky ripple and you realise that it’s not a wind that’s come up, it’s a black hole pulling everything towards it, to the things on the other side of the tear. Only you’re all held down safely. Except, of course, for Bro.

Bro twists and grabs at the end of the bed, clinging to the stone to avoid being sucked to his doom with whatever it is that’s living in the abyss.

“Sollux! The ring!” Hal shouts.

Sollux throws a hand out and psionically wrenches Bro’s hand off of the quest bed. A small gold ring flies off his finger and Bro’s body goes ragdoll limp and flies up towards the rip in space. A
monstrous tentacle covered in markings that make your eyes ache to look at them reaches out and snatches Bro’s body through the tear in the sky. There is the unpleasant organic sound of crunching before Dave and Rose clench their fists shut and the sky goes back to the pastel hue that that it was before.

Dave sways and then collapses to the floor, suddenly covered by some red cloth. From what you can see of his skin and his hair he’s back to normal, pale blonde hair fanning out over his now human skintone. The restraints fall away from you and you don’t need any prompting to rush to his side. Sollux is right with you and the pair of you roll Dave onto his back.

This time he does just look like he’s sleeping. His chest is rising and falling slowly under the red shirt that matches his quest bed. He’s no longer covered in blood or injured. He’s alive and himself again!

You realise that Dirk and Hal aren’t shoving you aside to look at Dave themselves and check that he’s okay and when you turn you see that Rose still has them snared in her black magic. And she is still- what was it Hal called it? Grimdark.

“Tell i’j nilgh’ri nyurb ya haug.” Rose says.

“She wants me to translate. Rose let me go!” Hal says but Rose seems to have no intention of doing that.

“Ya gohluyng nafl. Ya don’t kadishtu garem long ha’t passet g’rhoog fib’th side, ‘sub gu’ilg lem h’t ha’t futen month’t yi cj soul’t wandering grah’n.” Rose tells them.

“More time passed for them when they were dead than for us. Months, she says.” Hal explains. Dave went months without you? God, you can’t imagine how months of that would feel.

“Cn had gi lot yi yar tis talk. Ah jalu kadishtu edsam Dave comfortet ma fu futfore Bro murderet lem?” Rose asks, leaning towards Dirk who is still totally restrained.

Dave groans and you cry with relief when his red eyes open.

“Karkat?” he asks and you throw yourself against him, crushing him in a hug. When you pull back Dave looks lost, at least until he sees Rose and then his face flashes panic.

“Edsam kal kept saying tis himself?” Rose continues on.

“Kal said 'Dirk nge Hal gohluyng find lem. F’t'll rescue lem.’” Rose hisses coldly, leaning closer to the restrained Dirk. Hal looks like Rose just slapped him and she has to shoot him a menacing look before he translates.

“She says when Bro was taking them here that Dave kept telling her something to make her feel better. To make him feel better. That he said 'Dirk and Hal will find us. They'll rescue us.’” Hal repeats brokenly.

“Rose, no.” Dave pleads softly and Rose pulls back. She clenches her fists and shuts her eyes. Hal and Dirk are released and drop to the ground. Rose’s clothes flicker until they are different, an orange and yellow of light and her skin returns to normal. She takes a step back, shaking her head and then bursts into flight soaring away from all of you.

“Rose!” Dave calls out, leaping up and into the air as well. He pauses and hovers a few feet off of
the ground, watching her leave and then sighs and lands.

“You should go after her Kanaya, I think she’s pretty sick of me by now.” Dave says. Kanaya nods, throwing her jetpack on and blasting off.

Dave turns to look at you and without his sunglasses on you can see the way he looks you over, desperate in a way. But Rose says that it had been months for them, he probably thought he’d never see you again. Or, actually, he was dead so he probably hoped he wouldn’t for a long time.

“Hey.” he says weakly, his voice shaking ever so slightly. This stupid idiot, he dies, comes back to life and then goes into some alternate state, tries to murder a man, rips a hole in space and the first thing he says to you that’s not just your name is ‘hey’?

“Sup?” you reply tearfully, making Dave laugh. He grabs you up into a hug and you shove your face into the absurd red cloth around his neck and do your best to soak it with tears of relief. He pulls back from you eventually only to get mobbed by Sollux and then Roxy piles on top as well.

You look away from their reunion to see Dirk and Hal looking like they wish they were dead, neither of them looks like they can bring themselves to go near Dave. Rose had said that Dave had died having faith in a rescue. It makes sense, Dave always said that Dirk and Hal always saved him when it came to Bro. They couldn’t stop every fight or every attack but they kept him from the worst of harm and they made sure he never died.

Until now.

You tap Dave on the shoulder, distracting him from papping Sollux on the face. That doesn’t earn you any points with your brother but you need to remind Dave of his. Dave pulls back from Roxy and Sollux to face his brothers.

“I never thought I’d see you two again.” Dave says, beaming from ear to ear. You can’t miss the way that Dirk and Hal both flinch at his words.

“I’m so sorry Dave, it’s all my fault. I- I failed you.” Dirk whispers.

“Dude, no. It’s been like… four months and change for me. I’ve had a lot of time to think about this. I’m pretty damn sure Bro jumped me when he knew everyone else was distracted. You couldn’t have just hovered at my shoulder the whole time, I wouldn’t have let you anyway. It’s not your fault. Not yours, not Hal’s, no one’s. Just Bro’s.” Dave says, climbing down off of the bed.

“But if I’d answered Rose’s message right away I could have got there in time.” Dirk argues.

“If I hadn’t been so focused on your denizen and hadn’t left you alone he couldn’t have caught you in the first place.” Hal adds.

“And I told you that you were just being paranoid.” you say. The guilt for that one is going to weigh on you forever. Dave wasn’t being jumpy, it wasn’t PTSD playing tricks on him, he was sensing Bro stalking him.

“I encouraged you to fight the Bro prototyped enemies so that you could be on your own.” Sollux says as well.

Dave rolls his eyes at all of you.
“Yeah, but none of you hunted me down and murdered me and Rose. I don’t care about- actually there’s one thing I wanna know, how am I alive again? Mituna said that the whole god tier shit wouldn’t work.” Dave says.

“Wait, you were talking to Mituna? How?” Sollux asks.

“Dead Mituna, the one who died at the beginning of the game. He’s spent a bunch of time on his own so he just started figuring out how shit worked. Me and Rose told him what Bro did and he said that the game doesn’t work that way since our dreamselves were already dead.” Dave explains.

“I got Jake to use his hope powers on Jane. I made them think it’d work and because of his bullshit powers…” Hal answers.

“Because of his hope powers it did. What would you have done if it didn’t?” Dave asks.

“Waited until Jane could bring you back on her own.” Hal tells him.

“Wait just a minute, do you mean to tell me that Jane couldn’t bring Dave and Rose back to life? How can that be? She did just that! You said that she just had to give them a nudge and the game would do the rest.” Jake demands, his hands on his hips.

“Ugh you’re dense sometimes! The whole god tier thing doesn’t work that way, what Bro did would never have worked and even if Jane had managed to bring them back to life normally they wouldn’t have been god tier. I needed your hope powers to give Jane the power to bring them back at all and saying that the beds helped hacked the game into making them god tier.” Hal snaps at him.

“So you lied to us about my power to bring two children back to life?” Jane asks incredulously.

“Hey, I’m fourteen.” Dave protests but everyone ignores him.

“It wasn’t- he just needed to believe was all. If it didn’t work it was no worse than you not trying it. I did whatever I had to if it meant bringing them back!” Hal argues.

“Either way I wasn’t expecting to come back at all. It’s good to see all of you again. I missed you all really bad.” Dave says and pulls Dirk and Hal together in a hug. Hal’s wings wrap around Dave and Dirk and his red tail coils around Dave’s similarly coloured leg.

“I’m so glad you’re safe.” Hal whispers, burying his face in Dave’s hair.

Dirk’s body is rigid and he looks like he’s in agony, he’s not even really hugging Dave back. Evidently Dave notices, looking up at Dirk with confusion.

“Dirk, I’m fine. Stop looking like that.” Dave tells him.

“I’m- I’m so sorry.” Dirk says, his tone strangled.

“Don’t. You can’t be everywhere and I’m alive now so it’s cool.” Dave says, pulling back away from them.

“You know what? Actually, hah, I think I am gonna go after Rose. I’m basically the only person she’s been talking to for four months and she’s probably not handling the whole not being dead and
reunion thing well. I’m gonna, uh, go get her. You can pester me on- uh, actually I don’t have my phone or my shades so…” Dave laughs nervously, backing away from Dirk and Hal slightly.

“I have your sunglasses but the rest of your stuff is still on LOHAC.” you tell him, fishing them out of your pocket and holding them out for him.

“Oh, sick. You’re the best. I was able to dream up a pair when I was dead but I guess they didn’t cross over I just came back with like, a cape, I guess?” Dave rambles, putting the shades on.

“And Jane, Jake thanks for… you know. Sorry for sucking you into this bullshit and getting you a front row seat for CSI SBURB: dead teens edition. But I’m gonna, uh…” Dave trails off, awkwardly finger guns at them and then breaks into flight. He very quickly becomes just a small red speck in the sky.

“Oh hell no.” Sollux growls and zooms after him.

“He is not as okay as he’s pretending.” Roxy says croakily and gets up to get feet unsteadily.

“Are you okay?” Jane asks softly, reaching out to Roxy who climbs off of the quest bed and into her arms.

“I think I’ll have nightmares forever but they’re alive again, that’s what matters. Thank you. You too Jake.” Roxy sniffs, cuddling up to Jane.

“I don’t really understand what I did but anything for Dave and Rose. And I- OW!” Jake hisses and slaps his hand on his arm in pain. He scrambles to get out of his green overshirt and expose his bare arm only to show a large splotch of black covering part of his soulmark.

“Dirk? What’s happening?” Jake asks, his eyes wide with terror behind his glasses.

“Dave and Rose died because I was too engrossed in you to pay attention to my messages. If I had then they never would have died. My family was supposed to come first but I am clearly not capable of self-restraint when it comes to you.” Dirk says slowly and emotionlessly.

“What are you saying?” Jake whispers.

“Thank you for helping to bring them back but this is over, I can’t afford to be with you. I need to go find Dave and Rose.” Dirk answers flatly. He pulls out his rocket board and takes to the sky.

Before your eyes more blackness creeps over Jake’s mark as he stands open-mouthed and clearly broken-hearted. You want to tell him that Dirk is just in shock, that he doesn’t mean it but you don’t know. But more pressingly is Dave’s strange behaviour. He never once expressed how happy he was to be alive again. Sure he was happy to see all of you, especially you, Sollux and Roxy. But he never seemed happy to be back, he never said he was. He woke up all obsessed with revenge, destroyed Cal and ripped a hole in space the throw Bro into and after that he lost steam. When you all got back from Jupiter you saw Dave pleased to see Dirk, that was a totally different reaction to just then.

What happened to him?

Jane and Roxy are consoling Jake. You don’t really have anything else to add so you just get off of the quest beds, you were the last person left standing on them and it was weird. You don’t really
want to be near the quest beds and they still have blood on them which you’d rather not touch any more than you already have. You walk away a little bit and sit down, opening up your husktop and going through the motions of telling everyone else what has happened. You keep the story as brief as you can. The death of the twins, Bro’s involvement, their resurrection, the taking of the life ring, the twins going grimdark, Bro and Cal’s respective ends and then the twins taking off.

Karkat: THAT’S ABOUT THE END OF IT. I THINK THEY WANT TO BE LEFT ALONE FOR THE MOST PART BUT I KNOW DAVE AT LEAST HAS HIS SHADES WITH HIM IF THERE’S SOMETHING THAT REALLY CAN’T WAIT.
John: oh my god i mean i’m glad they’re ok and everything now but this is terrible!
Jade: its still so amazing that jake and jane managed to bring them back though :O
Feferi: I'm going to work as )ard as I can so I can get t)(ose kind of powers. I reely )(ope we'll not need t)(em again but still…
Jane: Well apparently even I don’t have those kinds of powers yet either, it was some combination of me and Jake, we don’t really understand it right now.

Vriska: I want to know what kind of new powers they've got their hands on. If they were that powerful when they were grimdark I can't w8 to see what their time and light skills have. Terezi: M4YB3 TH3 PROS3CU1TON SHOUL4 4LL0W 4 R3C3SSS FOR TH3 MR CH3RRY 4ND M1SS3 L4V3N3D3R B3F0R3 D1D Y0U KNOW 4BOUT TH1S?
Terezi: WH4T 4BOUT YOU 4R4D14? D1D YOU KNOW 4BOUT TH1S?
Aradia: n0
Terezi: 1M SUR3 TH3 TOP1C OF S4L4C1OUS R3L4T1ONSH1P GOSS1P K4RK4T YOU H4V3 B33N UNCH4R4CT3R1ST1C4LLY QU13T THROUGH 4LL OF TH1S
Karkat: GEE. THANKS. MY SOULMATE DID JUST DIE YOU KNOW, IT’S BEEN A HELL OF A FUCKING DAY FOR ME.

John: what was that?

Dave: nothing to see here folks rumours of my death have been greatly exaggerated etc also eat my ass vriska and later everyone else gotta bounce

[Terezi is idle]

Tavros: nOT TO, uH, iNTERRUPT BUT THIS DOESN'T REALLY SEEM GERMANE TO THE TOPIC AT HAND OF THE DEATHS OF TWO OF OUR FRIENDS AND THEIR MIRACULOUS RESURRECTION,
Gamzee: MiRaCuLoUs iNdEeD. :o)

Vriska: Uh-uh. Noooowww way are we going down that idiotic line of conversation.
Gamzee: oo(Terezi: Y35 B44CK ON TH3 TOP1C OF S4L4C1OUS R3L4T1ONSH1P GOSS1P K4RK4T YOU H4V3 B33N UNCH4R4CT3R1ST1C4LLY QU13T THROUGH 4LL OF TH1S
Karkat: GEE. THANKS. MY SOULMATE DID JUST DIE YOU KNOW, IT’S BEEN A HELL OF A FUCKING DAY FOR ME.

Terezi: 1W4NT TO KNOW IF YOU KN3W 4BOUT H1M 4NDF3LD 4LL OF THE DEATHS OF TWO OF OUR FRIENDS AND THEIR MIRACULOUS RESURRECTION,
Karkat: OH BOY WHAT IS THIS THAT I HAVE IN MY SYLLADEX HERE? OH SHIT IT’S A LIFETIME SUPPLY OF NONE OF YOUR GODDAMN BUSINESS. AND HEY, THERE’S ENOUGH HERE FOR EVERYONE! I’LL JUST KEEP HANDING THIS OUT LIKE I’M FUCKING OPRAH HERE.  
Karkat: YOU GET TO MIND YOUR FUCKING BUSINESS! YOU GET TO MIND YOUR FUCKING BUSINESS! AND YOU GET TO MIND YOUR FUCKING BUSINESS! EVERYONE GETS TO MIND THEIR OWN FUCKING BUSINESS! IT’S AN ENDLESS GIVEAWAY!  
Karkat: FUCK YOU ALL I’M LEAVING.

You snap your husktop closed and claw at your own hair. Your soulmate DIED! His blood is still in your clothes! You watched him come back as something twisted and warped and all they care about is whether Dave is papping your brother’s bony face?!  

You open your husktop up again. You need someone sane to talk to.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling grimAuxiliatrix]
CG: KANAYA WHERE ARE YOU?  
GA: I Am With Rose On Derse  
GA: Dave Messaged Me Earlier To Ask Me To Ask Rose If She Wanted To See Him But She Said That She Did Not Wish To At The Moment And I Feel That She Same Would Probably Apply To You If You Were To Come Here  
CG: I TAKE IT DIRK DIDN’T FIND HER THEN? HE LEFT TO SEE IF HE COULD FIND HER OR DAVE.  
GA: He Did Not And I Do Not Think She Would Welcome Him Right Now  
CG: HOW IS SHE?  
GA: She Is Very Upset I Do Not Think That Either Of Them Expected To Be Alive Again And She Is Very Emotional About This  
CG: EVERYONE ELSE HAS GONE CRAZY. THEY’RE JUST ACTING LIKE IT’S A BIG JOKE AND LIKE RELATIONSHIP DRAMA IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN DAVE AND ROSE DYING!  
GA: I Suppose It Is Hard For People To Express Their Condolences For People Who Are Now Alive Again And Who They Did Not Previously Know Had Died Before  
CG: IT’S STILL PISSING ME OFF.  
GA: That Is Understandable  
GA: Karkat It Keeps Showing That You Are Typing And Stopping And Then Typing Again Is There Something You Are Not Sure About Asking  
CG: IT’S JUST THAT DAVE WAS HAPPY TO SEE EVERYONE AGAIN BUT HE WAS OFF. I KNOW IT MUST BE REALLY JARRING BUT  
GA: But  
CG: THEY DID WANT TO COME BACK TO LIFE, DIDN’T THEY?  
GA: I Hope So  
GA: I Need To Talk To Rose Can We Talk Later I Will Let You Know What Rose Said If You Talk To Me About Dave Perhaps We Can Work Out What Is Happening If We Do That  
CG: YEAH, OKAY.  
CG: <>  
GA: <>  
[grimAuxiliatrix ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist]

This time when you shut your husktop you have no intention of opening it again for some time, even though the group chat is still pingining away. Instead you fly back to the base, you figure that Dave is with Sollux based on their earlier replies so you’re on your own for now. You go to your room, not
wanting to deal with anyone else for a good while.

You look down and see that your jeans still have blood in them and impulsively you take them off. You have to stop and sit down on your bed because shoes come off first, dumbass. You continue taking off all of your clothes and abandon them on the floor to visit the shower. Dave’s blood is on your hands and on your knee. You scrub at your skin and watch as the red fades down the drain.

Crying in the shower is a pathetic cliche, but sometimes cliches are there for a reason.

You’re not totally sure how long you spend in there but when you get out your fingers and toes have gone all pruney. Your sylladex provides you with clean clothes with the exception of new jeans. You decanted a lot of shit from your sylladex into a chest of drawers in your room so you walk out in socks, underwear and your sweater to get new jeans.

Your eyes are on your socks as you walk, you’ve got a hole in these and you’ll have to make more. Some stupid imp out there died and you’re going to use the grist from its body to make socks. Circle of life. You grab new jeans from the drawer and shove your legs into them. You try to shut the drawer with your hip but you haven’t pulled the jeans up high enough so you trip a little and then snag your belt loop on the handle and nearly fall over.

"Nice legs daisy dukes, makes a man go 'when did you learn how to dress yourself?'" Dave laughs and then you do fall over, ripping your belt loop off entirely. You glare up at Dave who is floating cross-legged a foot above your bed.

“How long have you been there?!” you demand, pulling your jeans up the rest of the way to preserve at least a little of your remaining dignity.

“Long enough for me to worry about your awareness of the space around you and also admire them buns.” Dave grins at you and waggles his eyebrows.

The clear temptation is to argue with him, to rise to his flirtatious teasing but you suspect that this is a diversion. A chance for Dave to get you to not ask about something he doesn’t want to talk about.

“I’m glad you’re alive again.” you say instead and Dave slowly floats downwards until he lands on your bed with a bump.

“I’m sorry I put you through that. I can’t imagine how- and here I’d promised that I wouldn’t do that to you again.” Dave laughs sadly, looking down at your sheets.

“You don’t need to apologise for being murdered. You’re the one who died, I’m worried about you, not me.” you point out and sit on the bed facing him. He’s rolling your sopor blanket between his fingers. You’ve not really slept in this bed since you got here, you’ve been in the human pile upstairs. That said, with Dirk and Jake broken up that might not happen anymore.

“Did you want to come back?” you ask warily. Dave looks up from the blanket, his face startled.

“I…” his expression twists a little, “I wanted to see you again. I wanted to see all of you, I missed you. It’s just Mituna said there was no way we could go back and I didn’t want to see you again soon because you had died, you know?”

“I get that, but are you happy you’re alive again?” you press. He didn’t actually answer your question.
“Yeah. I mean- yeah. Being alive sure has a lot of perks and now if I die I’ll probably come back again, not that I’m looking forward to dying again because it sucks so much ass. 0 out of 10 do not recommend. But at least when I was dead I didn’t have to worry about the game or letting people down, it was over for me and I’d already hurt all the people I could. So, you know.” Dave shrugs.

“It’s complicated then.” you conclude.

“You can say that again.” Dave grumbles.

“What was it like there? What happened?” you ask, changing topic slightly. Dave sits up a little straighter and purses his lips in thought.

“Boring mostly. The whole place is made up of these dream bubbles, they’re dreams and memories from people who died but just from our timeline because our timeline is so far away from- you know.” Dave amends. You nod, you remember what your secret source said about how your timeline is drastically far away from the alpha one, so much so that it should be theoretical. So it makes sense that any other timeline but this one even if it diverges from this would just be theoretical.

“So the afterlife is just empty then?” you ask.

“Well, no. Everyone who has died in this timeline has a ghost there, but it’s pretty empty, yeah. The first thing we did was go back in time and get into the dream that I had on Halloween and make my past self write on the wall because time loops and all that shit. So that’s a hell of a mystery no one thought was a mystery and didn’t even really need solving but damn if it didn’t get solved.” Dave explains.

“So that was… you, Rose, Mituna, Gamzee. Dirk’s dreamself died before the game, was he there?” you question him, you’re still trying to feel out the rules for this thing.

“Ehh, sort of.” Dave says with a wince. You raise an eyebrow at him expectantly.

“The dream bubbles shape themselves around your thoughts and memories, how well you can change them varies but Dirk was the first one in there by ages. And… well you know how Bro was batshit nuts and I say that Dirk is nothing like Bro?” he says slowly.

“Yeah?” you say warily.

“It turns out that a shitload of time with no one to talk to in the infinite void of the afterlife with only your own thoughts to deal with can make you go nuts. Not the same kind but still nuts. He left Mituna and Gamzee alone when they died but we wandered into one of his dreambubbles because I was homesick and it’s the same place. He freaked out when he saw that I was dead and asked me what happened, he found about Cal and Gamzee and just tried to straight up murder the dude.” Dave sighs.

“You can murder a ghost?” you ask in confusion.

“Yeah, you can double die but it’s hard to do. Dirk failed at it by the way, turns out crazy Dirk is not so good in a fight as sane Dirk and Gamzee killed him. Mom and some version of Bro were kicking around too, we saw them once and noped the hell out of there. It was mainly just Rose and me hanging together talking or remembering books or movies so we could do that together. Sometimes we’d chill with Mituna.” Dave shrugs. He picks at the blanket again.
God, Dave had faith that Dirk would rescue him and then not only does Dirk fail to do that but the next Dirk that Dave meets is out of his mind. You feel bad for that other Dirk but that can’t have done good things for Dave’s mind.

“We used to go to all sorts of places. Rose and I dreamed up your room and Kanaya’s room, we left you notes there in case you ever did die. We figured that your souls would probably wind up somewhere familiar and we didn’t want to miss you. We checked back every week at least. I actually made a social media platform when I was there, called it bubblr. I left shittones of ebubbles all over the place, not that it was the most lively kind of social media with just me, Rose, Mituna and a deranged clown using it. Oh, and our Derse dreamselfes too but we avoided each other the whole time. So, not super successful, but then again 100% market share so there’s that.” Dave rambles.

Okay, you’ll ignore that diversion too. You have more important questions.

“Are you mad at Dirk and Hal?” you ask. He had seemed so strange with them before.

“What? No. I thought I was pretty clear that it wasn’t anyone’s fault but Bro’s.” Dave says firmly.

“I didn’t ask about it being anyone’s fault. You can be mad at someone even if something isn’t their fault or not totally their fault at least. I asked if you were mad at him.” you point out. The fact that Dave leapt to that is very telling in of itself. Dave grits his teeth for a moment and then forces himself to relax.

“Look, it’s just… you know when you’re a little kid you think that your parents are always right about everything?” Dave asks. You nod, you remember feeling like that about your parents when you were really small.

“Obviously that was never Bro, but Dirk… I never believed in God but I believed in Dirk and Hal. He couldn’t stop Bro from hurting me but he’d never let it get too bad, he’d never let Bro kill me. Dirk made Hal to look after me and until we got into the game and got him a body he was on my face all of the time. I didn’t think either of them were magic or anything, I knew that they couldn’t protect me from dumb luck like when I died on Derse. But I guess I just still thought that they could stop Bro from killing me no matter what, that they’d do anything. That’s a crazy thing to think though, they both do other things and they can’t be around me all of the time. They’re only human. Or a bird sprite in Hal’s case.” Dave says.

“The way you grew up… you had to rely on them to survive. I guess you needed them and they weren’t there so it’s like a crisis of faith. I mean, you said you never believed in God but you believed in them and I bet in kind of the same way too.” you say slowly, turning the idea around in your head. Dave shrinks into himself sadly, his arms wrapped around his middle.

“It’s stupid and selfish. I don’t blame them, I really don’t. I don’t feel like this about you. I know you did everything you could to get to me, you were there with Bro when we came back. I’m not mad at you. I died because I didn’t fight Bro hard enough and because he plans like an evil genius and he knows how to manipulate me, that’s no one’s fault but his.” Dave says. He looks miserable at having to admit this but you’re smart enough to know that this is clearly something he’s thought about a lot and likely talked over with Rose and maybe even with Sollux since you last saw him.

“You’re allowed to feel like that, you know.” you remind him.

“Hah, you sound like Rose.” Dave snorts, resting his chin in his palm.
“For the sake of being honest you should probably know that after you left Dirk broke up with Jake and then flew off. I take it that he didn’t find you?” you guess. Dave groans, slaps his hands over his face and falls backwards on your bed with a thump.

“No, he didn’t. God what an idiot, he doesn’t need to- ugh. I’ll talk to him later.” Dave moans despairingly.

Since Dave is flat on your bed you move and settle yourself down against his side with your head resting on Dave’s bicep.

“You tried to kill Bro when you came back all grimdark.” you say quietly into his shirt.

“Would have gotten away with it too if it hadn’t been for you meddling kids.” Dave says deadpan.

“You don’t need to feel bad or anything, he deserved it.” you assure him.

“No doubt on that, mon amie.” Dave snorts in amusement.

“Do you remember it? Being like that I mean?” you ask him curiously.

“Eh, it’s a little hazy. It’s not fun being like that. You know when you get so furious you can hardly think straight? In one of your shouty shitfits I mean?” Dave asks.

“I’m not dignifying that with an answer.” you tell him stiffly, shooting him an unimpressed look and making him laugh.

“Well, it’s kind of like that but with every bad emotion. It gets the job done I guess but it feels shitty, just purging all that awful shit and the worst things go through your mind. It’s like projectile vomiting for the soul. Doesn’t sell so well as chicken soup for the soul I’ll tell you that.” Dave laughs.

“You’re gross.” you accuse him and throw your arm across his middle anyway.

“I’m glad you’re still around to be gross. I thought I’d never see you again.” you say softly and cling tightly to him. Dave doesn’t say anything but he squeezes you closer to him and runs a hand through your hair gently.

“It’s just… it’s over now. Bro’s really dead. The horrorterrors won’t leave enough of him to bring back even if someone had the ring that we’ve got. Plus no one’s gonna go out that far to find him. Cal can’t be destroyed but it’ll take him a long ass time to work shit so that he’s back in one piece. It’s over.” Dave says softly.

“Good.” you say vehemently. Bro deserved everything he got and more.

Dave is quiet for a little while, just petting your hair gently.

“Why did he even do it? He was clearly trying to god tier you, not that I totally understand what that means. But what’s in it for him? You and Rose came back and kicked the shit out of him, what did he stand to gain from that?” you wonder.

“Nothing. Bro was just a tool.” Dave replies.
“I know that.” you snort in amusement.

“Hah, yeah. But I mean he was Cal’s puppet, not the other way around. Cal got his orders from elsewhere, the fact that powering me up fucked Bro over was a sacrifice that Cal was willing to make. You saw how he ditched Gamzee when it was convenient.” Dave points out.

You sit up and look at him worriedly.

“Who’s Cal working for?” you ask.

“The big bad that we’re supposed to fight eventually. And when I say we I mean me, apparently I’m the one prophesised to fight him. Which is a load of horseshit if you ask me but there you go.” Dave sighs miserably. You chalk that up to another problem that Dave wouldn’t have if he was still dead and might be part of why he’s not too thrilled to be alive again.

“But why would someone who has to fight you want you to be stronger?” you ask.

“It’s an ego thing. It’s like… the Joker doesn’t just declare some rando in Gotham to be his arch nemesis, does he? What kind of weak bad guy just fights Steve from accounting? Nah, if you’re A-list baddie you fight Batman and he’s your nemesis. So, I get a forced upgrade for someone else’s vanity.” Dave explains unhappily.

That is really messed up. Dave must feel like a pawn in someone else’s scheme. It’s bad enough that this asshole is watching you all of the time but now he’s manipulating things within your timeline for his own amusement.

Dave swings his legs off of the bed and stands up.

“I’m, uh, gonna bail. I might have a shower too or and nap or… whatever. Later, man.” Dave mumbles and floats off out of your room.

You sit on your bed alone and resolve then and there that not only will Dave not have to fight this asshole alone but the moment you have the void players together again you’re going to hit up this muse and get as much information on him as possible. That asshole is going down.

Chapter End Notes

To get the translation to the broodfester tongues I used this awesome translator which you can use too if you want to see word for word what Rose and Dave said when they were grimdark! https://lingojam.com/TheBroodfesterTongues
Hey everyone, sorry for being so silent lately, I got caught up writing a novel for NaNoWriMo, so to make up for it here is a 26K CHAPTER OH MY GOD.

That said I’m gonna hit you with a slight *CONTENT WARNING* here for you all.

While I wouldn’t say any of this is out of the range of homestuck canon stuff with death there is mention of some pretty grim stuff in here so heads up for that. If you’re wanting specifics there’s mentions and text alluding to suicide, depression and generally other neurodivergent fallout. So, with that said I hope you all like this beast of a chapter.

You’re not gonna lie, flying is pretty dope. Not worth dying for but since you didn’t get a choice on that front it’s a pretty sweet perk for doing so. You pull a clock hand further around the giant vertical clock face until it syncs with the correct time. You’re awarded more experience and a fat stack of cash into your ceramic porkhollow. The clock reads 1am.

The matte metal of the clock face slowly starts to shine with red and blue. You turn around in the air and Sollux is floating right behind you in PJs that have bees all over them. You can’t help but feel a little bit like a kid who’s just been caught taking cookies from the jar by their parent. Not that you’ve ever had that experience but, you know, you imagine so.

“I’d ask you if you knew what time it is but I know you know.” he says flatly.

“Chill, man. I just couldn’t sleep. You don’t sleep in the dream bubbles really, so I guess I’ve forgotten how to. I figured I might as well have useful insomnia.” you say.

Sollux makes a thoughtful noise and floats over to your side.

“Total coincidence that you’ve still not talked to Dirk and Hal since you bailed on them when you came back to life, then?” Sollux asks lightly.

“I’ve talked to them.” you say defensively.

“Looking them to pass you stuff at the table over dinner doesn’t count.” he declares.

“Look, not that it’s related because it’s not, but talking to them won’t do anything. No one overthinks shit and punishes themselves like Dirk and Hal do. Nothing I say will change that, and I don’t feel like having to stand there and repeatedly tell them it’s cool.” you explain.

“Uh-huh. Nothing to do with the fact that the guy who taught you how to talk can tell when you’re lying and, in fact, you’re not cool with anything about this situation.” Sollux says flatly.

You turn around to glare at him.

“It isn’t Dirk’s or Hal’s fault. It’s just Bro’s. And I’m pretty sure he waited until everyone was distracted to make his move, he always worked like that. They can’t both be at my side at every waking moment, it’s not their fault.” you argue. You said the same to Karkat and to Hal and Dirk
earlier too. You’ve had this conversation with Rose countless times, you could say these words in your sleep.

“True, but you don’t actually buy that do you?” he asks.

“Of course I do. Logically they couldn’t have done anything. Eventually they’d both be caught up in stuff at the same time and that’s the moment Bro wanted.” you repeat.

Sollux leans his head back on the large clock face and watches you for a moment or two.

“If you can tell me that you actually don’t feel raw about it, regardless of how you think you should feel then I’ll drop it. I swear.” Sollux offers.

You open your mouth to answer him and hesitate. You know that Bro wanted to kill you on that quest bed and you know Bro, when he wants something he’ll scheme and stalk endlessly to get it. Unless Dirk or Hal had been glued to you 24/7 there’s no way it wouldn’t have happened eventually, and even then Bro might have just done the same to Dirk. It’s not as if Dirk being around ever stopped Bro from being terrible in the past, is it?

You know all of that. You understand it, and you accept it. There’s nothing they could have done. And yet…

You can still feel it inside you, the belief that at the last second one of them rush in and stop Bro. When he stuck his sword in your chest the realisation that you were wrong hurt just as much as the blade did.

It’s irrational and stupid, there’s no way you can get through a whole conversation with Dirk or Hal without them finding you out. You shut your mouth and look away.

Sollux sighs sadly and brushes his knuckles over your cheek. It doesn’t do the same thing for you that it does for trolls, the wonders of biology and all that, but it’s still a gentle gesture.

“Rose and I had a lot of time when we were dead to just talk and think. I got some time powers when I died and she got some light ones, that’s how we were able to go back to that night and get me to sleepwalk into writing that message on my wall.” you say slowly.

“I always wondered about that. I guess it means that you were destined to die one way or another or it’d be a paradox, right?” Sollux muses.

“You and I had a lot of time when we were dead to just talk and think. I got some time powers when I died and she got some light ones, that’s how we were able to go back to that night and get me to sleepwalk into writing that message on my wall.” you say slowly.

“I always wondered about that. I guess it means that you were destined to die one way or another or it’d be a paradox, right?” Sollux muses.

“Yeah, Rose and I combined our powers and we spent a lot of time looking to see if there was any other way it could have gone down. But there wasn’t, at best it got put off to a different day. At worst timelines where Bro didn’t get us just became doomed. If anything I’m starting to see Aradia’s point about things that happen in time being inevitable, there’s no point in fighting it.” you say listlessly.

“Dave…” Sollux says quietly.

“We even looked further back and figured like, hey what if Bro never died? Things play out real different when you do that because the game doesn’t even happen. Dirk chooses not to kill Bro and instead runs to Mom because Bro made it clear that he was going to take me away otherwise. Mom and Bro meet each other again and get into this huge custody fight over us. They even get back together and break up over and over again. We all end up in Texas and Signless tries to legally mediate it only Bro loses his temper and attacks him so he ends up in jail. Mom gets blackout drunk and the four of us bail on her and move out on our own. Dirk and Roxy work shitty jobs and we live
in this shitty apartment, we don’t meet you guys at all because we’re in different schools. Every time Bro gets out of jail we have to drop everything and run. Roxy and Rose both go full alcoholic like mom, and I don’t meet Karkat until I’m twenty-five at some stupid party and we have this dumb one night stand and he completely breaks my heart because he loses my number and I think he ditched me. Rose meets Kanaya in her crappy retail job and the week after that Roxy kills us all drunk driving. There are countless timelines and the best one that I’ve seen for me is where seven billion people and one planet are all destroyed and Bro murders me and my twin. Dirk’s guilt has fuck all to do with that!” you’re actually gasping for breath at the end of that far too long monologue and Sollux is just staring at you.

Sollux opens his mouth and then seems to think better of what he was going to say and shuts it again. His expression is cautious and so when he finally says something you’re not sure what it’s going to be.

“Can I ask you some questions and you just answer them without asking me why I’m asking? I’ll tell you after, I promise.” Sollux says eventually.

“Sure, why not.” you mutter, resting your head back on the clock face.

“Are you out here because you actually can’t sleep or you just don’t want to?” he asks.

“Can’t sleep.” you answer.

“You didn’t eat much at dinner either.” he points out.

“Can you blame me? It was super awkward. Besides, I’m not really hungry.” you shrug. You can still feel everyone around the table looking at you.

“How optimistic would you say that you are about any of this going well?” he asks vaguely.

“Not.” you tell him flatly. You’ve seen how many timelines die, you’re not special and you have no reason to think you’ll stay in the right one. Besides the creep who is watching you all might get bored of you at any moment.

“But you’re doing quests, are you trying to improve our odds?” he asks.

“I guess. Plus it beats just staring at the ceiling and thinking shit to death.” you answer, not sure where he’s going about this.

“Are you happy that you’re alive again?” he asks.

“I’m happy to see everyone again.” you answer.

“Not what I asked. Are you happy about actually being alive?” Sollux presses you.

You should say yes, that’s the right answer. Plus everyone else went through so much to get you this way again and people would be so upset if you weren’t. But that’s not the question he asked, is it? You think you might know what he’s getting at.

“The best I can give you is that I’m happy that you, Karkat, my family and friends aren’t sad. Other than that I don’t really care.” you answer.

“Ok, so you’re basically immortal now. Have you considered testing that? Like throwing yourself into the lava or stabbing yourself with your sword?”
“I’m immortal and you’re asking me if I’m suicidal? Seriously?” you snort.

“Yeah, I am.” Sollux says firmly.

“Aside from it being painful and pointless I’m not going to put you and Karkat through feeling that. Don’t worry.” you say and push yourself away from the clock face with the intent to fly off. Only you’re shoved back and held in place by red and blue light.

“I am worried, dumbass. You’re fucking depressed, I’ve been there I know what it looks like. It happens to me, to my brother and my dad. I know this shit and I only just got out of my last round of it. You died, you’ve got every right to be jacked up and this doesn’t need to be a big thing. But I can help, I get it, we can talk about it or not, whatever works. We’ve got alchemiter codes for all kinds of medication, and we can change that for you too. I know it’ll feel like you don’t want help because this is what things are really like and things really do suck that much, but just… trust me?” Sollux says, and the pressure on your chest eases, you could leave if you want.

You’re not depressed. You’re not. You just don’t much care about anything and you feel massively guilty about how everyone else feels and things really are terrible forever and-

Hm.

“Is this going to be a big thing?” you groan.

“Making a federal fucking issue of this isn’t gonna help, so nah.” Sollux says with a shake of his head and you feel a little better. The last thing you want is everyone to be worried about you. God only knows your loved ones don’t need more reasons for that.

“Hal’s the closest thing we’ve got to a doctor with all of the medical information he downloaded, you’re going to have to at least talk to him if no one else.” Sollux warns you.

“Ugh, fine. Fine. There might be something wrong, maybe. I just don’t wanna deal with it right now.” you complain. You look up at the slow-moving clock hands and wonder what the you in the alpha timeline is like, would you be jealous of him or not? You and Rose tried but their timeline was too far away from you to see with your limited combined powers. You wonder what he’d think of you. He’d probably think that you’re pathetic, you sure as shit think you are.

“Wanna crush some quests and destroy some imps until you get tired?” Sollux suggests into the silence that had fallen between you.

“Yeah. The nakkodile who got me to fix this big ass clock said I’d get cool shit at the end of the quest line.” you say, relieved at the change of topic.

“Sure.” Sollux shrugs.

So the two of you quest for a while. You don’t talk about the thing with Dirk and Hal, you don’t talk about Bro or being dead. You don’t talk about how over dinner no one was sure whether or not to be happy (because yay you’re alive) or sombre (because you died). Instead, you talk about your consorts, the dumb quests on your planet, you talk about how Sollux has never seen Con Air and whether he should let John show it to him.

“He’s just getting that look on his face, you know?” Sollux says with a shake of his head as you slide a gear over a spindle until it clicks.

“That look that says he thinks his prankster’s gambit is about to go up?” you ask and pull a lever, setting the clock parts in motion.
“Yeah, that one.” he nods.

“Look, rule of thumb, just don’t watch Nic Cage movies. I mean name one good movie of his.” you challenge Sollux. Sollux seems to think on that for a moment and you’re about to declare your argument won when he says something.

“Wasn’t he in Kick Ass?” Sollux asks.

Well, damn, he was.

“He wasn’t exactly great in that.” you say defensively.

“Hey, that wasn’t your question. It’s a good movie, he’s in it.” Sollux laughs at your pained expression.

“Okay, you win that one, but I maintain that those two things are unrelated.” you concede.

“I’ll allow that. Don’t you need to hand this quest in? Which nakkodile gave it to you?” Sollux asks.

“Fuck only knows, they all look the same to me.” you yawn and the two of you drift back to the nearby tower where you got the quest in the first place.

“That’s slightly racist I think, whatever I don’t care.” he replies, yawning as well because that shit’s contagious.

You find the right little nakkodile and when you point out the correctly ticking clock it paddles its little feet in excitement and hands you a key. With one deliriously happy flailing arm, points you in a different direction. Floating that way, because walking is for chumps, leads you to a large iron chest. Interestingly you’re not too far out from where you started the game, though you’re now floating between levels that you couldn’t get to on your own before. In the distance you can see your quarter of your house. The chest that you’ve found is probably one that you’ve walked over on higher layers without ever noticing. With nothing else to do you shove the key in the lock and turn it. The chest opens up on its own and Sollux sings a little tune in commemoration.

“You goddamn nerd, singing the Zelda item get jingle.” you laugh.

“Hey, you correctly identified the tune. Who’s the nerd now?” Sollux shoots back with a jagged grin.

“Hmm good poin- oh no, still you!” you chuckle and peer into the chest to see what sweet loot you got. Sollux drapes himself over your back like the world’s boniest cape so that he too can see inside the chest.

Inside the metal chest are what appear to be two free-floating turntables. You reach in and scoop them up noting that they have rotating red gears on the bottom of them. The record on the top of each one slowly spins and you know instinctively that they’re moving at the same rate that all of the gears on this planet do, along with the flow of time.

“I think my future self had these.” you say thoughtfully and bounce one of them experimentally on your palm. It bobs in the air and you twist your hand so that your hand is held above it and it floats on its own.

“That is seriously cool.” Sollux whistles and swipes his hand under and above it to see if there’s some kind of string holding it to you. There isn’t of course, it seems to just be attracted to your orbit like a moon to a planet. You move your other hand so that you’re holding your hands above both of
them.

“I wonder how they work, future me used them to time travel.” you say thoughtfully.

Before you can try anything out a chat window opens up on your shades.

[Future turntechGodhead (??? hours from now) began pestering Current turntechGodhead]

FTG: hello past coolest dude in the universe it is i future coolest dude in the universe
FTG: here is your copy pasted instruction manual for the timetables from the chat that future me had with me which is to say you in the past
FTG: where did this information come from first?
FTG: dont ask those kind of questions your head will blow up
CTG: uh
FTG: like an egg in a microwave
CTG: ok so how do they work then?
FTG: much like youd expect just stop the record to freeze time and move it forward or back to go forward or back in time
CTG: i think i coulda worked that out on my own dude didnt need that help
FTG: yeah well its easier in theory than practice you gotta think of a specific point in the timeline to go to or else youre just gonna end up at an unpredictable point in time
FTG: pros of travelling to the future is that you cant cause a paradox by doing it but you cant be totally sure that youre in the right future so its a pretty pointless task unless youre looking for spoilers about what to do next
FTG: going to the past is easier because you always go to your own past and you can essentially double up the amount of work you can get done in a short time period or triple or quadruple up or whatever
FTG: like karkat needs your help as does jade and also rose no problem just keep going back to that day until you are all the places
FTG: delight in confusing the shit out of people by remembering things theyve not done or said yet
FTG: remember though its harry potter time travel rules if you didnt see yourself in the past you cant let yourself be seen and if you did see yourself you have to be sure to go back to that point
FTG: JUST REMEMBER THAT WHEN YOU INTERACT WITH YOURSELF TO HAVE THE SAME CONVERSATION
CTG: wouldnt it be easier just to not talk to myself or to write shit down and then keep passing the same note back in time?
FTG: like im doing now you mean?
CTG: point
FTG: but yeah its easier for everyone if you keep conversation between daves to a minimum so we dont all have to learn the lines for that shit vital info and cool dude head nods only
FTG: anyways two last points one dont cause a paradox and doom the timeline and two macking on yourself in front of karkat will break him it is fucking hilarious you need to try it
CTG: oh my god
CTG: have you done that?
FTG: yep and i gotta say no wonder karkat likes kissing us so much weve got game dude
CTG: damn
FTG: anyway im done copy pasting this conversation go time travel

[Future turntechGodhead (??? hours from now) ceased pestering Current turntechGodhead]

“I just got a message from myself in the future.” you tell Sollux who raises an eyebrow.

“I figured someone was messaging you or else you were just staring at nothing for several minutes.”
he snickers.

“Hey, time travel is happening here but sure take the chance to mock me instead.” you snort.

“Anytime.” he nods.

“Okay, so… freezing time.” you murmur.

Sollux leans over, resting his head on your shoulder as you hesitantly extend your fingers over the vinyl. It’s not like you need to prepare yourself to work with records, you’ve done it since you were small. Bro taught you. That thought sits like a lead weight in your head and you’ve no idea what to do with it so you just pretend that it’s not there.

You press down and stop the record in place. The ticking inside your chest halts and though your blood keeps flowing it still feels deeply uncomfortable. Around you gears are frozen in place and bubbles of lava remain motionless.

“Whoa.” Sollux whispers.

The feeling of frozen time grates on your nerves so with nothing else to do you turn it back a ways until something in you prompts you to stop. When you stop and let go again time resumes. You hear a thump above you from the highest gear and you and Sollux both look up at it.

“You know Vriska mentioned a jetpack, if I got the code for that from her I could get across these platforms more easily.” a voice comes from above. Your voice in fact, you remember this.

“This is the first day we were here!” you whisper to Sollux in amazement.

“That could be cool. Downside would be the talking to Vriska part.” Hal answers back and you hear a shower of grist hitting the floor, this was your early questing.

“We can’t let them see us, I never saw myself that day.” you say into Sollux’s ear. Hal has very sharp hearing, and he absolutely cannot be allowed to hear you.

“Upside though, less of this.” other you says.

“What did happen that day?” Sollux asks softly.

“I think this is when the first Bro prototyped enemy showed up, which we really shouldn’t interfere with.” you say quietly.

“Future then?” Sollux suggests and you nod.

You both look at your timetables again, Sollux leaning over you and in contact with your body just so that you don’t accidentally leave him in the past or something. Now that time isn’t frozen the disks are spinning once more. It’s intuitive enough to slide you both forward through time, you feel the blip of the time you came from but continue past it a good way. When you stop and release the timetables you can feel that this is the future, but nothing around you looks any different at all.

“The future is now, the future is boring.” you snort.

Something in Sollux’s pocket beeps and he pulls it out with a frown.

“Not so sure about that. Fish Bitch’s ship is real close, just out of atmosphere here. Look.” he says and points low in the sky. There’s a slight twinkle of light through the heat distortion of the lava that way.
“Oh, shit.” you say.

“Let’s go see.” Sollux grins, taking to the sky without you.

“What? No! The last time I was anywhere near that ship I died! And it might not kill me for good now because ‘you were a dumbass’ deaths don’t count but Karkat will still feel it and you’ll still hear it. Also, you’re not immortal!” you protest, following him.

“We’ll be quick. Besides, you can stop time. If she does see us we’ll be gone before she can do anything about it. Think about it Dave, if we see what we do in the future we can change things. It’s like a walkthrough.” Sollux argues.

“And what if we see something bad and we try to avoid that bad thing and in doing so make it so that whole situation happens in the first place?” you say. Seriously, hasn’t the guy ever seen time travel movies? The best thing anyone can do with time travel powers is to use them as little as possible.

“My parents are on that ship, any information we can get to make it so I can get them back is vital.” Sollux says and your resolve wavers.

“You know I’ll go without you if I have to.” he adds defiantly. Goddamnit. You did agree to keep this idiot safe from his own bad ideas and you know if it was your family in that ship instead you’d be doing all kinds of stupid shit to get them back.

“Ugh. For the record, I hate this. Stay behind me, if I say we’re bailing we’re so bailing. Got it?” you warn him. Sollux nods.

The two of you fly in the direction of the light, following the program on Sollux’s phone. He wrote it to track the ship and it’s starting to prove useful. As you fly closer you can make out the hulking neon red bulk of the ship, far too big and bulky to be natural. Evidently, not all of your time in English class was wasted on focusing on Karkat because a line from the Hitchhiker's Guide floats into your brain as you keep your eyes trained on the ship.

“The ships hung in the sky in much the same way that bricks don’t.”

It’s a pretty apt description of the beast of a ship and maybe it’s just because the last time you were near it you got shot but it’s sending tingles of dread up your spine. As you draw closer you’re able to see people in space in front of the ship, on the outside just floating there.

You recognise your own red cape flapping in a nonexistent breeze as other you gestures as he talks. He’s taking to Aradia and Damara who are clad in different but similar outfits with the same time symbol on the chest, they’re god tier too.

Behind them the black expanse of space looks wrong. It’s like those art toys you used to see in shop windows where there’s a black surface and multicoloured paper behind and you had to scratch off a pattern. Only the pattern that’s showing looks like shattered glass. Bright light arcs through the cracks and you feel that it’s wrong right down to your bones.

“So then the horse says ‘no, she’s my wife!’” Aradia laughs and Damara cracks up. Other you snorts and then seems to catch himself.

“Wait, I remember-” he says and twists until he sees you.

“Oh snap, it’s nearly go time. Thought we’d be waiting forever.” other you says.
“Dave, how far in the future are we?” Sollux asks you.

“I don’t know, I just wound us forward. I didn’t have a set point in mind so…” you trail off, trying to feel out the timeline.

“You’ve got a good long while yet.” other you answers for you.

“Yeah, but we don’t.” Damara warns all of you.

“I do, I’m… maid of time.” Aradia laughs and Damara and the future you both groan.

“Why isn’t the ship trying to shoot any of you? Is Roxy making you invisible to it or something?” Sollux asks.

“Sorry, Sol. We don’t do spoilers, what you’re gonna see is a big enough one as is.” Aradia says seriously.

A muffled voice catches your attention and future you raises his arm out of his cape to reveal what looks to be a teeny tiny smuppet ass on a wristwatch.

“-ready yet or not? Or are… your shame globes?” Karkat’s yelling voice says, all tinny and muffled. You can’t even make out all of the words.

“Deep calming breaths, babe. We’re just about ready out here.” other you says into what you will charitably call ‘the device’.

“Are you talking to me... the little foam ass? You know I can’t… through the little foam…” Karkat complains.

“Oh no, you’re breaking up! I’m going through a tunnel! Kssht! Ksssh! Click.” other you pantomimes out and then lowers his arm, though you can still hear muffled Karkat yelling from it.

“Ready now?” Damara asks.

“Hell yeah. You two need to back up with me, Damz, Radia you both know what you’re doing. More than I do anyway.” future you says, muttering that last part.

He flies backwards, leaving you and Sollux to follow him. Aradia and Damara fly off a little ways until the three of them more or less form a giant spaced out triangle. Future Dave draws in a deep breath and then pulls out a sword that you’re not familiar with. The colour of it looks like that legendary Welsh sword that you repaired, but you can also see bits on it that look like the turntables you just found. Could you combine those in an alchemiter to make that sword? But then...

“I know what you’re thinking,” other you says, “if you got inspired to make this from seeing me with it, and I got inspired when I was you then who was the first one to have the idea?”

You don’t have anything to say to that and evidently your future self remembers that and doesn’t wait for a response. Instead, you watch as he twists and jams the sword into seemingly thin air. Half of it vanishes somewhere else entirely. Red light crackles along the blade and you find that looking at the place in space where it stabs in makes your chest hurt. He’s not lodged it in space, he’s impaled time.

Looking out into space you can see bright sparks of red from Damara and Aradia too.

Eventually, something seems to catch, and a giant almost runic looking circle spreads out between
the three of them. Bits of it spin and twist in the air, giant translucent red gears pulse up and down the white sword that your future self is clinging to.

To your left the giant ship moves, adjusting and lining itself up with the glowing red symbol. You see a glow of red and blue from it and before you can think better of it you grab Sollux and pull the two of you back through time. The last time you were near that ship and saw red and blue it was the last thing that you saw.

You let the record under your hand go and it starts to spin forward again as you and Sollux float in empty space. The ship isn’t here yet, it’s still in the future.

“What the hell was that?” Sollux gasps.

“I don’t know, but I wasn’t sticking around to get shot again.” you insist.

“I don’t blame you but… shouldn’t we warn people?” he asks with a frown.

“Warn them about what? We don’t know what was happening there. All we know is that at some point Damara and Aradia go god tier like me and we do something weird together with time near Fish Bitch’s ship. That might not even be the future that we end up living in, I don’t know if it was our alpha. But the more people we tell, the bigger chance we have of breaking ourselves into a doomed timeline.” you say firmly.

“So we just wait and see how it plays out?” Sollux asks, seeming to test the idea out as he speaks it.

“Sounds like the best idea to me.” you nod.

“I guess we know what kind of thing to look out for but man… Aradia and Damara are gonna die.” he says worriedly. Regardless of Aradia being his ex moirail both Megidos are adopted members of his family, it’s normal that the idea that they’re going to die would distress him.

“They’re going to be fine, you saw them.” you say reassuringly.

“I know, I just hope it’s painless is all.” Sollux mutters.

You feel Bro’s sword through your chest. Staring down at the silver of it in disbelief. On your side drowning in your own blood and watching waves of red rush from your twin’s sliced open neck as her terrified heart bleeds her out. The pain was white hot, every failed breath felt like your organs ripping themselves from their places in your chest cavity, blood pooling, filling-

You jerk back at warm hands on your face. You shudder slightly as adrenaline burns through your system and focus on thin thumbs trailing your cheekbones.

“Sorry. Flashback.” you manage to say roughly. You really wish your therapist wasn’t dead.

“You should sleep.” Sollux says, letting your face go and tugging on the front fringe of your cape.

Your body is tired and shuddery in the way that anything anxiety related always makes you. It’s not a good kind of tired but it might be enough to make you sleep and that’s what you need right now. You nod, and the pair of you fly back towards home base in silence. He doesn’t prod you for details or ask you if you’re okay, which you appreciate.

When you land he just pushes you towards the stairs and leaves you to it, walking off to his own room without a word.
You dress for bed, you brush your teeth and wash off the dried sweat that LOHAC had accumulated on your face. You crawl into bed with the light out and rest your shades on the table at the side. At first you can’t get comfortable, so you roll over one way and then the other. You lay there with your leg jiggling impatiently. Then your pillow feels too hot so you flip it, that doesn’t help. You get up to pee and drink something, though thankfully those two are unrelated. You stare at the ceiling as frustration builds in you. You could take sleeping meds but it’s so late that you still be out cold when you’re meant to be up tomorrow and then if someone makes you get up you’ll just be brainless all day.

Even before you died you’d been sleeping with a bunch of other people, curled up against your siblings and soulmate. But now you’re on your own and suddenly you can’t sleep. You don’t want to bother Rose and you don’t feel like seeing the others. So your mind goes to Karkat. Maybe you can sneak into bed with him.

Slipping out of bed and down to Karkat’s door is easy enough but you don’t even have to open it to hear how loud he’s snoring. He’s dead asleep and you’ll feel like a real asshole if you wake him up after the day that you’ve already put him through. So you walk downstairs, resigning yourself to not sleeping.

When you walk past Sollux’s door you hesitate.

He mentioned not sleeping, right? You’re pretty sure that Karkat has said before that Sollux has trouble sleeping so maybe he’s awake too. You’d certainly rather have someone to talk to than stay awake with your own thoughts for company. And so you knock on the door, quietly of course.

When Sollux opens it you realise that he was absolutely asleep. He’s bleary-eyed, and his hair is sticking up in every direction.

“Oh, shit. You were asleep.” you exclaim quietly.

“Sorry, man. I just couldn’t sleep and I thought you might be awake but you should go back to sleep.” you apologise hastily and back away.

A thin hand reaches out and snags the front of your pyjama shirt. It’s not really a pyjama shirt though, it’s one of Dirk’s old shirts. When you were younger all of your pyjamas used to be old clothes of Dirk’s that he’d grown out of and you got. Most of your wardrobe has been replaced by now, although you still have a few of his old jeans which were some high-quality ones that he stole back in the day and lasted well. You still sleep in a lot of his old shirts because… well they always made you feel safe. You didn’t even realise you’d picked this one out.

Sollux pulls you into his room and shuts the door.

“Just go to sleep.” Sollux yawns and nudges you to the bed.

“Hah, is this like… pale fourth base or something? Although actually, I can’t remember what the regular bases are supposed to mean, I think people don’t agree on that. But you know what I mean.” you babble.

Sollux just grunts to show that he heard you and continues shepherding you towards the bed and when you’re close enough he climbs in and looks at you expectantly.

“I don’t wanna keep you awake.” you say weakly. You get a very unimpressed look in response to that, you suppose you did wake him up in the first place.

You sit down on the bed and he all but clotheslines you into laying down at his side. The light flicks
off with a little red spark and you’re left with the subtle night light of John’s planet through the curtained window and the glow that seeps out between the lids of your moirail’s eyes. Because… you have a moirail.

Wow Dave, how come your mom lets you have two boyfriends?

You giggle in tired delirium, and the red and blue brightens as Sollux squints at you. He shifts and moves his arm until his hand gets into your hair and starts combing through it and scratching at your scalp. It feels nice, but you’re acutely aware of how sharp those claws are. You get this feeling sometimes with Karkat too, when you catch a flash of sharp teeth or the way his eyes reflect back at you in certain lights. Something so inhuman and dangerous. But yet you know that Karkat and Sollux would never hurt you. There’s something in that, that air of could maim you but never would that gives you the warm fuzzies. Dirk gives you the same feeling, Hal too. People who could fuck you up but would rather die. It’s probably a reaction to the presence of Bro which is, by contrast, could hurt you and did. That feeling settles into every wrinkle and crevice of your brain, marinading you in calm.

You fully expect to not sleep, you’ve given up the idea that you will but even so staying here and feeling relaxed is better than being in your own bed awake and irritated. It’s probably more restful too, even without sleeping. But somehow between giving up the goal of sleep and having sharp claws idly skating across your scalp you fall into a deep sleep.

When you wake up hours later it’s only because you hear the bathroom door lock clicking shut. You can feel that it’s late and you’re still tired but at least you slept a little. Rolling over in Sollux’s now empty bed you spot your shades on the nightstand right next to his mismatched glasses. Thinking about it you don’t remember taking them off, he must have brain magicked them off for you. It’s sweet.

You put them on, oh sweet you have messages.

[carcinoGeneticist began pestering turntechGodhead]

CG: WHERE ARE YOU?

[turntechGodhead is an idle chum]

CG: DIRK IS PRETENDING THAT HE’S NOT FREAKING OUT BECAUSE HE DOESN’T KNOW WHERE YOU ARE. I COVERED FOR YOU AND SAID I’D SEEN YOU ABOUT BUT PLEASE TELL ME YOU ARE HERE SOMEWHERE.

[turntechGodhead is an idle chum]

CG: DAVE.

[turntechGodhead is an idle chum]

CG: DAVE STRIDER I WILL GO THROUGH THIS ENTIRE GODDAMN BUILDING IF I HAVE TO.
TG: chill honey buns
CG: NEVER CALL ME HONEY BUNS AGAIN.
TG: sugar tits?
CG: I DON’T EVEN HAVE RUMBLESHERES YOU CRETIN. WHERE ARE YOU? YOU’RE NOT IN YOUR ROOM OR ROSE’S BECAUSE I CHECKED THERE AND ROXY AND DIRK’S ROOMS.
THE ONLY REASON I HAVE NOT CHECKED THE CROCKERBERTS ROOMS IS THAT IT IS TOO EARLY FOR MORE IMMATURE BUCKET RELATED PRANKS.

You don’t actually have your phone on you, it’s charging in your room. Your shades can take POV pictures but only when you’re wearing them so that’s no good. Unless…

You take your Polaroid camera out of your sylladex and snap a selfie of yourself snuggled up against Sollux’s sheets. You then put the camera away, wait for the photo to become clear and take a picture of that in your hand with your shades.

ANSWER ME!

DID YOU FALL ASLEEP AGAIN OR SOMETHING?!

[turntechGodhead attached a file shadesnap146.jpg]

IS THAT SOLLUX’S ROOM?

yup

YOU TOOK A SELFIE OF YOURSELF ON A CAMERA AND THEN TOOK A PICTURE OF THAT TO SEND TO ME RATHER THAN ANSWER ME WITH WORDS?

YOU ARE AN INSUFFERABLE HIPSTER DOUCHE AND YET I STILL LOVE YOU.

love you too sweetpea

NOPE NOT THAT NAME EITHER.

moonbeam?

sugar flower?

honey bunch?

dENIED.

you wound me

YOU’LL LIVE.

RIGHT, NOW THAT I KNOW THAT YOU’RE ALIVE AND WELL MAKE SURE TO COME TO BREAKFAST AT SOME POINT TO GET THE ASSIGNMENTS OF WHAT EVERYONE IS DOING TODAY, OR ELSE VRISKA WILL TAKE A NOSE DIVE OFF OF THE HANDLE INTO PRISsy BITCH SWAMP AND NO ONE WANTS THAT.

ALSO I HEAR YOU NEED FOOD TO LIVE.

idk where the science on that one man

#conspiracy #bigfood

AND YOU JUST MADE ME LAUGH AND INHALE COFFEE, WELL DONE.

yiss

I’LL MAKE COFFEE FOR YOU.

make it extra strong and i will give you my first born

I’LL MAKE IT EXTRA STRONG JUST TO SEE HOW YOU’LL COME THROUGH ON THAT PROMISE, I’M SURE THAT’LL BE INTERESTING.

WHAT WITH US BEING DIFFERENT SPECIES AND, AS FAR AS I KNOW, BOTH BIOLOGICALLY INCAPABLE OF BEARING CHILDREN.

eh how hard can it be

ACTUALLY I’VE CHANGED MY MIND, THE MORE I THINK ABOUT HOW YOU’RE A MAMMAL THE GROSSER I FIND YOUR SPECIES.

oh snap you’ve done it now

imma show you my functionally useless nips

behold my belly button where i once had an umbilical cord

I’M GOING TO SPIT IN YOUR COFFEE IF YOU KEEP THAT UP.

i prefer to swap spit with you more directly <3

THE FACT THAT I AGREE WITH YOU TROUBLES ME. NOW GET DRESSED.
You should get up. Standing up you find that you don’t have that many kinks in your back from sleeping in a strange bed, but you suppose you’ve spent every other night here in a pile with all of the other humans plus Karkat and Kanaya. That all feels like so long ago from your point of view.

You shake that thought off and knock on Sollux’s bathroom door. He opens it after a second, toothpaste foam everywhere around his mouth and hair every which way.

“I’m gonna go get dressed.” you tell him.

He makes an affirmative sound around his toothbrush and you leave, heading back to your own room. Is this like… the pale walk of shame? Or maybe not, you are dating the guy after all. Ugh, you’re overthinking this. You brush your teeth, try to fix your hair and then change back into your god tier clothes. You had to die to get them so you’re sure as shit gonna get some wear out of them.

Walking is for chumps so you float back down the stairs and into the kitchen where the long table is and from where the tempting smells of food and coffee waft. You’re all down for some coffee, or at least you are until you see that you’re already sat at the table drinking some.

At other you’s side Karkat’s eyes bug out in comic shock.

“Trust me, man, when you’re me you’ll need this a lot more than past you. Current you. Whatever.” future you mumbles and keeps drinking.

“What is going on!?” Vriska demands, pointing from you to your double in accusation.

“I can time travel now.” you both say at once.

“Since when?” several people ask at the same time.

“Since last night. Sup future Dave?” Sollux greets, walking into the room and past him nonchalantly.

“This is amazing, I’m going to have to change all of our plans to accommodate this. We could-” Vriska starts.

“Yeah, yeah. I can double up to be in several places at once. That guy’s spending the day with Roxy helping her learn her voidy shit, I’m with Aradia and Damara on Quartz and Melody and the last guy is with Dirk.” future you says blandly.

“What other guy?” Jade asks just in time for another you to appear. This guy looks tired as hell, he’s all scuffed up and there’s dried blood coming from his nose.

“Dave, you’re hurt!” Dirk gasps, rising to his feet.

“No shit.” future-future Dave grumbles.

“What happened to you?” Dirk asks, reaching for him but that Dave ducks out of his way.

“Shenanigans. Doesn’t matter. I’m fine. Look, let’s just go to your planet and get this over with. But, uh, first I need to borrow you outside Karkat. You too, you know what’s happening.” future-future Dave says to future Dave.

“You know, I suspect.” future Dave says and downs the last of his coffee before getting to his feet with a perplexed looking Karkat. The three of them head outside and shut the door behind them. Everyone looks at you as if you have some idea about what’s happening.
“Are you sure this much time travel is a good idea, Dave? It means that you’re living out of sync with the rest of us.” Rose points out wisely.

“It’s not like I have a choice now, I have to follow this loop now it’s started or I cause a paradox. Besides, more time sounds like a good idea to me.” you shrug.

Rose narrows her eyes at you but decides to keep whatever judgement that she has to herself. No doubt you’ll hear about it at some point but for now you’re spared.

“So he can time travel, did you not get any useful powers, Lalonde?” Vriska jeers at your sister. Rose picks up her mug and sips at it, narrowing her eyes at the other girl.

“I am still refining them but I can see the most fortuitous path. Either way, it’s more than you can do right now.” Rose points out.

“Ugh! I could go god tier if I wanted, I didn’t even lose my dream self like you did so I’d do it right too!” Vriska snaps.

“You’d have to die for that and you don’t have the spine.” Rose shrugs.

“Rose!” Dirk and Roxy shout at the same time.

“Don’t say things like that! You can’t goad someone else into- into-” Roxy fails to spit it out and Rose just shrugs one shouldered in total apathy.

“I entirely agree, Rose, it is unacceptable to bait someone into doing serious harm to themselves or even goading them into suicide. I think you owe Vriska an apology.” Kankri scolds her. Vriska seems torn between glee at Rose getting scorned and uncertainty at aligning herself with Kankri.

“Vriska is big enough and ugly enough to take care of herself.” Rose says apathetically.

Sollux shoots you a sidelong look, the kind of look that says that apparently neither twin is handling this whole thing super well right now.

A Karkat loud noise of alarm comes somewhat muffled through the door, followed by silence. A moment or two after that future you opens the door and peers in.

“Hey, time team, let’s bounce.” future Dave says.

Damara stands up, muttering something in that other language that she speaks sometimes and walks towards the door with Aradia following behind her. The three of them take off.

“Dirk.” is all your most future self says and then he flies off, leaving Dirk to rush off after him.

Karkat is still standing wide-eyed in the doorway. Actually, based off of that conversation you had with your future self through pesterchum you have an inkling of what might have just gone down.

“I guess it’s you and me then, Rox.” you say to her.

“Well, how can I possibly resist an invitation like that?” Roxy says, getting to her feet. She leans in and presses a kiss to Rose’s cheek, making your twin grimace.

“Be good.” Roxy says quietly to Rose and then backs off.

“Ciao, everyone!” she calls to the rest of the table.
“Stop being obnoxious and leave already.” Sollux says, glaring at her. Roxy sticks her tongue out at him.

“Wait, I need to borrow him before you go.” Hal says, leaping over to you with a flap of his wings and landing on your shoulders with clawed fingertips.

“All yours, man.” Roxy laughs and Hal steers you out of the room and into the empty hallway. When you’re alone he floats away from you and fixes you with a concerned look.

“Sollux messaged me in the night.” Hal says and you scowl. Stupid Sollux looking out for your well being and caring about you and shit.

“It’s fine.” you say on reflex, and your attempts to take a step back away from him are thwarted by a sprite tail wrapped around your leg.

“Dave, I-” Hal begins but cuts himself off. He sighs and runs his hands through his hair before starting again, his tone a little calmer.

“I know yesterday was a colossal shit show and it was worse for you and Rose than it was for the rest of us. I can’t imagine what the mismatch of time feels like for you two on top of the trauma of dying and everything else. And it’s fine for you to need time to work through that before you talk to me about it. And I know that I let you down, I’m probably never going to forgive myself for that and you’re justified in feeling however you feel about that. But I’m the closest thing we have to a doctor here now and if you’re having health problems you need to tell me.” Hal insists.

“I’m fine.” you mumble.

“Look, we don’t have to do this now. But when you get home tonight I have questions that I want to run you through, like your doctor did before. If everything is more or less the same as it was before I’ll drop it, but if your medication needs tweaking that’s a thing we should do. This game is hard enough, there’s no need to up the difficulty, right?” he says, his voice going softer and sympathetic.

Hal was always reassuring you. When you had to get Dirk to the hospital it was Hal helping you, when Bro was around it was Hal directing you to be safe. You’ve had your fights over the years but if nothing else you could usually trust that he didn’t have any agenda beyond what he said. His loyalty was always to you before it was to Dirk.

And there he is again. Dirk. The whole sticking point of your death. Rose had hours of opinion on how Dirk and Hal failed you both, you’d heard it a thousand times when you were dead. She witnessed you go through the disbelief that they hadn’t got to you in time, the incomprehension and the grief. But now you’re at a place where you don’t blame them, Rose isn’t there yet of course but she’ll get there. But things still feel weird and you don’t want to deal with it.

“Tonight and not now?” you ask.

“Of course. Although it looks like you loop a few times, so I guess it’ll be longer for you.” Hal agrees. You can’t help but wonder if this is part of the reason why you have three of you running around today, just to put tonight off.

“Can you not tell Dirk?” you ask him quietly and for a moment Hal looks surprised.

“If that’s what you want.” he agrees.

There it is again, if Hal has to choose between you and Dirk he chooses you. Why does that make you feel better?
“Dave,” Hal says softly and reaches out to touch your cheek, “I can’t apologise enough for yesterday. But I also can’t change it, but I’ll do everything I can to help you today.”

You swallow around the lump in your throat and let your head fall forward onto his chest, you feel the feathers in his ruff tickling your forehead. You wrap your arms around him and tilt your head up to smush your face into that cloud of stark red feathers. His tail snakes around your legs, and you feel suddenly very small. His claws run through your hair and you are struck with how fiercely you missed him when you were dead. You had wondered grimly when you were dead if you would ever see him again. You don’t think sprites can die. So seeing him again should be great, and it is in a way, but everything is wrong. Maybe Sollux really is right about you, that some chemistry in your brain has gone awry.

There’s a lump in your throat and if you’re holding onto Hal too hard he doesn’t mention it. When you pull back your cheeks are wet, but you rub at them and refuse to think on it. Hal graciously doesn’t call you out on it.

“Tonight.” he reminds you.

“Sure.” you croak and head back to the kitchen.

Roxy looks around when you come in and smiles sweetly.

“Rose went after future you and Dirk. How crazy is it that I have several little brothers running around the place?” she says.

“Pretty crazy.” you agree.

“C’mon lil bro.” she says warmly and slings an arm around your shoulders. She steers you out past Karkat who is still standing dumbly at the door. With the way that he flushes dark when he sees you it’s a pretty good bet that your guess is correct. You blow him a kiss and a wink which at least brings himself back down to earth enough to roll his eyes at you. Or down to LOWAS you should say.

You and Roxy take off and land shortly after that on her planet. It’s as dark and spooky as ever, even with her little chameleon consorts in the trees that swivel their eyes to look at you as you pass.

“How about I make you a deal? It can be like a little game, quickfire questions. I ask you something, and you get to ask me something.” Roxy proposes as she leads you along.

“I don’t really wanna talk about it.” you mumble.

“And you don’t have anything you want to ask me about? Besides, I have questions on a wide variety of topics.” Roxy says with a grin.

You want to say that you don’t have anything you want to pry into but she is your sister and Rose would never forgive you if you deprived her of juicy nuggets of sibling gossip by passing up this opportunity.

“Fine, but I go first. And I can stop when I want.” you state.

“That’s fair. Go for it.” she nods. The pair of you are walking up a hill to a Greek looking temple with the pillars and all that shit.

“Have you and Jane done it yet?” you ask, going right for the jugular.

“Have we ‘done it’?” Roxy asks, laughing and doing air quotes.
“You know what I mean!” you say defensively.

“I do, I do. Eh, she’s still getting over the whole ‘oh em gee I like girls’ thing so no we haven’t gone all the way yet but we’ve done a decent number of bases on that diamond if not a home run yet.” Roxy answers honestly.

“Huh, I owe Rose five boonbucks.” you comment idly and Roxy laughs.

“Okay, my go. How are things with you and Sollux going?” she asks.

“Good, I think. It’s totally different to Karkat, it really is a different kind of relationship. But I think I needed it. So it’s working for now.” you tell her.

“For now?” Roxy asks.

“Never underestimate the possibility of me fucking things up.” you intone sagely.

The two of you climb the steepest part of the hill towards the temple until you give up and just float up there. Walking is for suckers.

“My go. How are you dealing with the whole future of the troll race resting on your ability to pull some egg thing out of your ass?” you question her.

“God, I hope I don’t have to pull it out of my actual ass. But I don’t know, I didn’t think just making something was possible but now I can see what you can do I’m revising my opinion on it. The pressure’s a lot but what other choice do we have?” Roxy says with a shrug.

“Did you know we were coming for you?” you ask, pausing on the steps of the white stone temple. Your jaw clicks shut so fast your teeth ache.

What answer do you give? ‘I thought you were but no one came in time?’ or ‘I had thought Dirk or Hal actually, not you?’ perhaps ‘I was clinging to the hope that someone would come for me so that I could handle being captured by Bro?’ No answer is right.

“I didn’t know for sure. I didn’t know that Rose was going to show up and get involved. But when she did I figured she’d said something to someone or at least both of us going missing would ring alarm bells.” you say instead, erring on the side of diplomatic.

“It did. If we’d just been able to get there sooner…” Roxy trails off.

“You’d have doomed the timeline and killed us all. There’s no point thinking about it.” you say flatly and walk past her and inside.

It turns out that this isn’t a temple, but rather a museum. Plinths scatter the place with little placards on the edges describing the artefacts, only there are no artefacts in there at all. Just empty places.

“It’s your turn.” Roxy reminds you as she leans down to read some of them.

You don’t want to play this game but also don’t want to give up so pointedly after that question. If you don’t want to admit it bothers you then it couldn’t possibly be something that bothers you. 8/10 for that mental gymnastics routine, didn’t quite stick the landing but it had style.

“Did you hear that Dirk broke up with Jake?” you ask.

“I did.” Roxy says, her mouth pursing into an unimpressed line.
“And?” you prompt her.

“And I think he’s being a total tool about it. But you know Dirk, never one to pass up an opportunity for self-flagellation.” Roxy says in exasperation and you snort, ain’t that the truth.

“What’s time travel like?” Roxy questions you.

“It mostly brings up a lot of questions about fate and free will that I’m trying hella hard not to think about.” you complain.

“How so?” Roxy asks.

“Because I don’t have free will right now.” you say.

“Of course you do.” Roxy protests.

“No I don’t, or… okay I do but not in any way that doesn’t break the universe. I know that later today I go back to this morning, I have to say and do the things that version of me just said or I break everything and then I have to loop back again and I still have to say and do exactly whatever that version of me is doing right now.” you explain.

“But you’re choosing to have this conversation with me right now.” Roxy points out. Your phone pings.

[turntechGodhead 12 hours from now began pestering current turntechGodhead]

TG: hand the phone to roxy

You shake your head and pass it over to her.

“What I mean is that the conversations I had around my future self this morning have to go off exactly as I had them because I’ve already had them. It’s already happened. So when I’m that future self I have to say and do those things, I have no choice. I’m just following a script.” you tell her.

“And just because I haven’t seen this conversation doesn’t mean that it hasn’t already happened for the guy who just messaged me. Just because I don’t know what’s on the script doesn’t mean there isn’t one. So maybe every time I time travel I take away my own free will in order to do something but surely that means I take everyone else’s too. Maybe it won’t work that way for the other time players, they’re different classes than me after all. The point is that I get the feeling that, okay yeah I can manipulate time, but it manipulates me right back.” you finish.

Roxy stares at you and slowly hands you your phone back. Everything you just said was written down, and those messages came in before you spoke. No matter how much you thought you were choosing what to say it was predetermined for you.

People talk about a time stream, and you think that’s fitting for all that you feel up shit creek without a paddle when it comes to this.

“Maybe… maybe it’s like a quantum physics thing. Maybe the future is flexible unless you observe it, then it’s fixed.” she suggests. Clearly, she doesn’t like the idea of your fate being sealed any more than you do. It makes you feel like-
You hate yourself for even thinking this, but it’s true.

It makes you feel like you’re just a puppet, pulled by strings for reasons you’ll never understand or control. How ironic.

“Can we stop this now? I think you’re supposed to be doing this quest.” you tell her and Roxy nods, a ceasefire. You’re not naive enough to think it’ll last forever.

Roxy wanders around the place looking at all of the little labels on the things that aren’t there. You should help. If she doesn’t manage to get a handle on her void powers you won’t be able to tempt She Who Must Be Maimed down to kill her and rescue the adults and that would be bad.

You know it would be bad.

And yet fucks given remain at zero.

That seems symptomatic of something.

You open pesterchum and hesitate. Your first instinct is to message Rose, you just spent all of the time with her for months and she knows about psych stuff but she’s dealing with her own shit right now and a future you as well so maybe you should leave her be. If you don’t then future you is going to have to watch her having this conversation and no thanks to that. Not that you have any choice you’re just taking your time to come to the answer to what was always going to happen anyway.

Yay, no free will.

You could message Sollux, he said you could talk to him about brain weird stuff because he has it too. But you’re not looking for empathy, just a straight answer.

[turntechGodhead began pestering HalbirdSprite]

TG: hey could you check your web md files for me
HBS: You know full well I got more reliable medical sources than that. But sure I can, what do you need? You’re not hurt are you?
TG: nah not that it would matter if i was
HBS: I beg to differ.
TG: huh
TG: ok well thats sort of relevant
TG: i just need to know if something is a symptom of depression or whatever
HBS: A lack of care for your own wellbeing such as staying awake for incredibly long times and overtaxing yourself like you and your various iterations are doing right now? Yes, yes it is.
TG: ok not what i was gonna ask
TG: but good to know or whatever
TG: i was asking about apathy
HBS: Can you be more specific?
TG: i am supposed to be helping roxy on her quest i know its important and i know why and i am doing it but i just
TG: dont actually feel like i give a crap
HBS: Emotional numbness and apathy is a symptom, yes.
TG: well shit
HBS: I’ll see what I can do for medication. We’ll get you through this little bro, I promise.
TG: k
Roxy is still just looking at the walls and the placards. Boring. You should probably pass this official knowledge on.

[turntechGodhead opened board ‘smear all the quadrants!’]
[turntechGodhead added carcinoGeneticist]
[turntechGodhead added twinArmageddons]

CG: UH
TA: dv?
TG: i know that if i have to deal with this conversation twice i will lose my shit so were gonna call this something that is probably hilariously awkward for you two efficient for me
TG: so sollux was talking to me about how i might be depressed
CG: OH.
CG: AND WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THAT?
TG: fuck do you think i am as well
CG: IT’S BEEN A DAY, DAVE. I WAS PUTTING IT DOWN AS SHOCK. I MEAN I’M IN SHOCK, LOTS OF US ARE. IT’S STILL REALLY RAW.
TG: well its been months for me so i dont really have that excuse
CG: OKAY, THAT’S FAIR. DO YOU THINK THAT IS WHAT’S HAPPENING HERE THEN?
TG: ugh i talked to hal with all his medical books after sollux pointed it out and since then im just noticing more shit and just
TG: my shit is wrecked i guess
TA: dave it'2 ok. i mean it'2 not, it 2uck2 bulge but you'll liive.
TG: im so thrilled
CG: AND THAT WAS A CONCERNING LEVEL OF SARCASM TO THAT RESPONSE.
TA: yeah, we had thii2 talk kk. ii don't thiink dave need2 two be 2upervii2ed or anything. iit ju2t 2uck2.
TG: yeah besides im god tier itd be a waste of time
TG: hah time joke
CG: RIGHT WHEN YOU FINALLY STOP TIME LOOPING I’M DRAGGING YOU TO MY ROOM TO SLEEP AND WATCH MOVIES AND I WILL TELL EVERYONE ELSE TO FUCK THE HELL OFF. PRESENT COMPANY EXCEPTED OF COURSE. BECAUSE IT’S GOING TO DRIVE ME CRAZY IF YOU START HAVING TO MAKE JOKES TO PRETEND TO BE OKAY AROUND US WHEN YOU’RE NOT.
TA: 2eriiou2ly kk ha2 2pent enough tiime around occa2ionally depre22ed captor2 two not be a total taint liick about the whole thiing. ii 2econd thii2 iiidea.
TG: you second it of course you do
TA: ha ha a22hole
TG: well as much as i dont like the idea of people fussing over me i think a movie binge sounds good
CG: GOOD. YOUR ASS IS MINE.
CG: FOR THE PURPOSE OF PUTTING IT ON SOME FLAT SURFACE AND WATCHING MOVIES I MEAN.
TG: ooh mr vantas ooh
TA: *2low clap*
CG: OH MY GOD SOLLUX I AM GOING TO COME KICK YOU IN THE TEETH YOU ARE THE WORST BROTHER!
TA: eh, we both know that’2 not true.
You take a deep breath, you feel kind of cleaner somehow. It feels like all of the ways you started to uncramp your behaviour from the box that Bro and forced you and Dirk to occupy and you could start being like a normal kid. Sleep in a room alone? Sure! Not checking to see if a door will squeak before opening it? Go for it!

One way or another you know yourself pretty well, and you know damn well that if you can ignore or avoid a problem you’ll do just that. You weren’t crazy reluctant to get therapy for no good reason after all. You’ve told Hal about what’s going on, you admitted to Sollux that he was right and you told Karkat. That’s enough people that’ll be determined to drag you into being better that you won’t be able to just stick your head in the sand and ignore it. It’s probably a shitty coping mechanism to throw yourself at other people and demand to be fixed, but it’s a hell of a lot better than living in denial and getting worse. Isn’t that whole thing why they make alcoholics stand up and admit that they have a problem when they’re in recovery? Admit the thing, and then you can’t run from it.

Roxy makes a thoughtful noise on the other end of the room and that seems as good a time as any to drop your grim emotional masturbation and actually be of use to someone somewhere.

“So is this the worst museum ever or what?” you ask, walking up to Roxy.

“Apparently it’s a museum of things that don’t exist, the one thing all of these things have in common is that they don’t exist.” Roxy muses, reading an inscription on the ground.

“Do you think not existing is a void thing?” Roxy asks, straightening up and turning around to look at you.

You think for a moment.

“Rose said that her light thing was about things that are and can be so I guess void being the opposite and about things that aren’t tracks with that.” you theorise.

“So maybe non-existence is a property a thing has, like weight or roundness.” Roxy says slowly, gesturing in the air with both hands.

“Are you just thinking about boobs?” you ask flatly as Roxy’s hands cup two handfuls of nothing in the air.

“Well I wasn’t, but now I am!” she snorts and squeezes the air suggestively.

“Existing does seem to be a property though, I mean we’ve already heard about how some timelines don’t exist and the alpha does. Or rather they’re around, but they just have the property of not existing. Does that make any sense?” Roxy asks, looking genuinely lost.

“It… does. I think?” you say uncertainly.

“But so if I can steal void can I take the not existingness from an object and make anything I can
think of? That’s what it sounded like that oceanic hag wanted me to do.” Roxy continues.

You nod vaguely. If it makes sense to her then it likely is what she’s supposed to be doing and you
don’t much see how you interfering is going to help.

“Let’s give this a go.” Roxy says and drops down to sit cross-legged on the floor and so you join her.

“Since this museum is filled with things that don’t exist maybe you have to fill all the plinths up with
those things. Maybe you should start with them.” you suggest.

“Okay, yeah.” Roxy nods and twists up to read one of the little placards on a plinth and then sits
down again.

“Apparently I need a perfectly generic object.” she says with a frown.

What the hell would a perfectly generic object look like? Presumably, something that you could
attach as few descriptors to as possible. That sounds fine in theory but trying to picture that makes
your brain want to leak out of your ears. Roxy closes her eyes and holds her hands out palms facing
each other as she wiggles her fingers like a shitty wizard. Nothing happens right away aside from
Roxy scrunching up her face like she might just shit her pants or something.

Eventually, the whole thing is dull enough that you end up lying down and shutting your eyes.
You’re still tired from barely sleeping and your future self stole the coffee that you promised Karkat
your first born for, damn you future Dave. On the other hand it means you know that you have
coffee in your future for sure.

There is a sound that can only be described as the sound of a balloon popping but in reverse. It
probably makes sense, a balloon popping is a balloon not existing anymore and just being escaped
air and torn rubber. The sound in reverse is something suddenly existing perhaps. You hastily sit up
and held between Roxy’s hands is a smallish green cube. It’s about the size of one novelty fuzzy
dice, it’s bright green and the edges of it are rounded in a way that makes you a little unsure as to
where one side ends and the other begins.

“Is that perfectly generic?” you ask.

“That’s what the card says.” Roxy tells you, popping it into her sylladex and reading the card before
taking it out again. She turns it over in her hands.

You open your mouth to protest that it’s not exactly perfectly generic. It has words you can describe
it with, it is greenish though you’re not sure what word best describes the shade. It is cube-like and
maybe that would be more easy to mathematically describe than a ball, you’re not sure. You hold
your hand out and your sister drops the object into your hand. It’s not smooth or rough to the touch,
nor is it fuzzy or felted, instead it’s just nondescript and you have no clue what it’s made of. It’s
neither light nor heavy, just about what you’d expect for an object of its size.

“Alright, fair enough, perfectly generic is a pretty apt name for this.” you concede and place it on the
appropriate plinth.

“I just made something out of nothing, that’s pretty wild.” Roxy says in surprise, staring at her own
hands in wonder.

“Now you just gotta do it fifteen more times.” you tell her, looking around at the other empty plinths.

“Woo!” Roxy cheers and gets started.
It turns out that there’s not much else for you to do here, the enemies don’t come into this quest area and Roxy is spending most of her time sat in silence with her eyes shut. It seems other objects aren’t as easy to make and she just has a stack of perfectly generic objects and nothing else. You fuck around with the organisation of your sylladex to kill time.

Why do you have to be here if you’re not of any help? Obviously, you’re meant to be here because future you said about it and you followed that conversation with Roxy to the letter. You must be missing something, surely. The group chat pops up before your eyes.

Vriska: Prepare to eat your words Lalonde!!!!!!!!!
Mituna: VR12K4 N0!
Sollux: oh god ii’m going two barf, what the fuck vrii2ka?!
Rose: Don’t worry, I’ve seen how this plays out, she’ll be fine.
Karkat: TELL ME THAT WHAT I THINK IS HAPPENING ISN’T HAPPENING.
Mituna: D0 Y0U 7H1NK VR12K4 JU27 0FF3D H3R3LF B3C4U23 7HA7’2 WH4T JU27 H4PP3N3D!
Sollux: fuck that wa2n’t even a quiick way two go.
Kankri: Will she 6e alright? Is this a resurrecti9n situati9n like with Dave and R9se 6e9re?
Rose: I said that she’ll be fine. She will wake up as God Tier just like Dave and I did.
Karkat: This is precisely the kind 9f situati9n that y9ur suicide 6aiting results in, R9se. It is highly irresp9nsi6le and clearly danger9us. N9t t9 menti9n deeply upsetting f9r any9ne currently suffering fr9m p99r mental health at the m9ment.

You flick out of that conversation because nope you don’t need to watch Rose and Kankri get into an ethical debate, nor do you want to watch Vriska come back and realise that she just got played. Fuck, in a few hours you’re going to have to watch Rose bait Vriska into that. You don’t want to think about how Rose did that deliberately, you can’t.

[turntechGodhead began pestering twinArmageddons]

TG: hey are you ok
TA: ii could have liived wiithout heariing that but ii'll 2urvive.
TA: are you okay? not two 2ound liike kankriii here but ii2 that 2hiit two morbiid for you two hear right now?
TG: aw babe youre worried
TA: have ii ever told you how rea22uriing iin2iinceriity ii2, 2triider?
TA: 2poiiler2: not at all.

Aw, damn, now you feel bad. You hope that Sollux won’t have to deal with hearing anyone else die but you already saw Aradia and Damara in God Tier costumes so at some point he likely will have to. You just hope it’s not soon.

Wait.

Oh shit. Future future you looked like he had got the shit kicked out of him. A while back you saw yourself fighting Aradia, that kind of fight would match the jacked up look your future future self had. Does that mean that it happens today? God, if Aradia and Damara are going to die today as well then you probably should go be with Sollux. But wait, you don’t have that hammer yet. Unless you’re destined to find it today and... God, why is time travel so complex? You never want to do this again.

“Rox, do you mind if I bounce? I think shit’s about to get real.” you ask, turning to look at Roxy who is currently sat down surrounded by a growing pile of perfectly generic objects.
“Is it about this thing with Vriska? Do you need me to come with?” she asks you worriedly.

“No, it’s something else. It’s cool, you stay here and do… that.” you say, gesturing to the pile of stuff Roxy has made.

You take to the sky and open up your chat again.

TG: cool cool uh hey a/s/l
TA: 14/m/your mom
TA: wait fuck your mom ii2 dead and ii am the wor2t mo2t fuckiing iiin22iive a22hole iiin the uniiver2e!
TG: in fairness its a small universe now man
TG: make it up to me by telling me where you actually are because im on my way to you
TA: oh
TA: ii'm on lobaf ii'll piing the diirec2tion2 over two you, are you ok?

[twinArmageddons sent file ‘map app update’]

You click on the file and find that it entirely remakes your google maps application, so it now shows everyone’s planets and also a subtle ping on the Empress’ ship which is thankfully far from you right now. Sollux’s planet has a pin in it that is, of course, bicoloured red and blue.

TG: omw

The Land of Brains and Fire is exactly what one would expect from the name, you opt not to land on the squishy surface of the planet and note that Sollux is doing the same.

“Hey, are you cool?” Sollux asks quickly, floating up to meet you as you come close to the surface.

“Only always.” you answer smoothly and pride yourself on being able to tell that he rolls his eyes at you, featureless though they are.

“Nah, it’s just I have a feeling that we might have more than one person dying today and if Aradia and Damara do bite it, well…” you shrug helplessly.

“I don’t know. Aradia’s your ex and they’re both your sisters too which is a sentence that feels so weird to say but we’re powering past that. So, I figured you’ve already heard Vriska die today and if they’re going too I guess I didn’t think you should deal with that on your own.” you say rambling through the whole thing.

Sollux stares at you and blinks slowly. He floats closer and catches a hand in the front of your cape and pulls you close. His knee bumps into yours slightly and he grazes a kiss across your cheekbone.

You’ve had plenty of kisses from a range of people in your life. With Karkat it used to be awkward, fumbling and unsure but oh so enthusiastic. You’ve got better as time goes on and though many of your kisses with him are heated and desperate, you have to say that even the sweeter ones leave you flushed.

Dirk and Hal have both kissed you, especially when you were small and still slept in the same too small bed as Dirk. When you were frightened or had a nightmare he’d pet your hair and kiss the top of your head. With both of them it’s loving, parental, a reassurance from blood to blood. Roxy is livelier, when she presses a kiss to your cheek it’s like she’s trying to electrify the joy that she feels to have you around as her brother. Rose is either proper or teasing, both mocking at times and also sincere but still chastely familial.
This is nothing like any of those. Despite feeling in no way sexual it’s far closer to something from Karkat than anyone else. It feels needed, something both fiercely territorial and softly vulnerable too. He can’t fix you or the world but it’s something pale indeed, aptly named. White and pure like snow or sugar, blanketing the world and you like something sweet. You don’t want anything to hurt him and he doesn’t want anything to hurt you.

It’s pale and sweet like sugar.

You can feel his breath against your cheek as he laughs softly and pulls back.

“You’re mumbling again.” he says with a grin and you worry about just how much of your stream of consciousness he startled you into verbalising.

“Anyway,” you say moving on firmly, “I think they might god tier today and I think I might have to fight Aradia but I don’t have the weapon that I saw myself use yet so if I don’t find it I might doom everything.”

Sollux nods thoughtfully and chews on his lip, a dangerous endeavour with teeth like his.

“What was the weapon?” he asks.

“It was a hammer but I think it had time powers.” you answer.

“We could go back and try to make it and then if you can’t make it then it stands to reason that today isn’t the day. You already have two loops ahead of you so surely if you doom the timeline they wouldn’t be here.” Sollux suggests.

“I… maybe?” you frown, not sure if it works like that or not. Stupid time travel.

“Come on.” Sollux says and flips your cape over your head with his powers and flies off. It takes you a few seconds to untangle yourself and chase after him. By the time you get back the base on LOWAS you realise that you’re not worrying about Vriska and Rose anymore or the fate of Aradia and Damara either.

When you get back to the house Sollux is already inside. He’s not alone. In the main room are Karkat and Kanaya clustered around Hal who is floating with something in his hands.

“What are you guys doing back here?” you ask, kicking the door shut behind you. Karkat doesn’t answer but instead pulls Sollux close to him and shows him something.

“Karkat and I were on a quest that we think requires a new item, Hal said that there were some building toys that you and Dirk had when you were younger that were in a box here. We were able to alchemise some bigger tools from them.” Kanaya explains, holding up a card from her sylladex to show you.

“Oh, it’s like supersized knex. Yeah, don’t let Hal and Dirk fool you. Those were meant to be swiped from the store for me but that shit was always all over Dirk’s desk.” you snort. Building shit has always been Dirk’s jam and not yours.

“Look there’s this too.” Hal whispers, passing something to Karkat.

That’s suspicious. On the floor are boxes of things from when you moved, books of yours that you haven’t read in years as well as papers and other shit like that.

“What are you guys looking at?” you ask suspiciously.
Karkat has paper in his hands and he doesn’t look up from reading it, but Sollux does. He holds out a photo to you.

“Look at you, you’re adorable.” Sollux cackles, a picture of pure schadenfreude.

You snatch the photo from his hands to see that it’s a picture of you, you’re maybe seven years old and wearing Dirk’s shirt. Your hair is going in about six different directions as you’ve clearly just woken up. This was pre you knowing John so the glasses on your face are just like Dirk’s and you look sleepy as hell. It looks cute on the surface, but you know what you looked like back then.

On your arm is your less comprehensive soulmark but your wrists are painfully thin, you can see the sharp line of your collarbone from the way that Dirk’s shirt hangs slightly off centre on you. This was back in the days of stealing to eat before Dirk had built up a reliable cash flow to sustain the pair of you. Now that you’re looking for it you can see how one of your elbows is grazed up and there are scabbed over cuts on other parts of your skin, the red of Karkat’s blood on your arm camouflage them but it’s a sight you’re familiar with.

“He, look, tiny Dave and Rose.” Hal laughs, handing another photograph to Sollux who looks at it in amusement. They must have been shots that Hal snapped through Dirk’s shades and stored, probably only recently printing them out. Kanaya cranes to get a look and gasps in delight.

You hand the picture back to Hal and turn your attention to Karkat.

“What have you got?” you ask him.

“A letter to me.” Karkat answers, glancing up at you.

“What?” you ask, completely lost.

“It’s some school assignment apparently when you were still in elementary school. You talk like I’m a girl the whole time but that’s not surprising.” Karkat says handing the paper over.

Right before your eyes is your own handwriting, a little clumsier for sure but it’s your writing.

Hey shorty,

What’s a girl like you doing in a place like this? A letter ‘aint no place for a girl like you. So you will be super happy to here that i’m pretty much the coolest kid ever to have walked this or any other planet. You are set for life with me. I already know a lot about how you feel about things. So how bout you tell me something else? Have you got any brothers or sisters? Do you have to share a room if you do? I do, but my brother Dirk is hella cool. You’re gonna love him when u meet him. We’re supposed to think about what mark you might have for me. I mean i’m ment to, everyone else doesn’t have to think about what mark you have on your arm for me. Jim over there in his dumb hat isn’t like “golly Dave’s soulmate what does your arm look like?” That’d be dumb. Whatev. I figure these things are done on what you’re into or like things that have a big efect on your life. So maybe you have birds. I like the crows that live in on my building, so maybe you have them. Or records, my Bro plays a lot of music and he’s a super cool DJ. He won’t let me touch his stuff but it’s cool to listen to. When we meet I’ll introduce you to Dirk and we can all hang out at your house or see movies. It’d be cool to see you soon.

Dave

Your spelling mistakes are underlined in red as well as any time when you didn’t use proper English, also apparently it is inappropriate to begin a letter with ‘hey shorty’. You don’t really remember this assignment or at least you don’t until you get to the places where you obviously hesitated, where
your handwriting has an obvious stop in the middle of a sentence. Even then you knew what things you had to omit.

You can’t help but feel guilty for avoiding Dirk, even in this letter that was just meant to be to Karkat you’re talking about him. In that photo you’re wearing his old clothes. Dirk does everything for you, you can’t let him find out that you stupidly feel like he let you down. That would break his heart. But avoiding him is clearly no good either. The decision is out of your hands anyway, future future you is with him now. Eventually, that will be you.

“Just for the record, I’m adding ‘shorty’ to the list of nicknames you’re not allowed to use for me.” Karkat says flatly.

“But it’s so… accurate.” you say with a grin.

“You are very short.” Sollux agrees with a solemn nod.

“Not very short.” Kanaya interrupts.

“Thank you Kanaya.” Karkat says, glaring at his brother.

“Statistically below average of course but I would not say very short.” Kanaya corrects him. Sollux fails to stifle a laugh. Karkat is looking at Kanya in outrage despite the fact that she looks so innocent that butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth.

“Et tu Brute?” Karkat mutters sulkily.

“I am sure that I have no idea what that means. Dave, why are you and Sollux here in the middle of the day?” Kanaya asks with an innocence that you are starting to suspect is insincere.

“I need to get something that future me has. We need to make a hammer. Or I need to I guess, it’s my problem.” you tell her.

“Your problems are my problems.” Sollux says defiantly. Karkat makes a slightly strangled sound and Kanaya’s perfectly arched eyebrows raise at him.

“Sollux, should I suggest that you as they say on Earth ‘get a room’?” Kanaya asks primly.

Oh wow, look at that whole problem there that is 100% not something you are going to get involved in.

“The me that fights Aradia has a time hammer. I’ve got a hammer card from John but no hammer.” you explain to Hal.

“We can just make a hammer from the shared item history that we’ve got, John has probably got a thousand in there.” Sollux assures you.

“I got a photo of a hammer from your denizen, but that thing was huge. No way you could use it.” Hal says and hands over a captcharoid card of a hammer. You could use this to make what you need, it certainly looks like the one you remember seeing.

You take the captcharoid from him and wander out of the room to the alchemiter. You’ve got modifications to the thing now so that it’ll show you what it is that you’re making. You throw in the captcharoid photo code and let the machine think for a bit. It spits out the grist requirements for a giant hammer called “Fear No Anvil” which frankly costs more grist than your entire team has managed to collect so far. That’s clearly not happening. You need another solution. You sit down on
the edge of the alchemiter and consider about how to make this a more reasonable size.

“Hey.” Karkat says, coming into the room. He stands in front of you and tilts your head up with his finger under your chin.

“Hey Karkles.” you greet and lean in to kiss the inside of his wrist and the fluttering pulse there.

“You are lucky that was sweet enough that I’m not protesting your continuing attempt to nickname me.” Karkat grumbles though you can tell there’s no actual conviction behind it.

You pull him closer by wrapping your arms around the back of his thighs so he’s standing between your legs as you sit on the alchemiter platform. His sweater is soft against your cheek.

“I just need to work this stupid hammer puzzle out before I run out of time.” you say into the knitted wool.

“What’s the problem, exactly?” Karkat asks as he runs his claws through your hair.

“This bullshit hammer is too big.” you complain, pointing vaguely to your right at the display showing the theoretical hammer that you can’t afford.

“It’s a shame you can’t zoom out like in a photo.” Karkat says. You jerk backwards so fast that Karkat damn near yanks some of your hair out by mistake. You float up and kiss him intensely.

“You’re a goddamn genius.” you say delightedly.

“Hey, there’s something you could stand to call me more often.” Karkat teases, flashing his pointy teeth as he smiles.

You fly out quickly to the main room. Sollux and Kanaya are talking to each other apparently unaware of your presence.

“So I just need to restart it? But I tried that already.” Kanaya says.

“Ugh, just… just give it to me and I’ll fix it and have it back to you tonight.” Sollux sighs and takes Kanaya’s green husktop as she hands it over. You float over and catch him by the shoulders.

“Hey man I need your brain.” you say eagerly.

“And the rest of him?” Hal snickers.

“It will probably be less messy if you keep all that together.” Kanaya advises.

“True. Come on.” you say and pull Sollux up the stairs with you.

“What are we doing?” Sollux asks as you drag him along to your room.

“Hal had the right hammer but he’s right it’s too big, Karkat had a brilliant idea. Or, I guess he said something that gave me the idea.” you explain.

You drop to the floor when you get into your bedroom and paw through the stacks of boxes of your things that got packed up and brought here when it became clear that this was going to be a more permanent home than LOHAC was for you.

You pull a box back and there, behind it and under several other boxes is what you are looking for. Back in its original box is the Kaiser VCP Enlarger system that Dirk got you for your birthday last
year. Several other boxes are stacked on top of it, and your attempts to remove them without causing a cardboard avalanche are unsuccessful until your moirail floats them up in the air and allows you to retrieve your prize unhindered.

“This,” you say patting the box, “is the Kaiser VCP Enlarger system that Dirk got me for my birthday. It makes photos bigger and smaller. My thought is this, the alchemiter already projects what it’ll make and tells you what it’ll cost. If we could make a version of this work with the alchemiter itself as an add-on then we could scale that image up and down to make smaller and cheaper versions of things or even bigger ones if we want to size up.” you explain.

“That’s… that’s actually a damn good idea.” Sollux says slowly.

“Thanks for sounding so surprised.” you snark at him, resting your elbows on the box.

“And inspired by something Karkat said no less!” Sollux adds gleefully. You roll your eyes and grab a winter hat out of one of the boxes and throw it at him, he catches it in thin air with his brain powers of course but still.

You stare at your fetch modus for a little bit, trying to figure out where you can put the damn thing. You have a Groove Row for things fitting a nerd shit theme that you could put it into. Currently that contains a few Game Bro magazines, several cans of appleberry blast and a game boy and games that you swiped from Roxy almost the moment you moved in with her. Photography equipment is nerdy… sort of. But you need a rhyme still. With a little consideration you label the enlarger system as ‘embiggenator’ and store it with your nerd shit and in a Shade Column that also contains ‘freezer’, ‘(card) hammer’ and ‘beefburger’. You’ve no idea how long that burger has been in there and you are so not eating it. You wait to see if the modus will reject an or/er rhyme but evidently it decides that it’s okay.

“You could have just, you know, carried that with your hands.” Sollux points out.

“That’s quitting talk. Besides it’s good to know that photography equipment is dorky enough to go in with my game boy and the latest Game Bro.” you say, dusting off your knees as you stand up.

“I’m not surprised that you have the same good taste in terrible magazines as me, Mituna and Latula.” Sollux laughs and follows you out of the room.

“You mean fifty of them, fifty was the last and now the Earth is destroyed as is whoever the mystery creator of that terrible magazine.” Sollux sighs mournfully.

You open your mouth to correct him and shut it quickly. Yeah, no one else was supposed to know about who makes game bro.

“What?” Sollux asks suspiciously.

You look around cautiously but the two of you are alone on the stairs. You will also be strong and resist memeing about the stairs.

“If I tell you something you’ll keep it a secret, right?” you whisper.

“You could have just, you know, carried that with your hands.” Sollux points out.

“Of course.” Sollux says solemnly. You nod and pop the stack of Game Bros out of your sylladex and rifle through them until you find #51, the latest. You hand it over to Sollux whose eyes nearly
“This isn’t— this was never released and, holy shit, is that a review for SBURB?!” Sollux gasps.

“Dirk and Hal used to make it together whenever Dirk was super sleep deprived. They’re like… ironically sincerely ironic about it, or something like that. I used to do some of the images for them, apparently I’m the best at filling things with shitty jpeg artefacts after all my time doing Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff.” you explain.

Sollux stares at you in open-mouthed awe.

“But it’s a secret, you hear? I don’t think Dirk knows that there are still people alive who would read it except for me. Maybe I’ll tell him and we can just secretly leave printed copies around just to blow Mituna and Latula’s minds.” you say thoughtfully, the idea appeals. It’d be like the best secret santa.

“Oh my god this review is terrible, can I keep this?” Sollux asks, flipping through it and reading quickly.

“Sure.” you say with a shrug. You return to the alchemiter with Sollux floating behind you as he reads like a particularly absent-minded helium balloon. He has to focus when you get started trying to turn a copy of your enlarger into something that can interact with the alchemiter itself. Two hours of dicking around with codes and rewiring things pass before you have a functioning add-on to the alchemiter.

Once more you plug in the code for Fear No Anvil, it shows the exorbitant cost right away. You slowly scale down the hologram image of the hammer until it seems reasonable, a few button clicks allow you to create the now more affordable weapon. You’d feel a little bad about raiding the communal grist cache to make it but if you don’t create this weapon then you cause a paradox and kill your timeline any everyone in it, with that reasoning you’re pretty sure you’re cool.

You grab the finished hammer and your hammerkind card that you got from John gleefully slots itself into your strife deck, you now have to live with being the kind of tool that uses hammerkind. The things you do to save the universe.

“Want to test it out?” Sollux asks, leaning back against the wall.

“How?” you ask, hefting the surprisingly light hammer up. Considering as it has a giant hunk of ruby for a head, it’s not absurdly heavy. Sollux just tilts his head a little and a chair floats in from the dining room.

“It ain’t a baseball bat, man.” you point out.

“A valid point, but what about this? Think fast!” Sollux says, and the chair hurls itself at you. On reflex you swing the hammer and render the chair into either large wood chunks or perhaps avant-garde modern art.

“I remember it did a different thing, like a time thing.” you muse. You turn the hammer around in your hands, there are no visible buttons.

“Maybe try hitting something with the same feel you have with your turntables.” Sollux suggests as another chair floats in.

You roll your shoulders and when you seem ready enough the chair flies at you. You remember your future self sticking his sword not through space but through time and try to hold onto that idea. You’re not going to hit this chair somewhere, you’re going to hit it somewhen. You swing and a
loud clock chime rings out then suddenly there just isn’t a chair there anymore.

“Where did you send it to?” Sollux asks.

“That… probably should have been something I thought about before hitting it.” you admit.

“Well, that’ll be a fun surprise for someone.” he snickers.

“Bonus points if it comes back to me in the future and I keep hitting it with the hammer so it ends up as some kind of time based table tennis. Or chair tennis?” you say.

Sollux laughs and he seems about to say something when he freezes, his eyes going wide. Sollux drags in a trembling breath and he clenches his hands in his hair.

“No, no, no.” he whispers.

It must be Aradia and Damara dying, or maybe it’s just Aradia, you don’t know. Sollux slides down against the wall as yellow wells up in his eyes spilling over his eyelids. You’re frozen, you don’t know what to do. His sisters are dying and he can hear it, you personally know how terrible that feels, there’s nothing you can do to make it better for him.

But—no, shit, you can make it better. Or at least suck less. You’re supposed to be his fucking moirail and if he doesn’t need you now then when will he? You drop the hammer and jump off of the alchemiter to land at his side. You crouch down in front of him, uneasily setting your hands on his shoulders.

“It’s—” you cut that off, it’s not okay.

“I’m here.” you say instead.

“They’re going to be okay, we saw them alive and well in the future. Remember?” you remind him.

Sollux makes a strangled sound that’s all consonants and tightens his hands in his hair. That can’t be good for him. Cautiously you work his hands free and let him grab fistfuls of your sweet red cape instead. You need to make this better. Shit, you’ve read troll books with pale rom in them, mostly because Karkat was reading them and you were trying to be a good soulmate and do the cultural exchange thing. But reading about how to do something and actually doing it are two different things.

Shit, fucking up the execution of this but having good intentions has got to mean more to him than sitting here doing sweet fuck all, right?

Hesitantly you take your hands off of his shoulders and hold his face between your palms. He’s so pointy. Karkat is so round and soft all over from the curve of his horns to his soft cheeks and sweeping eyelashes he’s gentle. Sollux, on the other hand, looks like he was put together after someone had been on a shopping spree where pointy angles were 90% off. His cheekbones are sharp under your thumbs but at least you have a guide.

“Shoosh.” you tell him, feeling supremely stupid. You run your thumbs over his cheekbones, under his mismatched eyes. The fact that you’re smearing his yellow tears over his skin is a little distressing, but you persevere.

He squeezes his eyes shut and you have zero clue if that is a good sign or a bad sign. You scoot a little closer and keep petting his face, wow trolls are weird. You have no idea if the face stroking is working, so you desperately try for something else. You’ve watched Rose and Roxy put on makeup
countless times and when they’re putting powdery shit on there’s this sort of patting motion that they have, there’s usually a sponge or something involved but perhaps it might work.

“Shoosh.” you repeat, vigorously shoving down the clawing embarrassment that you’re making a fool of yourself and someone’s going to SEE and- nope, you’re not doing that.

He shakes his head, dislodging your hands and at first you assume that it’s because you massively ballsed this whole thing up. That is until he hauls you in and smoothers his face in your chest and wraps his bony arms around your middle like you’re the only thing that’s going to stop him drowning. Sweet, hugs you can do. Take hands, apply to hair, scritch, scritch. He stays curled up against you for some time before you think of a solution to his agony.

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do.” you say, your shades slightly bumping against one of his larger horns. He could gore your eye out but he won’t.

“I’ll loop back to this morning and I’ll go off with Aradia and Damara. I’ll make sure that them dying is intentional by them, that they come back. Then I’ll send myself a picture of them alive and well right now just to prove that it’s gonna be okay.” you vow.

“But…” Sollux protests but doesn’t seem to go anywhere from that.

Your phone buzzes in your pocket, and you contort around Sollux’s arms to grab it and pull it out. You open up your message from your future self and pull back from Sollux so you can show him the picture that you promised him you’d take. It’s a simple selfie, no duck lipped poses or playful grins but it is indisputably you, Aradia and Damara alive and well. You show it to him.

Sollux nods and you disentangle yourself enough to sit next to him, he rests his head on your shoulder, and you do your best to find a way to rest your head against his in a way that doesn’t mean that Sollux will accidentally get stabby with his actually sharp headgear.

“M sorry.” he mumbles.

“Man, don’t even start that.” you snort. This is the guy that cuddled you to sleep last night because you’re too fucked up to sleep like a normal person. He can absolutely cry when people he loves die however temporarily.

You stay in his company until the point in the evening where other people are starting to come home and he is mostly feeling better by himself as well.

“See you in a minute.” you tell him, walking out into the hallway and pulling out your timetables and dragging the records back to that morning.

The door in front of you is suddenly shut and from inside you can hear a faint knocking. That was you knocking on Sollux’s bathroom door, right after that you left and you didn’t see yourself then so you have to get the hell out of here now. You float down to the kitchen and find Karkat pouring coffee into mugs.

“You owe me now.” he says with a sharp-toothed grin as he hands you a mug. Oh boy, you barely slept last night and you’re starting to flag. It doesn’t help that you know you still have to do a whole day here and then another loop again before you can sleep. Well, dicks.

“My first born is yours, babe.” you promise Karkat, remembering the joke the two of you were doing this morning.

You sit down in your chair and surreptitiously eye people from behind your shades. Rose looks over
at you, and you somehow know that she knows that you’re a future Dave. Still, she says nothing and instead continues with her breakfast. Dirk is trying to stare at you without getting caught but you’re pretty sure he is, in fact, staring at you so you suppose he failed. Meanwhile Jake appears to be trying to psychically get Dirk to pay attention to him through sheer force of will. God, what a shitshow.

Actually, if your timing is right…

You hear Karkat make a strangled sound of surprise. Ah, right on cue. You hold your coffee up a little and say the words that you remember but also came to mind of their own. Boy, you do not want to think about free will right now.

“Trust me, man, when you’re me you’ll need this a lot more than past you. Current you. Whatever.” you tell your past self without even looking around at him. You drink more blessed coffee. Now Vriska will kick off, and there she’s already waving her arm at the two of you.

“What is going on!?” she demands.

“I can time travel now.” you say, hearing your past self echo the same words. Several people ask you how long you’ve been able to do that but you twist slightly to see Sollux walking in. He looks a lot more relaxed before hearing three people die in one day, unsurprisingly. You tune out of the conversation for just a moment but you feel the thread of time pulling you back, demanding your attention. Vriska is going on about the implications of your powers, frankly you’re not so excited about them.

“Yeah, yeah. I can double up to be in several places at once. That guy’s spending the day with Roxy helping her learn her voidy shit, I’m with Aradia and Damara on Quartz and Melody and the last guy is with Dirk.” you explain, knowing that you have to go to be with Aradia and Damara not just because time demands it but because you promised you would.

No sooner have you spoken and Jade asked what other guy you mean than a future you pops into existence. You already have the hammer you fight Aradia with, you know she’s going god tier today like she was when you saw her before. Future you clearly came off badly in that fight. You wonder how Aradia will look.

Dirk is freaking out about your future self’s injuries but he clearly isn’t game for being fussed over. You pick back up when he starts talking about you and Karkat.

“But, uh, first I need to borrow you outside Karkat. You too, you know what’s happening.” he says, looking at you.

Oh yeah, your future self messaged you about making out in front of Karkat and you remember him standing there completely brainless with shock afterwards. You’ve got a pretty good idea about where this is going.

“You know, I suspect.” you point out, he’s the one who has lived this after all. You drain the last of your coffee and lead a confused Karkat outside with future you.

Future you pulls the door shut and you remind yourself that you will have to do that when you’re him.

“Dave, are you okay? You look pretty rough.” Karkat asks worriedly.

“Geez, man. Are you saying that future me isn’t hot anymore?” you gasp in offense.

“He’s bleeding from his nose.” Karkat says grudgingly.
“I was, I’m not now.” Future you counters and rubs at the dried blood. It flakes off easily enough so it can’t have been that bad.

“Oh well, gee, now that you’ve done that I’m all aquiver.” Karkat snorts.

Wow. Even if you didn’t have a damn good idea of how this was going to play out and even if you didn’t have the pull of time herding you down this path you don’t think you would be able to resist this if just for comedy purposes.

“You know, I agree. Like, damn.” you say slowly, grinning at your future self.

“Do you think you could be any more narcissistic?” Karkat asks.

Okay, no, you have to do this now if just to spite him.

Future you grabs present you by the shirt and hauls you in. He kisses you hard and Karkat makes this delightful sound that is both startled and almost mortified. Kissing yourself is surprisingly dull, the internet has apparently lied to you yet again. All the same, it does feel good to have your almost entirely unused prankster’s gambit rocket up in points, even if no doubt Jane and John will bump you back down to zero again in no time. This town ain’t big enough for the three of you.

Still, you focus on mostly putting on a show for Karkat and when the two of you separate from each other, breathing heavily, Karkat is just staring at you with one eye twitching slightly. He looks delighted, horrified and terrified all at once. Like a kid who wished for more presents at Christmas only to find that Santa crashes into his lawn. Sure that’s infinity presents for you now little Timmy, you got your wish but at what cost? Future you was right, his expression IS priceless.

Future you inclines his head to the door and you remember that it was this version of you that called the girls out now. You open the door, reaching past the catatonic Karkat to do it.

“Hey, time team, let’s bounce.” you call. Both girls get to their feet and all of you take to the skies, leaving your stunned soulmate behind.

Part of you is a little bitter that they’ve always been able to fly but you had to die to be able to. Actually, could they always fly? Were they once little wriggly bug troll larvae that couldn’t fly or did some poor bastard have to contend with airborne psychic infants?

Thank goodness Karkat doesn’t have psionics, you don’t want to find that out first hand when-

...You just thought about having kids with Karkat. Which aside from being a terrifying thought because you’re goddamn fourteen is also entirely impossible because you’re not the same species and also you’re both dudes. You fight down the temptation to pop over to LOHAC and stick your head in the lava to burn out the mortification of even thinking these things. You’re going to put this down to your soulmate bond being cranky because you were dead and away from him for a long time and also being hella sleep deprived. That is your excuse.

The Land of Quartz and Melody is covered in giant crystal pillars of quartz in all kinds of soft pastel colours, between them red forests scatter the land, their narrow pine tips contrasting the hard inorganic quartz. For a moment you wish Instagram was still around because this spooky pastel quartz aesthetic would have exploded there. Scattered here and there across the land are tall cylindrical buildings with bumpy notches on them. They rotate slowly and the bumps ping the giant teeth of metal combs producing a slow and haunting melody from all around you.

“You already know what we’re supposed to be doing here, then?” Aradia asks, speaking for the first time. She pauses in the air and turns to face you.
“Not everything, I just know about one thing. Probably two but that’s a guess.” you answer.

“I found these on my planet yesterday.” Damara says and holds up two music boxes embedded in quartz, they float by her hands like your timetables do.

“We think we’ve found mine too.” Aradia adds.

The stupid words are out of your mouth before you can even think better of it.

“Would that even work without you being god tier?”

“He has a point. Would probably work better anyway if we changed.” Damara agrees.

Shit, did you give them this idea all along? Stupid fucking time travel.

Aradia just hums thoughtfully and flies off, leaving you and Damara to fly along. You end up in a giant music building that gently spins, from inside the slow notes of music from the drum are spookily resonated. You watch as the two girls blast through their challenges to get to Aradia’s own time device, only occasionally needing to help out with the odd enemy.

As the day ticks on a little the clock inside your chest tugs at you, a minute warning. Shit, what is past you doing right now? He’s with Roxy isn’t he? That means that- oh shit you sent him a message. For a moment you’re terrified that you can’t remember what it was that you said but then it occurs to you that you still have the messages you received and you can just copy and paste them across!

[current turntechGodhead began pestering turntechGodhead 12 hours ago]

TG: hand the phone to roxy

You spend the next minute or two copying and pasting your own words into the message for a horrified Roxy to read. You force yourself to not think of where the words came from in the first place or what would happen if you were to edit the words before sending them.

You ignore Vriska’s death and don’t even look at Sollux’s reaction, past you is dealing with that. In fact right now past you is realising that it’s hella likely that future you is going to fight Aradia which is why he looks so jacked up and no doubt he will soon be hauling ass to Sollux. That means you have only a few hours left until these two go god tier and you have to find out where their quest beds are. You have zero fucking clue how Bro knew the location of yours or Rose’s but you suspect that an evil puppet was part of that equation.

You float down a hallway after Aradia and Damara and look at the plinth, on it sit two music boxes in quartz just like Damara’s. But it’s pretty clear that the plinth is booby-trapped somehow.

“Oh, I have an idea!” Aradia says gleefully and flies off real quick only to return with a regular old hunk of quartz. She levitates it above her hand and then you watch as the music boxes take on a slight red glow. Quick as anything she switches the music boxes out for the hunk of quartz.

“I can’t believe that Indiana Jones shit worked.” you say in disbelief.

A distant rumble reaches your ears and Damara glares at you.

“You had to say it, didn’t you?” she sneers. The three of you rush out of the room in time for a giant boulder to burst through the back wall and start rolling right at you.
The three of you explode from the building with a due amount of theatre and fall to the ground. You hate this game. It also occurs to you when you’re face down on the ground that you are in the presence of two girls with powerful telekinesis, there was no danger.

“That was so fun! Let’s do it again!” Aradia cheers, jumping up and down.

Damara rolls onto her side and blows some hair out of her face.

“If I kill her you give me alibi, yes?” Damara asks.

“Considering as we have precisely one cop in the entire universe now and he already dropped the ball on an actual murder I think you’re cool. You just gotta worry about the short, pointy, teal arm of the law.” you warn her. Terezi would probably be so jazzed to have an actual murder to investigate, it’s almost a shame to deprive her.

“Either way, we need to search for Aradia’s quest bed so maybe you’ll get your wish after all.” you say, floating up in the air.

“So it does happen today then.” Aradia concludes, flying up after you.

You take off, not answering her question. You’re so not down with seeing anyone else die but there’s nothing you can do about it, if you’re lucky you won’t have to actually see it happen.

Aradia’s land of quartz clusters and red forests make searching for her red stone bed pretty hard but when you decide to focus just on high up places like your bed was on it becomes a lot easier. Her quest bed is on a clear spire of quartz, surrounded by a thorny crown of faintly red tinted crystals. The closer you come to it the worse you feel.

As you land before the stone bed, you can feel the echo of Bro forcing you to climb onto your own identical bed. Feeling sure that Dirk and Hal would save you both, so sure and so wrong. Or seeing Rose climbing up alongside you just like Aradia is doing with Damara now. The way the blood sprayed from her neck like those fucking Saw movies Bro used to make you watch. So much blood everywhere, hot, slick, stuck to your skin and-

“Dave!” Damara shouts at you, making you jump. You’re shaking, fuck.

“I…” you mumble, but you have no excuse you can give for spacing like that. They’re both on the quest bed and you want to say that you don’t think it works like that, Damara should be on her own one. But your internal sense of time tells you that you’re coming up to the moment of Sollux’s premonition. They are the same aspect so maybe it does work like that.

“We just have to die?” Damara asks, she sounds like she’s repeating herself.

“That’s all I did, but our dreamselfs were dead and Jake and Jane had to do a thing so…” you trail off with a shrug.

“Ours are alive. I think we just need to die.” Aradia nods.

“Well if Serket can do it.” Damara snorts.

They’re not going to ask you to do it, are they? You can’t run them through with your sword!

Damara holds out her hands to her younger sister and Aradia steps closer, putting her back to Damara’s front. Damara pulls out a needle, she has the same strife specibus as Rose and you know just how devastating that can be. Aradia uses a whip, far less useful in this situation.
The needle tip glows red. You spin on the spot, facing the other way, you can’t watch this.

You focus on your breathing, it’s too fast. You try to slow it down, counting your breaths, feeling the strange ticking of your heart. You’re practised at this, but it’s hard to do when you see the flash of red light off of the crystals around you and hear the sound of two bodies hitting rock.

You have to force yourself to breathe through your mouth because you can smell the metal tang of blood, but now you can taste it and that’s not better either.

Red jewelled beetles fly by you as you fight to not hyperventilate and you only turn around when a hand lands on your shoulder.

Aradia is standing there behind you, clad in the red that you remember her wearing with large red wings spread out of her back like Rufioh has. There’s no blood and they’re fine. Damara is similarly winged and she’s in a red dress, the same style that Rose was wearing when she went grimdark only hers are in the proper time colours. The three of you match.

“I gotta…” you say and pull out your phone. You turn and snap a picture, sending it off to Sollux.

“Who were you sending that to?” Aradia asks.

“Sollux.” you answer thoughtlessly, and you catch the way her expression darkens. Oh, shit. You look away.

Damara huffs out a sigh and sits down on the bed.

“You two are boring. You should fight, get tension over with.” Damara says. So this is how it happens.

“Well, we did fight in the past, presumably we need to close that loop at some point.” Aradia says thoughtfully. She holds out her hand and her music box floats above her palm. You can tell that it’s working now, though you don’t know how you know that. Perhaps she could have made it work before she went god tier and maybe even someone who wasn’t a time player could use it, who knows? They’d have to be pretty lucky or just think in a strange way if they were to get it as intuitively as you can.

“Future me looked pretty beat up so I guess it’s gonna happen, we don’t have a choice.” you say with a shrug. Exhaustion fills you, you’ve been awake for too long and frankly being alive is overrated. You’re apparently sick, things are fucked up with Dirk and honestly you are just over everything.

“Funny.” Aradia says in a voice that suggests that she does not, in fact, find whatever you said funny.

“What?” you ask.

“You sound resigned to the workings of time, fatalistic in the way you accused me of being for getting us in the game in the first place or do you understand now that if I hadn’t done what I had that we’d all be doomed?” Aradia asks, her hands on her hips.

“I’m…” you struggle for what to say, “I’m in a loop right now. What I do now is out of my control but I don’t know if it’s like that all of the time. Maybe there are big things that have to happen, like us getting in the game, but maybe the how you make it happen is negotiable. I don’t know. I don’t fucking… what does it matter now?”
“It matters because my moirail broke up with me for it and you talked to him about how terrible that was and then stole him!” Aradia accuses you.

“I didn’t steal him! He’s a person, you can’t steal a person. Besides, he asked me out.” you snap. Or… sort of, he asked indirectly and then you asked him when he tried to back out of it.

“He would have come around!” Aradia insists.

“No he wouldn’t, if everything is predetermined then he only ever would have done what he did, same as me. So you don’t get to be mad! This is the same goddamn argument as last time!” you shout at her.

Aradia snarls and her hair fans out around her like she’s underwater. She shakes her head and covers her face with her hands.

“I hate this. We used to be friends until I had to get everyone in the game, until I lost Sollux and you- this isn’t like me. So much of this sucks, why I do have to lose my friends too?” Aradia protests.

“So fight. Get it out of your systems, kick ass and leave it at that.” Damara suggests again.

“I don’t like fighting people.” you tell her.

“How would you know? You’ve never had a fair fight before.” Aradia states simply. Your spine jerks at her words. Fighting Bro was never fair, he was your father and a grown ass man. Training with Dirk wasn’t fair even if it was something you asked for, he’s bigger and older than you and you would never win. Even on the spaceship you fought adults, that wasn’t fair even if you did win.

You have to fight Aradia but you don’t get a choice about it, not really. Time shenanigans being what they are. Still, you’re used to fighting when you don’t want to.

“Fine.” you mutter, dropping your sword out of your strife deck and into your hand. It’s not that legendary sword, just your normal one that you’ve had since when you lived with Bro.

Aradia raises a hand, and you feel yourself hauled up off of the ground and into the air. You remember how it felt when Sollux picked you up, safe and floaty, this feels nothing like it. Aradia flings you backwards into the air and you have a horrible moment of feeling like you’re going to fall until your god tier ability to fly picks up.

You bait her, making her chase you around a column of quartz. When she comes close you lunge for her with your sword. Her whip snaps out and grabs your blade around the middle, yanking it out of your hands and snapping in two. Both halves fall down to the ground far below. Well, nuts.

You try to lunge for her bodily, if you can get within the range of her whip then she can’t hurt you with it. You slam her into the quartz pillar but she knees you in the guts hard enough that you have to let her go. You cling to the stinging pain, it’s far too close to Bro kicking you when you’re down. This whole thing sucks, you don’t want to fight her, you didn’t steal her moirail, you didn’t ask to play this game. She knows all of that.

Aradia throws a hand up in the air and the top half of the pillar snaps off. You fly desperately away from it, side on because you didn’t go to the Prometheus school of running away from things. No matter how fast you fly you’re limited and there’s no way you’re going to get out of the way of the pillar before it crushes you. Yanking out your time tables you drag the disk backwards sending you back through time. As you’re doing it the answer becomes obvious. All of your planets orbit Skaia so the same fixed location on Aradia’s planet will be someone else’s planet if the time lines up right. You could probably change things so that you stay in the same place when you go back in time, in
fact you think you did that before but now Aradia’s planet becomes yours just in time for the pillar to knock into you, sending you flying through the air.

Your back collides with something hard and unforgiving that snaps under your weight. Your kidneys throb and your brain reminds you that it’s your shitty Welsh sword. You land in a heap and see that just as you expected you’re back on LOHAC in front of a startled version of yourself from the past as well as Aradia and Damara.

God, your back hurts. That might be your kidneys complaining from the sword hilt that just got jabbed into them. You don’t want to do this but goddamn you are starting to get REALLY angry about all of this.

Aradia pops into existence and snaps her whip at you but you manage to roll out of the way.

“Get back here!” she shouts at you.

Oh, goddamnit. Fine, she wants you? She can have you. You are tired and angry, you hurt all over, and a girl who was once your friend just dragged you into being there when she died and is now fighting you. She knows about your history and she’s still doing this shit. It is on!

“Gladly! I’m gonna hit you into next week, bitch!” you spit out, remembering that you said it as the words pass your lips. You launch yourself into the air, reach for your hammer and pull it back. You smack Aradia right in the middle with it and with a loud clock chime she’s gone, just like your chair was. You can feel where you sent her this time and you pull out your timetables and prepare to chase after her.

Wait, shit, you need to tell your past self about getting the hammer card from John. You tell him and jump through time, a week from now. You really did hit her into next week. The planet is different this time, sugar cubes crunch underfoot. You grab for your hammer again and whirl around just in time for Aradia to smack bodily into you, sending the pair of you skidding down a hill of sugar. It scratches at your skin and clothes as the two of you tussle with each other before rolling to a stop at the edge of a tea riverbed.

You come out on top, you’re about to punch her when she rears up and headbutts you in the face.

“MotherFUCKER!” you curse as your nose explodes in pain and also blood.

You slam your hammer down on her and chase her through time. This time Aradia is prepared for you. You barely have time to orient yourself in knee deep snow before the troll leaps over a startled looking frog and bodyslams you forward through time again. You throw her off and try to get some distance but she kicks you clean in the chest, slamming you into a guillotine. The blade in it rattles and a distant sound of Karkat and Kankri shouting can be heard, a stream of angrily chanting multicolour shrimp stream by.

You get her in the face with your hammer and pop her through time. You jump after her. The ground under you is unsteady and you slip, sliding down a comically large pile of gold and other treasure. Aradia is laying on her back but she props herself up on her elbow when you slide to a stop near her.

“Just… give me a minute.” she pants and spits dark red blood out. It runs down an ornate crown.

You lower your hammer and catch your breath, rubbing at your still bleeding nose. The adrenaline is fading and wrath isn’t an especially long-lived emotion.

“This is stupid.” you say thickly.
“Ugh.” Aradia groans and flops onto her back, closing her eyes. You could hit her again but you don’t want to. You sit down with a thud and rest your chin on the handle of your hammer.

“Sollux would be so mad if he could see us right now.” Aradia says after a moment.

You consider this. She is probably right.

“I think we’d deserve that, this is really dumb.” you reason.

“Yeah. I’m sorry I suggested it.” Aradia says. She opens her eyes and looks at you.

“I think Damara suggested it, actually.” you correct her.

“Oh, well, fuck her then! Why’d we ever listen to her?” Aradia laughs brightly and you grin a little before you can suppress the reaction.

“Damn Damara.” you say flatly.

“This is really dumb. This isn’t gonna solve shit and I’m tired of being mad at the game, at him, at you. Can we just… truce?” she asks, sitting up and holding her hand out.

You really are too tired for this. You reach out and close her hand into a fist and then solemnly bump it with your own.

“Truce.” you agree.

Aradia leans back on the gold, and you wait for your nose to stop bleeding. It’s a slow trickle now but it still makes you want to sneeze.

“We should hang out. Like… tomorrow maybe. I have some Alternian nature documentaries saved on my husktop if you wanna watch them. If you thought Earth wildlife was weird you should see Alternian animals.” Aradia suggests, a peace offering. You remember going on a dig with her in the middle of nowhere, her showing you little animal skulls and the two of you gleefully discussing what kind of animal it must have been based on how it was put together. It was fun.

“Sure, as long as I’m not asleep for forever.” you agree.

“I need to go back.” you say finally, standing up and stowing your hammer away and getting your timetables out instead.

“To this morning?” Aradia guesses.

“Yeah, I’ve still got to spend the day with my brother.” you say.

God, he’s so worried about you and so freaked out. You’re still avoiding him about the whole him not saving your life thing and that’s not working. You’ve been all over the place today about how you feel about anything. The idea of having to loop back around one last time is deeply unappealing.

“Or you could hit me in the face some more, either is fine.” you mutter.

“Sorry, we made a truce, I don’t go back on my word.” Aradia tells you cheerfully as she gets up. She pulls out her music boxes and vanishes through time to, presumably, the point you left. You, on the other hand, have to do this groundhog day bullshit again because some version of you somewhere was colossally dumb.

You drag in a deep breath and remind yourself that Dirk is your brother, he’s always been there for
you. Mostly. Ugh, shit, maybe he’s just a person you’re related to and love very much. Less pedestal putting there, less problematic.

Problematic? Goddamn Kankri is infecting your vocabulary.

Reluctantly you spin the timetables backwards, knowing where and when you need to be.

Instantly you’re in the kitchen on the other side, looking at yourself and a younger version of yourself. Everyone is staring at you.

“Dave, you’re hurt!” Dirk exclaims, panicking of course.

“No shit.” you say in response.

“What happened to you?” he asks, trying to reach out for you, trying to make it better. You duck out of his grasp, you can’t do this here and you know you don’t do it. Time.

“Shenanigans. Doesn’t matter. I’m fine. Look, let’s just go to your planet and get this over with. But, uh, first I need to borrow you outside Karkat. You too, you know what’s happening.” you recite, gesturing to your past self. He drains his coffee and follows you out there and you pull the door shut behind you.

Past you looks actually excited and curious about this even though he’s trying not to. Are you that transparent or do you just know your own face really well? Karkat for his part looks concerned.

“Dave, are you okay? You look pretty rough.” Karkat asks, his thick eyebrows furrowing with worry.

“Geez, man. Are you saying that future me isn’t hot anymore?” past you says in mock offence.

“He’s bleeding from his nose.” Karkat says.

“I was, I’m not now.” you tell him. Your nosebleed has dried up now, but damn Aradia has a hard head. The blood kind of flakes away which probably makes you look a little less gross. Past you and Karkat are bantering back and forth, past you clearly trying to lure you into the kiss that you know is inevitable by now.

Eventually, you’ve had enough of listening to it and just grab your past self by the gear fringed front part of his cape and yank him in. You lay one on him and are dismayed at how much he tastes like coffee. You are so goddamn tired and you would straight up fight past you for that coffee.

Karkat is just as broken as he was last time which makes sense as this is technically the same time. Your past self smugly gets Aradia and Damara then flies off leaving Karkat still standing there with his mouth open in shock. You stick your head in the door, Dirk is already watching you. Shit, just get it over with.

“Dirk.” you call him and fly off. It takes almost no time at all for you to hear the rocket sound of Dirk following you. You carve a path through space to his planet. You’ve never been there. Actually you don’t know if anyone but Dirk has ever been there. Maybe Jake has, you’re not sure.

The planet has thick green clouds that obscure the surface of it as you fly closer and so you end up following Dirk’s lead as you descend through it. Once you’re past the top layer it’s just a thin greenish mist that isn’t massively pleasant to look at but at least it’s fine to breathe. The mist cuts your visibility down significantly so though you can see large structures scattered about you can’t make out what they are.
“Dave…” Dirk begins.

“Dirk.” another voice counters. You look up and see Rose landing, of course, she followed you. You had forgotten.

Dirk looks surprised but he’s hardly going to tell her that she can’t be here. He made an effort ever since he started living with her to treat her as well as he did you, of course, she was always less receptive to his brand of affection than you were. Telling her to leave would be tantamount to declaring you to be his favourite and he’s not going to do that.

“The Land of Cults and Obsession, I see. Maybe you should show us around.” Rose says airily.

“It’s a little dangerous.” Dirk warns.

“God, what if we died? Wouldn’t that be terrible?” Rose says flatly and walks off.

“Rose!” you hiss and run after her.

“What?” Rose sighs, hopping down a green stone ledge.

“You can’t just- you know that later today Vriska kills herself to go god tier because of what you said, don’t you?” you say sharply, it hasn’t happened yet but it will. Even just saying it out loud is horrible.

“I know, that’s why I said it. She has to be god tier for the best future to play out, I can see that. I just gave her a nudge is all.” Rose says.

You try to say something to counter her, you know that she’s not herself. You’re not yourself. But you can’t make Rose care about other people’s well being, if she doesn’t care if Vriska does something terrible to herself then you can’t make her. You don’t know what to do about this or even if there is anything you can do about it. Maybe you should talk to Hal about it or see if Rose might accept help from Roxy. You doubt it though, accepting help is never something Rose has done well.

There’s something in the distance in the mist but as you fall back into step with Dirk, following Rose, you start to make out what it is. Dirk presses his hand to your chest to halt you.

“Rose, come back. It’s one of my consorts.” Dirk calls ahead to her. The lumpy figure is on the ground seemingly on its side.

“It’s dead.” Rose says, walking towards it slowly.

“Dead? Consorts can die?” you ask. You try to walk closer, but Dirk stops you.

“My consorts kill each other all the time.” Dirk explains.

You freeze time for just a split second, long enough for you to get away from Dirk holding you back and several steps closer to the lump on the ground. Dirk’s surprised exclamation rings out just as you reach the consort. It is on its side and surprisingly is tall enough that if it was standing would come up to your shoulders. Its skin is a mottled scaly green unlike the smooth red skin of your nakkodiles. This thing has the same long snout as yours but the teeth in this mouth are seriously dangerous unlike the teeth of yours which are sharp but not really threatening.

Your nakkodiles are almost cute in the way that they’re like alligators painted in primary colours and with all the scary bits sanded down. This consort is closer to something from Jurassic Park. It had stubby flappy limbs and a long oarlike tail. There are bite marks in its neck as the obvious cause of
“Why do they kill each other?” you ask, turning to look at Dirk.

“I don’t know, they have these cults that they’re part of and whenever they run into someone from another cult they kill them.” Dirk answers with an uncomfortable shrug.

“That’s dark.” you say.

“Indeed, not at all like our consorts. What cults do they worship?” Rose asks.

“It’s… it doesn’t matter. It would be better if we could go to one of your planets or even just back home, you look really tired and hurt Dave.” Dirk says evasively.

You exchange a look with Rose.

“I think we’ll stay here.” you say. This warrants some further investigation.

“This planet is my problem, I’m working on it myself.” Dirk says without prompting. So the planet is a problem then?

“This way then, Dave, if you want to see how this works.” Rose says, turning away and walking again. You get to your feet and quickly follow her. Dirk is left with no choice but to abandon the dead consort and follow you. The longer you walk for the more buildings you start to see.

“This is Bro’s place, all of the buildings are.” you say after you pass the sixth one in a row.

“We should go.” Dirk says.

Three consorts run past you to join a growing number lining the streets. They paddle their flippers and gnash their terrible jaws.

An electrical sound rings out and the side of one of the buildings is lit up with a picture of you several stories high. You’re bleeding from the nose and one of your exposed eyes is red with burst blood vessels, you’re maybe ten. Just seeing it makes you flinch. The consorts go nuts, hissing and snapping at the air. Instinctively you back up to Dirk and he wraps an arm around you but doesn’t bother to arm himself, they must not attack him.

Above you the air churns, green clouds and mist swirling. You tilt your head back and see a shadow emerging from the cloud. As it breaks through you see that the beast is the same as the consorts only huge. It’s maybe fifty feet long from snout to tail tip and you finally recognise it for what it is.

“That’s a mosasaurus!” you hiss. You got cartoonish crocodiles and Dirk has actual goddamn dinosaurs swimming through the sky as if it were water.

The giant mosasaurus, or you suppose not giant as they were this size and it’s the ones on the ground that are little, swoops down towards the lit up building. It opens its mighty jaws lined with teeth almost as big as you are. It snarls and bites at the building, it twists and slams into it with its long flat tail reducing the building to rubble. The image of injured you is gone and the consorts seem delighted. The mosasaurus swims off back into the upper cloud bank.

“What the fuck?” you whisper in awe.

“I said we should leave.” Dirk says quietly.

“That was one of the cult leaders, wasn’t it?” Rose asks, looking up at the clouds. Dirk nods silently.
“Come on.” Rose says, pulling you forward.

Dirk keeps periodically trying to convince you to leave but Rose isn’t having any of it. The further you walk you start to notice a very high thick metal fence coming in from your right and a little while longer a matching one comes in on your left. The section of land that you’re on seems to be fenced off into an angled wedge.

As you get closer to the apex of the section you can make out another huge figure but this isn’t another apartment building. It’s a statue that stands at least fifty foot tall. It’s of you, or you’re in it at least. You, Rose and Roxy are etched into pure white marble with Dirk shielding all of you with his body. His arms are wrapped around you and multiple swords sprout from his back.

You and Rose fly around the other side of the fence to see it properly and find a large metal placard on the base of the statue.

*Cult of the Protector*

“What the fuck?” you whisper again.

“There’s more.” Rose says.

She’s right. This central area is a wide circle but it’s more like the centre of a wheel. The statues surround the edges and from there the segregated wedges of land spread out. Within the circle you and Rose walk along until you’re close enough to see the next statue. This one is Dirk, happily sat down surrounded by friends of his. Roxy, Jane, Jake, Horuss, even a few people that you don’t know that well but recognise from your Halloween party. He looks so happy and normal. Fittingly underneath it the statue reads ‘The Cult of Normality’.

The next statue is unmistakeably Bro. His pose is arrogant, like the kind of statues that dictators put up of themselves. The statue is defaced, parts of his glasses are broken off and giant stone blades penetrate his chest. It reads ‘Cult of the Reviled’. Behind the fence several of the small consorts are hissing angrily up at the statue and trying to push through the fence.

You shudder and move on from that one.

The next statue is Dirk again. He is sat cross-legged and behind him stands a futuristic robot. Mechanical limbs hang from the statue’s base. In one hand the Dirk statue holds a human heart made of glass, plastic and metal, wires run out of it and it beats gently, it’s artificial. In the other an open laptop rests on his palm. ‘Cult of Brilliance’ reads the description.

The final statue is of Dirk and Jake, it takes you a moment to place the sense of familiarity but you realise it’s a version of a real sculpture back on Earth. You don’t know who it’s by but the original is two naked figures kissing passionately. Thankfully your brother and Jake are clothed and you don’t have to look at their giant marble junk. Ugh, it’s bothering you that you don’t know what it’s called. Classical art was hardly your thing ever, but some things are just cultural knowledge. Was it something super obvious like ‘the kiss’ or something? The title that Dirk’s land has given it is ‘Cult of the Heart’. It stands next to the cult of the protector and there are a bunch of consorts clustered against the fence on the protector side hissing at it, a few are even trying to throw rocks over the fence at that Cult of the Heart statue.

Dirk is lingering by the statue of the Cult of the Protector, not able to look at you.

“These cults are all you or… well, not the one with Bro but that looks more like how you see him or something,” you say.
“They’re core beliefs.” Rose declares, explaining jack shit with a side of nothing. She evidently notices your lack of reaction to her sparkling insight and continues.

“Core beliefs are a term in psychology that describe beliefs which drive a person’s psyche. They can become overblown, obsessive and unhealthy, like these.” Rose says, gesturing around the circle.

“They’re not beliefs, they’re statues.” you argue.

“They represent a belief. Look at this one, it’s something like… I must always protect my family no matter what.” Rose says, waving her hand at the statue of the Cult of the Protector.

You’re about to protest that there’s nothing wrong with that and that you have the same thing too. But you don’t, you trust Rose to look after herself and work with you. When you were on the spaceship you were side by side not shielding her. If Dirk had been there he would have let you be armed to protect yourself, but he wouldn’t have encouraged you to go on the offensive when your life was in danger. He would have been on his own which is surely more dangerous for him than your way. Dirk is covered in scars from leaping between you and Bro, it’s hardly been good for him.

You look at the statue of Bro through the mist, if that’s how these things work then you can guess what that is.

“Never be like Bro.” you say, pointing at it.

“Yes, simple logic. He is terrible, so I can never have anything in common with him or I am terrible.” Rose nods.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing!” Dirk snaps at her.

“Was he terrible in every way? He liked music like Dave does, he taught him if I recall correctly so is Dave terrible? He taught you how to use a sword and that’s a skill you seem to cling to, does that make you awful?” Rose presses. Behind the statue of Bro the consorts in that cult become enraged at Rose’s words.

“All of these things are absolutes, there’s no compromise. You are, as the land name suggests, obsessed with them. And look, there, Jake.” Rose says, facing the other way.

“You broke up with him.” you say. Dirk didn’t tell you that but you know.

“I was too distracted by him, because of me being too obsessed with him you two died!” Dirk declares.

You look at him, at the way he is clearly upset and how sure he is that he’s right. You have to admit that when you and Rose combined your powers to see if there was any way things could have played out differently you didn’t take it well when you discovered that he was too busy getting boned by Jake to answer Rose’s messages. But Dirk clearly took it just as well, if his relationship with Jake was why he was slow to come to your rescue then OBVIOUSLY he should burn the whole thing to the ground.

“It doesn’t work, does it?” you say softly.

“No, that’s why I ended it.” Dirk explains.

“Not that, I mean these ideas. You can’t be everything you want to be for Jake and be this guardian angel at the same time. You can’t be normal like that and look after us. And what’s the Brilliance one all about? Your potential? Well, hey, you can’t be a super genius and have a normal social life and
protect us and be everything for Jake and never be even a little bit like Bro all at once. You just can’t!” you insist. Dirk looks physically pained at your words.

“I have to.” he says desperately.

Consorts try to bite each other through their fences, stirred up by your words. Of course, they attack each other, they each believe that their thing is the most important and nothing can overtake it. Thunder rumbles through the clouds and a flash of lightning paints the shadows of two mosasaurus fighting each other. This is what the inside of Dirk’s head must be like.

It’s like narcissism turned inside out. These aren’t monuments to the person Dirk is, they’re monuments to what he’s trying to be. A standard of perfection that no one can ever meet. But he keeps trying, doesn’t he? He gives everything to Jake because he suffered so much just for loving him, so it has to be perfect. He stays awake at night doing his robotics work for school, or he used to before the world was ending. After all who needs sleep? He cloned his goddamn brain to ensure that someone would always be watching you and that someone would always be guarding him against becoming Bro.

Only it’s finally starting to break down. His love life and his family life has clashed. His academic work was devoured by preparing for the game and goodness only knows what toll it took on him to try to prepare you for the game without acting like Bro. He can’t do this, no one can.

“What have you been doing? You’ve been questing here, haven’t you? What have you been doing in those quests?” Rose asks.

“What they ask me to. I help them find things or deliver messages, stupid shit.” Dirk says unhelpfully.

“You reinforce them, you mean.” Rose sighs.

“Well, what should I be doing then since you seem to know everything?” Dirk demands. Rose glares angrily at him. For all she wasn’t raised by him like you were the two of them are incredibly alike sometimes.

“What do you think? For someone so smart you’re awfully stupid. These things are part of who you are, heart is the aspect of soul and personality. You’re a prince, they destroy. You need to destroy your soul, or these parts at least to bring them down to something reasonable. God, even if you didn’t know that you ought to know that cults are a bad thing, that they should be broken up!” Rose sneers.

“You want me to just erase my entire soul?!” Dirk shouts. You cringe back, this is turning into a real argument.

“These parts, yes! Make them smaller, less absolute. Don’t appoint yourself our saviour, work with us. Accept that Bro was a terrible person but you’re not even if you do share interests or traits with him. Have a reasonable social life so everything isn’t about us, study and do things that make you happy rather than throwing yourself totally into just one thing. Don’t get so blinded by Jake that you don’t see anything else and, oh I don’t know, LET US GET MURDERED!” Rose screams that last part at him. Dirk flinches away from her.

“Rose, it wasn’t his fault.” you say. You go back and forth on how much you believe that but you do believe completely that if Dirk had known the cost of his time with Jake he would have never agreed to it. If he won’t stick up for himself, then you will.

“It was a mistake, fine, but there’s no need for him to make us being murdered all about how hard it
is for him! Oh, how sad, he must now martyr his relationship with his soulmate just to prove how sorry he is. We’re the ones who were murdered!” Rose shouts at you.

Rose backs up shaking her head and scrubbing at her eyes. Without looking she takes to the skies, vanishing in green clouds.

You open your mouth to try to say something. Like how Rose didn’t mean it, but she does. Or how she’s wrong, but she isn’t completely wrong. In the end, you say nothing and sit down on the ground. You shove your shades up into your hair and sigh. Dirk looks wounded and filled with self-loathing, now he’s looking at you as if to see whether you feel the same. This is exactly the sort of thing you’d wanted to avoid, but here you are, drawn inevitably here by the ironic currents of time.

You don’t want to do this. You stare down at your feet. Dirk is being crushed by the demands of things he can’t possibly be. But you’ve got your own demands on him, don’t you? You believed that he’d never fail to rescue you, but he did.

“Jake can’t have you all of the time.” you say softly.

“I’ve already ended it.” he says quickly.

“No. I’m not- look, we don’t want you all of the time. Even when we were younger I was everything. You stayed with me as much as you could to protect me and you only left if you staying put me in more danger. You never had friends or a life. Honestly, I was happy when you made Hal because it meant that if he was watching me then you didn’t have to absolutely every second doing that. Then maybe I wouldn’t be this huge burden and… I hated being this weight chaining you down.” you admit.

“What? No, I’ve never thought of you like that. Dave, no.” Dirk says, reaching out and catching your face between his hands. He makes you look up at him and he’s so earnest.

“But I was, when you act like that I am.” you insist, pointing to the cult of protection statue.

“Jake has no right to you all the time and we don’t either. I don’t want that, I just want to be your brother. And yeah I died and it’s really fucked me up but I’m-” you were about to say fine but you’re not fine, “I’m alive now.”

“But…” Dirk protests, looking around at the statues.

You get it, he doesn’t want to change it. He clearly knows that how things are now isn’t working but he doesn’t want to change it. It’s scary having to do that. There’s a reason that you dug your heels in so much when it came to you getting therapy, it’s not fun. But you guess your therapist didn’t get down to this level of shit with Dirk, probably because he’s a master of evasion.

You stand up and float so that you’re eye to eye with Dirk.

“I’m pretty sure that this is what you’re meant to be doing.” you tell him.

Dirk doesn’t seem to have anything to say.

“If it helps, I hate that you feel this shitty about everything. I mean, you want me to be happy don’t you think I want that for you?” you ask.

A wave of tiredness washes over you so you leave Dirk to his messed up green planet filled with dinosaurs and fly home. You freeze time before you enter the building. All you want to do is sleep but you can’t go to your room because you and Sollux were in there earlier and you didn’t see
yourself. You also can’t go for Karkat’s room because you don’t know if he went in there when he was home. You also don’t want to sleep in Dirk’s room and be woken up by your brother waking you up to apologise for existing or something like that, you’re too tired to tackle that. Sollux’s room, however, is good.

You fly past Karkat and Kanaya explaining something to Hal, stuck in time, and fly to Sollux’s room. You open and shut the door, change into pyjamas and drop into his bed. Sure that you’re no longer going to make any noise you unfreeze time and curl up under the covers. It has been one hell of a day.
Your strategy meeting contains a limited number of people. All three void players are here to obfuscate your presence and Hal floats in the corner jamming any way that Her Imperious Condescension has of tracking you. None of the time players wanted to be present; Aradia and Damara are convinced that things will be fine and Dave is too busy sleeping to care.

Vriska wanted to exclude Rose because she’s been unpredictable and volatile, but she is your seer of light and earning her scorn at this point isn’t wise. Roxy offered to supervise Rose so that was allowed. Dirk and Jane are present as they are the oldest and most conniving humans, Aranea is present for the same reason, Jake is absent for obvious Dirk related reasons. Both heiresses needed to be included and Terezi wouldn’t miss strategy for the world. Gamzee is sat at the table too, you didn’t ask him to be here and neither did Vriska but neither of you are willing to risk clown wrath just to kick him out.

“Where do we stand on creating a new matriorb?” you ask Roxy. This is the question you have asked her in these meetings repeatedly over the last few weeks, everything hangs off of this.

“Not too great atm. I’m working through making things don’t exist exist but the more complex the item is the harder it is. I mean this I can do no problem.” Roxy sighs holding her hand out and popping a generic object out of the air.

“I don’t like those things, I have a hard time seeing them.” Terezi pouts. Apparently their generic nature makes it hard for her to detect them.

“Perhaps you are not going at this in the proper way.” Equius suggests, picking the object up and turning it carefully in his hands. The surface of it buckles under his touch.

“Well I’m trying it every which way I can, what would you do?” Roxy asks testily.

“Can you describe your process?” Rose asks.

“She’s stealing the realness or something.” Vriska says snippily because she always has to get a word in, whether she has anything relevant to add is a non issue.

“You mean the lack of reality, you would need to rogue of light to steal realness obviously.” Rose retorts.

You massage your temples, you are not going ashen for these crazy broads just for the sake of productive meetings, you will not.

“If y’all are stealing the lies from up out of something to make it real why not make a lie and turn it real?” Gamzee asks. You’re sure that somewhere in those words was a sentence that made sense but you can’t find it just yet.

“You’re saying instead of Roxy making one from scratch we should make a really convincing fake and then steal the… fakeness from it?” Dirk says with a frown as he sounds the idea out.

All of you consider that for a moment.

“Gamzee that is the best idea I’ve heard all week, I think could work.” Roxy gasps in delight. Rose and Vriska both look personally offended that Gamzee of all people managed to come up with a brilliant idea.
“Okay, well, that happened. How are the life players doing on bringing people back from the dead?” you ask, looking around at them all. Jane shifts uncomfortably.

“Well, I’m making progress on my quests for sure, but it’s not as if I have dead people around to practice on. Besides I don’t want anyone to be in need of us practicing.” She says.

“Pretty sure it’s not gonna be a thing I can do anyway.” Meenah says with a shrug. Yeah, you didn’t think a thief of life would be able to help others like that.

Vriska raps her claws on the tabletop thoughtfully for a moment.

“I also have an update.” Dirk says, leaning forward a little in his chair.

“I’ve been on my planet working on… things, it’s pretty destruction based. A few consorts helped me with a sort of upgrade in exchange for destroying something they wanted taken down.” Dirk explains.

“You damaged one of your cults, which one?” Rose asks, though you have no idea what she’s talking about. Dirk looks at her poker faced and Rose looks back, the picture of innocence. You swear that she takes after Dirk more than Dave does. That said you’ve heard from Dave all about Dirk’s planet, it’s one hell of a shitshow from what you heard, different cults supporting his different neuroses. You’d hate to think what your planet would like like if you had his.

“Not relevant but it was heart, it’s… more manageable now. It doesn’t matter, look.” Dirk says finally and rests his elbow on the table, he extends his hand palm up and tenses his fingers as if he was trying to squeeze an invisible stress ball. Nothing happens for a second and then pink lightning arcs and ripples over his fingers and up his forearm.

“Careful with that.” Hal warns from his place at the window.

“It’ll destroy someone’s soul, right?” Dirk asks.

“Or rip it out. Yeah, don’t point that shit at anyone you don’t want dead.” Hal agrees, Dirk’s lightning fades away.

“Oh, this is excellent. As soon as we get the matriorb we’re attacking the empress.” Vriska declares.

“As much as I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Vriska,” you say slowly.

“That’s a lie.” Rose snorts. You glare at her.

“My point is that she is older than all of us put together and far more powerful, she won’t be easy to kill. Even those among us who have god tier powers don’t come back to life if they’re killed doing something heroic which attempting to take down a tyrant absolutely is.” you point out.

“Duh. And I know she has mind control now and powers like the Captors but in case you didn’t notice we have three people who can stop time.” Vriska says, banging her fist on the table for emphasis.

“So what if she’d beat us in a second? We’re not going to GIVE her a second. The time players will
freeze her and we’ll all give her all that we’ve got. By the time that the time players can’t hold her any more she’ll be dead before she hits the ground.” She shouts.

“Not exactly a fair fight.” Aranea says, pushing her glasses up her nose as she considers the idea.

“Beach don’t play fair.” Meenah says with a shrug.

“I don’t care what you have to say about this, Karkat. We’re doing it!” Vriska insists.

You had hoped that you could avert this, somehow get your parents back without bloodshed. At least if it was a fair fight you would feel a little better about this. But it was never going to be easy, was it? You look down at the table and wonder for the millionth time in your life what your father would do.

“Signless wouldn’t do this.” you say quietly.

“But,” you say over Vriska already starting to interrupt, “he’s a sprite ghost that no one’s seen in over a week. Always doing things his way doesn’t seem like it works so great either. She has our parents if she doesn’t get what she wants she’ll torture and kill them and if she runs out of them she’ll take us one by one. Even if we stole our parents back she’d hunt us down.

“Signless wouldn’t kill someone frozen in time unable to defend themselves but I don’t see any other choice here. At least from her point of view it’ll be quick.” you say. You hope that at least this small amount of mercy in a terrible act will make it so that your parents and Dolorosa will be able to look you in the eye afterwards.

“That’s a good way to look at it, Karkat.” Terezi says, patting you on the shoulder.

“I have to say I’m not comfortable with this either, Karkat but she has my father and you’re right, if it goes well then at least it’ll be quick.” Jane nods.

“Who will make the fake matriorb?” Equius asks, changing the topic.

“I’ve seen Dave sculpt from clay before and Kanaya and Porrim know what a matriorb looks like, they can work together.” you tell him.

“Get Strider on it ASAP, no more of this moping around.” Vriska sneers, waving her hand as if to gesture just how wishy-washy Dave’s current state is. You snarl angrily at Vriska and get to watch how the body language of every human at the table shifts up several notches in aggressiveness. Everyone except for Rose. Rose simply stands up from the table and walks away, leaving the building entirely. She’s taken to doing this lately, just leaving whenever she feels like it to go who knows where. Kanaya’s told you all about how distant Rose has been and Dave’s too burnt out right now for you to feel right asking him to fix her and when Roxy tried it just resulted in a fight. You need to fix this somehow but you have no idea what to do.

You call the meeting to an end after that and go to find your soulmate. He’s not in his room which means that at some point he got up but he’s also not in yours or Sollux’s room either. Extended searching leads you to finding him in John’s room along with a whole mess of other people. Shaun of the Dead is paused on the TV and everyone else is ignoring it to stare at Kanaya and Porrim.

“It really was not that exciting.” Kanaya says.

“Mostly just inconvenient.” Porrim agrees.

“You were a ZOMBIE HUNTER!” Jade exclaims, waving her arms.
“It wasn’t a job, more of a chore.” Porrim corrects her.

“But it was really like that? Destroy the brain or remove the head to kill it, lurching monsters who bit you and turned you?” Dave asks excitedly.

“Oh, removing the head does not work. The body will die then but the head remains animated for quite some time after if you do that. Destroying the brain really was the only way.” Kanaya explains.

“Are you talking about the undead on Alternia again?” you ask and Kanaya turns around and smiles at the sight of you.

“They seem fascinated.” She answers.

“Because that’s super weird, I’m still not convinced you’re not having us on.” John declares.

“It is not weird!” Kanaya protests.

“Kan, it’s weird. That Alternia had a virus that could make you a living shambling corpse was super weird.” you tell her.

“In fairness it isn’t like the movies you have, it’s very hard to catch. If you escape with just a bite you’re unlikely to get sick and there is medicine you can take to counteract a bite. Thankfully jadebloods have a natural immunity, but that shows up here and there in other colours too.” Porrim explains.

“Yeah, like leprosy in humans. You think it’s super easy to catch from how much people go on about it in movies and games but it’s actually really easy to treat and really hard to catch.” you say.

“Wow, space vampire zombie hunters, you Maryams are the coolest.” Dave declares, leaning back over Jade’s lap.

“That is very sweet of you, Dave.” Kanaya says, patting him on the head.

“I have great taste in moirails, what can I say? Dave can I borrow you?” you ask quickly.

“Borrowing implies that you’ll give him back.” Jade says, wrapping her arm around Dave’s shoulders and waggling her thick eyebrows at you.

“I will.” you say, silently adding the ‘eventually’ in your head.

“Sure thing.” Dave agrees, ducking out of Jade’s loose hold and floating over to you. You grab a hold of his cape and pull him out of the room.

“Why does everyone gotta pull me around like this? One day someone’ll strangle me to death.” Dave drawls. Inside the privacy of your head you set the counter of days since Dave has made a joke that’s actually a little worrying back to zero. More accurately it’s just been at zero ever since he came back to life.

His room is closer to John’s than yours is, which is on purpose on your part. If living with John Egbert has taught you anything it’s… don’t live with John Egbert. You like the guy so it’s not that but there’s only so early in the morning that you are willing to deal with shaving cream based chicanery. Regardless you pull the still floating Dave into his room and kick the door shut after you.

“You okay?” He asks, landing on the floor.

“I hate those meetings.” you confess, running your hands through your hair.
“Lots of arguing and no progress?” Dave guesses, reaching out and knocking your hands away to tangle his own ones in your hair. You shut your eyes and make happy noises that you know Dave can’t hear.

“No, we’re actually all agreed on a plan.” you say after a moment as Dave runs a thumb over the nub of your pathetic horns.

“So why was it so bad?” He asks.

“Because we just agreed to murder someone.” you say as you open your eyes to watch him carefully. Dave’s hand stills for a moment but only a moment. If he wasn’t such a rhythm based person or so precise with his hands you wouldn’t even have taken it into consideration, but that was a pause.

“That sucks.” He says softly.

“My father would never do this.” you admit.

“I would say he shoulda killed her when he had the chance but if he’d done that back on Alternia I wouldn’t have you.” Dave points out.

You don’t say that if Signless’s execution had been hers instead that it would have saved the lives of millions of trolls and that your paltry life is hardly worth that. Partially because that’s just depressing but also because the thought of Dave with a blank arm for his whole life is just too wrong to think of. Or maybe he would have been paired up with someone better than you in your absence. The thought of that makes you want to snarl with territorial rage, he’s yours and you’re his.

“I always wanted to be a leader but I didn’t think it’d ever come down to planning to kill someone, I’m sure I’m doing it wrong.” you admit instead.

“You’re protecting people, that’s not wrong. Plus some people deserve to die, it just sucks to have to do it. I’m pretty sure everyone in my family can tell you that.” He points out.

Of course, Bro. But for all you have sworn in the past that if you had been around when Bro still was that you would have helped in Dirk’s endeavour to get Bro to take a long walk of a short rooftop it’s still another thing to plan the end of someone else’s life. Even an evil genocidal monster who has your family captive. It needs to be done, you know that, it still doesn’t feel great.

Signless wouldn’t do this.

“It’s ok.” Dave says, even though you’ve not been verbalising any of this he evidently can tell just from the look on your face. He pulls you close and kisses you, no doubt to distract you.

It works.

Soon enough you’re not thinking about murder, you’re just thinking about Dave. About the way he makes a startled yip when you get your hands under his red time stamped shirt and onto his bare skin. You’re thinking about how glad that you are that even though Dave has lost interest in lots of things since he came back to life he’s not lost interest in you or this. Some petty jealous part had been worried that he would need Sollux more than you and you’d be dropped until he feels better. You’re ashamed to even think that, especially as Dave is doing his level best to kiss you as if there’s nothing in the universe he’d ever rather do.

“It’s gonna be okay, Karkat.” He assures you between kisses.
Guilt and fear still coil inside your stomach but he at least quietens them, for now.

You had thought it was a good idea for you all to watch a movie whilst Dave worked on the sculpted matriorb from Kanaya and Porrim’s designs. He’s working quite comfortably at the low coffee table and you had thought to keep him company, only movies tend to attract people. You’re not even through loading the film up before half of your siblings have appeared and by the time you get ten minutes in all of them are there as well as a bunch of the others and you have to start the damn thing over again.

You’ve never seen Les Mis before and you had no idea what it was about except there was singing in it and also it was French. Dave is sculpting horns for the matriorb as you watch Jean Valjean suffering slavery, of how he was imprisoned just for trying to help others survive. Your heart goes out for him. The film progresses and he meets students who are rebelling against injustice and you are painfully reminded of everything that your parents have said over the years. How they fought for their cause, of the speeches you’ve watched them give, of you playing your own part too. The same fire in the characters eyes has lit the eyes of your parents, only it’s real in them and not acted. You’ve heard how Psii broke people from slavery because he knew of the fate that would await him and he couldn’t bear to abandon others to that same fate. You’ve been told of your grandmother holding your ancestor as a grub in her hands and knowing in her heart what would face him if she let him be and choosing to dash her chances of an easy normal life for the right thing. Dis has told you of fighting off servants of the empire trying to harm your fathers as they desperately helped prisoners escape, doing the right thing against all risks and dangers. Real revolution. You miss them all so much.

You know revolutionaries, you know revolutions. But these people in the movie are young and idealistic, there’s no way they can win against a whole system. The same could be said of your parents struggle against the woman who now holds them.

When they start to sing tears well up in your eyes.

“Do you hear the people sing?
Singing the songs of angry men?
It is the music of the people
Who will not be slaves again!
When the beating of your heart
Echoes the beating of the drums
There is a life about to start
When tomorrow comes!”

By the time that very first verse is done there’s not a single dry eye among your siblings. They see what you see. Your father and his fight for your people, for you and Kankri to be allowed to exist, for Sollux and Mituna to not be turned into batteries and ship parts, for Kanaya and Porrim to not be enslaved to care for the mothergrub. Signless, Disciple, Psiionic, Dolorosa, they all gave so much for their cause. And too the children of the Summoner who stirred belief in so many, they stare at the
screen with wide eyes. The daughters of Redglare who has done so much to aid your father and fight for justice from within watch on seeing the similarities. The children of Mindfang and Darkleer are here at your side too, despite how their parents originally betrayed yours.

Isn’t it funny? You have the whole span of the hemospectrum here, descendants of people good and bad from either side of the revolution. That generation went through so much for that revolution and after all of it you don’t even know who won.

All you do know is that you miss all three of your parents terribly. Two of them are captured and one is a shadow of himself, seemingly having abandoned you. And yet on the screen you watch another revolution play out, you’ve spent so much time desperately trying to fill your father’s shoes and walk in his footsteps but you just can’t. You’re a kid and you miss him so much it makes you sick.

“Karkat?” Dave asks softly, a half painted matriorb in his hand. You nod at him, not trusting your voice right now. Stupid mutant tears are running down your cheeks as on screen the revolutionaries are killed and defeated as you knew they would be.

Dave points to the iron chain inked on his skin, he told you long ago what made him feel things through it. You comparing yourself to Signless. A man who fought to free his people, a man of courage, bravery and endless compassion. What would he do if he was here? What are you possibly supposed to do to follow him?

Yeah, no wonder Dave’s chain hurts.

CG: I’M FINE.

TG: you dont look like you feel fine

CG: I DON’T, BUT IT’S FINE. DON’T WORRY.

Dave raises an eyebrow above his shades but doesn’t say anything else and instead returns to work, shooting you cautious glances now and then.

You keep watching the movie but only with half your attention focused on it. Revolutions take up your mind. You’re a co-leader of your group, surely your parents would be proud of you for that. But under your so called command many of your people have died. That they got better from it is neither here nor there. You don’t think you are as humble or mesmerising as Signless. You’re not as decisive as the Disciple, not as powerful as the Psiionic, you can’t nurture people like Dolorosa can either.

All of them fought The Condesce and though you can’t say for sure if they lost or not you know they didn’t win. Despite all they sweat and bled for their fight one of you is going to have to confront the woman again to negotiate for the lives of your loved ones. Not that much negotiation is going to take place you wager, she’s going to have to die and you may not succeed at that. The day you meet with her may well be your last.

“I think,” Dave says slowly as the credits roll, “I’m done.”

He holds up a painted clay matriorb and though you’ve never seen one in person it looks convincing enough to you. Porrim and Kanaya dab tears from their eyes and scoot over to where Dave is sat so they can inspect his creation.

“It looks exactly like one, more or less.” Porrim says, peering at it.

“Rox?” Dave says, holding it out to her.
“Have you got the code for it in case I need to try again at this?” Roxy asks, leaning forward from her chair and taking the fake matriorb that is still tacky with paint.

“Yeah, I’ve got it.” Dave says.

“Well then, here goes nothing.” Roxy says. Everyone in the room is watching her, barely daring to hope that she’ll pull this off.

“You can do it Roxy.” Jake urges her as Roxy settles the sculpture between the fingertips of both hands. Roxy flashes him a smile and then shuts her eyes.

Roxy breathes in deep and her eyebrows draw together in concentration. As the seconds stretch on nothing seems to be happening, which given that you’re looking for void might be appropriate. Slowly things start to look strange, the air around the sculpture looks weird and not too dissimilar from the way the air seems to ripple above hot asphalt. The texture of Roxy’s shirt that you can see behind it seems to bend and distort almost as if the orb is sucking things in. When you move your head the illusion shifts.

Sweat beads off of Roxy’s brow and then there is a small noise, akin to the sound of a balloon popping but reversed. The orb bounces on her fingers and then lands in her hands again. Roxy opens her eyes and looks at the matriorb cautiously.

“Did it work?” Nepeta asks eagerly.

“I… have no idea. Porrim?” Roxy says, handing the orb over to Porrim. The two sisters look over the orb, touching it, and examining it from every which way.

“It’s real, I think.” Porrim says slowly.

“Can we sea? It contains the possibility to give life to our whole species again, it seems like Life domain. Right, Jane?” Feferi says, opening her hands.

Kanaya and Porrim look at each other for a moment and then carefully Porrim hands the matriorb over to Feferi.

“Oooh, it feels- well, I don’t know for shore but it’s something!” Feferi says brightly.

Jane reaches out to touch it and jolts just before her fingers make contact with it.

“Oh, I see what you mean. It’s like it’s glowing or something, if you could feel something glowing that is.” Jane agrees.

“I can feel it too and if it’s good enough to fool us then it should convince the hagfish that it’s real too, we can test whether it’s the reel deal or not later when she’s dead.” Meenah says, ever the practical troll.

“It’s not like we gotta do this right now though.” Cronus points out.

“Yeah we do, fishdick. My parents are stuck up there!” Mituna snaps at him angrily.

“Mituna, don’t call him that.” Kankri scolds him.

Mituna sullenly apologises but you’re not sure how much he means it.

You hold your hand out and Jane passes you the matriorb. It feels slightly warm in your hands but your aspect isn’t linked to it enough for you to feel anything special from it and you’ve never seen
one in person before.

This is what The Condesce is willing to kill for.

If she gets her hands on this then you are sure that she will kill your family, no one gets to rule
Alternia for that long by playing fair. Signless would not do this, but you will. Mituna is right,
though. Every second that passes that you delay is a second that Psii has to spend plugged into a ship
that was his torture chamber before and is again. It’s seconds that John and Jane’s soft human father
is prisoner on an alien ship, your mother and grandmother may well be suffering the wrath of The
Condesce for their previous crimes.

You cannot wait.

“We’re doing this now. I’ll contact her and meet her on my own, the void players can hide the rest of
you from her and then we can do what we need to.” you say, standing up and pulling your phone
out.

“Right now?” Dave asks in alarm.

The room becomes filled with the sound of people shouting at you, trying to reason with you. Their
points are reasonable to a degree. You haven’t thought of a meeting ground and scoped somewhere
out, you’ve not tested the matriorb enough, that if she sees you alone she may just kill you instantly
and take it instead of exchanging prisoners or even giving the others a chance to ambush her. You
don’t listen.

“The best place for the exchange is Mituna’s planet.” Rose informs you. You trust her on this.

“Can you give Sollux the coordinates to send to her?” You ask. She nods.

“What if she kills you straight off?” Kanaya asks urgently.

“I still have a dreamself, if she does kill me I’ll be okay.” you say with a shrug. Dave winces at your
words.

“I’ve seen you in the future, even if you die today you’ll be okay. I think, unless that was another
timeline’s future.” Dave adds that last part uncertainly.

“You win.” Rose assures you and Dave relaxes a little.

“Sollux, see if you can hail the Battleship Condescension.” you say. Your brother looks unsettled but
he pulls out his husktop and you see Rose message him the coordinates of the location on Mituna’s
planet. He sets the computer up on the coffee table and waves you over to sit next to him on the
floor. He opens a window and starts typing, activating programs and codes and… stuff. You don’t
understand it enough to know what.

You swallow thickly and roll the matriorb around in your hands as Sollux connects the video
channel and slides the husktop over so that you’re directly in front of its camera. A moment or two
passes and then the screen comes alive with the image of the Empress, her huge hair filling the frame
in its thick tendrils. As she sees you her nostrils flare and her slick painted pink lips split in a
monstrous smile.

“Aren’t you a brave little guppy swimming up to my ship’s fishtems to call me?” She trills, resting
her chin in her palm. The chunky gold rings on her fingers glitter with the movement.

You hold up the matriorb and watch with some satisfaction at the way her eyes widen behind her
dramatic but stupid looking glasses.

“You want this, we want our families back, so let’s do this. I’m sending you the coordinates.” you say flatly. She glances to the side and narrows her eyes at something, probably a computer screen, and then looks back with a sharp smile.

“I’ll see you there, ASAP. And don’t you dream of pulling anything fishy.” She warns.

You end the call without answering and push the husktop back towards Sollux.

“Send them.” you tell him. Your brother raises his eyebrows at you but does what you say.

You get up and pace for a moment or two and finally turn to Vriska. You don’t like Vriska, you never have but you at least respect her. She’s good at being a conniving, sneaky, devious bitch and honestly that’s the kind of bitch you need on your side. She’s not intolerable either but neither of you would hang out with the other by choice and that’s okay. You don’t need to be everyone’s best friend.

“Vriska, can you arrange getting everyone else there?” you ask her.

“Of course I can. We’ll get the void players to hide people, the psionics will carry anyone who can’t fly to avoid being picked up by heat from jetpacks. We’ll jump in and end her on my word and you can do whatever you have to do.” Vriska says, standing up and dismissively waving her hand at the idea of you doing anything.

“I’m- I’m going with you.” Kankri declares, leaping to his feet.

“Kankri, no. I can’t just take everyone with me. If too many people show up she’ll suspect a trap, that’s why the void players are-” you begin to argue but Kankri shakes his head.

“Absolutely not. Karkat, he’s my father too. Signless is an ancestor to both of us. This whole thing only started because of him. He played the game, he made the team of our ancestors, when it started again he tried to fix things and nearly died for it. It’s all about him. Now he’s not here and this is our chance to see the woman who caused so much agony, to get our family back.” He insists.

“I know you’re the leader and not me,” He adds quietly as his gaze falls to the floor, “but I have things that I need to say to her. And I think that I have that right as much as you.”

You open your mouth, you should say no. That this is your problem but it’s not just you. You don’t always think about how he must feel, you’re the younger of the two of you and yet Signless pushed you onto the stage of his debates and not Kankri. You became the leader of your group and not him. People don’t always listen to you but they rarely listen to him.

“Oh.” you say instead and put the matriorb into your sylladex.

You can feel everybody watching you as you pull out your rocket pack and walk out of the door with Kankri. You feel weirdly at peace but it still startles you when the door bangs open behind you. You turn and see Kanaya just before she bundles you up in her arms and kisses the base of one of your horns. You trill in alarm but there’s not much you can do about the way her much stronger arms crush you to her.

“Don’t you dare die.” She hisses at you and pulls back.

“I swear I won’t let her near you, either of you.” Kanaya insists vehemently as she looks at the pair of you.
“Your soulmate insisted that it would be fine, Kanaya.” Kankri reasons and she pulls him into a hug as well that makes him squawk in surprise to receive.

“Rose isn’t… she’s not doing so great right now. I’m not sure how much I should rely on her judgement. So just… be careful, you hear me?” Kanaya asks.

“We will, Kan. See you soon.” you tell her and pap her cheek softly. Kankri coughs pointedly at you, making you roll your eyes but all the same you pull back from your moirail and take to the skies.

The journey there is silent.

You haven’t been to Mituna’s planet before but you’ve heard of it, the Land of Glitches and Terminals. The surface of the planet is covered in rigid railway tracks that steam trains hurtle along at high speed. They rush through stations, or rather terminals as the things are both terminals in a transport sense but also giant computerised things. Yeah, technology puns are mostly lost on you. Every so often you see a track glitch, switching from one path to another and a train is sent screeching off into a new direction.

Avoiding the trains you follow your map application to the place that Rose indicated. Once you’re there you can see exactly why she chose it. The place is a flat plateau of rock with train tracks spiralling up the slope to the level top, enough space for her to deploy her ship’s landing gear no doubt. From here you have clear view of all the surrounding area, both the two of you and her could see if anyone else was sneaking up on you. Unless of course those people were hidden within the void.

Your phone tells you that it’s almost go time and as if on cue the sky starts to darken as the Battleship Condescension lowers itself through the sky. It is unimaginably large and puts the shuttle that you were kidnapped on to shame. The light of Skaia is blotted out as the red ship sinks down and then hovers above the plateau. A door opens and she floats out, the curtain of her hair floating behind her. In one hand she twirls her giant golden double ended trident. Up close and not filtered through a hologram you can see how truly old she is. Her skin is onyx dark, darker than any of the ancestors that you know, it is slick and she positively drips with gold. Her sign is painted over her bodysuit and accentuates and highlights every curve in a way that is both too extreme for any music video you’ve ever seen but also too terrifying for porn. Every cell in your thinksponge is SCREAMING at you to run, to hide, that facing her will be your doom.

“Whale,” She says landing and walking towards you both with a swish of her hips, “two little bouys lost at sea.”

You steel yourself and force eye contact.

“I don’t care about your games, let your prisoners go.” you tell her with zero expectations of her meeting your demands.

“Hmm.” The Condesce says twirling her double ended trident a little more.

“Nah.” She says and stabs it into the ground.

“You agreed.” Kankri points out calmly, he sounds calmer than you feel that’s for sure. Especially as she smiles and her painted neon pink lips part to reveal deep sea needle nightmare teeth. It’s like if someone making metal grills for rappers had a fever dream about angler fish and forged that horrible dentition to purge themselves of the image.
“But sea, you might have that matriorb that I need but I can force your void gilly to make more. You’ve got a fin-ite number of people that you care about locked up in my ship and you can’t replace ‘em. I’m the one calling the shots here.” She says smoothly.

You look up at her, she’s so tall and so intimidating. Her hair ripples like she’s underwater or like it’s alive, either option is disquieting. How many trolls met their end on their knees before her? How many deaths has she ordered with a flick of a painted claw with diamonds glued to it? You want to hate her and you do on some level, you always have. Signless would try to talk her into change, to get her on a path that meant she could earn forgiveness but you look at her and just know it’s not going to happen. Or if it could then you’re not the troll who can make it so.

You pull the matriorb from your sylladex and watch as her eyes sharpen with interest.

“If I give you this let’s say that you stick to your agreement and release your prisoners because that’s the best option here. If I do that you’re just going to try to get us out of the game so that you can use this to start up our species again, to recreate Alternia in all of its terrible glory, aren’t you?” you ask quietly.

“There was nofin wrong with my planet and if you had an ounce of loyalty you wouldn’t think any different but given who you take after I can’t say that I’m surprised you’re crabby about it.” The Condesce sneers. Huh, a crab pun. Well, then.

“I’ve been thinking about that, about what he would do in my place.” you say, thinking aloud.

“I think he would offer you mercy and compassion.” Kankri suggests.

“Yeah, well he’s not here to do that.” you say.

“I guess me stealing the life from him reely worked then, huh?” The Condesce cackles, clearly pleased with herself.

“You’re the reason he’s different.” Kankri concludes. She must have done something to him, he wasn’t like that the moment you resurrected him. Sure he was a little strange but it took a while for him to have such a complete change. She did it. It’s almost a relief to hear.

“I have one last question,” Kankri says, “are you even sorry for all of the death you caused? The harm? The agony?”

“Not even a little.” The Condesce sneers.

You laugh. The stress must be getting to you. The tyrant queen squints suspiciously at you.

“What?” She snaps.

“It’s funny.” you giggle a little deliriously. “You tried to kill him and failed, you supposedly crushed his revolution and he dies but you’re still scared of him enough that you had to fuck with his ghost! He won, you lost.”

The Condesce yanks her trident out of the ground menacingly and you see a flicker of your team in the air behind her but you hold up a hand and they vanish again.

“I WON, not him! He was a stupid little shrimp who wouldn’t shut up! He’s dead and broken now and you’re not getting him back and when I get that matriorb from you I’ll send you down below too!” She snarls angrily.
Your eyes cross a little as you try to focus on the point of the culling fork. You are scared, any troll would be.

“I’m not the same as him, you know.” you say slowly, reaching up and gently nudging the point of her fork away from your face.

“I’m not as compassionate as him, I don’t have the same amount of mercy. I didn’t grow up on Alternia and though there were trolls on Earth who made me feel shit for being a mutant I was never going to be killed for it. I have a family, friends. And you know what? We’ve had people like you on Earth before. Tyrants who kill and keep people in line but I gotta say that sooner or later there’s always a revolution. Humans don’t take well to people hurting their families, killing them, locking them up. Me and the rest of the trolls alive are as human as we are trolls, so how about this?” you say and firmly shove her trident away.

“I keep the matriorb, you let everyone go, surrender and I try real hard to be as merciful as my father would be.” you snarl.

The Condesce stares at you for a stunned second and then barks out a laugh like a sealion.

“You’ve got guts and I’m gonna see ‘em!” She laughs and yanks her trident back, aiming right for you.

And she freezes. Around you everyone else pops into view suddenly. Dave, Aradia and Damara seem frozen. Dave has one hand out to her and the other presses against the record on one of his floating timetables.

“Long range!” Vriska shouts. As you stare at Dave you see that his cape is flapping ever so slowly behind him, as is Aradia’s hair and Damara’s clothes. Not frozen totally but slowed almost imperceptibly.

Vriska shouts a command and a cacophony of noise rises up around you. Anyone who can attack in any ranged fashion is doing so. Rose’s wands shoot lightning at the frozen figure of The Condesce, Jake and Jade are firing as fast as they can with Eridan and Cronus matching them for speed. The two Captors are almost totally blotted out by the beams from their eyes and it makes The Condesce almost impossible to see.

Those with guns seem to run out of ammo so Vriska throws her hand in the air and shouts, the attack stops.

“Close range!” She shouts, throwing her dice and snatching the sword it drops out of the air for her. The long range people reload or catch their breath as everyone else just starts going to town on the frozen woman.

“Karkat, Kankri, back up!” Rose shouts out to you. The Condesce’s trident isn’t too far from your body and if she is unfrozen you may still be skewered. Kankri pulls you backwards just as you watch Kanaya run her chainsaw through a shoulder joint at the same time as Dirk slices through The Condesce’s neck.

“More.” Rose orders you so you both do as she says until she nods.

Vriska orders the teams to switch over again but you can see that the grip that the time players have on her is faltering. Her trident jerks through the air about a foot, enough that you would have been hit if Rose hadn’t told you to move. Dave’s face is a slow motion grimace. Blood is pounding in your ears, hammering louder and louder.
“Karkat, Kankri, duck.” Rose shouts and uneventfully you both do.

Behind you comes the electrical sound of a glitch and you twist to see a raised section of train track appearing just above and behind you both.

Time snaps back into place and all three time players stumble. Blood fountains from the many wounds on The Condesce and several of her limbs start to detach. You realise with a start that it wasn’t blood pounding in your ears that you heard, but rather the engine of an oncoming train. You see, for a fraction of a second, The Condesce’s eyes widen in disbelief as above you a train launches into the air thanks to glitched tracks. It soars and collides head on with her.

Your perception of time seems to speed up and the train snakes above you and the final carriage of it lands a foot in front of you and careens off of the stone plateau taking, well, most of The Condesce with it. There are still… bits of her about along with an improbably large amount of blood.

“I am pretty sure that Dad wouldn’t have done that.” you say, your voice barely above a whisper.

“If we manage to heal him and bring him back I suggest we don’t go into detail about this.” Kankri says with some consideration.

“Deal.” you agree.

“Oh, God.” Dave groans, he’s leaning forward with his hands on his knees.

“I think I’m gonna barf.” Aradia whines, wrapping her arms around her middle.

“ Couldn’t have told us about the train, bitch light?” Damara grumbles, rubbing at her nose. She’s bleeding!

“Is everyone okay?” you ask as you walk over. Kankri can’t look at the mess that was the former ruler of your species and honestly you don’t blame him. You’re trying not to think about the fuschia pooling around your sneakers as you get close to the others.

“’Cept for her I think we’re all good.” Latula assures you.

“I still don’t really feel good about this but at least we can get our dad back.” Jane says, pulling John close and trying to stop him from looking at the bloodied remains that are smeared across the plateau.

“I’m not an expert on troll anatomy,” Dirk says slowly as he looks at the floor.

“I wouldn’t say that!” Cronus calls out with a laugh and Dirk winces.

“Why, I do believe I have a gun in my hands. I do apologise Cronus, I didn’t hear you over the sound of how I still have ammo left. What was it you said to my soulmate just then?” Jake says loudly.

“My point was that although I’m loathe to regard anyone as truly dead these days I don’t think anyone can walk away from this. But it might still be wise to get all of the…” Dirk trails off gesturing to what you think is part of an arm with chainsaw marks on it. Ick.

“That can wait, we have people to rescue.” Vriska declares and straps on her rocket pack. Most of the others take after her but Dave and the other time players are still on the ground. Sollux is holding Dave more or less upright with an arm under his shoulders.

“Are you okay?” you ask him worriedly.
“Yeah, man. Just took a lot outta me and I’m trying to stop it taking more outta me if you get my meaning.” Dave whines. Somewhere off to your side you hear Aradia groaning. Perhaps they’re too newly minted as god tiers to restrain someone that big and that powerful when that much was happening.

“I’m sorry.” you apologise and Dave looks up at you, from the angle his head is at you can see his red eyes.

“Nah, man. This was super not fun but we had people to rescue and I swear later when I feel less like I’m gonna barf or pass out I’ll pop the biggest boner over your big hero moment back there but for now imma just feel sorry for myself. Seriously, go on, you’ve got actual family to actually rescue.” Dave urges you.

“Sol, I’ll take the others, you unplug Dad, right?” Mituna shouts.

“Yeah, just a minute.” Sollux shouts back and Mituna flies up and away.

“I’ll stay with him Karkat, you go.” Dirk tells you, his hand landing on your shoulder and making you jump slightly.

Dave and the others have more than enough people here with them, they’re right, you have a rescue to start. Feferi is helping Aradia onto a higher up rock away from the blood and giving her a bottle of water, Damara is just sat down on the floor with her eyes shut and blood still smeared across her upper lip. You nod dumbly and turn your gaze to the floating ship, the vessel held aloft by the suffering of Psii. You need to get in there.

“Call me if you need me.” you insist and fly away towards the open doorway that The Condesce flew out of.

When you fly through the huge doorway you find yourself in the cavernous interior of the ship. Large adult sized seats litter the room before consoles that manage to be sleeker and even more high tech than the ones you saw on the only other spaceship you’ve been on. Huge screens dominate the wall, showing the ground below and the pink smear of blood and parts on the floor. From the room several hallways branch off and it’s here that everyone else is gathered, looking down the corridors.

“Goddamnit Gamzee!” Aranea curses as you rush over.

“What happened?” you ask.

“We have no idea where we’re going here and the idiot clown just ran off saying that he had a, and I quote, ‘good feeling’ about that hallway.” Aranea says, throwing her hands in the air.

You open your mouth to tell her not to worry about Gamzee, that he can probably handle anything he runs into. At least that’s what you were going to say before you’re all plunged into darkness. You have a fleeting moment of terror and the sense that this is how you die, then the lights come back on. Or at least red alert lighting floods the room, it is periodically interrupted by a flash of a blue alarm light.

The corridors remain in darkness, all but one. One that branches off to the left is red with flashing blue.

“It’s Psii, he must have got enough control to screw with the lights.” Mituna breathes in awe. Psii never talked much about his time as a helmsman but your understanding was that his control over anything was heavily restrained. At least he never talked much to you about it, you suspect that he told Sollux and Mituna significantly more.
“This way, come on!” Nepeta shouts and charges off down the hallway.

With nothing better to do you all rush after her. Room after room of unknown purpose flits by you as you dash down hallways and descend staircases following the guiding red and blue light. Finally you come to a locked door.

“Prisoner containment and interrogation A.” Porrim reads from the Alternian sign above the door.

“Oh shit this must be it, move up I can probably hack this.” Roxy declares.

Jane whips out her alchemised weapon, a giant red Betty Crocker brand fork with a globe on the end. It bears a distressing similarity to the golden trident that was pointed in your face mere minutes ago. You don’t want to point that out because Jane twirls it around her wrist and with a yell jams in it in the seam of the door.

“We’re coming to get you out Dad, hold on!” She shouts and heaves on the fork. John cheers and starts to pull on the end of it too. Jake and Jade throw their weight behind it and then Rose and Roxy. You stare as the fork bends, the door groans and all you can think is that humans continue to be fucking baffling to you.

“I could just…” Mituna says quietly but Latula puts her hand on his arm and shakes her head. Best to let the humans just do their thing.

It turns out that their thing pops the door open with a bang and the humans beat all of you into the room.

“DAD!” Jane and John cry out as one and they throw themselves against the bars and a tearful man hugs them as much as he can with the cell door through the way.

You jog past them until you see your mom leaning against the bars of her cell, her hands are cuffed behind her but she shoves her face up against the bars as much as she can.

“Oh, oh boys are you okay? Where are the others?” Disciple asks desperately.

“Sollux is outside, the girls are-” you’re cut off by Nepeta elbowing you in the ear as she throws herself at both you and your mom.

“Alright motherfuckers, back up from those doors imma blast this shit so open it’ll look like fish bitch’s face!” Mituna shouts.

“What?” Mindfang says, clearly baffled.

Mituna starts to melt the cell doors one by one and Rose quickly picks the locks on the handcuffs. Perplexingly Mr Egbert seems to have got out of his own somehow.

Those of you who have parents/ancestors in the room waste no time in greeting them again. Even Vriska and Aranea who have always seemed pretty distant with their mom have their arms around her. Your mom is kissing each of you on the top of the head and checking you for obvious injuries.

“Where are Aradia, Damara and Sollux?” She asks, looking over everyone in the room to see if she missed any of you.

“They’re all outside with Dave and Dirk, they had to use time powers and they don’t feel so great now. They wanted to wait until they felt better before coming up here, I think.” Kankri explains.
“Oh, wow! I thought they were just friends and- no, no, we can do this later. I just- oh I thought I’d never see any of you again. Come here.” your mom says and crushes all of you against her again.

It’s not comfortable exactly, your mom has you squished in her arms against Mituna who gives Terezi a run for her money in the ‘secretly made of coat hangers’ competition, then it’s a face of Kankri’s fluffy red sweater on the other side. But for all its lack of comfort you have your ear pressed to your mom’s chest and you can hear the fierce protective rumbling purr from her. Your siblings are all clustered together and against her. It’s not your whole family but you really had started to fear that you would never have this again.

You had started to have nightmares where the adults were executed one by one as punishment for your lack of haste, of floors on alien ships running almost the full rainbow of blood. But here you are, warm against her cooler body with your family around you.

Finally she lets you all go again and Dolorosa finally gets her turn to squeeze all of you one by one.

“Where are your parents?” Mr Egbert asks and it’s like ice water has been thrown over the kindling fire of your happiness. You turn to see him looking at Jade, Jake, Roxy and Rose. They’re orphans now and they’re far from the only ones in the room. On the outskirts of this celebration multiple trolls also stand around uncertain of what to do.

“Oh, we don’t- no I understand your thinking but mine and Jade’s grandparents passed away a long time ago. It’s just been me and Jade for a long time, right Jade?” Jake says cheerfully and Jade nods.

“But- well what about you two? You lived with your mother, didn’t you? Where is she? Or your father?” Mr Egbert asks as he looks at Rose and Roxy with dismay.

“She deliberately blew herself up rather than be with us and our father is very, very dead.” Rose says flatly.

“I’m so sorry, you shouldn’t have to go through that. I promise I will look out for all of you from now on, you children shouldn’t have to survive on your own.” Mr Egbert assures them.

“I’m fine, really.” Jake insists.

“Yeah, we’re like, nineteen. And also I’m dating your daughter so you adopting me would be, uh, mad inappropes I think.” Roxy says uncertainly.

“It’s nothing legal of course but you really shouldn’t have to shoulder the weight of looking after children by yourselves.” He tells them.

“Dad, I’m thirteen.” John protests in the way a kid insists that they aren’t four, they’re four and a half. His father takes him just as seriously for it too.

“Where’s Signless?” your mom asks, looking at all of you. Suddenly none of you can meet her eyes.

[He died, remember?] Meulin signs slowly.

“I know, he was a sprite but where is he? Why isn’t he here with you?” your mom asks, again you don’t know what to say.

“The Condesce said that she did something to him, stole his life. He’s been strange for a long time, we haven’t seen him in weeks. It seemed like he had abandoned us but if what she says is true then it
seems like she damaged him in some way.” Kankri finally explains.

“Oh, God. I’m- we’ll find some way to fix this. There’s got to be a way.” your mom insists.

In your pocket your phone pings, you check it. Unsurprisingly it’s Dave.

[tumtechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]

TG: hey man sol asked me to tell you that we are busting psii outta the freaky tentacle set up that hes in now

TG: dirk is helping him so you don’t need to rush to us or nothing

TG: uh and sollux says that there should be enough power in the batteries that we shouldn’t get any power problems but if shit gets electrically weird up in here its us

CG: OH THANK FUCK. HOW IS HE?

TG: he looks like hes in a coma but honestly this wire removal looks painful as all hell so thats probably a good thing right now

CG: THAT’S… WELL, THAT’S TERRIBLE BUT GOOD AS WELL I GUESS? WE’VE FREED THE OTHERS, I’LL TELL MY MOM THAT YOU’RE WITH DAD NOW.

TG: no prob if you need sollux message me hes elbow deep in grossness so you know

CG: RIGHT, WILL DO. GOD I’M GLAD THAT BITCH IS DEAD, EVEN JUST HEARING ABOUT WHAT SHE’S DONE TO HIM MAKES ME WANT TO KILL HER ALL OVER AGAIN.

TG: she got hit by a train dude i dont think we need more overkill there

CG: DON’T YOU BRING REASON INTO THIS STRIDER. I’M ANGRY ENOUGH THAT THE CONCENTRATED BEAM OF MY RAGE COULD SPLIT ATOMS.

TG: and then we would be radioactive and or dead so probably a bad idea

CG: UGH FINE I NEED TO TALK TO MY MOM NOW BUT KEEP ME UPDATED.

TG: yessir

CG: WAIT BEFORE I GO, YOU JUST SAW A WOMAN GET MURDERED ARE YOU OKAY?

TG: sorry kar i have delegated freaking out about that to future dave take it up with him

CG: FINE, FINE. LATER. BUT I’M NOT GOING TO FORGET, YOU KNOW.

[carcinoGeneticist ceased pestering tumtechGodhead]

You shove your phone away and you’re just about to suggest that everyone move out of the prison and find a better place to stand around and regroup when your phone pings again. At first you think it’s Dave again but you hear the echoed tones of several people’s devices. It’s the group chat.

Gamzee: HeY YaLl sO I FoUnD ThIs oNe eYeD MoThErFuCkEr sKuLkInG AbOuT AnD He aLl uP AnD StAbBeD Me.
Karkat: OH MY GOD, ARE YOU OKAY? WHERE ARE YOU?

Gamzee: NaW, bRo. I'M FiNe, ThInK It wAs aS GoOd aS HeLlO To hIm. BuT He sEeMeD KiNdA KeEn oN DoInG It aGaIn sO I PoPpEd hIm oNe.

You shoot Mituna a cautious look.

“I didn’t hear anyone bite it.” He offers in answer to your silent question.

“Terezi, if we go back to the hallway that we saw Gamzee leave down do you think you could track him down?” you ask her.

“Pretty sure, especially if one or both of them are bleeding.” She nods as she pulls away from Redglare.

“What are you all talking a- oh thank you Jane.” Mr Egbert says and reads over the conversation.

“Oh, I know who that is. Could you ask your friend not to harm him? We had an agreement.” He says.

“One eyed, yeah that does sound like Jack.” Mindfang nods, also reading over her daughter’s screen.

“Who?” you ask.

“Jack Noir, he is a Dersite that The Condesce brought on board when she captured the royalty of Derse and Prospit. There are some other carapacians working with him and she was forcing them to work for her to run the ship. Jean here was able to prove his strength by-” Dolorosa explains.

“I don’t think the children should have to hear about that, Rosa. Young, impressionable ears and all that.” Mr Egbert says. Or apparently Jean as his name is, was the man just so into the letter J that when he had kids he thought he’d just continue that on? If you didn’t know better you’d almost think that by that stupid ass logic Jake and Jade would be related to them too!

“Hear what?” you ask curiously as Mituna stifles a snort and incredulously repeats Mr Egberts apparent first name of ‘Jean’. You sense denim jokes the the future.

“Okay, whatever, he’s an ally then?” you ask.

“Yes, unreliable but mostly harmless. Except he can get a little aggressive if startled, I do hope this Gamzee is alright.” Mr Egbert says with worry. You’re not that worried about Gamzee, given his blood colour you think it’d take a hell of a lot to kill him. Honestly you are still baffled that Bro managed to do so but you’re crediting that with him being Bro and having sprite powers at the time.

Karkat: GAMZEE, STAY WHERE YOU ARE WE’RE COMING TO FIND YOU. DON’T HURT THE GUY ANY MORE THAN YOU ALREADY HAVE, OKAY?

Gamzee: SuRe tHiNg.

Kanaya: Can You Describe His Current State Please

Gamzee: He's iN OnE UnRiGhTeOuS PiEcE, i dIdN'T RiP No lImBs oFf oR NoThInG.

“Are we… are we proud of him for that?” John asks, looking down at his phone.

“The bar is so low you need to lay on the ground to get a chance to see it.” you snort. If Gamzee hasn’t chucklevoodoo’d the guy out of his brain it’s likely because he’s a carapacian and that maybe
doesn’t work on them. Or maybe he had restraint, who knows?

Meenah: Is he still breathing?

Karkat: I ALSO WANT TO KNOW THAT.

Gamzee: Of course my invertibrator :o)

You feel suddenly compelled to get to the entrance of the ship and find Gamzee right the fuck now. You rush off without a backwards glance and find that you are trailed by Kanaya, Terezi and Vriska and you assure yourself that if Gamzee is wandering into murderhappy territory again that those three ladies will be far more competent than you at subduing that.

The hallways of the battleship are plainly coloured in this part, a clear military vehicle with each room neatly labelled and everything laid out just so. That’s probably nice and all but it makes you a little paranoid that you’re getting lost so you’re pleasantly surprised to find yourself exactly where you wanted to be. The doorway that you all came in through is open and through it you can see the smear of pink blood on the ground below, if you’re not much mistaken there seem to be larger parts of the former tyrant kicked together into a rough pile. Hal flits back and drops another on the pile and then pulls the sword out of his chest and starts the process of rendering the bigger parts into smaller parts. You don’t particularly want to know why he’s doing that or to watch it, you have bigger fish to fry right now.

...You did not just make a fish joke.

Terezi sniffs at the air and then hares off down one corridor leaving the rest of you to rush after her. As she runs she grabs her cane and pulls the sword from within it, the three of you following her similarly arm yourselves.

As you run the lights suddenly shut off and the ship jerks, it lasts half a second, if that and then everything is stable and bright again but it leaves you all staring up at the ceiling fearfully.

“They must have unplugged Dad.” you say warily, in case saying it would jinx it and plunge the ship down to the ground.

“Come on,” Terezi urges, “I smell red.”

File that under ‘unsettling things to hear’.

The four of you continue running and as you turn the last corner you see Gamzee leant against a wall with a carapacian man slumped mostly on the floor and partly on the other wall. He’s breathing for sure, he’s snarling and quietly cursing at Gamzee in fact. An eyepatch covers one of his eyes and what you can make out of his indistinct smooth face is that it’s damaged and leaking blood as red as yours and Dave’s.

Gamzee is leant against the wall, loose limbed and relaxed in his posture. In a gesture that almost seems bored he throws one juggling club up and down in the air, catching it in one hand as it spins with each throw. He looks almost like he could be idly waiting for a bus. His expression reads relaxed and close to sleepy even. But you can see it’s not. Though the humans would miss it all four of you can no doubt hear the quiet shuddering, shaking warning rattle from within Gamzee’s chest.

You can see the threatening way that his long horns are tilted.

His posture doesn’t scream ‘I’M GONNA BREAK YOUR LEGS’. No, this is more subtle. This posture suggests that Gamzee would quite like to do nothing and wouldn’t it be nice if we could all chill? It doesn’t even suggest, for that would be far too direct, it perhaps theorizes that just maybe it
would be best for everyone concerned if the carapacial just STAYED DOWN. The rumble from his chest innocently notes that the man seems to have nice teeth and it’d be a real shame if they were suddenly relocated, wouldn’t it?

Vriska draws a sharp breath and you see her hands go up to her temples. Gamzee snatches his club from the air and points it at her.

“I know you ain’t be doing what it looks like you’re doing, mind sister.” Gamzee says placidly.

You step forward and press your hand into Vriska’s sternum, steering her backwards.

“Negotiating, my job. Don’t jump the gun.” you say under your breath to her.

With that done you step ahead of her, towards Gamzee and his prisoner. You gently nudge the club aside as you get close and can’t help but note the smear of red on the end.

“Hey Gamzee, is this him then?” you ask pleasantly and the highblood turns his eyes on you.

“Found him skulking.” Gamzee comments.

“Mr. Egbert told us you were on our side, is that right, Jack?” you question as you look at the angry, bleeding man.

“Ain’t on no one’s side but mine.” Jack hisses angrily.

“Shame.” Gamzee says in a tone that is more befitting of a phrase like ‘in that case I will remove your kneecaps and turn them into festive cymbals’.

Jack Noir shoves himself upright and draws a knife. Gamzee goes from being behind you to not being behind you, there’s a blur of juggling club and suddenly there’s a knife embedded in the wall behind Kanaya, Terezi and Vriska. The reverberation sound it makes is almost comical.

“Okay.” you say, tugging Gamzee back behind you by the horn. You crouch down before him and put on your best winning smile.

“So what now? Good cop, bad cop?” the man snorts.

“More like: good cop, bad cop, angry moirail, murder clown and questionably immortal stab enthusiast. Trust me, you want to be talking to me. Let’s try this again, Mr. Egbert says that you’re on his side. Or at the very least you’re not on Fish Bitch’s side.” you say smoothly as you try to channel every noir themed movie you’ve ever seen.

“I hate her and I don’t care a shit about them. That human fucker cost me an eye, I’ll give you that guy has stones and I don’t got nothing against him but I don’t work for him.” Jack says, as he eyes Gamzee.

“That’s good because we just killed her and we’re taking this ship over.” you say coolly. You can do this, be the cool noir detective. This case is dirty, but not as dirty as… uh, the huge mess outside where you murdered a woman with a train? Damnit, that didn’t work.

“Really?” Jack says in clear surprise.

“How’d you do it?” He asks, suspiciously.

“We froze her in time and our entire team threw everything at her and then she got hit by a train.” Vriska brags.
“Oh, oh that is good. I bet she’s just a stain on the ground now! If I could recreate that for my wise and just queen I would.” Jack snorts.

“So, can we trust you? Are you going to help us or are you going to be a problem?” Terezi demands, sniffing in his direction fervently.

“I said I don’t work for-” Jack pauses and seems to think for a second.

“I don’t work for free,” He continues ever so slowly, “I want paying. I know everything about this game, all sorts of back ways in and out of things. I could give you help the sprites never could.”

“And you want…?” you ask expectantly.

“Just a ring. My queen’s ring, the black queen. That’s all, just that. She don’t have it but I bet that wet, dead, broad down there does. Give it to me and I’ll help you all.” Jack offers.

“What does the ring do?” Kanaya asks. She’s probably thinking the same kind of thing that you are, you already know there’s a ring of life and a ring of void in existance, what other kind of rings might there be and what might they do?

“Nothing.” Jack says quickly.

“I smell a liar.” Terezi cackles. You can’t help but agree.

“Gamzee,” you say slowly as you stand up, “you are not to kill him.”

You pull your phone out and take a few steps away, opening a chat to Hal.

“So you really just do everything the little guy says, huh?” Jack sneers and you hear him spit.

“He’s our leader.” Gamzee drawls.

“One of them.” Vriska interjects.

“Besides, he said don’t kill you, didn’t say nothing ‘bout not breaking your bones.” Gamzee snarls.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling HalBirdSprite]

CG: HAL I NEED TO ASK YOU A QUESTION.

HBS: Go for it, what can I do for you Karkat?

CG: THERE’S A GUY HERE ON THE SHIP, HE SAYS HE HAS NO ALLEGIANCE TO CONDY BUT HE DOESN’T SEEM SUPER KEEN ON US EITHER EVEN THOUGH JOHN’S DAD SAID HE WAS AN ALLY.

HBS: Between the two of us I can tell you that I might have tapped the man’s computer and phone a good while ago and I have to say that he shares John’s optimistic view of people for the most part. With the exception of where the safety of his kids are concerned. The man thinking that this guy isn’t harmful is not exactly a sterling endorsement.

CG: WELL I THINK WE’LL BE FINE, I HAVE GAMZEE, VRISKA, TEREZI AND KANAYA WITH ME. GAMZEE’S ALREADY HIT HIM ONCE.

Behind you there is a loud meaty thump and a good deal of swearing and threats.
CG: MAKE THAT TWICE.
HBS: Well now I almost feel sorry for him.

CG: THE REASON I WANTED TO ASK YOU A QUESTION IS THIS GUY IS A PART OF THE GAME, OBVIOUSLY, SO I FIGURED YOU MIGHT KNOW HIM. PLUS HE WANTS AN ITEM IN EXCHANGE FOR HELPING US AND I WANT TO TRUST HIM BUT HE’S PRETTY DAMN SUSPICIOUS.

HBS: And you just wanted to background check him with me? I’ll try to help but I don’t know every person made by the game. A lot of them are just filler, as callous as that sounds. I know the major players and pretty much all of the artifacts, I think.

HBS: Who is he and what does he want?

CG: HIS NAME IS JACK NOIR AND HE SAYS HE WANTS THE QUEEN’S RING IN EXCHANGE FOR HELPING US.

HBS: DO NOT GIVE THAT TO HIM!

CG: UH.

HBS: Sorry, shit, I’m on my way. Do not give him that ring, do not promise it to him and honestly stay away.

CG: IS HE DANGEROUS?

There’s a flap of wings and Hal appears in the hallway, red wings filling the space entirely.

“His job is to usurp his queen by stealing her ring and it fucks the game up when that happens. You’re meant to kill or usurp him yourselves as part of your quest. It’s advanced shit though so I didn’t expect you to meet him yet.” Hal explains, breathing a little heavily from his rush up to you.

“Shut up, cheating sprite.” Jack sneers, pulling himself into a crouch.

“The ring that he wants will grant him the powers of everything we prototyped.” Hal adds sourly.

You run your mind through what that would be like. Venomous, tentacled, sadistic, sociopathic, dog/spider/jellyfish/cat monster that can heal itself, burst other monsters from its chest and, if Jade and Jake are to be believed, can also teleport. You turn and look at Jack.

“Over my dead body.” you say flatly.

“That can be arranged.” Jack snarls at you.

A chainsaw revs and multiple threatening growls fire up around you.

“There are other prison cells in here, right? We don’t have to kill him, just lock him up where he can’t get out.” you order.

Gamzee grins, showing off far too many teeth. Jack Noir produces another knife from who knows where and leaps for him. You cringe as Gamzee smacks him down with his club and drops the man to the floor, at least he’s still breathing. Gamzee reaches down and picks him up one handed and slings him over one shoulder like a jacket and walks off with Terezi and Vriska following him. Kanaya and Hal stay with you.
“I still haven’t found that ring yet, keeping him confined or dead is the best solution until we do.” Hal says.

“I would rather not kill anyone else today, not that I did much.” you mutter.

“Karkat, you faced her down. That was brave.” Kanaya insists. She’s too kind to you sometimes.

“That said… the thing she mentioned about Signless. About how she stole the life from him…” Hal says slowly.

“It’s terrible, but in a way I’m relieved that he didn’t just stop caring about us or something.” you admit guiltily. It had started feeling that way in all honesty.

“True but I had an idea.” Hal says brightly.

“What?” Kanaya asks.

“Dirk is getting his Prince of Heart powers now, he could separate Signless’ body from the sprite he’s in at the moment.” Hal explains.

“That wouldn’t really make anyone feel better, Hal. Having part of him around is better than none of him.” you say.

“Right, but we just had to fight Bro because his body was removed from his sprite, or part of him at least. The bad parts, which was most of him but still. He then got up and walked around fully human, alive and well after that.” the sprite explains.

“We recall.” Kanaya says dryly.

“Because he had the ring of life on. The one which, last I checked, Sollux was in possession of. We can separate him out and bring him back to life and then when Jane or Feferi are able to bring people back for good we can do that. You can get him back and the ring of life restores life, it should fix any damage that was done to him.” Hal explains.

You could get your father back again. You could really do it.

“Hal,” you say slowly, “I need you to find Signless for me and bring him here.”

Hal grins and launches himself back down the corridor. The Condesce is dead, killed by every rung of the hemospectrum and humans allied together, defeated by a group led by mutants and now your father will be alive again.

Long live the revolution.
Hey so I did another sidefic which is over HERE: https://archiveofourown.org/works/13269168 but I really do recommend subscribing to the whole series of sidefics because I don't always mention them here and I'd hate for you to miss out. There will be another sidefic after this so keep yer eyes open!

Also also I now get to work with my hella rad beta catchingtheblues who is super cool, so thank you very much my dude! <3

You crouch on the ground, sipping the ginger beer that Dirk handed you to make you feel less like barfing. He’s checking on the girls now, Dirk’s always prepared for everything.

“I can’t believe she’s dead.” Sollux says in quiet awe as he rubs your back. You groan and press the cold can to your temple. You could deal with there just being pink blood everywhere, it doesn’t even really look like blood. You also didn’t really have to see her get killed either because you were as frozen in time as she was, you just about caught the part at the end when a train hit her. But how Hal is gathering her parts up so he can be sure no one will try to resurrect her and you could do without the wet squishing sound of chunks of her landing in a heap.

“Can we-” you pause as nausea roils inside your stomach. You suck a sharp breath in between your teeth and try again.

“Can we go in? I don’t wanna be out here an… we gotta help your dad.” you say, waving your hand in the direction of all of the… viscera.

“Yeah, yeah ok.” Sollux agrees with a sharp nod, you feel it instead of seeing it as your eyes are still shut. You finally open them again and chug down another mouthful of fizzing ginger. Dirk is talking to Hal who has… ugh, you’re not even going to look at what he’s holding.

“Guys, we’re goin’ up.” you call out. Hal and Dirk talk quickly and Dirk rushes back over to you.

“Hal is staying down here, I’ll come up with you. Sollux, you said you were going to get Psii free, I can help.” Dirk offers.

“You don’t know anything about this tech.” Sollux says flatly.

“I know a little about biotech but you’re right, not much. But I’m offering you another pair of hands if you need it, I’ll follow your instructions to help free him. He helped my family before, I like Psii,
anything I can do to return the favour.” Dirk says earnestly. You know he means it too, you told him all about how Psii hauled ass in that people carrier through the middle of nowhere when you were all abducted, of the fight he put up to protect you all. Dirk likes to pay his debts.

“‘Kay.” Sollux says quietly. Aradia is already getting to her feet again and Damara is struggling up as well. Stopping time in just one place is really draining, you hope you’ll get better at it but the universe doesn’t like to be out of sync if it doesn’t have to. It punishes you for your gall to challenge it.

That strange static feeling spreads over every inch of your skin and the world tints in a haze of red and blue and you’re lifted up into the air. You squeeze your eyes shut as your body wildly insists that you’re not moving, yours inner ears declare that you are and your stomach threatens to pull this party over unless everyone gets along. You only open your eyes again when your feet touch solid ground.

“Can you walk?” Sollux asks.

“Yeah, I’m good.” you say. You’re probably not but rather that than flying right now.

Dirk lands behind you and pats your back gently. Aradia, Damara and Sollux lapse into discussion about where the helmscolumn must be and what way to go.

“Hey, that was really something.” Dirk says softly, his hand on your shoulder.

“What was?” you ask, looking up at him.

“That whole freezing time just for her thing. You did great, and I know seeing the aftermath can’t have been… great. But you did it and we’re gonna rescue people now, I’m proud of you.” He tells you quietly and carefully.

You stare up at him in surprise. It’s not that Dirk doesn’t compliment you, he does. But usually it’s simple, a thumbs up and a ‘nice’ does it for the most part. When you play music for him to get his input you get most of your positive feedback from the way he bobs his head to it and smiles as much as what he actually says about it. But that was a hugely effusive burst of praise.

It makes you suspicious. And of course you’re immediately guilty for being suspicious about it but you can’t help it. Is he proud that you were able to do it despite not being on your game lately? Or did he think that you’d bail and is pleased that you didn’t?

“Those time powers,” Dirk continues oblivious to your inner turmoil, “they’re something else. I thought heart powers were confusing but whenever I see you use them… I don’t think I could wrap my head around it if I had them.”
Oh, so it’s just about the time thing? Yeah, that’s a fair point.

“Time powers blow, I’m lucky I’ve got the instinct for doing it because trying to explain how I do any of it is just impossible.” you agree.

“No shit.” Dirk nods.

“Still, my planet is awful on the ears and pretty much everything else but I’d still choose it over your psychoanalytical nightmare world.” you point out and Dirk grimaces.

“It’s horrible but I think it might be helping.” He says with a shrug.

“Sounds just like therapy with slightly more dinosaurs.” you snort in amusement.

“I like the subtle implication that regular therapy has a non-zero number of dinosaurs.” Dirk chuckles.

“Hey, prove it doesn’t.” you challenge him.

“Oi, this way.” Damara calls out, apparently they’ve decided on a direction. The three trolls set off down one hallway that quickly leads to a staircase, the five of you quickly descend that. As you go you can’t help but notice that the strangeness of troll tech is even more exaggerated here than it was on the small ship that you were on before. The doorways and ceilings are higher, panels to control things are situated higher up for the most part. Given how tall fish bitch was though you’re not surprised. Maybe the older trolls are naturally taller or maybe height trends up the higher up the hemospectrum you go. You’re not sure how true that is. The Marara’s and the Zahhak’s lend credence to that but then all of the Maryams are taller than all of the Pyropes. Plus the seadwellers that you know are all pretty short. If you discount the horns Feferi is Karkat’s height.

You don’t really have any concrete way of telling how deep in the ship you are but with each staircase you descend and hallway you walk do you get the feeling you’re more and more central. Right in the belly of this monstrous ship.

“At the risk of jinxing us, shouldn’t there be other trolls on this ship? It seems too big and has too many rooms to be designed for remote use in all its systems.” Dirk says warily.

“That’s… a good point. Psii told me once that there were fifty thousand trolls on this ship that he had to deal with but there’s no one here.” Sollux agrees from the front.

“All trolls dead.” Damara says from her position in the middle of your group.
“The meteors that took out Earth took out every other inhabited planet when we joined the game, everyone on Alternia is dead too.” Aradia explains with a nod.

“Okay, but this isn’t a planet.” you point out.

“Yes, but this ship presumably came through one of our portals into the game, most likely Mituna’s as no one remembers seeing this thing. That means that it was likely around when Feferi, Meenah and the Condesce’s lusus Gl’bgolyb died, and her final death shriek kills all trolls. Honestly Mituna was doomed either way, as were the rest of us if we hadn’t been as speedy as we were.” Aradia explains.

“Their lusus what? What sound was that you just made with your mouth?” you laugh, nearly spilling your ginger soda in your startled hillarity.

“Gl’bgolyb!” Aradia repeats.

“That sounded like throwing water bombs and marbles down a garbage disposal.” Dirk snorts. He would know, he used to throw all sorts of shit down Bro’s garbage disposal because Bro always secretly fixed it and it was one way Dirk could be passive aggressive against him without punishment. Which is… really odd in hindsight.

“Okay, but run me through how a lusus dying killed people?” Sollux asks.

“No idea how, all I know is its death screams are fatal to all trolls but the heiresses and the empress herself. It’s called the Vast Glub.” Aradia explains.

“Why is everything about Alternia like a batshit death metal fever dream?” you complain. Damara mutters something back in her own language but you don’t care enough to search for a translation.

“So I’m not going to bother asking how that works but your point is that the crew of this ship may still be around somewhere and maybe don’t start opening doors to other rooms in case we find hella rotted corpses.” Dirk says.

You do your best to ignore how gleeful Aradia suddenly sounds at the prospect of corpses and instead focus on you’re starting to feel better now. Your can of gingery goodness is empty and between that and the sugar in it you’re much more lively. Enough to allow you to look around as you walk.

There are the occasional signs on the walls and you focus on reading them. You did your best after your first sort of date with Karkat to actually learn the Alternian alphabet and, though the inflections are completely lost on you, you have a vague grasp of the words. Most of the signs aren’t too helpful, indicating stairways, various labs, and a few other things that you can’t decode by the time you walk past them. What is notable is how every twenty feet or so there is a portrait of the
Condescend. They’re not even all the same picture, they’re a whole bunch of totally different painstakingly painted portraits. You pass one of her sprawled on a golden throne, another of her naked but literally dripping in something that looks like liquid gold but couldn’t because that’d be surely far too hot. With each propaganda painting you pass you get a disquieting sense of familiarity that only clicks when you realise that a couple of them are almost shot for shot remakes of Nicki Minaj photos and album covers. Which is weirder? That an alien queen liked Earth music or that the same thing popped up independently?

“You’re right, it is like one of her posters.” Dirk says out of nowhere as he stares at one of the paintings.

“Huh?” you ask.

“Nicki Minaj. You were muttering her lyrics under your breath.” Dirk explains. Damnit, now it’s really stuck in your head.

“Eugh.” Sollux suddenly says, coming to a halt and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“What? Are you- augh.” Aradia suddenly recoils away from him and rubs at her head.

“What is it?” Dirk asks, his sword suddenly out.

“Psionic dampeners.” Damara says, pointing up at the ceiling which is now covered in a lattice of glowing cables that start right above where Sollux has stopped.

“Ugh, we gotta be close, come on.” Sollux says and forges on.

“You mean you three don’t have your psionics right now?” you ask, rushing to catch up.

“I could try to push through it but it’s possible that it’d either attack me for it or other self defense systems would come on. I know that within the actual helmsblock as a whole it just siphons it away.” Sollux explains.

“Like a lightning rod.” Dirk concludes and Sollux nods.

He breaks into a sudden run and stops a little way down the hall outside a huge set of double metal doors. The doors are surrounded by signs in large print. You focus on them and try to translate them, it takes a while but you get there.

HELMSBLOCK - RESTRICTED ACCESS
Sollux is frantically trying to break into the room through the security system but it just keeps buzzing ‘access denied’ at him. Dirk for his part has his ear pressed to the door and carefully raps his knuckles on it.

“This metal isn’t very thick, I can probably get through it.” Dirk declares.

The three trolls don’t look very convinced and continue trying to hack the console, or rather Sollux keeps trying to hack it and Aradia and Damara are making suggestions. Still, you know that Dirk cut a goddamn METEOR in half to save you once, he can do this.

Dirk rolls his shoulders a little and squares up to the door. You back up a little to give him room and watch in admiration as he draws in a breath and centres himself. Ever since you were able to hold a sword you’ve wished you were as good as Dirk, that still hasn’t changed. You watch the tension build in his form and then he explodes forward in a flashstep, the door splitting into four equal chunks from a cross cut in the middle and he lands gracefully inside the room.

“Holy shit.” Aradia exclaims.

“Told ya.” you laugh and leap the bottom section of door and land in the room.

The room is… wet. There’s a good inch of what you hope is water on the floor and it’s warm like bathwater. The lighting in the room is dim, most of it provided by humming alternations of red and blue glow from clear and pulsating tendrils on the roof that funnel out through the walls. The spread and shape of them is organic, like tree roots. The floor is also covered in similar tendrils but these ones are pink, the same kind displayed on Meenah and Feferi’s signs. All of them reach to a central column in the room, your mind flicks to Alien right away because plastered to the central column is Psii.

His body is restrained around his torso with pink tendrils that vary in width from your forearm to almost the width of a human hair, they cover his black and yellow suit. His arms are held above him,
wrenched painful at his shoulders and they disappear into a body of red and blue glowing vines that totally absorb his arms from his elbows onwards to his hands. Similarly his legs from the thigh downwards have been subsumed by a formless nightmare mass of pink grossness.

Psii’s face is blank and expressionless and his eyes covered with pink goggles that are almost identical to the ones that Feferi wears. You’re not sure if his lack of presence here is a good thing or not.

“Dad!” Sollux cries out and rushes to him. You follow behind him, shaken from your stunned staring. Up close you can see that Psii’s uniform parts in places in seams that you hadn’t seen and many of those tendrils are actually plugged into his body. His usually somewhat wild hair is slicked back with some sort of wet goo and you can see thin tendrils snaking into ports that have a slight metallic edge to them and you wonder if they had always been there and you’d just never seen them.

Sollux’s hands hover before his father’s face, not sure what to do first.

“Do you have a knife?” Sollux asks Dirk who nods and produces his medical kit. He fans out a number of small blades and scalpels for your moirail. Sollux grabs a scalpel and turns back to his father, he saws through the rubber of the goggles strap and pulls them away from him, throwing them carelessly into the water.

“Dad?” He asks, waving his hand in front of his face. Psii doesn’t respond at all and so Sollux staggers backwards, looking desperately around the room.

“What’re you looking for?” Aradia asks him.

“I don’t know, a console, anything. Other people must have to maintain the helmsman so there’s got to be built in tech to release him in an emergency.” Sollux insists.

“Is- oh! Oh this looks like it!” Aradia gasps, picking up a buggy looking tablet from a dock in the wall. The smile falls from her face as she holds it.

“I’m not a registered user, I can’t get in.” She says dispondantly.

“Fuck, of course you’re not. We’re just going to have to do this manually.” Sollux snarls and starts to run his hands over the biowires that cover Psii’s body.

“But you could paralyse him, kill him!” Aradia says as Sollux is already wrist deep in the wires around Psii’s legs.

“Well why don’t you come back from the future with a cheat sheet for me, huh?” Sollux snaps at her. It doesn’t work that way, you know it doesn’t and Sollux does too.
You chew your lip nervously and open up a chat to Karkat, you ought to keep him updated on how one of his other parents is doing. You also decide to tell him not to message Sollux because the last thing he needs to be up to his elbow in wires that could maim or kill his father and then for him to jerk because he was surprised by a message.

“If this is what’s siphoning his psionics away maybe if we disconnect or break that then he’ll be able to use his own psionics to get out.” Dirk theorizes, looking up at the buzzing wires on the ceiling that lead away from Psii.

“Oh feedback will kill him.” Damara counters.

Aradia fishes her own phone out with an expression of confusion and clicks on a few things with a expression of mounting shock.

“Dear Aradia Megido, congratulations on your posting on the Battleship Condescension as a Mediculler, clearance level A1. Please set up your staff profile by- he’s got me access!” Aradia whoops in delight and starts clicking through things on her phone.

“Can you use the tablet?” Sollux asks, pulling his hands free as carefully as he can.

“Just a second… yes, here. Let me search for helmsman ejection or something like that.” Aradia says, crouching down in the slimy water as she balances the tablet on her knees and taps through it with her fingers.

You look up at Psii warily, if he could do that then he is on some level still aware and present in what is going on in this room. He’s just immobilised and trapped, that’s kind of worse in your view. Like those nightmares where you can’t move or defend yourself.

“There’s no auto procedure, it’s all manual and really medical!” Aradia says despairingly.

“Well are there instructions?” Sollux demands.

“They’re all medical! I don’t know about this stuff. I know about bones and bodies but I don’t know the academic stuff, Sol! I’m trying here, give me time!” She argues back.

You wade over to her and peer at the screen. Troll numbers are the same as your numbers and you do know the alphabet so…

“Does that say L5?” you ask, pointing at it.
“Ah… ‘Ejection procedure begins with removal of biowire to L5.’ I don’t know what that means!” Aradia reads.

“L5, it’s a vertebrae, the lowest that trolls have.” you explain. Much to Nepeta’s dismay trolls don’t have tailbones, they never had tails. Their L5 fuses to their pelvis.

“It’s this one.” you say, wading over and carefully stepping over wires to find your way around Psii’s back. You reach out and touch the lowest wire on his back to demonstrate.

“I know you’re big on skeletons but you know troll ones too?” Dirk asks warily. You frown and look around Psii’s body to see him.

“We had biology textbooks and I started researching it after I met Karkat he was, you know, fascinating. I wanted to know how he was put together.” you say defensively.

“You know usually if you meet a cute troll boy and you get interested in his biology you don’t go to skeletons. That’s not what an interest in boning your boyfriend means.” Dirk says shaking his head. You flip him off with your free hand.

“If Aradia reads out what you have to do can you do it?” Sollux asks, grabbing hold of your arm and drawing your attention back from Dirk.

“I’ll try but I don’t know anything about the wires.” you warn him.

“I’ll help with that.” Sollux says, waving your concerns away with a hand.

“So, remove that one and I’ll tell you the next step.” Aradia says.

You breathe out in a puff of nerves and steady yourself. You wrap your fingers around the biowire, it feels somewhere between calamari and raw hot dog plus slime. Sollux rests his head on your shoulder so he can see without getting in your way.

“Psii used some of these before to connect himself to the computers at home, usually just that one.” He explains, pointing to the thick wire under the base of Psii’s skull.

“So you’ve got to be firm when you pull them out, they have little tendrils but they should just fold in when you pull out this way. Just go slow and even, once you’ve started you gotta pull it all the way out or it goes bad.” He explains, lisping quietly over the s sounds.

“Kay.” you mumble and gently pull on the wire. It clearly doesn’t want to move and it doesn’t help that the movement makes one of Psii’s legs jerk ever so slightly. You keep up the pressure and then
the wire comes loose with a slick sound. It tapers, it seems, and you pull it back noting how the little filaments of it fold back down to the body of the wire. It drops to the ground and you can see the port that it was plugged into, a tunnel from skin to spinal column held open by a metal port. Slime oozes from it over your fingers and then it’s followed by slick yellow blood as the port knits itself together again with sharp metal sounds.

There’s blood on your skin and metal in your ears. Your heart lurches and breath catches in your lungs. You can’t- you can’t do this. Not now. People need you, you can’t-

A part of you goes somewhere else, like you built a wall and shut a door on it. There’s still panic and fear and shouting behind it but it’s not you. Aradia is saying something about L3 but you can’t hear her. Sollux’s voice is in your ear and it’s all…

His hand twines with yours and it’s like lightning.

You’ve done this before, in a way. When you and Rose found your sleeping self and passed your message back you combined time and light to see the path to the right where and when. But now with his hand pressed in yours it’s not light with you but doom. And oh… OH. Sollux is no seer, he’s a mage. Mages don’t see, they know. His class floods through your system every bit as much as his aspect does. You’re a knight, you exploit time, bend and loop it like a toy knowing that it does the same back to you. But he’s a mage, he doesn’t passively observe the universe like a seer, he knows it. Just like your class it warps back on him, he knows doom but doom knows him back. It creeps through his bones, curls around his brain. It’s the abyss that stares back as he stares into it. And as you take his class you know both time and doom, and it knows you.

You stare at Psii and see it, every timeline fanning out like a deck of cards across a poker table. Every time where you didn’t make it here in time and he dies. Dehydration gets him before starvation does and he dies here. Eventually his insides rot and the biowires curl around what is left for the last nutrients that they can get as their system no longer feeds them they’ll eat him. Your can see every wire jammed into his spine, watch as time marches on and he falls apart, the room rusts and falls apart, millenia can pass leaving just minerals of metal and man here. You see all the times when he never even escaped her, when he never had Sollux or Mituna, all the doomed timelines are there. You hold out your hand and see through your skin, to each bone in your hand. All the times when you die are right before you and there are so very many. But you’re not afraid and you’re not sad. Death and doom aren’t sad, they aren’t bad, they just are. You can see through your own hand to every doomed you and though their deaths are sad there is life there too. There’s a version of you with a sword in his hand and juggalo blood on his clothes facing down the Batterwitch in a fight he knows he’ll lose and sure living for a cause in infinitely preferable to dying for one but death has meaning. Happily ever after is a bullshit story end but by god is there power, hope and life in dying for something. She kills you and thinks that she’s won but you have time in your heart and in that future there is a boy, an alternate version of your brother who speaks of your death not with sadness but with love and admiration. The syllables of the story of your end paved his life, drove his heart and burn within him. All things are doomed to die but there’s no reason to fear it.

What is that saying? Comedy is tragedy plus time?
You can see it all around you, though. Your crow died and that’s sad in the short term but her end gave Hal wings. Bro died and his end freed you. You died before as did Aradia and Damara but if you hadn’t you’d never be able to do what you can. Doom and Life are two sides of the same coin, just like Time and Space can never be truly pulled apart. You know this, you know it because Sollux knows it. Doom has cursed him with its knowledge but you’re directing it now, you’re borrowing this curse.

If it was Rose’s hand in yours you could see the path of what to do now but it’s not. Instead you see every doomed choice blacking out your vision, and with time bending to your will you can layer every doomed timeline over the next like layers of photos on glass until the single spot of light shines through.

You reach out and pull another wire free, then another and another. Your hear nothing and feel nothing but Sollux’s hand in your skeletal one. Your panic is walled off along with the rest of the world so you just follow the track that you’re on. Wire after wire comes free in your deft fingers and eventually you’re done.

Sollux’s hand pulls from your own and it takes a while for things to come back to you. You look down at your hands to see yellow blood on them, then the fear comes back. But you’re not standing up where you were anymore. Strong arms are around you and you recognise the pitch of Dirk’s voice before you understand the words.

“-think you should give him that to drink.” Dirk says reproachfully.

“Hey, I’ve seen him mainline this stuff before, drinking it is fine.” Sollux argues.

“He’s barely conscious!” Dirk argues.

You don’t open your eyes because they’re already open, instead you just start to actually notice what you’re seeing in front of you again. Your glasses are missing but you can see them hanging from the neck of Dirk’s shirt. You turn your head to see Psii slumped in the slimy water, his head against Disciple’s chest with Sollux and Mituna crouched on either side of him. Apparently at some point more people showed up? Who knew?

“Hey, with us again?” Dirk asks, looking down at you.

You frown as you think.

“I’m missing some time.” you say numbly, time is your thing you shouldn’t be losing it.

“Yeah, I think you had a dissociative panic thing. I know what that’s like. Sollux said you borrowed
his whole doom thing when you turned all Neo in the Matrix and unplugged everything at light speed.” Dirk says carefully, like he’s not sure how you’ll react.

You blink dumbly at him. You can’t put into words what happened, you’re not doing it now so it’s sort of gone. You’re still left with a strange feeling and an image of death. Of flesh rotting, returning to the ground, feeding new life, becoming plants that grow, bloom, wither, die, start again. A disjointed comfort in the certainty of it all. But now your brain just feels like jello and you’re not sure how to explain the feeling that you’re unsettled at not seeing your own bones through your skin.

“I can’t brain.” you mumble and slump lazily against his side. Double time duty in one day as well as bonus doom, you’re going to find a bed soon and sleep for a bajillion years.

It seems like Psii isn’t faring much better, he’s awake now and he’s not exactly talking but making noise. He makes a sound into Disciple’s chest that sounds like someone trying to cheat at scrabble by using all of the consonants at once.

“Give it here, he’s a wreck.” Disciple sighs and through one eye you watch her tip Psii’s head back and pour some energy drink down his throat. He’s at least coherent enough to swallow at the right time and not choke or drown. Sollux looks over and sees that you’re present again and quickly wades over to you.

“How did you do that?” He asks, crouching down. You realise that Dirk is on his knees holding you to him, he must be soaked in all this grossness.

“God tier bullshit.” you say and shut your eyes.

“Is that what time is like for you always? As a… a force or whatever?” Sollux asks, evidently he got time feedback from you in the way you got doom from him.

“What was it like?” Dirk asks instead.

“Like… it was like being microscopic but I could feel every other version of me. An impossible number of dead doomed copies of myself and the moment I made the slightest wrong choice I would be one of them and a different me would be the right one. A kind of unending tightrope act. But at the same time it’s like I couldn’t fuck it up, like being tied to a train that wouldn’t stop and there was no choice.” Sollux explains, grasping for the words. Dirk grips you a little tighter.

“How did you do that?” He asks, crouching down. You realise that Dirk is on his knees holding you to him, he must be soaked in all this grossness.

“God tier bullshit.” you say and shut your eyes.

“Is that what time is like for you always? As a… a force or whatever?” Sollux asks, evidently he got time feedback from you in the way you got doom from him.

“What was it like?” Dirk asks instead.

“Like… it was like being microscopic but I could feel every other version of me. An impossible number of dead doomed copies of myself and the moment I made the slightest wrong choice I would be one of them and a different me would be the right one. A kind of unending tightrope act. But at the same time it’s like I couldn’t fuck it up, like being tied to a train that wouldn’t stop and there was no choice.” Sollux explains, grasping for the words. Dirk grips you a little tighter.

“Bout right.” you mumble.

It’s nice that the Psiionic is taking time to recover too, and that his recovery is so much more dramatic with being moved into the hallway so his psionics can return to him and not get siphoned away by the webbing on the ceiling. He’s also oozing blood in places still and everyone is paying attention to him. It also helps that whenever anyone tries to bother you Dirk gives everyone an expression that
You have an energy drink and Dirk even produces cookies from somewhere. You’re still going to sleep for a million years later. Eventually Psii is awake enough that his kids are catching him up on everything that happened and you hazily watch the crackle of lightning in red and blue that runs up his horns as he grins wide at the news of Condy’s death.

“Hey, Davey.” Roxy says, soft and sweet as she kneels down before you and Dirk.

“He’s kind of out of it.” Dirk tells her quietly.

“I’m fine.” you mumble and Roxy ruffles your hair.

“You did real good.” She assures you with a bright smile.

“Did you hear the news?” Roxy asks seriously as she looks over your head to Dirk.

“Yeah, Hal caught me up. I’m waiting for them to pick a place for us to go to do this thing before we move Dave and Psii.” Dirk replies.

“The whole family is flipping shit, I guess they’ve not told Psii yet?” Roxy asks, looking across at the eldest Captor.

“No, I’m guessing they want him mobile before exciting him too much.” Dirk replies.

“What’s happening?” you ask, pulling back from where you were resting against Dirk’s chest so that you can properly look at him.

“Shh.” Dirk says and pats your shoulder soothingly. Only it mostly just pisses you off.

“Do you think it’ll work?” Roxy asks quietly, trying to be heard by only Dirk. Dirk shrugs.

“It worked on Bro.” Dirk says without any other explanation.

“What’s happening?” you repeat but they keep ignoring you.

“They’re just so… excited about it. I don’t know if I can do what they want me to, though.” Dirk admits quietly, totally not answering your question. Hey, it seems like the magic potion to make you feel more human and awake is irritation at being ignored.
“Well wouldn’t you be?” Roxy points out.

Dirk remains silent.

“I mean if we had someone like Psii and not the very dead asshole we did have.” Roxy corrects, waving her hands around emphatically.

You elbow Dirk in the stomach and he narrows his eyes at you behind his shades.

“What,” you say firmly, “is happening?”

“Hal worked out that in theory if I can split Signlessprite into a kernel and, well, Signless we can put the ring of life that Bro had onto his corpse and bring him back to life.” Dirk explains. He must not explain very quietly because further down the hall you hear Psii yell “WHAT” at the top of his lungs.

“Oh fuck gotta- NO!” Psii yelps, you turn in time to see him scramble to his feet, lose his balance and fall over again. All his limbs are long and uncoordinated, it’s like watching a drunk giraffe fall down a set of stairs.

“Okay honey, I got you.” Disciple purrs and scoops the taller man up and cradles him in her arms like he weighs about two pounds. Damn Karkat’s mom’s got an iron bod under those fluffy sweaters with cat pom poms on them. The lady could probably bench both her husbands at once and actually you’d like to see that.

“I have a map! We should go to the communal nutrition hall, lots of tables and chairs there.” Aradia suggests, holding up the buggy looking tablet. You run that through the over descriptive troll language filter in your head and take a guess that she means a canteen. Sometimes you forget that Aradia was hatched on Alternia instead of Earth.

“I’m a map.” Psii says sullenly.

“Shoosh.” Disciple says and starts following Aradia as she leads the way.

Dirk gets up with you bundled in his arms and you squirm away in mortification. You don’t need to be carried around thank you very much! You float out of his grasp and settle for following behind him on autopilot. Sollux keeps looking back at you to check that you’re still there but evidently whatever he wants to say to you isn’t something he wants to get into now or at least not with this many people here.

Roxy is quietly assuring Dirk that he can do his ‘force lightning-y thingie’ and everything will be just fine. Dirk expresses his wariness at the idea, Roxy assures him again, repeat. You could fall asleep
like this, probably. Can you fall asleep flying or will you fall the moment you fall asleep?

Suddenly you’re in the canteen of the ship and Dirk is pulling you along by the front of your cape’s gear toothed fringe. You can at least doze and fly it seems. Good thing you don’t sleepwalk, sleep flying would be a hella bad idea. It turns out that what woke you was Karkat’s loud voice.

“But you showed us you doing it!” Karkat shouts, jolting you into wakefulness. He seems to realise what he’s done when he stares up at you in alarm. His attention drops from Dirk and he reaches up his hands to you, blunted claw tipped fingers outstretched. You drift lower until you’re drifting with your toes just an inch or so off of the floor.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you.” He says reverently and smooches your forehead.

“Not that I don’t love your appreciation but uh, what?” you say dumbly and Karkat pulls back. He offers you an expression that suggests that he thinks you might be brain damaged. He reaches out and squishes your face in his hand, thumb on one cheek and fingers on the other. He turns your head until you can see a now standing Psii next to Dis with a spritely Signless floating before them.

“Oh, that.” you say stupidly.

“If I could pay you back somehow for what you did… Sollux told us everything and…” Karkat sighs, he’s going watery eyed but trying really hard to not show it.

“Pro tip: maybe don’t pay him back in kind. If you bring Bro or Mom back we’re gonna have words.” Dirk mutters irritably.

“Well, no shit. Anyway, I need your help. Hal says you can do this, you showed me the power earlier. Hal said himself that whatever separated Bro’s soul required powers like yours and we saw that worked. It’s not like the other heart players can step in. Dirk, please.” Karkat begs, turning his attention back to Dirk.

“But if I fuck it up then he might be gone for good.” Dirk says.

“You can’t leave him like that.” you say and Karkat nods along.

“Listen, I know you don’t want to screw this up. If you destroyed all of him then you’ve deprived eight kids of a father, it’s a lot of pressure and I get that. But- look all the adults in your family are shit but mine aren’t.” Karkat insists.

“Thanks for the reminder.” Dirk drawls.
“Shut your squawk blister I wasn’t done!” Karkat snaps at him.

“He always said to me that when he was gone one day that I would take his place, that I could do this. But I’m not ready, I’m barely able to direct us when I’m sharing the job with Vriska. Our luck is gonna run out and I can’t do this. Everyone has faith in me and it’s totally without reason and I need him back! My Mom and Dad need him back, my siblings need him back. Even if I can do a half assed job at being a leader in his place I can’t do any of the rest of that shit. I get it, you’re scared, join the fucking club. Fix this for me, please.” Karkat begs.

“Why do you think you’re such a bad leader? Look at what you’ve done.” you protest but he ignores you. Dirk also ignores you. Great.

Dirk looks over at Karkat’s family. You can guess at what he’s thinking. His and Bro’s parents died super soon after Dirk was born. Dirk never got to be someone’s kid, not really, he grew up too fast and then became your surrogate parent. But here is an actual family of people who love each other, parents who care for their children, siblings who are siblings and not caretakers. Normalcy is in short supply since the world ended and admittedly a polyamorous quadrant blurring troll family isn’t the American Nuclear Family™ of 2.5 kids, dog, white picket fence and so on but it’s pretty fucking close.

“If your parents agree I’ll try, let me just… find Jake. His hope bullshit worked with Jane so maybe it’ll help me. I can’t promise this’ll work.” Dirk warns him.

“Just try, that’s all.” Karkat agrees. Dirk nods sharply and strides off in the direction of his soulmate to secure his help.

“You’re a good leader.” you reiterate. Karkat grumbles and mutters under his breath.

“You led the whole mission to kill, like, Fish Hitler.” you argue and Karkat chokes on his laugh.

“I’m keeping that name for her.” He snickers.

He seems to hesitate, looking from you to his parents and back again a few times. Then, seemingly making up his mind, he turns and kisses you square on the mouth. His sharp little teeth prickle your lip and your body forgets how breathing works for a few seconds.

“For luck.” He says softly against your lips.

“Shouldn’t you be kissing Vriska if you’re wanting to steal yourself some luck?” you ask teasingly as you float back from him.

“The heat death of this new fucking universe that this game is hosted in will happen before I plant
my lips anywhere on the shambling husk of self righteousness that Vriska Serket calls a body and almost certainly not even then.” Karkat insists vehemently.

Karkat glances over his shoulder at his parents who are arguing with the sprite, you’re able to catch a little of the dispute from where you are.

“You were supposed to be looking after them!” Disciple insists.

“I offered appropriate help with their quests.” Signlesssprite replies.

“And with fish tits swimming around threatening them? You didn’t offer help then!” Disciple snaps angrily.

“That’s not part of the game.” Signlesssprite points out flatly and dispassionately. Disciple looks like she’s about to flip every table in the room. Psii reaches out and pats her on the cheek and moves her so that he is in between the two of them.

“You’re not yourself, she said she did something to you. I know what that’s like, just let us fix it.” Psii says patiently.

“I feel fine.” Signlesssprite says with a shrug.

“Not always a good indication that you are, though.” Hal adds from his position floating behind Signlesssprite, you guess he was the one who wrangled the man up here.

“You are going beyond what you are supposed to do.” Signlesssprite says disapprovingly.

“I do that. In fact I should get that tattooed or something. Hey, Porrim, if you work out how to tattoo a sprite hit me up, yeah?” Hal calls out and Porrim rolls her eyes at him.

Dirk is walking over to the three guardians with Jake in tow and Karkat looks back at you.

“I should-” He says hesitantly and you shove him in the right direction. Karkat runs over there and cements himself in the middle of negotiations between Karkat’s parents and Dirk. Dirk is throwing up all kinds of disclaimers about his abilities as Jake tries to assure him that it’ll be fine, no, really it will.

You look around the room and see your twin sat on her own at a table, drinking something from an unmarked bottle. That was the problem with alchemising things, often if you tried to take out too much extraneous information from cards to get a really specific item you got it in the blankest packaging possible. And God wasn’t John having fun putting the idea in people’s heads that those
generic drinks may or may not be synthetic piss.

You drop into the seat at her side and make grabby hands at her drink. She caps it quickly and vanishes it back into the tree structure of her own sylladex.

“Aw.” you protest and Rose rolls her eyes and retrieves something else from it, this time a marked bottle of apple juice. She cracks the lid open and takes a long sip from it before handing it to you.

“Seemingly claiming a drink as mine makes it irresistible to you so there you go.” She says slyly. You take the drink from her anyways and down a good portion of that sweet nectar of the literal gods. Rose rests her face in her palm and watches you lazily.

“You look tired.” you tell her. She does, she seems kind of hazy and sleepy.

“You look worse.” She replies.

“Are you-” you are cut off by a bolt of pink lightning and the sudden sound of a body hitting the floor. You crane your neck and see a flashing kernelsprite and Signless’ corpse on the floor.

“Holy shit he did it.” you whisper.


“Shut up, it’s pretty intense stuff and he’s not even god tier like us.” you retort. You can see Sollux handing the ring off to his mom and she leans in and slides it on Signless’ finger. The man jerks to life with a shout and then he’s dogpiled on by half of the trolls in the room.

Jake leads Dirk over to your table as he’s a little busy staring at his hands in something between horror and awe. You twist around and see Jane and Roxy leaning against a wall talking to each other, Jade and John are over there and… you count over everyone in the room and see that you’re all here. Everyone is alive, everyone is well. You all went into a fight this morning and instead of losing life you actually gained one back, pretty goddamn successful by any metric.

Things are going well for once and you’re actually starting to feel a shred of optimism for a change. There’s peace between two species, no war, and all that had to happen was for almost everyone alive on any planet to die. Okay, that’s more than a little grim but you’re trying to focus on the living here. You focus on the happy babble of relief, of ‘so glad you’re okay’ and ‘we were so worried’ that’s going on over there.

“I knew you could do it!” Jake says, slapping Dirk on the shoulder and squeezing him in a one armed hug. Your brother looks comically flustered which is honestly ridiculous because you and Rose saw just what they’d been getting up to before but evidently if you want to catch Dirk off
balance it’s sincere compliments that do it.

“They look so happy.” Rose says quietly as she looks over at the trolls around Signless.

“Yeah.” you agree.

“It won’t last.” Rose says flatly.

“Rose, don’t say that. I’m sure everything will turn out-” Jake begins.

“ABSOLUTELY NOT!” Huh, it looks like Vantas senior has the same volume capable pipes on him that Karkat does and then some. Arguing erupts as everyone starts up at once over there.

“Told you so.” Rose sighs and rests her head on the table.

“This is a WARSHIP! We’re not keeping children here!” Signless shouts.

“It’s MY ship! My sweat and blood is in this thing and if it can protect these kids then all the better!” the Psiionic shouts back.

“Quiet down both of you!” Disciple says, smacking both men in the ear.

“We are going to talk about this like the grown adults that we are,” She continues more calmly, “I take your point that nowhere is more defensible than this ship, especially in your hands if you were given full control. But are you really prepared to plug yourself back in for that?” She asks, hands on hip.

“A lot of it I could do remotely, besides a lot of the worst shit in the helmsblock is to keep me there when I don’t want to be. If I’m choosing it then that’s different, besides it’s not like I never plugged into the computers at home.” Psii reasons.

“It’s a warship, they’re children. They shouldn’t be-” Signless protests.

“You know we just collectively murdered the Condesce, correct? You know several of us have killed other people and died. I feel that the moral stance of stopping us from becoming child soldiers is in our rearview mirror, so to speak.” Kankri pipes up.

“I know it’s not your fault, that you became a sprite because you died saving me but… don’t you remember?” Karkat asks, sounding more than a touch hurt.
“You’re children, you shouldn’t have to do this. You shouldn’t have to kill or live on a battleship.” Signless says emphatically. Kankri narrows his eyes and folds his arms irritably.

“What we should or should not have to do holds little bearing on what the circumstances demand from us and, frankly, clinging to how things should be will blind you to how things actually are. I’m sorry, Terezi please pardon my thoughtless metaphor.” Kankri adds that last part nervously, looking over at Terezi.

“I literally could not care less.” Terezi groans.

“I know how this game goes, I’m the only one who fully remembers playing it before!” Signless argues.

“Yes, now do tell,” Kankri says as he draws himself up impressively, “how did that go for you?”

Signless recoils in shock and then his expression shifts to anger but Kankri plows on anyway.

“Furthermore, we have been doing just fine without the intervention of any of you. Though we are glad to have you back I think that it is highly inappropriate for you to dictate to us the proper way for us to do anything in this game as it was designed for us and not you. Assuming that it will be exactly like the game you failed at is pure conjecture. On top of that you have not asked us whether we want to stay in the safety of this likely highly defensible ship or whether we wish to remain in a building that Mituna and John built in a hurry with dubious use of the copy paste function. You have not opened this up to democratic vote or debate but instead return to life and project your will onto us like the very dictator you once opposed.” Kankri says in one wordy stream.

“Comparing me to her-” Signless starts but Kankri had merely paused for breath.

“Is fitting given your inclination to rule. But, no, you have not asked us what we want. Moreover you presume to lecture the Psiionic on how he should cope with his own trauma which is highly problematic, and on top of that you have not begun to check to see if any of us have endured psychological harm that would make this new environment a better one for us than where we were, instead you leap to lecturing.” Kankri continues.

“And I guess you could say there’s some merit in making this ship of all ships the home of the entire hemospectrum and the last surviving rebels to her rule.” Karkat muses.

“Precisely, Karkat, very astute. There is absolutely a value in reclaiming symbols, drawing power from that which once oppressed. If Psii determines that this place is safe for us to live in then there is no reason for our group not to take a vote to live here rather than the base on the Land of Wind and Shade, especially given that many of us have come to harm and exhaustion trying to reclaim this place.” Kankri nods.
“Damn yo, Kankri senior just got schooled by Kankri junior.” you whisper.

Rose makes a noncommittal hum and you see that she’s staring blankly ahead, seeing the future again no doubt. You preferred it when you were both dead and there was no future for either of you to fuck around with.

“Rose?” you say, elbowing her to get her attention.

“This is a foregone conclusion, I’m going.” She declares and sweeps out of the room.

“Rose!” you hiss but she doesn’t turn around and come back. Roxy is watching her leave with a frown but you catch her eye, point in the direction Rose left and rush after her, that way she knows where you’ve gone at least.

The hallway is empty but you take a fifty fifty guess on which way she went and fly down that way, turns out that you’re right and you catch up to Rose soon enough.

“What’s with you?” you call after her.

“Nothing, go back with everyone else.” Rose says, continuing on. Her voice is flat and she won’t look at you.

Is it time to have this conversation?

“Have you talked to Hal about… stuff?” you ask as you keep following her.

“Oh, stuff?” Rose says as her voice drips with faux sincerity.

The corridor that you’re in opens up into an observation deck, wide windows taking in the view of Mituna’s planet. There are consoles scattered about with projections of Mituna’s planet, computers running quiet calculations about distance, weather and wind resistance. You kind of want to fly this thing into space, nevermind that you could just open a door and fly out to space on your own anyway. You still have photos from the last time you were in space, in your art book is a print of Jupiter looming outside the ship’s window. You could have sold that picture to the papers or NASA back then but you’re glad you didn’t, it’s just yours.

“You know what I mean.” you tell Rose.

“Do I?” Rose replies, still not looking at you. She runs her fingers along one of the consoles as she walks towards the window.
“I talked to him about how I’m depressed apparently, you should talk to him about your stuff.” you insist. Now Rose does turn to look at you, head tilted so that she can look down at you despite being the same height as you.

“Why, Dave, your use of the word apparently suggests that you do not concur with this diagnosis. Surely you are not taking medication for a condition you do not believe that you have. I am sure that you would not also suggest that I do the same.” Rose says haughtily.

“Fuckin’... ugh, I know I have it I just don’t like it. Can we not do the snarky obfuscating horseshit please? I’m hella tired.” you plead with her. Rose is just as bad at you when it comes to avoiding things. You ramble streams of dialogue, make Freudian slips, distract people and run off. Rose avoids or turns things into an interrogative analysis of the other person, making them so defensive that she can slide on by unquestioned.

“Sure, we don’t have to do this at all, go back to the others.” Rose says with a shrug.

“No, because you should talk to Hal about how you’re clearly still messed up and not doing anything about it. You’re the one all into head shrinking, why are you so against this? It’s not like you’re someone who is against people talking about their problems and you never had a problem with my meds before, why is it suddenly a problem with you?” you press. You really hope she never thought less of you for any of that.

“There is nothing to talk about because no one could possibly understand.” Rose says sharply and turns back towards the window again.

“Bullshit, there’s nothing you’ve been through that I haven’t dealt with too. We both went through that shit with Bro, we were both dead, we both went grimdark, we both had to roll with being back here again! Tell me!” you say, throwing your arms in the air.

Rose turns and rests her back on the glass and gives you a flat look.

“Cheating on your moirail, I see.” She notes.

Your teeth click together with how fast you close your mouth. You draw a breath in through gritted teeth and try again. Maybe sincerity is the way here.

“That’s not it. You’re my twin, and I care about you so maybe let me help.” you say stiffly, even though being this candid feels all creepy wrong over your skin.

“Dave, surely by now you know that being related to someone doesn’t mean they like you.” Rose snaps. You jerk back, she may as well have just slapped you in the face. She’s clearly not going to talk to you and she’s obviously trying to hurt you enough so that you’ll go away.
“You’re such a bitch sometimes, have fun being miserable on your own since that’s what you apparently want. Whatever, I’m out, deal with your own problems!” you bark at her angrily and storm off.

“I AM dealing with them!” Rose shouts after you, always gotta have the last word, huh?

“BADLY!” you shout back and leave her to it.

God, fucking… you wanna punch her right in the face for that.

You don’t go back to where everyone else is, if you do people will just ask why you’re mad and they’ve got better things to debate than that. So you just start walking and poking the buttons to every door that’ll let you in. You find shockingly dull offices, cleaning cupboards, storage rooms. All of the minutia that you apparently need to run a spaceship effectively.

Eventually though you find someone’s bedroom. Well, not bedroom as such, seeing as how a bedroom needs a bed and this room does not have one. What it does have is a large textured pod filled with green goo and you’ve watched enough troll movies to know a recuperacoon when you see one. You eye the room warily and sidle up to the recuperacoon cautious of traps of any kind, you might be mostly immortal but death by some troll’s paranoid bedroom trap is a bad way to go. You’re pretty quickly able to rule out any traps.

Thanks terrible childhood filled with paranoia! Yay…

Wrapping your hands around the lid of the recuperacoon you lean in and give it a little shake. The green goo inside wibbles pleasingly, not quite liquid but also not all jello either. It’s probably a… uh… what was the word for it? A thing that’s sometimes a solid and sometimes a liquid. Custard is like that at the right ratios, you saw a guy on youtube walk across a swimming pool of the stuff like custard Jesus.

Damnit the not knowing is going to bug you.

[turntechGodhead began pestering gardenGnostic]

TG: hello my fave physics babe

GG: hey dave!!!

GG: i suppose i am space and that contains physics by default right?

TG: i guess so but i was more seeking out that large throbbing brain of yours
TG: i need to know the word for a thing specifically a science thing

GG: uh ok weird request but shoot!

TG: whats the name for a thing that is sometimes a liquid but sometimes a solid

GG: thats anything if you heat/cool it enough dave

TG: no like quicksand

GG: ohhhhh a non-newtonian fluid!

TG: ah yea thats it just couldnt remember the name but how do i check if something is that you know for science purposes

GG: slap it! >:D

TG: uh

GG: given sharp force a non-newtonian fluid will harden because it doesnt follow newtons laws of viscosity duh

TG: of course i am such a fool

GG: maybe if youd spent more time paying attention in science class instead of staring at karkats very nice butt youd know this!

TG: i dont think mrs cripps my science teacher had a section entitled the science of slapping shit for science

TG: actually thats a lie that old broad went hard for science RIP i bet she baking soda volaco-ed a meteor to death also i cant help but notice that you think my soulmate has a very nice butt there harley

GG: am i not allowed to say? because he does!

TG: no way man everyone should acknowledge that vantass it is a choice ass
GG: i can see im looking at it right now! ;)

TG: o damn send me a pic

[gardenGnostic attached file vantass.png]

TG: aw yeah i love how you can see the blur of him flailing his arms around as he yells like a furious little penguin is that argument really still going on

GG: apparently vantases can argue on an olympic level though mostly everyone else is just waiting for it to be over.

TG: sounds legit ok thanks for the pic and the science im going to go test this theory via slaps

GG: have fun with science!

[turntechGodhead ceased pestering gardenGnostic]

You hold your hand out over the surface of the sopor and prepare to do a science to it, the best scientist it is you. You hesitate as you stare at the radioactively green material. On the one hand you know sopor blankets aren’t toxic to humans, you’ve slept on them a bunch of times around Karkat’s place. But you also know that those were made on Earth and likely the reason they have those instead of this Nickelodeon like slime is for human wellbeing.

Science compels you to slap the sopor, self preservation suggests maybe not.

Damnit.

Well you can’t ask Karkat, he’s mid argument and you don’t wanna break the dude’s flow. Hm…

[turntechGodhead began pestering twinArmageddons]

TG: hey i have a question

TA: ok where are you anyway? ii 2aw you leave wiith ro2e earliier but you diidn't come back.

TG: im in a room somewhere
TA: …

TG: …

TA: just waiting for you two realize how unhelpful that is.

TG: oh i realize

TA: asshole.

TG: uh huh ok so hypothetical question is sopor toxic to humans

TA: you've been around our bedding for ages and you're worrying about this now?

TG: i didn't say bedding i said sopor just like on its own

TA: oh, like before it's been made into bedding or whatever.

TG: yeah

TA: well it's not even good for u raw, if you accidentally eat any it has psychological fuckery with it and people get addicted. the makara had a bit of a sopor eating problem in the past which probably didn't help their defense against cal.

TG: ugh cal

TA: yeah fuck that ton of a bietch

TA: but yeah it's obviously not toxic the touch 2eijing a2 how 99.99% of troll alive u2ed two 2leep in the stuffing raw and the rest of u2 have the blanket.

TG: sick thanks

TA: wait. hold up.

TG: uh
TA: you 2aiid hypothetiically.

TG: yeah

TA: hypothetiically ii2 dave code for 'thii2 2uper appliie2 two me but ii'm not going two 2ay that'

TA: but that doe2n't make 2en2e unle22 you have 2omehow found raw 2opor and are a2kiing me iif iiit'2 toxiic two you per2onally a2 a human.

TG: but you said its not toxic so no problem

TA: ii 2aiid iiit'2 not toxiic two *u2*, moron, have you found real 2opor??

TG: so what youre saying is that you dont know if the raw stuff is toxic to the touch

The door behind you whooshes open and you’re facing the other way with your sword out before you know what’s what.

“Not to humans.” Sollux grumbles and bats your sword aside with a bony hand. He leans over the rim of the recuperacoon and stares down at it what little light coming from the open door is reflecting off of the seemingly somewhat phosphorescent sopor and gives his face a green tinge. It’s pretty cool how that mixes with the red and green light from his eyes. You stow your sword away and pull out your camera instead, getting two or three shots off before he looks up at you with a skeptical squint.

“I’ll call it: ‘nerd examines slime’.” you announce.

“I’d dunk you in here if I was sure it wouldn’t give you chemical burns or something.” He grumbles. You put your camera back in your sylladex and eye the sopor again.

“How did you find me anyway?” you ask as Sollux reaches out and trails a finger through the thick slime.

“Your brothers have your phone gps chipped, it’s not exactly locked down. I think Hal wants it accessible in case the two of them were out of commission and we needed to find you.” Sollux answers.

‘Out of Commission’ is a nice euphemism for dead and you can completely buy that Hal and Dirk have preparations for that shit set up. Well, whatever, given that you were raised by Dirk and Hal your concept of privacy is pretty thin.

You change the topic.
“I was asking Jade how to test if this is a non-newtonian fluid and she said slap it. So, since you’ve already got your hand in there do that.” you urge him.

“I’m pretty sure it would drown people if it did that, it’s more like…” Sollux says and then drags his hand through the sopor so he ends up with a palmful of the stuff. At first it’s a solid lump, like cranberry sauce right out of the can. But then it breaks apart into jello like chunks and falls away from his hand. What little sopor remains in his hand melts like hot wax and slicks down his skin.

“That’s really cool.” you whisper and Sollux laughs and runs his hand through the stuff some more.

“It’s like those slime videos on youtube, man we would have been famous with this stuff if it still existed.” you say wistfully.

“I hear it’s even cooler when you’re actually in it,” Sollux says as he hefts himself up on the rim of the recuperacoon with his knee, “you’re supposed to just float in it with neutral buoyancy or something so people who don’t have a rack like Tav’s that would stop them getting all the way in don’t drown.”

You eye the rim of the recuperacoon and conclude that there’s no way that any Nitram dude could get his head in here. Sollux leans forward and lets himself sink in to his elbow and then stops there.

“You’re not holding yourself back from falling in?” you ask curiously.

“Nope.” He answers and pulls his arm back with a sound that can only be described as a ‘schlorp’. Chunks of sopor fall off of him and you’re so very tempted to catch one for yourself.

“Is it bad that I really wanna put it in my mouth?” you wonder as the jello looking cubes hit the surface and seemingly dissolve.

“I told you that’s bad even for trolls, it gets highbloods like Gamzee stoned off of their rumblespheres. It’d probably kill you.” Sollux says disapprovingly.

“Now, I hear you, but it’s so shiny and green and jiggly and my dumb primate brain says ‘eat the strange fruity looking goo’.” you explain. Really, you can’t blame the Betty Crocker mind control for how well shit like fruit gushers sold. Humans are all about brightly coloured shit filled with tasty goo apparently. You should share this revelation with John.

“And you’re the dominant species on your planet.” Sollux snorts. He moves to climb off of the edge of the recuperacoon and loses his balance, sliding off of it. Thankfully he slides down the outside and not face first into the sopor.
“Graceful.” you snicker and pull him up with his clean arm.

“Shut… shut your face.” He grumbles as yellow darkens his cheeks.

His expression seems to somber up after a moment as he stares off into the darkness of the rest of the room.

“Hey, uh, I know things were kind of crazy back there and there was all that shit with your time powers…” Sollux says slowly.

“And your doom powers.” you add.

“Ugh, yeah those too. Not sure I wanna learn more about those now that I’ve felt them. But my point is that…” Sollux hesitates and is still absolutely not looking at you.

“Being trapped in one of those things against my will, it’s absolutely my worst nightmare. Charging a battery like Mituna did before is one thing and even having all of the ports like Dad has is fine too, it’s cool even. But getting forced to be that is just-” Sollux grits his teeth and hisses.

“It’s like being buried alive and tortured at once?” you guess and now Sollux looks over at you, his expression pained.

“Yeah, like that. And maybe Aradia could have walked me through it without you possibly but I’m not so sure, especially given your bone knowledge and apparently my type in terms of moirails includes ‘weirdly intense knowledge of skeletons’ so that says something about me.” He says despairingly.

“It says you have good taste. Don’t throw shade on my dead shit collection.” you warn him, Sollux rolls his eyes at you and continues.

“All I’m saying is that you saved him and clearly it wasn’t easy either and ‘thank you’ doesn’t seem to cover it but I can’t think of anything else to…” Sollux trails off, waving the hand that’s not still dangling in sopor in the air in complex patterns that suggest gratitude.

He slumps against the recuperacoon that he still has one arm in and looks at you carefully.

“You’re just really great.” He says slowly.

“You’d do the same for me, man.” you shrug.

“Yeah but-” Sollux flails an arm and sends a wet wave of sopor in the air for a moment, “you’re just
“Uh, thanks?” you say uncertainty. You might be allergic to this much praise.

Sollux wraps his arms around you and jams his face into the side of you neck with a sad snuffling noise.

“You’re just so good. You’re my best friend, you know that?” He sniffles and your back starts to feel a little wet with sopor. That probably shouldn’t be on your skin.

In fact…

“Hey, Sol, have you ever touched the pure stuff like this before?” you ask calmly and clearly.

“No, an’ look you’re worried about me after everything you’ve been through today and before then and fuck-” Sollux keeps babbling mushy pale things about you but you tune it out.

Thankfully you still have your shades.

[turntechGodhead began pestering carcinoGeneticist]

TG: uh sorry if youre still mid argument but i may have a situation here

CG: NO I WON AND WE’RE ALL STAYING ON THIS VERY DEFENSIBLE SHIP. BUT TELL ME WHAT NOW ARE YOU ABOUT TO HEAP ON MY DOORSTEP ALSO WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?

TG: wow rude

TG: hypothetical question

CG: OH GODS IS THIS “HYPOTHETICAL QUESTION” LEVELS OF BAD? NOTICE MY QUOTATION MARKS OF DISBELIEF? WHAT HAVE YOU GOT YOURSELF INTO NOW.

TG: geez nothing im fine

Sollux nearly slaps your shades off of your face in a clumsy attempt to pap your cheek.
TG: SEMI hypothetical question then

CG: HOW CAN A QUESTION BE SEMI HYPOTHETICAL SMARTASS?

TG: where one of us has a pretty good idea of what the answer might be and is hoping it’s that and nothing worse

CG: FILLING ME WITH CONFIDENCE HERE, CAN YOU AT LEAST GIVE ME A DIRECTION TO START WALKING IN TO FIND YOU?

TG: uh k leave the room look in one direction and see the navigation area i think where my bitch of a twin sister is possibly still lurking

TG: go the other way

CG: I WANT TO ASK ABOUT THAT BUT IS IT RELEVANT TO THE CURRENT PROBLEM?

TG: not this one no

CG: CIRCLE BACK TO THAT ONE THEN, HIT ME WITH YOUR SEMI HYPOTHETICAL QUESTION THEN.

TG: so pure sopor is different from the bedding yall have right

CG: I WOULD THINK THAT THE WORD PURE GIVES YOU ALL THE SUGGESTION THAT IT IS STRONGER AND MORE POTENT, YES. THE ADULTS I KNOW CONSIDER IT A POOR SUBSTITUTE AT LEAST AT FIRST.

TG: oh good

“You’re fuckin’ drunk, or high or something.” you tell Sollux who shakes his head and slumps his weight against you a little more. Damn, the dude might be made of toothpicks, energy drinks and nerd rage, but he’s taller than you and that works out as being kinda heavy when you have to hold him up for a long time.

CG: SO YOU FOUND SOPOR THEN? PLEASE TELL ME YOU DIDN’T TOUCH IT. IF YOU DIE FROM POISONING YOUR SIBLINGS MIGHT JUST IMPLODE.
CG: AND SERIOUSLY I AM NOT SURE HOW MANY MORE TIMES I CAN TAKE FEELING YOU DIE.

CG: YOUR SLOW RESPONSES ARE NOT REASSURING ME HERE!

TG: i didnt touch it i did think it might not be smart and i wanted to ask you about it but you were having the great family shout off of the decade

CG: AND WINNING.

TG: very proud

TG: so i thought since i couldnt ask you id ask someone sensible

CG: AND SEEING AS THERE IS PRETTY MUCH NO ONE AROUND FITTING THAT DESCRIPTOR WHO DID YOU ASK?

TG: sollux

CG: THERE WERE TECHNICALLY WORSE ANSWERS THERE BUT ASIDE FROM JOHN “SURE I’LL Put THAT IN MY MOUTH ON A DARE” EGBERT AND THE MAKARAS I’M AT A LOSS TO FIND ANY. BECAUSE BOY I HAVE NO IDEA HOW THAT SHIT MIXES UP WITH THE EARTH BRAND OF HIS MEDS AS OPPOSED TO THE ALTERNIAN EQUIVALENT.

TG: kar youre starting to make me freak out here

“This game sucks, I hate it. Just wanna…” Sollux trails off into a jaw cracking yawn with a frankly impressive amount of teeth.

“Sleep? Yeah, ok dude just… come with me.” you say, pulling him towards the door. If Karkat is looking for you he’s not going to find you inside of a room with a shut door. You try to remember everything you can think of about drug overdose or bad reactions.

“Maybe try to stay awake for me? Please?” you say, trying to keep your tone cheerful and less panic filled. The pair of you stumble to the door and out into the hallway.

TG: ok we are out in the hallway get your vantass over here and help me!

CG: VANT*ASS*???
CG: YOU STILL HAVEN’T GIVEN ME PROPER DIRECTIONS BUT THANKFULLY HAL IS EVER HELPFUL.

[HalBirdSprite joined the conversation]

HBS: Hi Dave, we should be there in a few minutes. Can you tell me if you got any sopor on your skin?

You frown and try to think as you prop the barely awake troll up against the hallway wall. Your back feels sticky but you think when he had his hand on your face it was the clean one.

TG: i think there might be some seeping through my cape and shirt

CG: YOU SHOULD TAKE YOUR SHIRT OFF DAVE

HBS: Regardless of Karkat’s enthusiasm for that proposal I second it on a medical basis.

CG: HEY!

“Okay, just stay, alright?” you tell Sollux who blinks at you sleepily from behind his glasses. You take your hands away from his shoulders and he starts to slide down the wall so you turn side on and wedge your hip against, well, it’s not his hip because he’s taller than you. So it’s his scrawny thigh you guess. You wriggle and try to take your cape off one handed without touching the sopor and you’re only helped when Sollux puts a hand on your bare side, enough that you can feel like he’s not about to keel over. Your cape drops to the floor with a damp splat and you can then get your short-sleeved red time shirt off and you’re thankful that whoever designed this thing gave it short sleeves instead of full length ones because that would be even harder. With some effort you whip the shirt off with both hands and drop it on the floor. Oh boy that is a lot of sopor goo on the back even through the cape. Your body heat seems to have melted it somewhat and you’re probably not getting it out of that shirt. Or maybe since it’s godtier garb it’ll be fine? You hope so.

You can’t hear all troll noises as you well know by now but you’ve learnt that you’ve got a perhaps better than average ear for the lower notes. So you can hear the slight rumble coming from Sollux that’s starting to pitch up into louder and more audible tones for you. What’s perhaps more noticeable is the way that what little of Sollux you’re touching seems to suddenly be FILLED WITH BEES.

You twist to stare at him and see just how suddenly awake and furious he is. His eyes are narrowed, teeth bared and he’s just buzzing with anger.

“Hey, what’s wrong? You better not be seeing shit that’s not here, man.” you say worriedly.
A sharp claw runs over your side and you look down to see it following the line of one of your worst scars, Dirk had to give you stitches with that one. Your chest is kind of… jacked up. You guess your Bro figured it was the most covered place so he kept the majority of his deliberate injuries there. It has given you more than a little pause since you first started dating Karkat about if he’d hate it but you hadn’t considered Sollux’s thoughts on the matter.

“Glad he’s dead.” Sollux says, suddenly very clear and awake.

“If he was here again I’d…” his words break off into a snarl.

“He’s dead.” you tell him, it’s not like you’ve not repeated to yourself over and over that Bro is dead now. For real dead. Dead-dead. Body lost to the horrorterrors and unretrievable to anyone who might wish to revive him. He’s dead and gone, it’s super, hella, over with.

Karkat’s loud stomping footsteps ring down the corridor and you relax a little. Hal flutters around the corner just behind him, sees you, and then swoops ahead to you and Sollux. Karkat hangs back for a second and you get to watch his face cycle from ‘hng, shirtless soulmate’ to ‘aw shit I should be helping’. Apparently you don’t need to worry about your scars at all.

“It’s hard to check for pupil dilation when he doesn’t… you know.” Hal sighs, peering at Sollux over your shoulder.

“You’re both morons.” Karkat informs you.

“KK!” Sollux calls out all happy and sleepy now and reaches his arms out for his brother.

“Hah, nope. Getting this shit off of you.” Karkat snorts and snags Sollux’s goo covered arm in a towel and starts separating it from him. It turns out that with a little pulling on it the previously wet looking sopor becomes jello like again and peels off super easily.

“It doesn’t look like any touched your skin, Dave. I’m not seeing any reaction either way. Do you feel any different?” Hal asks, floating around you as he peers at you.

“I’m fine, it’s just him I’m worried about.” you say, pointing at the now more peaceable but still stoned looking troll.

“I think he’s fine, just dragged him into nearly being asleep real quick. That’s what sopor is for after all, besides that was probably balanced for an adult highblood so it’s gonna be strong stuff to a skinny pre-adult molt lowblood.” Karkat says reasonably.

“Mmm.” Sollux agrees sleepily, his eyes sliding half shut as he rests his head back against the wall.
“I know there’s no normal human beds but there’s got to be a sofa or something around here that we can get him to, right?” you ask.

“I haven’t got a map of this place, I only found you because of Hal!” Karkat shouts. You both wince and look at Sollux but he doesn’t seem disturbed at all by the noise in fact you think he might be- ok, yeah he’s snoring now.

“I have a map, there’s a recreation room not to far from here. Says there’s a TV so stands to reason there’d be sofas.” Hal says to you both.

“Here, hold him.” you tell Karkat and pass him Sollux’s sleeping form.

You snag your godtier cape and shirt and rifle through the clothing section of your sylladex enough to find a clean shirt, one of your nine million record shirts and put that on instead.

“I’ll take his legs?” you offer seeing as Karkat already has his arms around Sollux’s chest.

“Fine.” He grumbles and the pair of you hoist the youngest and presently super useless Captor up and carry him down the hall.

“So what happened with Rose?” Karkat asks.

Ahead of you Hal’s head turns ever so slightly, which for a Strider basically screams ‘oh me? No I’m not listening but DO GO ON.’

“It’s nothing.” you mutter.

Karkat makes a loud snort of disbelief behind you.

“Fine, she’s just a bitch is all sometimes.” you say instead.

“That’s not new, though. Or it sort of is, ever since- when you two came back she’s been off. Kanaya’s going out of her mind trying to work out what’s wrong with her or what she can do.” Karkat admits honestly.

“Officially not my problem.” you inform him.

“But what did she say though?” Karkat presses, Hal is still clearly listening.

“ Doesn’t matter.” you mumble and keep following Hal.
You can’t help the way your mind keeps going back to what Rose did say, about how she dismissed your concern and what it implies for what she thinks about how you’re handling this whole thing. You were just trying to help, if anyone could understand what she’s dealing with it’s you. Honestly, you can’t think of anyone else who could properly relate and she still doesn’t want your help!

It’s not like you’re bummed that she doesn’t want your help. If she had just said that she felt like she was best sorting her shit out solo but would give you a shout if she wanted to talk then you could have dealt with that. All you wanted was the assurance that she was dealing with things but instead she threw everything in your face and went right for all of your weak points. God, your very many weak points, you’re basically just one giant weak point these days. Bro would-

Oh boy, no, you’re cutting that thought short.

Hal pops a door open and you watch as his particularly avian body language expresses surprise.

“That’ll work.” He says, letting you all in. You see what he means. The inside of the room has a deep and sinfully plush movie pit, thoroughly instagram worthy even though it’s hot pink. You and Karkat drop Sollux onto one seat and watch his sleeping body almost get eaten by the soft cushions. Karkat drops in after him and flails as he sinks in with a startled loud yell of ‘fuck’ at the top of his lungs.

Floating down carefully seems to be the smarter plan. The edges of the pit are especially plus sofa but there’s a lower level that’s like a bouncy castle floor just not so springy.

“I’m guessing this is where we’re all sleeping until we get rooms sorted out.” you guess.

It turns out that you’re right. Hal presumably gives out your location when people ask because Dirk drifts in to check on you with Roxy, Jade and Jake in tow.

“Hey little bro, you ok?” Dirk asks, kneeling down outside of the people eating furniture.

“Tired and kinda hungry but I’ll live.” you shrug.

“John’s dad and Dolorosa have taken over the kitchens together. John and Jane are helping and I think John is trying to sabotage attempts at baking.” Jade says and jumps down onto the space next to Karkat and elbows him playfully.

“Yeah, so food will be in a few hours. Do you… need anything else?” Dirk asks uneasily. Hal snickers, you guess at Dirk seeing as there’s nothing too funny about him trying to wire up Earth tech to an Alternian TV.
Roxy slides in the space next to you and gives Dirk and Jake a conspicuous wink.

“We’ll be fine, right guys? You two go have fun.” Roxy says with a grin.

Well at least things between Dirk and Jake are more normal again now, he must be actually working on his shit after that time you spent on his planet. Actually you’re tempted to go sneak a look at what the statues there are like now.

“Sure, well, call me if you- ah!” Dirk flails a little as Jake pulls him back by the shirt.

“See you later Roxy, have fun kids!” Jake says brightly and pulls Dirk out of the room.

“They’re so gross.” Jade says quietly, like it’s a secret.

“It’s better than them awkwardly ignoring each other.” you say with a shrug.

“Speaking of,” Karkat says loudly, “are you and my sister still ignoring each other?”

“Ooh snap.” Roxy gasps.

Jade puffs out her cheeks in irritation.

“I’m not, and not that it's any of your business mister but I don’t really like the whole soulmate thing. Maybe when the world was bigger but now there’s so few of us and it just seems wrong to slap my hand on someone else’s and be all ‘GREAT YOU’RE MINE FOREVER’, you know?” Jade says, slapping Karkat’s hand to demonstrate.

“In fairness just because you know someone’s your soulmate doesn’t mean you gotta do anything about it right away.” Roxy points out, holding the hand with Sollux’s ring on it up to show them all. For his part Sollux loudly snores, his head in your lap.

“Plus do you know how much time I spent so sure that my soulmate was Dave but not able to confirm it? It was goddamn torture sometimes!” Karkat insists.

“Hey.” you say.

“I don’t mean it like that, you had good reason. But Nepeta and Jade don’t.” Karkat says quickly.
“One could argue that the sexy frustration worked for you two.” Roxy says, wiggling her eyebrows at you.

“Gross.” you groan.

“My point is that I’d like to get to know her before we ‘seal the deal’ or whatever. And the end of the world isn’t exactly the best time for leaping into a relationship especially when I’ve never dated anyone before.” Jade says firmly.

“Tell that to Dirk and Jake.” Roxy laughs.

“Yeah, well that worked great the first time around so I rest my case.” Jade says smartly.

Karkat looks at you pleadingly, like you have any dog in the race of getting Jade to mack on his sister. Across the room Hal cheers and the TV comes to life. He starts queuing up movies and instead of arguing you all just watch those.

You doze off against Karkat’s shoulder with Sollux sprawled sleeping between you. Evidently the siren song of TV is a perfect lure because when you wake up to the smell of food and Karkat gently poking you in the shoulder with a fork you see that almost everyone else has joined the room, it’s lucky the place is so big.

Dirk is back, sat with Jane’s legs in his lap as he whispers something to her that makes her guffaw loudly. Jake is sat on the soft ground by Jade’s feet, talking to her and Horuss about something nerdy. The other Vantases are sat on the plush ground with the Markaras and a good deal of food between them. Psii is slumped against the Disciple, lazily stealing food from her plate. Mr Egbert is talking brightly to Rosa who is laughing at his words. Honestly pretty much everyone is there.

Just Rose and Vriska are missing.
This is almost like how it used to be back at the house. You and Sollux have a snoring Dave sandwiched between you and Kanaya’s cool arm is around your midsection. Dave’s head is pillowed on John’s leg and he has his face against his Dad’s stomach, Dirk, Roxy, Jane and Jake are all in one big heap next to that and Jade’s foot keeps ending up near your head no matter how much you move around. It’s all one big pile of people.

Further down Signless and Disciple are wrapped around Psii who seems to be in only a light fitful sleep. Latula and Mituna are tangled together and Nepeta is sleeping on Equius’ bulky chest. Of everyone present all of the established romantic clusters are together and often family are reasonably close but as you sit up and look over everyone it looks fractured.

You try to sneak away to think but Kanaya grips you so tight in her sleep that she almost gives you the Heimlich. And though Dave can sleep through a movie at maximum volume with the rest of the humans screech laughing at him apparently someone trying to be stealthy near his sleeping body puts him from out cold to wide a-fucking-wake. You wish you didn’t know why.

“Karkat?” Dave asks blearily. Kanaya’s arm is now around your neck as you’ve tried to slither down out of her grasp.

“Little help?” you rasp. Dave reaches over and slaps Kanaya in the arm.

“Stop strangling him.” Dave hisses.

“Oh, sorry sugar.” Kanaya mumbles and lets you go. You are glad that Dave cannot see just how dark your cheeks are right now, Kanaya will no doubt be mortified when you tell her about this tomorrow.

“Sugar?” Dave sniggers.

“It’s- shut up stop laughing. It’s not a Texas thing, it’s a moirail thing. Sugar is sweet and white, if you watched more Alternian romcoms–” you start to lecture Dave but he falls dramatically back down onto the soft sofa and snores pointedly. That is definitely Sollux you can hear laughing.

“What’s going on?” Roxy’s sleepy voice drifts down to you all.

“Nothing!” you hiss hotly.

“Nothing!” you hiss hotly.

“Sure. Rose back?” Roxy asks and you can see her looking around the room and it takes you an embarrassing half second to remember how much worse their night vision is to yours. Dave and Dirk might act more like they can see in the dark but that’s more relying on other senses.

You take quick stock of the room, Rose and Vriska are still gone.

“No.” you whisper.

“Hn, we should go look. Unless- Hal?” Dirk rumbles, his voice deep with sleep.

A pair of red eyes open and glow in the dark, you can see the distinct outline of his wings from where he’s sprawled over the top of a bookcase that holds movie disks.

“They’re on the ship, I would have woken you if they weren’t by now.” Hal says reproachfully.
“Good enough for me.” Dirk grunts and drops his face back onto Jane’s chest and shoulder.

“Yeah, she can go be a bitch somewhere else.” Dave mutters bitterly and pointedly closes his eyes to go back to sleep.

Ugh, this isn’t good.

You slink out of the TV room and start wandering the halls as the problem at hand eats at your brain. You’ve seen this before, in movies and TV shows. Setup, conflict, resolution. On a TV show killing the tyrannical ruler would be the finale, and in a sense for all of you it is. Almost all of you had a parent kidnapped on this ship and that gives you motive to work together to destroy her.

But now…

Well, the villain is dead and the problem that you’re left with is defeating the game and creating a new world. Not only is not not as simplistic as ‘insert all weapons and one train into villain A’ but you’ve been told that your game is essentially unwinnable in the normal sense. You’re directionless and you know full well that asking almost anyone on this ship what a new world should be you’d get a different answer from each person. And what reason do they have to do what you say? You have no idea what to do now, so why should they follow you?

The problem then is that your group splinters into factions. Your hemocaste paradise that you’ve been living in splits and given how freely the humans group together you might be dealing with a species divide too. Add into that the old grudges the adults have against each other plus no clear antagonist for people to fight and it’ll be anarchy.

You need a way to progress and a way to keep everyone together. But what?

There’s no obvious single task that requires everyone that you can launch you all into, but you must think of something. You pace the corridors mindlessly until your feet take you into the communal dining hall. The doors whoosh open as you approach, automatically so thankfully because Psi isn’t plugged in right now, and you find that you’re not alone. Rose is dressed in a fluffy purple bathrobe with a black towel wrapped around her hair. Vriska appears to be rapidly snatching her hand back from the middle of the table where Rose’s are still resting.

Rose turns to look at you and hazily blinks before her expression changes to one of surprise.

“Oh, it worked.” she says softly.

“Of course it fucking worked, I said it would, didn’t I?” Vriska snaps.

“Uhhhh.” you say because that seems safer than ‘What the fuck did I just walk in on?’.

“I’ll just… go.” you add, backing up.

Rose sighs wearily and stands up. She’s wearing plush cat slippers. Perhaps you’ve fallen into an alternate universe.

“That’s fine Karkat, Vriska proved her point. Besides, you need to talk to her and I need to get some sleep.” Rose sighs and walks towards you.

“Why are you dressed like that?” you blurt out and Rose pauses just as she’s level with you and smiles that Lalonde smile that says ‘I know more than you do’.

“I needed to get the smell of burning off of me.” she answers you as if that explains ANYTHING.
“I have follow up questions to that!” you shout at her retreating back but she just waves at you without turning to look back.

You turn to face Vriska instead and open your mouth to question her but then think of all of the things that you’d rather do than that, like not getting stabbed for instance.

“Why are you up so late wandering around?” Vriska asks, yawning and showing off her long front fangs. Her teeth are the closest to Kanaya’s of anyone’s. Terezi’s are like shark teeth, the Leijons are appropriately catlike, Captors are a total mess, and then you have Equius who looks like a paleontologist with a mess of animal teeth took a much warned against trip down the stairs. Face first. Everyone gets threatening teeth except for your stupid line.

“I’m…” you hesitate. You fear discord among your team and you know that your alliance with Vriska isn’t the most stable thing given that you’re trying to pit common sense against Vriska’s ego and expressing fears of weakness in your position might make her seize for power. But… well, you ask others to trust her leadership in the areas that she calls the shots it would be disingenuous for you to not trust her as well.

“I’m worried about the others.” you say finally and sit down where Rose had been sitting.

“Ohhhhhhh?” Vriska drawls, eager for gossip.

“Everyone was on the same side about the fight and taking Condy down but now she’s dead I’m worried people might fracture.” you say frankly.

To your delight Vriska doesn’t leap for your jugular.

“Mmm, people get all pathetic and lazy with no big bad to fight and I haven’t got many other people to throw up as targets.” Vriska agrees unhappily. You are quietly glad she’s not yet considering you as one.

“I can just see how it’ll go. The humans will stick together and probably take their soulmates with them, or the ones who are actively dating them at least. Then there’s my family as another group. Then what? Highbloods and lowbloods or maybe something more imaginative than that. I mean-what are John and Kurloz going to stick together for when their lives don’t depend on it? None of us had met all of the humans beforehand and like… Eridan was a guy I was sort of friends with who shared drama with me and showed up at the community centre sometimes. How can I blame him if he’s not all ‘ride or die’ for me?” you say, your voice escalating as panic grips you.

“There’s a solution to this.” Vriska says slowly, drumming her fingers on her chin.

“Yes, tell me!” you say excitedly.

“You need,” Vriska says as she shoots you a sly look, “to manipulate people.”

“Vriska, no.” you groan.

“Listen! You want people to not do something they’re inclined to do and insteaaaaaaaad do what you want them to do, right? That’s manipulation.” she says brightly.

“I don’t want to make people do what I want them to do, I just want them to want to stick together.” you insist.

“So you want to control their actions, thoughts and feelings. That’s skilled manipulation.” she informs you.
You bury your face in your hands and shake your head.

“You are the worst person, Vriska Serket.” you groan.

“Don’t be such a wiggler, not all manipulation is bad. Besides you’re doing it for their own good.” Vriska reasons.

“I’m not sure if you’re the monster that I created or if being around you makes me a monster. Am I Frankenstein or the Creature here? Who knows?” you whine, resting your head on the table.

Vriska snorts dismissively and smacks you in the horn. You yelp and clutch your hands to your head.

“You’re such a fucking hypocrite. You try to change how people think and act all of the time, you try and put people together or fix everyone’s arguments. It’s the same thing. I’m just calling it what it is.” Vriska sneers. You really hate her sometimes, you also hate that she might be slightly right maybe.

“I just want to make people get along, that’s all. And we’ve tried setting people up by class and by aspect and that didn’t work.” you lament. God, when you tried spending that much time with Kankri on his planet you were damn near driven out of your mind. You got one day in there where you were with the other knights but you got the distinct impression that Rose and Terezi would murder you if they had to spend all day with Kankri again.

Damnit, you’re being too mean, maybe you’re the problem.

“Yeah, all that taught us is princes are assholes.” Vriska cackles and, ok yeah, Dirk, Eridan and Kurloz was a fun afternoon had by no one. Apparently princes aren’t keen on themselves or each other.

“There must be a way to get people who aren’t friends but could be friends to bond so that we won’t all fall apart. Otherwise everyone is just going to think their way is best and we’ll all fall apart!” you insist.

“Pff, good luck with that.” Vriska snorts, pushing herself up from the table. You squint up at her suspiciously.

“Was that a light and luck thing? Did you just do something?” you ask suspiciously and Vriska grins at you, her expression all predatory.

“Maaaaaaaybe, maaaaaaaby not.” she says, about an inch from your face and then whirls around and struts off, slapping you with her long bird’s nest hair as she goes. Her cool exit is cut off when she chitters in pained surprise and slaps one hand over her arm.

You sit up a little straighter that almost looked like- well it looked like how you react when you suddenly get a new addition to Dave’s mark on your arm. That sudden unexpected sharp burning of ink coming in under your skin. Or you suppose it’s not actual ink like it is with a human made tattoo done with needles and stuff.

Vriska shoves her sleeve up and stares at her arm in horror. There’s something there but you can’t tell what it is from where you’re sat. If she’s just got a soulmark then that means that at least one more human is doubling up, either that or Roxy’s going to have to start moving onto getting marks on her legs. Vriska glares at you and stomps back over to you like this is somehow your fault.

“What is this?!” she demands, shoving her arm in your face.
You peer at the mark on her grey skin. It’s what looks like a toy rabbit in a green box.

“A soulmark, obviously. But I don’t know who this is.” you say. You don’t say that you’re pretty goddamn sure it’s not Rose, seeing as how you’ve seen Rose on Kanaya’s skin for ages before you knew Rose herself. You know her style.

“Well who is it?” Vriska asks angrily.

“I don’t know, whoever you see tomorrow with a new mark talking about how new that mark is that they have. We can fit the entirety of the human race in one room I think you can solve this one.” you point out.

“Well I don’t want it!” she insists.

“Sure, go work that out with them. What the hell do you want from me? You want me to cut your arm off?” you snort.

Vriska looks troublingly thoughtful.

“Would that work?” Vriska asks.

“No, if you lose a body part that has a soulmark on it it just changes to a different limb. The only bit of you I could cut off that’d solve the problem would be your head and that gives me a different problem, besides you’d probably fight me on that one. Also I’d never cut your arm off anyway you fucking lunatic!” you exclaim.

“Psh, like I’d rely on you to cut my arm off. I’d do it myself or maybe ask Terezi. You’re too much of a pussy.” she sneers.

“Sometimes I think we only talk because I hate myself enough to subject myself to it and you love a captive audience. Go fuck off and be creepy somewhere else.” you groan. She flips you off with both hands and struts off, her head held high.

You should send a condolences card to whatever poor bastard just got saddled with Vriska Serket for life. What a nightmare.

Alone once more you scowl at the table with the drama of Vriska gone you’re left circling back to the same problem as before. This is always so much easier in TV shows, the group dynamics always make so much more sense. You’ve got the leader then their counterpart, the one who is rational if the leader is hotheaded or impassioned if the leader is more reserved. There’s a word for it, damnit, what is it?

You pull out your husktop knowing full well that this thought will bother you to no end if you don’t look it up. Though the Earth is destroyed as is its internet Hal took pains to make sure that as much of your shared culture was preserved as possible. The number of hard drives in the StriLonde household is obscene. When you got into the game Hal made copies of everything available to everyone in a museum of the internet sort of way. It’s actually really helped with the homesickness to have things like Youtube and Vine still around even if there’s that sad air to them that there will never be new videos on them. He preserved other things too and one of them is just what you’re looking for.

You pull up TV Tropes, which is not unusual for you at this time of night when you’ve decided that you’re not sleeping or resolved that homework will not be done. You try to articulate the concept that you’re looking for and type in ‘second in command’. It brings up a number of options, one of which is ‘number two: The right-hand man of The Leader, or second in command. Usually The Lancer and
a Foil.” You click the related link below which shows you that it is just what you were thinking of and it is, as you had thought, related to team dynamics.

Specifically, the dynamic of the five man band.

It’s used in fiction all of the time, from children’s stories, movies and TV shows. The leader, the second in command, then the smart one with all the ideas, the powerhouse of the team and the emotional heart. They call that last one ‘the chick’ but fuck humans and their stupid gender ideas. You gnaw on your claws a little, there are worse ways of mixing people up into groups and if you are picking people who would fit into roles of good group dynamics then surely you’re boosting your chances of people forming new bonds. Right?

So test it out. Think of a natural leader type among the humans.

Your mind springs to Roxy right away. She’s likable, charismatic, smart. She’d be a good leader. Maybe you should have thought of Dirk but by now you know him well enough to know that he micromanages out of necessity and the experience that no one else will do it. He’s never once challenged your leadership. That said he could easily be Roxy’s second in command, he can be calculating in contrast to how in touch with everyone she is.

You might be on to something here.

You stand up from the table sharply, filled with renewed hope. You have a plan, now all you need is… uh, office supplies. You did have a decent collection of pens and notebooks on you before but you made the mistake in your recent past of putting pens down near Meulin and the stationary obsessed weirdo stole them for her horde.

This is a big ship though, so no doubt you’ll find something appropriate around sooner or later! You can do this, you can absolutely fix your leadership problems!

Eight hours later you’re crouched on the floor with ink stained fingers and post it notes scattered all over the floor. At least you think they’re basically the Alternian equivalent of post it notes. There are some things that you feel you should experience guilt for being out of touch with your species’ culture but office supplies is an area that you can give yourself a pass in. Besides, you almost have a solution!

The door behind you snaps open, flinging light on you, making you hiss at the brightness. You squint up at your sister as she stands in the doorway.

[Shut the door!] you sign at her and she takes a step in and does so. You blink, trying to get your night vision back.

[So you’re like a crazy person now.] Meulin signs, looking pointedly at the post it notes surrounding you.

[What? No. I’m making a plan, it makes perfect sense!] you insist and then you look down at them again.

Around you are scrawled sticky notes with the names of everyone on them and notes about what you think they could do. What roles they could fill, obvious skills they have, things like that. But you’re missing it, it’s so obvious. You look back up at Meulin and give her what is probably a deranged, sleep deprived, smile.

[Meu, I need you to make me a shipping wall.] you sign with slow and deliberate emphasis.
Meulin’s eyes go wide and she kneels before you, gently takes you by the shoulders and speaks with high volume and barely contained excitement.

“Hell. Fucking. Yes.” she laughs and leaps up again.

She kicks several chairs out of the way and drags a table over to stand on, she whips out a long ruler that you know she has for this purpose alone and draws a top row on it and starts filling in names. When you combine your work you know it’s going to be perfect!

Meulin starts mumbling to herself as she counts along to check that she’s not missed anyone and you run your eye over the list as well, she’s included all of the adults too but she’s not got everyone. You walk over to her and tap her on the shoulder.

[You missed Hal off. He’s Equius’ soulmate remember?] you point out. Meulin gasps and leaps onto the table again to add Hal’s name to the end and then moves to start listing everyone down in the same order on the far left column.

She’s just got to the end of her list and checked it when the door slides open, your mom and Nepeta are grinning from ear to ear as they come into the room.

[Karkitty! I can’t believe you started a shipping wall without us!] Nepeta scolds you and you hold your hands up in defence.

[I started the wall but he asked, he was doing that stuff on notes first.] Meulin says, sticking up for you. Best sister.

[Well this is obviously going to be chaos if we don’t have a system so…] your mom trails off and pulls pens out of her newly reclaimed sylladex. She walks off to the side of Meulin’s table and draws a black box and writes ‘confirmed’ in it. She then goes through listing off colour coding quadrants and then non quadrant romance, at your suggestion she adds family because that’ll help you see the groups people will break into more clearly. And so on and so forth. With that done Nepeta and Meulin leap into action, filling out the relationships that they know already exist. Just charting out who is related to who takes a lot of time!

Your mom crouches down on the ground next to you, where you sit surrounded by your notes. Her long hair brushes the floor.

“I didn’t hear you come to bed last night.” she whispers. Your sisters continue with their drawings oblivious to your talk.

“I was here, doing this.” you admit.

“Sleep is important, kitten.” she says and wraps one large warm arm around your back.

“This is more important. I need to keep everyone together, make sure that our whole team doesn’t fall apart now that we’ve rescued all of you. I have to find some kind of solution.” you say insistently.

She doesn’t tell you that you’re being silly for worrying about it or ply you off with platitudes that it’ll all be fine. Instead she just wraps you in a big, soft, hug and tucks you under her chin. Your mom knows what it’s like to grow up trying to save everyone, she didn’t know your dad when he was your age but they still met when they were teenagers. She’s just… here for you, helping however she can.

“I really missed you.” you admit, your voice hoarse.
You were worried about why Signless was so weird, you were horrified at what Psii was going through and you were worried about her of course. The other adults weighed heavily on your mind as well, needless to say. But you had focused so much of your attention on solving the problem, on dealing with what was right before your nose and the things you could fix that you’d tried not to think about it. Missing your mom was never going to bring her back but the plan you put into motion did. With her here in front of you it all just wells up.

You’re close to all of your parents, of course you are. But your relationships with them are different. Signless is your role model, the man you aspire to be. Psii is less straight laced about things, you’re far more likely to end up both blowing off your chores to play videogames with him than with Signless. And your mom… well, she’s the person you watch romcoms with, even though Signless sneaks in every now and then. When you were little you’d sit with your mom as she talked you through human history and the classics because she could make any story fascinating.

“Missed you.” you repeat, squeezing her around the middle. It breaks your heart that none of the humans had this. Mom Lalonde was absent, cold or drunk for most of the time even when she tried to mean well. Neither Jade nor Jake remember their biological parents, just their grandparents. You don’t know how much Jane remembers her mom but John never got a chance to know her and she’s been dead for a long time. And here you’re the one from a species that doesn’t even have mothers and you have the best one but nearly lost her.

“Kitten, you should really sleep.” she says gently and pets your hair.

“No, I gotta…” you trail off as you squint at the now almost completed chart on the wall.

“I am not ashen for Rose and Vriska!” you shout angrily and when Meulin sees Nepeta cackling with laughter you angrily make the sign for ashen with your hands. It’s really just a representation of the symbol, you could understand it even if you didn’t know sign language.

[Yeah you are!] Meu grins at you.

[Vriska! Rose! Stop fighting right now, you two both drive me crazy and so help me I will intervene!] Nepeta signs, giggling and clearly pretending to be you.

[You filthy traitors.] you sign with a scowl. You peer at the rest of the wall curiously, there’s a good deal of speculation, including Rufioh having a thing with Horuss even though he’s already dating Damara.

[What’s this?] you ask, pointing at it.

[You don’t see how they look at each other?] Meulin asks, clearly surprised.

[Damara will kill him if he cheats on her.] Nepeta points out. She’s right, on the list of people you want to backstab ever Damara is on the bottom of that goddamn list. You love her dearly but she’s ruthless when crossed.

[You mean she’ll cut his bulge off and wear it as a festive little hat.] you snort.

[Well Horuss is smart, I don’t think he’ll make a move unless they break up. You know he hates making people unhappy.] Nepeta theorizes.

[Why have you put Hal and Dirk as pitch?] you ask.

[YEAH! It’s clawful!] Nepeta insists.
[They are so pitch, always trying to prove themselves to each other. Besides isn’t Dave basically their shared kid?] Meulin defends, clearly this one is her theory.

[Yeah but Dirk made Hal to help him and to make sure he didn’t become a bad person like Bro, if anything it’s just a really fucked up moirallegiance.] you argue.

[Or they’re just brothers!] Nepeta argues.

[Or that.] you concede.

[Hey, you’re also shipping Hal pitch with this Jake boy but he’s Dirk’s soulmate. Are you shipping two theories here or is this a poly thing?] your mom asks. Meulin looks at the wall and then back to your mom and shrugs.

[Weak.] Nepeta signs, rolling her eyes.

You take a few steps back and look at the chart on the wall and the big green sections of families and then the interconnecting links of relationships. What you need to do is to make teams for people to be in, that five man band thing, let people in disparate groups show off their best sides and bond with each other. Then you can keep everyone together.

You brush aside Vriska’s lingering accusation that this is being manipulative and pick up your sticky notes and pull a table over. You write down columns on the table for the leader, the lancer, the heart, the smart guy, the big guy. The terms need work but whatever. What can you make work here?

You grab Roxy and slap her into the leader column and since you’d thought about it you put Dirk in there too as her lancer. It’d be easy to fill this line with humans. Jake for the heart, Rose for the smart guy and Hal for the big guy. That’d work in a snap, but they already are a unit, you need to mix this up. So… who else? Who doesn’t yet have anything in common with those two but could?

You grab Meulin, she gets people, that’s why she’s here after all. She’d be a perfect heart and she probably has overlapping pop culture interests with Roxy at least if not Dirk too. You put her down in the Heart column. So who else is different? You need someone smart and someone strong.

Hmm…

Damara is super strong with her psionics and with her time powers she’s a badass all around. But she’s pretty grumpy sometimes and though she and Dave seem reasonably tight these days it’d be good to get her in with the other humans, plus she and Meulin are already close. Done, Damara is this team’s big guy.

Now a smart guy. Ugh, you’re pretty sure that Dirk and Roxy are already both geniuses but you’re looking for a different kind of smarts. The sort of cunning smarts that Terezi has, investigative smarts. This team is going to have to chase after a game mission and that requires detective work.

...Of course you do have one guy in your hand here who used to be a police officer. And Cronus is… well, not the sharpest knife in the drawer but you already said you weren’t looking for just IQ. He was a detective and from what Dave told you he was the only police officer, aside from Redglare obviously, who worked out that Dirk killed Bro. You do of course also know that Dirk and Cronus have ‘other history’ but Dirk clearly is no longer interested and if you could use Meulin and Roxy’s supervision to close that drama that might bring the team closer and make everyone more cohesive.

“Risky.” Nepeta notes softly.

“Could pay off though.” you mumble as you look from your notes to the wall a few times.
Yeah, that works. You have a team.

You look down at the scattered sticky notes, now you just need to arrange everyone else. This may take some time.

After some spirited and thankfully silent arguing about the relative canon nature of the ships on the wall, you for example take the stance that Hal isn’t pitch for everyone he’s an asshole to. That’s just Hal sometimes being an asshole to people. The advantage of sign language is that you can zone in on your work as your sisters have a screaming debate on shipping right next to you without you hearing a thing. Eventually your mom calls time on it and drags them out, leaving you be.

You have to include adults in your teams because the numbers don’t break up right but you’re starting to get the general shape of this down. At least until you consider one thing and move two people around and then have to alter others to fit all over again. It takes time.

Long enough that you’re swearing under your breath and pacing around with sticky notes in hand when Kanaya finally opens the door and glares at you.

“I should not even be surprised at this point.” she says flatly.

“Kan, I just need to fix this. Everyone needs to be in teams, I’m so close!” you insist.

“Did you sleep at all last night?” Kanaya asks as you put Mituna and Feferi in their places and squint at the layout of the board.

“I- no, but it’s fine. I’m not tired, I’ll have a nap this afternoon maybe.” you assure her, staring down fixedly at your sticky notes.

“Karkat, it is seven pm. Have you not even eaten yet?” she demands. You look around, her hands are on her hips and she looks really mad.

“Uh.” you hesitate.

“No, that is it.” she says firmly and sweeps you over her shoulder in a fireman’s carry and strides out of the room with you on her shoulder.

“Kanaya! Put me down!” you whine but she’s having none of it. Eventually you just give up and slump down, letting your claws catch on the hem of her shirt with each step she takes. She marches into the communal dining area and drops you unceremoniously into a chair by a table. There’s already talking going on.

“-I’m Obi-Wan, I’m a Jedi and I mean business. For the first three films I’m Ewan Mcgregor then I turn into Sir Alex Guinness.” Dirk raps.

“I need to watch that.” Dave laughs.

“I don’t know…” Jake hums as you turn around in your seat.

“Jake, I am not recreating the Star Wars Shortened rap in Yoda’s voice to convince you to watch it, don’t make me do that.” Dirk groans.

“Well…” Jake says with mischievous tones in his voice.

“Make him do that!” Dave and John shout as once.

“Traitors. Karkat, save me from my self made prison and tell me where you’ve been all day.” Dirk
“Around, doing things,” you say vaguely.

“Don’t you dare leave this table.” Kanaya growls and sweeps off towards the kitchens. John looks from her to you and then grins.

“Oooh, you’re in trouble.” John says teasingly. You scowl at him, it wouldn’t grate so much if he wasn’t right.

“What did you do today, John?” you ask instead of grabbing Dirk’s mostly empty mug and beaning John in the head with it. See? Smart choices, you can make them.

John seems a little confused at your change of topic but answers anyway.

“Me an’ Dave went and picked up all the junk from back in the LOWAS base.” John answers you.

“For shits and giggles I switched our sylladexes over to Hash Map.” Dave adds.

“So everything is broken?” you guess. Dave gasps in offence. You notice that John appears to have a bruise forming at the edge of his scalp so he must have got hit in the head with something.

“Nothing that can’t be replaced.” Hal says from behind you and drifts down onto the table and the last free chair like a sad balloon. He rests his head on his folded arms and makes a sad little chirp, his wings are even dragging on the floor.

You twist and look around the room and, there, you can see Nepeta sitting with Equius and she doesn’t look happy. And- ok, she’s clearly lecturing him and just smacked him in the arm. Apparently he was just being a dick, presumably to Hal. Dirk has evidently got to the same conclusion as you and you watch as his face warps through identifying with the feeling to an empathetic ‘same, buddy’. He even reaches out in front of you and pats Hal gently on the highest point of his red wing.

You catch Nepeta’s eye and raise an eyebrow at her, glancing from Hal to her again. Pitch crush your ass. Nepeta’s eyebrows rise in surprise and she nods thoughtfully.

[I’ll make the updates!] she signs quickly to you and you know when you get back the squares on the wall that cross between Hal’s and Dirk’s sections will be pink and not red.

You should change topic before Dirk finds out about that.

“What did you do today, Jake?” you ask, hoping the answer won’t be ‘Dirk’ because you would like less details about that.

“Me and Jade had a real snowy adventure! She’s been finding information on her planet that suggests that it’s vital to the game to make a new frog on her planet so we’ve been hunting high and low for them all day. There may have also been a snowman or two and a snowball fight involved!” Jake laughs brightly. Oh no, people are already trying to move on.

“Dirk?” you ask, looking at him. He’s stopped reassuring the now slightly less moping Hal.

“Me and Rox helped your dad with rerouting the ship’s systems, lots of tech stuff.” Dirk says with a shrug.

“So, what do you mean by ‘things’ then, Karkat?” Dirk asks, seemingly not willing to let you get off
of the topic. Kanaya puts down a plate with a burger, grub sauce and fries. The vegetation in your
burger is purple, whoever cooked this must have got into the troll food supplies. It’s weird to think
that you’re eating food from Alternia for the first time, rather than just recipes replicated and modified
on Earth.

“Yes, Karkat, I am very interested to know about what you thought was more important than food
and sleep.” your moirail says, dragging and chair over and sitting neatly in it.

“Oh, busted.” John giggles. You reconsider throwing things at his head.

You can’t tell them what you’ve really been doing. You’re not Vriska but even you know that telling
people you’re intending on manipulating their relationships for your own plans is not something that
goes down well. Perhaps you should take another leaf out of Vriska’s book and throw someone else
under the bus instead.

“Aren’t you more interested in whoever just got a new soulmark?” you say instead.

“Oh you heard about that?” John asks and holds his previously blank arm out for you to see, it’s not
the one with Terezi’s dragon on but this one has…

“It’s just a black circle with a little dent in the bottom.” John pouts.

It’s not, now that you know it’s Vriska you can see that it’s an eight ball. The dent on the bottom
looks like it might just be light hitting the ball but you can see it’s the edge of the eight marking. John
Egbert’s soulmates are Vriska Serket and Terezi Pyrope.

You look over at Kanaya who has clearly realised the same thing and is staring with wide eyes.

“You poor bastard.” you whisper.

“Wait, you know who it is?” John gasps.

“It’s not me, not that I’d want your dumb face up in my grill.” Dave teases and you only just catch
the way that Dirk snorts into his drink ever so slightly.

“Come on, tell me! I’ve already checked all the human girls so that means it’s one of the trolls. But
you’ve been missing all night and it’s obviously not Kanaya so who?” John insists, waving his arm
around.

“Oh will you can it? It’s– look give it here.” Hal snaps and grabs John’s arm. He stares at it for a
moment and then lets him go.

“There’s a number of things that could be but given that you’ve ruled out the girls with an interest in
space I doubt it’s a black hole which means it’s probably a ball and Vriska’s the only one here with
an obsession with magic eight balls. Congratulations you have the makings of a threesome that’ll
probably kill you now shut up and let me be miserable in peace.” Hal says bitterly and flops over the
table again.

“You sure are full of sunshine today.” Jake observes, clearly annoyed with Hal’s antics.

“Blow me, English.” Hal snaps.

“Blow what?” Jake counters smartly and Hal jerks upright, clearly furious.

“Dude.” Dirk says softly and reproachfully.
“Yeah, maybe that’s why your soulmate told you to take a hike.” John adds sharply, still holding his arm.

Hal makes a wounded, birdlike, sound and flies off with a flap of his wings that knocks almost everything off of the table. Your drink goes sideways but your food survives.

“John, what the hell?” Dave demands, leaping to his feet.

“You stay, Dave. I’ll go after him, I’d rather he yelled at me to make himself feel better than you. You stay here. And Jake, not cool.” Dirk says as he stands up.

“Seriously? Hal is always a heel to everyone, if he can’t take it then he shouldn’t dish it out I say.” Jake says defensively.

“About any topic other than him not having a body or his soulmate I’d agree with you but that’s just-” Dirk cuts himself off.

Your mind helpfully fills in the ‘below the belt’ part that Dirk wisely chose not to say and you choose not to add. This is one hell of a distraction but not what you wanted. Dirk leaves in the direction Hal left and everyone is a little more sombre after that.

“Aren’t Vriska and Terezi all diamondy for each other?” John asks after a few minutes of silence, his eyebrows are furrowed in worry.

“I hope not. Vriska is a terrible moirail and Terezi seems more like someone who would enable her.” Kanaya answers.

“Less ‘think about this’ and more ‘hold my beer and watch this’ huh?” Dave asks and you can’t help but note that his voice is flat and emotionless again. He’s very displeased indeed.

“Precisely.” Kanaya nods.

You listlessly chew your food, your appetite gone and when you swallow it you put what remains of your food down on the plate once more.

“I think I’m just gonna go to bed.” you tell Kanaya, who doesn’t look happy but does nod.

“I’ll show you where your room is now.” Dave offers and gets up.

“Uh, sure.” you agree and follow him out of the room.

Dave is scowling a bit as he walks and you hesitate on what to say. Finally you figure that saying something is better than nothing at this point.

“I forget that John can be kind of mean sometimes when he wants.” you say. Dave snorts and shakes his head.

“Yeah, he’s like that. Ninety nine times out of a hundred he’s a great guy who will tease you but it’s all in good fun and then sometimes he can just- bam! You know? He doesn’t mean it but he has the freakiest aim for saying the worst thing, he’ll feel bad about it too later when he tells one of the girls and they kick him in the ass about it.” Dave sighs. You wonder what John has said to Dave in the past that means he knows this so very well. You wish to re-re-consider your policy on throwing things at Egbert’s head.

You shove your hands in your pockets and walk along with Dave, before too long you both turn a
corner and see the word ‘bedrooms’ scrawled on the wall in red marker in what looks suspiciously like Dave’s handwriting. As you pass doors you see names written on each of the doors.

Dirk, Roxy, Jake, Jane, Rose, Jade, John, Dave and then right next door… Karkat.

“You can move if you want but you know we needed somewhere to put everyone’s stuff from their rooms so.” Dave shrugs, apparently not caring that he didn’t even finish his sentence.

“I’m not gonna complain about sleeping next to you.” you blurt out.

Dave raises an eyebrow at you and you bite your tongue to stop you digging that hole any deeper.

“Smooth.” he says finally.

“Shut your face.” you insist and grab him by the wrist. You slap the button at the side of the door and pull him into your room.

Your stuff is at least carefully put down in sensible heaps and you’re pretty sure that’s your bed from the base in here.

“Where’s the sopor?” you ask curiously.

“Dadbert and Signless went through the whole ship and put it in Dadberts apparently endless inventory to keep it out of tempted hands.” Dave answers.

The door slides shut behind Dave and low blue lighting clicks on, you wonder if a blueblood lived in this room before you. You still haven’t found out where the previous crew have got to. Suddenly you’re struck with the realisation that you’re still holding Dave’s wrist. It’s his marked one and you turn around and run your thumb over his wrist bone, looking down you can see your iron chain of feeling really shitty and inadequate.

“Been feeling shitty about your leadership I guess?” Dave asks.

“You don’t guess shit, you feel it.” you accuse.

“Hey, I ain’t Rose. I don’t know, I was guessing from what I could feel.” Dave tells you. You suppose he has a point, the things you feel aren’t incredibly specific though you can hardly deny that you’ve not been feeling much fraternal love coming from your twinned roses since they had their big blowup.

“How’s the Rose thing going, anyway?” you ask.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Dave answers stiffly, looking away from you.

“You can’t avoid her forever.” you remind him and his mouth flattens into a thin line.

“I told her that I cared about her and she should let me help her. She said that I of all people should know that being related to someone doesn’t mean they like me.” Dave says tersely.

She- WHAT?!

“I’m gonna punch her face in!” you yell, throwing your hands in the air.

“Can we not?” Dave sighs and flops onto your bed in a listless little heap, it really takes all of the rage energy out of your sails.
You grind your teeth for a moment, enough to reign in your anger. They’ll fix this problem sooner or later but that’s still a shockingly cruel thing to throw at Dave. Now that you’re a totally calm troll (hah) you climb onto your bed next to Dave. His legs tangle with yours, some days you swear he’s 90% legs and arms. He’s still got his shades on even in the relative darkness of your new room so you reach out and carefully slide them off him, he blinks a little at the light but you still get to see the same red that you’ll have one day.

“Hi.” you say quietly.

“Sup?” Dave asks, trying to fight a smile.

You reach up and balance his shades on the headboard of your bed and tuck your head down so your ear is pressed right over his heart. You take a minute or so to listen to the strange ticking sound his heart makes now. A steady thump, thump, thump that marks off time and draws you closer to the future.

“I’ve spent all day trying to come up with a plan to make sure that we don’t fall apart.” you say finally, even though he didn’t ask.

“Us?” Dave asks and his hand tightens on your side just below your grubscars.

“Yeah, I can see it. Humans breaking off one way, then trolls by family, quadrant or caste. It’ll be anarchy and if we’re fractured who knows what could happen.” you explain, the thought has been running over and over in your head.

“Oh.” Dave says and you feel him relax.

“Did you think I meant you and me?” you ask in alarm, pushing yourself up on your elbow to look at him.

“You did say it that way. I was like ‘dude is there something you should tell me?’ because that was out of nowhere!” Dave points out but you can hear the amusement in his voice now that he knows you didn’t mean that.

“Ugh, you dumbass. We’re fine.” you tell him.

Self doubt instantly sinks its hooks into you, essentially just because Dave didn’t throw himself at your feet professing his unceasing devotion to you. Though even if he did that you’d wonder at the sincerity. God, you have shitty self esteem.

“Aren’t we?” you hurriedly ask.

Dave grins and even now your heart still does that stupid flip-flop because the boy you like is smiling at you. He kisses you and it’s just perfect. Yeah, you two are okay.

You kind of awkwardly walk your hands back towards him a little so that you’re, as Dave would put it, ‘all up in his grill’ for the purpose of optimal makeouts. And despite the fact that you two are alone in your room, your bed no less, that’s really all that you want. Not that Dave isn’t attractive, honestly sometimes just looking at him erodes your higher brain functions, but you’re thirteen and stupid about him. You’re like a dog chasing a car, you’d have no idea what to do if this did go further and that’s if you didn’t give yourself a heart attack first. Plus there’s the whole different species thing.

So, no, you just want to kiss him a lot. And ruin his nice looking hair. You even get your hands under his shirt which is great because oh boy bare skin but also he’s apparently surprisingly ticklish
in places. He seems just as surprised by this as you. That proves to be entertaining until Dave’s flailing escape attempts end up smacking you in the face, leaving Dave on the floor crying with laughter and you clutching your nose.

“Oh man, I’m sorry Karkat, are you bleeding?” Dave giggles helplessly, he pulls a new shirt on because his godier one is tangled up with your bedsheets.

“No, just- ow.” you wince, looking at your hand that is thankfully free of blood.

“If it makes you feel better I think I landed on my head when I fell out of bed.” Dave offers, shuffling over to the edge of the mattress and resting his chin on it like a pet that knows it’s done wrong.

You wiggle your nose a little, you’re fine, it just smart’s a bit. Dave leans back and gives you his best sad puppy eyes, an effect entirely ruined by the fact that the shirt he put on says ‘A Man Can Only Take So Much Wizard Dick’. You barely stifle your laughter and instead pull him back onto your bed.

“Can you just hang out with me here tonight? Just so I don’t start tying myself in knots about everyone else, I have a plan, I’m going to put it in place tomorrow but-” you shrug.

“Yeah, I know what you’re like.” Dave nods, pulling his shirt and cape out from under you and stowing it away.

Dave seems to think for a moment.

“Movie?” He suggests.

“Do you have something in mind?” you ask.

“Fuck yeah, the best Kung Fu movie ever. It might be… problematic, in Kankri’s opinion but-” Dave starts, already taking his laptop out and setting it up on your bed.

“Oh, fuck that, play it. What’s it called?” you ask as you manhandle some pillows into place and let Dave use your leg as half of the rest for the laptop.

“Kung Fu Hustle and it’s the best Kung Fu movie ever.” he intones seriously.

You nod and cuddle into his side, Dave throws an arm around your shoulders just enough so you can see the inked facsimile of your blood on the soft inside of his wrist. You start to watch the movie.

It takes you approximately four minutes of runtime before you are pretty sure this is not an actual or serious Kung Fu movie at all. By the time ten minutes has rolled around you’ve decided you’ll watch it anyway and when you watch a woman in a nightdress chase a thug off of her property, beat him with a slipper and engage in a loony tunes style chase, well. By that point you think that Dave may well be right on his declaration of ‘best Kung Fu movie ever’.

Dave does art, you read to him. At some point you both fall asleep.

When you awake in the morning with your face in Dave’s stomach and your legs and arms around his legs like the world’s largest and most trollish koala you find yourself far more relaxed and filled with resolve. You brush your teeth as your plan solidifies in your mind, you change into clean clothes and brim with determination. You march confidently into the communal eating area and determine that the people you really need are in fact here already.
“Are you ok?” Dave asks from his place at your side.

“I’m fine, go get something to eat, I have something else to do first.” you tell him and walk to the nearest table. Your sisters are all sitting there with Latula joining them. You step up onto a seat and then onto the top of the table.

“Hey!” Nepeta protests.

“LISTEN UP EVERYONE, WE’RE DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENT TODAY!” you shout to the room, everyone stares at you but you power on before someone can heckle.

“I NEED TO TALK TO SIX PEOPLE ABOUT A HIGHLY IMPORTANT MISSION RIGHT NOW. SO IF I CALL YOUR NAME OUT, FOLLOW ME. JOHN, ROXY, TAVROS, VRISKA, JADE AND MEENAH.” you bellow.

You don’t give time for questions or for people to mock you. Instead you just leave with your head held high like you have important places to be. Your father has taught you how to be a fair leader but if anything working with Vriska and being around Meenah has taught you that often just sheer confidence and force of will counts for a lot too.

Regardless the half a minute that you spend in the hallway waiting erodes your confidence alarmingly quickly but you restrain yourself from going back in and yelling again. Someone who has to yell twice isn’t worth listening to the first time.

The doors open and everyone you called walks though, Vriska has a sly look on her face as if she has some suspicion as to what you’re doing.

“This way.” you say and lead them to a small meeting room, they follow you. When the door shuts behind all of you then you turn to face your selected people.

“It has occured to me that there’s a possibility of our group fracturing because of the sheer size of it, plenty of us haven’t really spoken much to some of our fellow players because there’s so little time and so many people but we can’t force ourselves to rely on strangers when we’re in trouble. So I need all of you to help me here.” you explain.

“You’re trying to get people to be friends?” Jade guesses, tilting her head curiously.

“More or less. But I’m trying to teach you all how to work together and so we can work out what everyone can really do when they’re pushed to in smaller groups. Like… if Rose gets knocked out in a fight can another light player or seer help out? I’ve seen that time and doom work well together, are there other combinations we should know about? That kind of thing. That way people bond as teams and we can count on each other.” you explain.

“That’s pretty tactical, it makes sense to change things up and experiment.” Roxy agrees, nodding thoughtfully.

“So, are we a team?” John asks.

“No, you’re the leaders. We’re going in teams of five and I’ve picked each of you to lead a team.” you tell them.

Vriska looks like she’s swallowed a lemon.

“You’re KIDDING me! Tavros isn’t a leader of SHIT! He’s the wimpiest little snotrag I’ve ever seen!” she exclaims, waving an arm at him. Poor Tavros winces.
“Um, I was actually wondering about that too.” he admits quietly.

“I won’t hear any argument on my choices of leaders, or in who has who in what team. It took me ages to get this right and we’re going to make it work. Just because you’re a leader doesn’t mean you all have to lead in the same way. But you’re all leaders and that’s all there is to it. And Vriska, if you’re so sure I’m wrong then you can wait and tell me I told you so if I am wrong.” you say quickly before Vriska can argue more.

You pull sheets of paper out of your sylladex and hand one out to each person.

“These are your teams, I had to add adults to some of them just because our numbers didn’t slice down just right. Each of you have one person in your team who should be your second in command, someone you would already trust.” you explain as they all read their sheets.

“You also all have someone capable of balancing your team, someone who can be relied on for a specialised skill and someone who’s just really goddamn powerful. Use your teams properly.” you instruct them.

“But what are we supposed to be doing?” Meenah asks, clearly unimpressed at getting orders from you.

“That’s entirely up to you. The game seems to have no end of objectives and I’m sure everyone has an idea of what they think would be good to do next. Work it out yourselves. I’ll start up a memo or something for the leaders so we don’t double up but it’s all your own free choices.” you explain.

“Hah, a literal choose your own adventure, huh?” John laughs.

-Wait.

HEY.

==> Be the author
Choose your own adventure? Look, I’m pretty sure we did this free will thing already. Remember? Took ages to write? Lots of links? Swore not to do it again?

Well, fine you free will fanatic, here are your choices. Get back to me afterwards.

==> Be Karkat (again)

==> Be John

==> Be Roxy

==> Be Tavros

==> Be Vriska

==> Be Jade

==> Be Meenah

You done? Read all that? Good! Now we can…

==> Be Karkat again already!

You fuss with the hem of your cape, the bit at the front that is and not the end. Yours doesn't have that gear teeth thing going on that Dave's has so it's totally possible that's a time thing. Thankfully when you're not flying you don't have wings flapping behind you like you're The Summoner or Rufioh which is good because you don't really want to adjust to having brand new limbs any more than you need to. Also, ugh, Rufioh. That whole thing between him and Damara is something you're going to have to address sooner rather than later.
Ever since you came back you've been hearing about the shit people got up to today and you're pretty sure this actually warrants everyone getting together and having a big meeting about it. Weirdly enough Kurloz died according to your brothers but no matter how much you message him he isn't replying with anything except 'honk' which tells you he's alive again so maybe he woke up on Derse or Prospit or maybe he god tiered but either way you will have to have words with him later on the subject of answering messages when asked.

"Hey, is anyone else back?" You ask, sticking your head into the cafeteria.

"Karkat, hey." Dave says wearily from across the room.

"Oh, when did you get back?" you ask, heading over there.

"Literally just now, they teleported in!" Roxy exclaims from a nearby table. Your eyes scan over what appears to be half of Jade's group and most of Tavros', Jade is dressed like Damara only all in black and grey instead of shades of red.

"You died?! WHEN? HOW?" you yelp in alarm and Jade smiles at you a touch uneasily.

"I didn't actually, my denizen gave it to me in exchange for a deal." Jade says quickly.

"Well shit and I had to die to get mine." you complain.

"Don't remind me, my ears are still ringing from Dave screaming about it." Eridan sneers.

"Fucking blow me Eridan." Dave snaps at him.

"Uh... ok. Dave, a moment?" you say diplomatically and then pull him out by the sleeve.

In the hallway outside you're alone but anyone could come along so you move into a big meeting room that's a little more private. Dave leans up against the window and looks out at the darkness of SBURB space on the other side.

"Are you ok?" you ask warily.

"I'm cool." he shrugs with one shoulder.

"Hm, debatable." you tease and lean against his side.

"Man, what a fucking day, huh?" you sigh, tipping your head back and resting it against the chilly glass.

"Yeah." Dave agrees with a nod and you feel warm fingers sliding between yours.

"Sorry about dying on you." you apologise again.

"At least I know now that if it happens again you're more likely to come back." Dave reasons.

You look over at him and smile, look at him being accidentally optimistic. You squeeze his hand in yours a little more.

"Hal looks pretty worse for wear." you say worriedly and Dave grimaces.

"How do you even treat a sprite injury? At least it's not really hurting him much now, but still... ouch." Dave nods.
"I was thinking we should get everyone together maybe, talk about what happened with each of the groups." you suggest. Maybe it could just be a memo but you have a sneaking suspicion that absolutely zero people would read that, even including your beloved soulmate and dear, sweet, moirail.

"You could al- AUGH! JESUS DICKS MOTHERFUCKER!" Dave yelps, yanking his hand away from yours and clutching at his arm. You watch in rapt fascination as white chain links arch up out of the place on his skin where your blood flows from his inner elbow. The links flow up and around the back of his upper arm to a kind of loop and then suddenly they fill in with a gradiated rainbow of colour. It starts, ends, and is anchored in your blood.

"I always forget how much that stings, god. That's a big one. I thought this shit was supposed to slow down as we got older?" Dave hisses as he twists his arm to look at it.

"You talk like we're adults. You're fourteen and I'm thirteen." you reason.

"Not for much longer." Dave adds.

"We got ours so much earlier than everyone else, most people just have a mark or two at our age, we're way more advanced." you say. You certainly got enough stares for it as a child.

"I guess." Dave nods.

Suddenly he straightens up a little and gets that faraway look he gets when he's messaging someone on his shades.

"Rose wants to meet me, she says she has something to talk to me about." Dave says slowly and not without a touch of skepticism.

"Has she apologised?" you ask in surprise.

"A little, I want the rest of it. She did say she'd talk to me later and this is, as it happens, later so I guess I gotta bounce. She's out there." Dave tells you, jerking his thumb towards the door.

"Go on, make her grovel at least a little." you laugh and shove him towards the door.

"Oh, you know it." Dave nods and walks out. As he goes you watch his new mark. He feels things through his just like you do, you wonder what he gets from that or whether even he doesn't know yet. It can't be unconnected to your god tier status or if it is that's a hell of a coincidence. Now that you're alone you take your own phone out and message Kanaya.

[carcinoGeneticist began pestering grimAuxiliatrix]

CG: HEY GUESS WHAT.

GA: I Guess That You Still Owe Me One Hell Of A Feelings Jam Especially Considering The Day I Have Had

CG: THAT IS ABSOLUTELY TRUE AND I WILL BE ALL YOURS THIS EVENING I JUST HAVE TO ROUND UP THE WHOLE CREW OF IDIOTS THAT I SEEM TO HAVE FOUND MYSELF CO-LEADER OF AND GET REPORTS FIRST. BUT THEN, YES, MY HAND, YOUR FACE. WE WILL UH DO THAT.

GA: You Very Nearly Said That You Would Make It Happen Didnt You
CG: YOU HAVE NO PROOF THAT DAVE’S SPEECH PATTERNS ARE RUBBING OFF ON ME. I WILL NOT STAND FOR THIS HEINOUS SLANDER, THIS ASSASINATION OF MY GOOD NAME.

GA: I Do Believe That Before This You Were Close To Approaching A Point

CG: I MAY HAVE EYED UP A POINT, AN END GOAL FOR THIS CONVERSATION. PERHAPS I EVEN FLIRTED WITH THE IDEA OF BEING ON TOPIC. GENTLY GOOSED THE CONCEPT OF COHERENCE.

GA: Do Not Let Me Stop You From Getting Down With Conversational Goals By All Means

CG: OK I CAN DO THIS ALL DAY BUT THE POINT I ORIGINALY TROLLED YOU ABOUT WAS THAT I THINK DAVE AND ROSE ARE MAKING UP.

GA: Holy Shit Really

CG: SOUNDED LIKE IT.

GA: What I Would Not Give To Be Able To Overhear That Conversation

CG: WELL THEY’RE RIGHT OUTSIDE THE ROOM I’M IN SO I PROBABLY COULD DO THAT.

GA: Karkat Vantas You Put Your Ear To That Door And Overhear Right Now And Report Back

CG: THAT SEEMS LIKE AN INVASION OF PRIVACY.

GA: As Your Moirail I Would Not Allow You To Do Something Immoral Ergo If I Am Telling You To Listen In On Those Twin Based Conversations You Can Do So In Good Faith And Furthermore Should You Not Listen So As To Further Support Dave Emotionally

CG: I THINK YOU’RE ALWAYS DESPERATE FOR GOSSIP IS WHAT I THINK.

GA: But You Will Still Listen

You hesitate. If they wanted a private conversation they wouldn't be having it in the hallway and also Dave has been really upset by this whole thing, plus you're concerned for Rose. So maybe it wouldn't hurt if you just had a little listen. Maybe.

You lean against the door pressing your ear to the cool metal. Rose is talking.

“-been so hard trying to blot it out and-”

“Yeah, no, I get it. Never thought I’d have to fuckin thank Vriska for her good judgement and selflessness.”

“Ugh don’t remind me.”

“So, uh, are you and her… OW!”

CG: THEY’RE TALKING ABOUT VRISKA.

GA: Ugh

CG: APPARENTLY SHE DID SOMETHING HELPFUL.
You go back to listening.

“-John also said that it’s like… I see the best way of doing things but it might not be the only way.”

“Really. The Rose Lalonde way of doing things is not the only way of doing things. No. Never. I am shocked. But seriously, Rose? I mean, time is more elastic than you give it credit for. Maybe not for me but you should see Damz and Aradia bend its rules like it’s no big thing.”

CG: THEY’RE TALKING ASPECTS NOW I THINK. LIGHT AND TIME.

GA: Rose Has Seemed Exceedingly Upset By Her Aspect But I Really Cannot Understand How It Works

CG: SHH DAVE’S TALKING!

GA: You Are Reading This You Do Not Need To Shush Me

“-before when we were trying to find my dream. Combine powers. Wonder twin powers activate and all that shit. See what’s coming in time too not just your Rose way. Here.”

“I don’t know… I- ok fine.”

GA: What Is Happening Now

CG: I DON’T KNOW, THEY’RE SILENT, THEY WERE TALKING ABOUT COMBINING THEIR ASPECTS LIKE DAVE’S DONE BEFORE BUT NOW IT’S ALL QUIET.

GA: Did They Leave

CG: I DON’T THINK SO.

“Oh fuck, Rox…”

“This is what I’ve been dealing with! You see?! There’s no way this ends well.”

“No. No you know what? Fuck that. I’ve already seen it we just need to get there and take him the fuck out. I didn’t know what that past loop was about until now but I get it.”

“And what about today, huh? You saw the paths of time!”

“We’ve… ugh I hate saying this but we’ve got to let it play. You already put us on the right line today with the beds so… fuck. Long game, that’s all we’ve got.”

GA: Karkat

CG: THEY’VE SEEN SOMETHING BAD I THINK, SOMETHING TO DO WITH ROXY. I HAVE TO GO.

You put your phone away and open the door, Rose is already looking at you of course she probably knew you were there the whole time.

“What’s going on?” you ask.

“See? Now you know what it feels like not being able to say.” Rose says sharply and Dave turns to glare at her.
“Sounds like a you problem, actually.” he snaps back at her.

“There’s going to be a problem soon.” Dave tells you, focusing on you.

“What can I do?” you ask.

“I need you to make sure you have that meeting, in here. Make sure everyone is there but don’t worry about us or Latula. Tell Meenah to be sure to be here. It’s gonna suck but I’ve got a plan.” Dave insists.

“What’s going to happen?” you ask worriedly.

Dave hesitates for a second but then starts to speak again.

“People are gonna die and it’s gonna suck for a bit trust me but there’s a plan and Rose has made it so things are gonna play out as best as it can. But… well, you know how you were worried about how we’d all cope without a big bad to fight like Fish Hitler?” Dave says.

“Yeah?” you reply.

“You’re not gonna need to worry about that anymore. Just be sure to get everyone there except Latula and Rose, I can count on you, right?” he asks.

“Of course you can.” You look from him to Rose.

“See, trusting people. Not that hard.” Dave says tartly.

Rose opens her mouth to argue but shakes her head. She pushes away from the wall and leans against Dave, her face in his neck and her hands tight against his shirt.

“I’m sorry. It’s not easy for me I never used to be able to… it was different with me and Roxy. She was my competition more than she was my teammate before, not like you and Dirk. I’m not used to relying on people so I didn’t and I fucked up, God I fucked up so bad I’m so sorry.” she says, choking on her words. Dave wraps her in a tight hug.

“Hey, no, it’s not… I’m not used to trusting people who aren’t Dirk and Hal.” he tells her, rubbing her back soothingly.

“But you’re better at it than me.” she whispers.

“So what, you’re smarter than me. And people don’t generally think you’re a dumbass when they talk to you so I think we’re fifty-fifty on social skills here. Look, trust us. It’s not you on your own. You got Vriska to help you, you got me and Karkat’s helping. Not just you, ok?” Dave tells her, pulling her back to look at her. Rose nods.

“And I’ll… I suppose I’ll talk to Hal. Like you said I should about, ugh, medical help for this.” Rose says with a grimace and wipes at her under eyes which are tinted with black makeup.

“I can’t believe that you’re so into psychology and so on board with my treatment but you get like this about the idea of you maybe possibly needing chemical help to make you not depressed.” Dave snorts in amusement.

“I know all about psychology and it’s my brain, it’s not unreasonable for me to expect it to do what I want.” Rose says defensively.

Dave pulls an expression that suggests that not only is that an unreasonable thing but it may just be
the stupidest thing he’s heard in a good while. Rose groans and shoves him. You feel a little like you shouldn’t have watched this but it’s just that stupid cross cultural human to troll stuff again.

“So I need to call that meeting now?” you ask.

“Yeah, get started now. Rose you need to start finding Latula.” Dave says.

“Mm, on it. I’ll see you soon. I’ve got to find Vriska and you get that bed too.” Rose sniffles a little and walks off with a wave.

You look around at Dave. Something bad is apparently going to happen, maybe to multiple people and Roxy’s name was mentioned. But Dave doesn’t look upset, his expression is tight and slightly angry. It’s a little like it was when you were kidnapped on that ship. A face that speaks ill to someone willing to harm his loved ones.

“Hey, are you still with me?” you ask and Dave looks at you, his expression becoming more normal again.

“Yeah, it’s just a day and I’ve got ass to kick.” he nods.

“Okay.” You say uncertainly. You remember that you were supposed to be starting a memo and head back into the meeting room, you hop up onto one of the tables and sit cross legged as you start putting out the word to various teams as well as the adults. It’s Sollux who shows up first, hands in his pockets as he slinks into the room.

“What’s going on?” he asks, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Rose and Dave are up to something, some big oncoming disaster. I’m just doing what they said by getting people together.” you tell him innocently. This isn’t your scheme.

“But they’re talking?” he asks in surprise.

“It seems like it’s all back to normal.” you nod. Sollux’s shoulders sag with relief.

He drops onto sitting on the tabletop at your side and seems to consider something for a moment as you type away to insist that yes, really, people do need to come here.

“This might not be the best time…” Sollux says slowly.

“Oh God.” you groan but turn to look at him because you disapproval has rarely stopped your brother from talking before.

“You know how we talked before about a single point of failure?” Sollux asks.

“Uh, not specifically but I know what you mean. A single point of failure is one narrowed bit where if that goes wrong everything does. It’s why having multiples of classes and aspects is nice, it’s why having three parents instead of one is good, it’s why me and Vriska sharing leadership is smart.” you say slowly.

“Right! You get it.” Sollux nods.

He falls silent and scratches the back of his neck uneasily.

“So!” you prompt.

“We only have one helmsman.” he says finally.
“I mean… the ship was only designed for one, even with Psii’s mods to it.” you frown.

“Yeah but this way a helmsman can disconnect from the ship when he wants to and walk off, no other ship is made like that. But like it or not dad is our only helmsman and even when he’s not connected he has to be ready to step in if something goes wrong. It’s a single point of failure. Even if he was stuck in there all of the time it would be.” he points out.

“So you want a backup plan for that?” you ask but Sollux shakes his head.

“Doesn’t it occur to you that our now ex grand leader of our species doesn’t let big glaring flaws like that happen? What happened when Psii got sick and had to be taken out? What would happen if he’d died somehow? You think they would have just left this ship stranded in space? I mean, I know the shuttle we got captured on was like that but it was always within range of its parent ship. A battleship like this though…” Sollux trails off.

Oh! Oh…

“Would have had other helmsmen.” you guess.

“Would have had ways to make other people helmsmen.” Sollux corrects.

“You mean a way to put in the implants that Dad has?” you ask.

“Tuna and I have had a look, the medical bay here has a whole machine that does it. The whole thing is automated, no medicullers needed. It’s just… get in and go. We could do it. We can make it so that it doesn’t all rest on Dad’s shoulders and so that if he can’t deal with being in there again for a while he doesn’t have to, even if there’s an emergency. No single point of failure. And it’s not like we’d be stuck in there, not like we would have if we were forced into it. It’s different.” he says insistently.

“And if it goes wrong?” you ask.

“I’ll go first, I’ve got a dreamself still. Kill me and that body wakes up instead good as new.” he shrugs.

“Probably.” you say stiffly.

Sollux shrugs and you stare at him. The plan is bananas, those ports go right into Psii’s brain, his spinal cord, his major nerves and several vital organs. It wouldn’t be an easy or painless thing and as far as you know it’s not reversible. You’re his brother, you don’t want to see him put through that and you know that Psii wouldn’t either.

But as a leader… well, Sollux’s argument makes sense. You heard the nightmares your dad used to have about helming, you know it’s better now that he’s modified the setup so he can leave whenever. You know there’s value in reclaiming trauma, in doing a thing by choice. And there’s value in Sollux who would have been a helmsman on Alternia for sure if he was there now choosing to be a modified version of that destiny in a way that gives him freedom. There’s rebellion in that.

“You haven’t told Psii.” you say slowly.

“You know what he’d say.” Sollux says, looking sidelong at you and seemingly evaluating if you’d snitch or not.

“You’re asking my opinion or my permission? Because even though the idea sets my teeth on edge it’s your body, not mine.” you say quickly.
“Not your permission but… I guess someone else’s view on if this is crazy. And I’d rather get the view of someone I trust who has lived with a helmsman before I freak out my moirail.” Sollux says, wincing as he talks.

“I don’t think Dave is going to be on board with this. And I’m not gonna be unless you take Hal with you, he’s the closest we have to a doctor.” you tell him.

“Yeah I know but-” Sollux pauses as the door opens and the room starts to fill with people. Dave is urging them all in and he comes inside with them, leaning against the window and peering out.

“Dave, what’s wrong?” Dirk asks worriedly.

“Later.” Dave mutters and pulls out his phone types something and puts it away again, walking out of the room quickly.

“That was suspicious.” Sollux says flatly.

More and more people come in and sit down, all looking a little lost. Sollux gets up and looks through the door with a frown.

“He and Rose are out there with Latula and- uh ok? Where are they going?” Sollux trails off as Dave comes back in again.

“Sit down.” Dave says quickly to Sollux and moves to the window again.

“Dave, what’s going on? You’re worrying us.” Roxy says and gets up. Not everyone has got a seat yet and all the void players are now crowding the front. Horuss has a really nasty black eye coming up, eesh.

“Karkat I need you to message Meenah, tell her to come here for the meeting.” Dave says, turning back to face you.

You want to ask questions, to protest. But you also know that Rose and Dave saw something that they’re working to protect people and ensure the best outcome. Right across from you is Roxy and this involves her somehow so you can hardly risk screwing things up by questioning him.

You nod and send the message, Dave looks over your shoulder as you do so.

“I need you to be ready to do your sick new chain thing, ok? You’ll know when.” Dave whispers and backs off to the window again. You’re about to question again but Aranea bursts in the door, leading Meenah and the rest of her team behind her.

You’re supposed to be having a meeting, that’s what’s happening.

“Oh good, you’re all here.” Aranea declares brightly, her voice brittle and strange. Her smile sits on her face wrong and the others with her look off too. But there’s a plan, right? So… go with it.

“You made it, I think we’re just missing a few people. Where’d Rose go or-” you ask, glancing at Dave.

“They’ll be here.” Dave replies instantly and perhaps that’s not something you should draw attention to. Nearby Dirk seems to be trying to psychically convey to Dave that he knows something is wrong and will do something about it. Dave’s expression and posture remind you entirely of how he was on the troll ship before, it does nothing to set you at ease.
“We should contact Calliope.” Aranea insists. You’re completely thrown by her nonsensical demand, especially with your worry over Dave so it ends up being Vriska who speaks instead.

“Who?” Vriska asks from her seat.

“The one we’ve been talking to.” Aranea says. That’s… wrong. Is that even Aranea at all?

“The muse, you mean? Did they ever tell us their name? I don’t remember that.” Roxy says, clearly just trying to help.

“I don’t-” you start to say and hesitate. You weren’t allowed to know their name, because it would summon their brother and he was supposed to be terrible wasn’t he?

Before you can think more the screen behind you lights up, Aranea somehow getting right into the presentation system of the room and popping open a troll chat window to do it.

[arachnesGauze began trolling uraniumUmbra]

AG: TALK.

That’s her trolltag but that’s not Aranea’s quirk, not at all. You look back at her, this isn’t Aranea. You turn your gaze to Dave but he’s not reacting, he’s not surprised. An answer comes up on the screen in the pale grey of the muse.

UU: hello?

Aranea explodes into crazed laughing and you are absolutely certain it’s not her now, but why are the others at her side not reacting when every other person in the room looks alarmed. You can hear more messages pinging in behind you but you’re not looking. No you’re looking at the trident suddenly in Meenah’s hand and seeing the way the Captors both react at once to a death they cannot stop.

You hear the trident hit Roxy as you turn to look at Dave. His face is icy and he is armed. Roxy drops to the floor with the other void players and you look to see Porrim standing blank faced and splattered in blue as Equius and Horuss are in halves. Their soulmates are screeching in agony Dirk is on his knees trying to somehow revive Roxy as Dave steps over her.

“Let them go, English.” Dave says flatly, stepping over Roxy’s body.

The smile falls off of Aranea’s face and Jake in the background quietly goes ‘what?’ as Dave squares up against Aranea.

“Oh even you’ve heard of how great I am. Right?” Aranea says, her cadence weirdly off.

“Too bad that you won’t. You know. Live to do anything with that knowledge.” she laughs and you see Kurloz move and react before you can think. He’s got a club in his hand he and means to kill Dave, you know it. Your hand flies out and chains rip out of the ceiling metal, forging into bonds and bindings, they snare Kurloz up so tight he can’t even move.

“You’re the one that made our universe real.” Dave says slowly and Aranea grins.

“I am. I’m your god you should bow to me.” Aranea laughs, or not Aranea but the thing in her right now.

“Yeah you clearly DIDN’T learn much about humans when you were watching us.” Dave says, his
voice growing loud just in time for Rose to sneak in with Latula.

“Oh really.” Aranea says.

“Yeah, I mean first off you killed my sister so I’m gonna kill you. And second…” Dave trails off.

“He’s got two.” Rose snarls from behind her.

Latula draws back her fist just in time for Aranea to whirl around to face Rose and get punched clean in the face. A flash of teal light comes out of her fist and Aranea drops to the ground like a tonne of bricks. Meenah, Porrim and The Summoner all recoil back from her and at once all launch into tearful explanations about how they didn’t mean it, how they couldn’t fight her control.

“Shut up, we’re not done.” Rose says sharply. She leans down and rifles through Aranea’s sylladex until she pulls out that deranged puppet, Cal.

The next thing she drops on a clear section of ground is a void quest bed.

“Get them on there, it’ll work. We still need to talk, that is if you’re still there. I would hate to think we’d scared a god away.” Rose sneers, her eyes on the screen behind you.

You twist to see a lot of arguing and fighting between the muse and the asshole in green text, but at the bottom he’s replying to her.

UU: YOU THINK THAT YOU CAN BEAT ME WITH A LITTLE TRICK LIKE THAT? I’LL KILL YOU!

UU: yoU leave them alone!

UU: YOU KNOW WHAT. SISTER DEAR. I WILL NOT LEAVE THEM ALONE AND YOU CAN’T MAKE ME.

UU: FuCKING BITCHES RuINED MY uNIVERSE BY WATCHING IT.

“You can’t unmake us by not paying attention. Trying to force yourself not to think of it won’t work and even if it would we have the attention of a muse too.” Rose purrs with malice in her eyes.

UU: I AM NOT POWERLESS! I AM A GOD! I WILL BREAK YOUr TINY PATHETIC uNIVERSE FROM THE OuTSIDE IN! AND YOU WILL WATCH THEM DIE AND THEN. NOW THAT I KNOW WHERE YOU ARE I WILL KILL YOU!

UU: no!

Outside the windows the edge of space begins to crack and crack some more, behind the cracks technicolour shifting rainbow light filters through. You feel like you’re inside a breaking snowglobe.

“That’ll take you six months exactly to break through because I’ve seen it, and I’ve also seen that you don’t win.” Dave drawls. Behind him Dirk pulls the trident from Roxy’s chest and places her on the void bed. Porrim picks up Horuss’ upper body.

UU: YOU DON’T KNOW THAT!

“Except Dave and I pooled our powers, so we do know. But the thing is that you can destroy our universe but your powers to do that are significantly more limited in the one that you are in, the alpha timeline. So we’re simply going to go there.” Rose smiles.
“And kick your ass.” Dave adds.

UU: IT’S NOT POSSIBLE FOR A MERE KNIGHT TO BEAT ME OR TO EVEN GET HERE. YOU WILL DIE. AND I WILL MAKE HER WATCH.

“My mother was not a good person but she was a scientist. So let’s try an experiment. If Dave is right and we survive longer than the projected end of this universe which is in…” Rose trails off, looking at Dave.

“Four thousand three hundred and forty four hours, that’s when this universe is destroyed.” Dave answers.

Behind them the quest bed starts to glow slightly and small insects bump up against the windows behind you, trying to get in.

“So if Dave were to get a message from a future version of himself from a greater number of hours in the future than that it would mean that we’re right, we’re in your timeline now and we’re coming for you. Because you killed my brother’s soulmate, you killed my sister, you killed our friends. But if we don’t get that message I suppose it would mean-” Rose pauses as Dave’s phone pings and he smiles but it’s a mean kind of smile. He flicks something on the screen and a chat window pops up next to the one between grey text muse and green text asshole.

[Future!turntechGodhead (4368 hours from now) began pestering Current!turntechGodhead]

FTG: oh snap

FTG: check me out mr lord of time cramping your style and also memes because hey guess what

FTG: im already here

[Future!turntechGodhead (4368 hours from now) ceased pestering Current!turntechGodhead]

Roxy, Equius and Horuss all gasp in a breath at the same time and the screen fizzles out, cutting the conversations off. Roxy sits up with a flail, dressed in blues with a strange eye mask. She looks around the room in bafflement.

“What… what the fuck did I just miss?” she asks right before Jane throws herself at Roxy and crushes her in a hug.
CONTENT WARNING: hey so just to be on the safe side a part of this chapter might be triggering to people who have issues around suicide. I know it's fine for me now but I also know that when I was very very unwell this might have upset me so use your own discretion here. I've put this before and after it **** so if you want to avoid the section when you see those first four asterisks hit control+f, put in **** and make it take you to the next set and you'll be after the worst of it.

I don't personally think it's that bad, it's not first person or directly on screen but we're all in different places so I'd rather be safe than hurt someone.

You lean against the table at the front of the room and silently watch as Karkat lets Kurloz down enough in his chains so that Latula can punch the crazy out of his head too. Jane, Sollux and Dirk are all hovering around Roxy and the other void players have their loved ones all up in their business. Rose comes and hops up onto the table at your side. Everything feels far away and you’re buzzing with anger. He killed Roxy. You don’t blame Aranea for that, not at all and not Kurloz either.

Lord English, no- fucking Caliborn is the one responsible for this. He’s the one who awakened your universe on a whim and chose to watch your life unfold like a reality TV show he got to vote on, he no doubt steered your reality into one that entertained him best. He is responsible for everything shitty in your life. And he killed your sister.

“Karkat.” you call out quietly and your soulmate’s head whips around so fast that you’re surprised his neck doesn’t break.

“Make everyone shut up.” you ask of him.

He stares at you for a second then nods. He climbs on top of the quest bed and you have to look up at the ceiling and focus on the tiles there for a moment because if you don’t your brain is going to cycle right back around to Roxy and blood and- and then you’ll be no use to anyone.

Crush that down.

“EVERYONE SIT THE FUCK DOWN AND SHUT THE FUCK UP RIGHT NOW!” Karkat bellows he then hops down off of the bed, stows it away and starts individually shouting down anyone who tries to say anything until eventually silence has been beaten into the room. Like the proudest little guard dog he turns around to look at you expectantly.

“We’re going to go kill him.” you say slowly.

“And HOW are we going to do that? You were pretty goddamn vague back there!” Vriska says, standing up in her seat.

“Sit your ass back down!” Karkat barks out.

“Karkat have you got a pen?” you ask wearily. Karkat nods and immediately hands you a black marker. You slide off of the table at the front and uncap the pen.
“I need to catch everyone up on timelines first.” you say and press the pen to the wall.

“This is our universe at the very beginning, right away shit can go different ways so it forks off, timelines separating everywhere. Then there’s our timeline, this one except we end here when our universe does.” you say, drawing a straight line at the top.

“Be the thing is even though there’s a crazy number of alternate timelines in our universe we’re not the only universe. The alpha timeline isn’t just some other strand in ours it’s in a different… look, if our timeline is a branch then our universe is a tree and the alpha timeline is a whole different tree in the next fucking orchard over. In between is everything else you could imagine. Like what if there was a universe where cats didn’t exist? That universe is there. What about one where everyone who is human is a troll and all the trolls are humans? Yep, right that way. Every possible variation is here but I need to get to that one way over there, the alpha timeline.” you turn around again. People are staring.

“But we know you’ve done it.” Rose says.

“I saw us doing it. I saw me, Damz and ‘radia cutting a hole in time for the ship on my first trip into the future. Sollux saw it too, I didn’t know what was happening but I get it now. Time is like space you can…” you make a vague motion with your hands.

“Fold it and cut a hole from one to the other.” Jade says with a nod.

“Yeah, then I get us there. We join up with our alternate universe selves, do whatever still needs doing to get to their reward because it’s obvious our universe ain’t getting one and then. Then I kill that bastard.” you say.

Dirk moves, it’s too fast and makes you jump. You can’t quite focus on him or anyone you feel really far off.

“You aren’t going to fight him.” Dirk says.

You look up at him. It’s like those magic eye paintings, everything looks strange anyway but with how stiff and angry he’s holding himself you could squint and see Bro.

Are you… having a panic attack? This doesn’t feel like one. You’re not panicking. You’re just calmly plotting a murder because this bastard ruined your life and killed your sister. And, actually, a lot of people.

“You can’t stop me.” you point out.

Dirk opens his mouth to argue with you and just.

No.

Time screeches to a halt around you and you’re not worried about it, time is your thing. You could make it go again. You look at Dirk, gearing up to berate you like he wouldn’t do what you’re going to do if he could. What kind of lame power is heart anyway? Fucking Captain Planet bullshit.

Roxy’s blood is on the floor, amid all of the blue that’s there and splattered on the walls. You can hear it in your head, the sound of the tines of the trident hitting her sternum, the wet gurgle of her lungs, the-

You press your head against the wall and try to breathe. How many other people are going to die before you’re able to get everyone out? Six months in this session, then the journey, then the alpha
timeline and fighting Caliborn. How many people are you going to have to watch-

Fuck you can still see Roxy behind your eyes, the spurt of blood, the sound of it. You can’t get it out of your head, and to make matters worse you can feel the echo of how everything hurt when Karkat died, you can still feel the warmth of Rose’s blood on your skin when she died.

You clench your fist and slam it into the wall, the bright spark of pain feels a little more real and anger and the unfairness of this whole thing wells up in you. You’re one of the last people alive from your whole species. You didn’t ask for this! It’s not FAIR.

Your hand is killing you and you still don’t feel any better or less angry. Time is still stopped but you don’t care. You leave the room, you leave the ship even and go sit on the outside of it. Staring at the crack frozen in time. At some point time slips back into running, you’re not sure when.

“Hey.”

You turn to see Hal floating over to you. He sits down by your side and drapes his wing over your shoulder, his one remaining wing that is because he got his other one shot off apparently.

“Does it still hurt?” you ask.

“I’m fine.” He answers with a shrug. That’s not an answer to the question you asked.

“You kind of vanished on us back there.” He says carefully. Are the cracks of light coming through the universe getting longer or are you imagining that?

“Dave.” He prompts.

“Only from your perspective, from mine I walked off.” you say flatly.

“Roxy was worried about you, Karkat and Sollux too. Dirk was in a panic but when is he not with you?” Hal laughs a little at that last bit.

“I know what I have to do, it’d just be great if people stopped dying. And Rose needs to get rid of Cal, I can’t be near him. Or just knowing he’s near and I can’t see him is worse maybe.” you say, shaking your head.

“People are working on that, don’t worry about it.” Hal says. His arm is on your shoulder, he’s testing to see if you will let him have more contact. The whole thing feels distant, robotic almost. You hold your hand out, the one that you didn’t punch a wall with and you wiggle your fingers on it. Everything feels dreamlike, it’s really odd.

Hal’s saying something again.

“I’m going to bed.” you say.

“Dave, no, stay. We should talk and you know it’s not like I can’t find you again.” Hal points out.

“Yeah, well, you won’t be able to tomorrow.” you answer flatly.

“I… what?” Hal asks, his eyebrows raising in surprise.

You open you mouth to answer him but draw a blank. What’s happening tomorrow with Hal?

“Sorry, I don’t know what I meant. I think I’m having some kind of light power hangover from sharing with Rose earlier.” you tell him.
Hal uncoils from sitting and looks over at you, peering into your eyes.

“Dave, you’re worrying me.” He says softly. And it’s a kind of softness that hurts to hear, the kind that’d break you open and leave your messy, awful guts spilling out everywhere.

This time when you freeze time and leave, you meant to. Though the losing track of how you got dressed and under the covers wasn’t part of the plan. You’re fidgeting under the covers, your whole body is restless and every time you start to fall off asleep it’s just blood behind your eyes all over again. The door clicks open and you groan, pulling the covers up higher, you don’t want another lecture from some do gooder. The door shuts and you can hear footsteps.

“Don’t you think you’d sleep better with your glasses off?” Karkat asks.

“Nhh, fuck off.” you grumble, though he’s right of course.

“I’m not fucking off, this is my room.” Karkat protests. You roll over to stare at him and realise that he’s right, you took the time to set lines of Rose’s wool up over every wall and have hung up more photos than you’d care to admit from it. This room has a few tacked to the walls but it also has a poster for an Alternian romance movie as well as the Titanic poster on the wall. Not your room.

“Did you come to my room and get in my bed by accident?” Karkat asks with a slightly disbelieving laugh. He tugs his cape and hood off to drop them on the floor.

“Maybe.” you mumble, curling back under the covers again.

“After you left Rose explained the rest of your plan in more detail, Sollux confirmed what the two of you saw. And… Rose told us that her ability to see the future ends when this universe does. So that’s… a shitshow. Don’t turn around.” Karkat adds that last part as an order and you are frozen staring at the wall as the sound of fabric hitting the floor fills your ears.

With more fabric sounds and then the sound of him walking off to brush his teeth in the attached tiny bathroom he comes back to you, his hand brushing your shoulder.

“You kicking me out?” you ask.

“No.” Karkat says, shuffling into the bed with you.

“You can go if you don’t want to be here, though.” He adds hastily.

“Wanna be here.” you mumble into his shirt, turning around to face him.

Karkat sighs and his fingers come out to touch the arms of your shades, his claws clinking on the metal, but then he pauses.

“Tell your moirail you’re okay, stupid.” Karkat orders.

[turntechGodhead began pestering twinArmageddons]

TG: youre okay stupid

TA: ii... what the fuck?

TG: just what karkat said to say

TA: you vanii2hed on u2 and then you vanii2hed on hal two what giive2?
TA: wait. tell me what kk 2aiid exactly.
TG: “tell your moirail youre ok stupid”
TG: so
TG: youre ok stupid
TA: you deliberately obtu2e a22
TA: giiven what ju2t happened you're eiither tryiing two be funny and faiiliing or you're being an a22hole two make me not pay attentiion two how fucked up you're probably feeling and ii don't know whiich optiion ii2 more piitiiful, hone2tly.
TG: the first
TG: i punched a wall i have to kill a god of time roxy died horuss and equius died
TG: i feel weird
TA: kk ii2 there?
TG: yeah
TA: maybe you 2hould 2leep thii2 off. ii'm gonna go talk two hiim.
TG: k
TA: <>
TG: its kind of funny
TA: what?
TG: i mean i bet this wasnt really what you signed up for cause like shit keeps happening and it dont stop
TA: ….
[twinArmageddons ceased pestering turntechGodhead]
Oh. Well that’s bad. Probably. You squeeze your eyes shut and turn your head into Karkat’s arm and tune everything out, even him talking. Karkat shifts his arm out from under your head and you consider what Lord English will be like. He can kick a hole in your universe from so much further through time, he’s a LORD of the thing, you’re just a knight and a dumb fourteen year old. You can’t even handle arguing with him and watching your sister-
“Well I’m not going, I don’t care. He’s my soulmate I have dibs, you know that.” Karkat says testily.
“I’m not saying you had to, god, just make it weird why don’t you.”
“He keeps going all blank it’s not like… I don’t know what we can…”
You jerk back from the hands on your shades which effectively pulls them off. Sollux is there.
“Hi.” He says, falling into place next to you.
“I was just talking to you.” you say dumbly. Sollux’s eyebrows raise a little.

You check your internal sense of time and find you’re missing something like twenty minutes.

“I think I lost twenty minutes there.” you say slowly.

“Yeah you went all blank on me.” Karkat tells you and pulls the pillow out from under your head and sits there pulling you gently so that your head is in his lap. You can feel his sharp claws petting through your hair.

“Got any other blank spots?” Sollux asks.

“I don’t…” you curl up a little and the flare of pain from your hand focuses you.

“Don’t remember how I got here, or how I got outside the ship before. And I didn’t mean to stop time either it just sort of happened.” you admit.

“So we’re thinking shock then?” Karkat asks quietly.

“Disassociation from it, yeah.” Sollux agrees and boy is it interesting to watch a guy with a lisp and a split tongue try to say that word.

There must be, it occurs to you, an alternate timeline where Sollux stayed with Aradia who though sometimes morally sketchy is still more stable than you. Karkat didn’t have much choice, he got cursed with you but Sollux chose Dave Strider: human garbage fire.

“Hey, don’t fucking say that. Just because you’re mumbling doesn’t mean I can’t still hear you, I’m six inches away for crying out loud.” Sollux snarls.

Oh you were mumble-thinking again. Shit, you must be bad.

“Hey, maybe you are a curse.” Karkat says lightly. You tip your head up to look at him as Sollux makes a noise of offence.

“Yeah, like one of those genie deals. Get the hot guy in your science class to date you but you end the world. That kind of thing.” Karkat grins.

“That sounds like a stupid deal.” you point out.

“Well, it’s more like get the hot guy your dad introduced you to at a crime scene to be your soulmate but you end the world.” He corrects thoughtfully.

“Still sounds like a bad idea.” you reply.

“I don’t know, have you seen your ass?” Karkat teases and it’s enough to make you laugh without realising you’d started.

“Alright, alright,” Sollux says with a sigh, “listen. I’m pretty sure that right now you need to sleep some of this off, but tomorrow we can talk and try to come up with some kind of a plan or something.”

“Yeah, remember your whole talk with Rose about not doing things all alone?” Karkat says pointedly. He slides out from under your head and shoves the pillow back there only to shimmy under the covers against your back. You’re getting the impression that calming down and going to sleep isn’t really optional here.
You curl up a little smaller, because though the beds in your rooms aren’t small (they were made for adult trolls after all) fitting three teenagers in one is a bit of a task. You manage it though, you have your head under Sollux’s chin, your painful hand is curled into your middle and despite being small Karkat is a damn good big spoon.

You feel like you’ve still got hints of Rose’s light sticking to your time powers, Karkat and Sollux are whispering above your head and it’s like you can hear this echo of them speaking only the echo comes before the speech. Damn if Rose has to deal with this no wonder she’d started drinking, though at least she’s sworn to you that she’s stopped. ~Hey, you’re not the only fucked up twin now.

Karkat gets out of bed and even though he’s floating you still know where he is. Years of knowing where people are without sound doesn’t go away. Not after Bro and-

Cal!

You jerk bolt upright in the bed.

“Rose! Cal! I gotta-” you gasp but Sollux pulls you down again.

“It’s already fixed. Rose explained a bit about it.” Sollux insists.

“But it could fuck her up!” you protest.

“No anymore. Terezi got a good sniff of it with Rose and it turns out that with a bunch of time and motivation our prince of heart and prince of rage were able to destroy the shit out of all of the possessed crazy making powers of the puppet. It’s just a shitty doll now.” Karkat explains from somewhere behind you.

But. No, that’s too easy. It can’t be.

“But-” you protest.

“And it’s locked in Dadbert’s safe now, apparently he has one of those on him all the time or something. Honestly, all the seers checked it over, you’re fine. Go to sleep.” Sollux says, pulling you close.

You don’t trust that, Cal could be faking. Then people take their eyes of him and he’s gone and who knows what’ll happen then! Karkat slides back into bed, he smells minty, he must have been brushing his teeth. There is only so long, thankfully, that you can sustain amped up panic. Especially between two of your favourite people. Admittedly after that much panic there’s always tiredness but hey- you’re already in bed. Falling asleep is easy and thankfully dreamless.

You are woken up… less than pleasantly.

“You asshole!” Karkat snaps, shaking you awake.

“Whuh?” you grunt, boy he looks really mad. Especially up close when you can see the way the little frowny crease between his eyebrows deepens.

“You busted your hand and didn’t tell us!” Karkat accuses angrily.

“He did tell me he punched a wall actually.” Sollux says and turns your wrist over gently. You look down it’s swollen to say the least and though you can still move your fingers it hurts enough to make you not want to. You’re a fun few shades of red and purple too.
“And you didn’t CHECK?!” Karkat screeches, he’s pacing back and forth across the small room.

“Does the shouting make it less injured?” you grumble, shutting your eyes again although you can still hear Sollux’s small laugh.

“Look, it might not be broken.” Sollux says.

“HE HAS SAUSAGE FINGERS!” Karkat screeches, projecting volume in the way only Karkat can.

“Could just be a sprain.” you argue.

“I don’t know, you punched a wall! How hard did you punch it?” Karkat demands, flailing around like an angry tornado incarnated into a short troll body.

“The point is that the ship has an Xray machine on it, we can just see if it’s broken.” Sollux points out. Karkat deflates all at once his arms lowering from prime overhead panicked flailing position to a rather sheepish acceptance.

“I’ll be fine, I’ve had worse.” you insist.

“You’re a trainwreck, also this isn’t optional. Come on.” Sollux says and hops out of bed over you. You sit up with a sigh, this is going to be a fuss and then people are going to get involved and it’s all going to suck.

“Or I could not.” you offer.

Karkat scowls at you and a chain drops from his hand which he catches and glares at you.

“Yeah, how about you see how well that works out for you.” Karkat growls.

“Alright, alright,” you groan as you get up, “I’ll go. Chill your secret god tier bondage powers.”

“HAH! Oh my God, he’s right. You went god tier and your super power is bondage! That’s the funniest fucking thing I’ve heard all week!” Sollux howls.

Karkat glares at the pair of you and the chain melts into redness and, uh- schlorsp back into his skin? Maybe? That’s the word you’re going with. You hope he’s not using his actual blood for that somehow and that it’s just symbolic and shit.

“Move your ass.” Karkat says, poking you in the shoulder.

“Hey, you said you liked my ass.” you say defensively.

“At least you still remember things from last night.” Sollux notes.

“Yeah, I like your ass plenty. I want to watch it walk all the way to that Xray machine. Move.” He says and pokes you again.

“Alright!” you say sharply and let the two of them lead you out of the room. You trek down the corridors following Sollux who apparently knows the way and with Karkat following behind you as if you’re going to run off on him. Though in fairness if you wanted to really escape him you’d be gone by now from having frozen time. You just know that Karkat has the patience and dedication into arguing the weather into changing, he has far more motivation for looking after you. If you stopped time and avoided him you’d only be putting this off. At least he’s not got Dirk and Hal involved yet so you’ll take this route, thanks.
The medical area of the ship is bigger than you had thought it would be, though you’ve explored the ship a bit you’ve not been down here. Perhaps you stuck your head in but all of the beds and big intimidating machines may have well put you off.

“Morning boys, why aren’t you three dressed yet?” Jane asks, looking up from one of the machines.

“Jane, what’re you doing here?” Sollux says and you nearly run into the back of him as he skids to a halt, you quickly tuck your hand behind your back but unfortunately you have to get up earlier in the morning than this to fool Jane Crocker.

“I was seeing if what we have here could add to our medical supplies. But what are you three doing here and what’s wrong with your hand, Dave?” Jane asks, pushing herself back from the giant machine that she was examining. It looks like a purple ridged chest freezer with clear plates and a weird number of tubes.

“Uh.” Sollux stalls.

Jane sets her hands on her hips and narrows her eyes at the three of you.

“We need to use the Xray machine.” Karkat says flatly.

“And why do you need to do that?” Jane asks, walking closer. You try to edge back but Karkat isn’t letting you.

“Gotta up my selfie game, stopping at the skin is just so last year.” you say quickly and flashstep around a machine.

“Come on Dave, it’s this one.” Sollux says, walking over to one more or less identical buggy looking machine and starts pressing buttons on it.

“Maybe I’ll just ask Dirk then.” Jane says lightly, pulling her phone out.

“No, don’t! Just, ugh. They want me to check if it’s broken.” you sigh, taking your hand out.

Jane’s eyes go wide and she reaches for you but Sollux holds her back with his psionics and pulls you up to the machine.

“Hand.” He says, looking at the screen.

“What happened?” Jane asks worriedly.

“Got into a fight with a wall, it’s cool though you should see the other guy.” you joke and set your pretty swollen and worryingly purple hand on the glowing plate that Sollux is tapping his claw on for you.

“I’m guessing the wall was unharmed.” Karkat snorts.

“Babe, why you gotta drag me like this?” you groan, turning your head to eye him around your shades.

“You deserve it.” Karkat says grumpily.

Sollux sucks a pained hiss through his teeth and winces, still staring at the screen. Now, you’re not a doctor but that’s not a good sound. You take your hand back and walk around to look at the screen. Displayed in the screen in black and green is a surprisingly clear picture of your hand bones. And you have broken several bones. Well, fuck.
“How bad is it?” Karkat asks, looking at the screen over your shoulder.

“Well that’s obviously broken.” Sollux points out.

“Yeah, that’s a pretty clean fracture right the way through of my third metacarpal.” you groan.

“What?” Karkat asks, squinting at you.

“I broke the big in my palm bone on my flip people off finger.” you explain.

“But that’s the best finger to have.” Karkat points out.

“Yeah well my second… medial phalanges there is fractured slightly too, as is… I think the head of the proximal on my third. I would say the tip of my ring finger too but that looks old and doesn’t hurt so, I think that’s a Bro one.” you add, peering at the screen.

“Wow Dave, you should have been a doctor.” Jane says and you can hear how painfully genuine she is. Blugh, CrockerBerts, there’s only so much sincerity a mere Strider like you can take in one go.

“I’d be a shit doctor, I hate blood. I just like bones. I learnt them all one christmas break when I was bored and Dirk was working, I had Hal test me a lot is all.” you say with a shrug.

Karkat’s arms come around your middle and he rests his warm forehead against your spine, all hostility gone now that you’re making some effort to look after yourself.

“You could have been an Xray tech, taken bone photographs during the day and done the photography you like the rest of the time.” He says into your shirt.

There’s a timeline out there where the game didn’t happen. Where you grow up and do just that, maybe work part time at a hospital and do your varied art things the rest of the time. Karkat could be a writer and you know he’d be leading shit at the community centre the rest of the time. You’d move out eventually, get a place just with him. You know you’d never move far from your siblings and he probably wouldn’t either so it’d like still be Texas for you. Maybe you’d still have your windows open and have crows come shout at you for food. Maybe you’d get to see Dirk have actual kids of his own when he’s an adult because he’d nail that. Roxy would be some badass hacker, Dirk would make robot body parts for people and Rose would either write pretentious fiction or psychoanalyse people for a living. Knowing her probably both. Maybe Karkat would even take in some mutant grub and you’d have a troll kid or you’d rescue some poor kid from the foster system and try to be something other than the horror stories you and Dirk were so scared of living.

Simply because time is infinite that exact thing that you imagined happens somewhere, some alternate version of you has that theoretical alternate life. But he’s not alive and real like you are because he didn’t get the interest of fucking Lord son of a bitch English and you did. You still hate him for that level of perfection all the same.

“Instead,” you finally say, “I just have broken bones.”

“Should I get Dirk? What do you need to do for broken hand bones?” Jane asks, pushing off of the machine she’s leaning against and taking you gingerly by the wrist, it might not be broken but its bruised from the shock. You’re such a dumbass, punching a wall.

“I don’t need Dirk, you just splint something like this and I can do that on my own or failing that I’m sure I’ve got some willing help here.” you say, jerking your head to your… uh… boyfriends. God it still feels weird thinking that.
“Well, still.” Jane sighs, looking down at it.

“Did Dirk ever kiss things better when you were little? Dad used to do that for me and I’d do it for John when he got on that deathtrap of a pogo toy outside the house and got thrown off and hurt himself.” She says with a slight laugh.

“He’d just treat it, besides mouth germs on anything bleeding isn’t smart.” you say slowly. Dirk used to sometimes hold you close or give you a kiss on top of your head if you were hurt and sad but not whatever actually hurt. Why would he? You get the vague feeling that you’re missing some cultural thing that people without shitty parents get.

“Well you’re not bleeding so I’ll do it.” Jane says primly and raises your hand and gently kisses the back of your hand like you’re some princess at a ball.

You have a split second of noting that her lips are really soft and then feeling REALLY awkward about noticing that because she’s your sister’s soulmate, man. All that is forgotten when a gentle shower of golden sparks burst between you. Your arm suddenly feels weird and tingly like you’d slept on it all night and the blood is finally rushing back in.

“Oh my gosh.” Jane gasps, staring at your hand.

You pull your hand back and gawp at it. It looks just the same as your other hand, not injured at all!

“Holy shit Jane!” you shout. You flex your fingers but there’s not even an ache there.

“It looks like you are making progress with your life powers after all.” Karkat says happily and cheerfully slaps Jane on the arm.

“Put that back there, let me see.” Sollux says, shooing you back to the imaging plate on the machine. You place your hand there and there’s another click as it takes a second image. For a moment you wonder if it’s bad to have this many Xrays in a solid twelve months, you had a lot done after you got back from being abducted to Jupiter. Also why is that a thing you can say about your life and also not even the strangest thing? Why this?

“Look at this.” Sollux whistles lowly, clearly impressed.

You walk around to take another look at the screen and this time when you look for it all of the fractures and breaks are gone. Even the old one from Bro times seems to be missing and you’ve died twice since then without that healing.

“Damn, Jane.” you agree.

“Well I’m glad that I could help but I didn’t even know I could do that, I didn’t mean to do it either. I just-“ She flounders.

“Kissed it better?” Karkat asks with a laugh.

“When I tell Roxy about this she’s going to get so many questionable and totally fake injuries, I’m sure of it.” Sollux snorts and switches the machine off.

“I- oh, I do not want to talk about that.” Jane says firmly.

“Yeah, Jane if you could do me a solid and not rat me out to Dirk on this I’d appreciate it.” you say hopefully.
“I’m not sure I can do that, I mean he’d be very worried that you were hurt even if you are better now.” Jane says uncertainly.

****

A message flashes up on your shades, it’s Rose.

tentacleTherapist began pestering turntechGodhead

TT: Good luck with that, she definitely wants to rat on you to Dirk.

TG: i thought you were trying to hold off on the all seeing thing

TT: I am, only I’ve seen today already. I can’t unsee it now, can I?

TT: Besides I need you to do something for me.

TG: of course you do

TT: Do you not remember this from sharing my vision? You don’t know what’s coming?

TG: i remember all the stuff relevant to the end of the world the universe were in right now not the last end of the world we went through

TG: how shitty is it that i have to clarify that?

TT: Very. Also that’s interesting, I feel I still have a slight ticking in my ears like a rhythmic tinnitus.

TG: ive had a few things that are like people speaking with an echo only the echo comes first

TT: Useless and annoying how on trend for our powers.

TT: Also I am glad that your hand is better.

TT: But on topic I need you to talk Dirk out of committing suicide please.

TG: WHAT

Oh fuck that you are switching conversations so fast.

turntechGodhead began pestering timaeusTestified

TG: ROSE SAYS YOURE ABOUT TO KILL YOURSELF WHAT THE FUCK DONT YOU DARE

TT: Ah, fuck.

TG: !!!!!!

TG: where are you?!

TT: It’s not like that Dave, calm down.

It’s not- oh. Fucking hell is he trying to pull a Vriska and deliberately god tier himself? That self righteous, self absorbed bastard, he is, isn’t he?!

“Do any of you know where the quest beds are? We got the void one off of Vriska in person but she
and Dadbert were putting the rest somewhere else on the ship. Where is it?” You ask desperately.

“What? Why do you want to know?” Karkat asks.

Rose messages you again, just a floor and room number. You take off in a run and Karkat and Sollux are smart enough to sprint after you. It’s one floor up and around the other half of the ship but, here’s the thing, you’re the time guy.

“What the- Dave?!” Karkat yells as you all fly by Vriska who is ever so slowly walking through a doorway.

Time snaps back into place like a rubber band as you land by a door and slam your hand into a button. The room is full of stone beds and right in the middle stand Dirk and Jake.

“I’ll be right back.” Dirk says quickly to Jake.

“No you fucking won’t!” you snarl at him. Dirk holds his hands up to try to make you be calm as he walks out of the room, the door clicks shut behind him.

“I knew you’d beat us here.” Rose says, flying around the corner with Jade and Hal.

“What the hell are you thinking!?” you demand furiously.

“Were you… were you just about to force yourself to go god tier?” Karkat asks suspiciously.

“It’s pretty obvious that the game is getting more serious lately, I have to be able to keep up to protect all of you.” Dirk says sternly, like you’re all being dumb and disobedient children for even asking. You punch him hard in the arm.

“HEY!” Dirk protests.

“You motherfucker, I’m the asshole that has to hear you die. Me and Mituna both do, and Psii as well! And you know yesterday I had to hear two of my friends die, two of my brothers and my goddamn SOULMATE but by all means just blow your brains out in the same rolling twenty four hours why don’t you?” Sollux snaps.

“And you can’t do that to Jake!” Jade protests.

“Oh, he’s in there too.” Rose says flatly.

“What? Oh I’m gonna-” Jade snarls but Rose holds her back.

“I still need you to open that portal, trust me.” She says softly.

“Look, I’m sorry you have to hear it but if I get to my top level I can protect Dave better. I’m sure you’d rather I died for a minute than have anything happen to him.” Dirk tries, looking at Karkat and Sollux both. That low sneak, he’s trying to leverage you against them!

“As the guy in charge of the wellbeing of pretty much everyone but especially Dave and Rose I really should point out that this is bad for them.” Hal says flatly.

“Yeah, I mean it’s not like you getting killed to protect me wasn’t my worst living nightmare for… oh, my ENTIRE LIFE. But hey, thanks for trying to make that nightmare a reality.” you hiss angrily. Dirk has no sense of self preservation, does he?

There’s a pop sound from your right and you look over to see that the hallway wall is no longer there
but instead there’s an open archway to some strange dark room filled with tubes. It’s clearly Jade’s doing by why she’s done it is beyond you and honestly not your concern right now.

“I can’t believe you were dumb enough to cook up some stupid god tier suicide pact with Jake without even stopping to think of the consequences. Even leaving emotional ones aside your classpect brings up all new problems! Not to mention your lack of dreamself.” Hal says, throwing his arms up in the air in despair.

“Get Jake out here so I can-” Jade is cut off by Sollux suddenly hissing, you twist to see Sollux covering his ears. Oh no.

The ring of the gunshot is muffled by the closed door but the way Dirk’s whole body seems to snap into a taut line is clear enough. His mouth falls open in silent agony and his hand clasps to his arm which is rapidly spreading black. You know all too well what this feels like.

****

“Dirk, it’ll be ok, he’ll wake up.” Hal says gently. Jade lets out a startled sob and Rose tightens her arms around her in a fierce hug.

“Jake.” Dirk chokes out and pink lightning arcs up his spine.

“No, no, no, Dirk this was the kind of thing I meant. You’re a Prince of Heart. You destroy your aspect but it can destroy you too, Jake is a huge part of your heart and you can’t lose it now, he’ll be back just…” Hal trails off as another zap of bright pink crackles through his chest. Sollux and Karkat pull you back a step or two with them.

Dirk seems to go partially transparent in places, bits of him glitch out of alignment like one of Bro’s shitty video games. There’s a shattering sound as it gets worse, he no longer looks like himself, just floating shards of Dirk parts.

“Dirk! No!” Hal calls out and desperately tries to grab for him.

Only… Dirk vanishes in a flash.

Hal wails in pain and rapidly flashes from orange to red over and over again, there’s no more tail instead there’s just legs and he’s suddenly wearing a shirt. Dirk’s shirt. Hal just absorbed Dirk.

“No, no, no!” Hal- or Hal and Dirk shout because their voice sounds double layered. You reach for them but Karkat grabs your hand.

“This won’t get better if you get stuck in there too!” Karkat hisses.

“Get out! Get out!” the sprite yells, clutching his head in his hands. His form warps and for a second you can see two sets of eyes behind his shades. His body shudders and then a limp black feathery body is ejected out of the sprite at high speed. Suddenly Hal/Dirk has no more wings or feathery parts, just a colour flashing body.

“I didn’t want this!” it yells and with a flash of colour a flickering kernelsprite is ejected. Now there’s just someone who looks like Dirk but wrong standing there in flesh tones and not sprite colours.

“Unless you all want nightmares I’d suggest not looking at this next bit!” Rose shouts, turning away and pulling Jade’s head towards her. Karkat and Sollux make that choice for you, dragging you around. Sollux has his hands over his ears and you know… you just know that Dirk is about to die. No matter what you did he would, so why did you come here?
You see the flash of Dirk’s heart powers, you see it flare on Karkat’s cheeks. You don’t see what happens but you hear it. There’s the lightning and then a sound which is distressingly organic and... meaty. There’s a distant shattering of glass and a crash. Then lastly there’s a sound of a body hitting the floor.

“Don’t look.” Sollux says quickly which is good because you’re not sure that you can move right now.

“Dirk! Dirk!” That’s Jake. The door opens and he makes a choked sound of horror.

“Well get him in there already if you want him back! Jesus this was your idea wasn’t it?!” Sollux shouts and flies over you.

“Dave, come on, this way.” Rose calls.

You turn, Karkat’s hand is still tight on your arm but you can see Rose and a traumatised looking Jade. There’s no Dirk on the floor but there is a lot of blood on everything. You- you’re trying not to look at it. You won’t look into the room with the quest beds, where all the blood leads. You don’t want to know what’s become of Dirk.

“Come on!” Rose urges you, rushing through the portal that Jade made and into a lab. You’re keen to be anywhere not filled with red, hot, sticky blood so you and Karkat follow her with Jade choosing to stay out there.

“If we couldn’t stop it why did you drag me up here to see?” you demand of her.

“Because this is the only way that this happens.” Rose says in a whisper.

“Only way what-”

You’re interrupted by a sound, glass falling to the floor and an inhuman noise. You and Karkat pull your weapons out and move out in front. The room is disconcertingly dark with giant black monitors on one side and rows of tubes on the other. In the middle is a mount for what clearly should be a much bigger tube but now there’s just a little slime and a lot of broken glass.

Behind it, in the darkness, something moves.

You’re prepared for a monster, for an enemy, but when you peer into the dark that’s not what you see. It’s not even a thought that you have first, it’s a reaction. It’s the same one you got the first time you saw Rose and Roxy, that recognition of a permutation of your own genes. Your face but different. Your DNA has assessed the figure in front of you and loudly yelled MINE at it.

You lower your sword.

On the ground amid broken glass and a hint of green goo is a guy, about the same kind of size as you. His face shape has echoes of Roxy but his eyes are all yours. His hair is Dirk’s but black and arching out of it are- well they’re horns. Troll horns. Only they’re not, instead of that red/orange/yellow tone that troll horns have these are bone white like antlers on deer skulls. His skin too is a symmetrical mishmash of pale human colours and troll grey. It’s like that skin thing that people get sometimes, what was it, vitiligo? Something like that.

Oh, yeah, and he’s buck naked.

His wide red on yellow eyes stare at you and suddenly you get it. Dirk and Hal threw out Bowie, threw out the kernelsprite and then Dirk ripped Hal out. Obviously that killed Dirk to do that. It
worked in the same way that ripping out your own lungs cures a chest infection but really causes a bigger problem.

“What’s happening?” the (Troll? Human?) guy on the floor asks. His voice is creepily identical to Dirk’s before his voice broke.

“When you separated from Dirk there wasn’t enough genetic material for-” Rose starts to explain but is cut off by a disgusted noise from Karkat.

“Try a word that doesn’t also mean troll spunk, Rose,” you groan.

“Right. Sorry. Dirk has only a finite amount of body, to expel you he gave up what he could but as the contents of his chest cavity was really not enough for a body to form for you this would have killed you. Especially as deliberately or not Dirk had incarnated your soul in them.” Rose explains.

The guy on the floor, and it’s Hal, it has to be Hal, starts making this high pitched whine. It’s like a distressed dog, that high almost whistling noise of ‘so upset, comfort me’.

“That’s weirdly low, you can hear that, right?” Karkat asks, looking at you.

“Yeah, it’s high but I can.” you nod.

“Anyway, this place is the ectobiology lab. We will, slash, have already completed our task here thanks to time travel but there were leftover StriLonde genes as well as a selection of troll genes that were collected in here. Jade opened a portal to here, you crashed through it in time for this to merge with what Dirk left you and that formed a new body. The one you have now.” Rose explains.

“In every other timeline he dies, then?” you guess. Rose nods and you and very glad she did this.

“Hey, Hal, come on.” you say, squeezing your way around the tube to get to him.

“Dave, I don’t… what am I?” He asks, still making that high whine as he looks at his hands. His nails are yellow like troll claws but short and rounded like Sollux has most of his cut down to. The outside of his hands are grey and the palms are the same colour as yours, it’s fascinating.

“You’re my brother, doesn’t matter if you’re a cool species remix and- ok you have troll junk and I did not need to know that I am getting you some clothes hold on.” you say that last part quickly, averting your eyes. You scroll through your sylladex and get out a shirt that you and Sollux made and throw that at him. Then it’s not hard to find clean underwear, socks, jeans and shoes. He looks about your size in stuff. With a little forethought you throw him a towel as well and Hal sensibly wipes off what little goo still remains on him before pulling your tshirt on.

“AH! Stuck!” He yelps with a high trill reverberating through his voice.

“Stay still, let me.” you say calmly and reach out to help him.

His white horns are unusual. You’re not sure if he has four horns like the Captors do or if they simply fork like the end of one of Vriska’s does, though if it’s the latter it’s far enough down to be lost in his hair. Instead of going diagonally front to back like Sollux’s do these are all in a horizontal line across his head and they’re pointy like Terezi’s. In fact as you disentangle them from your lent shirt it occurs to you that if you took Dirk’s shades and drew a line on the bottom of them following the edge in that almost W shape of those pointy shades it would be almost exactly the line of Hal’s horns here. Of course.

“There.” you say, freeing him and pulling the shirt down.
He thankfully doesn’t need your help with the rest of the clothes so when you two both step out from behind the shattered tube he’s decent.

“Dave that shirt is tasteless.” Rose sighs. It is absolutely not, it’s white with shitty red pixellated comic sans font that reads “I ended the universe and all I got was this lousy t-shirt”.

Hal’s making that whining noise again somewhere in his throat as he looks himself over. Karkat squints at him and leans in closer. Hal jolts at the intrusion into his space and there’s a small noise in reaction to it, not like a growl but more akin to a small huff of sound similar to a big dog not being bothered to bark and just producing this muted ‘boof’ sound. Karkat pulls back but still stares skeptically.

“This is really weird.” He says.

“Karkat, our brother has just been incarnated from a sprite into a species that’s an entirely new hybrid you may have to be more specific.” Rose points out.

“I don’t mean the way he looks, that’s unusual but fine. Trolls are pretty disparate in appearance anyway but just listening to him is…” Karkat trails off.

“What?” Hal asks, clutching to his borrowed shirt. The distressed whining picks up in volume and Karkat winces.

“They shouldn’t be able to hear that. It’s like- imagine if you started talking to a human whose voice was totally flat, everything they said just confined to a few notes or whatever. That whine’s too low and other shit’s too high. It’s weird.” Karkat explains.

“I think you just described Bro.” you point out. Though his emotionless flat way of speaking when he did talk to you was all kinds of unsettling so perhaps the point still carries.

“An audio uncanney valley, interesting.” Rose nods.

“GREAT! That’s just fucking great! Not only am I stuck in some horror movie body and look like I’m years younger than I thought I was but I’ve still got my soulmark here. Look!” Hal shouts, twisting his arm to show you.

“And now- now I find out that not only am I a hybrid freak of nature but I’m creepy and unsettling to trolls too! Great! I mean my soulmate already didn’t like me but now he can be actually repulsed by me too!” Hal shouts.


“Hal’s got a body now.” Karkat explains.

“I see that. Nice shirt, I made that.” Sollux nods.

“Listen,” you say as you turn back to Hal, “forget about Equius for now. Maybe he’ll come around and if he’s a dick we’ll talk to him, or try to get Nepeta to smack some sense into him. I know this isn’t what you wanted but you’ve always been something different and cooler than anyone else.” you assure him, squeezing his shoulder gently. You don’t want to overload his system too much, he’s new to having an organic body.

“It’ll be fine, Hal. And everyone in our family is going to love you just the same as always.” Rose adds.
Hal sniffs, he looks genuinely on the verge of tears. You don’t blame him, you’d probably be freaking out way worse if you were in his shoes. Well, technically he’s wearing your shoes but that’s not the point.

“It’s gonna be fine.” you tell him and pull him closer, wrapping one arm around his back. Rose gently rubs his shoulder. Hal sniffs a little and makes a kind of watery cricket noise into your shoulder. Suddenly he jerks back, his ears flat against his head and his eyes wide and alarmed. You turn around but you only see a surly Karkat and a pissed off looking Sollux.

“Hey, knock it off.” Karkat scolds him, smacking him in the arm.

“You heard -” Sollux protests.

“Yeah, I heard he got this body in the last five minutes. He’s half human, remember? He doesn’t know what he’s saying. Besides, human family remember?” Karkat points out.

Hal is behind you and back to making the distressed dog whine. Sollux winces and shakes his head.


What was the noise Hal made? Some kind of cricket noise? You think you’ve heard it before from Karkat when you’ve recorded him around other people. But- oh! When he was around Kanaya! Putting that together with Sollux looking angry and you’re pretty sure that’s a pale sound. Huh, you suppose Hal’s wires have got crossed in his head and the trolls do say that humans are absurdly open with pale stuff and troll quadrants weren’t made for people who had families. Besides the line between ‘I love you very deeply, trust you and care for you but would never ever bone you, ew gross’ is pretty thin with humans between family and pale things. You’re half convinced the only way you’re holding down a moirallegiance is because your social skills are kind of jacked up for humans. No wonder Sollux and Karkat don’t look too pleased though.

“They both went god tier then?” Rose asks and Sollux nods.

“Oh good, I need to go shout at him. That’s easier if he’s alive.” you say angrily and march past both trolls and back out into the ship’s hallway. There’s still blood everywhere which is not going great things for your state of mind. The door to the room containing all of the quest beds is open and you can follow the dragged blood trail of your dead brother to his now reanimated form in stupid god tier clothes. Dirk looks over at you and drops his conversation with Jake and comes to the door.

“Hey, you shouldn’t have had to see that. I didn’t anticipate there being so much blood either.” Dirk says.

“No, I shouldn’t have.” you say flatly.

You open your mouth again to yell at him but nothing comes. He looks concerned for you, of course he is. Between that and all of the stress from last night and everything that just happened with Hal… well, you don’t have the energy to yell at him.

“Dave?” Dirk asks worriedly.

“You owe SO MANY people here apologies, asshole.” Karkat snaps because he’s never short on yelling.

“Uh-huh. Dave, it’s ok.” Dirk says, dismissing Karkat and focusing on you.
“You know, speaking from someone who suffers from the same thing sometimes Dirk you really can be a deluded, selfish, prick at times.” Hal says with an angry little snarl from his place behind you.

“Hal?” Dirk asks, his eyebrows rising up in disbelief.

“Yeah, you can thank Rose and Jade that I have a body and that you didn’t manage to kill me too with that stupid stunt of yours.” Hal says.

“Fuck it,” you mutter, “let’s just go I can’t deal with this bullshit.”

“Yeah I thought you might say that, so I called someone else.” Sollux says quietly.

“DIRK STRIDER!” the furious yell echoes down the hallway, making all of you look around in alarm. Roxy barrels around the corner, takes one look at Dirk and flies over to punch him hard in the shoulder.

“Ow! Hey!” Dirk protests, stepping further out of her range.

“You KILLED yourself?!” Roxy screeches at him.

“To go god tier.” Dirk corrects her.

“That’s no better, Dirk.” Jane lectures him. She’s shown up now as well as, oh god, Dadbert, Signless and Psii are here too.

“Really guys, we’re fine now. We really had hoped that we wouldn’t have such an audience for this but still.” Jake says, coming to the door in-

What the fuck is Jake wearing? It’s like a regular weird god tier outfit on the top and then just… tiny yellow underpants. Ok, that’s distracting but not important.

“So you were just, what, hoping that I wouldn’t be here for this and that everything would be okay if I just didn’t see it?!” Jade yells.

“Well, yes. This is happening to everyone regardless and choosing a controlled time to do it seemed like a better plan.” Jake answers, resting his arm on the door and leaning casually.

“Jake is one thing but Dirk, you don’t have a dreamself any more! What if that hadn’t worked? You’d just be dead!” Roxy insists.

“That actually shouldn’t have worked. I’m guessing Jake just forgot that fact from when Dave and Rose died and believed really hard that it’d work.” Hal grumbles.

“I’m inclined to agree, if you had stayed dead then you would have left Roxy as the only family member looking after your younger siblings. Of course she would have had help but that’s an unfair amount of responsibility.” Dadbert nods.

“It’s not as if we weren’t going to die eventually, and who wants to die alone anyway?” Jake protests.

“And I was supposed to be there in case anything went wrong. You know if Jake had fallen off of the bed and wouldn’t have revived if he had been on his own. We thought about this.” Dirk says defensively.
“Oh my God.” Roxy says quietly, staring at Dirk.

“What?” Jane asks, looking at her.

“This was Jake’s idea, wasn’t it? He talked you into this—this Romeo and Juliet bullshit!” Roxy accuses furiously, pointing her finger in Dirk’s face.

“I- what does it matter?” Dirk insists. So it was Jake’s idea then. Ugh, Jake could talk Dirk into damn near anything. Dirk’s so desperate to please him that it’s almost painful. Or in this case literally painful.

“I love that movie.” Jake adds in helpfully.

“It’s a play you dummy and it’s a TRAGEDY! As in not to be emulated!” Jane shouts, stamping her foot.

“Look, it’s not what you think. I didn’t know that what happened to Dirk was going to happen but look, it all shook out alright in the end.” He insists.

“Did it? I wouldn’t say that any of the kids look happy with this and look what you’ve done to Hal here.” Psii points out.

“They weren’t supposed to see. Look, I’m sorry that happened and that everything was so… messy.” Dirk says, glancing down at the blood smear on the floor.

“Yes, we all know that Schrodinger’s morality is how the universe works. If you do a morally bad thing unobserved it doesn’t really happen.” Rose says tartly.

“Big words from the girl who baited Vriska into killing herself.” Dirk shoots back. Roxy shoves him angrily again.

“Don’t you talk to her like that! She’s a kid and she was sick then! You’re an adult and you should know better!” Roxy shouts.

“And if Rose hadn’t intervened and brought everyone here we’d both be dead and you wouldn’t have a body left over to put on any bed or slab. Good job, idiot.” Hal hisses and it’s an actual catlike hiss.

“How was I supposed to know that? And we only have Rose’s word for that and we know her powers aren’t perfect anyway. Don’t act like I’m some dumb kid who made an impulse decision, I didn’t know this would be quite so ‘kill or cure’ but it worked in the end and you have a body too so don’t complain.” Dirk argues.

“I got stuck in THIS I can complain all I like!” Hal yells.

“Quiet, all of you! You’re all still children and evidently we should not have given you as much free reign as we have.” Dadbert says, talking over all of you with his stern fatherly voice.

“Your actions were thoughtless and dangerous. If you had brought your plan up with us we could have discussed it like adults and uncovered these flaws as well as the emotional risks. If we have chosen to go ahead with it we could have prepared the younger children but despite claiming to be adults you acted like irresponsible kids. I had thought better of you, Dirk.” Signless agrees and you get to watch an unusual expression of shame flit over Dirk’s face. He’s never had an adult who cared about him to disappoint before. He hated Bro and even before he came to hate Mom too he never craved her approval. Signless is the first adult that he’s given a crap about and up until now it was
mostly proving to him that he was legally capable to look after you. That’s not a risk now but evidently his approval still means something.

“I was just trying to get the strength I needed to protect everyone.” Dirk says defensively.

“Yeah because everyone who has god tier powers is so happy with them.” Psii snorts.

Dirk’s mouth opens and shuts. He turns to look at you and you back up into Sollux’s chest.

“I was just trying to do the right thing.” Dirk says weakly.

“I didn’t want this, no one did.” you say wearily, suddenly you feel like you could sleep for a million years again.

“What you want and what’s right aren’t the same thing, Dave.” Dirk points out.

“Yeah, when are they with you? This is the ‘no weapons’ thing all over again. I’m out.” you sigh and turn away.

Jade stays with Rose and behind you Jane starts laying into Jake and Dirk again with the adults chiming in their disapproval. Karkat, Hal and Sollux follow you instead.

“I thought you were really going to shout at him there.” Karkat eventually says.

“Isn’t shouting your job? I’m sure no one wants to infringe on your brand.” Sollux teases and you hear Karkat shove him.

“I’m too tired of being angry at people or being upset. Is it bad that I’m getting kind of numb to all this bullshit?” you ask, looking back.

“Ehhh.” Karkat says uncertainly.

“Yes.” Sollux says more firmly.

Karkat’s phone pings and he grumbles, fishing it out of his sylladex and glaring at it like it spat in his face.

“Speaking of bullshit apparently I need to go put out some fires. But… I can make Vriska do it if you want me to stay.” Karkat says, looking up from his phone at you.

“As much as I’d like to see Vriska be a social mediator it’s cool, you can go.” you tell him. Karkat nods and puts his phone away, he catches the bottom hem of your shirt and pulls you close. He kisses you sweetly and briefly, enough to make your cheeks grow warm in a frankly totally unwarranted fashion. Then again, he is your soulmate, a kiss from him will probably always make your heart thud hard in your chest.

“Love you.” He says and whirls off in another direction in a swish of cape and purpose.

“So,” Sollux says, stuffing his hands in his pockets and tapping his white shoe against the floor, “what now?”

You barely need to think to call the figure to mind, with how much you slept before the number has gone down a lot. You have 4,356 hours until this universe is destroyed. Your stupid, selfish, brother might be misguided but he is right in the idea that you all need to do shit to be ready for this fight when it comes.
“Can I ask you to do something questionable for the sake of making me better?” you ask.

“That’s basically a huge chunk of what being someone’s moirail is so yeah you can. What do you have in mind?” He says.

“Well… remember what we saw when we went into the future? Me and the girls ripped a hole in time big enough for the ship to go through. We stopped time so something else could pass through. That’s going to take some practice. We held fish face for a while but she wasn’t moving at the speed the ship probably will be and she was much smaller. So I need to train that. Could you throw big things at me so that I can stop them in time?” you ask hopefully. You know it sounds like Bro’s school of batshit crazy training but the difference is that Sollux doesn’t want to actually hurt you.

“Hm, if I stand nearby I can probably catch anything that comes near you if you miss it. The ship has a gym, not that I’ve been there but that probably has some big heavy shit in it. Let’s go there.” He suggests. Huh, no protest at all.

You nod and he leads you down there.

The gymnasium of the ship is huge, aside from all kinds of weight and cardio machines set up in one half there’s an entire second section that seems to be devoted to combat training. The floor is slightly bouncy and like a boxing ring with clear markings on the floor to delineate areas for matches. Other areas have ringed off sections and the walls are lined with weapons. It’s not all fight though, pushed up against the wall are various nets and things that suggest sports or games were done in here too once.

Sollux holds out a hand and a ball flies over from a rack to him, he gives it a slight squeeze. To your eye it looks comparable to a basketball.

“Before I toss anything big at you show me some proof of concept first.” He tells you. He’s holding his index finger up and spinning the ball on it with his psionics, the nerd. You nod at him and with a flick of his hand the ball flies off through the area, surrounded by red and blue. You flex your fingers gently and feel the steady flow of time beneath them despite the lack of timetables in your hands.

The ball turns in the air slowly and then rushes right towards you. You remember what Dirk taught you once, patiently while nursing bruises on your rooftop. The thing with flashstepping was that if you attacked what you could see you’d never win because whoever was flashstepping was already gone from there. You had to aim for where they WOULD be. You don’t stop the ball where it is, you freeze where it will be, stopping it when it gets there.

The ball hangs frozen in the air but around it time ticks on.

“I’m not even holding it right now.” Sollux says in wonder.

The thing is, stopping time isn’t hard. The problem is keeping it stopped. Time has a natural flow. Diving through it into the future or the past is easy, all you have to move is yourself and then slot into the stream of time as natural as can be. Stopping time isn’t hard either but when you’re doing anything less than the whole universe it creates discord. Like a runner stopping stone in the pack of athletes at the beginning of a race the sudden lack of progression of time ripples outwards. Time wants to move, it goes by second by second and the longer you disrupt one thing in time the harder it pushes back against you.

It doesn’t help that this ball was going pretty damn fast and by comparison the sea witch was standing mostly still. Speed is of course distance over time and boy was this thing doing that with vigor.
“Dave, are you ok? You’re getting sweaty.” Sollux points out. You nearly lose your grip on the ball and so the best response you can offer him is a strangled mess of consonants. Inside your head time is angrily ringing like an alarm clock. You shake and let it go. Time snaps back into place and you move to dodge the ball but it stops in the air about a foot from where you were, Sollux caught it.

“You good?” He asks, letting the ball drop to the floor with a bounce.

“Yeah, this is just gonna take some work is all.” you agree breathlessly and nod.

“Hm, well now that we’ve got the theory done maybe we can get something bigger over here, see if size makes a difference.” Sollux says, floating a bench off of the floor across the room.

“Insert dick joke here.” you say with as much concentrated seriousness as you can manage to squeeze into the words. Sollux snorts and then suddenly the bench is flying at you. You manage to catch it, not for as long as the ball.

As the two of you work through various projectiles your amount of time that you can freeze them for remains mostly constant. You imagine it’s fatigue vs progress levelling you out and tomorrow will be the real test of if there’s been any improvement.

Eventually you’re splayed out on the floor catching your breath with Sollux lazily sitting next to you, he’s glaring off into the distance like something across the room is deliberately annoying him.

“Hypothetically.” He says slowly, “would you rather be asked something at an inappropriate time or be kept in the dark until a better time came up?”

Boy that does not sound hypothetical at all.

“There’s never as much good timing as people think and I’d rather know, go for it.” you say, waving a hand at him.

“Just… let me get through this before you say anything, ok?” He says. You push yourself up on your elbows and nod at him.

“I want to be a helmsman.” He says quickly. You bite your tongue to keep silent and so Sollux forges on.

“I mean, I don’t. Not like the empire used to have them, that’s pretty much my worst nightmare. But Dad has a lot of awful memories here, helming this ship was literally torture for him and it fucked him up real bad. But that’s not because of just being plugged in, it’s what they did to him. I mean Psii willingly would connect himself up to the computer network back home through all of his ports, that’s not the problem.” Sollux explains.

“It’s just… I know I’m a pessimist and maybe that’s it but if something happens to my dad we’re all fucked. Me and Tuna can’t move this ship without him, not without risking blowing our brains out like what nearly happened on that shuttle. The ship is modified enough now that no one has control over the helmsman and he can just step in and out when he wants.” He adds.

“But your dad has those metal lined holes in him, that was something done to him surgically wasn’t it? It’s not like you can just jam those biowires against you and have them do that themselves is it?” you ask. Psii’s situation when you unplugged him was pretty chock full of body horror but it’s not like the biowires tried to turn around and burrow under the skin of you or Sollux like some horrible parasite. Organic or not they’re just machine parts.

“Yeah, that’s what I mean. Without those we can’t helm for him in case he gets sick, can’t do it or
just straight up doesn’t want to.” Sollux nods.

“But?” you say.

“I’ve looked over the whole medical area on the ship, there’s a whole automated machine for that procedure. Because trolls vary so much in body type and psionic ability it was safer to have a machine do it than a mediculler. Literally all we’d have to do is get Xrays and MRI data in there and it’d do all the work. Mituna’s on board with the idea too and I’d go first, worst case scenario I die and my dreamself wakes up instead. I wanted to ask you about it before talking to my Dad or just going ahead with it. Especially with, well…” Sollux shrugs.

Yeah, you get his meaning. He’s implying that you’ve had enough of people you care about risking death or dying because they think they’re doing what’s best for everyone. At least he’s asking people. You run your hands over your face wearily and try to focus on the actual question and not the stupid terrified bit of your brain screaming that no one you care about should be hurt ever. Even with consent and for the greater good. The crux of it is of course that Sollux’s logic is sound, he’s thought this out, talked with someone else about it and is doing it to help everyone. Besides it’s his body which makes it his choice.

The same sort of holds for Dirk too of course. Dirk has every right to off himself, you don’t own him. The fact that the whole thing was stupid, behind everyone’s back and dangerous as all hell is more relevant though.

“Would it hurt?” you ask eventually.

“I wouldn’t be awake for it, the machine has to stick things into my spinal cord. That’s a lot harder if I’m flailing around like a tool. You’re supposed to be usable as a helmsman as soon as you wake up but ideally you let that shit heal first. I guess it probably hurts after, I mean it’s surgery, right?” Sollux shrugs.

“We should check if Hal still remembers all the medical knowledge he downloaded now that he’s human- now that he’s whatever species he is. If he does remember it you should have him there in case something goes wrong.” you tell him. Sollux’s head jerks up and he stares at you with wide and mismatched eyes.

“Wait, you’re ok with this?” He asks.

“Not really, no. But I get it and as long as you ask Psii about it because that guy knows how the whole thing goes and you have Hal there who’s got medical training well… that’s about as safe as you can make it. It’s still hella dangerous and I don’t like it but I get it. I can’t say that I wouldn’t do the same thing.” you sigh.

Sollux grins, slowly like the sun dawning, if the sun was a jumble of endearingly jagged teeth. He shoves you in the shoulder until your sprawled out on your back right by him and then proceeds to jam a hand in your hair and mess it up good.

“You’re cooler than people give you credit for, you know that?” He says.

“Aw yeah.” you say. Yeah, you’re cooler than- wait.

“Hey, wait!” you protest but oh hey this has turned into nice claws on your scalp so protest cancelled for now. You didn’t used to get cats before but now you get their scam of tricking owners into loving them and petting them.

“I should… hm I should probably go find Hal. See how bad he’s freaking out still. He was a totally
innocent bystander of Dirk’s asshattery.” you sigh but make no real move to go.

“Hm.” Sollux grunts. You open your eyes to see a petulant little scowl on his face.

“Don’t be a dumbass, he’s my brother.” you snort.

“Fine but how would you feel if someone ‘accidentally’ slapped Karkat’s ass or something?” He challenges you.

“I’d probably be hurt. In my ears, from all the yelling that’d cause. I trust Karkat can take care of his own virtue, thanks.” you say flatly.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you.” Sollux insists.

“Uh huh.” you reply, leaning out of his reach for a moment.

“It’s just you’re human, you don’t get this as well and you can’t hear this stuff usually.” He protests. Which, okay, ouch. You’re gonna try real hard not to take offence at that humans are too dumb for this theme here.

“I get it, it’s a trust thing.” you say and sit up properly.

“I said I trust you.” He says firmly. Yeah, that I trust you just not everyone else is some kind of bullshit for sure.

“Sure, and Aradia put a big ass dent in your ability to trust your moirail, huh?” you reply flatly and watch him wince.

“It’s- ok, maybe. But also wow dick move, Dave. You didn’t hear him though.” He says, you say nothing.

“And I get that he maybe doesn’t know what he’s doing.” He adds, you still stay silent.

“I just really like this. Us. You know?” Sollux says in a small voice.

“He’s my brother, dumbass. You’re right, I’m human and our shit is messy. Same as it is with me and Rose and with Roxy and Dirk. Hell, I’ve known Hal longer than I have Rose and Roxy. This was part of the deal, you know that.” you point out.

Sollux glares at the floor and hisses slightly.

“Ok, you have a point. I don’t want to be that guy and you’re being cool about the helmsman thing so I can’t even- ugh.” Sollux says with a groan, like a petulant kid who knows that he’s wrong but doesn’t like it at all.

“Yup. It’s chill, man. I’m gonna go see if they’re all ok, thanks for throwing things at me.” you say as you stand up and reach down to mess his hair up. Unlike Karkat his hair has a real and defined style and it’s possible to mess it up. Attempting to mess Karkat’s hair up will either prove ineffective or will land you with your fingers stuck in it. You curiously feel out and- yeah, he does have two sets of horns, they’re not just split.

“Go talk to your Dad.” you remind him and give him a shove when he makes a noise of complaint.

“Hey, before I go I wanted to say thanks for being cool last night and this morning.” you tell him quietly. You’re pretty sure most other people would have worked themselves up into a panicked froth. Dirk might not have, he’s used to triaging and treating you but you’re not thinking about that
right now.

“Anytime but, hey, leave the walls alone ok? They didn’t do anything wrong.” He snarks and wow look at that sincere sentimental moment go. You shove him away and he flops back with a laugh, you know, as if he couldn’t launch a planet into space with his brain or evaporate you with a thought.

“Nerd, I’m gonna bounce. Bye.” you say and walk off.

“Later.” He calls out after you, still sat on the sparring mat.

You leave the gym and walk around a bit before deciding to just message Rose and find out where she is.

[turntechGodhead began pestering tentacleTherapist]

TG: a/s/l?

TT: 14/F/kitchen.

TG: ahh how many siblings do you have with you?

TT: How many of our siblings or how many siblings period?

TG: of ours why do you have any other collectable sets there

TT: Jane and John are here but I am also with Hal and Roxy so two pairs right now.

TG: isnt that rummy or gin rummy

TG: or no that must be four and three right

TT: You know I’m actually not well versed in card games, if the aim is to collect similar sets one can only imagine that pairs would be too low but then I think that’s a thing in poker. I genuinely don’t know.

TG: good thing vegas blew up then or wed have been humiliated

TT: Thank goodness.

TG: aight on my way

TT: You’ll cut two letters out of ‘alright’ but forgo using the common acronym for ‘on my way’ which would save far more letters, why?

TG: hey rox already stole my handle abbreviation and pink is just a few shades lighter than red between our lack of reliable punctuation colour will be all that sets our typing styles apart if i start turning you into u and on my way into omw

TG: its a thin and perilous line

TT: Of course, how foolish of me to ask.

TG: anyway

TG: omw
You’re starting to know your way around the ship just fine so you’re able to zone out while you walk to the kitchens. Your mind goes first to Dirk, to blood, to the sound of meat hitting the floor. You wrench it back from there and instead turn it to Hal. He’s interesting enough to keep that focus. His body is fascinating, a human/troll mashup of epic proportions. Are his eyes red because yours are or is his blood red too? Young trolls don’t get coloured in eyes until they’re well into adulthood in like their twenties although the older trolls you know are getting there now. His skin is also exciting and you want to find out if there’s a pattern to where his human tones are and where the trolls sections lie. You itch to photograph him but it’s probably best if you let him settle into himself rather than make him feel like a museum exhibit.

Still, Hal’s alive and not a sprite anymore, you don’t have to wonder what will happen if the game ends suddenly and he can’t get a better body. Dirk’s alive, against all odds. It’s been a fucked up start to the day but it could have been way worse, you owe your sister big time.

“You’re being RIDICULOUS.” echoes down the hallway.

Ah, be still your beating heart. It’s the ornery yelling of your beloved, slamming down distant fools. Predictably he’s not quiet for long so you can hone in on his location from noise alone. It’s Karkat and a bunch of other trolls in a meeting room. It’s not the one that the void players all died in, but it’s close enough.

“I’m telling you Karkat, he’s dangerous!” Vriska insists. There are other trolls there too and you can’t help but notice that all of the ones there besides Terezi are Alternian born trolls. Or hatched, you think that’s the right way of saying that. It’s strange to think that once there was an egg that had Karkat in it. Although technically you suppose there was once an egg that had you in it but that just kept dividing until you became you, right? Every time you start thinking that troll biology is weird you remember that human biology is just as strange.

Actually you probably can’t convince most of the trolls you know about this but Meenah and Feferi at least never went to school on Earth. You might be able to convince them that how Hal was just made is how all human babies are born and that it just went bad because Dirk wasn’t built for that. You could show them Alien even. Your nonexistent prankster’s gambit tingles.

“You are out of your minds, Mr. Egbert is no more dangerous than any other human.” Karkat insists.

“His specibus is jokerkind, just like a subjugglator!” Meenah shouts.

“Yeah, I heard you the first five times. He’s just a normal guy.” Karkat argues.

“Dave, what do you think?” Kanaya asks and several of them turn to look at you in the door.

“I’m still trying to work out the question.” you say.

“They think John’s dad is a subjugglator.” Karkat says flatly.

“Cool, cool, I totally know what that is but I just want to see if you do.” you say smoothly and
“A specific group of trolls, basically walking murder machines who had a stupid, crazy, cult religion and all happened to use the same specibus as him. In fact only they used it which I think have them spooked.” Karkat explains. They do all look spooked.

“You think Dadbert is a murder cultist? He’s a cake making, prank loving, suburbanite dad. I mean he’s pretty ripped under that white formal shirt from what I hear but he’s a pretty placid dude.” you tell them all.

“He carried one of the quest beds under his arms! He single handedly sliced them from the base!” Vriska hisses.

“Ok, but Bro did that too and Dirk cut a meteor in half with a sword one time so I don’t really see what you’re getting at.” you point out and they all stare at you.

“Can you do that?” Porrim asks.

“What? No. I’m not that strong. Dirk isn’t usually either but my life was in danger so that’s kind of a powerup I guess. But seriously John and Jane’s dad is just normal dude.” you say with a shake of your head.

“I think they’re worried that because none of them are Mr Egbert’s kids that he’s a danger to them.” Karkat explains.

“Yeah, but why? So what if he’s strong? Equius and Horuss are strong and no one’s pissing themselves in fear from them, hell, your grandmother is a space vampire.” you reason.

“Right, and he wouldn’t hurt anyone if he didn’t have to.” Karkat agrees.

“What’s wrong with being human?” you ask sharply and suddenly all of the trolls are looking at you.

“Y’all don’t think we don’t notice you treating us like creatures out of a monster movie sometimes? There’s nothing wrong with humans and Mr Egbert is one of the few decent adults I’ve ever met, if he knew you were scared of him you’d really hurt his feelings.” you tell them angrily. They’re all looking at you warily. So maybe your fuse is a little shorter after the events of this morning at last night, maybe you could have phrased that better but seriously what the fuck?

“We don’t mean to be insulting, Dave. It’s probably just crossed cultural wires.” Kanaya assures you.

“Yeah, besides you’ll forgive us if we don’t trust your judge of character with adults, I mean just look at your mom.” Vriska sneers.

“You wanna SAY THAT AGAIN, Vriska?” you snap at her furiously.

“Okay, okay, no. Vriska what the fuck? Fuck off over there. Ignore her, Dave.” Karkat says, pulling you back. You glare at Vriska even as Terezi elbows her back out of the way from you, you still itch to put your fist through her face. How dare she bring your parents into this?

“They’re just rattled is all, especially from last night. And it’s like Kanaya says, crossed cultural wires.” Karkat says soothingly and you relax a little at his words.
“Besides it doesn’t help that humans have a reputation with trolls for being, you know, crazy in a fight.” He adds and you stiffen up again.

“You think we’re all crazy?” you demand and Karkat’s face goes through a panicked ‘abort, abort, abort!’ expression.

“No, no, no. I was hatched on Earth, I know humans. They’re worried about nothing. I’m not afraid of humans, I love them.” He blurts out.

“Some of your best friends are human.” you supply dryly.

“Exactly!” Karkat agrees quickly.

You see him realise the unfortunate sounding phrase he just agreed to. The whole ‘oh sure humans on the whole are crazy but the ones I know are fine, I love humans, my best friends are humans, I’m such an ally.’

“Wait, no I didn’t mean that. Dave you know I didn’t.” He says desperately but you back up.

“Nah, it’s cool you stay here. I’ve got to go see the rest of my murder cult family, later.” you say in totally deadpan and stalk off irritably.

You shove your way into the kitchen through the swinging doors and find both of your sisters, Hal, the CrockerBerts and Dadbert. He’s baking up a cake with Dolorosa at his side, he has a smudge of cocoa powder on his cheek and they think he’s a murderous lunatic.

“Dave?” Hal asks, still whining.

“Ugh, fuck everyone.” you complain, walking up to the group.

“Oh man, I do not have that kind of time.” Roxy snorts.

“Gross.” John says.

“How’re you doing, man?” you ask Hal and lean against his knee, he’s higher up than you because he’s sat on one of the food prep tables.

“I guess I wasn’t expecting to feel so organic and squishy, parts of me keep gurgling and I don’t like it.” He complains.

“We tried giving him something to eat.” Rose adds helpfully.

“Yeah, that was ok. Weird, but ok. I’m not a fan of being hyper aware of food being chewed in my mouth.” Hal says.

“PLEASE don’t describe that again.” John says loudly.

“Yes, I’m in favour of not hearing that a second time.” Jane agrees.

“Well, did I miss anything?” you ask and there’s a quiet, irritated, rumbling growl from Hal. If these are all the sounds trolls are normally making it’s blowing your mind how much you must be missing.

“Dad essentially adopted Dirk and Jake and then grounded them for bad behaviour.” Jane explains. Dirk’s going to be twenty this summer, you can’t imagine that conversation went well.

“I’m so mad at both of them.” Roxy says tightly.
You nod in vague agreement at the sentiment but you meant what you said to Karkat and Sollux, you’re just kind of over being bitter about other people. Instead you turn your attention to Rose.

“Hey… thanks for making sure today turned out the way it did.” you say to her.

“Oh! Well, you’re welcome. I wouldn’t have wanted to lose Hal either.” She says in pleased surprise. The fact that she’s surprised must mean that she’s been trying to not look at the future anymore and that it’s working to an extent.

You nod in satisfaction and try to think about what to do now. You’re forever aware of the ticking clock of time left in the universe, it seems unfair that the others aren’t all aware of it too. Right now you have 4,354 hours left.

“Hal, do you wanna help me make somethin’?” you ask him.

“Are you just trying to make me feel better?” He asks sullenly. Yeah, you StriLondes deal so well with the condescending kind of pity.

“No, I just don’t know how to make a clock by myself and it seems like a better use of your time than sitting here all sad.” you answer.

“Oh, well ok then. Why do you want to make a clock?” Hal asks, hopping off of the table and nearly fumbling the landing. You have to give him credit though, he’s doing well for a guy who hasn’t had legs in seven years.

“More of a countdown kind of thing.” you say.

“Until the end of the universe.” Hal guesses.

“Cheery.” Rose says dryly.

“Won’t that make people scared?” Jane asks.

“I don’t know, a ticking clock is kind of motivating and dramatic don’t you think? Just like in movies when they have to defuse a bomb or something.” John points out.

“Those movies never end with ‘aw nuts he failed to disarm the bomb, boom, roll credits’.” you say.

“That’d be a bad end to a movie.” John argues.

“I would totally make a movie and end it like that.” you tell him.

“I can believe that.” Rose says wryly.

“Well either way we’ll have to go to the alchemiter to get the parts.” Hal says.

“Great, let’s go.” you say and turn to walk off. You turn back around when it becomes clear that Hal isn’t following you, also you can hear that anxious whine again.

“What?” you ask, looking at him.

“I’ll come with you Hal, baby. And if anyone acts like a dick when they see you I’ll kick them in the crotch.” Roxy declares, walking to Hal and patting him on the shoulder. There’s that same pale, watery cricket noise again as Hal looks up at Roxy and nods.

“I’m sure there’s some level of confrontation before kicking someone in the groin, Roxy.” Jane
“Probably. Later!” Roxy chirps and bounces out of the room with you and Hal pulled behind her.

“I’m going to have to explain what I am to everyone.” Hal mopes. Roxy opens a door into the hallway with her hip and shakes her head.

“Nah, one of the advantages of John having a big mouth is it saves that kind of conversation. Besides you know half the trolls around here gossip like old women, I wouldn’t be surprised if everyone knows by now. And like I said if anyone gives you shit for it I’ll deal with them.” Roxy assures him.

“I want to give me shit for it, I feel so slow and stupid. I can’t think a thousand things at once and I’m cut off from what passes for internet around here. I’m a moron now.” Hal complains.

You and Roxy share a skeptical look.

“Just because your brain is processing information differently now that you’re made of meat doesn’t make you dumb.” you tell Hal gently.

“Hm, what’s the… what’s the sixtieth element on the periodic table?” Roxy asks.

“If you mean ordered by atomic weight it’s neodymium, obviously.” Hal replies.

“I actually don’t know if that’s right.” Roxy laughs.

“Tell me as much of pi as you can and don’t tell me it ends in four like you did before.” you challenge him.

“What does this prove? Ugh, fine. Three point one four one five nine two six five three five eight nine seven nine three two-” Hal starts listing off but you interrupt him.

“Okay we get the point and I remember at least some of that to know you’re right.” you say, holding up a hand to stop him.

“But I didn’t even get that far.” Hal protests.

“What’s the speed of light?” Roxy asks excitedly.

“Roxy, please, a child knows that.” Hal snorts.

“It’s… uh…” you frown, trying to remember. Hal whips around to look at you, clearly offended.

“I taught you that when you were eight!” He accuses.

“No, no, I know this it’s… uh. Six hundred and something million miles an hour?” you frown as your hazy memory seems to shrug and you’re pretty fucking sure your memory chucked that fact out to remember some radio jingle that will forever get stuck in your head.

“Six hundred and seventy one million miles an hour, Dave.” Hal scolds you.

Roxy grins and wraps her arms around Hal’s shoulders.

“Yeah, Hal, I don’t think you’re stupid.” She says, beaming. Hal makes a delighted little chirp and actually smiles for real.

“Come on.” you say and pull Hal and Roxy in the direction of the alchemeter.
When you get there however you freeze. Karkat’s stupid meeting of jerkbags must have broken up because Equius is standing next to Nepeta at the alchemiter as she reaches over it to pick up several giant pusheen plush pillows. He’s wearing his stupid godtier robes, the hood of which stretches out like a giant windsock behind him only it clips through the floor like a bad video game.

Hal runs into the back of you and makes a troll noise that even you think is pitiful. Equius is staring at him, his eyes so wide that even his broken shades can’t really hide them.

“Oh wow. Hal, you look…” Nepeta says but words seem to fail her. Roxy tenses, ready to fight for Hal.

“You’re a disaster.” Equius says slowly.

“Hey!” you snap at him.

“But he is. Wouldn’t survive five seconds on Alternia, even humans would cull you to look at you.” Equius says, taking a step towards you.

“Oh really? Just you try it.” Roxy hisses, stepping between them.

Equius pulls back in alarm, he’s probably still rattled after that conversation about how your species is all horror movie monsters. Well, fuck, if he hurts Hal then maybe you and Roxy will show Equius just what he thinks you are.

“Oh, fiddlesticks. No, I didn’t- that wasn’t a threat. I wouldn’t-” Equius fumbles, breaking out into an instant sheen of sweat.

“It’s fine, we’ll go. You don’t need to look at me, I can’t even bring myself to look at how awful I look now.” Hal sighs, pulling on your shoulder to steer you away.

“You don’t look awful.” Equius says quickly, stepping closer.


“That he would be culled immediately on Alternia, yes. And he didn’t chose to be this and he’s stuck this way, completely alien to everyone. It’s…” Equius swallows, seemingly choking on his words.

“Pitiful. The good troll kind, he means.” Nepeta fills in helpfully, grinning like a cheshire cat as she squeezes her pillow in delight.

Hal makes a sound that you really haven’t heard before. It’s got a strange trill to it like someone dragging a tin can of startled cicadas over a xylophone. Equius is suddenly so shiny that he looks almost badly rendered.

“I must go!” He chokes out and quick marches off in the other direction. Nepeta giggles and runs after him.

“Score?” Roxy says uncertainly.

Hal looks kind of dazed and you realise that though you can hear him you’re still missing half the conversation, you can hear whatever sound Hal makes but only he can hear the other trolls. Either way you’re instituting the same policy on Hal’s love life as you do on the rest of your siblings. That you’re very happy for him but you want as few fucking details as possible, and at least with Dirk and Roxy you mean the ‘fucking’ part of that quite literally.
You leave Hal to his doki doki meet cute moment and instead take a whirl through the library of things that’s already stuck to the alchemiter that John and you moved up here when everyone’s stuff came up. You can filter by item type as well as who made it but a lot of this tech is lost on you. Evidently Hal gets a grip on himself and elbows you out of the way to fiddle with the alchemiter.

Now that you’re side by side with him you can see that he’s slightly taller than you, an inch at most if you don’t include the horns.

“You should probably make yourself some new clothes as we’re here.” Roxy suggests.

“And stuff for your room.” you add, you’re lucky you had already designated a room for Hal to chill in even though before he had said that he didn’t need any such thing. Well, now he would.

The three of you pass hours alchemising things, fixing up Hal’s room and making a doomsday countdown clock which you nail to the wall in the cafeteria. Eventually though Hal just wants to be left to himself, it makes sense, he’s been through a lot.

You guess you have too so you go sit on the outside of the ship again and stare at the crack in space. You’re there long enough that you lose track of time a little, or at least as much as is possible for you.

4,346 hours left.

You tilt your head as Dirk lands on the edge of the ship by you. He has two plates in hand and offers you one.

“You didn’t eat much today.” He says as you take it. He’s right, what with your hand breaking, Dirk dying, Hal getting a body, training with Sollux and helping Hal out you’ve not eaten more than some doritos that you found in your sylladex.

The plate has lasagne on there which seems suspiciously full of vegetables and you’ve only got a fork on you so this is going to prove interesting to eat. Dirk sits next to you and starts to eat but he’s mostly just torturing his food with his fork.

“I’m sorry.” He says finally.

“Hm?” you grunt around the fork in your mouth.

“I thought I was helping and because that was what I wanted to do I didn’t… I didn’t look too hard to see if I actually was. You said me dying to protect you was your worst nightmare but me not being strong enough to save you is mine. And so I tried to avert my nightmare and made yours reality which was shitty of me.” Dirk continues.

“I already knew that was why you did it.” you say and stab some hidden broccoli. You consider throwing it off of the side of the ship but that seems like a waste, plus if you smear food on the outside of the ship Psii will have your ass.

“Oh.” Dirk says, surprised.

“Ok, well, it was a dick move and I’m sorry. I love you.” Dirk says, like he’s trying to figure out what the secret pattern is to unlock your forgiveness.

“I know.” you say and lean against his side.

“Did you just Star Wars me?” Dirk asks slowly.
“You don’t need to know the answer to that question.” you tell him flatly.

“I don’t need to know the answer to that question.” Dirk echoes monotonously and that is officially the limit of your poker face. You laughed first, you lost.

You look over at Dirk properly now that you’re not semi-ignoring him, he’s dressed as normal again except... well, except there’s still a sparkly little tiara in his hair. You swallow your lasagne.

“Your god tier outfit was dumb.” you tell him.

“The arm things were cool but I wasn’t a great fan of the dumb poofy pants.” Dirk agrees with a nod, the tiara in his hair glitters at the movement.

“You, uh, forgot part of it though.” you point out, gesturing to the tiara with your fork.

“Oh no, I’m keeping that in forever. I am the prettiest princess, it is me.” Dirk says, perfectly serious.

“My mistake your highness. Did you convince Jake to change too? Or did he find the rest of his outfit somewhere else?” you ask, rolling your eyes.

“I convinced him that pants were a good idea, he’s back to normal. Not that I don’t like seeing that much of his skin but maybe not in public.” Dirk agrees.

In your head the hour ticks over, you have 4,345 hours left now.

“Hey Dirk.” you say quietly.

“Hm?” Dirk responds with his mouth full.

“We’ve got a lot of work to do if we’re going to survive the end of the universe again.” you tell him.

“Yeah, we do.” Dirk agrees.

The pair of you go back to eating and watching the crack in space that rotates through a range of colours and gets almost imperceptibly but unstoppably wider.
Hey all! In case you missed it I did two little sidefics from other people's POV before this chapter which are...
https://archiveofourown.org/works/13777218
https://archiveofourown.org/works/13694859
Also if you are on tumblr you can follow me where I talk about the fic sometimes and also you can ask me things if you like. undanewneon.tumblr.com

You squint up at the clock nailed to the wall which, you suppose, is counting down to the time when you’ll all leave this universe. You guess that’s what it’s for because combining the words painted around the timer and what’s on it it says:

4332 hours left until shit gets real

“Smells like Dave was behind that.” Terezi declares, bumping into your shoulder.

“You truly are the greatest detective.” you say flatly.

“I know.” She purrs and saunters off.

Still, you stare at it and contemplate. There’s so much still to do and the worst thing is that you don’t even truly know what else there is that you need to focus on. You need a plan, a better plan. You need markers, paper and probably Vriska. Thankfully you have two out of those three things in your sylladex already, you do not want Vriska in your sylladex. Besides you can’t put people in there anyway, you tested that out on Kankri when you were six and he was exceptionally annoying. He just burst right back out again and told on you, the little snitch.

You march over to the largest table, pen and paper in hand and leap up onto the table before everyone assembled.

“Listen up, morons! We have a new and limited timescale so we need to nail down what we need to do. And because I am a gracious leader I am willing to hear all suggestions!” You declare.

“Are you able to do anything without this much drama?” Jade asks from by your ankle.

“No.” Vriska snorts.

“Pot, meet kettle.” Rose simpers at her.

“Oh, related note but I have a suggestion.” Damara says from the end of the table.

“Great, Jade move your breakfast so I can sit down.” you tell her.

“Nope. You got yourself into this on the table situation, you’re gonna deal with it.” Jade says firmly.

“But- no, wait, I can fly now. Why am I arguing this?” you say in stunned realisation and focus on flying and then move into floating and sitting like you’ve seen Dave and Rose do.
“Karkat! You’re getting glitter from your wings in my eggs!” Jade protests, trying to pull her plate away from you.

“Damara, what was your suggestion?” you ask, holding your pad and paper ready.

“We could all just get high and chill for a while.” Damara suggests. Well, she’s handling that breakup well. This is just because Rose said the word ‘pot’ isn’t it?

“I’ve never actually done drugs, it was too risky because I had to look after Dave and I couldn’t risk a record.” Dirk remarks casually over orange juice.

“Would be very good for you, help you relax.” Damara nods.

“I have my suspicions that would not actually work work on him.” Jake says. Dirk opens his mouth to protest and then pauses, next to him Roxy grins.

“Were you just about to say how you have no problems not being in control and then heard how that sounded in your own head?” Roxy snickers.

“Shut up.” Dirk grumbles.

“Well that was a fascinating diversion into why Dirk is…” you wave your hand in his general direction, “but I still want ideas. Any questions you have about the game, any leads to new things.”

“I still need to learn to bring people back to life.” Jane notes.

“I’m sure the Zahhaks would like to have Darkleer back.” you agree.

“How- look I don’t know if I’m allowed to ask but how did he die anyway? I mean we know about your dad, Mrs. Lalonde and Bro.” Jade says, pushing her plate of eggs away.

“I don’t actually know, I tried asking him to talk about it and he said he didn’t want to tell me, broke out into a sweat and left and at this point I think it’s well past the point at which it’s cool for me to ask.” you admit uncomfortably. You could ask Nepeta but she’d probably make a fuss out of you not knowing already or if he hasn’t told her it’d be a big thing and you don’t want that either.

Still, you write down:

1. Get the life players resurrection abilities
2. Bring back Darkleer

“Anything else?” you ask.

“This is like… a video game.” Mituna says in a voice that suggests that he’s had a revelation despite obviously not.

“Sometimes I think that the doctors got the wrong chart when they said you didn’t have brain damage.” Sollux remarks around his bite of toast. Mituna zaps him for the insult.

“I MEAN that we’re the players of this game.” Mituna continues.

“Yes.” you say slowly.

“How’d the game know we were gonna play? It was made for us.” he adds.

“If we hadn’t played this timeline would be doomed, there’s ones out there where we didn’t.”
Damara says, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah but it doesn’t work for other people, it had to be us. We’re not random background npcs we’re core player characters we have to be here.” Mituna argues.

“Ok but what’s your point?” you ask, not quite following what is supposedly new here.

“Oh, I think I get what you mean.” Sollux says slowly, lowering his toast.

“Can you explain it then?” you ask flatly.

“Right. So from a time player perspective this is a non-issue, any time when we’re not the ones who play is a doomed timeline like Damara said which makes sense from time’s point of view but this is still a game. I still made it and the code for most of it existed before. This was designed which means it has goals we know that.” Sollux explains.

“And we’re meant to play.” Mituna insists.

“Games aren’t games if they can’t be played by anyone and if the game is made for us we… have to exist?” you say uncertainly.

“Right, our data must be built in. Which doesn’t make sense because some rando npc on the street on Earth came from their parents and their parents and so on, which person they are is not really relevant like how Skyrim has a set number of random npcs that it just spawns indiscriminately when needed, it only cares about having someone there not who they are. Unless they’re super important npcs like our parents.” Sollux continues.

“And an npc is?” Jake asks, leaning forward to look at the Captors.

“A non player character, not one of us.” Dirk replies.

“It can’t be turtles all the way down.” Rose agrees.

“Okay, what the fuck is that meant to mean?” you ask, looking at the world’s least helpful seer.

“It’s a quote from… Russell I think?” Dirk answers, telling you nothing helpful.

“Attributed to him, yes. The anecdote goes that Bertrand Russell was giving a talk on astronomy and explaining how the universe works. An old woman stands up at the end says everything he said is wrong and that the Earth is actually a flat disc on the back of a turtle. Russell gets smug and asks her what the turtle is supported by and she replies that he’s very clever but won’t get her that way and it’s turtles all the way down.” Rose tells them all.

“It’s the paradox of the unmoved mover. The old woman’s answer is that no matter how many turtles you go down there’s always more, which makes no sense. But, look, Karkat you agree that if I throw my plate at Rose to prove this point you agree that only happened because she gave that explanation to prompt me to do that, right?” Dirk tries.

“I… guess?” you agree vaguely.

“Ok, but I only talked about Russell because Mituna brought up the problem. He only did that because you asked. Every action has a cause, right?” Rose continues for him.

“That makes sense.” you agree albeit suspiciously because this sounds like she and Dirk are rounding up to make a point and you probably won’t like it.
“So you can trace the line of things that caused other things all the way back, correct?” Dirk asks.

“Sure?” you say.

“So what was the first thing?” Rose challenges you.

“The beginning of the universe, right? The big bang.” Jade pipes up helpfully.

“Cool, what was before that?” Dirk asks cheerfully, you are VERY suspicious when he is this happy.

“Nothing.” Jade answers.

“Ah, but we just agreed that all things are caused by something. What caused the big bang?” Dirk asks and you swear you hear Sollux mutter ‘bad tv writers’ under his breath but you ignore that.

“Well I mean- that’s not how it works.” Jade protests.

“What about the G-man? Humans have a bunch of gods and creation myths, pick any of ‘em.” Latula suggests.

“Oh, cool, theology in here too. Cool I’ll bite, let’s go for the Christian God then, I’m more familiar with that. Let’s say he made the universe.” Dirk agrees.

“I’m absolutely certain you’re not suggesting that’s the actual answer.” Jake says knowingly.

“I’m certainly not. Where’d God come from?” Dirk beams.

“From noth- ah. I see.” Latula nods.

“Turtles all the way down.” Rose says solemnly.

“The thing is if you want causality as a concept you have to accept that there is no first thing, that’s it’s turtles all the way down as it were. Which is fine if time is infinite and chaos exists but if the game is a fixed point and requires us to play it to be a game then we have to exist, that means that we’re created and you can’t have both. It’s a paradox.” Dirk explains.

“But there are timelines where we don’t play the game.” Damara argues.

“Are there any where we just plain don’t exist because Dave and I saw none. I know he said that theoretically anything that we can imagine exists but I’m starting to think that might be a time player blind spot and that statement may well come with the asterisk stating ‘as long as the players exist’. If one of us died before the game and couldn’t play then the game exists but merely had an error. We have to exist.” Rose insists.

Damara’s jaw clicks shut and she frowns, clearly thinking hard.

“Huh.” Roxy says thoughtfully.

“Huh, what?” Dirk asks.

“Yeah, ‘huh, what?’” you agree, happy for someone else to look stupid instead of you.

“Time doesn’t really matter here, I mean, from our point of view. Like, if something was broken irreparably now it doesn’t mean that we can’t ever use it, we’d just have to go back to a point when it was not broken if we wanted to. Right?” Roxy says.
“Yeah, it’s more complicated than that but yeah.” Damara nods.

“So, if I was designing this game and I needed player characters I’d do what games already do. Spawn the players that you need inside the game. And if I was going to do that I would say that the lab that contained giant vials of our DNA, enough of it to make Hal a body when he crashed into it would be where I’d do that. When we got there everything looked locked, like it had already been used. So maybe it had.” Roxy says.

“Don’t piggyback off of my point to make your point. Get your own point.” Sollux snipes at her. You ignore his pathetic blackflirting attempts and focus on Damara who looks like she suddenly just got four from putting two and two together.

“I’ll get Dave!” she declares, leaping out of her seat and rushing off.

“But you can time travel too why- and she’s gone.” Dirk sighs.

“Rose, can you tell me what’s going to happen?” you ask, looking at her.

“I could but I won’t. I’m trying not to look, I know no one will die but I am refusing to look closer than that.” Rose says and sips her coffee.

You kind of want to say that she’s always been a smug know-it-all so why stop now. But… well, anything that will stop her from being callous and reckless is good.

Damara returns with a blinding grin as well as Dave being dragged while floating by one arm and John stumbling along behind from her other.

“Why?” you ask, gesturing vaguely to all three of them.

“Spoilers. Come on Jade, Roxy, Karkat we need to go. Rest of you can come or not, I don’t care.” Damara says, clapping her hands.

“Well I wasn’t gonna eat more anyway now.” Jade says, pointedly pushing her plate further away. You stow your notebook and watch as Jade just opens up a hole to the lab that Hal came from. A bunch of you walk through it, although John needs to be shoved.

You watch as Dave looks down at the blood trail that seems to come from nowhere but leads right to the shattered glass tube. He then looks up at Dirk who has followed him and glares at him. Well, not an outright glare, what with the shades and all. A lot of Striderian facial expressions are part actual expression, part body language and part plain fucking guess work. The point is Dave essentially just pointed to Dirk/Hal’s blood on the floor and more or less shoved Dirk’s face in it like ‘look what you DID’. Dirk looks appropriately guilty. When did you learn to read these obtuse assholes again?

“Ok, come on, over here.” Damara says, beckoning you all over to her.

All of you in this context comprises of you, Dave, John, Jade, Rose, Dirk and Roxy as well as Damara herself obviously. Everything feels weird for a moment, like when you dive too deep in a swimming pool and feel the pressure of water in your ears. It’s that except it’s a whole body situation. Around you time spools backwards, you watch Hal’s creation in reverse then the room is fine again, then you see Roxy’s team coming through here, the central glass vial mysteriously unfilling with goo and them then leaving again.

“Is this how you always do it or is this just because of people? This isn’t how I time travel.” Dave wonders, looking around.
“Witches and Knights are different.” Damara offers unhelpfully.

“Well, no shit.” Dave points out.

Abruptly and for no reason that you can see Damara stops all of you and time resumes as normal. Every glass vial is empty and the room is pristine.

“When are we?” Roxy asks in wonder.

“Three weeks ago.” Dave answers her.

“So this is great and all but why are we here? Why am I here? This is boring.” John whines.

“You have Vriska and Terezi as soulmates, I want nothing to do with whatever you consider exciting,” you snort. John punches you in the shoulder a lot harder than you were expecting.

“So, when we were here last that machine seemed mostly locked but you could adjust it by turning one of the dials.” Dirk explains.

“Oh, let me see!” John gasps and rushes over to the machine. He jabs a button on it excitedly and all of the screens come to life.

“John don’t just hit random buttons!” you scold him, running over as well. The screens are all showing trolls, the ancestors by the looks of it.

“Oh, shut up. Look this selects a screen.” John explains and turns a dial that makes the screen on the console reflect one of the screens already lit up.

There appears to be a giant roller mouse ball set into the console, like some eighties shit and you curiously move it around as on screen a young looking Damara like person wanders about. Though you suppose it must be her ancestor, The Handmaid. You remember seeing her ghost when you were young but it’s still strange to see her young and alive, looking for all the world like your sister.

“Select DNA template.” John reads off of the screen. The two of you share a look, shrug and so you roll the cursor over to the young Handmaid and click on her.

‘Paradox Sample Acquired!’ the machine happily announces in a pop up. You spin around to see that on the platform next to where Dave and Damara are sitting on the floor a Damara shaped… goo… person appears. She appears and then promptly slumps into a pile of slime.

“That’s nasty.” Dave adds helpfully.

The machine whirrs and the slime is sucked up by a tube, deposited into a large tube at the back and a happy green light on it clicks on.

“Good job?” Roxy says uncertainly.

“Maybe we have to get them all.” Jade suggests, looking over John’s shoulder to the screen.

“This isn’t pokemon, they’re people!” you argue but John is already switching the screens. Next you see a young Summoner and, with no other clues of what to do you continue grabbing slime copies of trolls you know and putting them into giant vials.

With all twelve done the machine flashes you a new popup.
‘Samples Collected! Print Generation 2a Line? Y/N?’

“Uh.” you say as John reaches out and hits Y before you can stop him.

Behind you the laser like part of the machine rumbles and then in a flash of light there’s a little wiggler on the platform with a bright pink body and eyes and very familiar horns.

“I’ve never seen one of y’all as babies before.” Dave says, peering at her curiously.

“So if I’m understanding this right then you’re making the ancestors now, or copies of them at least.” Roxy says uncertainly.

“No, these are the actual ancestors. There’s time functions and send functions on there, this is the future tyrant queen of our people.” Damara corrects her.

“Mmm, besides we’re in the past right now and we’re not up to our eyeballs in bug babies so these suckers go somewhere and I can feel that time is all… weird around here.” Dave adds.

“So it’s actually her.” you conclude, looking down at the innocent looking wiggler.

“Really brings up that whole ‘if you could kill Hitler as a baby, should you?’ problem, huh? Especially as you guys even call her Fish Hitler sometimes.” Dirk notes.

“That thought experiment is bad for so many reasons.” Rose sighs.

“Also you’re not allowed to kill this one. You’re not saving anyone, the game happens which kills every other troll and human but our party or you’d doom the timeline killing everyone anyway. Everyone’s gonna die regardless and we already kill her later as is, don’t make a paradox happen, bro.” Dave warns.

“So I guess we do the rest of them, then.” you say with a shrug.

Rejoining John at the machine you print the remaining eleven ancestors. The machine happily declares ‘Generation 2a Complete!’ Damara is sitting entirely straight faced with a tiny Redglare hanging from her hair Dave has your mother on his shoulder and is watching Signless scamper over his arm.

“Look, it has coordinates.” John says and you can see that you’re looking at a brooding cavern and from the date you can work out that it ought to be The Handmaid on there, assuming that she has the same hatchday as Damara which she probably does.

“Okay, but- no. Look, the adult trolls played the game before, fucked up and had to reset. That made our universe so how can we be making them?!’ you demand.

“Well, the game made new versions of them, right?” Dave says, picking up a tiny Darkleer who is trying to escape.

“Yes.” you agree.

“Well there you go.” Dave shrugs as if it’s obvious.

“What?” you demand. None of this makes any sense!

“This is how the game makes people, this is how it did it when it scratched. We’re the part that makes them again and also us.” Damara explains.
“Isn’t that a paradox?” Dirk asks.

“Yeah, but it’s the right kind. Trust me.” Dave tells him.

“There IS no good kind! A paradox is a paradox!” you shout.

“No, that’s a tautology.” Rose corrects you.

“Fuck you all!” you shout and stomp back to the computer.

The machine locks onto The Handmaid who is now scuttling across the platform and when you smack a button it transportalis her elsewhere. The screen flashes to a rock outside which then launches itself through space and then… vanishes. Suddenly on the other screen you see a meteor crash into the brooding caverns and The Handmaid landing on the ground with a bump. She shakes herself off and scuttles away.

It looks like you’re on the bullshit express train to this doesn’t make sense town so you just keep sending these assholes away and eventually the machine declares ‘Generation 2a Complete. Lock Initiated!’ The dial on the computer clicks itself over and you see brooding caverns again, only these look different. The rock is strange and they seem smaller, more clinical. A jadeblood with a soulmark up her arm bends down and turns an egg carefully. Oh, oh, this is the cavern on Earth! It’s supposed to be hugely secretive but you know that it’s somewhere in the middle of fucking nowhere in Texas.

‘Generation 2b Print Y/N?’

Okay, well obviously this is going to be Damara’s generation. The machine flip flops between Alternia and Earth with each new troll you make and sending these ones off is easy enough, you even feel a little warm and fuzzy about it when it’s your siblings that you’re sending off to your parents. Plus you’re not gonna lie that it feels good to finally get to shoot certain annoying siblings of yours into space on a meteor. You’ve never wished for that specifically before when Kankri’s been ranting (sorry, lecturing) you but apparently this was what you wanted all along. Dave is right, it’s the good kind of paradox.

“Hal’s genetic heritage is looking interesting.” Dirk remarks, looking over the remaining vials.

“Oh?” you say turning around. You can see that the slime isn’t even but it’s hard to tell which ones are that much fuller than the others as there isn’t a whole lot of variation.

“We’ll see soon, I guess.” Dirk shrugs.

“Dave, you should probably make sure to steer away from these grubs.” Rose warns.

“Yeah, I know when the first time I touched my soulmate is, I don’t want that kind of bad paradox to happen if it’s now instead.” Dave agrees and floats over to her.

Well, you may as well get on. You’re getting the hang of this now.

‘Generation 1 Initiate Mutation Shuffle? Y/N?’

“You’re mutants?” John gasps in awe.

“Fucking rude, me, Kankri and Signless have always-” you cut yourself off and squint at John’s delighted expression, behind you Dave badly stifles a laugh.

“You’re thinking of some kind of X-Men shit, aren’t you?” you accuse.
“It’s not?” John says, clearly disappointed.

You roll your eyes so hard you think you maybe sprained something and hit Y on the machine. Behind you the 12 troll vials buzz and whir, they bubble and glow and finally settle.

“I’m faintly reminded of Bro’s blender, only less blood.” Dirk muses. You have questions about that but if you followed every disturbing comment about Bro you’d probably know far too much and you’d spend all your time doing it anyway.

You ignore that and send this generation of trolls through portals, pleased to note that the human brooding caverns have put in an open skylight as a result of periodically being showered with meteors once a month every five years or so. When you’re done that part of the system locks its controls and it flicks over to screens showing humans.

“Your turn.” You say smugly to John, his job is so much easier given that he has far fewer people to deal with.

“Oh wow, Hal’s got a lot of family, huh?” Dave says and you turn to see the remaining slime in vials. Working from left to right you can see who he pulled DNA from. There’s a significant amount of, er, Vantas slime left over which given his eye colouring makes sense. He has about a third as much from the Megidos, the Nitrams and the Captors. You were right that there is Pyrope in there as well, the horns don’t lie, but you didn’t expect it to be so little. Nor did you expect him to be as much Serket as he is Vantas.

Huh, wait. Megido, Nitram, Captor, Serket, that’s every psionic line with you and Terezi’s added in for flavour.

“If he doesn’t have some kind of psionics I’ll eat my own head off of my neck.” you say bluntly.

“Well, either of those outcomes is horrifying, thank you Karkat. I do wish your word pictures were less graphic.” Rose sighs, you flip her off as a matter of principle.

“Oh, come on, move!” John says elbowing you out of the way and fiddling with the dials. The screen reads ‘Generation 2 select samples’ and now fewer screens around the console are active than were when you were running it.

“We’ve already seen this, that’s Mom and that’s Bro.” Roxy says, pointing out a little boy and girl that look JUST like her and Dirk.

“Ok, so that’s your parents done but what about… I mean, Dirk you have a different mom, right?” John asks, looking over at him.

“Yeah, and I’ve also seen another problem with this. If this is planning on shooting the kids we make off on meteors then there’s a bad kind of paradox here. I distinctly remember sitting with Roxy and M- with Roxanne when she was pregnant with Dave and Rose talking about what to name them and I have video of her pregnant with Roxy. I don’t see how that’s gonna work.” Dirk says.

“That’s a good point.” Dave agrees.

“Godzilla! OMG, I think I remember that!” Roxy gasps, clapping her hands over her mouth and jumping in glee.

“Yes!” Dirk says with a laugh.

“What?” Jade asks in bafflement.
“Don’t tell me you suggested Godzilla as a name for one of us.” Dave says incredulously.

“I did!” Roxy laughs.

“Well, thank goodness Mother had some common sense for once.” Rose says dryly, looking highly unimpressed at her older siblings.

“Well… actually.” Dirk grins wolfishly.

“No.” Rose whispers in horror.

“When I adopted Dave I had to get his original birth certificate from the hospital and I got yours too in case we needed to bounce from your Mom’s place and have me or Roxy adopt you too which to be honest was pretty good foresight on my behalf but… here. I’ve been hanging onto it for the right moment but I guess this is it.” Dirk says and hands out a sheet of paper to her.

You strain your neck to read over her shoulder and there, in looping font is the details of when and to whom Rose was born, but also her name in looping official script.

_Rose Godzilla Lalonde_

“This is the best thing I’ve ever seen.” you say in awe as John just loses his shit behind you. Rose is staring down at it in horror but Dave looks up with suspicion on his face.

“No way did Mom just do this to Rose, if one of you suggested Godzilla for her middle name then what the actual fuck is mine?” Dave demands. Dirk hands Dave’s over with as straight a face as he can manage and you eagerly peer at that one too.

_Dave Skeletor Lalonde_

John is barely able to breathe now and Jade isn’t doing much better. Dave looks up from his birth certificate to Roxy and Dirk.

“Which one of you suggested Skeletor?” Dave asks flatly, looking between them.

“Guilty.” Dirk says holding up his hands, though he doesn’t look at all sorry.

“Bro, bro, that is… the tightest shit I have ever seen oh shit I am gonna frame this.” Dave says, finally cracking up and fistbumping Dirk.

“How can you be so pleased by this, Skeletor? It’s an outrage!” Rose insists. Dave shakes his head and throws his arm around her.

“Nah, look. Godzilla is a giant lizard created by like… hubris and science gone awry and wreaks destruction in revenge but she lives in peace in the end and in some movies she even has a whole ‘lil family. I think that an avenging god settling the score seems right for you, don’t you think?” Dave says to her, his arm around her shoulders. Rose makes an uncertain sound so Dave just snickers a little and then kisses her cheek. You’d never know that they hadn’t spent their entire life together.

“It’s weird to think that you’re a Lalonde though.” you note and Dave turns around to look at you, holding out the paper like you hadn’t been sneaking a look earlier.

“At least people never have trouble spelling Strider.” Rose points out and Dave shrugs. To be honest you don’t see her point, Lalonde is at least pretty much phonetic. You’ve had way more trouble as Karkat Vantas, getting people to spell any of it right has been a pain always. Whatever, you’re not
“But… if you last name is really Lalonde why are you still going by Strider?” you ask curiously.

“Because,” Dave shrugs, “it’s my dad’s last name.”

“Since when did you want ANYTHING Bro gave you?” you ask incredulously.

“Fuck him, Dirk was the one who adopted me and actually wanted me. Bro was just there, he doesn’t count.” Dave answers calmly. Behind Dave’s shoulder you can see Dirk in the distance almost collapse against Roxy, his face a picture of ‘oh no I’m not about to cry right now, not me, stop staring’.

That being Dirk ‘genuine feelings are my kryptonite' Strider.

“Aw, Dave that’s so cute!” Jade gasps and grabs him into a hug. You can hear Dave’s squawk of offense through her god tier clothes so apparently Dirk’s condition is genetic.

“Still, I don’t know what to do now that Dirk has pointed out about pregnancy. Maybe this works differently for humans and I just have to scan everyone and then there’s some kind of… I don’t know, some other means.” John says worriedly.

He steps back to the machine and he zaps the remaining two people. The machine declares that the scanning of that generation is complete and instructs John to switch to ‘Generation 1’. John twists a dial and the screens change.

“Jaspers!” Roxy exclaims in glee and you can see a little Rose talking to a cat in a suit. Somehow you are not at all surprised by this, you are even less surprised that this appears to be a feline therapy session. Over there on another screen is a small John falling off of a playground toy and Jade running around with a dog. Your blood goes cold when you look at the last one a young Dave in replica Dirk shades sits on the same shitty sofa that you saw in Bro’s apartment. There’s blood smeared across his face and his tiny chest hitches as a far too young Dirk bandages several of his fingers together. Your mind flips back to the X Ray of Dave’s hand that you saw before, that finger is broken.

“Turn it off.” Dirk says quickly.

“It’s not working! It keeps saying sample already acquired when I try to scan anyone!” John says in a panic.

You see it, a slight blur and then suddenly there’s a puppet behind Dirk. Dave jumps and tiny Dirk spins around and then suddenly both of them are on the floor. Bro’s figure looms large before them and then John turns the monitor off. Everyone is silent, either too upset by what they saw or at a loss for what to say.

“Hey, Dirk.” Damara says quietly.

“Yes, Damara?” Dirk replies stiffly, still looking at the screens even though now they’re back to showing Bro as a child as well as the other guardians as children.

“Falling off a roof and having that ring taken from him were too good. He deserved slow and painful.” Damara hisses.

Dirk laughs, startled and with a touch of bitterness but he smiles at her slightly when he looks around.
“You’re right there.” he agrees.

“What do you have to do now John?” Dave asks and his voice is rough and blank.

“Uh, well it said that the samples were already acquired which doesn’t make sense.” John frowns.

“Tell it to print them first. Do… do her.” Rose says, reaching around John to point at one of the smaller screens.

“That isn’t my mom but it could be my Nanna, look her eyes are the same colour as Jane’s.” John says, peering at the screen. He smacks the button and one of the tubes goes down a little and with a flash of light there’s a little human baby sat there. To be honest all human babies look the same to you except with colour variations, they’re like lazy video game sprites that just get palette swapped. You don’t say that because it’s probably speciest, or at the very least it’s rude.

“Well if that’s your grandmother then that must be my grandfather.” Jade says leaning in as well. You just can’t see the screen now so you take your place next to Dave and squirm your hand into Dave’s stiff one, wriggling your fingers between his until he loosens up a little.

“Okay, maybe let’s send these two off then seeing as we can’t really tell them apart.” John nods. The three of them at the console start talking about how there are two alternate dates that the machine is offering but they both know when their grandparents were born so they select those and off they go.

On the screens you see two small babies land on Earth on meteors, the time skips ahead and then there they are as small children, it skips once more and you see them as adults.

“They look just like Jane and Jake.” Roxy gasps.

“Except for the baby and the…” Dirk trails off gesturing at his face, he’s right though the Jake look-alike does have a rather impressive moustache. You watch as he shoots a lion in the face with a musket and dances around it. The Jane look-alike is holding the hand of a small boy.

“That must be my dad.” John says.

“What does it mean by ‘reprint second edition’?” Jade asks in puzzlement.

“The other controls are locked so it seems you have no choice but to find out.” Rose notes. John presses the button uncertainly.

The vials and laser repeat their process and you end up with the same babies again, they’re identical.

“Maybe it’s some alternate timeline shit.” Dave speculates, pulling one of the babies up to standing by its armpits.

“Dave that’s not how you hold a baby that little, put her down.” Dirk reprimands him. Dave rolls his eyes but does as he’s told.

“Uh, guys? We recognise these dates.” Jade says, looking around John’s frozen frame to stare at you all.

“You had two sets to choose from, right?” you ask.

“Yeah and I didn’t look at them too close because I know our grandparents weren’t born nineteen years ago. But I know who was.” John tells you.

Slowly you look at the babies on the platform. They’re not look-alikes, they ARE Jane and Jake.
“Uh, John. Do you have any cousins because Jane never mentioned any and if that’s your Dad then who’s that?” Dirk asks, pointing to a second small boy on the screen with John’s grandmother and his father.

You watch at John tries to get the machine to scan either boy but it refuses and eventually he’s forced just to send baby Jane and Jake off on their way via meteor. Jake’s streaks down through the sky first, alarming a young couple on an island sat down next to a tree. The young man is dressed in hunting gear and the young woman has long black hair and almost hippie like clothes despite, you’re sure, the time period for that having passed.

The meteor crashing both startles the young couple and breaks up an argument between two older adults, their face already lined.

“Grandma and Grandpa! That must be- well, that must be grandma’s daughter and Grandpa’s son, my… my parents. They used to argue terribly sometimes but they always said it was us and their kids that made them friends.” Jade says with a slightly wistful expression.

“Friends? But if they’re your grandparents aren’t they-?” you start to ask.

“Jade and Jake’s Grandmother is their mother’s mother and their grandfather is their father’s father.” Dirk explains helpfully.

“I can’t believe that you ever had to gall to tell me my family was confusing.” you accuse Dave.

“Hey, I didn’t mean it like that. Biologically your species and your family is perfectly easy to understand. I just meant everyone in your family is really fucking weird.” Dave replies.

“That seems fair.” Damara nods. Yeah, it kind of does.

“Whoa, whoa, DAD!!” John suddenly yelps and you look up to see a familiar looking man walk over to the young couple. He’s younger but he’s still wearing the same hat and is noticeably the same man, that’s Mr Egbert alright. His sleeves are rolled up to his elbows and an unfamiliar soulmark decorates his arm. He catches the elbow of the other man who looks remarkably similar.

“The other boy.” Rose whispers.

“I… I need to draw out a family tree, hold on.” John says and crouches down on the floor, taking out a notebook and pen. You peer over his shoulder and watch as he writes the whole thing out, all of that implies that the two boys were products of Nanna Egbert and Grandpa Harley, making Jade and John… cousins.

“Ooh, I am not explaining that one to Jane and Jake. Aaaawkward.” Roxy hisses and winces.

“Me neither. But the more important thing we’re neglecting here is that Jane and Jake are somehow their own grandparents. John printed them from the same material, they’re clones. And looking at Jade and her grandmother on the screen there I’d say it’s not just those two either.” Dirk points out. You look back at the screen, the resemblance is uncanny.

The screen changes and you watch Jane’s meteor crash down and, distressingly, it crushes Nanna Egbert to death. You watch a sobbing woman, presumably Jane’s mother, get consoled by Mr Egbert. The man then turns and jumps down into the crater and when he emerges he has baby Jane in his arms.

“Dad didn’t mention this before.” John says in shock.
“Which part? The crushing your grandmother or the coming to Earth on a meteor?” you ask. Dave shoots you a look that suggests that you have failed this section of interacting with another person and that perhaps asking that MIGHT have been a little rude. Maybe.

John shakes his head and continues printing and sending off members of his family. It turns out that Jade is her own grandmother as well and weirdly John isn’t his own grandfather but his great-grandfather some Colonel someone or other but it seems like a big deal to him. For some reason it makes him declare that he’s the funniest man alive and at that point you tune him out.

In the meantime you look at the screens that have now lit up with an older guy who looks like an adult Dave and a woman who looks like an adult Rose with long hair. You’d seen the video earlier of a little Dirk helping Dave out as best as he can and you also saw a young Bro, but now you can’t tell the difference between them. You eye Dirk, Dirk who is twenty this year. Dirk who is an actual adult, Dirk who has been eating better lately thanks to all the parents around and who has grown taller and broader than he was when you first met him in Bro’s apartment.

You’ve seen Bro, you saw him in person when he killed Dave and now when you look at Dirk the only difference you can see is age and the fact that Dirk still has a soul that you can see in his expression and hear in his voice. If Jade is her own grandmother, if Jane is hers, Jake his and so on…well.

You have a horrible feeling about who Bro is going to be to Dirk.

John is kneeling on the floor, editing his family tree with Jade so you take control of the machine with Rose standing by you, she probably has worked out just what you have too. You hit the right buttons and with a zap two small babies appear on the pad. The screen offers you two dates, an older one and a newer one. Now, you don’t know just how old Bro was but you do know Dirk’s date of birth and one of them is his. You sigh, on the screen is presumably Dave and Rose’s alt selves so you have to send the older ones. Clicking the dial to the furthest back date you smack the button and send them off.

On the screen with older Dave you watch him standing behind an old style film camera, his shades pushed up into his hair and a cigarette loosely between his lips. He’s filming a shot of some city. The woman who looks like Rose walks up to him, taps him on the shoulder and says something. Adult Dave frowns and then suddenly the meteor crashes, Rose walks off and a startled Dave leaps into the meteor crater and pulls out a tiny baby Bro.

On the other screen the Rose looking woman finishes signing a stack of papers, sets them down on a park bench. They read ‘the complete works of Roseanne Lalonde.’ she stands up, rifles through her purse for a second and sets her driver’s licence down on the floor and takes three steps back from it and looks right up, directly at the screen. You have a half second of distressing eye contact with her before a meteor lands and obliterates her, in the smoking wreck a baby Roxanne Lalonde giggles and claps her tiny baby hands.

“At least that explains why she has the name she does despite being an orphan.” Roxy says slowly.

Dirk is suddenly behind you, staring at the screen. The only dates left on the screen are his birthday and Roxy’s, the two newly lit up monitors to the side show Bro looking slightly younger than Dirk does now and at his parents house with his mother on the next is Bro sleeping in a bed with Roxanne with the covers shoved off.

“You’re not…” Dirk falters, his mouth hangs slightly open and then horror crosses his features.

“You’re not mutating the DNA or anything I’m- I’m Bro.” he gasps and stumbles back.
“You have the same DNA as Bro that doesn’t make you him.” Rose insists but Dirk isn’t listening. He backs into one of the giant vials and seems to shudder all over. You hit print and make Dirk and Roxy.

“If anything the fact that you had the same genetic start but turned out so different proves that you’re nothing like him.” Rose adds vehemently as she walks over to him.

You want to argue the same point but Dirk looks so lost, so filled with self loathing that you don’t know what you can say. You know he considers Bro to be the worst person ever and that he’s hated the similarities that he shares with him. How much of a mindfuck must it be to find out that the man who tortured you, who abused you and the only person you loved turned out to be a clone of you? What can you possibly say to make it better?

Dave sits down on the raised pad and holds his arms out to baby Dirk who crawls over. Dave picks him up and pulls him into his lap as Roxy does the same to her younger self and sits.

“Should Dave feel shitty, Dirk?” Roxy asks and apparently her words are enough to stir Dirk out of his horrified stupor and he looks at them in confusion.

“We saw someone who I bet is going to have the exact same DNA picking Bro up and raising him. That version of Dave the guy you think of as your father. But he raised Bro and Bro was a monster, he had Cal with him at some point but you and I lived with that puppet for the first five years of our lives and we’re fine, on top of that you were raised by Bro and you turned out great. So clearly it’s not your DNA that’s the problem, obviously it’s Dave’s shitty parenting.” Roxy says, matter-of-factly.

“It makes as much sense as your ‘I have the same DNA so we’re the same person’ theory. I mean, if Dave and I were identical twins would we be the same person or two different people with the same DNA?” Rose challenges him.

“Or maybe,” Dave says as baby Dirk clings to his shirt and he holds him close, “the difference between this mini you and the baby Bro we just sent back is what you chose to do. You being his clone means nothing. You’re the same person you always were you just know about your DNA now, what does it matter?” Dave asks.

“But-” Dirk starts.

“Shut up.” you tell him sharply and, to your surprise, he does.

“What we need to work out is how we get these babies down there but not on meteors.” you say to everyone.

“Is this the point where we’re supposed to say ‘I know how to do that’? Because I don’t know how to do that also this baby keeps trying to escape.” Dave complains.

“You’re holding him wrong. Me wrong, I mean. And you Roxy, look just- there.” Dirk says, seemingly shaking off a lot of his worry and striding across the space between him and Dave to scoop baby Dirk and Roxy up into his arms. He shuffles them around a little but both babies lean back against his chest. Baby Roxy sleepily shuts her eyes and baby Dirk’s tiny hands cling to Dirk’s shirt.

He still looks unhappy and distressed but somehow calming two infants seems to calm him down at least a little.

Meanwhile you John and Jade look over all of the functions on the machine that you can find. Which
considering as this is a machine that literally grants life and controls time are shockingly few, but perhaps a lot of the commands are hidden from you so you don’t fuck it all up too bad. It seems to all be predestined so far which maybe given the paradoxical nature of all of this ectobiology is to be expected. Regardless there seems to be no option to... uh... impregnate Dirk’s mother or a Roxanne who, frankly, looks too young for that kind of thing to be okay. She’s, what, Roxy’s age maybe?

At a total loss you turn to Rose.

“Look, I know you’re trying to cut back on seeing the future for your own health but we’re really at a loss here. Can you help us out?” you ask her. It occurs to you a moment later that you are technically her leader, you could have just ordered her to do it. A moment after that it occurs to you that there’s no ‘technically’ about it, you are her leader.

“The matter of our creation seems like the kind of thing the continuation of our timeline hangs upon. Give me a moment.” Rose says.

You watch as her expression goes unfocused for a moment and she glows every so slightly, like your grandmother does sometimes. The glow fades, you think you would have only noticed it in this very dim light. Rose chuckles and shakes her head.

“Clever. Of course, babies are just bigger, older foetuses.” Rose laughs softly.

Dave raises an eyebrow at her slowly.

“Wow, I knew I was the twin that was better in science but boy I didn’t know you were that bad. Yes Rose, babies were once foetuses, well done.” Dave drawls sarcastically.

“Damara, you can manipulate time in a way that Dave cannot. You can age a person down, you could in fact reverse a baby’s development right back into the almost embryonic stage. And of course Jade could shrink a meteor down to impressively tiny. Naturally this wouldn’t harm either of them, the meteors already project a field that protects their charges. If they didn’t it would just be raining dead babies and grubs the whole time we were doing this.” Rose says. None of that is a mental image you wanted, thanks.

“Rose, are you suggesting knocking up our mom?” Roxy asks in horror.

“That does solve the whole evidence of them being pregnant problem.” Dirk concedes.

“I think I’m glad I just arrived by meteor, this is pretty gross sounding.” Jade announces and John nods in agreement.

On the screen that shows Dirk’s mother you can see her stretched out on the sofa, a book in hand. She lowers it and sits up a little, saying something. Bro is sitting on the floor sewing something together, he shakes his head as she speaks. Dramatically she flops back on the sofa, fanning herself with the book. You watch as teenaged Bro stands up, obviously rolling his eyes despite the shades in the way. He walks over to the bay window and pulls one open then drops back into place on the floor. A few autumn leaves blow in through the window and you watch as Bro pointedly puts a sweater on while making unflinching eye contact with his mother who seems entirely unphased by his petulance.

“I guess do me first then.” Dirk says, handing his baby self off to Damara.

“How am I going to know which meteor to shrink? I- oh.” Jade gasps. You turn to see Rose’s hand in hers and the hint of what Hal had once informed you was a ‘fraymotif’ echoing around them. Rose’s hand slides to Jade’s back and the girl holds up her hands like a camera viewfinder and brings
them together, sizing something down.

“This might get a little freaky.” Dave warns as Damara settles baby Dirk down on the centre of the pad under the laser. She takes his tiny sunglasses off and baby Dirk begins to fuss.

“Be ready to hit that button.” Damara tells you. You settle your fingers on it and wait for her word.

You might not have been old enough to get the full sex-ed classes, for whatever quality that counted for in Texas, but you did biology. You know roughly the stages of development babies go through before they’re born. But you learn that it is one thing to see it in a book and another to watch it happen right in front of you in visceral detail. Your throat tightens around the urge to retch and you squeeze your eyes shut and focus on your hand on the button.

“Now.” Damara calls and you hit the button. When you turn around there’s no baby anymore and only an abandoned diaper and pair of sunglasses to show that there ever was one. You don’t even have the wherewithal to wonder why and how the machine made inorganic items like that.

On the screen Dirk’s mother suddenly jolts on the sofa, one hand pressing to her stomach. Her book drops to the floor. With a grimace she sits up, holding her lower abdomen in pain and her expression is far more confused than it is agonised. Bro tilts his head curiously, a memetic bit of body language you’ve seen on every Strilonde you’ve ever met. Whatever he says his mother shakes her head and flops back on the sofa, rubbing the part of her you just shot with a meteor. After a moment she frowns and fishes her book up off of the floor and starts reading again.

“Well I’m still here so I can only guess that it worked.” Dirk says after a few seconds of silence.

“Time feels fine to me. Dave?” Damara asks, Dave nods.

“My turn then.” Roxy says and so Dirk places her on the pad in the same place, grabbing the discarded baby things and putting them in his sylladex somewhere. Rose and Jade do their thing with another meteor and you look away in time to avoid the worst baby to embro animorphs cover ever reenacted live for you. When Damara calls you hit the button and look at the screen.

Bro and Roxanne are sleeping in a single bed together, the window is open by it and they’re a tangle of bare limbs. Roxanne’s pyjama shirt is hitched up enough to expose just the right part of her stomach above her pyjama pants. She jolts suddenly in her sleep and you actually see a red mark show up below her navel. She doesn’t wake but Bro stirs and squeezes her in one arm, barely awake.

The next thing on your list is to make Dirk’s… father? You’re going to say father. The movie man who is obviously alternate Dave and then the woman who was other Rose. You blast through them in less than a minute, it’s only when you make actual Dave and Rose that you run into a problem.

That problem being Dirk.

He’s standing there holding Rose and Dave to his chest, his nose buried in Dave’s hair.

“God, I forgot how tiny you were.” Dirk says with a warble in his voice that might actually be him trying to hold back tears.

“Yeah, we’re cute babies, mind putting us back?” Dave asks.

“I- no.” Dirk says tightly and backs up a step.

“Dirk.” Dave groans.
“No, listen. I was five when you were this age, it’s a miracle I didn’t accidentally drown you in the sink when I tried to look after you. I could do a good job this time, with both of you. And- and we’d be ok. Bro and Mom didn’t split up until you two came along because Cal made Bro wait for you or something. Me and Roxy would be okay together and Mom might keep Bro from going too far and I could-” Dirk protests.

“You could cause a paradox and doom the timeline. Besides who knows what kind of people you and Roxy would be without me and Rose around. Or who we’d be- no, this is a dumb question because you not letting us send those baby-us’s back in time DOOMS THIS TIMELINE AND KILLS US ALL.” Dave says throwing his hands in the air.

Baby Dave starts crying and that sets baby Rose off, filling the room with terrible wailing. But Dirk just shushes them and jiggles them about a little in a way that you would think would distress them more but in fact the pair quiets down almost immediately, clinging to him and snuffling. Dirk is apparently amazing with babies. This probably shouldn’t surprise you.

“I know what I’m sending them to. A mother that couldn’t care less about Rose and- and Bro. I know you don’t remember but you weren’t even a week old before Bro injured you the first time. The only reason he let me look after you is because he couldn’t stand the sound of you screaming and no one fixing it to make you stop. How can you ask me to send you two to that?” Dirk asks, holding them protectively. You don’t want to go and try to pry those babies from him, removing babies from their human parents is not the kind of thing anyone should try if they want to keep their limbs.

“Dirk, look at me.” Rose says slowly. Dirk does but holds the twins a little tighter as if Rose might try to take them.

“You’d never hurt those babies, would you?” Rose asks softly.

“Of course not.” Dirk answers instantly.

“Right, but if you don’t give them to me so we can send them back you’re murdering them. Not just them either, all of us. Even me and Dave, this me and Dave. Look at us. Would you do that?” Rose asks and Dirk shakes his head.

Carefully Rose takes her infant self out of Dirk’s arms and sets her on the floor, then just as carefully takes Dave into her arms. Dirk looks like he’s going to be sick, like he’s barely restraining himself from fighting her for them. Rose is right of course but millions of years of human instincts to protect their young are a hard thing to fight. You see him turn his head into Roxy’s shoulder.

You focus on the screen as Damara unages Rose. On the screen Roxanne and Bro are asleep in bed, it’s a bigger bed this time and Bro is curled around Cal’s creepy puppet body. Roxanne is half under and half out of the covers and there’s just enough of her skin exposed that when Damara gives you the signal and you send Rose off you can see the same mark and trace of blood show up there. Roxanne hisses, sleepily swipes at her skin and then seemingly drifts off again. With another button press you send Dave away too, his mark landing just next to Rose’s.

That’s everyone.

Or at least it’s everyone that you’re supposed to make. There’s no more functions available and presumably who Dave’s alternate self ends up with is of no consequence as Bro was found and you ensured Dirk exists yourself. Similarly Dadbert and whoever Jake and Jade’s actual parents are seems to require no input from you.
John seems annoyed that his dad mentioned about what happened to his mother, you can tell that from the family tree he drew, but neglected to mention the arrival via space rock. Though you have to consider that it’s not the strangest thing that’s happened in Mr Egbert’s life so maybe he’s just stopped considering things strange.

Either way you’re all pretty emotionally beat up from this so Jade happily opens a portal back to the ship when Damara stops Dave and whispers something to him as Roxy suddenly remembers she needs Dave to take her somewhere. Or rather somewhen and then promptly drops them both into the void and out of your sight.

You traipse back into the ship exhaustedly and fall onto one of the inset sofas in the movie area. You’ve had enough of paradoxes and time travel for one day and possibly forever.

4,310 hours remaining

Watching Hal trying to interact with absolutely anything is fascinating in a car crash kind of way. You can get over how he sounds too middle-toned flat, you’re used to humans after all, but it’s when he makes troll noises that get you. You have heard Hal pale-chirp at fifteen different people human and troll alike, several movie characters on screen and now a coffee machine of all things.

“Jesus fuck what did they do to you?” Hal mutters as he pries a dented panel off of the front, a few screws fall out and Hal chirps at the thing like it’s alive. Aradia is sitting next to you barely smothering her laughter. You shouldn’t be mean, he doesn’t intend to do it and he is part human. Their species is notorious for their insane pale drive and total disregard for boundaries there. Still, a coffee machine?!

“Mornin’ Hal, aw no coffee?” Roxy yawns, coming in the room.

“Give me a few and I’ll have it working. I think Horuss manhandled it and pretended someone else broke it.” Hal tuts disapprovingly.

“I have every faith in you, want me to grab you some food since you’re fixing that for everyone?” Roxy offers, petting his hair.

“You’re a goddamn saint, Rox.” Hal sighs and pale chirps at her now. Roxy walks off with a smile and you observe Hal as he watches her go. See, Hal might be a complete pale slut at least audio-wise but you are pretty damn sure he has actual pale feelings for Roxy. To add favour to your theory you know both Nepeta and Meulin agree too, you’re so damn sure you’re right.

That said if Roxy does land Hal pale that makes her the person with the most quadrants on the whole ship, which is impressive for a human. Though you could argue that Sollux doesn’t really count as they’re not actually dating yet but you disagree with that idea and you know he would too.

Hal stows his screwdriver away and presses a few buttons, the coffee machine happily starts up just in time for Roxy to get back.

“You know we have fruit on this ship, it has actual vitamins in it that you could eat instead of just the admittedly godly pastries that Dadbert makes.” Hal says judgmentally as Roxy returns. Because he’s meddling in her affairs for her own good. Totally pale crush, one hundred percent.
Your position as co-leader is stressful and they key to managing stress is to relax. Kanaya made you tea, you’ve had a soothing bath, you’re in your pyjamas and you’ve already done all of the things you want to do today. Dave is spending the evening watching movies with his siblings so he won’t need your attention either. You have your phone on do not disturb, a nest of pillows around you on your bed and a romance novel that you never got around to reading.

It’s perfect.

And, of course, someone is knocking on your door.

“Karkat,” Vriska’s voice eventually comes through the door, “we can hear you screaming in there, open up.”

You put your book down now that you’re done screeching into it and stomp over to the door, in your pyjamas no less. You slam your hand on the button and the door whooshes open. Vriska and John are there, holding hands. That’s new and also terrible, you didn’t realise that she’d made a move there. Hm, seeing as you seem to lack the ability to projectile vomit them away you seem to be stuck with talking to them.

“What.” you say flatly.

“John had an idea.” Vriska announces. You look at John skeptically.

“Was it the idea to disturb me on my one night off in FOREVER because if so fuck you both.” you snap.

“No, Karkat don’t be dumb. Can, uh, can I come in? I’m still not sure how territorial trolls are.” he says bashfully and you realise that he doesn’t really hang out with trolls much, he spends most of the time with the other humans when he’s on the ship and when he is hanging out with trolls up here it’s usually either in common space or in someone else’s room like Rose or Dave’s. Huh.

“I lived on Earth longer than you, fucker. But yes, fine, ruin my night both of you and come in.” you groan and walk back into your room. You sit on your bed and take a pointed sip of tea. It’s not your thing but Kanaya likes it and she thinks it might help with your ‘stress problem’ whatever that is. You don’t have a stress problem.

“John had the idea of training everyone.” Vriska announces.

“Well yeah, that’s what the planets are for and all the quests.” you say flatly. Vriska picks up a clay heart that Dave sculpted for one of your science projects, you kept it because you’re a sentimental fucker. You glare at her until she puts it back down.

“Oh, but that’s good for game stuff but this Lord English guy is a real person isn’t he?” John says.

“Well, if the brief talks we’ve had with his sister are any indication he’s another player, or was I don’t know. Time shit. But he’s not human or troll but he’s not a game construct either.” you nod.

“So how is the game training gonna help then? I mean great if it helps those of us who have stupid game powers which is, you know, basically everyone but me right now.” John adds that last part bitterly. Though Jane isn’t god tier either yet she does have some life powers already but as far as
The point is he’s a real person and we have no training fighting real people. And I can do it! I’m strong and I’m good with my weapon but the only people who have training in fighting real people are Dave and Dirk and that wasn’t-” John cuts himself off and you watch his fists clench. You don’t know how much he knows about just what Bro was like but it’s clear he knows a decent amount.

“Plus any troll raised on Alternia has experience in combat against real people trying to kill us and fair enough that the Earth trolls got some training from their parents but as you said, that’s not from people who were trying to kill them.” Vriska nods.

“Ok, I get that but what exactly is your plan?” you ask, setting your jade coloured teacup down. This might actually be interesting.

“My dad is super strong and actually surprisingly good at fighting. Dirk is an actual ninja, Jake and Roxy are basically Annie Oakley-” John says, pacing back and forth.

“I have no idea who that is.” Vriska adds unhelpfully.

“And- and Jane is strong too! I saw her clock some imp through a building with her warfork yesterday! Besides aren’t your parents all war heroes or whatever?” John asks, looking at you both.

You look at Vriska and think of Mindfang. Yeah, Mindfang is a war hero for a flexible definition of war and an outright elastic take on the word hero.

“You’re suggesting that they train all of us in their skills? Like some kind of… teen fight club?” you ask dubiously.

“Yes!” John exclaims.

You open your mouth to tell John his idea is stupid but you can’t help but pause. He does have a point. If you just assume that everyone agrees to it then it would be worthwhile. Dirk and Dave trained with swords but how do they do against guns? How can the people with guns do if they’re unarmed? The game teaches plenty of things but it also misses a lot.

“I told John that we trained in some basic stuff pre-game.” Vriska adds.

“It’s not the worst idea.” you say carefully.

“That’s not very enthusiastic.” John says flatly and crosses his arms in displeasure.

“It’s not the plan that I have a problem with it’s the people, really. I’m not sure if all of the adults will agree to actual combat training, especially your dad.” you say.

“You leave my dad to me.” John says defiantly.

“Well that’s sorted then, everyone else agreed to it before.” Vriska declares, standing up.

Yeah, the other problem is Dirk and Dave agreeing to it. Dirk semi agreed before and Dave threw himself into training but you’re not so dumb as to think it wasn’t mentally stressful for him. But then again this whole game is like that, surely it’s better to have a manageable amount of stress over months than chill for a while and then suddenly have dead friends and family.

“There has to be strict rules and I’m dead serious about this John. Rules about how people who are teaching are allowed to do it, what’s too far and making sure people don’t get too badly hurt and
most importantly that people can tap out. I won’t force people through the kind of thing that…” you shake your head, barely able to say it.

“I wouldn’t want it to be any other way. Let me talk people into it but if they agree can we do this? If it’s all to your specs?” John asks.

“Sure, it’s a good idea. If you can get everyone on board I’m all for it but you’re organising it though. If I have to do any more goddamn admin around this place I’m going to reinvent fucking capitalism and make you all pay me.” you tell him.

“Great! It’s gonna be the best!” John declares and rushes out of the room.

“I’m suspicious about how much you agreed to that.” Vriska says, narrowing her eyes at you.

“It’s a good idea also if I agree sooner you both get lost and leave me to my book and relaxing tea. HINT.” you add that last part loudly and shove her with your foot. Vriska casually flips you off and leave, making you able to settle back on your bed with your book and your tea. You’re pretty sure that future you is going to thank past you for this.

4,124 hours remaining

Past you can go fuck himself, honestly. The adults had all agreed to your training and several of them agreed that stamina was a key component of fighting, as such you are all going to run the ENTIRETY of Jane’s planet as it’s apparently really small and only eight miles around. Only.

“Can we fly?” Mituna asks from the back.

“No, you can’t.” Dirk says flatly, he and Jake are standing on a large rock and you know a lot of your ancestors are scattered about the course to make sure no one is cheating. This was Dirk and Jake’s idea and you’d be more bitter about it if you didn’t know that they’re running this thing too. John’s even set up a leader board with times ready for when people finish.

“Aw, what that’s bullshit.” Sollux whines from next to you.

“Why am I doing this again? I’m not even a player and I only just got legs for the first time.” Hal shouts out.

“Then you’d better learn to use them.” Jake retorts with a grin. Hal mutters something very unsavoury in response that you only just catch.

“Won’t there be enemies along the way? Do we ignore them and keep running or fight?” Jade asks curiously.

“That’s your call.” Dirk tells her.

The race starts and you lose sight of the athletic people within the first five minutes. Mituna has more stamina and athleticism than Sollux, he might be famously bad at skateboarding but he still does it a lot with Latula and that’s exercise.

Dave comes in third place after Dirk and Jake with Jade right after him. He and Jade ran the whole
thing in an hour and ten minutes and he still bitched about his time being much slower than it used to be. You on the other hand end up walking about 80% of the thing and only running when stubbornness or shame propelled you faster and it took you well over two hours.

A good number of you didn’t make it including Hal who apparently has no idea how to run and Equius carried him for a while until they were caught and both disqualified. Unsurprisingly the seadwellers all fared badly too. The upside of having a breathing system complex enough to deal with water is that drowning is impossible but the downside is that extended strenuous breathing of dry air is apparently not great either. Every human finished, even Jane who told you before the race that she’s never done any kind of running race ever. She didn’t run at all in this, instead she just quick walked which seemed dumb especially as you ran ahead. But, well, half an hour in she overtook you and you never saw her again, she finished decently high up actually. But isn’t that how humans evolved? They’re persistence predators, they chase something until it dies. If cavewoman Jane had been hunting you it’s apparent that you could not have outrun her and she didn’t even have to run.

Still, you finished and lots of people didn’t do that. You’re… below average admittedly, but not by much.

“Well,” Dirk says as he looks at the leaderboard, “that’s our baseline. We’re going to do this every week.”

Groans of despair come from almost everyone there, many of you still slumped on the ground.

3,964 hours remaining

Dirk is the one who thinks to run classes for more than just fighting or fitness and chooses to teach first aid. Jane may be able to heal people but she won’t always be right there. He did some first aid teaching before the game and it makes sense to do it now that you have some time and have more idea what you’re in for. As Dirk’s class is first aid Dave is exempt so Hal is his willing model for most of it. So far the topics have been pretty common and at first you figured that Dirk was dumb for making everything so idiot proof and assuming no prior knowledge on anyone, at least that’s what you assumed until Dirk’s lesson on ‘if someone is impaled with something do not remove the thing they will bleed to death’ ended with him answering a question and confirming that ‘if you do pull the thing out don’t just put it back in, you’ve just stabbed them twice that is, in fact, worse.’

It’s probably a good thing that you’re all learning about medical shit after all.

“A concussion is a brain injury, usually from a blow to the head but not always. A jolt to the spine can do it, Dave got one once from landing real hard on his tailbone. The shock went right up his spine and jarred his brain.” Dirk explains.

“Check that the pupil size is the same, that they know who they are, who you are. You can ask them other things if they seem disoriented, who the president is used to be a popular one but I guess that’s not applicable. Work with what you know they know. What else?” Dirk asks.

“Headache, obviously.” Kanaya says.

“With any head injury you’re likely to get a headache, you’re looking for one that doesn’t go away. This can go on for days, remember. What else?” Dirk answers.
“Well you gotta keep them awake, right? So I guess falling back asleep.” Roxy says, her hand in the air.

“Yeah, dizziness, drowsiness, clumsiness, slurred speech all of those are worrying. But they might seem fine and get those later, bumping into things or even big mood swings. I got concussed once and freaked Dave out because the day after I could barely stop crying and I had no idea why it was happening.” Dirk tells you all, you note that down.

“Nausea and vomiting are also symptoms but anything vision based is as well. You can have just a few of these too so if you hit your head, feel fine but then your vision goes bad and you feel sick that’s a concussion.” Hal pipes up.


“You covered that yesterday.” Meenah groans.

“Exactly, now it’s a practical test. Hal?” Dirk says, turning to his half troll assistant who grins.

You’re part way through asking what he means by ‘practical test’ when Hal just slices him across the arm. Everyone in the room shouts in alarm, several people get to their feet to try to help.

“Ah, no, stay put. What do I do?” Dirk asks calmly.

“Put pressure on it you psychopath!” Mituna shouts from the back of the room.

“Correct!” Dirk says cheerfully and does just that.

“Now what?” he asks.

Half an hour later you’re stumbling back to your room wide eyed and horrified at Dirk’s bonkers teaching methods but pleased that he at least let Jane heal him after everyone talked him through stitching himself up. You’re pretty sure that the adults are going to have WORDS with him about that.

You get to your bedroom door and find Dave and Jade chatting. She was excused from class as well, living with Jake alone on an island gave both tropical morons plenty of first aid experience.

“Hey, how was class?” Jade asks you cheerfully.

“You look like you’re gonna barf.” Dave adds.

“I might. Class was… ugh.” you shudder.

“If anyone was in a sexy nurse outfit please don’t tell me.” Dave says quickly.

You’re pretty sure that what actually happened was worse. Pretty sure.

3,628 hours remaining

“The secret has to be team combinations. We already have a few that have been made on the fly but
we need better ones, controlled ones. We have to find the optimal combination and drill them to work together.” Vriska says, pacing in front of your board of names that you reset after your first foray into team exercises.

“I’m sure we can do more with Meenah’s Thief of Life than we are now. What about putting her with Mituna?” you suggests, balancing on the back legs of your chair.

“Heir of Doom? I don’t think so. What about… more destructive? Prince of… Hope or Heart?” Vriska muses, swapping names around on the board.

“You need someone to balance that, plus if you’re looking to make that some kind of instant kill you want to make sure no one escapes. Add Jade to that.” you say and Vriska makes a thoughtful sound and drags Jade’s name over.

“We still have to sell this to them, the last team up didn’t exactly go well.” Vriska points out.

You consider this. You consider what you know about people in general and then your people specifically.

“Tell them what we’re trying to accomplish and… and let them name their teams. Make them want to belong to them.” you suggest.

A week later you’re looking at a chalkboard that’s three quarters full of teams with their names and you’re sifting through reports on how useful the various teams proved. This is technically a success. You remind yourself that as you look over the effectiveness of team ‘Delirious Biznasty’.

3,448 hours remaining

You’re sprawled over fabric swatches, bolts of soft cloth, photo albums and fancy cushions. Your spine is all melted in the best way which is unsurprising as you’ve talked Kanaya’s ears off over the last hour and got to focus on her problems for a change instead of your own hellish ones. What’s unusual is that Kanaya isn’t in the pile with you right now, she’s leaning on the doorframe to the bathroom and Dave is sat at your feet.

“I limited my designs down to the final three and you are welcome to take them all if you want but if you want replicas of a specific one do let me know which it is.” Kanaya explains to the shut door.

“I think this one.” Sollux’s voice comes from inside the bathroom and a moment later the door opens.

Sollux steps out, he’s still wearing his normal jeans but instead of his regular tshirt he’s wearing one of Kanaya’s creations. Skintight fabric sticks to him in black and yellow. His sign is blown up over his chest, the top bar of it just under his underarms and instead of ending it wraps around his back in a band, the bottom one does the same just above his hips. Sollux turns and you can see that the two vertical bars of his sign repeat, one on either side of his spine.

There are square voids in the black fabric framing each port up his spine and the collar of his shirt is high but merely separates for the ports in his neck and the base of his head. At the front the collar reaches his jawbone in a futuristic android way. Bright yellow sleeves run down, hook over his thumbs and part of his palms and it all matches the yellow trim of the shirt.
“You look like a superhero.” Dave gasps and Sollux beams, he stands up a little straighter and you can’t help but grin at how much happier your brother seems these days.

“Damn, Kan, you’re a legend.” Dave cheers and fistbumps a very pleased Kanaya.

“You really are. And now that I look badass I’m gonna go fly a spaceship.” Sollux declares. Dave cheers and follows him out of the room. You shake your head in despair as Kanaya sits back down with you but you’re sure Sollux will be great at it. If all goes well Mituna will get his ports put in next.

2,948 hours remaining

Conversations with Vriska always give you a headache. Ok, that’s not really true. The more you’ve worked with her the less your thing with her has been so antagonistic and the more it’s felt like a proper leadership alliance. Neither of you would probably choose to hang out in your free time with each other but when you both stop undercutting each other it’s a mostly pleasant relationship. Besides, the pair of you have skin thick enough that your snappishness and her insatiable needling doesn’t get through too much.

Most of the time.

“Look, I’m not trying to get in the middle of this.” you insist.

“And yet here you are.” Vriska groans, banging her head on the table.

“This is a perfectly standard quadrant negotiation. Kanaya is my moirail and protecting her is my business. Her relationship with Rose was agreed to be pan quadrant with overlap in pale areas because, well, humans. It’s meant to be the same as mine and Dave’s.” you explain.

“Except it’s not like that because Dave IS dating someone else oooooooobviously, him and Sollux.” Vriska argues.

“Yeah and before he even waded into that he did the adult thing and talked to me first as well as Rose actually because he thought they were kind of pale and…” you shrug.

“Yeah, I can see where four-eyes got that impression. The twins are always up in each other’s faces way more than any of the other siblings.” Vriska nods like she’s not wearing fucking glasses herself. You decide not to pick on that, you have bigger fish to fry.

“You and Rose have gone beyond simple pitch flirting and you know it. You need to talk to Kanaya about whether she’s ok with you having one of Rose’s quadrants and you need to ask Rose too.” you insist. She’s not just getting away with this, no matter how much she slumps over on the table and makes petulant child noises.

“Listen, Rose has been doing better lately and I’m not so stupid as to not realise that it’s when you started this thing that is not yet a pitch relationship. So clearly that relationship benefits her and with an actual target for your assholery you’re not so insufferable anymore but if you two keep doing this slyly you may well cost Rose her soulmate relationship which would ruin both of their lives as well as mine and then I’d be very much inclined to throw your dumb ass in Dave’s hell planet’s lava like you’d deserve.” you snap, pointing your finger in her face. Vriska tries to fucking bite you like the wiggler that she clearly is and leans over the table in what has become your control centre or, as
Dave calls it, your ‘evil lair’.

“Like you’d even dare.” she snarls.

You stare at her and smile, sitting back in your chair.

“You’re right, I probably don’t have the guts or skill to kill you.” you agree with a nod.

“No duh.” Vriska sneers but she looks suspicious.

“I wonder how Dave would feel about you wrecking his twin’s life though. Or Roxy, or Dirk. And hey, Mr Egbert has basically adopted that whole family and didn’t he lose his soulmate? I wonder how he’d see someone who broke up a soulmate relationship like that.” You say slyly. Of course Dave may well punch Vriska in the face if she did actually destroy Rose and Kanaya’s relationship but you also know damn well that he’d be just as angry at Rose and Kanaya for letting that happen, same goes for the others too. But Vriska doesn’t need to know that.

You watch the calculating expression go over Vriska’s face, weighing her odds against that many angry humans and then probably adding in the other humans too because, well, humans. Her expression settles on stifled horror and she looks at you again, her eyes a little too wide.

“So you want to… help.” Vriska says slowly.

“I’ve been trying to help this entire time you fist-fucking moron!” you screech in indignity, throwing your arms up in the air.

“I know that but I mean, you know, mediate.” Vriska says.

Images of your sisters’ shipping wall floats through your mind, of the ash in your column in Rose and Vriska’s boxes. Of the idea of being perpetually stuck between the two craziest broads you know.

“Are you PROPOSITIONING me ASHEN?!” you yelp, leaping away from the table.

“Well, duh. I’d like to avoid being culled by humans or pre-vampiric exes of mine and besides you clearly can’t help but meddle, that’s what this whole conversation has been after all.” she says and then fucking- fucking WAGGLES HER EYEBROWS AT YOU!

“Oh, no, no, no. If you think I am suicidally stupid enough to get involved with the two most batshit women I know then you’ve got some reconsidering to do. I may have self loathing problems but even I don’t hate myself enough to sign up on that merry-go-round of snarky horseshit and overdramatic temper tantrums. Not in a million fucking years!” you shout and then storm off for good measure.

2,927 hours remaining

Well, fuck. That was a short ‘million fucking years’. Didn’t you dream of this when you were young? You have your soulmate, a moirail and now you’re a proper middle leaf auspistice. Except it’s like one of those fucking genie wishes and yes you got your soulmate but the world ended, your moirail’s soulmate is your soulmate’s twin which can be complex as fuck when it comes to trying to be impartial oh and you’re also auspisticizing her soulmate (your soulmate’s twin) and her pale ex. WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED TO YOUR LIFE?!
Honestly the world ending was the easiest thing to understand there. Uuuugh. So help you god if you get another member of this family involved your quadrants you’re going to go stick your head in lava.

2,423 hours remaining

You’re getting more than used to walking in on people. It stands to reason, really. You’re all stuck together on a spaceship in a life or death situation, tensions are running high and when you add teenage hormones to that mix, well, it happens. Mituna and Latula are the people you walk in on most but that mostly because they’re shameless and any flat surface is an opportunity for impolitely sloppy makeouts, gropings and states of undress. Your poor goddamn eyes.

Dirk and Jake are clearly just as obsessed with each other but no one’s ever caught them so it’s not like it’s impossible. Or maybe Dirk’s just that ninja. You’re actually the reigning champion of walking in on people. Last week you caught Vriska and John smooching in the hallways and that might not have incurred so much of Vriska’s wrath if you hadn’t done the exact same thing to her and Rose’s heated hate-makeout the day before. You don’t regret agreeing to help Rose get her head out of her ass re: Vriska because the tension was making poor Kanaya miserable. It wasn’t even that hard to sit the three of them down and negotiate how that was going to work, what was and wasn’t over the line and so on. A poly negotiator is you. Or, well, considering that Kanaya’s one real demand for how this would work would be that you make sure Rose and Vriska are healthy means that an auspice is you.

You’re dating twins. There are three Captors aboard and it ends up being you dating twins, Mituna and Sollux kind of hate you on principle but your dad at least thinks it’s hysterically funny. Nepeta is upsettingly smug about her ashen ship sailing.

So yeah, you walk in on people a lot. You’re used to it by now. Although you will point out that this wouldn’t happen if people kept that shit to their own goddamn bedrooms. But, uh, well you’re not entirely free from sin there either. Look, it’s not your fault, okay? Your soulmate is unfairly hot at the best of times and you had to watch him be very athletic and hot as he got his ass entirely beat at basketball against John. It turns out that though Striders have reflexes for days, speed and agility skills unmatched they know precisely fuck all about sport. The only reason Dave kept it competitive is he kept fucking around with how time was affecting the ball so John had a hard time stealing it or throwing it.

Regardless, you had to endure half an hour of watching that torture. You’re just a teenage boy, you have very little willpower here. It’s absolutely not your fault that you caved the very moment you were alone with him and kissed him so he was even more breathless, gave him the world’s most noticeable hickey on his neck and got partway through getting his shirt off. When Dave yelped out John’s name you were about to be really pissed off until you realise that he hadn’t mistaken you for him in some kind of messed up fantasy but was instead reacting to John coming back in the room. John of course told everyone, goddamnit John.

Regardless, you are no longer surprised to walk in on people making out. Or you’d thought that. You’d thought that up until a half second ago when you were walking into the kitchen for a snack only to find Dolorosa and Dadbert kissing.

“Fuck!” you yelp in alarm and the pair spring apart and look at you in surprise. Your grandmother is glowing in embarrassment, her hands over her face.
“Shit, sorry. I’ll just- go.” you apologise hastily.

“Wait, wait, Karkat no!” Rosa shouts after you and vaults a table. You hesitate, one hand on the door.

“Please don’t tell your father about us.” she says quickly.

“You… this isn’t the first time is it? You two are a thing!” you gasp as the idea occurs to you.

“I just don’t think your father would take it well, I’ll talk to him in my own time.” Rosa explains.

“I would ask that you extend the same courtesy to me with my children, please.” Dadbert asks you seriously.

“Hey, it’s literally none of my business. You and my grandmother are grown ass adults, what you do is your business. But if you wanna keep it that way I would suggest keeping this to your own rooms because anyone can walk in here, you know?” you tell him.

“I know, I apologise. I’ve not been this young and impulsive in… well, I know it’s improper.” Mr Egbert says regretfully, glancing away from you.

Right, your grandmother isn’t his soulmate. His soulmate is dead. It’s… well, it’s not unheard of for people to move on after their soulmate’s death, it’s one of those unspoken things that you know make people shifty about old people’s retirement villages and the people there who swear they’re just friends. It’s just not socially accepted, your soulmate is supposed to be your everything, when they die your heart is supposed to die with them. Exceptions exist of course for people like Roxy and John who may outlive one soulmate but continue their relationship with the surviving soulmate but if, say, you were all still on Earth and you died people would judge Dave if he ever dated anyone else. It’s a shitty system.

“Is this about your soulmate?” you ask bluntly and Mr. Egbert winces. That’s a yes.

“Look, soulmates are amazing. I don’t need to tell you that I mean I’ve had mine less than a year and you’re an adult. But- if I died in this game for good then when it ended and we all went wherever we go afterwards… I’d hate to think that he’d be alone if he wanted to be with someone else. Fuck anyone who says any different. You have two great albeit frustratingly annoying children and my grandmother’s got a good judge of character, if you’re both happy then it’s none of my business or anyone else’s.” you insist.

“Oh, Karkat, sweetie.” Rosa sighs and bends down to hug you.

“Thank you Karkat. Although I still can’t believe that Rosa is old enough to have grandchildren.” he laughs and you roll your eyes. Gross.

So yeah, you can keep a secret. You leave with a slice of cake and Rosa’s lipstick on your cheek. You’re happy for them. You hope, of course, that they’ll tell their families soon enough but it’s their choice. You freeze as you consider just how many ‘children’ Mr Egbert has technically taken under his wing. He’s taken full responsibility for all of the humans, though most of them were doing fine without parents. Except of course for Jake and Dirk who have suddenly discovered that parental disappointment is inexplicably worse than anger and both of them have started being far more sensible since Jake’s dumbass double suicide mission with Dirk. Boy Jake got in so much shit for that, deservedly too.

The thing that had always amused you about that is that it’s Signless who is known for having the most children but with Dadbert adopting all the humans (pack animals, you swear) it’s him who now
holds that title. Of course, if he was to marry Dolorosa he would be SIGNLESS’S DAD. It’s the ultimate powerplay in a who is the best dad competition. Dadbert is so dadly he will become your dad’s dad. You’re having to smother your laughing in cake. And speaking of cake the icing on that particular cake is that you’re on a ship right now, a spaceship. Maritime law applies in space to Earth citizens, which you are. And given that no one on board is a priest the only people who could marry Dolorosa and Mr Egbert are is the captain. Which is you or Vriska. This is AMAZING.

2,088 hours remaining

“I want to try healing you.” Jane declares. You look up from your bowl of cereal, she’s not talking to you, she’s talking to Signless.

“I feel fine.” he says in confusion.

“No, I mean for good. You know?” Jane says, waving her hand towards the ring of life on his finger. That means he’d have to take it off. Which means he might…

Milk dribbles down your chin and you wipe it away with the back of your sleeve.

“You think you can do that?” you ask her.

“Well I wouldn’t be suggesting it if I didn’t believe I could.” Jane replies, a touch pointedly.

“I believe in you babe!” Roxy cheers, throwing an arm around Jane’s shoulder and beaming at her.

“Do I need to take it off? If I’m going to actually die I think I need to tell the Captors and forewarn them and also not do this in public, perhaps?” Signless says.

“That seems reasonable. Perhaps we can try in the medical area of the ship in, say, one hour? Give me time to finish breakfast and tell the people who need to be told, yes?” Signless smiles at her. Jane nods and pulls Roxy away as they retreat and leave you in peace with your father.

“As much as I wanna call you on being hypocritical on the whole ‘no deliberate death’ rule we do need that ring back just in case and we do need Jane to be able to resurrect people.” you say quietly. You push your bowl of cereal away, you’re suddenly not hungry anymore.

“I know.” Signless nods.

He gets up and cards a hand through your hair as he goes off to find your other parents and your brothers too.

[carcinoGeneticist opened a memo ‘memo1’]
TG: dude did you not even name this memo who are you and what have you done with karkat

CG: JANE IS GOING TO TRY TO HEAL MY DAD BUT IT MEANS SHE’LL HAVE TO TAKE THE RING OFF OF HIM AT SOME POINT.

CG: I DON’T KNOW IF IT’S BEFOREHAND AND HE’LL DEFINITELY DIE OR IF IT’LL BE AFTER TO SEE IF THE HEAL STUCK.

GA: I Can See How That Would Be Stressful But I Am Sure That Jane Would Not Offer If She Did Not Feel She Was Up To The Task

CG: I KNOW SHE WOULDN’T BUT IT’S NOT LIKE SHE’S HAD ANY OTHER PRACTICE ASIDE FROM HEALING SMALL WOUNDS.

CG: AT LEAST DEATH FROM TAKING THE RING OFF IS INSTANT.

GA: And If It Does Not Work We Can Put The Ring Back On

TG: not to piss in your cornflakes here kan but the game is not exactly nice to players we know that and janess powers are meant to be one heroic/just death get out of jail free card we cant be sure that the ring doesnt work the same way in that its one use per person

CG: THAT’S EXACTLY WHAT I WAS WORRIED ABOUT.

TG: im sorry man i dont mean to freak you out

TG: i believe in jane too but there a risk to this you know

CG: AND I’M TRYING TO BALANCE THAT RISK AGAINST US POSSIBLY NEEDING THAT RING IN THE FINAL FIGHT.

TG: thats a real shitty choice to have to make man im sorry

GA: Hopefully It Will All Go Fine And This Is All Theoretical Worry But Regardless Do You Want Either Or Both Of Us To Be There When Jane Tries This

CG: I THINK THAT WOULD BE GOOD, YEAH. BESIDES THE CAPTORS ARE GOING TO BE THERE SO THEY DON’T JUST HEAR DAD POTENTIALLY DIE AND FREAK OUT.

TG: soulmate and moirail duty i guess im there then

CG: YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE IF IT’S GOING TO UPSET YOU, DAVE.

TG: oh eat my dick karkat like im going to just abandon either of you

GA: Oh My

TG: damnit kan

TG: where and when karkat
CG: ONE HOUR IN THE MEDICAL AREA PLACE

TG: theres no name for it that doesnt make this whole thing sound like fuckin star trek is there

CG: NO AND NOT THAT I’VE EVER SEEN THAT SERIES EITHER, BUT STILL.

TG: wasnt it one of the big cases back on earth of is something racist about trolls if it was made before we had contact with each other sorta debates

CG: YEAH, ESPECIALLY THAT IT HAD SOME REALLY WARLIKE SPECIES IN IT I THINK. BUT GIVEN THAT HUMANS HAVE WON EVERY TROLL/HUMAN ENCOUNTER I’M NOT SURE YOU CAN REALLY SAY THAT’S MEANT TO BE US EVEN IF IT WAS MADE AFTER OUR SPECIES MET.

GA: Not That I Do Not Like Engaging In Your Blatant Self Distraction Attempts But I Have Some Things I Must Attend To In The Next Hour I Shall See You Both Then

GA: It Will Be Okay Karkat <>

CG: THANKS KANAYA.

[grimAuxiliatrix left the memo]

TG: do you wanna just meet up and talk shit about scifi until its time to go there so that you dont just think about it non stop

CG: PLEASE.

TG: cool im in my room i was doing photo shit before you messaged me come over whenever

[carcinoGeneticist closed the memo]

All of your siblings are crowded in the room, mainly because there seems to be little that anyone can do to discourage them. As well as that Dave and Kanaya are in the room as well as all three of your parents, your grandmother and then obviously Jane and also Roxy who she brought along for ‘moral support’. Needless to say the medical room is quite crowded.

Signless is sat in an examination chair calmly with Jane by his side.

“So, Jane, what’s your plan?” Signless asks her.

“Well, when I healed Dave and the others I just had to sort of… reach out and, er, well it’s hard to describe. But I want to try the same thing now to you.” Jane explains.

“That makes sense, go ahead then.” your dad nods.

“I believe in you Janey!” Roxy cheers and pats Jane on the back as she moves to stand right up close to him instead of just nearby.

Jane flexes her fingers a little, rubs her palms together and takes a deep breath.

“Nervous?” your dad asks with a small, kind smile. You’re pretty sure that if you were in his shoes you would not be so calm and gracious. You’re not like him, you’d-

“Cut that out.” Dave hisses at you, pointedly scratching at the chain around his wrist. Right, he can feel that. You forget sometimes.
“Better to learn now than in the middle of a real fight.” Signless says to Jane.

“Yeah, you’re right. Okay I’m just going to put my hand on your chest if that’s ok?” Jane says hesitantly. Signless nods and Jane places her hand above his heart. She shuts her eyes and silence falls over all of you. Signless doesn’t look especially changed by whatever she’s doing and when she pulls back she’s frowning.

“It’s… weird. When I’m healing an injury I feel it get better but you’re alive already because of the ring, so maybe I wouldn’t feel anything.” Jane says and rubs her chin.

“Well, then let’s put that to the test and see if you did it.” Signless says, reaching out to take the ring off of his finger. All three Captors suck an alarmed breath in and you watch the realisation flicker over your dad’s face as he pulls the ring off and holds it above Jane’s hand.

“Good luck.” he says quickly and drops it into her palm.

The very second it stops touching his skin you dad’s body goes slack and he slumps back in his chair.

He’s dead, he’s dead again and you’re clinging so hard to Kanaya’s arm that you’re worried you’ll cut off circulation so bad the thing will fall off. Your mom is holding Psii close and everyone is looking at Jane expectantly.

“Oh god, oh gosh, I’m gonna- ok.” Jane babbles in panic and presses her hand to Signless’ chest once more.

A glow surrounds her, a warm light. Looking at it feels like a summer rain shower when you’d been desperate for water, the smell of rain hitting parched soil and bringing back… bringing back life. Jane pulls her hand back, trembling hard enough that you can see the shake in her fingers. A second passes and then Signless gasps, jerks upright and looks around at you all.

He looks at his hands which are still ringless and at the ring of life that sits in Jane’s palm. His face breaks into the proudest grin that you’ve seen in ages.

“You did it!” he says happily and Jane is suddenly swamped by your entire and incredibly grateful family. Even you manage to squeeze her around the middle in thanks. The crowd eventually parts and she turns to you, ring in hand.

“You should keep this. If everything I’ve been learning is right then I can bring someone back from a heroic or just death once per person, or someone like Signless just the once but beyond that this ring is the only thing that can revive people and we only have one.” Jane says seriously.

You hope that it won’t come to that but Roxy pulls a chain out of thin air and you slide the ring over it then fasten it around your neck. Yeah, you hope it won’t come to that but you’re no hope player.

1,748 hours remaining

You look over your team lists, Vriska at your side as she moves team names around to form different plays. If you’re dealing with a scouting situation you need this team and then these ones defend the ship. If you need to sway an enemy force or cause chaos you switch around to that arrangement.
You have to plan for every possibility.

You’ve been doing a shit job at this and you know why.

The crux of the problem is this. From what Jade said Dave HAS to fight Lord English with his special bonus sword but she never said alone. You know he’s a time player so you’re throwing Dave and space players at him as well as banning anyone he has an easy psychological hold on.

But Dave is your soulmate and you’re gearing up to send him into battle against a god so powerful he can break your universe in a temper tantrum. You don’t want that, you want to wrap Dave up safe and protect him. But he has to fight. What’s worse is that he’s not just in that team, Dave is a key player in a hell of a lot of other teams that are used for different angles and powers.

Rose is aggressive and can handle herself, you know this first hand, but her powers make her an assisting player. One willing to jam her needles into the eyesockets of enemies and ride them around like a carnival ride, sure, but still an assisting player. Her fraymotifs are used to boost the abilities of others but Dave’s a knight, they’re combat dependant. He’s the one who gets boosted by others, he’s the one whose neck is on the line.

You don’t want him hurt, you don’t want him to die, but if you hold Dave back you risk the lives of others. Without his combat prowess and his time powers so many other teams just cannot work. You hold Dave back and you may get to keep him but you’ll lose other people you care about and you’ll lose this war. That’s what this is, of course, a war. You need to start thinking more like a general and less like a soulmate.

You stack up team names and set them out.

“What’s this for?” Vriska asks, looking at it.

“If we have to fight our doubles in the new universe.” you say solemnly. Vriska’s eyes scan the board.

“So that’s… me to steal Rose’s sight, Equius to surround her with void. You, Dirk and Gamzee spread chaos in their team, turning them against each other. With… oh, with Meenah to steal their lives. What about the other key players?” Vriska asks, turning her gaze on you.

“Nepeta to steal Dirk’s soul, that’ll kill him and break Jake and you put him under just in case. Our Jake can nullify the Makaras and I can restrain them. Sollux and Mituna can be taken out with a psychic attack from Latula. With you an overload of doom will stack the odds against you so Mituna is best there and most anyone could take me out in a fight. Dave- we can take their Dave out with Gamzee or Kurloz, he’ll either be too broken to fight or his fighting will be bad.” you explain woodenly.

“It could use work but… yeah. Let’s hope they’re on our side.” Vriska says quietly and punches you in the shoulder.

“I wish Rose could see what’s going to happen so we knew what we were walking into.” you sigh.

“Rose’s vision ends when this universe does. When we get there she should adjust but until then…” Vriska shrugs.

Yeah, until then you’re planning for the worst case scenarios.
CG: LOOK I KNOW SINCE DIRK AND JAKE GOT EVERYONE BANNED FROM OFFING THEMSELVES TO DELIBERATELY GOD TIER THINGS HAVE BEEN TRICKY FOR SOME PEOPLE.

CG: AND WE HAVE HAD A FEW ACCIDENTS LIKE JOHN ACCIDENTALLY FALLING DOWN A GIANT PIT ON HIS PLANET.

CG: WHICH I KNOW WAS AN ACCIDENT BECAUSE IT WAS THE CHILD’S POGO TOY TO THE FACE THAT LANDED THE KILLING BLOW.

John: do you need to bring that up every time??

CG: WASN’T LOOKING FOR INPUT HERE JOHN.

CG: IN THE EVENT OF ACCIDENTS OUR HELMSEMEN HAVE BEEN ABLE TO GET THERE IN TIME AND GET PEOPLE TO THEIR QUEST BEDS WHICH IS GREAT.

CG: BUT DON’T THINK I DON’T NOTICE THE SUDDEN RISE IN ‘ACCIDENTS’ AROUND HERE. NOTE THE SKEPTICISM INDICATING PUNCTUATION I HAVE ADDED THERE.

CG: THE OLD ‘I WAS CLEANING MY GUN AND IT WENT OFF’ IS BELIEVABLE WHEN ERIDAN SHOOTS HIMSELF IN THE LEG AND BITCHES THE WHOLE WAY TO THE MEDICAL ROOM FOR JANE TO HEAL HIM.

CG: LESS SO WHEN IT’S IN YOUR HEAD AND ALSO NOT YOUR FUCKING GUN, NOT NAMING ANY NAMES OH EXCUSE MY COUGHING FIT HERE ESPECIALLY WHEN IT HAPPENS TO SOUND LIKE MITUNA.

CG: PLEASE ALSO DO NOT THINK I AM STUPID ENOUGH TO HAVE BOUGHT THAT KANAYA AND PORRIM HAD A SIMULTANEOUS CHAINSAW MALFUNCTION.

CG: IF YOUR DUMB ASSES GET CAUGHT BY AN ADULT OR YOU END UP TRAUMATISING EACH OTHER IT IS NOT MY PROBLEM AND I WILL ABSOLUTELY NOT SAVE YOU FROM EGBERT SENIOR’S LOOK OF DISAPPOINTMENT THAT I SWEAR CAN PEEL THE FUCKING PAINT OFF OF THE WALLS.

CG: WHAT HAS MY LIFE COME TO WHEN I HAVE TO MAKE THIS KIND OF GODDAMN MEMO?! I HATE YOU ALL.

CG: LOOK I KNOW SINCE DIRK AND JAKE GOT EVERYONE BANNED FROM OFFING THEMSELVES TO DELIBERATELY GOD TIER THINGS HAVE BEEN TRICKY FOR SOME PEOPLE.

CG: AND WE HAVE HAD A FEW ACCIDENTS LIKE JOHN ACCIDENTALLY FALLING DOWN A GIANT PIT ON HIS PLANET.

CG: WHICH I KNOW WAS AN ACCIDENT BECAUSE IT WAS THE CHILD’S POGO TOY TO THE FACE THAT LANDED THE KILLING BLOW.

John: do you need to bring that up every time??

CG: WASN’T LOOKING FOR INPUT HERE JOHN.

CG: IN THE EVENT OF ACCIDENTS OUR HELMSEMEN HAVE BEEN ABLE TO GET THERE IN TIME AND GET PEOPLE TO THEIR QUEST BEDS WHICH IS GREAT.

CG: BUT DON’T THINK I DON’T NOTICE THE SUDDEN RISE IN ‘ACCIDENTS’ AROUND HERE. NOTE THE SKEPTICISM INDICATING PUNCTUATION I HAVE ADDED THERE.

CG: THE OLD ‘I WAS CLEANING MY GUN AND IT WENT OFF’ IS BELIEVABLE WHEN ERIDAN SHOOTS HIMSELF IN THE LEG AND BITCHES THE WHOLE WAY TO THE MEDICAL ROOM FOR JANE TO HEAL HIM.

CG: LESS SO WHEN IT’S IN YOUR HEAD AND ALSO NOT YOUR FUCKING GUN, NOT NAMING ANY NAMES OH EXCUSE MY COUGHING FIT HERE ESPECIALLY WHEN IT HAPPENS TO SOUND LIKE MITUNA.

CG: PLEASE ALSO DO NOT THINK I AM STUPID ENOUGH TO HAVE BOUGHT THAT KANAYA AND PORRIM HAD A SIMULTANEOUS CHAINSAW MALFUNCTION.

CG: IF YOUR DUMB ASSES GET CAUGHT BY AN ADULT OR YOU END UP TRAUMATISING EACH OTHER IT IS NOT MY PROBLEM AND I WILL ABSOLUTELY NOT SAVE YOU FROM EGBERT SENIOR’S LOOK OF DISAPPOINTMENT THAT I SWEAR CAN PEEL THE FUCKING PAINT OFF OF THE WALLS.

CG: WHAT HAS MY LIFE COME TO WHEN I HAVE TO MAKE THIS KIND OF GODDAMN MEMO?! I HATE YOU ALL.
Darkleer’s spread out ashes. You’re all in the medical area of the ship which is pointless really as there’s no way you can make Darkleer better with any of this stuff and he certainly not getting worse!

“What if we can’t bring him all the way back in one go?” Feferi asks as she crouches on the ground by the pile of ash.

“Then I guess I’ll take over, if he’s injured I can fix that up no problem.” Jane answers her.

“Hey, um, I’m shore this is insensitive to ask but just so we know what kind of injuries we might be dealing with here how did he die?” Feferi asks innocently.

“Well our estimation is that the Empress most likely arranged his death as punishment for his betrayal of her cause. Before that we assumed it was just an unfortunate masonry collapse.” Equius answers.

Oh.

“Like what happened to Signless before. Our buildings were not really meant to be taken apart that way, it’s dangerous.” your mom nods sagely.

“Ah, it was not our building that crushed him. My planet is covered in cities and within those cities is a great number of large statues, it was one of those that crushed him.” Horuss corrects her.

Oh god fucking christ. You bite the inside of your lip so hard that it almost bleeds. They’re talking about their dead ancestor, you can’t laugh. You can’t laugh even though you’ve seen those giant, enormously bedicked, horse statues. You absolutely cannot imagine Darkleer standing there, staring up at his oncoming equine doom. You focus on breathing normally and count backwards from ten in Spanish in your head until the feeling of building laughter fades.

When you focus again Feferi is holding her hands out above the ashes. Her face becomes a picture of concentration, her eyebrows furrowing and ear fins pressed tight against her hair with tension. Yellowish gold sparks around her, like a camping stove trying to catch a flame and then finally flares up to a full body glow. On the floor the ashes reorder themselves in the world’s most advanced jigsaw, it’s like an ashy shadow of Darkleer on the ground.

“Whooo, that’s- whew.” Feferi gasps, lowering her hands for a moment.

“Yes, I think that’s quite a bit more than I had to do with Signless. Would you like a hand?” Jane asks and Feferi nods.

The two of them adjust their positions on either side and get to work again, their hands outstretched. With the two of them the glow is almost unbearably bright and the little that you can see of Darkleer’s body being rebuilt and reanimated line the world’s most macabre 3d printer makes you glad that you can’t see more.

When the girls lean back Darkleer gasps and bolts upright.

“She’s here.” he chokes out, then seems to realise that he’s not where he thought he was and looks around.

“I… are we in the ship?” Darkleer asks and you suppose that confirms the two Zahhak’s theory that it was Fish Face who offed him with the statue.

“It’s fine, it’s our ship now. The kids beat her. I can catch you up on everything.” your mom smiles at him.
“I am glad that you are... alive again. Darkleer.” Equius says, his speech stilted as he tries to hold his cool.

“I am sorry to have left either of you, it was inexcusable of me.” Darkleer apologises and stands up.

“We’re just glad you’re back.” Horuss nods.

Darkleer also nods and pulls his descendants (no, they’re his sons, ok? Family is contagious in your opinion) into a strong and likely sweaty hug. Not everyone’s parents are back but at least now all of the parents who deserve to be alive are. You’re happy for Equius and Horuss, you really are.

But you’re also happy that your life players can definitely both bring people back to life now. You leave the bluebloods to their reunion and message Vriska with the news, you don’t have as long until the final fight as you would like.

1059 hours remaining

[Memo Book Club Session 21 opened]

[Name filter applied]

Kanaya: I Had A Thought About Meeting 21 Which Is Some Time From Now I Know

Karkat: WHAT?

Kanaya: Perhaps The Players In The New Session Will Want To Read Our Books As Well And I Cannot Help But Notice That Our Final Meeting Scheduled Takes Place On Our Second Day In The New Session

Porrim: Are you suggesting that we would put fighting our opponents off to have a book club meeting?

Rose: Not to preempt our time players but I imagine that when we meet up with those in the new session they will give us some breathing space to formulate a plan and perhaps assess each other’s fighting capabilities.

Rose: Whether that includes time for any interested parties there to catch up on your selection of ‘In Which A Rainbow Drinker And Mediculler Fall In Flush Romance While Caring For Their Mutual Pale Crush Contains One Polyamorous Red/Pale Triangle’

Karkat: AW WHAT I WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO THAT ONE. MAYBE WE COULD JUST BRING IT CLOSER?

Kanaya: You Just Copied That From The Book List My Quirk Is Still There

Rose: I won’t deny that, the title is unwieldy.

Kanaya: Fine But Karkat Please Consider This As An Olive Branch We Could Offer To Our Counterparts

Porrim: Yeah, I’ll seco+nd that. It’s a go+o+d one to+o+ I bet we co+uld tempt new members in this way.
Kankri: I als9 v9te in fav9ur 9f p9stp9ning the 699k, 69th as a gesture 9f peace and t9 give time f9r me t9 assem6le a c9mprehensive list 9f warnings as I d9 n9t kn9w their situati9n.

Karkat: UGH.

514 hours remaining

[carcinoGeneticist opened memo ‘GOOD JOB BREAKING IT HERO’]

[carcinoGeneticist applied name filter]

Karkat: AS THE OBSERVANT AMONG YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED, THE UNIVERSE IS BROKEN. MORE THAN USUAL I MEAN.

Eridan: that garish crack in space ate my planet

Karkat: EXACTLY. ERIDAN’S PLANET IS GONE AND THE REST OF THEM SEEM TO HAVE FROZEN.

Feferi: Also all of t)e underlings and t)(ings seem to )ave just stopped in place and stabbing t)(em gets you no reward anymore.

Kankri: Feferi why did y9u try t9 sta6 them when they weren’t d9ing anything t9 y9u as y9u just admitted?

Feferi: I t)(oug)(t it mig)(t be a really stupid trap or somet)(ing, it's not like I'm still doing it! Reely!

Rose: I can also confirm that our denizens are now inactive too.

Karkat: GIVEN ALL OF THAT AND HOW TWITCHY THIS HAS ALL MADE OUR PARENTS I AM HERE TO INFORM YOU THAT WE ARE ALL CONFINED TO THE SHIP FOR OUR OWN SAFETY. THERE’S NO TELLING WHEN OR WHERE THESE NEW CRACKS MIGHT SPREAD TO AND GIVEN THAT THERE’S NO REAL BENEFIT TO BEING OFF SHIP ANYMORE THE ADULTS HAVE DECIDED THAT THE RISK OUTWEIGHS THE REWARD.

Vriska: A decision I was against, for the record.

Rose: I think I was just deafened by the sound of nobody caring.

Kankri: R9se please 6e m9re careful with y9ur w9rding in future.

Meulin: =^-^=

Rose: Kankri, I'm offended that you would bring up the future so thoughtlessly around me. You know how much seeing the future distresses me and the mere mention of it is heartless, nay, callous.

[carcinoGeneticist banned Rose from responding]

[carcinoGeneticist banned Kankri from responding]

Karkat: AS MUCH FUN AS WATCHING KANKRI SPECTACULARLY FAIL TO RESIST THAT BAIT WOULD BE I HAVE OTHER SHIT TO DO WITH MY DAY. NAMELY
FIELDING QUESTIONS AND COMPLAINTS FROM PEOPLE ABOUT US BEING
CONFINED TO THE SHIP BECAUSE EVERYONE’S A GENIUS.

Dave: hey sol is helming right now isnt he

BattleshipRebellion: yeah ii am.

Dave: you and i know where the cracks wont spread to remember?

Dave: we were there before

BattleshipRebellion: oh 2hiit youre riight ii'll move u2 now.

Vriska: Uh HOW exactly do you know this?

Dave: time bitches

Damara: what

Aradia: yes dave

Dave: ahahahah oh god time bitches i love it can i call you that now thats amazing

Dirk: This seems like the kind of situation where punctuation could have helped you, Dave.

Hal: I didn’t spend that much time tutoring you in English for you to claim that you don’t know how.

Dave: but i am just a poor orphan boy and punctuation is vastly overrated

Roxy: seconded

Dirk: Roxy how could you?

Dave: and hey my girl kan has my back here right

Kanaya: At The Risk Of Getting Involved In A Pointless Debate I Feel That I Must Add A
Rejoinder

Kanaya: Hell Fucking Yes

Terezi: 1 TH1NK TH1S MOV3M3NT OF YOUR H4S M3R1T D4V3 W3 C4N 4LL F41L TO
PUNCTU4T3 BUT YOU W1LL PRY 3XCL4M4T1ON 4ND QU3ST1ON M4RKS OUT OF
MY COLD D34D H4NDS! C4N 1 G3T P4RT14L M3MB3RSH1P 1NST34D?

Karkat: I HAD A POINT, IT WAS RIGHT THERE. RELEVANT. A PLANET HAS BEEN
DESTROYED, THE GAME IS BROKEN. INTERESTING SHIT.

Karkat: THE LAST TIME A PLANET WAS DESTROYED YOU ASSHOLES WERE ALL UP
IN ARMS BUT NOW YOU’RE WHAT? OVER PLANETARY DESTRUCTION? SEEN ONE
OBLITERATION SEEN ‘EM ALL? THERE SHOULD HAVE BEEN SOME REACTION
HERE BUT NO, WHAT DOES THIS BECOME? A PUNCTUATION DEBATE. YOU’RE A
BUNCH OF FUCKING GRAMMAR NERDS AND I HATE YOU ALL, KISS MY ASS.

[Karkat banned everyone from responding]

[Karkat closed the memo]
You knock on the door and after a minute Dave answers, rubbing his eyes.

“Dude, it’s two in the morning.” he groans.

“I know.” you say and walk in the room and sit down on the edge of his bed. Dave yawns and follows you, climbing into bed as the door shuts after you.

“Can’t sleep?” he asks.

“Not really.” you admit, folding and unfolding your hands. It’s been going around and around in your head if there’s something else you could have done, something you’ve forgotten.

“It feels kinda like the night before the game started, huh?” he says.

“I’ve been thinking about, well about a lot of things but about Mr Egbert and my grandmother.” you say quietly.

“Oh, that wasn’t where I thought this was going.” Dave says in surprise.

“I mean… we’ve got the ring and Jane and Feferi and maybe even Meenah could regift life to someone else if she steals it but maybe that’d be a rogue thing and- look we have a lot of contingencies is what I mean.” you babble and out of habit you touch the ring around your neck to be sure it’s there still.

“The thing is that it’s possible we still might lose someone, or several people. Even the god tiers aren’t safe. And I just- I know what it was like on Earth, how lots of humans would have judged Mr Egbert for finding someone else but all I’m saying is that if I kick the bucket hard enough that I’m all out of extra lives I’d want you to be happy. Even if someone else made you happy.” you say thickly.

“That’s not happening, you’re not going to die for real and even if you did… dude, I don’t want anyone else.” Dave tells you, reaching out to set a warm hand on your shoulder.

“No, no that’s just what I’m saying! If I’m dead that doesn’t-” you protest but he jams his hand over your mouth and fixes you with a stern and laser focused gaze that reminds you that he might go by Strider but he’s a Lalonde.

“Karkat. You’re loud and shouty, you care too much about everything that I swear it gives you ulcers, you flip shit over the slightest little thing, you’re all weak and wibbly for romance flicks. You’re an amazing leader, you’ve made this group of hugely disparate people look up to you not because you shout them in line, because you intimidate them or because you’re a dictator but because they respect you. You…” Dave draws in a tense breath and shakes his head.

“You make everything better for everyone but for me too and… and you don’t treat me any different because of what I’ve been through. I’ve never been scared of you, when I first met you I was scared of what you meant but that’s not the same. This soulmate thing isn’t just- I couldn’t have designed you for me if I’d tried, you’re way better. And, fuck, no one could ever follow that.” he says, shaking his head.

“We’re fucking fourteen, Karkat. We shouldn’t be having to sit down and go ‘hey if I die you can
totally bone someone else’ and honestly I’m pissed that we’re even doing this. But it doesn’t matter because you’re not dying on me and if you try I will do an acrobatic pirouette off of the timeline and break the fucking concept of time to get you back. You know I’m still alive enough after tomorrow because I sent myself a message so stop… just stop.” he insists.

You wipe at your cheeks, you’re crying a little. Not the big ugly kind of sobs but just pink running down your face. You suck in a deep, shuddering breath and nod. Dave shifts and wraps his arms around your shoulders.

“We’re gonna get there, I’m gonna kill this son of a bitch and when we win you’re not gonna have to organise so much as a movie night if you don’t wanna.” he tells you.

“And you won’t have to fight anyone either.” you add.

“Well, idk man, I still have siblings. No way I last a week without me an’ Rose sniping at each other all over again or arguing with Roxy about stealing my shit or Hal taking my clothes.” Dave chuckles.

“Good point.” you agree.

“Also, you have to know I love you because it’s two in the morning and in eight hours I have to heft this entire ship through a bajillion parallel timelines and I’m not pissed that you woke me up.” Dave adds brightly.

Oh, shit you didn’t- if you just doomed this timeline by exhausting him because you needed to talk you’re going to lose it.

“I can go.” you say quickly.

“Oh no, you owe me for waking up. You gotta stay here now and make my bed warmer, make sure I’m toasty enough to go back to sleep. The fate of the universe depends on it.” Dave grins and yanks you back to his pillow which you fall into with an ungraceful flail. And after all the time Dirk put in to teaching you all how to fall properly, for shame. Somehow you’re not sorry at all.

5 minutes remaining

Everything is set up, Psii is in the helm already. On the main control area of the ship every station is manned so that you can all see what’s going on with the next universe when you get there. Sollux is standing in the centre with a biowire running from the back of his head to the nearest console. He waves a hand and a clock counting down drags into the corner of the screen.

Dirk is at the back of the room ready and the other technically minded people are broken up into teams and set at strategic locations around the ship, ready to be directed in case anything should break. Everyone else is in the room and keeping out of your way. Vriska stands at your side, running a critical eye over everything.

“Jade, what’s your latest prediction for the cracks?” Vriska barks out.

“Same as before, the cracks laid out so that in… well, in exactly five minutes they’ll all collapse in on us and end the universe.” Jade tells you.

“That’s fine, we won’t be there then.” Rose nods.
“We’ve planned for everything, it’s going to work.” Vriska declares. You nod and raise your arm up, you and Dave crafted little walkie talkies. It’s an idea that he hated and to prove his displeasure he threw a smuppet in the alchemisation process, which sucks for him because he still has to wear it. It also sucks for you because the thing barely works.

“Dave, come in Dave. Are you in place?” you ask into your crab shaped walkie talkie wristwatch.

“I’m not a space player but even… can find the front of the ship. Yes, I’m here.” Dave’s muffled but annoyed voice comes through.

“I told you to alchemise another one of these that wasn’t smuppet based, Dave! Did you do that?” you ask.

“...did that.” comes Dave’s barely audible reply.

“Spoilers: he did not.” Sollux says blandly from the front.

You eye the clock on the corner of the screen and grind your teeth, you’re so nervous you feel like you could puke. The tension in the room is disgustingly thick, it’s rolling off of every person like a horrible pheromone soup. You jerk your wrist up again.

“Dave are you ready yet or not? Or are you just fondling your shame globes?” you demand.

“Deep… breaths, babe. We’re… ready out here.” Dave’s voice comes through intermittently. You hiss in outrage.

“Are you talking to me- are you SERIOUSLY still using the little foam ass? You know I can’t understand you when you talk through the little foam ass!” you snap at him.

“Oh no, you’re breaking up! I’m going through a tunnel! Kssht! Ksssh! Click.” Dave’s voice comes through infuriatingly clear as he hangs up on you.

“Aradia just messaged me, they’re about to start. Sollux change the screen to the ahead view, Psii line us up when we get the fraymotif portal open.” Vriska orders.

The screen ahead changes and you see Dave flying back with two other- fucking hell it’s Sollux and Dave, no wonder they knew so much about exactly how this part was going down. They mentioned vaguely that they’d seen some of what happens but not how right up in it they were! Those assholes!

You watch as the three time players spread out into a triangle slightly larger than the dimensions of the ship. Rose clears her throat and unfolds a sheet of paper.

“Dave, with the approval of the other time players has asked me to pass on this message which I shall read without editing.” Rose announces.

“Sup. This time shit is probably gonna not feel super cool, hopping across timelines is hard enough as is and we’re doing it times a bajillion. Remember that time we hit above lightspeed before? Probably shittier than that. Thankfully Psii isn’t a weenie and he’s gonna fly through no matter what you guys say. Point is we don’t know what the alpha timeline is like but we’re gonna take you there. We also all demand that you build a statue or something about how cool this is gonna be because we’re the best, time is the coolest aspect. And then… there’s some old Alternian characters that I can’t read, I don’t know why Damara did that.” Rose frowns.

You snatch the note out of her hand and scowl at it.
“It says… ‘Kiss our asses nerds, we rock. Something… bought time for us to do it.’” You stare at the paper and then up at the screen. A looming red time fraymotif glows in front of you and the ship’s engines kick in all of a sudden.

It’s like…

There is nothing this is like. Your whole body feels as if it might pop and your blood buzzes. You drag your head up to stare at the screen because at some point you slumped over a railing. As you move you see ghost after images of yourself in every in between position. Through the window you can see glowing red but you’re too close to see Dave. Things flash by outside of the circular tunnel you seem to be in, universes rotoscoping past and you feel glimpses of it.

You hear laughing, jokes you’ve never heard told, you see crying, blood in every hue. Memories that aren’t yours at all. They’re getting increasingly faster and faster, a grey blur of possibility. The faster you go the stranger things become. Your skin flashes the darker skin of an adult for a moment and then for a split second the grubscars on your side are actual grublegs again.

The world around you fades away and you’re alone in inky blackness. An after image of yourself appears before you, facing you and as you move it does too. His eyes are white completely and then behind him is another Karkat and a reflection of more and more. You twist and see behind you and infinite number of you which spawn in every direction, left to right above and below. You are one in infinity and every single other one that you can see has white, dead, eyes.

A stab of pain jerks you back and you stare down at your arm, you have two on one side, one slightly displaced from the other. One is going black and the other still has Dave’s soulmark all over it. Abruptly the outside stops moving and the red light of time powers snaps off. You have only one arm again on that side and it’s going black.

You swallow thickly, forcing past the pain. You’ve had it before, you need to focus.

“Dad, where are we? Where are Dave, Aradia and Damara?” you call.

“I… ugh, I have no idea where we are but this place doesn’t look doomed. Aradia and Damara are dead but I’m bringing them back to the ship with a tractor beam. Dave is dead too but, well, look at the screen.” your dad says from the speakers.

The screen changes and shows a top down view of a grey disc with a whole load of familiar faces on there, there’s plenty of people missing but the thing you can’t help but note is that they’re all standing there staring at Dave’s body on the ground. Around you other people are coming to their senses and Dirk is staring in horror at the screen. You need to lead.

“Sollux, you’re in charge up here. Dad, bring them in, that whole thing. Dirk, Jane, Jake, Rose, Roxy, Vriska, Kurloz, Gamzee and Latula, you’re with me. Jade stay here, if I need you I’ll shout. Vriska, let’s go.” you bark out.

She nods at you, still looking a little sick, but nonetheless she stands up properly anyway and marches out of the room with you. You have a soulmate and two sisters that you need bringing back to life. Besides, you’re in a new universe now, you should be polite and go say hi to the locals.
> Dave: Be the other Dave

Chapter Summary

TW: If eye trauma squicks you out... consider yourself warned. It's pretty brief and not SUPER graphic but yeah.

==> Be Dave

Oh, it looks like you can’t be Dave. Dave is too busy being dead.

Hmm.
I guess you should…

--> Be the other Dave

Terezi wants you to just plan around your Bro, like you’ve not been doing that for forever but you can’t even explain the fact that the guy is such a mystery to even you that you just don’t know what he’ll do. Much less some teen alternate Bro. And now Vriska is blabbing and Karkat is yelling and it’s all just- ugh.

“Who said I wasn’t being constructive?! God. I cut him all the slack in the world on this, but I can see it isn’t doing him, or any of us, any good at all. I can see I’m going to have to expedite matters. Go figure, leave it all to Vriska ONCE AGAIN.” Vriska huffs, pulling a huge red gun out of her sylladex.

“What? What the fuck are you even going to do?” you demand. She glances at you as she raises the gun.

“I told you. I’m expediting matters.” she says, squints down the scope and fires.

For a moment it seems like nothing happened and then a plum coloured blur flies out of the transporter window that was by Vriska’s feet and the next thing you know you have a face full of plush rump. Why is your life like this? What did you do? How did you get this weirdly specific curse?

You’re shoving Bro’s alternate self off of you as you try to scramble away, it seems like no matter what reality you’re in you will forever be accosted by plush rump with him around. Several others in your group are laughing and you see Karkat’s eye twitch.

“Oh fuck.” you hear Bro’s alt self mutter as he scoots back and it’s weird seeing him younger and you know that his name is Dirk, the others have made that clear but it’s hard seeing that.

“Strider, meet Strider. He’s pretty fucked up but probably a nice guy when you get to know him. Which one am I talking about, you ask? Who knows! Get the fuck over it. Ok guys, I’m out of-AUGH!” Vriska is interrupted by a loud thud that’s close enough to you that you shove yourself to your feet in alarm.

It’s… you.

Your body is sprawled on the floor, one leg bent at a weird angle and a twist to his neck that would assure you that he was dead even if you couldn’t see the halo of blood starting to spread around him.

“What did you do?” Terezi asks, looking at you.

“I didn’t-” you stammer out in confusion. You don’t time travel any more, but you were probably going to today. Did some future you fuck up?

“It’s not him.” Vriska says. She leans down and squints at the body, picking one limp arm up by the wrist, it’s black all the way up to his mid bicep.

“Not unless you got some kind of weird tattoo when I wasn’t looking.” Vriska says, looking over at you again. You shake your head and roll up your sleeve to prove it. In fact that guy doesn’t have the brighter red undershirt of your god tier clothes, just the outer t-shirt.
“He looks younger than you too. What the actual fuck is going- HOLY SHIT!” Karkat yelps and you watch him flail his arms around wildly, like he’s about to fall.

“My feet are stuck, I can’t move.” he huffs as he tries to yank them off of the floor. Around you everyone tries to move and finds that they can’t.

“Um, I don’t even have legs and I’m stuck too.” Tavrossprite says.

“My ludicrously out of control computer brain informs me that this kind of situation happens with a tractor beam, also we appear to be moving.” Arquius says.

You all look up but there’s nothing above you but Skaia and, yeah, it does seem to be getting closer.

“What’s that?” your mom asks, pointing off to the side. You squint a little and see a figure floating there, it seems to be coming closer to you and when you look around you see that there’s another on the other side.

“Aradia?” Kanaya asks and, yeah, you can just make out her time outfit, her hair and the shape of her horns.

Above you the air ripples and the blue and white of Skaia flickers and becomes slick red metal and a large hatch is sliding open on its base.

“What? NO! That’s the Condesce’s ship! That’s- she shouldn’t BE here!” Vriska shouts.

“I guess we’re doing this fight first after all.” John says and pulls his hammer out, the rest of you who aren’t unconscious or sprites do the same.

You rise into a wide industrial looking room and the lilypad hovers above the floor as the hatch closes, you can see Aradia floating on her back clearly as dead as the Dave at your feet. Plus there’s another dead troll in red time clothes but her back is to you so you can’t make out who she could be. With a loud clunking sound the hatch that you all floated in through seals itself and you’re all dropped to the ground, the second that happens movement is magically granted to you again.

Your heart hammers in your chest and you shift a little to put yourself between Karkat and the big door that you can see at the other end of the room, if Fish Bitch is coming in from anywhere it’ll be there. Plus it gives you something to focus on that’s not… alternate Bro. And now you’re thinking about him again, fuck. The door slides open and you tense, a blur of movement makes you jump and you’re trained enough to see a figure in there.

Bro.

You jerk back, bumping into Karkat as Bro drops to his knees by the dead Dave and grabs him by the shirt.

“C’mon, wake up. Wake-” Bro chokes on his words when he lifts that dead Dave up a little and his head lolls in a thoroughly broken neck direction.

“Dave.” Bro hisses and clutches the dead Dave to his chest. Is he… you’ve never seen emotion on Bro’s face but you could swear that he’s crying. Whoever this guy is, he’s not your Bro. Your sword shakes as you lower it in shock.

“Jane!” Karkat barks, but not from behind you. Ahead of you.

Through the door you can see Karkat. You can see a Karkat at least. He’s wearing colour swapped
clothes to you, knight clothes. He’s clinging to one arm like he’s hurt and his whole face is a mix of pain and anger.

“Hurry up and bring the three of them back to life before I barf. Roxy, grab Aradia. Jake get Damara for me, put them all in one place for Jane,” he orders as a bunch of other people rush into the room with him. Slightly older versions of some of the people you just met, including your mom, and a couple of people that you’ve only ever seen in dreambubbles. They scatter, all following his orders immediately. What is going on here?

“What the fuck is going on here and who the fuck are you?!” Karkat demands, elbowing past you, clearly never one to miss an opportunity for loud shouting.

“I’m you, fucking obviously. Or so I thought but I guess I underestimated your ability to think and recognise your own face when it’s in front of you. So maybe it’s not obvious alternate-me-with-less-brains-than-a-parrot.” other Karkat hisses. He’s still holding one arm tight and glaring around angrily.

Another Rose who looks younger than yours walks past the shouting Karkat and hops up onto the lilypad that you’re all standing on. She touches Bro on the shoulder gently, not like she’s scared of him but like she’s trying to be kind.

“It’s a heroic death, they died to save us. He’s not going to come back on his own you need to put him down there for Jane.” she says softly. Bro stands, scooping one arm under the legs of other you and carrying him to the space in front of Karkat.

The other HarleyBert guy J-something, Vriska kept calling him Joke but that’s obviously wrong. It was- Jake, yeah, the other Jake puts Aradia down on the ground next to where Bro gently places the dead Dave. Your older mom runs back with the last girl and puts her down too. The three of them are lined up in a row, red time robes matching. What was that thing one of the girls said? You can’t remember if it was Aradia or Terezi. *Time is dead kids.* Despite all of the practice you’re still not used to having to see dead people up close.

Bro is staring at his hands, there’s blood all over them which you can only assume came from somewhere on dead Dave. He ate shit pretty hard when he landed, at least the troll girls just fell through space. He rubs his hands on his black jeans and shudders. Again, your Bro was never grossed out by blood at all but this one seems genuinely disturbed.

An older version of John’s hot mom kneels down in front of the dead time players and rubs her hands together. Behind her other Karkat paces back and forth with an expression of pain on his face.

“You’re clearly not ghosts, so how the hell did you get here? You owe us an explanation! And what’s with this ship?” the Vriska on your side demands.

“Just wait a sec.” their Vriska says from the back.

“We will not!” yours argues.

“Vriska Fucking Serket if you don’t shut up this instant I will MAKE you, I’m not having anyone interrupt Jane healing them, got it?” other Karkat hisses furiously.

“Oh like you could-” she starts to say. You stare as their Karkat obviously snaps. He throws his hands out, palm up at waist height and red chains bursts from his skin, arcing through the air like pissed off snakes and rendering Vriska into a ball of chains on the floor like the most Hot Topic mummy there ever was.

“Jane are you waiting for A WRITTEN FUCKING INVITATION?! BRING THEM BACK!” he
shrieks.

“You’re ruining my focus, Karkat.” she replies matter of factly and holds her hands out above other Dave’s dead body, they glitter ever so slightly. Jake sets his hands on her shoulders and... glows slightly.

“You can do it!” he tells her and suddenly that gold glittering light blows out into an explosion that knocks you all on your asses.

“I think… I think you may have overegged that hope boost there, buster.” John’s hot mom says, or you suppose she’s someone else’s hot mom. Or- fuck it she’s hot and you’re just thinking, no one can catch you.

“Oh Jane, you’re a god.” other Karkat gasps as he stumbles to his feet.

“Well, yeah!” she laughs brightly.

You stand up again and look at the former corpses, you can see they’re alive again now. All of their chests are rising and falling as they breathe but other than that they’re as motionless as they were when they were dead. Seemingly their Karkat notices it too as he steps towards them.

Behind him Aradia pops into existence, all smiles despite the recent presence of corpses. You suppose some things stay the same.

“Jane didn’t do it wrong, before you say that!” Aradia chirps and their Karkat yelps and flails, he turns around to look at her and then between Aradia and her sleeping self a few times.

“Why do you non time players always forget that we can be in two places at once? Anyway, I’m not here to chit-chat we’re moving the ship again now.” Aradia explains.

“Wh- how far in the future are you from if you’re looping?” that Karkat asks her.

“About thirteen hours and we’re asleep for twelve of them, I tell you that trip was hard as hell.” she says with a sigh.

“Why did you all die anyway? I know it was hard but what actually killed you?” other Karkat asks.

Aradia hums thoughtfully and pouts a little as she thinks.

“You know how you can slide into water no problem but if you fall from a mile up it’s worse than hitting concrete and that impact and sudden stop just basically liquifies your insides like a person smoothie? Well, turns out time is like that. We tried to decelerate through time properly on the way here but we couldn’t do it enough and, well, like I said. Sudden stops. We’re all fine now though, but like I said we need to move us back in time, I’m just waiting for the others.” she says.

“But this isn’t everyone, we can’t-” he protests and Aradia fishes something out from inside her shirt and hands it to him, a sheet of paper.

“Co-signed orders from my bosses. Hold onto that. Hey, Damara, Dave, do you copy?” Aradia says as she leaves Karkat to his sheet of paper, instead she switches to talking to a little walkie talkie on her wrist. Other Vriska marches over and peers at the letter.

“Well that is our signatures.” she sighs.

“I’m in position.” a female voice comes from the little walkie talkie.
“Great. I’m done with this, can we just fucking bounce already?” other Dave’s voice comes, echoing through the walkie talkie.

“Sure thing! In three, two, one…” Aradia’s quartz music boxes play, a melody hanging in the air as you feel time slide around you all. When it stops she vanishes into nothingness.

At your feet Vriska struggles in her chains, her angry voice muffled by thick links of metal stuffed in her mouth. Terezi is kneeling, trying to get her free but having no luck. The other Karkat looks up at the noise and his eyes go wide and horrified. He takes a few quick strides towards you and holds his hand up, the chains on Vriska melting into candy red and flowing back to him.

“Shit, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to go and forget you like some empty headed moron who gets all one track minded when it comes to their- it’s just I’m not the same when Dave is dead.” he apologises hastily, taking his eyes off of Vriska to look down at the passed out form of other Dave.

Your Karkat and Vriska are loudly demanding answers from their counterparts, wanting to know what the hell is going on, where you all all, what’s with the ship and so on. You should be listening but all you can do is stare as Bro kneels down at other Dave’s side and ever so gently picks him up. He carefully pulls Dave’s arm around the back of his neck and then slips his other arm under his knees and stands with Dave cradled in his arms. Your Bro never- never EVER would have done this. Why is this Bro like this? What is- your thought process screeches to a halt as you watch Bro murmur something quietly to other Dave’s sleeping body and then press a whisper gentle kiss to his forehead.

You may as well have just downed a gallon of boiling water for all it feels like your insides just caught fire with something terrible and painful. It spreads through your system like poison and the rest of the world only comes back into your periphery when Bro walks out of the room with the sleeping alternate Dave and Roxy and Jake following him each carrying another time player.

Why is he different? What’s going on?

You return your attention to the argument in front of you.

“It was a straightforward question, you don’t need to flip your shit over it.” other Karkat sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Well there’s no surprises as usual, Karkat doesn’t know what he’s talking about and should just shut up and let the leaders talk!” your Vriska snaps at him. Other Karkat’s hand slowly lowers and he stares at Vriska like she’s grown a second head.

“Aw, sorry I didn’t realise this was a bulge measuring contest here but sure we can do this. Hi, Karkat Vantas, co-leader of my group with Vriska here and you’re currently on our ship. But I’m sure your giant frog coin is very impressive too.” he drawls and there’s something off about his voice, something familiar but not Karkat-like.

“You’re a leader?” your Karkat asks, wounded and only just hiding it. You know how much he’s agonised over his failings as a leader, though honestly you don’t think anyone could have asked for better from him given the crazy trolls he was saddled with. He never agrees with you when you say that but you know you’re right.

“You let Karkat lead with you? HAH! What, do you give him make-work jobs so he feels better?” your Vriska crows.

“Boy I’m missing that point in time when I had you gagged, I’m so tempted to repeat it.” other
Karkat growls.

“Actually,” other Vriska says and tilts her jaw defiantly and folds her arms, “Karkat is a vital part of our partnership and if you haven’t utilised your Karkat’s innate skills I wouldn’t be at all surprised to find you dealing with a crappier situation than ours ever was.”

“Vriska, that was actually sweet.” other Karkat says in surprise but their Vriska ignores him, clearly uncomfortable with having said what she did.

“So we’ll repeat our question, where is the rest of your team? We need to find them, though why we’re doing that after the time players jumped us back I have no idea but I expect to soon be enlightened.” other Vriska demands.

“There is no one else, we’re all here.” Terezi answers for Vriska.

“What? What happened to the rest of your team?” other Karkat asks in shock.

“They’re all dead or… well Aradia isn’t dead and Sollux is complicated but they’re in the dream bubbles with all of the ghosts but- yeah, basically everyone else is dead.” Terezi says.

Other Karkat stares at Vriska and Karkat and then around at the rest of your group, his eyes wide and horrified. A vein bulges in his forehead and one eye twitches.

“EVERYONE ELSE IS DEAD?!” he screeches at you all.

“Wow. Good leadership job, assholes. I guess that explains why we jumped back now. Right, that’s it we’re officially taking over as leaders here since you’re clearly incompetent at your jobs. We have questions for you to get us up to speed but I’m fairly sure we’ll handle it from here.” other Vriska says, behind her other Karkat is pacing and occasionally shouting ‘DEAD?!” with various different horrified inflections.

“This is OUR session, you can’t just come in here and take it from us!” Vriska argues.

“I think you’ll find that we can.” the other one says sweetly.

Behind her other Karkat pauses his hands over his mouth and seemingly frozen.

“Well, good job, thanks to you we’re all going to be dead. Good job dooming the timeline and ruining all my hard work. Feel free to lead for the, what, five minutes it’ll take until the universe breaks thanks to you.” Vriska hisses.

“Don’t be dramatic, we’re here to help your dumb asses.” her counterpart snorts.


“No, we haven’t. We’ve got two doom players on board and I’d have heard if we’d doomed anything and your Dave would know if this timeline was doomed, right?” other Karkat says and everyone looks at you.

You stare back at them for a second and then mentally feel out for the beat of time, but it feels fine. The tick and the tock of it are right when they’re meant to be.

“I don’t know what this is but we’re not doomed as far as I can tell.” you agree.

“See? So tell me what your plan is and-” other Karkat starts to say but your Karkat bursts forward and shoves him backwards.
“Where the hell do you get off ordering us around?! You can’t just fly some giant shitfucking imperial ship into our timeline and start calling the shots just because you’re some snooty god tier and I’m not! Do you know how many dead versions of myself that I’ve met? They all thought they knew what they were doing and they got people killed and you’re going to do the same to us!” he screams at him furiously, his fists balled up tight.

“You can’t be this stupid.” other Karkat groans.

“Oh, fuck YOU, you insufferable nookwhiff!” Karkat screeches.

“No, fuck you. You never tried to understand what your role was here? You’re a goddamn Knight of Blood and you’re this lost? Look at your group!” Other Karkat exclaims, pointing at all of you.

“Don’t give me that, I tried being a leader and I got people killed!” Karkat snarls.

“Because you’re not a leader, dipshit. Not like you’re thinking of. You’re not a dictator of what other people are supposed to be doing, that’s not what a leader is and not what you were meant to be. You don’t get visions of the future, you don’t get space powers, you can’t magic shit out of thin air, you can’t rip people’s souls out, fill them with rage or drain them of it, you can’t time travel or believe in things so hard they become real. You don’t get any of those powers. You’re not the king, you’re not the tactician, you’re not the muscle and you quite clearly aren’t the brains of the operation either! You were never meant to be, of course you’d fail at it!” Other Karkat shouts, shoving Karkat back.

“Oh but you are?” Karkat sneers.

“No, fuckface, I’m not! You’re the- if your team is a body in this strenuous metaphor that I’m going to cram down your throat then you can say the light players are your eyes. The mind players are your brain, heart players are your soul, and so on in this really obvious scheme. You’re the blood! Your job is making sure everyone else can do their jobs. When people don’t have direction you make it so that your light players and seers can do their jobs, when you need people’s shit wrecked you point Vriska at them and send the princes and bards in to wreck said shit. Good fucking god, you’re as implausible as Kanye West running for president and about as brilliant an idea, how are you of all people alpha?” Other Karkat groans.

“I scheme, we plan together and he deals with the people shit. He makes people want to do the thing I want them to do.” other Vriska shrugs.

“I can’t believe this.” Karkat mumbles furiously and you get a little closer to him, you reach out and catch his sleeve with your fingers. He was never a bad leader, he wasn’t. People care about him which is more than you can say about Vriska. The only person who likes her is Terezi but everyone would square up in a fight for Karkat, that means more, doesn’t it?

You eye his counterpart instead who looks far calmer now but different too. There’s a confidence in the way he holds himself as opposed to the way Karkat often looks, like he thinks that at any moment the terrible thing he always assumed would happen will and he’ll die. He’s different. You can get a good look at him now that you’re closer and you can see that the arm that he was clinging to when he came in is covered in ink, tattoos that is. Not the blacked out thing that other you was rocking but actual pictures, although they’re too far for you to make out much.

“Hey, Karkat-looking guy, what’s with your arm?” you blurt out. Brain to mouth filter was never one of your strong suits.

“My arm? Nothing’s wrong with it.” he says, walking up to the lilypad again. His frothing rant had made him pace around angrily and get further away.
“You have tattoos, oh great leader.” your Karkat points out sullenly.

The other Karkat blinks at you in bafflement and then looks down at his inked up arm again.

“Oh, right. My soulmark. I guess since you lived different lives and had different experiences you might have different marks. I… I imagine losing your whole family would leave a mark.” other Karkat says, adding that last part quietly.

“No one has any idea what you’re fucking talking about, what a soulmark is or what you’re talking about with ‘family’, are you even talking to me or to him?!” your Karkat snaps.

The other Karkat and Vriska look at each other in confusion and you can see the same confusion amongst everyone else with them, well, not with the juggalos but that’s more because they just look perpetually stoned. Their Rose pushes past their Vriska and stands in between the two groups with a smile.

“As much as I would love the endless feedback loop of Serket-Vantas arguing and the headache that would presumably split the world asunder I would like to suggest an information exchange between people who can discuss things calmly. Other Rose, yes the living one rather than the sprite if you please, could we talk?” other Rose calls out.

Your Rose walks past you and looks down at her younger alternate self from the greater height of the lilypad and stands there expectantly.

“We have many questions for each other but perhaps I can propose a fair and equitable system. I can ask a question of you and then you of me, without interruption from other parties.” younger Rose proposes.

“Well, I can’t promise that my team will keep quiet but I certainly can agree to your terms otherwise.” Rose nods.

“Hah, I can’t ask the impossible of you. Would you like to ask the first question as we did bring you in here and I’m sure that was a little alarming at best.” other Rose smiles. It’s all so polite. Your Vriska opens her mouth to argue but Terezi elbows her, she at least has the sense to see that this will clear some shit up in a speedy fashion.

“I think the starting question that we all have is where are you all from? You’re obviously not from this timeline.” Rose says.

“You’re correct. We’re from a timeline that my brother described as, and I’m quoting from memory here, ‘if their timeline is one branch on a tree then we’re a totally different tree in an entirely different orchard growing totally different bullshit fruit like mangoes or some shit do those even grow on trees’ and then some other things that cast doubt on the quality of Texas schools and Dave’s knowledge of fruit. The point is we are from a timeline very, very, distantly related to yours. We were only supposed to exist in theory when a heinous monster named Lord English took interest in us and due to some Lord of Time mechanic that seems to make sense to the time players he accidentally granted us a level of realism usually only reserved for the alpha timeline. We upset him and he destroyed our universe, our only opportunity for survival was to come here.” other Rose answers primly.

“So he’s going to do the same to us? Gee, thanks!” Vriska snaps and your Rose rolls her eyes and looks over at her.

“You were supposed to be quiet but if I’m not mistaken we were already going to fight him in some
“Quite. My question now, why was your Dave so confused by our Karkat’s soulmark?” other Rose asks, pointing to Karkat with her thumb.

“Because I’ve no idea what the shit that thing is and you’re talking about it like I should.” you answer instead of her. Rose looks at her alternate self expectantly and that presumably is enough of a question that their one starts explaining.

“I see, well, perhaps you have different expressions for it or- I suppose it doesn’t matter. I’ll just explain as if you were trolls who had never heard of the concept, though I doubt by the time Earth was destroyed that wasn’t many. Regardless, I’ll explain. A soulmark is a visual representation of a human’s soulmate that appears on their skin in parts throughout their life, the parts that are added are representational of life events, feelings, personality traits and such that are key parts of who their soulmate is. Though this phenomenon is unique to humans it does appear on trolls and presumably any other alien species if their soulmate is human. Honestly the information on them is extensive and I’m reluctant to explain it all, does that help?” other Rose explains, her tone almost bored.

“Soulmates?!” Karkat demands.

“How does that even happen? By magic? Have you got etch-a-sketch skin or something?” you ask.

“I think it’s safe to say that we don’t have any of that.” Rose says simply. All of the others on their side look stunned, except again for the clowns.

Rose looks at you quickly and you see a flash of a devious smile before she turns back to their group, you realise what she’s doing too late to stop her.

“So, Karkat, if that is a representation of your soulmate on your arm may I ask who it is?” Rose asks sweetly. Other Karkat raises a skeptical eyebrow at her and holds his arm up, you catch a sword up the inside of his forearm.

“Dave, obviously. Like it’d be anyone else.” he snorts.

“Oh my God!” John yelps, bouncing up into the air and climbing over you, one knee on your shoulder as he stares at the mark.

“It’s just like we were saying, the gay butterfly effect!” John says excitedly, looking down at you so his stupid windsock hood flapping forward. You hear the other Karkat go ‘what?’ in bafflement but you’re too busy jerking around to look at your- to look at younger Bro. He can’t know that you think about Karkat like that, not that you DO really… dreams don’t count and- but if Bro had found out that you even thought of another guy like that he’d kill you. The guy with you here might not be Bro himself but he’s still a version of him. You look over at him but he’s almost entirely blank, he’s not even looking at you at all but rather up at John who is still balancing precariously on you and using his floating powers and the breeze to cheat. Did he not hear or…?

“Fascinating as this all is should we really all be hanging around in whatever this place is?” you ask hurriedly.

“You’re right, we should get back up to the control deck. I left Sollux in charge. But…” he trails off.

Other Karkat looks behind you with a suspicious set to his face, he opens his mouth to talk, hesitates and then looks at his Vriska and then to your Karkat again.

“I hate to ask…” he says slowly.
“Reeeeeeeally hate to ask.” other Vriska nods.

“But what’s in the fridge?” other Karkat asks, pointing behind you.

“Fucking Gamzee is, that psycho.” your Karkat snaps.

“Of course, that’s what refrigeration and freezer units are for. Storing assclowns of all stripes.” other Karkat groans, his face in his hands but despite that he’s still got two juggalos standing near him so you don’t know about that.

“Wow, well done everyone we went almost a whole year without repurposing appliances to hold either bodies or weapons. I should tell Dave, he can reset his clock. I already miss those halcyon days of normalcy, now instead of flirting with using machines for their intended use we are back off of the reservation once more.” other Rose says, shaking her head.

“Can it with the needless verbosity, Rose.” other Vriska snaps.

“A strange demand for a girl choosing words with such grandeur like ‘verbosity’.” other Rose shoots back, glaring daggers at Vriska. Other Karkat makes a strangled kind of sound and looks heavenward as if he’s hoping someone will smite him and save him from this conversation, but without any divine intervention he simply grits his teeth and looks at both girls in turn.

“I might not be a Prick of Time but even I know that this isn’t the time for this so you two cut that shit out or I swear to fuck you will both feel my wrath. And if you want specifics I will personally spoil the ending the next book on the list for you Rose and I will make Tavros DM your next Dungeons and Dragons game Vriska and I’ll even let him make your character sheet. You’ll be lawful good. Don’t fucking try me today.” he hisses at them both and to your shock both girls recoil in horror.

With both Rose and Vriska masterfully, if confusingly, subdued Karkat turns to his creepy clowns.

“Hey, you two. Go over there and open that, get hold of their Gamzee and see what the damage is. If Latula can fix him then great if not- well, un-rage him and we’ll see what our next move is.” other Karkat says.

“You want me to listen for the crazy before they pop that?” an older Terezi looking girl asks. You’d seen her before in bubbles and that Karkat did just call her Latula. Why do they have people from the bubbles?

“How do you know he’s alive in there?” Other Vriska asks, looking at the fridge.

“I can feel a heart beating in there, if it’s not his then I have other questions.” other Karkat snorts.

“Hey, no, you can’t let him out!” Vriska protests.

“It’s fine, they can neutralise him.” the other one says casually.

Either way it’s a moot point as their Gamzee whips a juggling club out and clobbers the padlock with it, shattering it easily.

“Gamzee I was supposed to listen first!” Latula shouts and you watch as their Gamzee’s face shifts into something that can only be described as ‘aw, shit’.

The fridge door slams open and an enraged Gamzee with blood red eyes bursts out, honking angrily like a murder goose. You lift your sword up again and everyone else with a sense of self preservation
does too. Evidently the juggalo takes offence to seeing another version of himself and it ends up being a crazy circus brawl. Unfortunately it looks like their Gamzee is following the same trend of the others on their team that you’ve seen and is younger. He also doesn’t seem so unhinged and both factors are going against him.

“Latula!” other Karkat barks. The girl puts one hand to her head and the other held out towards Gamzee like she’s some troll Professor Xavier but she has to leap out of the way when the brawl rolls her way. Vriska snatches Jade up off of the ground before she can get woken up by clown fighting and the weird Arquius sprite guy floats out of the way as Roxy pulls Jane back.

“It’s not the kind of crazy I can fix! Or not when he’s so mad at least!” Latula yelps and pulls a sword out.

“Fine, Kurloz take him down already!” other Karkat orders.

The other juggalo, the one with the creepily stitched up mouth lifts a hand towards Gamzee. With a terrified honk the younger Gamzee rolls away just in time to avoid the purple lightning that slams into Gamzee’s back. There’s a sound like screaming but it’s coming from everywhere, maybe even inside your own head. But as soon as it’s begun it stops and Gamzee keels over like a felled tree and lands face first.

“You’re a prince too.” Dirk says and the stitched mouth clown nods.

“So it that permanent?” Dirk adds, pointing down at Gamzee who isn’t moving.

“It better fuckin’ not be Kurloz, what did I say about making irreversible changes to people’s psyches?” other Karkat grumbles. The clown with the stitches, Kurloz, makes some rapid motions with his hands that are totally going over your head but evidently the other Karkat understands them fine.

“Exactly.” other Karkat says despairingly. The clown shrugs.

A staticky burst of sound comes from above you and a voice fills the room that you’re in which you suppose is a hangar if this is a spaceship.

“Not to interrupt the clown fight circus act but you all should get up here ASAP.”

“Sollux?” Kanaya and Karkat both say at the same time. You know of the guy, you’ve seen him but you’ve never actually exchanged any words with him but given that a lot of Karkat’s friends are murder happy weirdos you’ve never been kept awake by that state of affairs.

“Yeah, yeah, we’re on our way.” other Karkat says loudly and you’re not sure if he’s talking loud so that the disembodied voice can hear or just because he’s Karkat.

“You give the sweetest benign compliments, Karkat.” other Rose says entirely insincerely.

Their Rose starts to ask why you have two party members out cold but you already know the answer to that, not that it or anything makes much sense. Instead you turn your attention on Karkat who is glaring daggers at his alternate self who either doesn’t notice or doesn’t care.
Hey, you cool?” you whisper, tugging his sweater sleeve.

“He’s god tier.” Karkat says bitterly.

“We talked about this, the alpha timeline has to go the way it goes even with John messing with it. You’ve seen god tiered versions of you before and they’re dead, like every timeline that isn’t us. Them being from one that got somehow magicked into relevance doesn’t say anything about you.” you assure him quietly.

“It’s still something I want. To have not been so much of a failure that I missed it I mean.” he whispers to you, his suspicious eyes darting to the Karkat in front who is talking to his Vriska as he jabs a button for something on the wall.

“Karkat, no.” you say softly.

Doors open and it turns out that it’s an elevator, you all pile inside of it but that puts you close enough to other people that you can’t really carry on your conversation.

“So there’s other versions of all of us here?” Rose asks.

“This is exciting, do you think something I did made this happen?” John whispers to you, you shrug because at this point who knows.

“Yes, and then some. Our ages seem to be disparate. Mine and Dave’s birthday isn’t too far off so though we are still fourteen I would say that it’s more accurate to say that we’re only a year younger than you, given how close the date is from our point of view. Whereas on the other hand some of us have older siblings that are already in their twenties so we seem to have more of a range.” other Rose answers primly.

The door dings and slides open, the other Karkat flailing as he elbows several people out of the way at once to be the first out of the door.

“Can it with the Q and A for a minute, Lalonde.” their Vriska says to, well, both Roses and also pushes her way out of the elevator.

The stream of people flows out into the hallway and you do your best to keep away from mini-bro, which mostly results in you sandwiching yourself between Karkat and John. The room you all end up wandering into is like something straight off of a sci-fi movie set. A large curved walkway with railings along the edge dominates the room with a circular grey centre to it that contains a hell of a lot of controls. Lower than that are a number of other smaller stations and chairs filled with people you know very well and many you don’t. A large window spans one wall and a non-dog Jade is pointing to a few projected screens on it.

On the central platform stands one troll who seems to be somehow plugged into it, you recognise his red and blue glasses but not the slick TRON shirt that he’s rocking instead. At your entrance he turns to look at you, his expression serious.

“The jump here through time caused a number of small fires, about six in total. Nothing major, I sent people to deal with them and between them and the ship’s automatic droids there was no real damage at all. We’re a week back in time exactly and under full stealth which we were when we arrived here. We’ve moved the ship so that we’re out of the way of everything and long range is picking up a few distant objects coming towards the session but nothing else. But we have two bigger problems.” he says.

“What?” other Vriska asks.
“Firstly, there’s another version of this ship here. It’s parked on Derse and from what we can tell there’s no helmsman in there at all, that should mean that there’s no way we can be seen but we’re scrambling the stealth program to up our odds there. But still, it’s a risk.” he says.

“Shit, that’s not good. What’s the second thing?” other Vriska asks.

“Something’s wrong with Dave.” he says and other Vriska facepalms.

“He wasn’t with you when we went back a week? Right? So he avoided both of us. And I heard him, he sounded angry. Something happens in the next twelve hours to do that.” the guy says.

“That’s not mission critical, Sollux. God, do I have to dictate everything you do?” other Vriska groans and you can just hear the ‘8’ in her words.

“You don’t, but when has that ever stopped you? Regardless, Sollux, my beloved and highly stupid twin is currently out cold and apparently will be for the next twelve hours. Nothing much we can do for now.” other Rose shrugs.

“Yeah, well.” the guy grumbles and turns back to the screen with a frown.

“Can you show me the layout of the session?” other Karkat asks and the window changes to a screen that maps out more or less what Karkat drew earlier.

“Hey, you guys can sit down if you want.” their Jade says and there’s an awkward shuffle as some people decide to do that and others are less sure. Their Karkat is asking for Vriska’s plan and you already had to sit through her long winded explanation of that once, you sure as shit don’t want to-

A door swishes open and a troll walks through, an actual adult troll. You’ve never seen one before, not in person at least. Every troll from your universe reacts like they’ve had a pan of boiling water thrown on them. The troll in the doorway has skin darker than the trolls that you know and she looks at you all with wide jade eyes, the resemblance to Kanaya is uncanny.

“Oh, I am sorry, I didn’t mean to alarm anyone.” she says, eyeing the weapons bristling from all of your trolls.

“I don’t know why they’re doing that. I’ll add it to the long list of shit that I need to ask about. What’s wrong Rosa?” other Karkat asks.

“Mindfang and Redglare wanted me to tell you that they can’t get the map projections for the session working but they didn’t want to bother Psii with it.” she answers calmly.

“But you’ll bother me. Ugh. Hm, well the maps are on there so that’s a hardware problem and therefore not my problem. I’ll send tech support for assholes down there, the Zahhaks can fix it since they probably broke it. There, they should be on their way.” Sollux says, waving a hand at her.

“Thank you sweetheart, I think I should perhaps... leave you all be. I’ll see you later.” she says and ducks back through the door.

“You have ADULTS on this ship?! What the hell is wrong with you?” Karkat hisses furiously at his doppleganger. Other Karkat gives him a look that’s becoming familiar to you of confusion and irritation all at once.

“You mean my grandmother? Yeah, she lives here along with my parents and most other people’s.” he says.
“Trolls don’t have ‘grandmothers’ that’s a human thing. Rose told us all about your human relations but you’re a troll.” Terezi points out.

The ‘other’ versions of the trolls all look at each other.

“You must have been hatched on Alternia, right?” their Vriska asks.

“Obviously, where else would I have been hatched?” Terezi snorts.

“In fucking Texas like most of us were.” other Karkat snorts.

“THAT’S why you sound different!” you exclaim without thinking and other Karkat grins at you, it’s all slow and easy but if your insides could stop trying to tie themselves to each other now that’d be great.

“Ask any other human I met that’s not on this ship and I sound too alien but ask any Alternian hatched troll and I sound too American, can’t win.” he laughs.

The room explodes into conversation because the fact that this timeline’s Earth had humans and trolls living together is a huge goddamn deal. It’s not even a contentious thing like everything else has been, it’s just genuinely excited. You look around the room at everyone, even those people like Karkat who aren’t talking are listening curiously. John is basically bouncing with enthusiasm and Rose has all but pinned poor Earth Karkat down to dissect just how that arrangement worked. You remember too late that you weren’t supposed to be looking around at people when you see him.

Dirk is looking at you.

Teen Bro is looking at you.

It’s hard to tell, but not as hard as it was with Bro himself. The subtle turn of his head towards you so he can see out of the corner of his eye is a little more exaggerated than Bro’s own, but he’s watching you. Presumably he sees you too because he turns and starts to walk to you. You take a step back, left foot back, more stable to fend off an attack-

And you step right back into your mom. Ah- your Roxy. Roxy. God.

“Oof! Sorry about that! I think it’s a voidy thing, I sneak up on people!” she laughs good naturedly and pats you on the shoulder even though you bumped into her. In fact last you saw her she was holding Jane but she’s now slumped in a chair with the sprite working on her again. Karkat peers around you at her and at Dirk, squinting at them suspiciously.

You had told Karkat about Bro. Not- not every little thing but you had told him enough. He had sat with you and helped you put words around it without making it into a punchline or a meme. It really is something when the kid raised on a murder troll planet by a literal monster says that you had it rough. You knew you’d have to see Bro’s teen self here and fuck only knows how many hours you and Karkat had burned talking about it. How long you’d spent pacing back and forth in his block talking about it to him. You’re terrified of him, there’s no denying it. But he’s your age now, not some man in his thirties who was at least twice your weight and height. You can stop time, you can take teenage Bro in a fight. Or if you can’t you can at least abscond like your life depends on it (it might). But Karkat had encouraged you to talk to him, if the guy was the same guy at a base level then you could either figure out what made him tick in such a way to hurt you the way he did or at least to rip him apart cathartically.

It had been such a good plan but you don’t think you’ve got the spine for it now.
The look Karkat is giving you is him trying to determine if he needs to bail you out, which he agreed to do but only if you really needed it.

“Hey, you hadn’t got to talk to each other yet, right?” Roxy asks, looking between you and Dirk. Oh no Roxy please don’t try to be helpful.

“No. I just crashed through a window onto him and then this, not really any opportunities so far.” he answers smoothly. Your breath judders in your chest. You gotta get outta here.

“You wanna go?” Roxy asks, looking at you again.

“You said that out loud.” Karkat says under his breath. Ah, fuck.

“Hey, if you want we can sneak off and explore! I can void us out!” she offers. Karkat’s hand curls in your elbow and Roxy grins brightly. She grabs hold of your hand and then of Dirk’s and then there’s a pop.

Around you everything gets a little dimmer, a little quieter. Dirk holds up the hand that Roxy isn’t holding, he holds it up in front of his face and you can see the faintest hint of his shades through it. You look over at Karkat and he’s the same way.

“Can they see us?” he asks in bafflement, looking over at the others.

“Nope!” your mom says, popping the ‘p’ in her word loud and obnoxiously, yeah ok you can see how you’re related.

“I’ve never actually done this with you.” Dirk remarks, peering through his own hand a little more.

“I actually would like to look around without being seen, can you do this absurdly high powered god tier shit for long?” Karkat asks, looking up at her and still holding onto your arm.

“Oh, I can go hard with this and also, incidentally, long.” your mom says and waggles her eyebrows at him salaciously. Karkat look from her to you accusingly and groans.

“Suddenly so much about human genetics is explained.” he deadpans.

“Still, if you wanna bounce, come with me!” your mom says gleefully and flings you all backwards through a door. A shut door that you all somehow manage to fall through.

“That was mildly terrifying, let’s hope that this power means that we also can’t be seen on camera. Am-am I the only one who’s suspicious about this whole thing?” Karkat asks.

“How do you mean?” Roxy asks him back.

“I… ugh, on Alternia there was this plant. It didn’t grow anywhere near me, it was closer to the forests, but it’d bloom around sunrise once or twice a sweep. It put out this pollen that was a hallucinogenic, it lured people into it and people who got stopped by their friends said after that it made them see everything they want. So we’re at the end of a game looking down at a fight that’ll be hard as shit and suddenly a bunch of other versions of us show up with a slick ship that belonged to the Empress no less and I’m god tier and apparently none of my friends are dead AND I’m a leader? And all the soulmate thing, it’s just too…” Karkat shakes his head.

“So is your theory that you’re imagining this or that they’re pretending to be people they’re not?” Dirk questions him, his voice clinical in a way that makes your spine tense.
“It can’t hurt to look around and see if they’re on the level buuuuut how about this? I don’t know you Mr. Karkat and you and Dave seem like you’re p. close so I wanna know you and I know Dirk hasn’t got to talk to you yet so how about while we’re sneaking and snooping we also do lightning round two?” Roxy asks cheerfully.

“So help me if you say-” Dirk starts.

“Electric Boogaloo!” Roxy laughs loudly.

You don’t want to do this. But you’ve got Karkat holding onto your arm and your mom’s hand in yours and she’s a buffer between you and him so maybe now is as good a time as any.

“So how does that work?” Karkat asks as the four of you start walking.

“You ask a question and all three of us answer it then we move on, hence lightning round.” Roxy explains.

“Uh. Hm. Name a movie that you like but wouldn’t normally admit to liking.” Karkat asks.

“Ooooh, that’s a good one. Uh… ok, Earth Girls Are Easy.” Roxy answers first.

“Oh, wow.” Dirk says, apparently surprised. Is that surprise on his face? How do you read Bro face with some expression?

“Ok, so I’ll say… Rocky Horror Picture Show.” Dirk answers. Something in your brain short circuits until you figure that he’s probably saying that ironically, mocking Karkat.

“I don’t know why I thought this would be illuminating, I know none of these movies.” Karkat complains and looks at you expectantly, right, you also have to answer. You desperately run your answers through a filter of things that wouldn’t make Bro puppet you in the face against things that would piss him off because fuck him, then you remember that you’re not supposed to care anymore so you just spit something out without really thinking.

“The Royal Tenenbaums.” you answer hastily, though some time has past. Dirk makes a thoughtful noise and you want to scream, what the FUCK does that mean?!

Roxy squeezes your hand and you gather that it’s your turn to ask.

“What,” you try to get the words in order, something that sounds funny, “what was your dumbest near death experience before the game?”

It’s your question so you don’t have to answer. You don’t want to give your answer, you had so many near death experiences.

“One time when I was really little I opened the curtains in the middle of the day and nearly cooked myself.” Karkat says with a shake of his head.

“Accidental molotov cocktail.” Roxy answers.

“I got my foot stuck in a giant clamshell underwater and nearly drowned.” Dirk says.

“You dope but hold it, what’s that?” Roxy asks and nods towards the wall. There’s a large lit screen covered in messages next to a door that has ‘games room’ written on it in red marker in what looks suspiciously like your own handwriting.

You stand there in bafflement staring at what appears to be a community notice board, it’s digital of
course but still. There’s a list of food that will be cooked in the cafeteria, a job rota, a ‘helm schedule’ whatever that is. But there’s also regular messages.

‘Can people stop asking Rose if they “beef it in a major way and die or off themselves”? It’s starting to upset her. Problems with this? See Roxy and Dirk for further ‘debate’ on this.’

‘Hello kids, please don’t use the games in the game room collection for gambling, even if you’re only betting chores. - Dad

ESPECIALLY DON’T BET AGAINST VRISKA WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU PEOPLE?! - KARKAT’

‘as per adult request there is n0 p0rn 0n this ships files if y0u want t0 discuss why there is n0 p0rn g0 talk t0 damara latula 0r mituna ^_--aradia’

‘As i am a man of my word i have to post this message. Jake english is a terrible marksman and jade is the best also i smell. - Jake

so kind of you to say that jake!! - Jade

H4H4 PWN3D! - Mituna’

‘Book Club Weekly Meeting Postponed Because Of The Whole New Universe Situation If They Decide To Join We Should Give Them A Chance To Catch Up The Book Can Be Found Here And Is In Which A Rainbow Drinker And Mediculler Fall In Flush Romance While Caring For Their Mutual Pale Crush Contains One Polyamorous Red/Pale Triangle - Kanaya’

‘FR33 COM1CS D3L1V3R3D R1GHT TO YOUR DOOR! - Terezi and Dave

D --> Nobody wants these - Equius
tough - Dave

D --> You painted it on my door, this is beyond childish - Equius

aw sorry well fix it so you like it - Dave

Th9ugh I understand 6ut d9 n9t 6uy the excuse that drawing a giant h9rse phallus 9n ‘sweet Br9’ w9uld make this m9re t9 Equius’ tastes I request that this 6e taken d9wn - Kankri

Fixed! - Hal

D --> A giant semi-transparent pi%ellated sticker does not "help", you are supposed to be on my side Hal - Equius

Hey man I’m only human. Mostly human, also part troll, hence the trolling. - Hal

Next pers9n t9 ditch their ch9res has to scru6 Equius’ d99r clean. - Signless’

“Hal?” Dirk says.

“Huh, I guess your alt-self made one too. What’re-” Roxy cuts off, there are voices coming down the hallway.

“I purpose that we just make a new one.” a girl’s voice says. Actually you’ve met this girl before in dreambubbles, she’s the arty cat girl and you chilled with her ghost and drew on the walls on the
meteor one time. Her name was Nepeta. She walks around the corner carrying a fire extinguisher with two hands. She has a green coat tied around her waist and the sleeveless shirt with her sign on reveals tattoos up her arm too. A green paw print, and a weird kind of neon many petaled flower that you’d seen in Jade’s greenhouse before it got destroyed. She’s with another girl, a fish troll. The one whose ancestor is the very fish queen that you’re all trying to kill.

“Water boat what’s left in there though?” the fish troll girl asks and Nepeta pauses.

“I don’t know, Fef. Aren’t they like bike helmets or something? Use them once and you replace ‘em?” Nepeta asks and pouts her slightly split lip. Karkat’s hand tightens on your arm, his blunt claws digging into your skin. You look over at him and raise an eyebrow.

“I… I never thought I’d see them alive again. I mean there were dreambubbles sure but it’s not the same. I guess other me really didn’t fuck up like I did.” Karkat whispers.

“Dude, no.” you whisper back insistently. He can’t keep thinking that.

“Maybe we should ask.” the other one says. She looks uncomfortable for a moment and then speaks again, apparently oblivious to the fact that she’s mere feet away from you. The four of you are all back against the wall even though Roxy can phase you through walls and could presumably put you through people too.

“Hey, you don’t fin-k that Aradia is badly hurt do you? I mean Dave died so maybe she did too.” she asks.

“Even if they did die Jane was assigned to dealing with the new people and the time players so we’d have heard if they weren’t okay and- wait a minute. Why’d you ask about Aradia and not Damara, huh?” Nepeta asks, narrowing her eyes at Feferi.

“Oh! I didn’t mean to exclude her or anything, of course I care about Damara too!” the fishtroll says, holding her hands up innocently.

“HMMM.” Nepeta says, leaning towards her.

“You have been spending a clawful lot of time with Aradia since Sollux and Dave got together.” Nepeta says suspiciously.

“Wait, what?” you blurt out and are suddenly very thankful that she can’t hear you. You thought that other you was supposed to be other Karkat’s soulmate so how can he be dating TWO dudes?! Other you is apparently a ho.

“I- that- it’s none of your glubbin’ business Nep!” the other girl insists. Nepeta grins at her with feline fangs and levels the nozzle of the fire extinguisher at her.

“CONFESS!” Nepeta yells and pulls the handle, making the other girl squeal and run off. Nepeta chases after her and you watch in utter bewilderment.

“They’re loud but I’m not sure they’re evil robots trying to kill us all.” Dirk says after a moment or two.

“Guys, I- ah… I think I need to take a bit of a break. Apparently doing this for four people is harder than I thought.” your mom says with a rough breath and all of you hurriedly start looking around for doors. Karkat sticks his head through one and then pulls you all in. Seeing that you’re alone Roxy breathes a sigh of relief and drops your hand, leaning over and bracing herself on her knees.
You look around the room, doing your best to not let your gaze land on Dirk. This room appears to have all of the alchemy equipment set up in it as well as a computer and a few signs on the walls.

1. check the community alchemii2ation log before making anything.
2. Search the prediction database before experimenting on something new.
3. Ask for approval before making legendary items, they're expensive and there're only 20 many high negative items we're willing to shoot into space two earn it back.

But also there are signs in bright red that would fit easily into any passive aggressive notes compilation post back on the internet on Earth. Things like ‘Please leave this room as you would like to find it.’ and other shit like that.

“This has got to be connected to their network.” Dirk says quietly, pointing to the red and blue troll computer that’s left humming idly by the alchemister.

“Time for hax?” Roxy asks, standing up a little bit from her earlier slumped posture.

“I would rather you didn’t.” comes a loud voice from nowhere, making you all jump.

“Shit! Cameras!” Roxy gasps.

“Don’t bother, I might not be able to see you when you’re doing your void thing Roxy but your electronics still let me track all of you. So if it’s all the same to you I’d prefer if you didn’t try to hack anything directly connected to my brain, thanks.” the voice says, sounding bored.

“You’re… the helmsman.” Karkat says, looking up and around the room. He’s not as good at spotting hidden cameras as you are though, a skill you really wish you hadn’t needed to cultivate.

“This is the Condesce’s ship, right?” Dirk asks.

“It used to be, but she’s dead and it’s ours now. You’re onboard the Battleship Rebellion.” the voice answers with a hint of pride.

“Then if everything is the same as it was in my universe, which I suppose I have don’t have much basis for assuming, then that makes you the Psiionic.” Dirk says warily.

“Correct.” he answers.

“What’s a helmsman?” you whisper to Roxy.

“Trolls with the brain powers used to get crammed into the engine of spaceships to power them, super brutal. It tortured them into living batteries and made them part of the ship’s operating system.” she whispers back.

“That’s not completely accurate to how it was but close enough. But it’s not how it is now. I can get out any time I want, I share shifts helming with my kids.” the voice says. Feeling it coming from everywhere is starting to unnerve you, like some Saw trap closing in.

“Sollux and… Mituna I think his name was? That’s why he had all of the ports in his back?” Karkat asks, oblivious to your discomfort.

“And do you usually spy on people all the time?” you demand as the itching discomfort of being observed but not seeing who is watching you gets too much for you to handle in silence.
“Ah. No, I don’t. Today is the first day the main cameras have been on since we took the ship over. I’m not exactly keen on spying on my friends and family either and I know several people on the ship hate being watched. The microphones are always on but they run on a subroutine usually where someone has to call for the helm for it to even catch my attention. Having everything on right now is just a security measure from having so many new people on the ship.” the voice says, but it still makes you shudder.

“I don’t think I can fault you for that, I would keep an eye on anyone wandering around in my space too.” Dirk nods.

Fuck no. Nope. Nuh-uh. You thought you could do this, be around Bro’s alternate self but you can’t. You can’t listen to him talk about how planting cameras to watch people is okay. When Karkat pointed out to you once that your need to perpetually appear to be the right kind of person is almost certainly linked to spending your entire childhood surveilled without any way of stopping it. It took you forever to say ‘fuck you’ to that idea and actually be genuine with the guy and goof off and have fun with him is ways that Bro wouldn’t approve of. But now alternate Bro is like ‘oh yeah cameras, great idea’ and you just can’t.

“I gotta.” you mutter to Karkat and duck out of the door. If the helm guy can track you whatever then what’s the point in invisibility? You flashstep until you come to a door that says ‘stairs’ and you can’t resist the irony there and escape through there. You rush up two flights and then sit down on the landing there. This is fucked, this is so fucked, you’d honestly rather be fighting all the Jacks and Lord English at once than be here. But you can’t leave. Even if you could find a way out of this spaceship you can’t go, you’re back a week in time and if you leave this stealthed ship people who aren’t meant to see you might see you and then you doom the whole thing. Alternate universe you trapped you here and you can’t imagine that it’s accidental.

Sitting on the stairs you put your foam ass walkie talkie away and mute it just to be sure. You switch every piece of tech you have onto silent. You untie and re-tie your shoes and tuck the extra laces away and carefully stretch. As prepared as you possibly can be you peek out of the door and are relieved to find an empty corridor.

On the wall before you is a handwritten sign with arrows on it.

You are on - Upper Residential Floor

Apiculture Maintenance Room ^<

Rooms 1-10 <

Rooms 11-20 >

Rooms 21-30 >^

Rooms 30+ Lower Residential Floor (down one level)

You have no real destination so you head on left. The floor seems to run in a U or three sided square kind of shape with rooms 1-20 being on either side of the stairwell. As you go past them there are names on each door, most of them have little whiteboards stuck to the wall by the door too like movies told you college would do.

Terezi’s whole door is coloured red and the wall by it has stickers that remind you of the pictures the two of you used to send each other. You easily enough spot Equius’ door that you saw mention of on those notes, mostly because it has a giant SBAHJ style horse drawn all over it, complete with
Terezi’s over the line colouring and a giant pixellated horse dick. You get to the end of the hall and see that the rooms at the corner, room 1 and 2 respectively belong to Mituna and Sollux. Then there’s the Apiculture room, whatever that is but the button doesn’t open when you press the little black glass pad that you can only assume opens it.

You double back on yourself and try to think a little more clearly.

This ship has alternate versions of everyone you know here and Karkat is right, everyone seems suspiciously and disgustingly happy. Trolls have families and it seems siblings too if the dancelstor are alive and well here. You can only assume then that since you’ve already seen Bro and Rose’s Mom that the human guardians are here as well, they look a good deal younger but maybe that’s just the way things are. It’s not like they had to have you biologically, right? Your ass crashed down on a meteor courtesy of John. So does that mean that John has his dad back too? You hope so. Rose’s Mom wasn’t perfect but you know Rose regrets her death, Jade misses her grandpa too but both of them were a little fucked up in their own way. But John won the competent parent jackpot, his dad loved him and of all the people to die it seems unfair that he had to.

You linger at Karkat’s door. There’s a polaroid there, one of yours by the looks of it and you can see Karkat in it, sticking his tongue out as far as it can go. Behind him is his dancelstor (or brother?) primly sticking the tip of his tongue out. Then there’s Sollux and his dancelstor and Nepeta and hers to either side of him and just in the frame below is Aradia and the other time girl that you saw. They all have funny faces and party hats on but you’ll be damned if you know whose birthday it is.

You jump when you hear a door open and Bro’s voice. You mash your hand on the black glass square by Karkat’s door and blessedly it slides open, you leap inside and the door shuts after you. Heart hammering wildly in your chest you press your ear to the door and listen but it’s someone else talking now.

“Honestly, love, you know he’ll be fine.”

“I’m not worried about that. Well, ok, I am worried but it’s not just him being out that concerns me. He’s out of lives, Jane resurrected him from a heroic death and he doesn’t get another one of those.” Bro argues. He’s worried about other you.

“Hey now, we don’t know that Feferi can’t pull that same trick again. Maybe they just can’t do it twice to the same person by themselves. As in Jane gets to help him out once and so does Feferi.” the other person, a man, says to Bro.

“I’m not willing to bet my brother’s life on that. I’m not letting him fight anyone, I don’t care if I have to lock him up to keep him safe.” Bro says darkly.

“You and I both know full well that Dave and Jade are equally impossible to restrain. Dave’ll just go to another when and leave the room then step back and Jade’d just pop outside. I feel your frustration, I do, but you should just talk to him when he wakes up. You know how much he respects your opinion.”

You push away from the doors, sucking a stressed breath between clenched teeth and drop onto the nearby bed. Your fingers tangle in the covers as you consider that this guy really is a different person to Bro. This guy has a soul and clearly loves and worries about his Dave. Your Bro never worried about you a day in his fucking life.

Something sick and poisoned thrashes inside you. You try push it down and ignore it because you know nothing good will come of it. You need a distraction and so you look around.
The room is a decent size. It has a bed, a desk and a wardrobe. There’s a space on Karkat’s desk that looks suspiciously husktop shaped, a mousemat sits there but there’s no mouse. He must have it on him. The rest of his desk is kind of cluttered but in that anal, orderly, Vantas way that you’ve started getting used to. At the back there’s a vintage looking typewriter and a stack of paper which pings all of the secretly hipster aesthetics that you pretend to have only ironically. There are a few books stacked up at the edge of the table, both troll and human in nature.

There’s ‘In which a rainbow drinker and mediculler fall in flush romance while caring for their mutual pale crush contains one polyamorous red/pale triangle’ which is the thickest. Then there’s ‘the art of war’ and to the side is ‘Atlas shrugged’ which has more post it notes sticking out of it than book. Curiously you pick it up, open it at random and read one. ‘AYN RAND CAN BLOW ME, SHE’S A FUCKING SOCIOPATH.’

In fact as you look over his desk and the nearby bookshelf you can see that there’s an entire shelf dedicated to philosophy and political books in both Alternian and English. With a rainbow spine one proclaims ‘Radical kindess: tolerance and the end of the hem9spectrum - The Signless’. But there’s also titles like ‘On Liberty’, ‘Justice as Fairness’, ‘Applied Ethics’, ‘The Social Contract’, ‘Ideal Code: Real World’. This isn’t stuff you’ve ever seen Karkat read or talk about. The shelf below on the other hand is full of Alternian books, multiple ones that you recognise and read with him. The shelf below that is all human books. You haven’t read very many of them at all, Bro never bought you books so it was just shit you downloaded online, but you’ve heard of most of them.

This whole thing fits a pattern, there are plenty of Karkat-y thing about this guy that don’t surprise you at all but then there are things that do. Alternate timelines, go figure. Since you’re already in here snooping and you don’t’ know if Bro is still outside and really don’t want to find out you figure you’ll look around more. The walls have posters on for movies but they too continue the theme of being both human and troll.

The wall by his bed has a bunch of pictures stuck up on it, a good number of the same three pairs of trolls and his dancestor, he must be closest to them. But there’s also a number of him and Kanaya that don’t look like they were taken by him but rather someone else. There’s pictures of Karkat himself as well and you never figured Karkat to be a guy who keeps pictures of himself around but it’s obvious that you took them, or alternate you anyway, you know your own style and it’s got you all over it. There’s one shot of him looking up at hanging photos on a line and the sun filters over his skin and hair just so and it tangles your heart up something chronic.

You don’t so much as sit down on Karkat’s bed as you do drop onto it with weak knees.

They’re soulmates. Aside from how bananas it is that soulmates are a thing they’re so fucking visible. There’s no wondering if you’re meant to be with someone if they’re just there on your skin like that, right? And you can’t imagine that his world had any kind of homophobia because, like, if you have a dude on your arm when you’re born then there’s nothing you can do about that is there? No one can tell you you’re choosing to be that way. You can’t get scared straight or sent off to those conversion summer camps that you used to hear about.

Your counterpart never had to look at Karkat and his fascinating alien face and wonder if he was fucked up for finding him so interesting. You’ve been desperately trying to get over what Bro made you into, to be genuine with Karkat, to trust him. You don’t know what you are. Karkat said that the way the two of you help each other is more pale than just friendship. But you also know his society fucked him up too, told him that he has to love in fours and sure you can swap but you can’t have a bit of one and another, you can’t have several in one person at the same time. You had let him cry into your shoulder and wished dearly to burn down the world that made him hate himself for that. The obvious parallels are laughable.
Even if you could bring yourself to get the stones to do anything about the nameless thing you probably do feel for him you don’t know if he’s ready to deal with that. You’re already knee deep in pale territory but you know that’s not all you want (and you hate yourself for that) but you know he can’t keep it in just one quadrant either (and BOY do you know the implications of that), you’re both fucked. You’re both two cracked glass jigsaw pieces and both too afraid that if you put them together you’ll both shatter for good and everything will be lost.

You eye an off centre polaroid that’s on Karkat’s nightstand. It’s him kissing your double. Taken by his own hand and wonky but they’re in love and happy. Just seeing it makes your heart claw at your ribs because you want that too, even though you hate to even think it. You’re happy that other Karkat is happy, no Karkat should be unhappy but seeing how other you has just lived this charmed life with everything falling into his lap without hardship… it makes you want to kill him.

You quash the sick and violent thought and force yourself to leave. You listen at the door for a moment and, hearing no one, you leave into the now empty hall. You’re buzzing underneath your skin with a feeling that sets your teeth on edge and makes your fists clench. You don’t want to think about any of this so you shove it down, refuse to voice it even in the privacy of your own head.

“And what are YOU motherfucking doing here?” A voice says slowly from behind you. You spin on your toes, pulling your sword out only to find yourself face to face with Gamzee. A Gamzee who is your height for once, so it’s their Gamzee. You would say the not crazy one but there’s a juggling club in one hand so you’re absolutely not saying that.

“Back off.” you tell him.

Gamzee was leaning against the wall with one hand and he pushes away from it with an air of malevolence and narrows his eyes at you.

“This here’s my home, you know? And you’re our guest but you’re a pretty shady, unrighteous guest. Sneaking around in places you don’t belong without no permission.” he says, lowering his head and angling those horns at you ever so slightly.

“Fine, it’s your ship but you flew it into my universe.” you say defensively, backing up.

“Hm. My Karkat warned me y’all might not be like us, that you might try to hurt my people, kill them. Sneak into places you don’t belong. So you think I ain’t practiced? Think I can’t feel your rage as you hide all up in my leader’s room?” He hisses and sounds like he has a rattlesnake in his chest. You back up more, nearly tripping over your feet. You feel like your muscles are trembling against your will, no matter how much you try to resist. Around you the walls and ceiling close in on you, you can’t breathe, you can’t-

“Gamzee.” a stern voice says from behind him and what feels like an ocean of pressure on your lungs eases up and you stagger back against a wall. You blink and focus and see Karkat there. No, not Karkat. An adult that looks a hell of a lot like him, clad in black and red with a brown cape and hood hanging from his shoulders.

“He was sneaking in Karkat’s room, all bubbling with rage, I could wicked hear him!” Gamzee says defensively.

“And I’m sure he won’t do it again. Jean wanted your help in the kitchen by the way, what with all these new people it’s a lot of extra work.” the Karkat looking adult says.

Gamzee glares back at you, growls and marches off into the stairwell. Your breath is coming too fast and too sharp as the troll walks towards you, but he stops about ten feet away from you and sits
down on the floor with his legs crossed. He starts to talk and you stare at his sharp teeth and try to focus on the words.

“I am sorry about that. Gamzee is quite protective of this ship and everyone on her, I think change to it threatens him and he does care for Karkat very much. Still he should not have used his chucklevoodoos on you and I’m sorry. Just… try to breathe and it ought to pass.” he says.

You swallow and your throat sticks together at the movement, all tacky inside like you’ve been gargling sand or something.

“I’m fine.” you rasp.

“Hi there, Fine. I’m Signless.” the man jokes and you groan at how bad it is.

“You’re uh… you’re Karkat’s ancestor, right?” you ask, forcing your voice to go back to normal.

“I am indeed. My husband has communicated to me and the rest of the adults that we’re all dead in your universe so I understand that you won’t have met me before. From my understanding almost everyone that I love is dead in your universe.” Signless says softly.

“Y’all seem pretty different.” you manage to say as your breathing starts to go wrong again. Goddamnit you were almost fine again.

“I guess so.” he agrees.

“You’re not a lot like Karkat.” you tell him because you need to say something and it’s pretty obvious that he’s sat down that far away so as not to scare you, how much of a mess must you look? Fuck.

“I’m going to guess that I seem calmer than him.” Signless smiles, it gives you this jarring echo of the expression that Karkat makes when he knows that he’s right and is just waiting for you to prove his point.

“Pretty much, you’re less angry.” you say with a nod.

“Ah, but that’s my secret. I’m always angry.” He grins at you and the absurdity of the moment startles you out of being so guarded and into total bafflement.

“Did you just quote the Incredible Hulk at me?” you ask, reeling with confusion. To add to it the grown man in front of you pouts and stands up.

“Oh, apparently me being dead and my life’s work never happening on Earth doesn’t affect anything enough to stop Marvel making movies.” he grouses. He’s- this is ridiculous. You put your sword away, clearly a guy who looks like Karkat and tries to steal movie quotes in the hope that your universe didn’t have them isn’t intending on being a danger to you.

“So,” you fish for something to say, you don’t have a hell of a lot of experience talking to adults because Bro never let you go to school and insisted on homeschooling you. Not that you learnt much on the regular curriculum but boy did you ever get schooled.

“I heard other Karkat say that he was born in Texas?” you ask.

“Hatched, but yes. With the exception of Aradia and Damara who were hatched on Alternia and adopted by me and my partners when they got to Earth all of my children were hatched on Earth.” Signless nods.
“I can’t imagine what trolls on Earth would be like.” you admit.

“Evidently not that much different from your Earth. There weren’t that many of us compared to the vast number of humans but in some places we were more populous, like in Texas actually because of the mother grub we had there. You’d often find that most schools had no trolls in at all or maybe one and then one specific school in an area had a good deal of us. Though the speciest and socio-economic reasons for that raise a bigger debate that I’m sure you don’t want to get into now. But my children had to change schools a few times, I would say that it was luck that my kids ended up going to the same school as the Strider Lalonde kids but knowing Rose as I do now I suspect more underhanded means there.” he explains.

So they went to school together? So this Dave went to school with Karkat AND Rose? He didn’t just know her through the internet? The urge to punch the lucky fucker in the face rises up again.

“So what now?” you ask, trying to distract yourself.

“Oh! Well, I can find out what the others are doing if you want to rejoin your friends. Honey, where are the rest of the kids he came with?” Signless asks, looking up at the ceiling.

“They’re all in the cafeteria.” The ceiling, uh, the helmsman answers. You’re still not into the disembodied voice from nowhere. *Is that you God? It’s me, Dave, stop being a creeper.*

Seemingly ignoring your internal dialogue that you may or may not have been mumbling, you need to keep better track of that now, Signless instead smiles at you and gestures into the stairwell. You follow his lead as he rambles about the shape of the ship and insists that he’ll get his husband to put you all on their network and outfit you all with maps. Regardless it’s a pretty twisty path to get to a big room filled with tables and chairs.

You stare at the huge group of people, that’s way more living people together in one place than you’ve seen since the world ended. At the far end of the room a group of adult trolls are sat together, keeping out of the way of the younger generation. Signless flashes you a smile and walks over to the group, and damn but some of those adult trolls are tall. You watch as he kisses a Nepeta looking troll and it takes a moment of you wondering because you swear he said he had a husband but, oh yeah, trolls and multiple partners.

Near to that gathering is a man you know from pictures to be John’s dad, that great deduction is helped by the fact that he has not one but two John’s near him. Christ, their John is little, he’s like chest height on you or something. With him is also not one but two instances of John’s hot mom, you guess the sprite got her free after all. The five of them are talking pretty intently and- wow, that man sure can hug a lot of kids at once. Well, at least someone’s happy.

You scan the room for Bro but you see only your universe’s teen Bro who is sitting on a table behind where Roxy is sat on a chair and… yeah, he’s looking at you. Great. Your Karkat has also noticed you so you walk over to him and sit down between him and Terezi. He shoots you a curious, worried and annoyed look. Vantas has the best expressive face in the universe, hands down.

“Where the fuck were you?” he whispers as best as he can, it’s still pretty loud.

“Just sneaking around, old man Vantas caught me and released me back into the wild after rescuing me from a threatening clown. Swoon. I’m leaving you for the better model.” you snark. Is snark a verb? Probably not but you’re verbing that shit right now as well as verb itself. A mess, you? No you’re totally cool and chill. Handling this well.

“Isn’t the trope leaving someone for the younger version?” Karkat asks.
Uh, well, he has a point there. You try not to think about that, or about how alternate you is apparently already in his Karkat’s grill as well as who knows where else. Not thinking about it.

“I found out your alt-self has parents and siblings and shit. Apparently he’s also really into, like, political books.” you inform him, hoping to change the topic to Karkat ragging on his alternate self. But he doesn’t take the bait for the first time in forever. He just wrinkles his nose in distaste and eyes other Karkat who is standing next to his Vriska looking painfully bored at whatever she’s talking about with her doppleganger.

“Doesn’t surprise me, the way people act around him you’d think he was a natural hatched leader. Guess what I found out.” Karkat says.

“I don’t know, what?” you say.

“All the quadrants!” Terezi hisses over your shoulder.

“This soulmate thing appears to be built in relationships that you just get handed but you can have relationships outside of them. Their Rose has Kanaya as a soulmate.” he explains.

“Not surprising.” you nod. Rose had it bad for Kanaya since day one, that being a universal constant doesn’t surprise you one bit.

“But their Rose is also in a pitch relationship with Vriska and other me is their ashen middle leaf!” Karkat hisses, clearly scandalised.

That’s… huh. Ok. Weird.

“That’s gotta be a job and a half.” you acknowledge. You don’t get much about the blacker half of the quadrant system but you know at least that ashen shit is about making peace and ensuring no one dies or loses a limb. You don’t envy anyone who has to get between Rose and Vriska, both of those girls can be bloody minded as all hell.

“So what’s the youngest someone has ever got their mark then? And how does that play into legal age of consent?” Rose asks curiously, evidently that discussion is still going on.

“Dave and I were very early as these things go, I don’t know what the youngest someone ever was when their mark appeared but if Psi links you all up to our network you can look that up on wikipedia if you like. We were both… fiveish if I recall correctly. And age of consent laws vary around the world but at least in Texas it’s sixteen, I think that was changed relatively recently. There are of course exceptions if both parties are underage and are soulmates and, well, there’s a lot of legal fuss but Texan legislature is hardly applicable here now is it?” other Rose answers.

“Fascinating. And the upper limit?” Rose asks.

“I know there was a case of someone in their mid twenties but they may not be the oldest. Regardless, between ten and twelve is average but teenage years isn’t uncommon by any means. Why, Vriska and Terezi only got theirs this year.” other Rose’s grin is sharklike as Vriska glares at her.

You tune out of that conversation and look over at the Egbert family. Kanaya’s ancestor is there now, her hand on John’s Dad’s back. Or their John’s Dad at least. Why is he the same age when the rest of the guardians are younger? Thinking on it that older guy with Bro must have been Jade’s Grandpa. Make that way younger then.

Oh, they’re coming over now. You get to see all of the trolls on your side tense as an adult troll
walks close to them.

“Karkat.” John’s dad says as he comes over. Other Karkat perks up and looks around.

“Hey, Jean. Adopted more kids?” he asks with a grin.

“I’m afraid that this isn’t the time for japery, Karkat. We need to launch a rescue mission. Young Jane here has informed me that her father is still in this session and he’s imprisoned on Derse, we need to rescue him immediately. A child should not be deprived of their parents wherever possible.” the man insists.

“Aaaah, uh. The thing is that their Roxy said that Derse is under the Condese’s direct rule right now, she’s there and she’s got guards all over the place.” other Karkat says uneasily.

“So murder her again . You did it before, do it again.” John’s dad says stiffly. Whoa, that was pretty 0 to 60 in no time at all.

“Okay, not that I’m not all for killing that monster and, hey, what’s a little contract assassination between family members? But my point there was that we’re a week in the past from when we met these guys and if they knew he was in prison at that point in time he needs to stay there until at least then. Until we have our time players back I can’t do anything about this. But I swear I’ll start a plan for his rescue, okay?” other Karkat says.

“You have one time player.” he says, looking over at you. Aw, shit.

“Yeah and it took three of them from, like, twelve hours in the future to move this whole ship back in time. I doubt he can do it alone and even if he can Dave and my sisters moved us on mine and Vriska’s orders, I don’t know why we gave them yet but I’ve got to trust that. It’ll be ok.” other Karkat says sincerely.

John’s dad (did you hear Karkat call him ‘Jean’? You aren’t surprised at that naming convention at all.) nods slowly and Maryam the elder pets his shoulder reassuringly.

“I understand. Sorry if I was too insistent, I don’t want to pile extra pressure on you. I just hate to think of Jane without her father.” he- Jean says solemnly.

“You’re human, it’s cool, I understand.” other Karkat says with a wave of his hand. The older Maryam steers Mr Egbert away with mentions of tea.

“What do you mean by that?” Rose asks.

“Oh, you know, the whole humans are crazy thing.” other Karkat shrugs.

“What.” you say flatly.

“Hey, is it just me or does D- does your dad and Kanaya’s mom seem kind of… close?” John asks.

“They’re engaged!” other John says brightly.

“What?!” John yelps.

“Yeah, they were gonna get married but they kind of wanted to wait until after the game. I’m gonna be Karkat’s uncle!” other John cackles.

“Fucking choke on my bulge, Egbert. Stop lording that over me!” other Karkat snaps at him. This whole thing is so surreal, you’re pretty sure now that this must be some very strange dream. The
whole situation between the two of them seems like one or both Johns are going to wind that Karkat up until he explodes. You’re startled out of watching that happen when an alarmed yelp comes from a little further down the table. Looking around it’s obvious that Dirk is missing. You push up in your seat and get a look at the back of your own head.

Other you is kneeling on the floor uncapping a marker with his teeth and covering Dirk’s mouth with the other.

“You need to be quiet, ok? You can’t tell anyone I was here. I need you to trust me, you’re my brother, you trust me don’t you?” other you asks. Dirk nods and your other self removes his hand.

“Pull down your sleeve thing.” he tells him and Dirk starts doing so, tugging the weird arm warmer things of his god tier outfit down. Other Karkat nearly elbows you in the head by climbing over you and onto the table.

“Dave? What the shit are you doing?!” he hisses.

“Ssh, no one else can know I’m here especially not my brothers.” other you says without even looking around at his supposed soulmate.

“Listen to me, I’m going to write this down and you gotta read it out loud at midnight. Don’t show it to anyone, don’t tell anyone you have this.” he explains seriously and starts writing something on Dirk’s skin.

“How far in the future are you from?” other Karkat asks but alternate you doesn’t answer.

“Hey, I’m talking to you!” other Karkat snaps and still gets ignored.

“Are you… okay? What happened?” Dirk asks, but before he can reach out and touch other you he’s gone and Dirk is just left with writing all over his forearm and his other hand outstretched to nothing.

“Ohhh, when you start being linear again you son of a bitch we’re having words. Sollux was right, something’s up.” other Karkat mutters, grinding his teeth.

Your Bro senses tingle and you jerk around to see alternate Bro walking towards your group with the slightest frown on his face. Your heart freezes and it’s all you can do to restrain the urge to pull your sword out. It’s a bullshit double standard, Bro didn’t like you being jumpy enough to draw your sword before him but you also always had to be alert. How the fuck do you do both?

“Hey, Karkat?” he asks, making other Karkat flail and turn around to look at him.

“What?” other Karkat demands.

“Have you seen Dave?” Bro asks. Other Karkat looks pointedly from you to Bro and raises an eyebrow.

“Not that one. My Dave.” Bro insists. Other Karkat doesn’t even hesitate. He might have been bitching about your alternate self just then but apparently if the guy asks Karkat to keep his presence a secret then he’s all ride or die for him without a second thought.

“Pretty confident I could identify him in a lineup, yeah. Why?” other Karkat asks smoothly.

“Damn. Psii mentioned that he was working on a patch to get all of our tech talking to each other, something about divergent operating systems. But I think he must have pushed an update that fucked with my Dave tracking program. It says he was here just for a moment and- why are you on the
floor?” he asks, presumably looking at Dirk.

“Am I not allowed? Also why do you have a ‘Dave tracking program’?” Dirk asks. Yeah, you’d like to know that too although you’re not really surprised given that it is Bro, alternate version or not he’s still the same guy at least a little.

“So I can track Dave. It’s an old program, really. I just have it set to ping me if I get two reads so that we know not to talk to future versions more than we strictly have to, it gives him less to remember.” Bro explains.

“Oh, changing the topic kind of but I need your help. Other- uh, younger Jane’s dad is locked up on Derse under Fish Bitch’s orders and because of time shit I don’t think we can break him out yet but could you help me?” other Karkat asks quickly. Bro shrugs and puts his phone away.

“Sure. Map room?” the guy asks and other Karkat nods, jumping up off of the table and walking away from you all with Bro following behind.

You start breathing again.

A few people ask Dirk what it was that other you wrote on his arm but he adamantly refuses to show anyone.

You spend the rest of the day avoiding most people’s conversations and avoiding Dirk. You don’t need to avoid Bro as he’s just up and vanished with Karkat and never came back, nothing new there then. Rose is fascinated by their whole soulmate thing in their universe and you try to avoid that conversation too, you don’t need to hear about how any version of you and Karkat are meant to be.

There’s food given out and it’s a damn sight better than anything your dumb ass was making on the meteor and it’s nice to see John helping a guy who isn’t his dad but could be. John deserves a family again. A lot of you do but John especially, he actually liked his guardian.

No one has yet worked out how to fix Jade like they did with Jane and both Vriskas are too nervous about the possibility of attracting attention that they shouldn’t that for now Jade stays asleep. You feel pretty bad about that, she’d like seeing so many people and you know she’d have rad science questions. God, you missed Jade. Dirk tries to talk to you when you linger around Jade too long and you have to smoothly slip away.

As the day goes on and turns into night you continue avoiding most people but you can’t help but envy the sweet setup that other you has around here. Somewhere safe to live that was actually designed for people to live in, not like the meteor. He has everyone with him and didn’t have to be apart from half of his friends for years. His Bro doesn’t seem to be a psychotic hyper-masculine drill-sergeant intent on transforming him into a warrior via swords and puppet ass beatdowns.

You’re all given rooms on a higher floor, they have beds, furniture, individual bathrooms and though they’re bare it’s a pretty comfy setup. You stake out some time sitting by the alchemiter as your friends start making things to make their rooms feel like home for the week or so that you’ll evidently be here. Not that you bother to make anything. Not for yourself anyway, you make a tonne of cans for the Mayor who is rightly adored by everyone on the ship who talks to him but that’s just how it is with the Mayor. No one can resist him.

As the clock in your head ticks closer to twelve hours from other you being resurrected you slip away from the group and make your way back to the floor where the ‘other’ versions of yourselves rooms are. You need to talk to yourself. Not in the way that you usually do by mumbling to yourself but actually face to face.
You figure that what you touched on the wall to open other Karkat’s door was some kind of fingerprint lock and it makes sense that your prints would have opened that. So that means that your prints ought to open your alt-self’s door, right? It’s a little early but you sneak to the door that has your name on it in your handwriting and carefully touch the panel.

The door opens with a fwip sound and you step quickly into the empty room, trying not to attract the attention of all three Serkets who are arguing at the end of the hallway. There’s no one in the room but you can hear the sound of the shower going, you guess Aradia rounded up when she gave out the time that the three of them were out cold for.

The room itself has the disconcerting feel of being pretty much how you’d want a room to be but also being totally new to you. One wall above the head of the bed is almost entirely photographs pinned to string that loops down the wall in lines, it’s a pretty good look into what you might have been if you’d kept your camera with you and kept taking pictures. They all seem like casual pictures but on the other wall is the more artsy stuff but without the layers of irony you always reflexively put on them.

There’s a picture of Karkat with some kind of filter on that makes it look like he’s covered in stars, that one looks like it was on Earth because it’s not from this room. There’s another filtered picture of Rose surrounded by plants and butterflies, an intricate photo of Jade whirling tiny things around between her fingers with her space powers, and there’s an abstract shot of several trolls on the roof of something, with the whole focus on the dreambubble like cracks in the sky. Although weirdly among all of these pictures that he obviously took is a picture of Jupiter which must be some printed NASA picture so that’s pretty out of place.

You eye the rest of the room, there’s stacked photography stuff, your dead things collection with way more items in it than yours ever had, your big turntables and a hella messy desk.

Curiosity and envy draw your eyes back to the more candid photographs and polaroids strung up. As you look at them you can start putting a life together. There’s hundreds of them and it’s enough to get a good look. There’s so many pictures of Karkat, smiling at the camera or rather the guy behind it in a way that makes your stomach tighten. There’s even right there actually, a picture of the two of them kissing in some dumb selfie. That’s definitely envy boiling in you, not just because he got the guy that you have... something for but because he evidently doesn’t have all of the same issues as you do about it. He just gets a tattoo of Karkat, falls in love and that’s it.

It’s no wonder either, he has pictures of his version of Bro pinned up all over the place and the guy is actually emoting in them! There’s a picture of Bro, your mom’s alt self, their Rose and other you all curled up together on a sofa. You’ve no idea who took the picture but it’s the happiest most hallmarky thing you’ve ever seen and you’re shaking with rage just looking at it. It’s not fair. You look more and find older photos in there too, ones where Bro looks a little younger but he’s sat on the rooftop of the apartment that you lived in for years. He looks relaxed. Was that how it was for other you? He’d get to go to the roof to chill with his Bro when you got... when you got...

You feel like you’re burning. You’ve never been like Karkat, hating on your alternate selves. They’ve always just been Daves who didn’t make it, people who lived your life and things went south for them. No hard feelings there. And you don’t hate your past or future self either outside of the realm of normal human wistfulness or regret, not like Karkat does. But this guy? You LOATHE him. His Bro is younger, clearly loves him. You’ve got photographic evidence of good times on the roof instead of what you got. All around you is evidence of a version of you who got a perfect life and had every talent encouraged.

You hate him.
Behind you the bathroom door slides open and you turn to see yourself walking out of it, towelling his hair off. He startles a little to see you but then smiles, just openly like that, the son of a bitch.

“Shit, I didn’t expect to see you. I guess we really did make it here ok. Are we…” he frowns and looks up for a second then pulls one timetable out and presses his hand to it.

“Huh, we’re in the past. Did we do a second jump?” other you asks and you stiffly nod because it’s all you can manage.

“I guess I still have to do that. So, uh, hey other me. You’re older, right? How old are you?” he asks and drops his towel on the back of his chair.

“Sixteen.” you say tightly.

“Not too much older then, cool.” he nods.

The two of you stand in silence for a moment. He presumably feels awkward but you’re just trying not to scream at him.

“Listen, I’d love to stand around and not chat with you some more but I really gotta bounce. Karkat and Sollux will flip their shit if I don’t let them know I’m okay, to say nothing of Dirk.” other you laughs. He calls his Bro Dirk, you know, like a normal person. You clench your fists tight. It’s not fair.

“Hey, I can even show you around a little come on.” other you persists, leading you out of the room. The Serkets are still arguing down the hallway.

“I don’t know if anyone else showed you around when I was out but this wing is mostly people’s rooms, we’re mostly all clustered together but some people live further out. I’m sure there’s a map or something. But because it’s not the main body of the ship there’s no elevators here, it’s all stairs. So ah, don’t say I didn’t warn you about ‘em!” other you laughs and you freeze to the spot.

“Don’t make that joke.” you say quietly, stopping where you stand.

“Hey, man, it’s not tired. It’s a classic.” he laughs.

“No, you don’t- you don’t have the right to say that shit. You’ve got this perfect fucking life, you don’t get to make jokes about the stairs when it doesn’t mean shit to you!” you snap at him furiously. You earnt that shitty humour with every bruise, fracture and cut that you got from those stairs but him? He was fine, wasn’t he?

“What’re you talking about? I mean I get that SBAHJ is a universal constant as is only right but it’s not yours any more than it is mine.” he argues, getting in your space a little.

You don’t mean to do it. You’re just so sick and furious. It’s not even your strife specibus but you know how to improvise in a fight, you learnt, unlike him. You almost watch yourself punch him rather than actively choose to do it. Right in the face, smack into his nose and you know that’ll make his shades dig in like a bitch but he deserves it and worse. The first time was just an impulse but the second time, that you mean.

You grab him by the shirt and punch him again. You punch him because nothing is fair, because you got such a shitty deal and he evidently got such a good one. You’re just evening the scores a little. You jerk back from the punch because something cuts your hand. He screams and drops to the floor. You stare at your hand. It’s Red.
There is blood all over your hand and it’s not coming from that shard of glass in your finger. You pull it out and stare, black tinted glass.

You know what they say about not hitting kids with glasses.

There’s… oh that’s an upsetting amount of blood on the floor and other you is suspiciously silent, hunched over with one hand to his face and shaking all over. You can’t help but stare at it and focus on how warm your hand feels with it despite the fact that the rest of you feels like you’ve been plunged into ice water.

“Hey… are you…?” you step towards him but he blindly swipes with his sword at you, you leap back just in time.

“What the hell is going on h- oh shit.” you turn and see Vriska, not your one you don’t think. Or she’s not the one who spoke. She starts typing something immediately as the other Serket walks towards other you.

“Dave, it’s Aranea, are you ok? That’s a lot of blood are- oh Jesus. Vriska get Dirk and Jane RIGHT NOW.” she gasps, stumbling back from him.

You didn’t see, not properly. He tilted his head up to look at her- well, not look. You shove the thought and the image away as you tear your gaze from him or else risk throwing up. But even just thinking about what you might have accidentally done to him when you deliberately punched him in the face twice is just-

You can’t look. But, well, you don’t think he can now either. You just blinded a guy with his own eyewear. Desperately you try to keep down every meal that you’ve had for the last twenty four hours. You jerk back as Bro flashsteps into the hallway. In an instant he’s at other Dave’s side, grabbing him by the shoulders and pushing him to sit straight up. You flinch away from looking at his face, there’s just so much blood and you hate blood but it’s all over your hands. Other Dave makes this terrible, wretched noise of pain when Bro moves him, part sob and part wail.

“Oh, fuck- Dave it’s me, can you see me at all?” Bro asks. The noise his Dave makes isn’t quite a no, it’s not coherent enough but you saw what you did to him. There’s no way he can see at all, with that much broken glass he’s blind for sure. You think you might throw up.

“Alright, ok, I’ve got you. I just need to get all this out, ok? It’s gonna hurt but you can do it, alright? Alright, here’s the big bit.” Bro says in a soothing voice and you hear the same frames that you have on now clatter to the ground. Dave cries out.

“Oh my god, what happened?” Karkat gasps, you turn and see that it’s not your Karkat but yours is right behind him along with most of the people from your universe including Dirk. The kid with the glowing eyes, Sollux, elbows past you and skids to his knees by alt-Dave.

“Dave, what happened?” he asks. You look up, more people are arriving and there’s now no exit you can take out of here. You’re freaking out so much that you can’t tell your people from theirs. His blood is still slick on your hands and you’re sure you can smell it, hot and copper tinged in the worst way. You didn’t mean to do this.

“Psii, what happened?” other Karkat demands.

“The older Dave visited ours as he woke up, he lost his shit and attack him. He punched him twice, blinding him the second time.” the disembodied voice from above says. Your friends stare at you and Karkat, the younger one, he looks at you like you’re something terrible and dangerous.
“I didn’t mean-” you choke out.

“MotherFUCKER!” a screamed shout rings out and you look over to see their Rose being barely restrained by Mr Egbert.

“Everyone calm the fuck down! I need to get this glass out before he bleeds to death. Sollux, Dave keeps jerking when I touch him and I’m going to make this worse if he keeps up. Can you hold him in place all over with your psionics? I need him awake to tell me if I’ve missed anything.” Bro says and Sollux nods.

“You’re gonna be okay Dave.” he assures him and holds up his hands. Younger you glows red and blue, like a 3d drawing without the glasses on. You stare frozen as Bro pulls a shard of polarised glass from Dave’s face. The whole hallway is silent except for muffled whining from they guy with glass getting removed from him but then that stops too, it’s almost worse that way.

“I can fix him, if it’s all gone I mean.” Aranea offers and people part to let her through.

You don’t know if the girl is god tier or not but she crouches down on the floor and holds her hands up to Dave’s ruined face and then everything starts to glow. By the time the road flare level of brightness fades things look normal again, the psionics are released and Bro gently wipes the blood from his face.


Other Dave stands up slowly and turns to look at you, some blood still smeared on his skin. But it’s not your eyes looking at you, they’re purple like Rose’s and though he’s no longer injured there’s a pretty deep scar running up to his left eye. It’s not that or the blood that makes you freeze in place, it’s the expression on his face. Or rather, the lack of one. He’s totally stonefaced but he’s radiating malice, he seems more like Bro than Bro’s double behind him.

A weapon drops into his hand, it looks like a giant clock hand but the edges of it are razor sharp.

“Hey, hey, Dave let’s not leap right to revenge killing, okay?” other Karkat says hastily. Sollux leaps to his feet and grab’s other Dave’s wrist.

“You’d better start talking and do it fast.” other Karkat says to you.

“I didn’t mean to do that.” you insist.

“You did still punch him in the face repeatedly.” other Vriska points out.

“Dave wasn’t even arguing with him, this guy just started yelling and then attacked him.” Aranea says. Other Rose struggles in Mr Egbert’s arms harder.

“I meant to punch him, I didn’t mean to blind him. It was a freak accident.” you insist.

“On Earth any death caused when committing a felony is murder. You shouldn’t be punching people in the face, any maimings and blindings by the same logic shouldn’t be seen as an accident, no matter what you say you meant.” other Terezi points out and yours makes a thoughtful ‘hmm’ at her logic.

“Why would you attack him at all?” Bro asks, he’s pulling his Dave close to him in what would be a hug if your alternate self would stop glaring at you as he holds a sword.

Something in you sort of… snaps.
“Because it’s not FAIR!” you shout and regret it instantly as everyone stares at you but fuck it you’ve already started you may as well finish.

“I had to live with my Bro, he was a monster and you’re- you’re CLEARLY not! He gets a Bro who loves him, he obviously never had to strife for shit!” you yell.

Other Dave struggles away from his Bro and stabs his sword into the ground where it sticks. Then wrestles his shirt off and throws it furiously on the ground before grabbing his sword up again.

His bare chest and his arms are covered in scars. Just like yours are.

“Didn’t have to strife for shit, huh?” he shouts and then points his sword at you once more, the razor tip of the clock hand pointing right in your face.

“Call Dirk ‘Bro’ again, I fucking dare you.” he hisses at you. He looks different than you somehow, younger obviously and his eyes are wrong now but there’s something unsettlingly feral about him and the way that he looks at you that makes something deep and buried in your brain want to run away. Behind him his Rose is giving you the same look, as well as a bunch of the other humans, like circling sharks. The only one not freaking you out is the one who looks like Bro.

“I’m- I’m not Bro. Why would you think- I know I look like him but I’m not. He was our guardian in the loosest fucking sense of the word. I know I’m older than your Dirk but-” he says with a shake of his head.

“I’m not Bro.” he repeats tightly his voice barely above a whisper, he looks almost like he’s going to be sick and every syllable of it seems to make your opposite self more livid.

“Congratulations, asshole. You just maimed me worse than Bro ever did, at least he never blinded me.” other you snarls.

“Don’t you think Bro’d be proud of him, Dave? Picking on someone smaller and younger than him just because he’s angry.” other Rose spits and that makes you recoil.

“Rose, stop. Look, I’m sorry that I look like him but ectobiology is a bitch and I’m biologically his clone but I’m nothing like him, I promise. I know that your Dirk is the same age as you more or less so maybe it went down differently for you two-” Not-Bro starts, clearly trying to hold shit together.

“I only met this guy today!” you yell, pointing at Dirk wildly.

“What?” several people say at once.

“Wait, hold on a second. Maybe I missed this part of the conversation earlier, love, but do you mean to tell me that you two never lived together?” Jade’s young grandpa asks, shuffling out of the crowd and looking from not-Bro to Dirk and back again.

“John mentioned the same earlier, he and his version of me never knew each other. They had different fathers I just didn’t put two and two together.” older Jane says slowly. There’s a scuffle as someone else pushes their way through the crowd and you stare at the person who seems to be half human half troll.

“Dave, oh shit what- are you okay?” the guy asks, peering at other Dave who finally stops glaring a hole in you to look at that guy instead.

“No I lived alone, like Dave said we only met today. We’ve barely got a chance to even talk at all.” Dirk says.
“Shit, that is a hundred percent fucked up.” the half-troll guy says and Dirk seems to react to that.

“Are you… Hal? You gave your Hal a body?” Dirk asks and not-Bro sucks in a sharp breath and suddenly there’s a sword in his hand. The part troll guy, Hal, squints suspiciously at Dirk.

“I thought you said you didn’t live with Dave?” Hal asks slowly.

“I literally just said that.” Dirk replies sharply.

“So why did you make your version of me if not to protect Dave?” Hal presses him. You look at Dirk and see him shift uncomfortably.

“I guess… just to see if I could. I got him to answer my messages for me.” Dirk says quietly.

“You dragged a PERSON into existence, into slavery to be your fucking ANSWERING MACHINE just to see if you COULD?!” not-Bro shouts furiously.

“Forgive me for wanting the company! The first time I saw another living person was when the game started! All I had for company were two shitty robots I built that had the combined intelligence of a roomba and Cal who wasn’t much of a conversationalist!” Dirk argues back and you stare, maybe you should have been paying more attention to what people in his universe were saying. Did Roxy say anything like that? You can’t remember.

Not-Bro is shaking his head. He points the tip of his sword at Dirk.

“You grew up unchecked, you obviously have no empathy for Hal. And you had Cal with you. I’ve seen where this leads and I’m not letting you around my kids. You’re coming with me, I’m locking you up.” not-Bro says.

At this other you steps between not-Bro and Dirk, pushing the sword to the side.

“Uh, Dirk, you’re throwing the wrong guy in space jail. I think you want the one that maimed the shit out of me just now and blinded me.” he says, pointing at you.

“You dragged a PERSON into existence, into slavery to be your fucking ANSWERING MACHINE just to see if you COULD?!” not-Bro shouts furiously.

“Forgive me for wanting the company! The first time I saw another living person was when the game started! All I had for company were two shitty robots I built that had the combined intelligence of a roomba and Cal who wasn’t much of a conversationalist!” Dirk argues back and you stare, maybe you should have been paying more attention to what people in his universe were saying. Did Roxy say anything like that? You can’t remember.

Not-Bro is shaking his head. He points the tip of his sword at Dirk.

“You grew up unchecked, you obviously have no empathy for Hal. And you had Cal with you. I’ve seen where this leads and I’m not letting you around my kids. You’re coming with me, I’m locking you up.” not-Bro says.

At this other you steps between not-Bro and Dirk, pushing the sword to the side.

“Uh, Dirk, you’re throwing the wrong guy in space jail. I think you want the one that maimed the shit out of me just now and blinded me.” he says, pointing at you.

“I think you should lock them both up.” Hal says stiffly.

“I told you it was an accident!” you say defensively.

“You don’t accidentally punch someone twice in the face so hard that you break their shades and blind them. Also John got those for me, you asshole!” your alternate self snaps at you.

“I’ll go.” Dirk says suddenly.

“What? No you don’t have to! You haven’t done anything wrong.” Roxy protests.

“No, I get it. I don’t know everything about what this alternate me was like but I’ve heard enough. I already don’t trust any of my splinters, I can’t blame him for not trusting me. Besides I can’t leave and I get the feeling that if I don’t go willingly I’m liable to get the soul ripped out of me, am I right?” Dirk asks.

“That’s about it. Move it, come on.” not-Bro says with a jerk of his head. Dirk steps out of his group of people and moves past you, his hands still in the air as his other self leads him away.

“Dirk! No, don’t do this!” other Dave calls but they both ignore him.

With not-Bro taking Dirk away their Rose comes and takes his place, winding her arm around her
Dave’s bare waist as she does. She’s still unsettling to you, sharper to look at somehow.

“Why didn’t you stop them?” other you asks, looking at his Karkat.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that. I’m going to try to fix this but you and I both know that Dirk gets rapidly less reasonable the more in danger you are. If the guy is locked up I can talk some sense into the both of them.” other Karkat answers somewhat defensively.

“This is such bullshit.” he mutters. Their Rose makes a thoughtful sound and looks her brother over carefully, you’re still trying to avoid looking at all of the scars that he has on him. You’d really thought- well, you were obviously wrong. You attacked him for no good reason.

“We match now.” she says quietly to him and pulls a mirror out and hands it to other you. He takes it and looks at his now purple eyes and the scars he has around them.

“What the- oh fuck you, man. Thanks for the sight and everything Aranea but I really wish you hadn’t had to ‘fix’ my eyes this much.” he says angrily and glares at you.

“It’s ok, the scar is roguish don’t you think? It makes you look like the evil twin, which is hilarious as we both know that’s me.” she smiles at him and pets his scarred cheek. You and Rose aren’t really as close as that, not as touchy feely at least.

“Sol, how do the cells work? Can’t you hack them or let him out from the helm?” Dave asks. You suppose you should stop thinking of him as ‘other Dave’ it’s not like you’re going to confuse him for yourself and evidently he has the scars to have earned his place in the ‘real Dave’ club.

“I can’t hack them, the code to unlock them changes every minute on the minute and it’s twenty four characters long pulling from the full ASCII keyboard of both Alternian and English. The code itself is stored in the helm but it’s encrypted and I doubt I could get it out without being caught but- Dave I don’t want to.” the troll argues.

“What, why?” Dave protests.

“Because he’s a danger to you, he’s too similar to Bro and I’m not willing to have anyone like that wandering around you. It’s already been proven that you’re kind of bad at reading the intentions of the new people, asshole you just blinded you. Honestly I think he should be locked up as well but I’m not the one calling those shots. I won’t break him out for you, especially when he’d just go right back in there and then I’d be in trouble too.” Sollux argues.

“Sollux, are the past codes kept on file somewhere?” their Rose asks slowly.

“Yeah, they’re in some big databank so we can reference them if we have to. You can go look at them on the system if you want and see just how uncrackable they are and they don’t repeat either so they’re no use to you.” Sollux says with a shrug.

“Depends on your definition of the past. Thanks Rose.” Dave says. He turns his head, kisses his Rose on the forehead and vanishes. You feel the pull of time as he pops out of the present.

“What the-?” Dave says in surprise and their Karkat groans.

“He’s gone into the future, that way he can look up a ‘past’ code. That’s what he met up with Dirk for earlier, that’s what he wrote on his arm under his god tier outfit. Dirk has the key to get out already.” he groans.

“He won’t use it. Dirk probably thinks that he belongs in there, like he’s responsible for what any
and every version of himself does.” Roxy huffs.

“Well, good. If anything having the keys to escape and not using them because he feels empathy and remorse is exactly the kind of thing that’ll help change our Dirk’s opinion of the guy.” other Karkat nods.

You’re trying to pay attention to this interesting time puzzle but ever since Dave left his Rose has been staring at you. Her eyes are cold and you’ve seen them like that before when she’s facing down enemies but never directed at you before no matter how angry she’s been.

“What?” you finally ask her. She smiles, but it’s not the nice kind or even the kind you see on your Rose when she’s trapped you into some Freudian slip you didn’t mean. This one is cold and mean.

“Would you like to know an interesting fact?” she asks.

She doesn’t wait for you to answer.

“You maimed my brother, you drew blood, caused him pain. With the exception of you do you know what everyone who has done that has in common?” she asks.

“No?” you say uncertainly.

“They’re all dead. Everyone who ever hurt my brother is dead and as long as I draw breath I swear that if you so much as breathe too hard on him I will fix it so that you are no longer the exception. The only reason you’re still alive is that you wearing his face makes it hard for me but I will power through that if I must.” she says, her voice thrumming with malice. It’s impossible not to believe her, yet again you’re struck by the feeling of being something very small and scared hiding in a cave from an ancient monster outside.

“Rose, you’ve made your point. Can you dial it back a little?” other Karkat says in a carefully neutral tone. He glances back at your friends and the people from your sessions, they mostly all just look shocked at what’s happened and yet Karkat is looking at them like they’re the ones behaving oddly.

“Everyone from my universe get back to your rooms, I’m not having anyone else hurt tonight, ok? Tomorrow when everyone is calmer we can talk about this.” he says firmly. No one actually moves so he turns around to glare at them all properly.

“Now.” he growls.

You hesitate, are you being confined to your room too? You did blind his soulmate so you should be pleased that he’s not tried to kill you or lock you up. You probably do deserve to be locked up with Dirk. The other universe group disperses with a lot of menacing glaring and mumbling to each other but eventually you’re just left with people you personally know and the other Karkat. He looks you all over suspiciously.

“Jane, you’re the most normal human that I know.” he says, looking at her.

“I feel like the rest of us should be offended.” Roxy says from behind you.

“Hey, there are a lot of words I can use to describe every StriLonde I know but normal was never one of them. Jane I have a hypothetical question for you, just… just humour me.” other Karkat says with a shake of his head.

“I don’t see why but I imagine if I play along with this game of yours we’ll get answers sooner, so I’ll go along with it mister, but don’t think that I’m alright with all of this.” she says firmly.
“That’s fine. I want you to close your eyes and imagine that you have a baby, it’s yours and it’s really new maybe only a few days old. Totally dependant on you.” other Karkat says to her. You frown, that took a turn you weren’t expecting.

“Alright?” Jane says uncertainly.

“Just imagine how much you care about it, how defenseless it is. Now imagine that someone takes it. What do you do? How do you feel?” he asks.

“Why are you asking me this?” Jane asks sharply, her blue eyes snapping open.

“I just have a theory, just answer. Please?” other Karkat pleads. Jane frowns but then seems to deflate a little.

“Fine, I don’t know why you’re asking but I’d be very upset, worried. If I was still on Earth I’d go to the police, I’d talk to the newspapers so people looked out for the baby. Why are you asking me this?” she asks.

Other Karkat stares at her wide eyed.

“Alright, yeah you all need to come with me. I have a theory that I’m pretty sure on and I have to test it, I think our timelines are more different than we thought they were. This way.” other-Karkat says and leads the way. With a little bit of looking at each other uncertainly you all follow him.

“What’s your theory?” Jane calls after him, breaking into a half jog to close the distance.

“My theory is that the humans in your group aren’t the same species as my humans.” other Karkat says from halfway down the staircase. You pause in the landing and stare at him.

You’re not human?
You watch god tier Karkat walk down the hallway, his long cape swishing as he walks. You’re not even going to deny your envy, or the way it makes you hate yourself for not being strong enough to reach the same height. Most of your group is here though, barring Gamzee who got locked up and Jade who is somewhere else asleep, the sprites are missing too and you lost track of the Mayor a little while back. He’ll be fine though, the Mayor has things under control.

You catch your claw in Dave’s sleeve and feel him jolt in alarm at the touch, he’s still on high alert. His face is stiff and blank and you try your best to communicate to him without words that you’re worried about him. He told you once on the meteor that you have an expressive face.

“I think,” he’d said, “it’s all in the eyebrows.”

He’d touched your face then and your stupid mixed up heart had glowed at it. You still don’t know if you were hoping for him to stroke your cheek paleways or for something redder. You still don’t know. Regardless Dave doesn’t seem to be parsing your message which is worrying in itself. He gets angry, of course he does, he’ll argue with people or bicker but he’s never ever attacked someone seriously before. The two of you have scuffled before and he’s tossed you away at the seating platform but even that had no intent to hurt behind it. For him to punch someone in the face hard enough and repeatedly as to blind them is unthinkable to you. But you can’t get any answers out of him now so you look ahead again at your double.

Other Karkat presses a button and a door slides open.

“Come on in.” he says and walks in. The crowd of people on your team walk in. Well, not your team, Vriska’s team.

The room you go into is large and clearly medical, in one bed you can see Jade sleeping away happily. Lots of giant esoteric machines scatter the place, only a few of them are recognisable to you. There’s also someone else in here, the troll guy with the weird skin who is apparently involved in the whole Dirk and Dave situation in its varying iterations.

“What the shit, Hal? I thought I told everyone to go to their rooms.” other you says irritably.

“Hm, you did. I just ignored you.” Hal responds. He’s sat in a computer chair at a big fancy console with one leg tucked up on the chair as he stares at the screen and chews some red tube shaped sweet.

“And why are you ignoring me?” he asks.

“Mostly because I can and also because you sent people to their rooms because you’re obviously worried about a murder happening and as I have no intention of murdering anyone I wanted to come down here and get some work done.” Hal says and squints at the screen for a second.

“So you really are the Auto Responder then?” Jane asks and Hal glares at her, a growl rising up in his throat.

“I’m not dignifying that with any response aside from this: gargle my bulge, Crocker.” he snaps at her and flips her off.

“As much as I want to watch people egregiously offend you, Hal, I did come here for a reason. Which machine is the DNA testing thing machine?” other you asks.
“We have a genetic sequencer if that’s what you mean. It’s that one over there, if you want to enlist the help of an actual doctor let me know.” he says and points.

“You’re not an actual doctor, you photoshopped your own degree.” other you snorts and walks off.

“It took ten minutes to do, respect my effort!” Hal shouts after you all as your group, for lack of anything else to do, follows other Karkat. It’s not far across the room and he busies himself going through the drawers on the side of the console, pawing through things.

“So your Dirk said that he didn’t see any other people ever, which is why our Dirk thinks he’s dangerous.” Karkat says to the inside of the drawer.

“He’s not dangerous!” Roxy protests.

“That’s fine, if he’s not then we’ll let him out. It wasn’t what I was asking about. What I wanted to know if why he never saw anyone else.” Karkat asks, the other one obviously not you.

“Our planet was flooded, we were the only two humans left alive on it.” Roxy explains.

“How exactly did that happen? You never actually said how.” John asks her. Roxy shifts a little and then sighs.

“It’s a long story but Fish Hitler got her gross watery eyes on Earth and took it over, partly by force and partly through mind control and a bunch of other shit. Eventually everything was so broke that she just mowed everyone down and flooded the planet by melting all the ice caps and a bunch of other mumbo jumbo and turned Earth into a water world so that she could make sea trolls again, only she failed and eventually me an’ Dirk came down on meteors. We talked to Janey and Jake obvs but that was through a time thing and- that’s a different story. So, yeah, it was just me and Dirk on Earth and we didn’t meet in person until the game started. I think he saw my dreamself before then but I was asleep so that doesn’t count.” Roxy says in a rush. Other Karkat looks up at her with a frown.

“I’m really sorry that happened to you, but now I’m sure that I’m right.” he says and stands up, in his hand are little medical swabs in plastic.

“About what?” Jane asks, but your alt-self ignores her.

“Dave, can I have your hand please? The one with the blood on it.” he asks and warily Dave holds it out. The swab collects up enough of alternate Dave’s blood and then Karkat lets Dave go.

“So, here’s my theory. You’re not humans, or more accurately you’re not the same humans as my humans. You act differently and here’s the thing, Condy tried to take over Earth too.” he says, dropping the sample into a slot on the machine and clicking the lid shut.

“Really, what happened?” Vriska asks, clearly interested.

“Shit fucking lost. Humans became the first and only species that trolls encountered that beat us. They look harmless but they are fucking deranged. Also here, Dave, you can clean that off.” he says and tosses a medical wipe at Dave.

Roxy opens her mouth to talk but the computer interrupts her with a smooth technical voice, across the room Hal groans.

“I hate that thing, it’s got all the brains of the microsoft paperclip.” he whines.

“DNA sample analysed. Match to crew member: DAVE STRIDER.” the computer reads out, her
voice going incredibly synthetic as she mangles Dave’s name. Your other self taps a button or two and the machine keeps talking.

“Sample is from species Psychovirales found on planet C-413. Colloquially known as ‘humans’. Psychovirales is a class 1 threat species, do not attempt to detain a subject in anything other than an a pre-approved cell and only detain a subject when there is no other option. In all other circumstances, kill on sight.” the machine reads.

“I think it’s really fascinating that you guys classify humans as a virus. I mean if research on how soulmark bonds are made panned out you wouldn’t technically be wrong in that viruses transmit part of themselves into another life form as a means of procreation. The theory, of course, relies on a kind of quantum tunneling with very tiny sections of DNA into the other person across great distances but given that it does group people up you can argue that it is a means of procreation. Though essentially naming us Viral Psychosis is a little much.” Hal says, wheeling over to all of you.

“I thought you were working.” Karkat says dryly.

“This is more interesting, ooh, I’m gonna play the part about social structure.” Hal gasps and without him doing anything the computer starts speaking again. This time the screen is displaying a video of a group of humans unknown to you on what looks like an Alternian ship.

“Psychovirales are pack animals, they form a primary pack which is often but not always between genetic relations but also additional packs between their pair-bonds, friends and other members of their species. When the life of a member of their pack is threatened Psychovirales responds with violence.” the computer announces.

On the screen an adult troll who looks to be cerulean in colour grabs a young man and waves a weapon threateningly at him. In unison five other humans leap to their feet and rush the troll, wrestling his weapon away from him and killing him. You feel your jaw drop.

“When immediate protection or retribution is not possible Psychovirales often employs delayed tactics. Though the technical competencies of their society is very limited they are adept at improvising weapons from even the most subtle of means.”

You watch as a man wriggles out of a ventilation shaft in a busy mess hall and pulls a pan off of the meal preparation plateau. He rummages through a unit and pulls out multiple bottles, he jams fabric in the top of the bottles and balances them on the side by the open flame of the unit. With that done he upends two bottles of cleaner into the pan and leaps back into the vent. The pan fizzes and white clouds come out of it, one troll notices, walks closer and falls to the floor clutching his throat. The bottle with the fabric in then explodes, flinging burning shrapnel across the room. In less than a minute one human turned a peaceful mess hall into a warzone and he’s not even there anymore.

“It is vital to note that Psychovirales form immediate pack bonds with their young, attempting to remove young from an adult will not only result in immediate retaliation from the pack the individual belongs to but any and all nearby Psychovirales who witness the attempt. As such the physiology of any Psychovirales under the age of four sweeps has never been studied.”

“Alright, enough, they get the point.” Karkat says, rolling his eyes.

“Aaw, you don’t want to show them the video from when Condy captured a pregnant lady and her family and they tried to take the newborn from her so she ripped the guy’s jugular out with her teeth?” Hal asks gleefully.

“Pass.” your alternate self says with a shake of his head.
The humans on your side all look shocked at the information. Some of them look impressed and proud but others much more disconcerted. Your other self holds his hand out to Dave again and when everyone looks at him he holds his hand out once more. He takes Dave’s hand in his own and you get to see the inside of your alternate self’s wrist.

There’s a chalked outline of a man drawn on there, surrounded by blood. It’s just like one of Terezi’s crime scenes. A sword that looks very much like one of Dave’s shitty swords starts in the middle of the man’s body and spreads a good deal up his forearm. Is that the kind of mark Dave’s soul leaves on someone? What kind of mark would you leave on Dave and you don’t mean what mark does this competent and respected version of you leave but what would you be?

“This won’t hurt.” your other self says softly and presses a finger to a vein. When he pulls it back a large drop of blood floats up, chasing his finger but not touching it. The wound, tiny though it is, instantly clots up.

“God Tier powers, huh?” Terezi notes, sniffing a little too eagerly at the smell of redness.

“Yeah, they’re not actually that useful. After this game ends I have a promising career in either the blood bank or in a really specific and kinky kind of porn.” he snorts. With his teeth he pulls the plastic cover off of another swab and drops the blood onto it and then slides that in a different compartment on the machine.

“How could we be different species though? The game is supposed to make us in every timeline.” Rose asks.

“Well, we are pretty far removed. We were meant to just be theoretical, remember? But maybe you just need to be the same people deep down and the biology matters less. Who fucking knows, this game makes zero sense at the best of times.” other you shrugs.

The machine beeps and a message flashes up. ‘Species Unknown’.

“I knew it.” other you hisses triumphantly.

“Oh, hold on. I’m gonna take control of this and work out where the differences are and how far apart they are. Hold on.” Hal says, hooking his foot under the edge of the console and pulling himself flush up against it. He sets his hands on the metal and the image of the screen flutters before code starts streaking across it. It must be some kind of technology based psionics, fuck, Sollux must be so jealous.

You look at Hal curiously, from behind you can see a wavering line where his skin goes from as grey as yours to as human pale as Dave’s. If he used to be a computer program you can only assume he got made physical through some game bullshittery but you’re not really willing to rudely enquire about it when you genuinely want to know the differences between the humans that are already here and the ones on your side.

“No to be blunt Karkat but should we be worried about your humans? Your Rose seemed especially menacing earlier and you seemed concerned too.” Kanaya asks. It’s weird watching your own face grimace especially when you’re not looking in a mirror.

“You should be fine. Should. The thing is I’m not worried about any of our trolls at all, like it said humans are pack animals, bonded by family and the whole soulmate thing as well as simply being friends. All the humans are in the same pack by now even though they have different factions within that. Then when you consider how many soulmate connections that they have and that Mr Egbert has basically adopted anyone who stood still long enough the chances of the humans flipping shit is
really low.” he answers her.

“But that doesn’t cover us.” Vriska concludes and Karkat nods.

“I had figured you’d all be okay, humans pack bond with the dumbest shit. Even Hal’s not immune, I heard you chirp at the coffee machine once.” other you laughs and Hal pauses and shoots Karkat an offended look.

“Some heathen broke it and the poor thing did nothing wrong. And don’t start on your droid rant again either.” Hal warns him.

“Oh fuck, yeah they named the little bots that clean the place. John keeps sticking googly eyes on them. So I thought you all look like your counterparts and they’d just take you in, Jean had already started with Jane and John. I didn’t anticipate one of you maiming one of ours, and really of all the people you could pick the only person who would have been as bad to choose would have been John.” he says despairingly.

“Aside from the fact that Dave has me he also has a moirail with psionics powerful enough to evaporate all of you, not to mention that Rose is perhaps the most ruthless human I know and fiercely protective of her twin and Dirk has already killed other humans to protect Dave. I swear the only thing that kept you alive is the fact that you have the same face as the guy they care about.” other you adds.

“What about my alternate self? Isn’t she his family too?” Roxy asks.

“Hm, Roxy doesn’t really work that way. If you hurt Dirk’s kids he’ll just kill you, Roxy’s more the type to watch you, see how you work and then make you wish you were dead as you stand in the burning crater that was your life. She and I did that to everyone in the Betty Crocker company who were hurting Jane. It wouldn’t surprise me if she was here and invisible, trying to work out if you’re a threat and all.” Hal says, not taking his eyes off of the screen.

“Well, that’s great.” Dave says flatly.

“Dave, no… look, you’re not my soulmate and none of you are my friends but you are versions of those people to me and I’m not going to let anything happen to you as long as I can help it. I know you didn’t mean to attack him that badly and anything regarding Bro is always kind of… eh.” he trails off a little and next to you Dave is only ever so slightly tensed at his words, it’s taken you forever to notice that tell but clearly his counterpart has it too because the other Karkat realises that he doesn’t want that discussed right now. He shrugs and moves on.

“Besides, it’s not like my soulmate reacted well either considering what he said to you and then just hopped off through time like a jackass to see Dirk and then move the- oh shit, I need to order Aradia, Damara and Dave to move the ship. Oh no, oh fuck I need to find one of them. Where’s the damn paper Aradia gave me?!” Karkat starts frantically patting himself down and then scrolling through his sylladex.

“Shit, I don’t have to time to go looking. Uh, fuck.” he hisses.

You look around and spot a stack of paper that looks like it’s ready to go through a machine to print something, you grab a weirdly proportionate square sheet and hand it over. He stares at it blankly.

“Time is such a bullshit aspect, Vriska I’m going to need you to sign this.” Karkat says and you watch as he writes down what was the same message that he got earlier and signs his name. In a rare
show of doing what she’s asked Vriska signs the paper as well.

“Let me know what you find in that DNA Hal! I gotta go!” he yells over his shoulder and rushes out of the room.

“Uh-huh.” Hal says around the mouthful of red candy that he just threw into his mouth. Terezi inches forward, sniffing hopefully. Hal grins, sharptoothed and offers the bag to her.

“My DNA is a big cross species clusterfuck with far too many donors but I’ll let you have some of these because it’s yours that gave me my sicknasty sense of taste. It took me months to get what the deal was until Jane made this cherry pie and, yeah, red things.” he sighs happily, and Terezi jams a whole handful into her mouth and slurps delightedly. Now is as good a time as any to remind yourself that you were once really really attracted to Terezi.

...It’s also a good time to quietly admit that it’ll probably never totally go away. She’s gross and bonkers but in a kind of hot way still. (What is wrong with you?)

“Well,” Vriska says brightly, throwing her arms around Jane and Jake’s shoulders, “this has been fascinating but I think we’re all going to go to our rooms. Get our rest for tomorrow’s day of planning!”

She steers the two humans out of the room and so baffled and curious the rest of you follow suit with Hal returning his attention to the computer.

“Vriska, what are we-” Rose starts but Vriska shushes her.

In silence you all ascend the stairs to the floor that all of your rooms are on and she herds you all inside one that is presumably hers. It’s a pretty tight squeeze all things considered but you all get in there. You’re all silent except for the sound of Terezi demolishing her candy.

“We need a plan. I already did not like being stuck on someone else’s ship but if their humans are really a class 1 threat species then outright taking the ship from them is not an option.” Vriska insists.

“It wasn’t made entirely clear from the time that we have spent with our counterparts and the others nor from the computer’s research about their species but we don’t know if they’re normal most of the time and just have this… other state or if they’re always different. But either way I’m sure that you and Terezi would agree with me that if we had known we’d be meeting up with them that we would have prepared contingencies in case that meeting didn’t go well. I dare say that a version of yourselves used to dealing with far more dangerous humans would have done the same.” Rose says thoughtfully.

“You think they have a plan to take us out.” you conclude.

“It’s what I’d do.” Terezi nods.

“So what are our options then and I’m telling you that they’d better involve getting Dirk free.” Roxy says, her voice insistent.

“And my dad.” Jane agrees.

“Wait, why do we have to do this at all? We all want to get out of the game and the more people in this fight at the end the better, it’s more odds on our side compared to all those Jacks and everything else. If we just play nice and work with them then there’s no problem, Karkat said as much.” John argues.
“Either way our hands are tied for the rest of the week, we can’t leave. Not unless Dave can take all
of us through time and leave the ship here?” Terezi looks over at Dave who just shrugs.

“It’d be pretty obvious what we’d done and they’d notice that we were gone, even that doesn’t
work.” Vriska says with a shake of her head.

“And we can’t leave in case we’re seen in a timeline we’re not meant to be in yet.” Rose nods.

“And they have adult trolls as well.” Kanaya agrees.

“I don’t think we actually have any choice. We have to play nice.” Terezi concludes.

“Fine. Tomorrow everyone be on your best behaviour, be friendly, make them like you. Find out any
weak points in their social groups and how these ‘packs’ work with the humans. Terezi, you study
biology with that half and half freak guy. I’ll see how the command chain goes and if I can insert
myself there or break it up. Kanaya seeing as you mentioned the ancestors I want you to find out
what you can about them, see if what I know from the journals back home is true here too. As for the
humans, focus on how to wake Jade up and see if we can do it without tipping The Condesce off to
her presence and work on getting Strider free. The rest of you ingratiate yourselves, make them less
willing to kill us. Got it? Now scram so they don’t think we’re plotting.” Vriska orders you all. She
then glares until it’s clear that she really does mean for you to all leave right now.

The rush of other people leaving drags you out with their tide and you stand dumbly in the hallway
and watch as there’s a good deal of ‘oh wait was that your room I thought it was mine’ as people get
settled. You follow Dave down the corridor, you got the room next to his. You catch hold of his
bloodstained sleeve quickly.

“Are you okay?” you ask quietly and Dave looks at you, still blank.

He opens his mouth, hesitates, closes it again and then shakes his head minutely.

“I know you didn’t mean to blind him, it doesn’t make you like Bro at all. I mean, Vriska blinded
Terezi deliberately once and we all still talk to her. Your thing was an accident.” you assure him.
Dave does not look reassured.

“Night.” he mumbles and ducks into his room, the door clicking shut after him.

You fucked that up. You’re not sure how but you did. You probably shouldn’t have mentioned
Vriska. Left alone you walk into your room and drop onto the bed feeling heavy and useless. You
already hate that you fucked your job up so spectacularly but it’s even worse to see another version
of you doing so well, you can’t even blame Vriska because he managed to work with his. And he
just has everything, doesn’t he? He has Dave and you don’t.

You spitefully kick off your shoes and wrestle your sweater off like it personally offended you.

And SOULMATES even! The concept of being hatched just for another person isn’t alien to your
culture, of course it’s broken up into quadrants. But, oh, to have proof of that right on your skin and
to know that someone else out there is made is such a way that they would want you back that way
from your mangled soul to your mutant husk of a body. What more could you want? Oh, you know
what more you could want.

Dave.

Dave is what you could want. What you do want. You stand there with your shirt off and barefoot
and turn to look at the wall the bed is against. You’ve seen the layout of the rooms, how they’re
mirrored and his bed is right on the other side of that wall. He’s probably there right now mere feet from you.

It’s painful. It’s been painful ever since you first started becoming friends with him and then your feelings spiraled outwards like radiation fallout. You want Dave. He’s so pitiable that you want to help him be the guy you see in glimpses, you want to make it so that he’s as happy as he can be sometimes. You know he trusts you enough to tell you things that he tells no one else. You’re desperately pale for him, stupidly pathetically so. And if it was just that you could be happy, you could offer him your diamond and hope for his acceptance.

But it’s not just that. You’re redder for him than the awful blood in your veins, neon with sin. Sometimes when you watch movies with him you see him look at you and you feel like if you don’t turn and catch his face, kiss him and don’t stop doing so that you’ll just burn alive. But you never do it and so you’re a one man spontaneous combustion event that never quite stops. It’s funny that flush can mean ‘to have in abundance’ because that’s how it feels, you’re overwhelmed and overburdened with how much you need him.

The idiocy continues because you ashenly mediate his interactions with people you know he comes off worse with, you act as a buffer between him and Vriska because her ever watching, ever judging mind games remind him too much of his Bro. And you’re even pitch sometimes too, he makes you so angry at times or so riled up that you just want to scream. You want to viciously tear your bad parts away, grow tougher and better and rub it in his face that you surpassed his expectations. You want him, in every quadrant.

Dave has told you in moments that are so close to pale that your world is dead so fuck its expectations of what you should feel because you’re not so subtle as to not have alluded to your feelings. Everyone knows you have FEELINGS and that they’re for Dave but people think you’re being coy and not saying what they are, but that’s only because you don’t know. You can’t just cut him down to flush. Though getting your hands under those stupid red pyjamas would make you deliriously happy you’d feel bereft of the so-close-to-pale talks that you have, it’s not enough. You know humans don’t do quadrants either, although apparently these other humans do. But the point is that you can’t demand all of Dave’s quadrants, you can’t demand that he be your everything and you be his. How could you possibly be enough for him? How could you demand that of him?

Even beyond your own problems you know that Dave has anxieties about human sexuality that he may not be past yet enough to even accept any feelings that you have.

So you’re stuck. You’re a bit of the puzzle that doesn’t fit, you’re playing a game with the wrong kind of cards to everyone else and you can’t win. You’re just damaged and broken and you deeply want to find a way to be whole and good like you’re supposed to be, even if it’s not normal you at least want to be okay. But it just… won’t happen.

You kneel on the mattress and press a hand to the wall. You’d like to be as lucky as your counterpart, to have your Dave on your arm. To see the edges of his soul inked into you. He’d have tragic parts, you’re sure but also sincere artistry and love. But you don’t have that so instead you just press your hand to the wall like you can somehow psychically force your feelings through the metal and to him. It kills you to know that mere feet away Dave is hurt and distressed. He’s got blood on him and he hates that, it makes him go into traumatic places inside his head and he hates hurting other people just as much. You know the damage he did has to be tearing him up inside but he’s not your moirail and he didn’t want to talk about it with you, he doesn’t want you there.

Your hand slides into your lap, this is stupid. You should change, you should brush your teeth. Fuck it, maybe other Karkat who has everything manages to go to bed dressed properly without furry
fangs but you sure as shit can’t right now. You topple sideways and have a half second of exhausted shock that the bedding somehow feels like sopor before you’re sucker punched into sleep.

Without the dreambubbles around you dream normally like you haven’t in forever. You had forgotten how nonsensical but normal dreams are. You dream of following a version of you in god tier clothes, he spots you following him and turns around to slice your throat clean open and as the life drains from you his white ghost eyes become alive again and he walks back the way you came, replacing you. You dream of their Dave, curled over himself and crying. With each sob a glass tear falls from his face and shatters when it hits the ground, you don’t go near enough to him to see the injuries to his eyes that you know he’s carrying. Then lastly in the morning when you’re in your lightest sleep you dream of being human, soft and clawless with the kind of darker skin the non-Strilondes have. You dream of the room you’d seen Dave in through the viewfinders so long ago, only he’s there as his current age. You’re both human and sitting on his bed watching a movie, in keeping with garbled dreams you have no idea what it’s about but you’re focused on him anyway. Your chest wells with the confusing feelings that you have for him and you kiss him just like that. His hands end up in your hair as he kisses you back just as urgently and when he whispers against your mouth that he loves you it startles you awake.

Sick shame floods you and you have to check that your horns and claws are still there. You’re a troll, that’s what you’re meant to be. You’re not human and you have no desire to be but you know that if you were that your feelings wouldn’t be so bad.

That does carry the unfortunate implication that your Dave doesn’t feel the same way, or else surely you’d know. You spiral down into your usual debate about what if any feelings Dave might have back for you, some days you’re convinced it’s only ever pale and some you’re sure that it’s full bodied red that his human sexuality hangups are ensnaring. You don’t get so far as to feel the gnawing dread that he’ll drop you when he gets the rest of his friends back, but if only because you know that he’s not so callous. Even if he WAS just humouring you there’s no way he’d hurt you like that just because you were no longer convenient, you have that much faith in him.

You wash and dress in silence, spending extra time scrubbing your teeth to make up for last night. Out of habit you pick up your palmhusk onto to find a message glowing in the middle in yellow text.

hey there kk, i’m 2tiill not totally clear on where your ver2iion of me ii2 riight now but iit doe2n't matter. thii2 i2 ju2t two let you know that all of your device2 have been inte2grated iintwo our network. ii’ve populated your chumroll wiith everyone here and marked you alpha tiimeliine people 2o you don’t troll the wrong people. there’2 a few biit2 of the network you need permii22iion two acce22 but iit’2 only 2o your 2hiitty code doe2n't bomb the helm or 2omethiing.

later
2ollux

You gnaw on your lip a little and open trollian and groan at the absurd number of names that are now online. All of your troll friends have duplicates but half of them are now denoted as from your universe, even the ones that have been greyed out for too long.

cuttlefishCuller - ONLINE

cuttlefishCuller(Alpha) - OFFLINE

Oh hello guilt, back again? It’s like you never left, take a seat. Fucking hell.

You scroll down a little further.
You should message him, but before that why not procrastinate by poking around a little more? You tab over into the memos and eye them. There’s one for a book club, one where people vote on the next movies shown, one where the next meals are announced. You eye and eventually give into looking at a board set up by Nepeta.

**SHIPPING MEMO GRID! (updated 8 hours ago)**

Nepeta: :33 < i think it's purrfectly reasonable to use our relationships as a guideline but we can't insist that the new group's relationships will be like ours! think of the new ships!

Meulin: (=^·. ^=) IT'S COMPLICATED THOUGH! AND WE'VE BARELY S33N THEM!

Karkat: I'M NOT SURE THIS BLATANT SPECULATION WILL HELP ANYTHING.

Nepeta: :33 < says the guy with a firm stance on whether alpha rose and alpha vwiskers are pitch or not!

Meulin: (^•o•^) OH DAMN!

Karkat: THOSE ARE STONE COLD FACTS THAT THEY'RE NOT. IT'S NOT SPECULATION! ANYWAY I HAVE SHIT TO DO THAT ISN'T PUBLICLY COMBING THROUGH OTHER PEOPLE'S RELATIONSHIPS.

Nepeta: :33 < boo!

Meulin: (= ; I ; =) WHYYYYYYY! BOOOO!!!!

Karkat: STOP BOOING ME!

Your fingers itch to comment and finally you give in, you always did like talking to Nepeta about shipping, for all that you pretended it was a chore. She at least got your movie tastes. It just got a little awkward with her thing for you.

Karkat(Alpha): THEY'RE NOT PITCH.

Meulin: (= ; I ; =) MY SHIPPPP! </3

Karkat: OH SHIT IT'S VANTAS FROM THE HALF COURT LINE AAAAAND NOTHIN’ BUT NET, RIGHT AGAIN! HAH!

Meulin: (=`ω`=) I S33 THAT SPORTS METAPHOR KARKITTY, YOU’VE B33N SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME WITH DAVE!

Karkat: ONE, THAT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO DO. AND TWO, I CANNOT HAVE PICKED UP SPORTS METAPHORS FROM DAVE BECAUSE THE STRILONDES UNDERSTAND FUCK ALL ABOUT SPORTS FOR ALL THEIR UNFAIR ATHLETICISM.

Karkat(Alpha): I ALWAYS JUST ASSUMED HUMAN SPORTS MADE NO SENSE?

Karkat: OH, NO NO, THEY’RE EASY TO UNDERSTAND MOSTLY. UNLESS YOU’RE A STRILONDE AND APPARENTLY GENETICALLY INCAPABLE OF GRASPING ANY OF THE CONCEPTS. THEY JUST BULLSHIT IT.
Karkat(Alpha): I SHOULD HAVE PREDICTED THIS, THAT’S ACTUALLY REALLY FUCKING OBVIOUS.

Nepeta: :33 < watching sports movies with them is the best, it's so funny! also hi alpha karkitty, are you and dave going to come have breakfast with the rest of us?

Karkat(Alpha): I DON’T KNOW, I JUST WOKE UP. I GUESS SO.

Meulin: (^•o•^) YOU’RE MISSING A FOUR WAY SERKET SCREAMING MATCH, IT’S REALLY FUNNY.

Yeah, no, you’ll pass on that. But regardless Meulin’s words imply that Dave, your Dave, isn’t out in public yet. Given what happened yesterday you can understand that and it does say that he’s online.

[carcinoGeneticist(Alpha) began trolling turntechGodhead]

CGA: DAVE ARE YOU AWAKE?

TG: uh

TG: did you mean me

CGA: OH FUCK STUPID TINY SCREEN I’M NOT USED TO HAVING SO MANY PEOPLE ONLINE TO TALK TO, I CLICKED YOU BY MISTAKE.

TG: that sounds pretty fuckin tragic man but its fine i bet this shit will just happen for a while

TG: look im kind of in the middle of avoiding someone so

CGA: RIGHT. UH. AT THE RISK OF BEING PAINFULLY AWKWARD ARE YOU ALRIGHT? AND I MEAN YOU NOT THE DAVE THAT I KNOW. THAT WHOLE EYE THING WAS AS GROSS AS IT WAS HORRIFYING AND OBVIOUSLY IT WAS WORSE FOR YOU.

TG: oh

TG: i didnt think youd care or youd maybe just be on your daves side or whatever now i kind of feel like a tool

CGA: YOU’RE *A* DAVE STRIDER SO THE LIKELIHOOD OF YOU BEING A TOOL IS HIGH ANYWAY.

TG: hah

TG: well im not blind which is great but my eyes are all wrong and im not really digging that even if it makes me look more like rose but i gotta say im more bothered by the horrifying facial scarring

TG: ill never be pretty again my fanclub will be devastated

CGA: YOU DON’T HAVE A FANCLUB.

TG: not now i lksfga;

CGA: UH DAVE?

TG: 2orry dave'2 avoidant a22 can't come two the phone right now, he'2 two bu2y beiing 2chooled
on why literally vani2hiing for huge patch2 of time ii2 a diick move. leave a me22age.

CGA: I’M GONNA GO. I’LL LEAVE YOU TWO TO… WHATEVER THIS IS.

[carcinoGeneticist(Alpha) ceased trolling turntechGodhead]

Right, try to get the right one this time. Before you can do anything else another channel invite pops up on your screen, it looks weird and there’s none of the usual trollian/pesterchum text around it. It simply reads ‘alpha timeline voided chat’. With nothing else to do you click it.

~Roxy pinned this message - so i stayed up all night doing my voidy techno shit and managed to cobble together this voided channel its just got us in it and the text should fly under their radars and delete itself from ur devices when not in use but theres a totes subtle app on your things now to open it also i stole their name filter because shit be confusing enough with our repeated handle abbreviations! ~

Karkat: AM I THE FIRST ONE HERE?

Terezi: NO 1T JUST D3L3T3S M3SS4G3S TH4T C4M3 B3FOR3 YOU JO1N3D W3R3 ST1LL W41T1NG ON COOLK1D 4ND TH3 3NGL1SH GUY

~Dave joined~

Dave: are they not going to see this?

Roxy: they shouldnt and they havent done anythin yet if they have so i think were good

Dirk: So it’s just Jake now?

Jane: I think he was in the room next to me, I’ll go get him. This is a lot of sneaking around! :B

Karkat: STRIDER, HOW ARE YOU ABLE TO TALK FROM WHATEVER CELL THEY HAVE YOU LOCKED IN?

Dirk: Well, other me took everything else from me but he left me my shades. He didn’t bother locking me out of any of my applications, probably because he knew that I could work around anything he could do and also likely because my internet usage is being monitored, but a void channel seems to work. No one has come in here at least to tell me otherwise.

~Jake joined~

Jake: Uh jane asked me to join this but it seems that no one else is talking.

Vriska: It doesn't show you messages before you got here, Roxy you really need to pin that as a message as well.

Roxy: y? we all know now

Vriska: Well whatever, we're all here now. So, to sum up we have several problems. So don't interrupt me as I go over them!

Vriska: 1) The humans apparently aren't and may well 8e some deranged altern8 species prone to rage and violence. 2) We are very outnum8ered 8y their side. 3) Gamzee is in their custody and Jade is still out cold in their medical area, which makes it very hard to escape. 4) We might not 8e a8le to escape 8ack to the present again if our time player can't move that many people at once 8ut even if he can they have three time players and will 8e a8le to find us. 5) One Strider is locked up under
suspicion of being secretly evil and the other one has outright attacked one of their team so if they weren't suspicious of us before they are now. Good guys. 6) We're not even sure if they're on the level or if they're all secretly against us with the intent of betraying us at the last moment and taking the reward that should be ours. We need to assess their mentality towards us and their plans. 7) We don't know how combat capable they are and we really need to figure that out before we make any kind of move. 8) We absolutely cannot be under the leadership of any version of me who sees fit to broker a deal for leadership with Karkat of all people.

Dave: that list just had to be eight things long huh?

Karkat: YOU JUST HAD TO POINT OUT THAT PART ABOUT ME, DID YOU? REALLY?

Dirk: Wait, what about them being an alternate species?

Roxy: yea apparently they're some kind of monty python fluffy bunny version of human where its like aw youre so cute and nonthreatening augh my throat

Roxy: apparently condy TRIED to take over their earth and got her ass handed to her thats how different they are

Dirk: Well damn.

Rose: If everyone can be quiet for a moment.

Rose: I think there are a few obvious choices of action here. Needless to say our alternate selves seem pretty volatile, my counterpart had been perfectly pleasant all evening up until she saw fit to try to revenge murder our Dave at the very least and was only stopped by Mr Egbert. Or possibly Crocker, I’m not sure what his last name is actually.

Rose: As such caution is advised, I think we should play nice here and gather as much information as we can.

Vriska: Knowledge is power after all.

Karkat: COULD YOU TWO BE ANY MORE LIGHT PLAYERS THAN YOU ALREADY ARE?

John: so we’re doing a sneaky espionage mission then? find out what they know and what they’re like?

Rose: I think that’s wise.

Terezi: G3TT1NG STR1D3R OUT OF TH3 SL4MM3R SHOULD 4LS0 B3 4 C4US33 FOR 4CT1ON FOR US 1 MOT1ON TH4T H1S FR13NDS P3T1T1ON 4LT3RN4T3 D1RK FOR H1S R3L34S3 VOUCH FOR H1S CH4R4CT3R 4ND PR3S3NT 3V1D3NC3 4S TO WHY H3 SHOULD NOT B3 1NC4RC3R4T3D

Jane: We can absolutely do that!

Dave: not to put another wrench in the works here but i know that their gamzee really hates us or me at the least and we've not seen their rose or roxy since so we should probably limit how much we use this void chat in case they're watching us i already know there's cameras everywhere

Roxy: aggreed this should be on the down low
Roxy: *agreed

Vriska: Right then, the task for everyone is this: assess your alternate selves for sanity, hostility and combat ability.

Vriska: You three alpha humans go present evidence to get your Strider out of jail. Rose, Terezi and I will try to suss out their plans and report back.

Vriska: Dirk I want you to tell me what kind of security they have in their cells and that'll help us work out how to get Gamzee back. However much I dislike the clown we do need him.

Dirk: Probably not a good idea for me to be seen testing how easy it is to get out though. Besides if my counterpart sees me as a threat I’m pretty sure me trying to break out will make him decide to try to kill me if anything and I’m unarmed at present, I don’t really like my odds.

Rose: That’s a very good point. I shall assess Gamzee’s cell, you stay put in yours and look innocent.

Roxy: He IS innocent!

Jane: Agreed, and I’m sorry I didn’t put up more of a fight about it last night. I was just so stunned by everything that had happened that I just didn’t react. I’m so sorry.

Dirk: Jane, no. It’s fine. I absolutely understand his thinking. I’m not surprised that some alternate version of me was a monster and I know that I’d treat any other version of myself with great suspicion even if I didn’t know that. It sounds like he was the worst, so locking me away is a sensible course of action.

~Dave has left the conversation~

Dirk: Shit.

Karkat: UH, I’LL GET ON THAT. ARE WE GOING TO MEET UP AGAIN TONIGHT ON THIS?

Vriska: Meet back on here at midnight, tell Strider too.

~Chat closed~

You didn’t expect to end up with some mission of subterfuge, much less to find your alternate self and see what he’s like. It all seems so rosy for them. But… well, you suspect that was the assumption that Dave had, the one that prompted him to attack their Dave only to be proven that shitty childhoods run deep in both their timelines. But at least their Dave wasn’t alone. Yours was unjustified in blinding the guy for sure but he’s absolutely allowed to be envious of the life the guy lived.

You’re trying not to make assumptions but other Karkat lived on Earth where, you presume, there was no risk of him being culled for being a mutant. He had a family like he was some kind of human, he seems happy, he’s god tier and he’s a leader. He’s so many things that you should have been and failed to be, you’re entitled to hate him at least a little aren’t you?

Shit, you can’t risk fighting with the guy. Their team may well be willing to overlook Dave’s outburst but if your whole team proves hostile they may just choose to wipe you all out and you can’t risk that. You should just tell yourself that his life wasn’t perfect, even though it looks it. Or you should tell yourself that if you lose your shit with the guy you might be killed for it. Hey, that logic helped you hold your tongue at least a little around highbloods that weren’t your friends back on
Alternia. You can deploy the same thinking now.

Either way, you should really check in on Dave. You open up a regular chat with him, aware that this one will be going through the network that the helmsmen are plugged into. You’ve no proof they’re actively spying on your words but you’re aware that they can be.

[carcinoGeneticist(Alpha) began trolling turntechGodhead(Alpha)]

CGA: ARE YOU ALRIGHT?

TGA: of course i am you know me im the king of cool

TGA: cooler than some ice planet like pluto and that was so cool that it didnt even wanna be in the planet clique anymore and just did its own thing thats how cool i am

CGA: LOOK OF THAT WALL OF BULLSHIT RIGHT THERE.

TGA: mmhmm

TGA: im so proud karkat we built this city together

CGA: A CITY OF IDIOCY, POPULATION YOU.

CGA: SEEING AS YOU ARE OBVIOUSLY NOT OKAY, YOU THEORETICAL COOLNESS NOTWITHSTANDING I WAS HOPING I COULD AT LEAST GET A CATEGORY OF WHY YOU’RE NOT OKAY.

CGA: IS IT BECAUSE OF WHAT HAPPENED WITH OTHER DAVE LAST NIGHT? THE FIGHT SPECIFICALLY.

TGA: that was so not cool

TGA: karkat? youre not saying anything

TGA: i didnt mean to do that to him im not like bro i hate hurting people you know that right

CGA: OF COURSE I KNOW THAT. I JUST DIDN’T WANT TO COME IN HERE TELLING YOU HOW I THINK YOU FEEL.

TGA: oh thats

TGA: okay alright

CGA: ARE YOU UPSET ABOUT YOUR BROTHER TOO?

TGA: man i dont even known but hes locked up and i can avoid the other one okay i think but its pretty obvious that hes nothing like bro so i dont know shit about him i dont really have a lot of feelings about him

CGA: I GUESS A LOT IS HAPPENING ALL AT ONCE.

TGA: thats one hell of an understatement

TGA: almost as much as saying that i have a big dick would be an understatement

CGA: SO YOU’RE TELLING ME THAT YOUR HUMAN BULGE IS ‘UNDERSTATED’
THEN? AN UNUSUAL CONFESSION BUT ALRIGHT.

TGA: oh my fuck that is not what i said

TGA: that is a total lie and there's written fucking record up there of what i said

You backspace away from enquiring more about his dick because sexually charged antagonism is a wholly different quadrant than the flushed two that you usually linger in for him and you really don’t need to confuse the situation more than it already is. You’re so bad at this, why are you so bad at this?

CGA: AS MUCH AS I LIKE TO WATCH YOU TRIP OVER YOUR WORDS INTO CONFUSED CONCIPIENT ANALOGIES, AND I DO, I DID WANT TO KNOW IF YOU HAD PLANS TODAY.

CGA: I DON’T REALLY WANT TO WANDER AROUND THIS SHIP ALONE SEEING ALL THE PEOPLE THAT I SHOULD HAVE BEEN ABLE TO SAVE AND DIDN’T.

TGA: aw shit no thats not cool

TGA: we could get food see if john’s alt dad is as badass of a baker as john always made him out to be

CGA: AS LONG AS I DON’T GET A PIE TO THE FACE I CAN LIVE WITH THIS PLAN.

TGA: see you outside in a minute

[turntechGodhead(Alpha) ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist(Alpha)]

You open the door to find Dave leaning on the wall between your doors, he pushes away from them when you step out. His hands are casually in his pockets and he starts leading the way without a word. You keep up by his side as the two of you navigate your way into the cafeteria. John sees you first, perking up and waving wildly.

“They’ve got plates and stuff over there and SO much good food!” John exclaims, pointing across the room. You’re all just acting like that chat didn’t happen and so far you’re all doing a good job of it, maybe you could have been a spy in some other life.

“I guess we’d better go.” you say and Dave nods.

“I’ll save you both a seat!” John adds happily and you wave him off.

The two of your walk across the packed cafeteria, there’s so many people though you can see that the place is clearly meant to seat more it’s more living people than you’ve been around in a very long time. Your eyes roam over people as you cross the room. You spot Kankri easily, his bright red sweater gone and instead replaced with the blood version of Rose’s seer robes. Shockingly he doesn’t seem to be talking but is instead listening to Meenah talking.

You stumble to a halt when you see your own face but adult. There’s a man there who looks just like you and Kankri only he’s got the height and dark skin of an adult. He’s wearing a brown cloak with some black and red skintight thing under it and no visible sign anywhere. You’ve heard of him, of course, several people in the bubbles spoke of your ancestor. The Signless. A man who stood up against the Empress and got killed for it but became a kind of martyr, only in their universe he apparently lives. He’s sat down between two taller trolls who are clearly Legion and Captor in line. All three of them are laughing together and the Captor looking guy who must be The Psiionic that
you spoke to yesterday has his arm slung around Signless’ shoulder but his attention is on a Zahhak ancestor as they talk animatedly. The Legion woman laughs at something Signless says and kisses him on the cheek. You… you have no idea what to make of this.

“Come on.” Dave says softly and tugs you away from the view and towards the kitchen hatch. Through it you can see John’s dad walking around the huge adult rainbow drinker like she couldn’t just snap him in half easily. But then if he’s that other species of human maybe he’s more of a threat to her, though as you look at him in his plain human shirt and chef hat you find that hard to believe. Your skepticism is further deepened at the look of his apron which has a cartoon picture of some kind of shrimp thing with the text underneath reading ‘My a-prawn’. This is a man you’re meant to fear?

“What can I get you boys this morning?” John’s dad asks as he notices you.

“Uh, what do you have?” you ask uncertainly. For the other meals you had here food was just kind of pressed into your hands, this is the first time you’ve had to be proactive about it.

“I can do pancakes. I know the way that our Dave and Karkat like them if you’d like me to make those for you, or I could do something different.” He offers. You and Dave both dumbly nod, neither of you used to interacting with pleasant adults who want to feed and look after you.

“This is really weird.” you whisper to Dave as John’s dad whirls away and starts mixing and pouring things.

“Yeah, no shit.” Dave agrees, looking over his shoulder at the rest of the room. You take a peek too and realise that the other Dave isn’t around but when you spoke to him earlier he was pretty obviously tied up with Sollux. Still, you can understand Dave worrying about repercussions for what he did.

“Rose seems pretty occupied with herself.” you note, spotting her further down one of the long tables.

“Yeah, she seemed pretty serious about that revenge.” Dave grimaces.

“Let’s hope it won’t come to that.” you mutter.

“Here you go boys. Drinks are down there.” John’s dad says, handing you a plate each and pointing down the way to a table with jugs and glasses. You look down at your plate to see pancakes, something you’d only seen in human movies. Rose tried to make them once and horribly failed. There are two thick slices of lush green lime and a thick dusting of sugar on the top.

“Holy fuck are these apple and cinnamon?” Dave gasps and sniffs at the plate eagerly.

“Oh, language please, Dave. But yes, they are. It took a while to perfect the recipe but you’re not the only fan of it. All the fruit here is fresh grown in our harvest bay thanks to Jade, Aradia and Nepeta and the juice is all fresh squeezed by the lovely Dolorosa here.” he smiles and the rainbow drinker waves and smiles, showing her long fangs as she does so.

“Oh my god.” Dave whispers and you elbow him until he moves to the table. You see pitchers of juice for fruits that you haven’t seen since before the game and you greedily fill a glass and down it then and there before topping up with a glass of spike orange with all the bits in it, you could never afford that before so you’re definitely having it now. You are totally unsurprised by Dave choosing apple juice, you could not be less surprised if you tried.

Dave sits down next to John and you sit on Dave’s other side, the tables have long benches so how
close you sit is up to you. There is a temptation to sit close to Dave because you’re hopeless but you
know from experience that Dave is at least 50% elbow when he eats so you’re not keen in being
elbowed in the ear.

Cautiously you squeeze the lime over the sugar and try a bite of your ‘pancakes’, about half a second
after that you’re groaning in delight and deciding that John’s dad is the best human ever. Dave seems
similarly delighted, enough that he doesn’t notice his other self walk in the room with Sollux. John
and Dave are talking so you’re free to silently track the other Dave’s progress as he grabs pancakes
and a drink with Sollux at his side doing the same. You squeeze lime on the next layer of pancakes
and watch as other Dave tries to walk off the way he came onto to come to a screeching halt and get
dragged back by red and blue psionics. Sollux shoves him towards your table and the younger
Strider complies.

Other you said they were moirails which is weird because you’ve seen how Dave has thought that
Terezi and Vriska’s relationship was weird, the idea of him having a moirail of his own is strange to
you. Not that you don’t feel pale for him because, God, you do. But you feel everything for him, is
that not the case for your alternate self? Has he managed to slot his feelings for his Dave neatly into
flush alone and is happy for Dave to be pale with someone else? Probably, the well-functioning sink
full of assholes that he is, fuck you hate him. Other Dave and Sollux sit down at your table, Dave
opposite Dave and Sollux opposite John.

There’s a tense moment as younger Dave glares at his pancakes and your Dave holds his breath.

“Hey, so I didn’t really get to see you yesterday. I was so goddamn busy with stuff with the ship but,
yeah, hi. Welcome to Battleship Rebellion.” Sollux says, entirely ignoring the tension and turning his
smile on you. He looks happy, it’s a little weird.

“Oh. It’s… fine.” you say, trying not to eye the ports in his temples and failing.

“So.” other Dave says but doesn’t add anything.

“Gonna finish that sentence?” Sollux asks lightly and sips at his coffee. Dave glares at him,
something that’s easy to tell without his glasses. It is really weird seeing Rose’s eyes in his face and
that scar down his cheek and over his eyesocket is… dramatic to say the least. It’s not like it makes
him unattractive in your view, but you’re a troll, your culture views scars differently.

“So, it has come to my attention that. Uh.” other Dave says, he drops his gaze to his own apple
pancakes.

“I think that if I met another me who grew up with a Bro who wasn’t a crazed monster I’d probably
flip right off of the handle as well. Well, theoretically there is a Dave out there like that but his
timeline is doomed and he’s dead and we’re not so fuck that guy.” other Dave says to his pancakes.
He frowns a little more and taps his finger on the tabletop, beating out a little uneasy rhythm.

“And maybe I shouldn’t have said that thing about you hurting me worse than Bro ever did. That
was a dickish thing to say. But I gotta point out that you did BLIND ME man, that was SO painful
what the fuck? Plus you literally could have said anything about Dirk being Bro and I woulda set
you straight and I wouldn’t be scarred forever!” other Dave adds that last part angrily, glaring up
from his pancakes. Sollux elbows his Dave and the rage seems to drain out of him.

“But also… I can’t imagine growing up without Dirk or without Hal. The number of times they
saved my life was crazy and I’ve no idea how you lived without them. The thought of you growing
up alone with just that psychopath makes me feel sick. And we could sit here all day in the world’s
most fucked up pissing contest comparing whose version of Bro hurt who worse but no one wins
there. So maybe… maybe we should just say that we both sucked yesterday and… call it square. Yeah?” he offers. That’s unexpected, is that Sollux’s doing?

“I blinded you, though. I punched you so hard I broke the shades that John gave you and then punched you again and jammed that shit into your eyeballs and face. And we’re square?” Dave asks skeptically.

“I mean… not really.” other Dave admits and touches the scar on his cheekbone tentatively. With interest you flick your attention to Sollux who is giving Dave a pitifully pale ‘oh no don’t think that about yourself’ kind of look. You don’t blame him, even you feel bad for poor injured other Dave. Even though your Dave didn’t mean to hurt him he came out the better in that fight for sure.

“I’m still really mad about it but I get why you did it and I can’t say that I wouldn’t have been just as fucking stupid. Besides, we’ve got less than a week until all the final fights go down and I’ve got to kill Lord English and I don’t know if you’ll be on that team but I’ve gotta count on you either to back me up or to back up people I love and I can’t do that if we spend all week at each other’s throats. So, no, it’s not square but we can agree to be cool at least, right?” other Dave says.

Your insides churn worriedly, what other Dave just asked was for the whole thing to be dropped as proof that your Dave can be trusted to be sane and reasonable. If you’re totally honest your Dave hasn’t been acting as such lately but if everything you heard about this species of human is true you don’t want to give them any reason to mistrust him. You want to be reassured by the fact that Sollux is right there because he was always one of your saner friends despite having actual diagnosable shit wrong with him, but there’s marks on his arm too and there’s the small point that your species classified these humans as a virus. As infectious. Their name basically translated to madness virus and their soulmate shit transfers to trolls as well so who’s to say the crazy doesn’t too? If your Dave turns down this olive branch that their Dave is offering you who’s to say that Sollux will do a damn thing to stop the humans beating you all to death with said branch?

You don’t think it’ll go that way but are you willing to bet everyone’s lives on that guess? No. You kick Dave in the ankle under the table, he needs to accept.

“I guess.” he says and cautiously raises a fist and offers it to other Dave who stares for a second then smirks and bumps fists with him.

“So.” Dave says, apparently starting his conversations the same way.

“You two’re… dating?” he asks, jabbing at his pancakes with his fork.

“Mmm,” the other one says around his own food and chew for a second, “moirail. Sorry you don’t have a Sollux, that sucks. You can’t have mine.”

“Just decide that for me why don’t you?” Sollux sniffs and sips at his coffee.

“Number fetish aside could you actually deal with two of me?” other Dave challenges and Sollux grimaces.

“Fuck, no.” Sollux snorts.

“You’re such a contrary bag of dicks. Not even dicks like, worse than that, you’re a bag of fucking shake weights is what you are.” other Dave complains. What the fuck is a shake weight? Clearly whatever it is isn’t lost on Sollux with the look of mild offense that he gives him.

“Our Vriska and Terezi are moirails.” Dave says slowly.
“Same.” the other one nods.

“Which means, what? He just tells you what to do and you do it?” your Dave asks.

“HAH.” Sollux says loudly and mirthlessly.

“No it’s not- it’s more… you know when you know the thing you should be doing but you don’t wanna do it because it’s hard or awkward or this is not a dick joke I promise. But it’s more like that voice in your head or that feeling in your gut that knows what you should be doing but you’re being a dumbass and trying to avoid it because that’s easier. Well it’s that but someone else who gets you to do shit that’s good for you even if it’s not fun all the time.” other Dave clumsily explains, it’s clunky but it’s a better explanation of pale relationships than your Dave has ever managed to repeat back to you.

“Aw.” Sollux says with a shit eating grin and other Dave glares at him.

“Like making sure that the guy who’s gonna spend the next twelve hours plugged into the ship needs to drink something other than coffee or else he’ll be bitching about a totally preventable migraine again and get no sympathy.” other Dave says sharply and launches a bottle of drink out of his sylladex which halts in mid-air.

“Mostly we just hang out, play video games and talk shit about people.” Sollux adds, stowing the drink away. God, they’re disgustingly cute together. Maybe this is why their Dave seems pretty emotionally balanced when he’s not being blinded. Could you be that grounding for Dave? Would he even let you? Ugh.

“Aren’t you going to give me the same I’ll murder you if you go near him talk that Rose gave me?” your Dave asks because he was apparently hatched without critical thinking skills or a sense of self preservation!

“Wait, she what?” other Dave asks in surprise but Sollux has paused and is staring at your Dave over the rim of his coffee cup.

“Do I need to? Anyway, you’re a Dave which means you’re not stupid. You heard Rose, she made her point pretty well if you ask me.” Sollux says flatly.

“Point made.” you say quickly before Dave can open his big mouth again.

“Wait, what did she say?” other Dave asks with a frown.

“Don’t worry about it, just Rose being Rose. Besides, everything’s square now, right?” Sollux says, putting his stuff on his tray.

“I- yeah. We bumped on it so it’s official.” other Dave nods. Sollux gives him a ‘well there you go’ kind of look.

Sollux stands up, negotiating his long legs around the bench he’s sat on. He stretches and then reaches out to tangle his hand into Dave’s hair who just tolerates it with a smile.

“Alright, you walking disaster I have to go helm but if you need me…” he says, his tone suggesting that Dave had better contact him this time.

“I know. Call you, beep you, if I wanna reach you.” Dave says totally deadpan as John aspirates half of his juice in startled laughter on your Dave’s other side.
“Jesus, no one should have ever let you consume media. I’m leaving.” Sollux groans. He glances up and raises his eyebrows.

“Also good luck with that.” he says quickly and walks off.

“Good luck with what?” other Dave wonders aloud.

“I missed that reference.” you say in disappointment.

“It’s a stupid kids’ cartoon. Dave Lalonde you fucking ghosted me and died in the last twenty four hours from a death you apparently knew would happen and didn’t tell me about and I swear to fuck if you go anywhere or any when before you explain yourself I will make you rue the day we shot you at your mother.” your other self says, coming to a sudden stop by the table from where he’d apparently barrelled across the room as he came in.

Other Dave tips his head back to look at your other self and smiles, bright and fake.

“Hiii babe.” he says lightly, other you seethes visibly.

“Dave Lalonde?” your Dave asks skeptically.

“Oh, there’s an interesting story behind that!” other Dave says immediately, clearly desperately hoping for a distraction.

“No one cares about your ridiculous legal name, you’re going to stay there and explain yourself or so help me I will strangle you!” other you shouts and sits down on the bench, glaring at him. God, do you always sound this overdramatic? No wonder no one takes you seriously.

“Will you strangle me in a sexy way?” other Dave asks hopefully.

“Absolutely not. Explain yourself, now. And I swear if you start explaining about auto-erotic asphyxiation instead of your heroic suicide I will methodically go around this room, flip every table and then come back and strangle you in the least sexy way possible!” other you yells.

“Only if you don’t interrupt.” other Dave says and though it clearly pains him your alternate self pointedly shuts his trap and looks at the guy expectantly. Other Dave shifts in his seat.

“We didn’t know for sure that jumping all the timelines would kill us. We were pretty sure it would kill us but there was a chance we could have pulled it off alive, like how some people get shot in the head and are fine like that one guy where the bullet curved around his skull on the inside and didn’t damage his brain at all. It wasn’t certain.” other Dave says. That’s… a pretty flimsy argument if you say so yourself. Other you seems to concur but regardless other Dave keeps talking.

“Our universe collapsing in would have killed us all but Lord English would have been the one who killed us, so leaving was the only option. If we’d have stayed everyone would have died. The three of us knew we’d likely die but we didn’t want to tell you.” other Dave says.

“Why not?” you ask. Other you promised to stay quiet but you didn’t. Dave winces but keeps talking.

“Because I know my soulmate. Letting the time players take a dangerous mission on to save everyone is one thing but sacrificing two of his own sisters and his soulmate to a suicide mission to save his own life and everyone else’s isn’t something any Karkat could do and sleep easily with after. We all knew it so we just didn’t tell you just how dangerous it was. That way you can’t say you did anything wrong and we’re the assholes. I was dead either way most likely so why not pick
the option that gives you less room to torture yourself?” he shrugs.

“I’m the captain of this ship, you can’t do shit like that behind my back.” other you insists.

“You’re my soulmate first, I’d rather keep you alive than do what you tell me to. It’s just usually those things aren’t two different choices.” other Dave shrugs. He’s clearly not sorry.

“You died. Heroically. You don’t get another revive from Jane, Dave. You can’t keep doing this and I mean that on a technical level, to say nothing of putting me through your death over and over.” your counterpart says, rubbing his hands over his face. At least the other Dave looks guilty.

“I still have to fight Lord English, it was part of the deal with Hephestus and Echidna. But I don’t have to do it alone and I’ll be careful, I’m not trying to get killed. You know that, right?” other Dave says softly.

You look away. This isn’t your relationship and you shouldn’t be watching this argument resolve into something emotional and meaningful but aside from that it kind of stings to see the sincerity and open affection in other Dave’s strange new eyes. You divert your eyes to see that Dave is giving the pair no such privacy, even as their voices drop into low, quiet tones obviously meant just for them. His eyes are wide behind his shades as he watches them and you see his mouth open slightly in a silent gasp and you glance over to see that they’re kissing. Nothing scandalous but something painfully sincere and gentle. You’ve imagined kissing Dave a million times but seeing it is something else entirely. It… hurts.

“Are you two done sucking face?” Vriska asks, her hands on her hips as she stops at your table. You have never been so happy to see Vriska. Wait, it’s not your Vriska, it’s theirs. Well, whatever, you’re still happy.

“Never.” their Dave grumbles but rests his chin on other Karkat’s shoulder as the guy glares up at Vriska.

“Go eat your own nook, you poorly timed irritation manifested into flesh.” he snaps at her.

“I hear you need ribs removed to do that.” Vriska shoots back with a grin.

“Luckily for you we both know an unscrupulous doctor.” other you replies back dryly.

“It bothers me that I’m not confident to say that Hal wouldn’t perform that surgery. Either way I need older Karkat to come with me and you need to deal with Lalonde.” Vriska says, pointing at each of you in turn.

“Which Lalonde and why?” your counterpart asks before you can ask her what she’d possibly want you for.

“Stop the psycho bitch being a psycho bitch.” Vriska snorts.

“Hey, Vriska, fun fact. Rose and I have a list of girls we would totes mack on and it is a long list and completely identical except for you. You’re the only girl that she wants that I don’t. Keep calling her a psycho and I can promise you our list will both the same and also shorter.” other Dave says flatly. Vriska seems to consider this for a moment and then grins.

“Dave, do tell us how many people that aren’t Karkat that you have the hots for. Jade, obviously but who else? Oh Kanaya too, wow your soulmate’s aunt/moirail how classy of you. Terezi too, huh? But who else? Aradia or Damara maybe?” Vriska asks with a wolfish grin.
“This did not pan out like you thought it would, did it?” other you says flatly, looking at a slightly panicked looking Dave.

“John’s hot mom.” your Dave chips in with a smug look and other Dave starts going red.

“What?!” other John exclaims, well, he’d apparently been listening.

“You traitor.” other Dave hisses.

“And the older Terezi girl is pretty hot too and the other Maryam.” Dave adds happily.

Your alternate self raises one eyebrow and drums his claws on the table.

“Ah… haha, I think I hear Dirk calling me from, like, across the ship. Gottagobye!” he says quickly and flashsteps away.

“Well, as hysterical as that was I probably should check on both Lalonde girls. Or… four of them now I guess? Shit. Oh, should we do the big meeting at like… two?” other you asks as he stands up from the table.

“Sounds good.” Vriska nods. With a backwards wave he walks off and Vriska turns her eyes on you once more.

“Come on, Vantas, I need you.” Vriska insists, beckoning you with her hand.

“Well, what am I supposed to do?” Dave asks her.

“I don’t care. Go sort shit out with your other siblings, any of them. Or ask the adults what work you can do, maybe go be useful and train in the gym. I literally couldn’t give less of a shit, Strider. Now move it Karkat, come on!” she huffs. You shoot Dave a regretful look but down the last of your drink and get to your feet, Vriska is already walking off so you have to break into a little run to catch her. She sweeps dramatically out of the room with you on her heels and starts marching down the corridor.

“I have to say, I spoke to my alternate self to get the details of this session for strategic planning but I really am not a fan of her at all.” Vriska snorts.

“Join the club.” you mutter.

You duck out of Jade’s way as she comes down the hallway carrying a large box, their Jade of course not yours. She flashes you a bright and friendly smile as you pass but it doesn’t make you feel any more at ease.

“What do you need me for? I wasn’t involved in any of the planning for the final fight, I was left out of all of it.” you tell her and Vriska shakes her head.

“Join the club.” you mutter.

You duck out of Jade’s way as she comes down the hallway carrying a large box, their Jade of course not yours. She flashes you a bright and friendly smile as you pass but it doesn’t make you feel any more at ease.

“What do you need me for? I wasn’t involved in any of the planning for the final fight, I was left out of all of it.” you tell her and Vriska shakes her head.

“Well, no wonder no one on your side gives two shits about the plan if you had no part in it. Honestly, leaving out the blood player, my counterpart’s a real dope.” Vriska tuts. She comes to a halt and turns around to grab you by the shoulders, she’s smiling but it’s sharp and worrisome.

“I need you, Karkat, because you are important. Not as important as me, of course, but you are still important. The success of our final fight rests, at least partially, on your shoulders.” Vriska assures you.

“I find that hard to believe.” you grumble but she just scoffs, grabs you by the wrist and pulls you up
a flight of stairs and into a room you’ve not been in. It’s dimly lit and circular.

“This is the map room and it’s mine and Karkat’s headquarters. We used to work elsewhere but eventually Sollux and Psii fitted this room out for us. Not only does it have live running maps of the session…” Vriska says and snaps her fingers until a 3d projection of Skaia and all of the planets and moons of his session pops up and slowly spins in place.

“But it also allows us to work on one of the most important aspects of our planning, something which is far more Karkat’s domain than mine. People,” she says, and presses a button on the console. The air above the central console fills with floating tiles with the faces of the players. She reaches out and grabs Dave’s tile, pulling it towards you. She flicks her fingers out and a whole bubble of information spills out around him, you read it. It has basic stuff like his height and weight but also how fast he can run a mile, a rating out of ten for his agility, stamina, reflexes, physical strength.

Then there are more unusual categories of information.

Weaknesses: Blood, risk of ‘trauma combat fugue state’, “metal sounds”, chucklevoodoo vulnerability

Known effective combat fraymotifs with: John, Jade, Damara. (Theory: active class compatibility)

Related to: Rose, Roxy, Dirk, Hal

Quadrants: Karkat, Sollux

Soulmate(s): Karkat

Works best with: Rose, Roxy, Dirk, Hal, Sollux, Karkat, Jade, John, Aradia, Damara, Kanaya, Terezi, Tavros

Works poorly with: Cronus, Meenah, Feferi, Gamzee, Kurloz, Jake (if no leader present), Meulin

Stealth skills: Good

Strife specibi: Bladekind, ½ bladekind, hammerkind, jokerkind (newly acquired/very little testing)

The list of information goes on. You look up from the card to Vriska to find her watching you.

“This is like… a card for a game character, like this is a FLARP game and he’s a premade player.” you say slowly.

“That’s partly where the idea came from, actually. We needed to evaluate our players, to construct combat groups that played towards the full strengths of people and covered their weaknesses. Because of this card I wouldn’t send Dave on a mission with Gamzee and Kurloz, I’d send Aradia or Damara if I needed a time player. Karkat’s the one who makes the best evaluations on how people work, but look.” she says and reaches over to a cluster of tiles in blue with all of your photographs on them. She picks up Dave’s one and flicks it open, aside from the most basic information it’s blank.

“What, exactly, are you expecting from me? Your Karkat’s a leader and I’m not, we’ve seen the disastrous results of my leadership. I should have realised that Tavros was going to try to stop Vriska and that she’d kill him for it, that the whole clusterfuck with Feferi, Sollux and Eridan was going to happen and most importantly I should have realised how close to the edge Gamzee was. All that is ‘people stuff’ as you’d put it and I failed. If anything any ‘help’ I give you here will cancerously infect whatever information you already have and ruin everything.” you tell her, pushing Dave’s card
“Yeah,” Vriska says and pulls up a chair to sit down, “I heard about that all going down at the same time.”

“Yes, my catastrophic failures happened at a fast pace, what’s your point?” you grouse at her, folding your arms angrily. You hate talking about this.

“Sit down, what do you know about all of the aspects?” Vriska asks, kicking a chair over to you. You sigh and sit down on it, it’s a kind of wheeble stool without a back.

“They’re the stupid magic powers the game gives you. That’s kind of a big question.” you say with a shrug. She presses a button and again the holographic tiles vanish and are replaced by the aspect symbols floating around.

“Well, do you know that all aspects come in pairs?” Vriska asks, pulling the symbols closer.

“Yeah, guess so. Time and space, light and void, uh… mind and…” you trail off with a frown.

“Heart, that’s the opposite of mind. More accurately, two halves of the same idea. Mind is the things you think and the choices you make, heart is who you are and how you feel. Tell me what you know about rage as an aspect.” Vriska asks patiently and pulls the token for rage closer.

“Why are you doing this?” you ask her instead. What’s her angle? Does she just want to go on a droning rant about how dumb you are for not knowing this shit? Doesn’t she understand that you don’t want anything to do with leadership and that it’s better for everyone if you don’t?

“Because I need you and I don’t give up on getting things I need. Tell me about rage.” Vriska barks at you, clearly getting annoyed. At least she’s more Vriska-like, this patience she had was weirding you out.

“It’s- I don’t know. Unstoppable highblood rage and super strength that makes you go batshit nuts.” you say with a shrug.

“Duh, wrong.” Vriska says, rolling her eyes. She shakes her head and holds up the rage symbol to you, with her other hand she reaches out and plucks hope from the air.

“They’re the same idea, two halves of it. Everyone has rage. Rage is… refusal, denial. It’s that part of you that stands your ground and says ‘no fucking way’. Rage is no and hope is yes. Hope comes up with the third way when given two options, it handwaves reality, it says my way or the highway. Hope can create and add endless new options but rage can destroy and limit things down. It’s not good and bad. Too much hope makes people delusional and crazy, makes them worry about things that won’t happen, drowns people in choice. Too much rage and you blinker yourself to other ways of doing things and you can walk right into failure because you can’t see any other way.” she explains, holding one in each hand.

“And this has what to do with me?” you ask.

“Gamzee is a bard of rage. He destroys through passive destruction with rage, he narrows everyone else’s choices down. People act irrationally. It makes someone like your Tavros confront your Vriska because it’s the ‘only choice’ he has even when he could have done a hundred other things, talked to her, asked someone else to do it, got backup. But you put rage in the mix and everyone sees everything as this or that, it makes them angry and stupid. It’s not mind control like a mind player could do, it just makes people into angry little toys. A less destructive class of rage player could probably be more creative but, well, Bard of Rage.” she sighs and lets the tokens go. Hope and rage
float up together and you watch them rise to meet the others.

“Did he do it deliberately then? He’s not god tier so…” you trail off. Does he actually have that level of power?

“What a very Karkat question to ask.” Vriska laughs and you glare at her, what’s what supposed to mean?

“I don’t know what he meant to do and I don’t care. My point is you had a Bard of Rage lose his shit and suddenly everyone gets irrational and murdery and you think it’s all because of your leadership. It’s like inside out narcissism, it’s all your fault because you’re soooooooo important.” she says, clearly mocking you.

“Look, I’m all for holding people accountable for their failures but I don’t actually think you have failed. But if you don’t tell me everything you know about your team so that I can put them where they need to go then you will be failing them. Tell me everything.” Vriska says seriously.

So you do. As much as you can think to say. You recount the progress that you saw the humans go through in the game, what you know about how their apparently different species works. You talk about how well Dave gets on with Terezi and what his relationship with Rose is like. You discuss Vriska and Terezi and how the planning goes on with Rose. You help her pick apart who Kanaya would and wouldn’t kill, what your lives on Alternia were like. It’s shit that seems irrelevant until you start putting the data in together. As you add all of the information you have patterns start becoming clearer, who has the strongest relationships and who would work best together.

Vriska is still Vriska, she talks more than she listens but she does at least think that some of the things that you have to say are worthwhile. You ask her about her Alternia a little, and aside from there being fewer of your friends there and her not knowing Feferi when they were both on your homeworld it all sounds the same to you.

“Why are just the humans different?” you wonder.

“Who knows.” Vriska shrugs and scraps a team formation that required their Rose to be with your Dave, you can see why that wouldn’t work. You feel the ping of an incoming message and look at your palmhusk.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling carcinoGeneticist(Alpha)]

CG: SO I HEAR THAT YOU AND YOUR DAVE ARE SOMEHOW NOT TOGETHER AT ALL IN ANY QUADRANT OR HUMAN RELATIONSHIP.

CGA: THAT’S NONE OF YOUR GODDAMN BUSINESS.

CG: HOLD ON I’M GOING TO CHANGE MY COLOUR THIS IS UNREADABLE.

CG: UGH KANKRI’S RED MAKES ME FEEL WRONG BUT I’LL DEAL WITH IT FOR NOW.

CG: I’M NOT TRYING TO PRY INTO YOUR PERSONAL LIFE FOR SHITS AND GIGGLES, I DO HAVE BETTER THINGS TO DO THAN THAT. BESIDES I REMEMBER THE HELL THAT WAS PINING FOR DAVE AND NOT BEING WITH HIM, IF YOU’RE STUCK IN THAT SITUATION YOU HAVE MY SINCERE SYMPATHY RATHER THAN SMUG MOCKERY.

CGA: AREN’T YOU MAGIC “SOULMATES”? DOESN’T SOME WISH FULFILMENT
FAIRY COME AND TIE YOU TWO TOGETHER SO YOU LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

CG: HA AND ALSO HA.

CG: NO.

CG: IT TOOK FOREVER, THOUGH I SUPPOSE YOU’VE KNOWN YOUR DAVE LONGER THAN I’VE KNOWN MINE SO IF ANYONE HAS GROUNDS FOR COMPLAINT HERE IT’S YOU, BUT MORE ACCURATELY WE CAN BOTH COMPLAIN.

CG: I DID HAVE A POINT HERE.

CGA: HAVE YOU LOOKED UP YOUR WASTECHUTE FOR IT? IT’LL BE RIGHT NEAR YOUR HEAD.

CG: IS THIS HOW EVERYONE ELSE FEELS WHEN THEY TALK TO ME? GOD, I HOPE NOT. WHATEVER. MY POINT WAS THAT YOU AT LEAST *HAVE* PALE FEELINGS FOR DAVE, RIGHT? REGARDLESS OF WHAT OTHER FEELINGS YOU MIGHT HAVE? AND YOU ARE FRIENDS AS WELL, RIGHT?

CGA: WE’RE FRIENDS. I’M NOT TALKING TO YOU ABOUT MY FEELINGS.

CG: I FEEL LIKE I NEED TO OFFER KANAYA SOME WONDERFUL GIFT IF THIS IS HOW EMOTIONALLY CONSTIPATED I AM WITHOUT HER.

CGA: JUST KEEP RUBBING YOUR QUADRANTS IN MY FACE WHY DON’T YOU? YOU’LL BE LAUGHING OUT OF THE OTHER SIDE OF YOUR FACE WHEN I NEXT SEE YOU.

CG: GOOD LUCK WITH THAT. THE POINT IS THAT THERE’S ABOUT TO BE A BIG STRIDER MEETING IN HERE WITH OUR DIRK, DAVE AND HAL, YOUR UNIVERSE’S DIRK AND DAVE. I TRIED TO GET THE SPRITE THAT IS PART HAL INVOLVED BUT HE HAS NO INTEREST.

CG: IF YOUR DAVE HAS NEVER SPOKEN TO ANY VERSION OF HIS BROTHER WHO WASN’T A STONE COLD LUNATIC HE’S PROBABLY FEELING PRETTY TENSE AND OUR MUTUAL DAVES HAVE A TENSE HISTORY SO IT SEEMED SENSIBLE TO ASK IF YOU COULD COME ALONG AND BE THERE TO HELP HIM OUT. I’M THERE FOR MINE AFTER ALL.

CGA: I COULD OFFER, I GUESS?

CG: GREAT. IT’S DETENTION BLOCK C, NOT THAT THEY’RE FAR APART OR VERY BIG. MY DAD SHOULD HAVE GIVEN YOU A MAP BUT IF YOU CAN’T WORK IT OUT JUST ASK VRISKA THERE’S A CHANCE SHE’LL BE HELPFUL.

[carcinoGeneticist(Alpha) ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist]

You hesitate. Elbowing in on someone else’s business is pretty pale but it’s not like you haven’t been doing that part for some time anyway. Besides which you know that Dave is a mess right now, even entirely outside of quadrants you know that he needs someone. He’s done so much alone through his whole life, he doesn’t need to do this if he doesn’t want to.

[carcinoGeneticist(Alpha) began trolling turntechGodhead(Alpha)]
CGA: HEY ARE YOU GOING TO GO TALK TO YOUR BROTHER?

TGA: are you looking at me through all of these hidden cameras too or whatever

CGA: WHAT? NO. OTHER ME SAID IT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN.

TGA: oh

CGA: THAT SOUNDS LIKE THERE’S GOING TO BE A LOT OF STRIDERS WHO AREN’T YOU THERE AND THE LAST TIME THAT WAS THE CASE IT WENT BAD. BESIDES WE KNOW THAT SEVERAL OF THEM AREN’T HUMAN AND ARE LIKELY SPACE CRAZY SO MAYBE BACKUP MIGHT BE AN IDEA?

CGA: DAVE?

CGA: YOU DON’T HAVE TO.

TGA: no its not that

TGA: i just know what bro would say about you and i dont know what they think about soulmates and not soulmates and what their not-bro guy would assume about us because of his dave and karkat or whether i even care

CGA: I'M TRYING TO MAKE YOU LESS FREAKED OUT HERE, IF THIS IS JUST GOING TO MAKE THINGS WORSE...

TGA: yeah but i also dont want to go alone

TGA: fuck im such a pissbaby about this

CGA: HEY, LEAVE INSULTING YOU TO THE PROFESSIONALS.

TGA: shit sorry i didnt mean to infringe on your dave haranguing brand there mr vantas please dont sue

CGA: I SHALL CONSIDER NOT TAKING IT UP WITH TEREZI.

TGA: for my penance i guess you can come with if you want

TGA: on the 3rd floor if you go to the front of the ship theres this bigass window meet me there?

CGA: ON MY WAY.

[carcinoGeneticist(Alpha) ceased trolling turntechGodhead(Alpha)]

“I have to go.” you say quickly to Vriska and she nods but doesn’t say anything else. She’s flicking through some written notes and looking over at the tokens of the people from your universe. With nothing stopping you it’s easy enough to slip out of the map room and find the nearest elevator. You go to the right floor and follow signs indicating which end of the ship is which and soon enough you find Dave, leaning against a railing, haloed by the light of Skaia. Your bloodpusher clenches and flutters around in your chest.

“Hey.” you call out as you walk over. He looks around at you and nods.

“I’m trying to think about what I’m going to ask him. Dirk or Bro- or… Not-Bro? I can’t just call them both Dirk and I’m not doing this stupid ‘alpha’ thing that the chat does. If they’re totally
“Well, if the older Dirk and younger Dave grew up with Bro they might at least have a different perspective on him than you. And I don’t know what the half troll guy might have to say. We’re not going to find out here though,” you point out.

Dave nods and pushes away from the railing. He walks off and you keep in step with him. His hand brushes yours but he doesn’t try to hold it, you think he might have been thinking about it, though. You hear the other Dave long before you see him.

“-shit that we’re keeping him in there at all! What gives us the right?” he demands. You walk around a corner and see their Dave pacing back and forth with the guy who Dave has dubbed ‘not-Bro’ standing before him. Hal and other you both see you coming and greet you, though Hal’s chirp is way lower than your own.

“Any version of me worth anything would understand that protecting you is more important than anything else.” Not-Bro says firmly.

“But he didn’t grow up with me so he might not have that same self-sacrificial complex that you have!” other Dave argues.

“Sounds like a good reason to keep him locked up.” Hal suggests and Dave makes a frustrated noise. He pivots on his foot and jerks to a halt when he sees the two of you.

“Holy shit the noise stopped. Can we go in now that everyone is here and Dave momentarily is silent?” other you asks and Dave shoots him an offended look.

“You’re the one who can open the door since we changed the security levels. I can’t even go in there.” Not-Bro points out.

“I can. Mad hacking skills.” Hal brags.

“Yeah, I do love watching the Captors smack you down when you try that on the secure systems.” other you chuckles, obviously offending Hal.

“Hold that thought. Can I talk to you first?” Not-Bro asks as he walks towards you and Dave. He stops a more than respectful distance away from you both, though. Dave glances at you and you can see the red of his eyes behind his shades. He nods once, a stiff jerk of his head and then walks back a little to move them away from the rest of the group but it’s clear he’s trying not to expose his back to Not-Bro.

Not-Bro stops walking and slides off his glasses, hanging them from the neck of his shirt. His eyes are orange and as bright as Dave’s red, it must be a family thing when you look at Rose and Roxy as well. He leans against the wall with a sigh.

“Yesterday was kind of a shit show, not gonna lie. But I just wanted to make it clear that I’m not Bro, even though I look like him. But that said I can’t imagine my Dave having to have grown up with Bro alone so I can absolutely understand if you never want to see me again after this, I can make sure you don’t run into me on the ship again if that’s what you want.” he offers quietly.

“I think you sneaking around the ship and tracking where I am would be worse.” Dave says after a moment.

“I- yeah I can see that. Bro used to pull the invisible ninja act on us too, not cool.” Not-Bro agrees
with a nod.

Not-Bro looks back at the others. His Dave is talking to his Karkat now and you can see how Dave is calming down just from that. You’re not jealous, no, really.

“My Dave is usually a pretty peaceful kid, he’s not a fan of violence. But also I know that he makes shitty decisions when he’s stressed and angry but they’re usually more self destructive than lashing out at other people physically. Is that the same for you or…?” Not-Bro asks, looking sidelong at Dave who tenses up.

“I didn’t mean to-“ Dave starts to protest but Not-Bro holds his hand up.

“That was pretty obvious from how horrified you looked about the whole thing and Dave told me the two of you are cool now I guess I just want to be sure that you two aren’t going to be at each other’s throats or anything. One dumb decision doesn’t make a pattern but I’d be an idiot if I didn’t check to see if it was fixing to be one or not.” Not-Bro says patiently.

“He really isn’t like that, he’s not dangerous.” you insist and Not-Bro’s curious orange eyes turn on you.

“We’ve lived with Vriska for three whole years and he’s never even tried to smack her in the head for being a bitch and this is Vriska!” you add. You really, really, don’t want the guy to see Dave as a threat and more than that you really don’t like the idea of anyone thinking of Dave as some monster. He’s not, Dave’s a good person.

“Well, shit, that’s some iron-clad self control.” Not-Bro says, totally deadpan.

“All I’m saying is that I obviously am not cool with what you did but my Dave has done some dumb shit in his time too.” Not-Bro tells him.

“Really? Because he seems to have his shit together.” Dave says bitterly and it’s by far the boldest thing that he’s said. Not-Bro laughs loudly and Dave jolts at the noise.

“That’s the funniest thing you’ve said yet. Nah, you’re looking at a kid who gets way dumber when he’s angry. And I love him dearly and he’s mine but- ok, so despite being twins he and Rose didn’t actually meet each other until they were ten. The two of them got into a huge throwdown argument about whose life was worse because they both thought the other one had it better.” Not-Bro says with a grin. You side-eye your Dave because hmm, that sure does sound familiar.

“One time when Bro hurt me so bad he nearly killed me Dave panicked and threatened to set Cal on fire so Bro would let me go.” he adds.

“How did Bro not- fuck, I don’t even know what Bro would have done if I tried that.” Dave whispers in horror.

“Yeah, it was very dumb.” Not-Bro agrees.

“I didn’t know that his... or I guess your Bro was like mine.” Dave says finally.

“Well he’s gone now so it doesn’t matter. I just need to make sure that this guy isn’t the same person but just younger. But if you need to bail on this at any point you can. Don’t stay on my account. I’m not letting this guy out until I’m sure that he’s no danger to any of you.” Not-Bro says and walks back towards the others.

“He’s counting you as one of them.” you whisper to Dave.
“This is so fucking surreal, come on.” Dave says under his breath and the pair of you follow Not-Bro back. Other Dave actually smiles at you both when you come close.

“We’re not getting an actual judge to arbitrate on theoretical crimes.” other Karkat says, apparently partway into a debate with Hal.

“Besides you never know what way Redglare’ll flip.” other Dave nods.

“What about theoretical crimes?” Not-Bro asks.

“Theoretical crimes are the best crimes.” other Dave says solemnly.

“Maybe the real crimes are the friends we made along the way.” Hal agrees seriously.

“Y’all get dumber every time I talk to you.” your other self groans.

“Hm, common denominator is you there, Karkat.” Not-Bro points out and moves past the others to press his hand to the panel by the door.

The mechanics of the door beep approvingly and the whole thing swishes aside. You’re still caught up at the mere fact that you’re on an imperial ship. Younger and naive you had wanted to be part of the fleet, in a stupid hope that if you conformed enough you’d be allowed to live. So to be on any ship, let alone this ship is mindblowing, especially knowing that it’s in the hands of rebels and captained by a mutant who is another version of you.

Beyond the door you can see cell after cell down a short corridor. The cells aren’t what you’d expect. There’s no bed, no bars, no nothing. If there’s any plumbing in there it must be hidden. The walls and floor are smooth, slick and seamless. Only one cell in the rows has anyone in them and it’s the one right in the middle on the left. Other Dave rushes ahead.

“Hey.” He says brightly.

Behind a slightly shimmering field you can see Dirk talk but you can’t hear anything.

“Move, Dave. These are human level containment cells, they mute speech. There, you should be able to hear him now.” other you says, reaching past his Dave to tap on a panel by the cell. His hand lingers on Dave’s waist as he taps away with his other hand and then with that done he stands back. It’s so casual, he didn’t even think about it, didn’t worry about it at all.

“I don’t really think that was needed, it’s not like I had anyone else in here to talk to until now.” Dirk says, finally audible.

“I guess it’s preset, sorry about that.” other Dave apologises.

“It’s fine.” Dirk shrugs.

“Great. We have questions.” Not-Bro says flatly, he still has his shades off and his eyes are narrowed at his younger self.

“I don’t, I’m pretty sure he’s a good person and we can just let him out.” other Dave says stubbornly.

“I’m not… I don’t think I need to be in here but I’m not sure I’d say I’m a good person either. I’ve been a pretty shitty friend lately at the very least.” Dirk says unhappily.

“Hey, bad people don’t worry about whether they’re bad people. Bro never felt a fucking second of remorse in his life for what he did to anyone, but if you worry about how you treat people you’re not
“Pretty sure you could say the same for my Bro.” Dave says quietly. Dave had agonised over that for ages. Did Bro mean to do what he did? Was it reluctantly done or remorselessly enacted? Does it even matter when the result is the same?

“I guess it’s kind of validating in a way to have people agree that some other version of me is awful and agree that it’s likely reflected in however I am now. My friends always thought I was better than I am, I think. Especially Roxy.” Dirk nods.

“Regardless, you two do realise that the delineation between the group of people who deserve to be locked up and those who don’t does not solely comprise Bro in the one and literally everyone else in the other, right? Just because he says he thinks he’s not a good person doesn’t make everything okay!” Hal argues.

“I don’t think either of us were saying that.” Dave points out.

“Yeah!” other Dave echoes, apparently they’re on the same side for once.

“Well, you had questions so you may as well ask them.” Dirk says, his attention focused on Not-Bro and Hal.

“Your friends have been hounding me all day about you, trying to get me to release you.” Not-Bro says slowly.

“That’s not a question.” Dirk points out.

“Tell me about your friends.” Not-Bro says.

“Are you trying to assess my relationships?” Dirk asks curiously.

“That’s not an answer.” Not-Bro says tartly and a smug expression creeps on his face. Other Dave groans in irritation and, honestly, you feel the same. This isn’t getting anywhere.

“This is like when you and Hal used to fight all the time.” other Dave complains, glaring at Not-Bro and Hal.

“Actually, on that note, how about you tell me everything about my counterpart?” Hal asks, stepping closer to the cell. You can hear a slight growl coming from him but, again, it sounds odd. It’s not quite like a human mimicking troll sounds but it’s weirdly human pitched.

Dirk shifts uncomfortably in his cell as he weighs his words.

“I was thirteen when I made him.” Dirk says finally, rubbing the back of his neck as if to brush off some uncomfortable prickle of guilt.

“Why?” Hal asks instantly.

“I’m going to be honest, partly to see if I could. I was all alone where I was, I could talk to my friends through pesterchum but that was it and there’s only so much you can do that. Roxy had her carapacians to deal with, Jane had a whole life and Jake had a whole island to explore. They had shit to do beyond talking to me and there’s only so much I’m willing to expose my odorous personality onto other people especially if I want them to keep liking me. I hated the idea of not being there when someone needed me so between making sure my friends could always talk to someone who was at least like me and making sure I always had someone to talk to I… made him. But it’s not like
it worked well, I don’t know why I thought someone with as much self loathing as me would deal well with talking to someone who was literally them reflected back. It was a bad idea.” Dirk says in a rush.

You try to think what the purpose of this is. They’re trying to work out if this guy’s a good person but all they’re getting is what he thinks of other people. People often have jacked up perceptions of themselves, like Vriska who convinces herself that what she’s doing is in someone else’s best interest regardless of what they think. So maybe the question shouldn’t be what he thinks of someone else but…


“Why don’t you tell us what that Hal thinks of you?” you ask.

“Uh.” Not-Bro says, looking at Hal.

“No conferring, that’s obviously cheating!” you snap.

“Oh, I think I get it.” other you nods, fucking trying to take credit for your thought. Fuck him with a rake. Not-Bro seems uncertain but then seems to decide to go along with it.

“We get on better than we used to. Pretty sure I piss him off a lot but we’re fine with each other. He trusts me and we talk a lot. I don’t know, we’re family, what do you want me to say?” Not-Bro shrugs.

“Is that accurate?” you ask Hal.

“Yeah, we’re cool. We’re Striders so we obviously are. We disagree on our opinions of other people, mostly his terrible taste in romantic partners but that’s whatever.” Hal says with a shrug that’s almost a mirror image of Not-Bro’s own.

“You say that like your soulmate isn’t a sweaty weirdo.” Not-Bro says defensively.

“You say THAT like Jake isn’t an asshole who just pretends to be dumber than he is to get away with it!” Hal argues back.

“Hey.” Dirk protests with a frown from inside the cell.

“Wait. Jake? The guy in the yellow hotpants? Jade’s young-again-grandpa?” Dave asks suddenly, and his interruption stalls the argument.


Wait. They were talking about soulmates, about romantic partners. This is Dave’s brother who… is a man. And Jake is one as well so…

“Your soulmate is Jake?” Dave asks slowly and carefully.

“Yeah. See?” Not-Bro says, turning his arm a little so that you can see the designs on his upper arm. You’d love to get to study some of their soulmarks to understand how that shit works but this really isn’t the time.

“You’re…” Dave hesitates and then tries again, “you’re gay?”

Not-Bro stares at Dave for a long moment and other Dave covers his face with his hands.
“I’m getting second-hand embarrassment from this especially because the last time this conversation was had you were like… my age.” other-Dave groans.

“Maybe you ought to make up for putting me through it and you can have it instead of me.” Not-Bro says flatly.

“Ugh, ok. Fine.” other-Dave huffs.

“Yes, Dirk is solely into dudes. Jake is his soulmate, that’s the guy you so wonderfully described earlier. I’m guessing the same applies to you too?” other-Dave says, looking at Dirk in his cell. The guy winces and shakes his head.

“We kind of broke up, it’s… probably for the best. But, yeah, I’m not interested in women so…” he mumbles.

“Aw, shit I’m sorry. Dirk and Jake broke up once too because they’re both dumb but it worked out. Rose is gay and I’m guessing yours is too and Hal is…” Dave trails off with a frown.

“Not having anything to do with your human sexuality. But yes, if you must, I’m gay, he’s gay, he’s gay, Rose is gay.” Hal lists off.

“Then who’s flying the plane?” Not-Bro mutters.

“That’d be me.” Sollux’s voice comes from some hidden speaker above you and other-Dave laughs so hard he doubles over with it.

Humans are a universally stupid species, no matter which subspecies they are it seems.

“And you are…?” Dave asks, looking at his other self.

“Oh, shit. No. Bi, hella bi. Same as Roxy. I mean, have you seen girls?” other Dave says enthusiastically.

“No, please do do go on your second rant of the day about our mutual female acquaintances that you find attractive when I’m standing right here.” your other self says flatly, though you suspect he’s mostly just fucking with Dave.

“We should help him out of this mess.” Hal says thoughtfully.


“Ha ha, just seriously though man, don’t proclaim to be the only straight person in this family. I swear to god that line is cursed and no one will ever let you live it down ever.” other Dave warns your Dave.

Dave seems to consider this and you hope at least that this will have done something towards making Dave feel more normal for not being straight like he knows that he’s supposed to be. To find out that no one in his family is must-

“What about Bro?” Dave asks quietly and you feel the amusement just drain out of the room.

“I’ve thought about that myself.” Not-Bro says quietly.

“Who cares about him?” other Dave hisses angrily.

“You don’t think that matters?!” your Dave challenges him.
“Well, he and Mom- Bro and their Mom were soulmates so presumably he was into women. But I thought that before we found out that we were all a product of ectobiology which didn’t actually require them to… the point is we don’t know.” Not-Bro says awkwardly.

“I don’t CARE who he liked! I don’t think he liked anyone because he never felt anything good about another living person ever. I hope he never inflicted his whole shitty person on anyone else in any context! He didn’t deserve to have anyone like him either! When he found out that you liked guys he tried to kill you for it! He smashed your head into a wall so hard that I had to drag you to safety and the hospital, you were injured for weeks! That isn’t made better if he secretly liked dudes too!” other-Dave shouts. He’s shaking with anger and his Karkat wraps an arm around him and shushes him in a very obviously pale way, what the fuck?

“No one’s saying that makes it better.” he says soothingly. Isn’t Sollux watching this? Doesn’t he care?

“But… I thought you had soulmates, how can people have a problem if your soulmate is a guy given that you have no choice over who you get? Why would people be shitty about something that’s so clearly out of your control?” Dave asks with a frown.

“You’d think that but it’s more… consider it undeniable proof that you’re inherently broken and sick. It’s not like it happened so much anymore, or at least it wasn’t as accepted but plenty of people got killed when it turned out they’re the same gender as their soulmate. People would get accused of it, be made to match up to prove their innocence or guilt and hey if you’re gay then bye. In cultures that believed in reincarnation and did that it was like ‘hey one of you picked the wrong body this time, try again’. Yeah, no, I think people will universally try to be shitty about things that make people different. By the time the game started things were better than they used to be like twenty years ago but… yeah.” Not-Bro shrugs.

“Oh.” Dave says quietly.

You should probably divert this back on topic.


“Well, uh.” Dirk frowns, maybe he’s trying to work out the best answer to give.

“I don’t know, honestly. I know he didn’t like me which I imagine is half because I made him from my brain and I don’t like me either, so every interaction we both had was a shitty echo chamber of self loathing and fucking with each other just to be antagonistic. He spent so much time scheming behind my back and he said he was for my own good but I’ve still got no clue if he believed that or if he was trying to sabotage me, that whole shit show is half of the reason things with Jake went south. I had promised I’d give him a body but I wasn’t sure I should unleash that kind of mind on the world, it’s bad enough with me in it let alone another of my splinters running around. But I did end up spriting him and he seems… happy? I think. I can’t really read anything about ARquius except he’s gross and is really fascinated with his own muscles.” Dirk says with some bafflement. Well, that does at least sound like someone who is one half Equius. Not-Bro is barely suppressing laughter and Hal is growling at him for it.

“Fuck you man, my soulmate is great. He’s not gross and his muscles are awesome. Stop FUCKING
LAUGHING already!” Hal snarls at him. The patches of his face that have human skin are pretty much bright red and the troll parts are dark with embarrassment.

“I didn’t say a word!” Not-Bro snickers.

“As side splitingly funny as mocking Equius is, and it is funny, I think other me proved his point pretty well. No matter how shitty he might be at relationships he seems aware enough of his own faults and able to understand and care about other people’s feelings even when they make him look bad. He hasn’t actually done anything wrong and to be honest he just seems like younger, somewhat socially stunted version of you, Dirk. I’m not really comfortable keeping someone locked up for that. If you want to keep an eye on him and help him grow you’re welcome to but I’m not going to keep him in a cell.” other Karkat says.

Well, damn, that’s one thing off of Vriska’s list already.

“Are you okay with that, Dave?” Not-Bro asks, looking over in your general direction.

“Are you seriously asking me? I didn’t want him in there in the first place.” other Dave insists.

“Which might have been your clue that he was asking that Dave, not you.” your counterpart says flatly, pointing to the Dave at your side.

“Oh.” other Dave says in quiet embarrassment. At your side Dave hesitates but then nods.

“Great, Sollux, open it up please.” your counterpart calls out and the slight sheen that separated you from Dirk drops. He cautiously puts his hand through it and then steps out.

“Excellent, thanks. You’re free to go about the ship wherever you want, contact your friends, whatever you like. Right?” other you says, looking at all of you at the end there.

“Yeah, I’m gonna see what the other Hal has to say. See if I can’t convince him to talk to me now.” Hal mutters and skulks off.

Other Dave looks from your Dave to Dirk and back again. He steps in closer to Dave and speaks quietly.

“Hey, he’s the Dirk you were meant to meet. I already have mine so… do you want to do this alone? Get to know him I mean?” other Dave whispers.

“I…” Dave hesitates then nods.

“Hey Dirk, come help me find Rose. I need you to settle a bet between us about which one of us jumps higher without using powers.” other Dave says loudly and pulls his Dirk out of the room with him. Your alternate self rolls his eyes and heads out too.

“I can stay.” you offer under your breath as Dirk looks wary and confused just a few short feet away.

“No, we’re doing this, bro.” Dave mumbles and you hear the lowercase ‘b’ there.

“I’ll be out there.” you tell him and leave quickly. The door clicks shut behind you which leaves you in the hallway. You’re not alone as it happens, the younger version of yourself is slowly walking down the hallway, claws clicking on glass as he types a message out on his phone. The same one that Dave has with the fruit on the back.

“Hey!” you shout after him and rush to catch up.
He pauses and looks curiously at you, a soft trill of curiosity echoing down the hallway as he put his phone away and focuses his attention on you instead.

“Yeah?” he asks.

He’s calm as anything. You’re older than him, bigger even, but he’s so confident without having to be shouty and brash about it. All the things you aren’t. It makes you want to sock him in the face but you’ve seen where that leads. So… a new tactic maybe.

“Dave was a dumbass, getting so angry at your Dave that he attacked him. I’m not saying he’s wrong to hate the guy but all this assuming and anger didn’t really get him far,” you say carefully.

“Yeah it’s… hard. I talked to him before we met up just now and honestly the idea of any version of him not having a Dirk to grow up with is horrifying to him. It’s half of the reason he was so keen to get this Dirk out so they can at least start now. And in true absurd StriLonde logic he feels like maybe he was luckier than your Dave and maybe did deserve to be punched in the face. It’s stupid.” he sighs and shrugs.

“I’ve argued with other versions of myself before and it pretty much fucking never accomplishes anything and everyone involved just shrivels up and dies with secondhand embarrassment. Maybe we could shoot for being smarter than the Striders or at least smarter than I usually am about this.” you offer.

“Not accidentally blinding each other is a pretty low bar, I think we can do this.” your counterpart says. You both pause and feel the weight of a ‘were making it happen’ memetic response hanging in the air and studiously ignore it instead. He gestures for you to follow him and you end up back where you met Dave, looking out through the giant glass windows at Skaia. He grabs hold of the metal balcony railings and swings himself down so he’s sat on the floor with his legs freely dangling through the bars. You sit down at his side.

“So,” you open with, “I pretty much want to punch you in the face out of jealousy too.”

Excellent start.

“You know what? Kind of same here.” he says and you squint at him skeptically.

“What.” you say flatly.

“You… ok I guess this is how we’re doing this. Earth was my home and I loved lots of things about it but I hated a fuckload of it too. I mean, you got to grow up on a planet made for you. Nothing on Earth is made for trolls, even ‘troll food’ that our own businesses sell is scraped together from what little things they can import and Earth substitutes. We scrape by on whatever culture we can get from anyone coming to Earth from Alternia and outside of that we just have human movies and tv, which I do like, but I can count like… five good troll actors on Earth and the writers they have to work with often tank their shit anyway.” other you says in one long stream of speech.

“Everywhere I went on Earth I was so obviously alien and it gets old. And I was lucky, I lived in a pretty troll heavy area as those go. But even among the trolls we had not everyone was cool with my dad’s movement, lots of people hated him and I’m so obviously his kid that everyone knows I’m a mutant too. I can’t tell you how much of my shit got ruined by bright red paint and other shit being poured on it when I turned by back. I know that hiding who you were on Alternia can’t have been great but I never got to be a normal kid, I kind of hate you for that.” he says miserably. He rests his chin on one of the railings and stares out through the window.
“You got to belong on Alternia. All the adult trolls on Earth were hatched there and they’re Alternian but I’m American and not even really that. You talk to humans all the time, hear them everywhere, get taught by them and you start talking like them. They don’t hear all of the troll noises we do so we adjust but it means that we don’t fit in on Earth and we’re not Alternian either, we don’t belong anywhere.” he says sadly.

“If anyone had found out about me they would have culled me.” you argue, you can’t feel sorry for this jackass.

“Yeah, people sent us threats like that too. I guess at least it would have been illegal on Earth, not that it would have done me a lot of good if I was dead.” other you shrugs.

“I had to see my friends die!” you snap at him. You hate talking about that day, about Gamzee’s rampage and your friends turning on each other. The feel of Sollux’s barely alive body in your arms as you tried to save him. You had it worse, damnit!

Instead the younger and more accomplished version of you just looks at you with sympathy.

“I can’t imagine how much that must have sucked. I’ve heard about it from some of the others, even though I took Vriska’s ‘and somehow the day was saved thanks to me’ version with a fuckload of salt. I can’t imagine how awful that must have been.” he says sincerely.

“Oh fuck you and your genuine empathy! I’m trying to prove how much my life sucks compared to yours, you can’t also be the better person and be nice about it!” you yell at him.

“Right. Pissing contest, I forgot. Hm.” he says with a frown.

“You’re a leader,” you say accusingly, “a real one that people respect.”

“And I’m not even half the leader or the man that Signless is. I’ve studied my whole life to be like him and I can just about convince a group of teenagers to work together in the mutual interest of not dying. Just. And- and the moment we get through to the other side if we manage that I know it’ll all fall apart and everyone will know how not like Signless I am and my parents will be so disappointed in me but they’ll feel too bad to say anything.” he counters.

“At least you’re still doing it, though. I just gave up.” you point out. Maybe you should have fought Vriska to keep some control but with so much blood on your hands during your stint at leader it seemed like it was best for everyone if you stayed out of it. Did you make the wrong call?

“I wish I could do that. All that stuff I said about blood and being a real leader is just what I tell myself so I don’t go crazy. I’m just making this up as I go along in the desperate hope we don’t all go off of the rails and die. I just get credit for other people’s work and I’m too afraid that if I admit it’s nothing to do with me everyone will descend into chaos and people might die. I am the terrified top layer of a living jenga tower.” he whines. You have no idea what jenga is, he’s making stupid human references that you don’t get just like Dave does. But given that he’s just complained that he doesn’t fit in with Alternian trolls it’d be a real kick in the globes if you were to say that you don’t know what he means. You’re not that cruel.

Is that it? The bottom of your list? You both envy each other enough that you’re at a stalemate? Are you done running a mile in each other’s shoes as some proof that each of you has it worse? No, you can still think of one last thing you hate him for having instead of you.

“You still have Dave.” you point out quietly, checking over your shoulder that the human in question isn’t suddenly here or anything.
Your younger self thinks for a moment and then tips his arm over on the railing so you can see the vulnerable inside of his arm and the more abundant marks there.

“Every time any version of my Dave dies I get put through blistering agony. Literally this kills people sometimes, it killed Dirk once when Jake died. It’s like everything good being ripped out of your soul and you know you’ll never be happy again. And… Dave dies a lot. Plus he’s out of extra lives now unless he manages a non-heroic non-just death next, so if it happens again I’ll most likely be stuck that way without him. As far as I know your Dave still has a Jane resurrection waiting to happen, so does that do anything for your misery contest?” he asks flatly.

“Yeah, that sucks I’m sure, but you’re still with him.” you hiss.

“That’s true.” other Karkat nods. He gives you a curious look, like he’s wondering about something but doesn’t really want to ask. Probably something like ‘how are you failing so bad at getting your Dave to be with you?’, the urge to punch him is rising. But you’re not going to. He succeeded at this and you want to know if it’s because you’ve not done the right thing or if it’s because he’s just inherently better than you are. He could be, the humans are different after all.

“How did you do it? Get your feelings for him in one quadrant? Is- is it just because you have other quadrants and you’re able to keep them contained when you have enough or what?” you ask him desperately.

“What?” he asks in bafflement.

“Dave!” you insist.

“I’m- we’re not. Quadranted, that is. I feel all sorts of shit for him, red, pale, human love and sometimes even ashen shit or pitch stuff if he annoys me enough.” he says, his face slack with surprise.

“But that’s not how it’s supposed to work!” you whine. You bang your forehead against one of the railings in despair.

“I guess I just took it for granted. My parents all all pan-quadranted for each other and it’s pretty much accepted that if you end up with a human soulmate your quadrants are just going to be a total mess because humans super rarely can keep it in one quadrant. But- even for your universe, why does it matter about how it was supposed to be? If it works the great but if it doesn’t then fuck it! Why should anyone get to tell you what to do when they’re all dead and gone?” he demands.

It is blisteringly ironic that you’ve said almost exactly the same thing to Dave about human straightness. Maybe you can tell Dave that it’s confirmed that you’re both fucked up by your societies’ sexual standards.

“If it makes you feel better I think you won, your situation sucks more. Just don’t blind me if you punch me, alright?” other you says uneasily. You tip your head slightly to side eye him, he looks so unsure and though it’s easy to forget it he is younger than you by pretty much a sweep.

“How did you even manage to get together with him anyway?” you ask weakly and so he tells you, probably just so that he has something to say that might distract you from how you loathe yourself for something he accepts thoughtlessly.

He explains how confirming their soulmate bonds work, how they get a ring. He tells you about being small and harassed by other kids both troll and human but having his ever building mark to dream about. He met Dave the day after Bro died and there is zero sympathy in his eyes when he
explains that Dirk was the one who took the guy out. But how it made Redglare and Cronus suspicious of him and thanks to fate he was home from school and came along to see Dave with Signless that day. He bites his lip to hold back a smile but he fails at it, apparently no version of you is good at being subtle.

“I don’t know how it was with you, I think you talked to him before you met him in person but I hadn’t. I just saw him and... he was so pretty I thought I was going to die. And then I massively fucked the whole thing up, I’m so goddamn lucky he ever spoke to me again.” he groans, his head in his hands.

“Now you have to tell me.” you insist, eager to hear about how this dumbass screwed things up. No better way to make yourself than laughing at other versions of yourself.

“Oh, fuck. I was just like ‘I THINK YOU’RE MY SOULMATE TAKE MY HAND!’ and then basically chased him like a crazy person until Dirk got in the way with this expression that pretty much was like ‘hey I’ve murdered one person in the last twenty four hours for this kid I will totally up that to two’. Signless was so pissed and we left and I snuck back a day or two later with Kanaya and Sollux who forever enable my shitty ideas and Dave and Dirk had just MOVED halfway across the country and that is the story of how I nearly scared my soulmate away forever.” other you says and flops back onto his back and covers his face with both hands.

“Past me is the worst.” he whines.

Ah, there it is. He’s secretly a disaster too. You hate him a little less for that. Besides, you still haven’t heard how he secured the affections of one Dave Strider yet.

“So what happened then?” you ask.

“They moved into the woods with Rose and Roxy. But... okay I’ve never got to the bottom of this either because the two of them are cagey fucks but I’m pretty sure Rose and Hal colluded to move them all back down here so that he and I could meet again, she even enrolled them in the same school as me. I have no idea why she would go that far when she could have just got my trolltag from getting Hal to hack us but Rose is...” other you makes a vague gesture that suggests the ineffable, inscrutable and generally incomprehensible web of mindfucking that is Rose Lalonde. You nod, you understand him on this point very well.

“So you met him again.” you prompt.

“Uh huh. Guess what I did.” other Karkat says miserably from the floor.

“Horribly embarrassed yourself again?” you guess.

“Yeah, followed by me swearing to him that I could be cool about it and then fucking that up too. Thankfully I was with Kanaya by then and she made me realise that it might not just be me losing my shit and me and Dave agreed that he wouldn’t avoid me if I wouldn’t talk about soulmate shit or try to confirm if we were or not.” he sighs. You watch as he lifts up his arm and runs his thumb over the red ring around one of his fingers.

“Is that where you’re at? Where you’re friends even though you’re in love with him?” other Karkat asks, pushing himself up to look at you.

You squirm a little under his scrutiny and look around to check that Dave isn’t lurking and listening.

“You say it like I don’t want to be his friend at all, like this is just a gateway to hopping on his human dick. I’m not Eridan.” you say defensively and then feel a spark of guilt for bad mouthing
the dead. But Eridan’s inability to keep his quadrants in any form of alignment and his entitlement caused a lot of bad shit to go down. There, guilt gone for now at least.

“I didn’t say that. It’s not like me and Dave aren’t still friends, we’re other things to is all. If you’re not friends with your soulmate as well as anything else you’re doing it wrong.” he snaps at you.

“So how did you do it then? How’d you go from one to the other?” you ask desperately. Is there something you should have said to Dave by now? Something you should have reassured him of or done? It’s not as if your own quadrant issues are resolved yet or him with his sexuality but you could work it out together at the same time, couldn’t you?

“I… don’t actually know what I did, or if I did anything. It was all Dave, you’d have to ask him.” the guy says unhelpfully. You’re considering strangling him when he sits up and rests his chin on one of the railings again, smiling and looking out at Skaia.

“He just… showed up. Brought a ladder and climbed up the outside of my house on Christmas eve or- uh- 12th Perigree’s Eve I guess. He said he wanted to give me his present first since it was technically Christmas then. He got me this typewriter because, well I guess you write as well maybe? I’m not good but maybe if we get to a world after all this where there’s other people to read my stuff I might keep going. And he told me that he knew about my writing because it was on his arm and we didn’t talk about that, it was part of the whole me leaving him alone deal. And then-” he stops and ducks his head into his arms for a moment, even though you can see the way his skin is going dark just talking about it.

“Anyway. It turned out that I was right, he was my soulmate. And he’d gone through all that elaborate romantic gesture just because it was romantic and I like that. He swept me off of my feet, not the other way around.” He says, his smile stupidly happy and his cheeks dark.

You’re not sure that you’ve ever been as happy as he looks. Or maybe you have when you’ve been with Dave, you had some really good times with him on the meteor after all. Either way you’ve never seen your own face happy like that, whether you’ve felt it yourself or not. The expression slips a little as he looks over at you and chews his lip for a moment.

“But who says you have to do it the same way? If you end up being alright with the idea of romance outside quadrants you can sweep him off of his feet instead.” he tells you earnestly.

“I don’t know that I am, and even if I was it’s Dave and he’s-” you say but your alternate self suddenly kicks you really hard in the ankle.

“HI DAVE.” he says loudly and you turn around to see Dave walking over to the pair of you. Behind him Dirk hesitates and walks off the other way. Oh shit he just nearly heard you, you’re pretty sure your owe your alternate self big time now for that level of dragging your ass out of the fire.

“Hi Karkat… s. What’s the plural for Karkats anyway? Or the shit, no the group noun. Like a murder of crows.” Dave rambles incoherently.

“An argument of Karkats, obviously.” other you grins at him and Dave laughs, a short bark of surprised amusement.

“Oh, what about a squabble?” Dave suggests.

“No way. That’s Vriskas. And a hearing of Terezis naturally.” other you bullshits back.

“Not a blinding then?” Dave jokes. Other Karkat’s jaw clicks shut and he pouts slightly for a second
before smiling slightly meanly.

“No, that’s apparently the singular for Daves. Just you, apparently. A blinding of Dave,” other Karkat says and Dave cringes.

“Ah, shit. I didn’t-” he starts to.

“It’s fine,” your alternate self says as he stands up, “if you didn’t eat your foot on a regular basis I wouldn’t think you were any kind of Dave at all. Speaking of I should go find mine. I need to make sure he’s talked to Rose and called her off or else we… well, it doesn’t matter. Plus Dave still died on me yesterday and he’s got a lot of making up to do for that. Fucker hasn’t even properly promised not to do it again.” other Karkat grumbles.

“Aren’t you kind of fucked if he dies heroically again? You only get one resurrection from the life players, right? I wasn’t really paying attention to the briefing Vriska made us listen to but I got that much.” Dave asks and your alternate self glowers at him.

“Yes, thanks for the salt in that wound, Dave. If my soulmate dies heroically again he won’t ever come back, that’s the rules of the game. With any luck it’ll take me out too. But, thankfully I have a countermeasure against that horrible scenario, you insensitive one man jizz sprinkler system. We got a game item, the Ring of Life. It’s a dual item, sometimes it’s a Ring of Void and sometimes it’s the Ring of Life but you can’t ever have both. We’ve had it in our constant possession as the Ring of Life for nearly six months. If Dave were to die again I’d just revive him that way. He’d never be able to take it off, of course but he’d be alive.” other Karkat explains, clearly irked at having to talk about the subject.

“That’s a pretty powerful item.” you say, genuinely impressed.

“Yeah, I keep it on a chain around my neck so I don’t have to deal with finding it when I’m already dealing with a dead person. See?” he says and reaches into his godtier shirt and pulls out a relatively short necklace chain. You see the chain but no ring.

“I- oh it must be…” other Karkat says, feeling the back of his neck and then with rising panic all along the sealed chain but there’s clearly no ring there.

“WHERE THE FUCK IS MY RING?!” he screeches in terror.

You and Dave exchange a look of worry, this can’t be good.
> Dave: Objection!

I also recently released a Kanaya backstory sidefic chapter which you can read here if you haven’t already: https://archiveofourown.org/works/14280156

You eye Terezi who is sitting on Karkat’s other side practically vibrating with excitement.

“Could you be less thrilled about this?” you ask her.

“Absolutely not!” Terezi hisses at you.

“Just… everyone remember to be cool and don’t incriminate yourselves.” Vriska says under her breath.

“Solid life advice.” Dirk says nonchalantly from the row in front of you on the stacked bleachers that you’re all sitting on.

“Enough muttering from the suspects!” Terezi’s alternate ancestor Redglare snaps out.

“Isn’t everyone a suspect?” other Terezi calls out from across the room.

“Ah, I have taught you well.” Redglare nods.

She adjusts her position in the middle of the floor of this gymnasium that you were all summoned to since other Karkat found out that his ring was missing. She now stands facing you all with her hands clasped behind her back, her shoulders thrown back confidently as she eyes the large assembled group.

“You may be wondering why I called you all here.” she says.

“Actually, Karkat did that.” Kankri says.

“Silence! We are all here because the vital Ring of Life has gone missing, its loss could be devastating to our team. As such it needs to be found and the culprit rooted out. I first call to the stand, the holder of the ring, Karkat Vantas. That one, not you.” she says, pointing at the other Karkat who sighs and trudges into the middle of the room, pulls a chair out of his sylladex and sits down. Who just carries a chair around with them like that?

“Karkat, why was the Ring of Life in your possession?” Redglare asks, pacing back and forth slowly.

“I got it after Jane healed Signless back to life, Roxy put it on a chain for me and I’ve held onto it ever since. Never took it off, except now I just have a chain.” other Karkat says.

“Very well, you may return. Leave the seat.” Redglare says. You watch other Karkat go on a face journey of wanting his damn chair back but also figuring that it’s probably not worth it and then slumping back to his place on the bleachers on his side without his chair.
“The prosecution calls its witness The Psiionic to the stand.” Redglare says.

A tall four horned Sollux-looking troll unfolds himself and shambles over to the chair before dropping into it. He looks both tired and bored of these shenanigans. Redglare turns her attention on him, scrutinising him for a moment.

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?” Redglare asks him sharply.

“God doesn’t exist and technically almost all of my kids are ‘gods’ so that’s dumb, also you’re a district attorney AND a legislacerator, you don’t need to pretend at it. And everywhere that granted you those positions blew up, this is a waste of my time.” The Psiionic says grouchily.

“Name anything you’d rather be doing than this!” Redglare demands, pointing her finger in his face.

“Disciple and Signless.” Psiionic says with a grin. Several kids on their side of the room make exaggerated gagging noises of disgust.

“Your sexy testimony is noted but irrelevant.” Redglare decides after a moment, though she has that prickly amused smiled that Terezi gets sometimes.

“You reviewed the footage from the ship’s cameras, correct?” Redglare asks and The Psiionic’s teasing expression drops and his demeanor becomes serious.

“I did. I found a moment before we changed universes where Karkat showed Vriska the ring on his necklace. I have continuous footage of him since then and he never took it off and I didn’t see anyone take it from him.” the Psiionic says with a shake of his head.

“Could he have lost it somewhere? Could it have fallen off?” she asks.

“No. Aside from the fact that I can see everywhere through the cameras the cleaning bots all report anything found like that and nothing has been.” he replies. You try not to think about cameras, about not having any seconds unobserved. You especially try not to think about how even now, at this very moment, you are being recorded. Aside from not being bombarded with smuppet ass it’s just like being with Bro again.

You grit your teeth, tap your toes inside your shoes, tense and untense your muscles. Finally you try to focus again on the courtroom conversation before you.

“-without an alibi?” Redglare asks.

“No, all of the people from their universe appear on camera the whole time. None of them got anywhere close to where Karkat had the ring around his neck, it’s not them. And unless their Roxy’s powers work differently to ours I can’t see that she took it either, and even if she could have I’ve not seen her with it.” The Psiionic answers. Well, that’s good.

“Do you have continuous footage of everyone from the entire span of time in question?” Redglare asks.

The Psiionic hesitates and you perk up with interest, there’s a suspect.

“I’m only missing one person and I know it wasn’t her.” he says firmly.

“I will decide that, who is without an alibi?” Redglare asks, peering down at The Psiionic in his chair.
“Our Roxy. I’m missing about five hours of her totalled up.” he sighs.

“The witness is excused! I call Roxy Lalonde from our universe to the stand!” Redglare calls out. The Psiionic stands up and returns to his place from before as their Roxy floats down to the floor, scowling as she goes.

“I didn’t take anything.” she says petulantly.

“The defence attorney advises her client to not make statements without being questioned!” their Terezi shouts out from the crowd.

“Overruled. Ms. Lalonde, since you volunteered that statement would you care to tell me why you would not have taken the ring?” Redglare asks with a predatory smile. It’s the same gleeful look that you’ve seen Terezi give her scalemates on trial before. Their Roxy seems less pleased.

“Because that ring is the only thing that can bring back two of my friends and my baby brother back to life if something was going to go wrong. It’s safest with Karkat because he knows instantly if Dave needs it, I have no reason to take it and even if I did want to look after it I’d just have asked him. Losing it puts my little brother in danger.” she argues.

The wheels in your mind spin fruitlessly over the idea of any version of you being anyone’s baby brother, of having a big sister who loves you that much. It’s so alien and honestly that’s a little sad.

“Perhaps you wanted to ensure that it was reserved solely for Dave?” Redglare asks sharply.

“No way. Me and Damz are tight and Aradia is cool, I don’t want to see them hurt either. Besides, if one of them got killed in the final throw down it means that there are less people around backing Dave up which is dangerous for him. And yeah I’d rather Dave be revived than anyone else but not reviving other people if they died first is dumb.” Roxy says defensively.

“Perhaps the court buys your lack of motive, but you still have to account for your missing time. Where were you for five hours?” she asks.

Their Roxy looks over at you, right at you specifically and you feel that uncanny valley stare on you. It’s strange, they don’t really look different from you at all but every now and then something about how they look just pings you wrong. You can’t help but wonder if somewhere back in your shared history there was an evolutionary fork that led to them being selected in their universe where your brand of humans was selected in yours. Maybe they’re more Neandertal or some other strain of proto-humans than you are. Either way it’s likely that the point at which their timeline diverged from yours is where your species diverged. Your semi-sincere, semi-ironic interest in long dead shit means that you know that modern humans diverged about three hundred thousand years ago. But here’s the thing, some things are coded into your DNA. Being cautious around things that hunted humans is vital. Feeling that jolt of fear up your spine at the sound of a wolf growl without having to think is the sort of shit that kept that humans alive whereas the one that looked around curiously just got eaten.

Genetic fear, or something like that. Either way maybe there was a time when her species existed on your own Earth with your ancestors. You can only assume it must have because when she looks over at you, her bright and pink eyes are cold and her body language is coiled, or perhaps it’s something in her voice… either way an ancient part of your brain gets scared. Some proto-human part of your DNA is warning you to get away from the very bad thing in the dark that wants to kill you. It’s the same thing you felt when their Rose threatened you. It’s the unsettling, uncanny valley horror that so many movies tried and failed to get.
I was watching them.” she says, staring at you.

You swallow thickly, not knowing who she was watching but suspecting it was probably you. How long was this not-human person stalking you, unseen in the darkness? What was she waiting for? What would she do?

“To what end?” Redglare asks, their Roxy doesn’t break eye contact.

“They attacked my little brother. I wanted to be sure it wouldn’t happen again.” she answers. It’s territorial. Mine, my brother, back off or else. You’re reminded of those idiots who pick up bear cubs and then get their heads swiftly and rudely bitch slapped off of their necks by a big momma bear. But if you understand things right she is your alternate self’s big sister and it’s pretty clear that she’s their Dirk’s age too more or less and he’s obviously the guardian of that family, it stands to reason she is as well. So you basically did just attack her baby. Maybe you should consider yourself lucky to be alive.

“And your conclusion on that is?” Redglare asks.

Their Roxy looks at you for a moment longer before shifting her gaze back to Redglare, you can breathe easier suddenly, like someone just took their boot off of your chest.

“Jury’s still out but I’m leaning towards thinking they’re okay.” she answers with a shrug.

“I have a plan.” you hear your Rose mutter to Vriska. She stands up suddenly on her bench, her hands behind her back mimicking Redglare’s official stance.

“Permission to approach the metaphorical bench, your honour?” Rose asks. Redglare seems to consider this for a moment or two.

“Granted, approach.” she says.

Rose floats over you and lands on the floor, walking briskly up to Redglare.

“It seems to me like no one took the ring, that it just vanished. However, I have a theory on why that would be.” Rose says.

“Please elaborate then.” Redglare nods.

“From my understanding the Ring of Life and the Ring of Void cannot be present at the same time, the game has built in rules about it. We know there is a Ring of Life in this universe, although I could not say where it is right now. The game can presumably tell the difference between items and players from different universes and timelines and I would imagine that a second Ring of Life would present the same error as attempting to have the Life and Void rings together at once. It would make sense for the game to favour this iteration’s ring over yours and either delete it or deliberately ‘lose’ it.” Rose says.

There’s a loud curse and other Karkat bursts from the stands on their side of the room with a flutter of neon wings and appropriately bright red glitter dust.

“Are you SHITTING ME?!” he demands, looking at you all.

“That’s my theory.” Rose says calmly.

Other Karkat twists around to look at his crowd of people.
“Hal, is that right?!” he demands.

“Dude, I’m not a sprite any more and you have one actual sprite over there to ask. I don’t have that knowledge plugged right into my brain anymore but it makes sense at least, but you could have worked that out on your own.” Hal shrugs.

Other Karkat whips around yet again and eyeballs that sprite that’s part glasses and part sweaty weirdo who thus far has been floating around your group with mild disinterest.

“Is that right?” other Karkat asks, eyeballing him.

“I can’t be sure but I have a STRONG conviction that is what has happened. And if you have no evidence of the ring being taken by any other means then it’s a good guess.” the sprite nods.

“FUCK!” other Karkat screeches and starts to pace.

“We can’t even go looking for this universe’s ring either, we can’t be seen and we have no leads on where it might be.” their Roxy says from her seat in the witness stand or whatever Redglare is pretending it is now.

“FUUUUUCK!” other Karkat continues, his pacing in circles getting tighter and tighter.

“Is it weird watching an approaching shitfit happen in the third person?” you ask Karkat under your breath.

“If by that you mean horrifying and mortifying, then yes.” he mutters back, his head in his hands. Aw, poor Karkat. You rub his shoulder carefully, he’s been doing pretty well with his double in all fairness so you should cut him some slack.

It seems like your other self has similar Vantas based thoughts as he flies out of his seat to land on the floor by the ever tightening circle of Vantas rage.

“Dude, chill. I know the ring was important but we’ve got backup we didn’t have before now, it’ll be cool.” he says soothingly. His Karkat screeches to a halt and fixes him with some serious stink eye, he breathes in deeply and you wince. You know an oncoming rant when you see one.

“No, Dave, it is not ‘cool’. It will not be cool. That ring was the one thing saving you or Aradia or Damara from permadeath in the final fight and we both know that any death you get in that fight would be heroic due to the mere nature of fighting bad guys. And seeing as your skills for avoiding death are on par with a suicidal lemming I have zero faith in your ability to stay alive! That means that me and Vriska have to change all of our plans to keep the three of you out of the fight and that changes EVERYTHING! So no, it’s not cool or okay!” he shouts.

“Rude. But that’s irrelevant, we’re still fighting. Lord English has to get his ass served to him and me, Damz and ‘Radia are the official waiter squad ready with full dishes of ass kicking to serve up. We’re doing it, we’re-” he starts.

“No! You’re not doing it, making it happen or anything else. NONE of the three of you are fighting and that is final.” other Karkat declares loudly.

“Karkat, you can’t be serious.” Aradia protests.

“I am deadly fucking serious, the three of you are staying here and that’s final.” he insists.

“I have to agree with Karkat, I was barely okay with you fighting Lord English when Jane could
revive you and we had the ring but without either of those things I’m not letting you do this. You could die for real.” their Dirk says seriously.

“Agreed, it’s too risky for all three of you.” their Roxy nods.

Your younger self is looking around at all of them in wide eyed shock, the literal kind because you can actually see his weird Rose-purple eyes.

“Are you all out of your minds?” he asks.

“Yeah, I have to agree with Dave here. He and I made a deal with our denizens that means he has to fight Lord English, he got that special sword for it too. We can’t break our deals!” their Jade insists, moving to stand at your counterpart’s side in solidarity.

“There will be A Dave fighting him, just not you! Give your sword to that one and he can fight him, as far as I understand he still has a heroic death left so we can afford for him to die at least once and we’ll give him all the backup we can so that doesn’t even happen. Deal fulfilled!” other Karkat argues.

“Gee, thanks.” you complain.

“I wasn’t aware you thought we were so interchangeable.” other you says icily. The two Megidos also walk over to the rapidly forming group of dissenters.

“We’re fighting him, he’s too dangerous and we only get the one shot at this. We’ve already practiced being careful and with more of us there the better our odds are. It’s our decision to make Karkat, not yours.” Aradia says solemnly.

“No, I’m your goddamn leader. It is, in fact, exactly my decision.” other Karkat argues.

“Karkat,” other Rose says as she gets up and joins her twin, “you’re being absurd. We absolutely need to adjust our strategies based on this information but panicking and pulling out three of our strongest players is absurd.”

“Too bad, he’s not going.” their Dirk argues.

“You don’t get to just decide that!” other you shouts at him.

“You’re my kid, I absolutely do.” other Dirk says flatly.

You boggle vacantly for a moment as that argument between the two of them goes back and forth. How strange it is for a guy who looks so much like Bro to be vehemently insisting that another version of you not be put into a risky fight on account of how much he loves and cares for him. It’s goddamn opposite day up in here.

The argument has progressed now, with their Karkat, Sollux, Dirk, Roxy and several of the adults all arguing in favour of the three time players being kept back and said time players plus Rose and Jade arguing the opposite.

“ENOUGH!” other Vriska shouts, leaping to her feet.

“This argument is POINTLESS, they are still going to fight Lord English and I’m saying that not out of approval for the idea but an acknowledgement that it is simply what is going to happen. I refuse to plan for them actually staying back when my time would be far better put into planning on how to fight our opponents with them in the field to best protect them.” she says loudly.
“They’re NOT going!” other Dirk says furiously.

“Don’t make me do this, man.” your double hisses, angrily looking up at his older brother.

“Oh, do what?” their Roxy demands.

“Point out that you can’t actually stop us! What’re you gonna do, huh? You can’t lock us up anywhere that we can’t go to a time when we can get out or where Jade, who is on the sensible side here, can’t bust us out of. You can’t make us sleep through the fight because at some point we wake up and do that TIME TRAVEL THING WE DO. And what’re you gonna use? Your powers? Because honestly the three of us got you beat.” your counterpart argues.

“Yeah, Roxy makes things invisible, won’t stop us. Dirk and Sollux would have to kill us and won’t do that and Karkat can’t keep us chained forever. You can’t stop us.” Damara adds with a nod.

“It’s not personal, it’s just fate.” Aradia agrees.

“And that’s why there’s no point me planning for them to stay here, because they won’t.” their Vriska concludes.

“Will you three just think for a goddamn second? What are we supposed to do if you die?” their Karkat pleads. You counterpart has no answer and just looks guilty.

“Everybody dies eventually Karkat. We have no intention of doing so but if it happens then it happens.” Aradia answers instead. Their Karkat jerks back but it’s Sollux who turns and walks out of the room at that, he doesn’t look back when other you shouts out after him and it’s unsettling to see heartbreak written so plainly on your own face. It worsens when his soulmate leaves the room right after the first guy too. Rose is all that’s stopping him from following them and he looks far younger than he is when he shrinks back against her side.

Dirk looks over at Vriska, his expression steely.

“I won’t participate in this. I will not just roll with some plan that puts my kid in mortal danger just because it’s easier for you. I can’t stop him, clearly, but I won’t help. If he dies I can’t live with knowing I helped that. I won’t do that.” he says and follows Karkat and Sollux’s exit with Roxy at his side.

“Well they’re dramatic to say the least.” Rose says under her breath.

“FINE! Anyone else? Jesus. No more debate on this, I’ll think of a plan. I always have to, don’t I? I’m changing to a different topic since everyone who hasn’t had a dramatic exit is still here. Has anyone got any plans for how to wake their Jade up?” other Vriska asks, looking around the room.

People on their side shift uncomfortably and everyone on yours just looks weirded out by the huge blow up drama fest that just happened. Like you went channel flipping from Judge Judy to a daytime soap with lots of dramatic shouting and storming out. You think they’re only one ‘IT’S YOUR BABY’ shy of full blown soap opera.

“I had an idea but I’m missing ingredients for it.” Hal finally says with a sigh.

“Tell me.” their Vriska orders.

“Me and my other self were looking at the tiaratop and I figured I could engineer one that would function as a block for that kind of psionics. I can use the Nitrams to test it but I can’t alchemise something that’ll be resistant to animal mind control without an animal to use as part of it. But given
that we have no animals and the closest thing is the bones in Dave’s dead things collection I’m out of ideas.” he explains.

“The consorts wouldn’t do?” one of the adults on their side asks, the one that looks like Nepeta except with more hair than is really reasonable.

“They’re game constructs, not animals. I can’t control them so they’re really not animals.” one of the other adults with super wide horns says.

“Big boast claiming that your shit works on all animals but you’re right that the constructs don’t count. My point is if anyone knows where to find animals let me know. And don’t suggest the food in the kitchen, Eq already talked to me about that and I now know things about our food supply I never cared to and why several of the vegetarians on our crew have been eating ‘meat’ lately.” Hal sighs.

“Soylent green is people.” Rose whispers to quiet laughter from several people on your bench, though Karkat just looks perplexed at her reference.

“Oh! I have an idea!” your John blurts out excitedly, leaping to his feet.

“You want to share that with the rest of us, John?” other Vriska asks, but her voice isn’t mean and the look she gives him has a weird touch of fondness in it like how she looks at Terezi. Eugh, Vriska.

“Jade’s quest was to breed a frog, there should be thousands of the things on her planet.” John tells her brightly.

“Well, true. But we’re nowhere near Jade’s planet, our universe blew up with her planet in it. Not that she had any frogs on hers because our universe was never meant to seed a new one.” other Vriska counters.

“But ours was. And my Jade had all the planets shrunk down in her sylladex, I’m pretty sure this timeline’s Jade does too.” John points out.

“She does.” Rose nods.

Other Vriska looks intrigued and turns to look at her Jade on the benches across the way.

“Could you get her planet and- well I guess you’d have to shrink people down onto it rather than make it bigger, I wouldn’t want to take the risk of voiding a whole planet in this situation.” she says.

“Hm, I’ve never gone that small before but it’s absolutely possible. I think I’d need to do a little bit of math and maybe resize the planet a little just to jig the proportions around some but it’s doable. It’s probably best if I don’t shrink myself down though, so we’d need other people to go in there.” other Jade explains, scratching her chin thoughtfully as she talks.

“Fantastic. Head to your counterpart and do what you’ve got to do to that planet and… you four are going to be my frog hunting team.” other Vriska says to the three time players and Rose on their side, the ones that started all the drama.

“Why, sweetheart, that sounds like you think we’re causing you problems and want us gone.” other Rose says, her voice sugary and mean.

“Insightful as always. Take their StriLondes with you too.” other Vriska orders her.
“What? No, why would I?” other Rose balks in clear distaste of you all.

“Oh, are you not capable of being polite and welcoming to our guests? Are you not up to that task?” other Vriska simpers, the look on her face making it clear that she thinks that she’s won this exchange.

“She’s actually pretty good at this, in an aggressive bitch kind of way.” Karkat says under his breath.

“Fine. I’ll show you polite.” other Rose hisses and turns to march out of the door, shooting you a narrow eyed look. She’s dragging her brother behind her and the other two time players are sullenly going along with it. Their Jade scampers over and looks up at all of you.

“Well come on then!” she says and ducks out of the room.

You look over and meet eyes with Dirk which is, you’re going to be honest, still not super comfortable. But with no other choice you fly out of your seat and land on the floor by the door and when you turn to look Dirk, Rose and Roxy are all there with you.

The door out of the gym opens and in the hallway you come face to face with your younger, alternate self. Honestly he looks like he’s going to be sick and is too busy looking at his marked arm in worry to really notice you. Alt-Rose looks pissed as fuck and honestly Jade is the only one who looks okay with things.

“We should probably get going.” Jade says.

“Maybe I should go find Karkat.” your double mutters, rubbing at his arm.

“Oh will you stop? So it’s your first big fight, get over it. You’re in the right here and regardless I think there’s very little you could do that would break your bond so will you stop staring at your arm like you’re worried it’s going to fall off if you look away?” other Rose scolds him.

“What’re you worried about? Does your tattoo change if he’s mad at you?” you ask in confusion.

“No, but if he hates me it can cut us off as much as it would if one of us died. It’d mean he’s not my soulmate anymore. It happened with Bro and Mom and it nearly happened with Dirk and Jake, only they salvaged it in time.” your counterpart says in a panic, still twisting his arm this way and that to check for any change.

“I’m fairly sure our parents’ bond broke down because neither of them had souls and Dirk is a self destructive, self sacrificial moron whose claspect literally focuses on the destruction of the heart. Neither of these cases are evidence that one argument with Karkat, or even Sollux for that matter, will sever your relationships with them.” other Rose insists. Your counterpart does not look convinced at all.

“Gee, thanks.” Dirk says and, yeah, that actually wasn’t super complimentary to him.

“Does the boot not fit?” other Rose asks pointedly.

“I wonder at what point our lives diverged that made you so needlessly antagonistic.” your Rose opines and the younger one prickles.

“Perhaps the point at which you decided that formal, verbose language was a substitute for politeness.” the younger one counters. Oh, damn.

“No, you do that too. Look, if we’re going can we just go?” other you cuts in, literally putting
himself between the two of them.

“I second the idea of us leaving.” Jade nods.

“Medical, wasn’t it?” Aradia chips in brightly, clearly trying to steer away from this brewing argument. Your younger self links his arm with his Rose and pulls her off with the rest of your group following.

They seem to know the path through the ship by heart so you mostly just follow them and watch Dirk and Roxy. The pair both look like they want to say something but they’re clearly uncomfortable, whether it’s because of the company around them or the constant surveillance in the ship you don’t know. You can certainly relate to it though. Rose is similarly silent, Jade is leading the way, the two troll time players are talking to each other in a language you don’t speak and whatever conversation your double is having with Rose is too whispered for you to hear.

When you all get to the medical area of the ship there’s no one there except for your Jade in her bed. Her wild hair is covering so much of the pillow she’s sleeping on. Other Jade gently touches Jade’s dog ears, her fingers running over the fluffy fur of them.

“They’re just like Bec’s.” she says softly.

“That’s how she got them.” Rose tells her and younger Jade looks a little sad, she must miss her dog. At least you assume her dog is dead in this universe too but unlike your Jade it didn’t become part of her.

“Alright, LOFAF time!” other Jade says brightly and does something highly technical with her sylladex and her counterpart’s. With a little technical hacking she suddenly has a tiny icy planet floating in her hands, it’s the Land of Frost And Frogs. Or in your case, land of freezing your balls off and getting shot.

“Looks just like yours.” other Dave says, leaning in to look at it.

“Well, let’s hope it isn’t because we need frogs. Now, stop huffing on the planet and scooch over there with everyone else. Let me just make this bigger…” other Jade says and the planet floating above her hands goes from baseball size to basketball to uh… bean bag? You’re not sure if there’s a sport that has a ball that big in it. Maybe water polo? That’s like horse soccer in a pond, right?

Other Jade looks up at all of you and shuffles you in closer together still, other you’s shoulder is digging into you.

“Jesus, Jade, how close are you looking for us to get here? Biblically?” he demands. She giggles and suddenly Jade and her planet start getting real big and the gap between you and the others around you is widening.

“This is some innerspace, honey I shrunk the kids shit and I’m not really cool with…” whatever Dirk is saying is lost on you as he gets further away from you and you all get tinier. Then in a green flash you’re all dumped in a heap in the snow on LOFAF.

“I have a complaint.” your double says from further down in the heap. You float off to let the others get up.

“I have SEVERAL.” your Rose hisses and squirms free.

You all stand around in a cluster when you’re freed from the pile of people. You look around, the ship isn’t here and you have to be unbelievably tiny right now. You doubt that their Jade can hear
you right now and if you want to be made big again you probably need to message her. That means that you’re no longer under surveillance, suddenly breathing seems a lot easier.

“I think we should probably split up. Perhaps a group of our timeline and one of yours? That way we can cover more ground in the same time.” Roxy suggests.

“Well the big mountain there seems like a good middle point, if one group takes one side the other can take the remaining one. We could meet back in… an hour?” Dirk suggests. Their Rose seems to consider this.

“Well, I didn’t spend much time on my Jade’s planet but if it’s similar there’s a slope like that which leads to woodland around all sides.” she says, pointing behind you to the distant woodland.

“There’s some ponds around too, and the lake which is… somewhere.” your counterpart agrees.

“Well in which case dividing and conquering seems the best option.” Dirk agrees.

“Makes sense to me and if it stops all of you bickering all the better.” the older troll girl says with a shake of her head she backs off and takes to the sky, leaving you all behind.

“Oh, oops. I didn’t think about why she might not like this planet.” Aradia says with a wince.

“Ah, shit, yeah.” your double says with a grimace.

“I wonder if there’s like, a number of teens that you can have together before drama forms.” Roxy muses.

“In my experience… one. One teen.” Dirk says flatly, making Roxy giggle and punch him playfully in the shoulder.

“Right, well. An hour.” other Dave says backing off and pulling his phone out of his pocket as he floats up.

“Dave! Don’t just start messaging them you- and he’s gone. God, brothers.” other Rose groans.

“Always trouble.” Aradia agrees, taking to the skies.

“One hour.” other Rose says, looking over her shoulder at you and flying off.

“Have fun storming the castle, kids. Ehhh, I have a teensy confesh to make, boys and girls.” Roxy says through clenched teeth. Her eyes are fixed on the distant alter selves that are flying off around the mountain.

“I have a terrible feeling that I know just what you’re about to say.” Rose says, looking sidelong at her momdaughter.

“I have the ring of life, ours I mean. I didn’t take theirs.” Roxy insists and with a furtive look around she whips out an unassuming gold band and hastily stashes it back in her sylladex again.

“You were going to give it to Callie, right?” Dirk asks and Roxy nods.

“That’s the female cherub, Lord English’s counterpart?” Rose questions thoughtfully.

“She didn’t deserve to die and she could possibly help us beat him! I was going to void off and give it to her after we left the lilypad to do our things but the sudden raining of teen corpses kinda stopped me!” Roxy says hurriedly.
“And this is the only place that we’re not being watched.” you conclude.

“Right.” Roxy nods.

“I have to say that I’m not sure that you have the chance to bring her back now. Their Jade would certainly notice another person to size up and it wouldn’t be hard to work out how she was alive when she wasn’t here before.” Rose points out.

“Besides I think if they saw her- well, they might let her keep the ring as long as no one else needed it but I think the moment one of theirs needed it they’d off your friend in a heartbeat.” you say regretfully.

“I wouldn’t let them.” Dirk protests.

“Then I’m afraid a heroic death will be in your future. I have seen absolutely nothing to suggest that the information we learnt about their species of humans would stop at murder. I entirely believe my doppelganger’s murderous threats from before and honestly Dirk I think your double would kill you without a second thought if it meant retrieving a ring that could revive either my double or Dave’s, probably Roxy’s too. Honestly the best case scenario we can hope for here is that when the fight starts Roxy revives her friend and she lays low until the end and no one else needs the ring.” Rose says.

You can’t help but wonder how you’ll feel if someone does perma-die and their friend has been revived. Do you really have the right to choose who deserves to live or die?

“That does sound like our best option.” Dirk says unhappily.

“What if time isn’t passing the same way for Callie as it is for us? Jane told me that before she woke up she and Jade were with Callie. But Jade is still asleep so what if time is going forward for Callie and she’s in danger or she thinks we abandoned her?” Roxy says miserably.

“Waking Jade up ought to at least give us some answers, so maybe we should just look for these frogs, yeah?” Dirk says kindly. It’s… yeah, he’s not Bro. He’s weird and awkward but not Bro at all.

“Wait, no. Look, I’m going around with this damn ring. What if I lose it or if one of them finds out I have it?” Roxy hisses, looking around even though no one is there.

“Well, what do you suggest?” Dirk asks.

“I… what if… what if I go void. We have an hour so I could go looking for Callie, find her, give her the ring and tell her not to use it until later when we find her again. Then we can’t be caught with it and no one can take it from her.” Roxy suggests.

“Do you know how to get there?” Rose asks her. Roxy chews on her lip, candy pink lipstick sticking to her teeth as she does.

“I just- I gotta try. She’s one of my best friends, I can’t just abandon her.” Roxy says firmly.

“No one’s saying you should. Ok, just go and we’ll cover for you.” Dirk tells her hurriedly. Roxy throws herself at him, wrapping him in a tight hug.

“You’re the best DiStri.” she whispers and then pops out of existence leaving Dirk holding nothing.

Your group splits up, it’d be no good if someone from their side checked on you only to find you all
having a secret meeting. You figure there’s not likely to be any frogs higher up so you mooch on down to the wooded area and start looking there, trying to keep an eye on the ground so you don’t accidentally squish a frog.

As you search your mind idly tracks back to the other you. You’re starting to feel a little less like he’s infringing on your brand by just existing. Now that you’ve got that shit with Bro out of the way it seems pretty clear that his life is really different from yours but clearly not without problems. You gnaw on your lip and pull out your phone, you keep your message on the visible channel because you know enough about being watched to know that you have to be seen sometimes or else you can’t hide when you need to.

[turntechGodhead(alpha) began pestering carcinoGeneticist(alpha)]
TGA: hey so you seemed to be getting on well with other karkat
CGA: HE’S NOT EXACTLY MY FAVOURITE PERSON BUT WE’RE SUPPOSED TO BE BUILDING GOOD RELATIONSHIPS SO I’M TRYING AT LEAST.
TGA: hey not a critique here man i just figured with all of the time you spent ragging on your past and future selves that you would have a harder time with him than you seem to be
CGA: UGH, CAN YOU NOT REMIND ME OF THAT SHITSHOW?
CGA: REGARDLESS OF THAT I THINK IT’S EASIER BECAUSE HE NEVER WAS ME? HE GREW UP WITH DIFFERENT PARENTS, WITH A BUNCH OF MY FRIENDS AS ‘SIBLINGS’, IN A DIFFERENT CULTURE AND A DIFFERENT LIFE. WE’RE CLEARLY SIMILAR BUT HE’S VERY DIFFERENT. THAT PROBABLY HELPS.
CGA: PLUS HE’S APPARENTLY JEALOUS OF ME FOR THINGS IN MY LIFE TOO SO THERE’S THAT.
TGA: huh i didnt think of that
TGA: i guess my double must be more similar to me than yours is to you or something
CGA: PLEASE TELL ME YOU DIDN’T HIT HIM AGAIN.
TGA: what no have a little faith in me man
CGA: HM.
TGA: blow me
TGA: no i was just thinking that i dont know how i feel about him because seeing him earlier was weird
CGA: HOW SO?
TGA: a bunch of people were mad at him his *boyfriends* included and he just crumpled like wet tissue paper and hes a mess right now
CGA: I GUESS IT MAKES MORE SENSE THAT A DAVE WHO GREW UP RELYING ON OTHERS FOR SUPPORT WOULDN’T HANDLE LOSING THAT VERY WELL. OUR GROUP IS PROBABLY A LOT MORE SELF RELIANT THAN THEIRS WHICH IS SO ABSURDLY INTERCONNECTED.
TGA: i guess
TGA: i might talk to him maybe
TGA: it seemed like he was trying to be cool with me before and i did blind him in the last twenty four hours so i maybe oughta be nice
CGA: I DREAD TO THINK OF THE ECHO CHAMBER OF AWKWARD STRIDER BULLSHIT. BUT PLEASE DO SEND ME ANY SNIPPETS OF THIS ENLIGHTENING EXPERIENCE.
TGA: gee thanks
[turntechGodhead(alpha) ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist(alpha)]

You crunch through the snow for a bit, eyeing the distant form of Dirk who you can just make out a way aways. He picks up a decent sized rock and looks underneath it. You watch him in confusion for a moment until it occurs to you that he grew up on post apocalypse Earth and has probably never
seen a frog in person or has any idea that they don’t live under giant heavy rocks like millipedes. You figure you’ll leave him at it and instead open up a new window on your phone.

[turntechGodhead(alpha) began pestering turntechGodhead]
TGA: hey
TG: uh nope were not doing this both in red hold on
TG: i may as well gank roses purple since i got her eyes
TGA: oh good now this is just super weird
TG: did you want something
TGA: i just wanted to shoot the shit
TGA: things seemed pretty intense back there with all the yelling and storming out and how weve been banished to here to stop shit escalating because thats blatantly what vriska was doing lets be real
TG: oh good so youre just here to observe the trainwreck cool cool
TGA: geez was i this pissy when i was fourteen?
TG: oh my fucking god right first things first i am fifteen like next fucking week alright and second with all the time travel im basically already there so im only a year younger than you so shut your fuck
TGA: shut my fuck
TG: you heard me
TGA: you know actually thinking of it was a moody fucker when i was your age all that teen angst
TG: im going to find you and drown you
TGA: ha
TGA: maybe i will send a copy of this to karkat
TG: wait
TG: mine or yours?
TGA: mine obviously

You look around but there’s still no frogs so you keep going, skirting the trees and glancing at your phone every so often only there’s still no reply from other you.

TGA: i was joking man im not gonna do that
TG: oh
TG: no i knew that
TG: i was just looking at my mark and man i gotta say trying to look at your own tricep is kind of hard
TGA: so it really just magic erases if they dont love you anymore?
TG: its complicated lots of things cause it
TG: a huge personality change can break it as well as relationship breakdown which i guess is what happened to bro and my mom but like rose said not great test cases there
TG: dirk nearly lost his with jake because he dumbly decided that looking after me rose and rox was more important than his relationship with jake because he couldnt be trusted to not get distracted by jungle boys twelve pack or whatever and that decision made theirs black out partway until dirk realised he was dumb
TG: so yeah me choosing to risk permadeath could be a line too far and kill my whole soulmate relationship to say nothing of my moirallegiance because aradia pulling similar shit to this was what broke them up so yeah theres all that and rose is the only sibling i have whos not hella mad at me rn so my life is garbage what about u
TGA: holy shit your whole team is crazy codependent and weird
TG: again are you just here to laugh at me or what because i can totally come find you and literally eye for an eye you if youre gonna keep being a fucking tool
TGA: jesus calm down
TGA: i said sorry about the blinding thing i didnt mean it
TGA: i mean if it helps i dont think your whole argument was bad or anything
TG: lord english has gotta go down and the more of us that fight him the better our odds are gonna be i mean theres probably some sort of too many cooks tipping point where it goes down but id rather fight him with you three than on my own
TG: right?? see this is what i mean but its so obvious that everyones thinking that im trying to kill myself again or something
TGA: what
TG: oh not like god tier obvs but the whole suicidal thing
TG: ive been over that for ages but apparently it means i cant make a rational argument for anything where i might die as a side effect without everyone losing their minds
TGA: wait back up
TG: you tried to kill yourself?
TGA: what
TG: oh no it kind of looked like i meant that fuck that wasnt what i meant
TG: i never actively did that shit i just
TG: i mean you must know what that depression bullshit is like right i mean you had the whole thing with bro and you didnt even have a dirk right so yeah
TG: its you know the whole doing risky shit because you dont actually care if youre alive or not and like being disappointed when you wake up and like well shit im still alive that kind of casual wanting to die thing
TG: you know… depression?
TGA: i dont know actually
TG: i mean i get fucked up if i think about bro too much but i dont want to die at all i never did ive been trying to avoid it like hell for forever
TGA: the one time i came close was this suicide mission i had with rose to save shit but that was for a reason not because i wanted it
TG: you
TG: youre not depressed like not even had it and got better because im basically better
TG: you dont take stuff for it medication i mean?
TGA: i dont know actually
TG: why what no you have to youre like me why wouldnt you have it too
TG: i cant

[turntechGodhead ceased pestering turntechGodhead(alpha)]

Uh, that didn’t go well.

You don’t have depression, right? Sometimes you get burnt out but it’s really temporary. It’s the nightmares and panic for no reason that bother you and the issues you have with things. Wow, you didn’t consider that your opposite might be so different from you. Maybe it’s to do with his species, maybe all of them are less mentally stable.

Still, you feel a little bad that you evidently freaked him out enough that he dropped the conversation with you. You hesitate and wonder what to do. You could contact his Rose but she might just come around and zap you with her wands for upsetting her brother so that’s out.

Shit, you’ve seen enough troll movies to know that fixing that kind of meltdown is a pale thing. His diamond boyfriend is clearly pissed with him but maybe this could help? You open the shared contact list that populated on your phone. You’re pretty sure he was yellow and ‘twinArmageddons’ seems to fit that, and the other two yellow names don’t have doubles on your list which makes you think those are the dancestors that don’t have counterparts from your universe. This is some good detective work.
[turntechGodhead(alpha) began pestering twinArmageddons]
TGA: hey
TA: dave ii'm really not iintere2ted in talkiing two you right now.
TGA: hey man check the extra letter youre stonewalling the wrong strider
TA: oh.
TA: what do you want?
TGA: its sollux right?
TA: yeah.
TGA: youre mini mes monorail or whatever arent you?
TA: moiirail and ye2. why do you want two know?
TGA: i kind of broke your dave by accident we were talking about shit and he mentioned being
depressed or some shit like that which is crazy and i mean literally crazy
TGA: like who knew other me had actual mental problems
TGA: and finding out that im not listening to emo music and praying for death flipped him out and
my understanding is that fixing that is kind of a you problem
TGA: also other rose scares the shit out of me
TA: what the fuck diid you 2ay two hiim? plea2e tell me you diidn't phra2e iit liike that you
ii2en2iitiive a22fuck
TA: do you know how long iit'2 taken me two get hiim two accept help or under2tand that there'2
nothiing wrong wiith hiim??
TGA: i mean not to be a dick here but isnt there technically something wrong with him medically
speaking?
TA: ju2t 2top. 2top talkiing. i'll deal wiith hiim, fight or no figh. ii'm pretty 2ure whatever you
2aiid two hiim ii2 goiing two have jacked hiim up biig tiime.
TA: don't talk two hiim again, you're clearly doiing more harm than good.
[twinArmageddons ceased pestering turntechGodhead(alpha)]

Wow everyone is highly strung. Or maybe that guy is always like that, you literally don’t know him
at all.

Your instinct is to open your message to Karkat again and tell him all about it. That’s what you do
now, it’s what you did on the meteor. Whenever anyone said some dumb shit you’d regroup and talk
about it, mock people and take sides. Not always even real people, though the thrilling ketchup in the
cupboard or fridge debate held by justices Lalonde and Pyrope was thrilling. No, Karkat has in the
past kicked open your door book in hand and loudly declared that you would not believe this shit
and then started reading to you.

Needless to say the kneejerk impulse to digitally grab Karkat and catch him up about your alt-self’s
fucked up brain and his weird full-homo but no bone-o relationship is understandable. But it occurs
to you that maybe running back to your Karkat like a gossipy bitch is kind of.

Of…

Gay?

You know it’s a dumb thought but it’s breathing down the back of your neck like the ghost of Bro.
Not helped by the extended contact with a guy who looks almost identical to him setting you on
edge. But it is. You might be ragging on your alt self for being codependent on his people but you’re
the one who acts like you’re on a piece of elastic with your Karkat.

You try to remind yourself of what Karkat told you (Karkat again? GAY.) that even if your old
society would have frowned on that, who cares? So ok, who cares? Both Roses are gay, other you is
bi, at least one Roxy is. You eye the distant figure of Dirk as he climbs a tree (is he looking for tree
frogs or something?) and remind yourself that apparently he bones dudes. Which is weird because he seems normal, though you know as soon as you think it that it’s a bad thing to think. You’re also somewhat undecided on the Dirk being any kind of normal part too as he’s leaping across to another tree despite being able to fly.

Whatever.

You try to accept the thought that running to Karkat with every thought you have is gay. And for a follow up if you wanted to challenge that you could point out that it’s not really, you’re not fucking him, that’d be gay. That… oh boy. No, you’re not thinking about THAT.

It’s hard to put that genie back in the bag again though, especially as you know that your alternate self over the other side of the mountain here is in the habit of routinely sucking face and who knows what else with his Karkat. It’s not like you’ve not considered it, you went through the worst of puberty on a meteor with a bunch of aliens and your sister for company. At this point you could probably jerk it to furniture and still get there. And besides the trolls fascinated you for how alien they were, being interested in weird shit is your jam. It’s not weird to like how Karkat looks and it’s understandable in your highly limited group of people to interact with that certain thoughts might stray out of the platonic territory now and then. It doesn’t mean shit.

Except other you over there fell for Karkat when he was on Earth, surrounded by other teens in a damn highschool and above all of them he still wanted Karkat more. And you can tell yourself that he’s different to you all you like. You can point out how he is literally a different species to you, how he seems down with weird quadrants that you don’t get, how he apparently has mental problems too. All of those are valid reasons for why him being desperately in love with Karkat isn’t a damning sign that your own obsession with being around yours as much as you can isn’t the same fucking situation.

You won’t let yourself imagine it for real, not beyond things that you can brush aside as random ideas or hormonal flutterings unrelated to reality. Because, let’s be real, there are people equipped to deal with relationships and then there’s you. The relationship you have with your sister is weird, each of you caught in a kind of doublespeak of your own that makes any kind of sincerity hard. As for the rest of your friends even before the game happened they were far away and didn’t have to deal with your bullshit in person and in the game itself there was so little time. Bro was a nightmare, you had no other friends and everything went kind of weird with Terezi after the whole coin flip thing. Karkat is unequivocally the best relationship you’ve ever had and you’re a mess. He’s one too, you know what he feels is wrong for his culture so you make quite the pair.

You have everything to lose and you’re not sure you can deal with what you might gain, you’re not sure he can either. So you refuse to imagine it. You’re not going to stand here when you should be looking for frogs and instead recall the way his thick eyebrows pinch together when he’s irked. You won’t visualise the way his dulled spiky teeth dent his otherwise plush and weirdly inky lips. You refuse to recall the way his voice has all those gravelly tones in it like he broke it from shouting or consider the sounds you can’t hear without messing with them on your laptop, the ones his books describe and you can sometimes feel but not hear.

You won’t.

A croak sounds, nearly scaring you out of your skin. You look wildly around until you see it, a patchy blue and green frog sat on a rock. You grab its weird sticky body and eye it suspiciously. It croaks at you again and you have the dumb thought that you should be all fairytale and kiss it, only that’d summon your prince charming and now you’re thinking about Karkat again. It does mean that you’re thinking about Karkat in the dumb as fuck prince gear that Dirk is still running around in and
that is enough to make you have to fight to keep the poker face and not laugh.

[turntechGodhead(alpha) opened a memo “fucking frog finding”]
-- tentacleTherapist(alpha) added --
-- timaeusTestified(alpha) added --
-- tipsyGnostalgic(alpha) added --
-- turntechGodhead added --
-- tentacleTherapist added --
-- apocalypseArisen added --
-- anacronisticAbsterge added --
TGA: boy i hope thats the right people
TGA: dude theres a name filter checkbox that oughta help
[Name filter applied]
Roxy(alpha): thats better

Huh. You suppose she’s done with her secret mission, a good thing she is too and you didn’t inadvertently out her as not being here. You kind of want to ask her about it but that’d be super dumb of you.

Damara: why did y0u make this
Rose(alpha): Did you find a frog, Dave?
Dave(alpha): yeah i did but im thinking we should maybe get more than one
Rose(alpha): I suppose Jade doesn’t them need anymore and if we are trying to distill down the essence of an animal for Hal it would seem that the more variety the better.

Aradia: i think i hear cr0aking near me this is exciting
Dirk(alpha): It’s a shame we don’t have other animals that we can find. Different species I mean.
Rose: My planet had a quest to return fish to the ocean but I never completed it, did you either Rose?
Rose(alpha): No, other goals seemed more pressing a the time and I don’t know if I’m the kind of person who that quest is even designed for anymore. It was for a thirteen year old me, a wholly different person to who I am now.

Dirk(alpha): Wouldn’t a quest designed to reflect who you are be adaptive for who you become though? Not that I can really say as the quests on our planets were clearly broken and there was little to do except dungeon grinding and waiting in a dead session for all of you to arrive.

Roxy(alpha): omfg the roses talk like dirk this is wild to see
Dave(alpha): that sure is a lot of text up there
Rose: Yes, we have previously noted the similarity of my attention to how the English language is meant to work matching with Dirk’s own as opposed to Dave and Roxy who seem to think that coherence is optional.

Rose(alpha): idgaf u get me
Dave(alpha): i get u

Rose(alpha): I suppose one could make an argument that as long as meaning is preserved the method is neither here nor there.
Dirk(alpha): Pretty much what she meant by “u get me” I think.
Rose: ...strange I thought Dave would want to get in on this debate.

Roxy(alpha): we seem to have it p well covered if u ask me
Rose: Be that as it may it’s never stopped him before.
Rose: Dave?
Aradia: maybe hes wrestling a fr0g
Rose: Oh for goodness sake. Dave?
Rose: !PingHalStatusBot
-- HalStatusBot joined the chat --

HalStatusBot: This is HalStatusBot, programmed by Hal to find and store information on the
StriLondes for emergency situations, designed to run at a minimum of 90% accuracy at all times. Current accuracy percentage is operating at 75% due to critical hardware failure. As such these sicknasty stats should be verified in an emergency before further action. How can I help?

Dirk(alpha): Oh God it’s splinters all the way down.
Rose: HalStatusBot, !FetchTurntechGodhead heart rate.
HalStatusBot: Current heart rate for Dave Strider is 0BPM.
Rose: WHAT.
Rose: Oh, no, wait his shades were destroyed of course it's zero.
Roxy(alpha): this is kind of cool but im glad that his actual heart rate isn't zero
Rose: HalStatusBot !FetchTurntechGodhead current activity.
HalStatusBot: Dave Strider’s phone is not currently in use. 0 active chats.
Rose: This is infuriating.
Dirk(alpha): Why don’t you ping his location? Is that a thing you can do?
Rose: Because it will likely return that he is less than an inch from my current position due to our scale. It’s no help to me.
Rose: Also I know a location ping alerts Hal, which you’d think the others would too but as far as I’m aware they don’t. Not unless Hal updated his bot’s programming since I last used it.

-- autonomousTerminal has joined --
Hal: 1 d1d. Als0 Dave 1s n0t currently 0n L0FAF. R0se, st0p wast1ng my t1me and f1nd me fr0gs.
-- autonomousTerminal has left --
Rose: ...I suppose that answers my question of whether he’s angry with me or not.
Roxy(alpha): was he writing with a quirk too???
Rose: He is mostly troll, genetically speaking.
Dave(alpha): well this conversation got way too creepy given all of the surveillance powers yall have and the fact that someone can just drop in on a chat uninvited so im gonna bounce

You minimise the chat and focus on what you’re doing. You don’t focus on how other Dave has robots watching his every move. You try even harder not to wonder if your own phone is so infected that Hal and his programs can see into it, you hope even more severely that if that’s the case they can’t see that voided chat you’re all trying to keep secret.

How does other Dave not see how fucked up all of this is? Should you tell him? Tell him that he should be able to go places, say and think things without anyone being able to run some computer script on him to see what he’s doing? Is he so conditioned to find that normal that he can’t see how it’s no different from Bro’s observation at all?

Oh shit. There’s the difference between you two, the kind of thing that describes why he wants to die and you don’t. You got free of Bro when you were thirteen but he never did. Or not totally. His “Bro” died at that age but he had two more watching his every step, not to mention two sisters who are possessive and territorial. You’ll buy that none of them want to hurt him but the guy isn’t free, he’s something they own.

Or is your own thinking of it fucked up? Is being able to find if someone is alive and where they are a reasonable precaution in this game? Do they use the ability only rarely? Where’s the boundary between puppeteering control and protective love? How would you even know? You’ve had far too much of the former and barely any of the latter, your personal scale is probably fucked up.

There’s a distant croak above you and you look up. Well, shit, there are tree frogs here.

You try not to be such an introspective weenie for the rest of the hour but it’s hard, it’s hard and nobody understands.

Regardless when you all meet up again, though without your double, you have a decent collection of
frogs.

“I like these little guys.” Aradia says cheerfully, balancing one on her head.

“Hopefully it will be enough for Hal, I’ll just pester Jade.” other Rose says, typing away on her phone.

Moments later you’re struck with the feeling of being far bigger than you should be compared with what’s around you. Your ears pop and suddenly with a flash of black you’re on your ass by Jade’s bed again. Their Jade is still standing there but she’s joined by Hal who has a big plastic container in his hands. He jostles it at you impatiently until you drop the three frogs in there that you’d caught. The rest of you all put yours in there too and the bottom of the box is covered in irritated frogs, even the one that was riding Aradia’s head is deposited inside.

“Hal, where’s Dave?” other Rose asks.

You watch Hal as he responds. He’s strange to look at, like one of those magic eye paintings. At first glance he looks like a pallet swapped Dirk with horns, like a fun downloadable skin in a video game. Only when you look closer you see so many things that aren’t him. He clenches his jaw in irritation and it does something to the cut of his jawbone and the tense muscle in his neck that’s weirdly Vantas-y. For the first time you really hear the noise that so far you’ve only felt, a building, buzzing, growl.

“Oh, you care about his well being now?” he snipes, his tone buzzing irritably and making his voice sound full of gravel like Karkat’s does.

“I always care about his well being!” other Rose snaps at him.

“Funny way of showing it, siding with his suicidal sacrificial lamb impulses instead of with those of us trying to protect him.” Hal sneers, his growl ratcheting up.

“Don’t be such a patronising, paternalistic fool. Dave isn’t a child, he understands very well the risks. I’m just trying to increase his odds of survival instead of throwing a tantrum about it. You always do this, this is exactly the same as the sword thing.” other Rose argues with him.

“AND I WAS RIGHT THEN, TOO!” Hal screeches at her.

“No you weren’t and just like then you’re putting him in more danger by not allowing him the best means to protect himself. Throwing a wrench in the works of the plan serves to only leave him less protected! You’re making it worse.” other Rose hisses and marches off out of the room. The two time trolls look at each other and awkwardly scoot out after her.

“GOOD! FUCKING G-GO YOU TREACHEROUS- oh God what?” Hal makes a hiccuping choking sound and clutches the plastic tub of frogs a little tighter.

“Uh, Hal?” their Jade asks as he sucks in another choked breath. As she touches his shoulder a fat red tear streaks down his cheek.

“I- ah, I can’t breathe right am- am I crying?!” he demands, dropping the frogs to their loud displeasure and touching his face instead.

“That is definitely a thing you’re doing.” Dirk nods, sounding shocked.

“What the- I- no, why is this happening?” Hal gasps.
“Well, you’re angry and stressed and probably upset too. Angry crying is a thing some people do.” Jade explains for him.

“It’s not something DIRK DOES!” Hal wails, his face in his hands. Jade winces and pats his shoulder a little more.

“Sorry, he’s not had an organic body for all that long and I guess he’s never been this emotionally taxed since getting it. I think he’s still getting surprises.” Jade says apologetically.

“M gonna find out who in my genetic heritage does this and sue. Damnit, I’m not sad I’m pissed and this makes me look like- fuck.” Hal says, choking as he tries to smear tears away.

“Aww, Hal baby it’s ok.” Roxy says soothingly and reaches for him but he jolts back away from her, scrubbing at his face with his sleeve.

“Guh, no. You’re not my…” Hal sniffs and shakes his head then bends down to pick up the frogs.

“I have to go alchemise.” he adds in a mumble and leaves with his frogs.

“That was unspeakably weird.” Dirk says slowly.

“Yup.” Roxy agrees with a wide eyed nod.

Their Jade decides to take LOFAF with her, Dirk and Roxy wander off together talking quietly about Hal and Rose decides to find out what’s going on with the plan now that everything about the ring has been revealed. So after all of that you’re left with a sleeping Jade. You fiddle uncertainly with your sylladex until you pull out your captcharoid camera and snap a photo of her. It’s unusable because the game doesn’t allow you to recreate people with the alchemy system but Jade still has a code. Maybe it’ll be of help for making something to protect her.

You lean on the edge of her bed and look down at her, you haven’t spoken to her for so long and she’s here with you now but out cold for everyone’s good. And here other people are off trying to solve this, to be the hero. You’re the one who’s her friend not any of the doubles here or people who’ve never spoken to the real Jade. They’re helping and you’re angling.

Well, fuck that.

You shove away from the frame of the bed and follow as best as you can the way to the alchemisation room. Living on the meteor if nothing else gave you a great sense of direction with its winding hallways that looked the same. The hallways of the ship are at least better marked. You press the button pad by the door and it slides open, letting you walk inside the room you’d previously investigated with Roxy, Dirk and Karkat.

The inside looks the same as it did before, all of the alchemy equipment set up in an orderly fashion. Only now that Sollux guy is sat on one chair floating a frog in the air as Hal takes captcha photos of them to get their codes.

“Uh, sup?” you call and they both look at you. You’re thankful at least that the shades you still have set you apart from your counterpart.

“Hey, asshole.” Sollux mutters.

“Really feeling the love.” you say flatly.

“Am I wrong though? Thanks at least for pointing your better version my way.” Sollux says
apathetically.

“Give me a new frog.” Hal says and his voice still sounds weird from crying and you’d bet money that he’s embarrassed about the whole thing so you’re not going to bring it up, especially around someone who wasn’t there. Sollux obligingly floats the new frog up, putting the old one somewhere in his sylladex.

“You’re kind of an asshole too from what I’ve seen.” you point out to Sollux who just snorts and changes frogs again as Hal takes a photo.

“Never said I wasn’t.” he shrugs. Well that’s… upfront at least.

You sort of want to ask him if he and your double are cool now or not but the very last thing you want to do is to have to experience Hal crying again and you think he feels the same so you pass on that. Maybe, in retrospect, you could have been a little more delicate with how you phrased things. Although you say that like shit that people say to you doesn’t play in your head for forever afterwards.

Whatever, you didn’t come here for drama.

You fish out your captcharoid of Jade and hold it out to Hal.

“If you’re trying to make something that blocks mind control to her because of her dog side maybe it’d be helpful to have this, it has to have the data on her dog half so it could be helpful. Otherwise you might just protect her from frog stuff.” you say.

The two of them look at the card and then Hal takes it, reading the back with a frown.

“This… hm. That’s… creative.” Hal muses.

“Could we get our Jade in here, get the same for her and then run an exclusion on them to just get the dog part?” Sollux wonders.

“If we could then we could cross that with the frogs and get the code for generic animals, maybe.” Hal nods.

The three of you sit down, the bucket of frogs forgotten. You call the other Jade in and snap a captcharoid of her too and it’s a pretty nice photo regardless so you’re secretly a little pleased with it.

“I was talking to John this morning, your one I mean, about everything that happened for other me.” Jade says, watching Hal and Sollux bicker as they run the cards through the punch designix and the rest of that crap.

“Yeah?” you ask.

“Yeah. He said she had to spend three years alone on a ship with just a sprite of old Jane and a bunch of consorts. Her John and a version of you that was a sprite just died on her, I feel so bad for her.” Jade says, tucking her hair behind her ear and frowning sadly.

“It’s dumb, I missed her and John so much when they were gone and we had no idea shit had gone so sideways for her. Or maybe Vriska did but who knows with that grinch, I tune her out. I just wish Jade would have been with us if that was going to happen.” you sigh.

“The really mean thing is that now that we’re all back together she has to be asleep. I hope at least that if we do this right we can wake her up. I’d really like to talk to her, get to know what some other
me is like!” Jade says, optimistic as ever.

You consider how well everyone else has been getting on with their doubles, which is at best neutral and at worst how you and your one are doing. Ironically Karkat is probably doing the best out of all of the people you know, maybe the Johns are doing alright but you’ve not really asked. Terezi finds it hard to deal with her other self because she’s entirely blind to her own scent and the two of them are completely unable to read each other.

Plus you remember that Jade didn’t exactly get on well with Jadesprite.

“Well I want to wake her up too. I just wish we had more animals to throw at this thing.” you say, sliding away from THAT clusterfuck.

“Hmm, I wonder. Hey, my Jade had this sketch tablet thing that could make cards for shit she didn’t have that we could put into the alchemiter. Do you have that too?” you ask as the idea dawns on you, slow and glorious.

“My pictionary modus? Uhm… hm, I think I have it in here somewhere I don’t use it a lot.” Jade hums and fusses with her sylladex until she produces it. She holds it out to you and you take it from her, scooting your chair over to a table and setting it down.

“I’m not sure Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff merch will really help us here, Dave.” she warns you.

“Hold that idea for later but I’m gonna try something.” you mumble, shielding the tablet with your arm as you draw.

“What’s he doing?” Hal asks from behind you and Jade explains as you keep sketching out the design that you’re working on. You’re going for photo realism here, or as close as you can render in one colour.

“But a Sweet Bro and Hella Jeff design won’t really help.” Jade says as she finally catches them up.

“Maybe he has secret art skills like our Dave has.” Sollux says slowly and you feel the back of your neck prickle with heat at the idea that these people know. It’s not like you care about traditional art or being good at that stuff, it’s just something you can kind of sort of do.

“Dave has secret art skills?” Jade asks. Ah, apparently it’s not widely known here either then.

You pull back from the tablet and it thinks for a moment. It recognises that Jade doesn’t have what you drew so it spits you out a ghost card for the item, which is in this case a crow. Not a photo of a crow which you were a little worried it’d do.

“There, a bird.” you say and hold the card out.

“Oh, shit! Do more! Go for something mammalian, primate maybe. I’ve got photos if you need… here!” Hal gasps, taking the card from you and swapping it for a tablet of his own, though not the drawing kind. This one is suddenly displaying a whole host of animal photos.

You suppose you had better get drawing.

You crack out about half a goddamn zoo’s worth before Hal decides that’s probably enough and there’s probably some kind of irony of you being on a ship trying to save a life in what is the last remnants of several species as you draw animals. For added ironic bonus it’s the people who are all two by two here instead.
“You know maybe the life players can do something with this when we’re out of the game, if we still have alchemy there that is. Populate a planet with Earth animals again.” Sollux says thoughtfully as he turns one of the cards over in his hands.

“Oh yeah, that’s what we really want. Go through a murder game, get somewhere safe only to fill it with lions.” Hal snipes back.

“We have way too many people with psionics, including animal control ones to worry about that. Plus most everyone can fly anyway.” Sollux reasons.

“Oh, just fuck me then, I guess.” Hal grumbles, tossing the totem he’s working on aside and stacking the cards across in a pile.

“I think my relationships with your family are weird enough without fucking you so, eh, thanks but no thanks.” Sollux snarks and you barely suppress a laugh. The guy is pretty funny, you’re actually starting to see why your other self likes him.

“I wasn’t serious!” Hal squawks, going rapidly red.

“I have a soulmate for one and you- I- ugh!” Hal snarls, making Sollux snicker.

“Like I said, he’s still getting used to the whole biological emotional regulation thing.” Jade chuckles from your side. Hal shoots her an offended look.

“Well, I mean… aren’t you genetically part of lots of people? Don’t you have Vantas DNA in you?” you ask curiously.

“Among others, yeah.” Hal nods.

“Well, you’re doing pretty well for not having screaming, frothing at the mouth, tangential rants.” you grin and Jade giggles wildly.

“In many places across the ship several Vantases are looking up like, I feel burned but I don’t know how or why.” Sollux snickers to himself.

Alright, as much as I like mocking Karkat. And I do, so much, national sport in all honesty. BUT I think I’m seeing a pattern here, pass me the card for the dog in Jade.” Hal says, his voice returning back to a serious business tone. He holds up card after card on top of each other as they block hole after hole out of it until only a few very small slithers of light remain shining through.

Jade reaches out and flattens the dimensions of the cards until they can be slid together in the machine and read. It produces a whole new card and totem from the remaining punched holes. Hal picks it up and you all crowd around the card to see it. The picture on the card looks like a child’s drawing, the kind that you could look at and guess that little Timmy was going for an animal but you’ll be fucked if you know what one. It has a slightly weird number of legs, some kind of fur, a fin, a tail(?) and a face with that little ‘3’ mouth shape that kids give cats and dogs in drawings. It’s certainly an animal but you can’t get more specific than that, which is what you were going for you suppose.

“Right. Now, I already fucked with the tiaratop’s settings to protect against mind control instead of enforce it but that wouldn’t protect Jade without this. So if I just…” Hal trails off and combines the punch cards for his altered tiaratop and the “animal?” card and alchemises the result.

He picks up the band. It’s green and slightly scaled like a snake, so it looks like the ideas have combined.
“Right, well The Summoner should be meeting us at Jade’s bedside, his control is the strongest so if it foils him we’re good. Dave, since you know this Jade personally maybe you should lead off explaining what’s going on.” Hal suggests. That seems to make sense so you nod in agreement.

“You guys go on, I’ve got to talk to my parents.” Sollux says unhappily. So as you, Hal and Jade, well their Jade, all go right out of the door Sollux goes left.

“It’s so weird to hear trolls talking about parents, as actual people I mean and not giant white monsters.” you say, glancing behind your shoulder at Sollux’s retreating back.

“Well, you’ll find it’s only the Earth born trolls that really feel that way about their parents. Terezi absolutely views Redglare as her mother but the same cannot be said for Vriska and Mindfang. Kanaya and Porrim don’t wholly see Dolorosa as their mother in the same way that Aradia and Damara don’t totally view their adoptive parents as ‘really’ their parents. But I think at least the Maryams and the Megidos have pretty positive relationships with their guardians. And then of course there’s trolls who never had any parents at all, Makara’s, Amporas. They grew up in foster or community care. Which, you know, my sympathies there.” Hal explains as you all walk.

“I’m pretty sure that John and Jane had the most normal childhood out of any of us humans though.” Jade says.

“Yeah, and their maternal grandmother turned out to be the evil leader of the troll race who we all murdered before busting their Dad out of prison.” Hal snorts.

“Yeah, I stand by my statement.” Jade nods.

“Well… yeah, I think you might be right.” Hal shrugs.

The doors to the medical room are already open. One of the adult trolls with the huge bull horns is standing there in his ripped up denim jacket with a patch for the zoo that was in your city on the shoulder. Next to him are Karkat and Kanaya. You shoot a message to Rose and John, if Jade really is going to wake up they’ll want to be here too.

As you enter Hal makes that weird little chirp again and the other trolls look at him.

“Is that it?” Karkat, it’s not your Karkat but the other one, asks him.

“Yeah, lots of hard alchemy work went into it but we’ve got it.” Hal nods, holding up the headband thing. Karkat squints dubiously at it.

“Explain to me how it works.” other Karkat demands.

“I…” Hal looks down at his creation in his hands and then helplessly up at Karkat.

“I’m not going to let you put it on her if you don’t know how it’s supposed to work!” Karkat argues.

“No, no, I know how it works I just don’t know how to… uh. Okay, so I put it on her and imagine there’s a big magical shield that protects her from all the mean brain-thinky waves that make her dog brain do bad things.” Hal says with entirely unconvincing sincerity, a forced smile and even a slight theatrical handwave.

Karkat makes a frustrated noise and Kanaya grabs him by the arm and pulls him to her side. She purses her lips and frowns at Hal.

“Must you antagonise him?” she asks with a huff.
“Look, Kan, just take my word that I have no reason to believe this will fail. It’s either that or y’all sit through a five hour neuroscience lecture featuring mind control psionics, susceptibility to them and a primer on alchemic concepts. Do you want the explanation or do you want this done?” Hal challenges her.

“I think we should just test it out, if it doesn’t work I can put her right back to sleep in two shakes. Okay?” the adult troll says.

“Have you started yet?” John asks as he barrels into the room with Rose on his heels.

“I think we were getting to that.” you tell them.

“Oh, shut up. Hal put it on her.” Karkat orders.

Hal slips between the adult troll and the bed with Jade in it and gently lifts her head a little to slip the wide green band down so it rests across her forehead.

“Oh, that should do it. Are you going to wake her up?” Hal asks the adult troll.

“Well, it doesn’t really work like that. I put her under whenever she starts to wake up, you help me set the alarm when your machines sense that after all. But it’s not like I’m keeping her asleep. I can just…” he leans over and flicks Jade in the nose with one clawed fingertip.

Jade, your Jade, flails awake and sits bolt upright. The adult troll raises his hands to his head with a look of concentration.

“Ah! Where- John? Rose? Dave? Are you really here?” Jade gasps, her arms outstretched for you all. Sheer reflex drags you in until there’s a pile of your friends in one suddenly desperate heap on the bed.

“Nnnnng!” the adult troll grunts.

“I’m pretty sure it works, cut that out before you burst something.” Hal snorts.

“Well, congratulations, you can no longer be mind controlled as long as you’re wearing that. Please don’t, uh, take that off.” the adult troll says as he points at the headband on her head.

“Well, I’m glad you’re awake. You’ve got a lot to catch up on but I’m sure your friends can get you up to speed and from what I understand it’s been a while for you so…” other Karkat says with a vague gesture towards you all.

Jade squirms out from between you and Rose and catches Karkat’s wrist in her hand.

“Karkat?” she asks, staring at him in wonder.

“I- yeah, I’m not your Karkat but…” he trails off.

“I didn’t know you had a tattoo.” Jade says, pulling at his arm to look at it.

“It’s not a tattoo it’s a soulmark, I know your species doesn’t have them for reasons that escape me but our humans do. It’s a representation of your soulmate’s soul.” he explains, looking more and more uncomfortable with each word. Evidently he’s no more pleased about his first fight with your counterpart than that guy is.

“Is this Dave? I mean the sword, stairs, and the records- oh and birds too.” she exclaims in delight. Your stomach clenches, is it really that easy for her to assume that any version of you could be
involved with Karkat? Had you given her the impression of not being straight even before the game?

Pain twists Karkat’s younger features and he snatches his arm back, wrapping it around his middle.

“Dave is my- I have to go.” he mutters and rushes from the room. Kanaya shoots you all an apologetic look and chases after him.

“I guess I’m going to be the one reporting to Vriska about this, then.” Hal grumbles.

“You are the doctor after all.” the adult troll teases and slips out of the room before Hal can foist the task off onto him.

“Hey, Jade? Before I go just let me add myself to your chumroll, if you feel weird at all just hit me up. I’m sure you’ll get a full patch for your tech from the helm soon but you should have me. Do you feel okay now?” Hal says, brushing aside his irritation for concern.

“I’m fine, really. What’s your name?” Jade asks, peering over John’s shoulder at him.

“I’m Hal.” he says with a broad and pleased grin.

“Well I- oh, you added yourself! How’d you do that?” Jade asks, looking up from one of her many computing devices.

“I’m just that great. Later, Harley.” he says and walks off with a wave. Now it’s just the four of you and the other Jade who is suddenly looking a little awkward.

“I, hah, I’m sure you have questions but I just wanted to give you your planet back and I think everyone’s giving you your space so maybe I should too? But here.” other Jade says and holds out her hand with the gently revolving planet of LOFAF floating above her palm.

“Oh, thank you. Gosh, it’s kind of strange looking at myself like this.” Jade says, holding her hands out. The small planet drifts over to her and bobs between her cupped palms.

“It’s probably a little stranger for me what with the… heh, they’re very cute you know.” other Jade grins, gesturing to her own head where the dog ears are on your Jade’s.

“Aw, thank you!” Jade laughs.

“Okay, well I’ll see you later! I’d love to talk science with you at some point but I’m sure Vriska is gonna want to talk planning if I can get Karkat to see reason. And… speaking of I should go track him down. Have fun together!” other Jade says with a passing grimace of irritation. She vanishes in a black pop of space, unlike your Jade’s flash of green.

“Man, I’m feeling really nostalgic. What’s say we have this party at my house?” Jade asks brightly and, without waiting for a response from you, shrinks you all down tiny so fast that your ears pop and when you open your eyes from blinking your surroundings are different. You’re on LOFAF but indoors in a hallway of Jade’s old home.

“Well, that ought to do it!” Jade barks with laughter and then leans over to squeeze you all together in a tight hug.

“Well are we here?” John asks from somewhere near your forehead. Jade finally lets you all go and grins.

“When I was asleep I ran into Rose’s mom, Roxy. She caught me and Callie up with everything that
was going on. I know we were being watched up there and I know all about our doubles and the ring.” Jade says with a sly smile.

“Oh, that’s brilliant.” Rose grins.

“We missed you, you ridiculous genius.” you say and hug her side on. It breaks your heart that she was alone for so long, she should have been with you two.

For his part John shifts uncomfortably on the floor and looks down at his knees.

“Jade I’m- I’m really sorry about what happened.” John mumbles unhappily. Jade’s grip around your shoulders slackens and her ears droop.

“I had to make the deal I did to save everyone but- but it’s not fair that it meant that you had to be alone. I didn’t know just how it would- that Davesprite would also- and that you’d be- I’m sorry.” John sniffles and big wet tears streak down his cheeks.

“Oh, John no. I- I hated being alone, so much. But it’s not your fault!” Jade gasps, flinging herself at him and nearly bowling you over in the process. You watch as she squishes John to her chest and his shaking hands clench in the black fabric of her dress.

“It is! I made the deal!” John says, his voice muffled by fabric and probably his sister’s cleavage too. Damn ectobiology making this shit awkward. You look at Rose, still somewhat paranoid that she can read your mind. Her expression is knowing so either she can or she just always looks that way. You’re not sure which is more likely. You figure that if she could read your mind then she probably would have strangled you to death by now just to get some peace and quiet from all the shit you think all of the time.

“John, am I wrong or did the timeline you came from have all of us dead in it?” Jade demands, pulling him back by the shoulders and fixing him with a firm stare.

“Yes! It was the worst! But I didn’t know that you’d have to pay the price for me fixing things, or I didn’t think about how you’d-” John begins to say again only for Jade to lock him in a headlock.

“You listen to me, you dumb butt. I hated being on my own with my friends having died, but I hate the idea of BEING dead and all my friends being dead way more. If you could have asked me I’d have agreed. Now you whining over it isn’t gonna change that so are we good or am I gonna have to do this until you go bald?” Jade says and starts to vigorously noogie John’s head. John yelps and flails, trying to squirm out of her grasp but Jade is a rough, tough, buff girl. Hello adolescent crush, nice to see you again.

John is snortlaughing as he tries to flail away so you simply can’t miss the opportunity to pull out your phone and snap a picture of the scene. Looking at the screen it looks like Jade’s eyes are doing that thing that dogs and cats do, where their eyes reflect the light back. With a gust of wind John breaks free and falls onto his ass.

“I give! I give!” he giggles as Jade reaches for him again. Jade grins triumphant and falls back on him, leaning on his stomach.

“So, our doubles.” Jade says a little more seriously.

“They are different to us.” Rose nods.

“Yeah, in weird unpredictable ways. And they’re not fully human either.” you say, like Jade doesn’t have dog DNA partying it up in her genes right now.
“Mmm, Roxy told me you accidentally blinded other Dave by fighting with him and that damaged their view of us a bit.” Jade nods and you squirm guiltily. You didn’t mean to goddamnit.

“In fairness though if he’d done that to you I don’t think I’d be rolling out a party for other Dave either.” John points out and you can see his point.

“Well regardless of why things aren’t great now the question is can we trust them?” Jade asks.

You share a look with Rose and both make the same uncertain sound.

“Trust them to what, is the question. Right now we have aligning goals, we have the same enemies to defeat and our mutual cooperation increases the survival odds of both teams. Beyond that however it’s less clear.” Rose answers.

“They’re pretty, sort of… werewolf feral. No offense.” John says, flicking Jade’s ear.

“Certainly they’re violently territorial, my counterpart attempted to murder Dave for blinding his double and was only stopped by the crowd and other John’s father. I have no doubt that if they had to choose between anyone on their team or ours they would choose their own, so really the crux of the matter is to either get them to consider us one of them or simply not to get in a situation where it becomes us versus them.” Rose suggests.

“Easier said than done. It’s really weird interacting with younger me, it’s like looking in a funhouse mirror. I hope I’m not really that annoying.” John huffs and flops onto his back, nearly unbalancing Jade.

“I also feel that my double is considering stabbing me on a regular basis and Dave seems to be unable to avoid upsetting the apparently far more emotionally literate version of himself.” Rose agrees.

“Wow, fuck you. I can totally get on with other me this is just… teething problems. I don’t have self loathing issues, I’m great and if he’s anything like me I’m sure he’s great too. This is just a weird time and we got off on the wrong foot. Or, uh, eye.” you argue. You’re gonna fucking befriend the shit out of the guy just to spite your goddamn sister. That’ll teach her.

“Well, anyway I feel like we might be better suited to trying to ingratiate ourselves with different people. The older humans might be wise, especially if it can ping their parental instincts that their species seems to favour.” Rose continues.

“So then we have how long?” Jade asks.

“Tomorrow it’ll be five days until we’re back to the present again.” you answer instantly. As much as the ‘present’ means anything, but it’ll be the moment you return to the time you jumped back from. When the loop closes. It’s weird feeling the sensation of a time loop when it’s not one of your own.

“That’s five days to befriend them enough to make them not want to betray us when it comes time to making a new universe.” Jade tells you.

“Would they really cut us out for no reason? That seems needlessly cartoon supervillain-like of them.” John says with a frown.

“Well I’m not exactly down with living in 1984 constant surveillance, that’s pretty villain like if we’re throwing those terms around.” you point out.
“But that surveillance helped prove that we didn’t steal their ring, who knows how big of a deal that could have become otherwise!” John argues back.

“I think it was Benjamin Franklin who said ‘Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.’ The point is their willingness to survey everything is suspect all by itself.” Rose quotes. You have to agree on that point, you’re not down with being recorded twenty four seven in any way. You’d rather have had to all argue your case on not stealing the ring than be filmed the whole time.

“Well haven’t we established that they’re a different species? Maybe that lack of boundaries between people and the whole community is normal to them. This could just be a culture clash.” Jade says thoughtfully.

Since being here you’ve learnt that Not-Bro made an AI to track your double’s every movement for basically his whole life. Even if their ‘human’ culture doesn’t have that normalised it’s pretty obvious that it’s normal for him. You wonder if a few years down the line he’s down for the same kind of nasty ‘HEY THAT WAS REALLY FUCKED UP’ kind of shock that you got.

“Once we win the game we don’t have to stay on the ship, right? Not unless we just get kicked out the other side of that door with nothing but empty space out there. So once we win we won’t be watched all the time, even if they want to keep watching us. So maybe we’ve just got to grit our teeth through a week of it, or less now actually, and then it’ll all be fine.” John says with his usual optimism.

You’re not sure that he’s right but you honestly don’t have a better plan. No one else seems to either and so instead the conversation moves on. Jade and John want to hear all about the meteor and you do your best to catch them up on other people’s antics instead of focusing on you and Karkat. Rose at least does you the solid of sticking with that plan and not dragging you into anything that you’re not sure you’re ready to discuss. You’d already tried to talk to John about it on the lilypad and honestly that was a huge mess.

You spend a good few hours shooting the shit with all of them and it feels good in the way that things haven’t for a long time. It’s not that you didn’t enjoy spending time with Karkat, God you did more than you might want to admit, and it’s not that kicking it with your sister or the Mayor wasn’t fun because again it was. But there’s something about the four of you together, laughing about Jade’s dream bot and her time on Prospit, about John’s terrible taste in movies, with Rose making sly comments and you slip falling into innuendo. The four of you have chemistry that just WORKS and for the first time in years you’re all back together.

It’s not like there aren’t moments where your different experiences don’t cause a hiccup in your flow, like John referencing something his Jade did but this one never experienced. Or Jade saying how she wished she could have been with you. There are moments when it is obvious that though you all grew up together online and went through this shitshow together that there have been years where your lives diverged without contact. It’s like missing a tooth, everything feels normal and then bam there’s a gap. But even those quickly smooth back to normal. You can’t steal back those lost years, you’re no Rogue of Time but you have now and hopefully if you beat the game you have infinite time to get back into the groove of things.

It’s nice. John snort laughs and then Rose and Jade share a look before bursting into laughter at him for being so dorky, the whole thing makes your heart clench in the best ways. The place you lived with Bro was never your home, not even technically a house either, your home was times when the four of you all talked together and this feeling welled up. It’s been three years and you’re on a game planet floating in an alien spaceship from a parallel timeline but now of all times you’re finally
FINALLY home.

Hours later you knock awkwardly on the door of your alternate self. You have a plan, an excuse, and you’re going to stick with it. With a beep the doors slide open revealing younger you standing there in different clothes. His whole outfit is skaia blue with white fluffy clouds on it, a sleeveless shirt hangs loosely on him and in the centre of the chest in large grey font reads:

GO FUCK YOURSELF WITH A CLOUD, YOU HEINOUS TOOL.

“What are you wearing?” you blurt out.

“Oh. When the game started a few of us had fun making weird clothes.” he answers.

“Yeah, we did that too but I never made anything like that.” you point out.

“Hah, well, if you combine printed out pesterlogs cut down to what you want it’ll spit out text on clothes. I’ve got a lot but this is one of my latest in the line of Karkat insult sleepwear. Though I did gift John a tshirt that was an entire pesterlog of him and Karkat arguing about the merits of Con Air and the font had to be super tiny to get it all in which makes it all better.” other you explains.

“That’s pretty cool. Did he say that to you, then?” you ask, pointing at the Karkat quote.

“Nah, this was Karkat insulting Jade in what I think was their first conversation. A great first impression.” he says with a shake of his head. Well, there have been worst first impressions. Yours for one.

“Not that I’m not down with these sudden fashion memes but I did have something I wanted to ask you.” you tell him.

“A’ight.” other you says flatly.

“You’re, like, big into photography. Right? Like I used to be before I left all my shit behind and just kind of… stopped doing that.” you ask with creeping shame curling up your spine about it. Yeah you kept some of your other interests up and letting some fall by the wayside is normal growing up, right? But he didn’t and-

And you should stop comparing yourself.

“Yeah, why?” other you asks.

“Do you… have something to print a picture off? From a phone?” you ask, holding up your phone. You have no idea why you’re doing that. You’re fairly sure they guy understands the concept of a phone without a visual demonstration. Either way he doesn’t note your weirdness and instead perks up slightly.

“Shit yeah I do. Come on in.” he says and turns and walks into his room. You do follow after him and watch as he drops into his desk chair, he minimises a few windows on his computer screen but you can still see the names of those chats at the bottom of the screen. You’re kind of surprised that he’s being so pleasant to you given the shit you said to him earlier but you’re not going to throw his niceness back in his face or anything.

It’s kind of early for him to be in pyjamas of any kind, although you are too if you’re being all technical about it. Also, why is he changing out of magic soft god tier pjs for ones that don’t clean themselves, even if they do have great insults on them. You figure he should go eat as you haven’t even done that yet but there’s a plate on his desk that looks pretty fresh so you guess that someone
brought him food. You awkwardly sit down on his bed, your phone held between your hands.

As he clicks things on his computer opening the right programs you have a moment to look around his room again. This time you spot something you didn’t last time, little white generic boxes with drug names on them. You can’t make out the second one because it’s hidden under an empty snickers wrapper. Right, he really does have to take medication for his head, huh? You look away so you can’t get caught but he’s not paying any attention to you anyway.

“If you send me the picture I can print it.” other Dave tells you and leans over to fuss with a printer that’s on the floor.

Right, the photo. You open your photos and select the one with Jade’s reflecting eyes and then hesitate.

“Could you print more than one for me? I know it’s totally stealing your idea but this is kind of cool.” you say, gesturing to the strung up lines of photos on his wall.

“Yeah, same size?” he asks and you nod. You start selecting other pictures to send to him, shooting them over one by one.

You jump in alarm when the door opens and you have a split second of paranoia that he messaged someone and that this is an ambush because the door is the only way in and out of this room and it’s BLOCKED and-

“I talked to Karkat, I have good news and- whoa.” Sollux halts in the door, staring at you with his weird glowing eyes. Oh yeah, he said something about you not going near your double again and now you’re back to that point about him blocking the only exit.

“You have good news about Karkat?!” other you demands, spinning around in his chair to stare desperately at Sollux.

“I… why is there a party in your room and only you’re invited?” Sollux asks, still looking at you.

“Why do you have to make it sound like we were fucking?” other you grimaces.

“Despite Karkat’s many requests I’m not actually going to go fuck myself.” you agree.

“I think his head would explode if you did but we’re missing the point about GOOD NEWS ABOUT KARKAT.” your double says loudly and pointedly.

“But I’d hate to derail you from the unbroken ground of self-cest tangents, usually you’re just straying into weird sex metaphors involving Rose. I couldn’t bar you from so fresh a source of shame.” Sollux snickers.

“Dude, there is no one on this goddamn ship right now that I would not go down on to make you bring me good news about you talking to Karkat, how’s that for commitment to this cause?!” other you insists.

“We both know that’s blatantly untrue.” Sollux says, narrowing his eyes at Dave.

Yeah, you’re pretty sure you can think of a large number of people that you wouldn’t blow even if it’d spontaneously explode all of the enemies that you have left to fight and gift you a genuine video of a rap battle between the President and Snoop Dogg.

...Although that is pretty tempting.
“Even without going for anyone in your shallow gene pool, I can just say Cronus. No news is good enough for that.” Sollux points out. Other you seems to consider this apparently valid point, though it’s lost on you because you can’t remember which dancelor was Cronus.

“I’d just ask Dirk in that situation I think, if that’s how you get that info he’d know it.” other you says with a grin that shortly falls off of his face, presumably as he remembers that he’s not exactly on good terms with his brother right now.

“Anyway, what I was saying was that I talked to Karkat and I have good news and I have bad news.” Sollux says.

“Oh no.” other you says unhappily.

“Good news is he’s calmer now. Not calm but… calmer. He’s willing to consider your stupid, possibly a suicide mission, plan but only on the condition that if he comes up with a better one you do that.” the troll explains.

“That seems reasonable.” you remark.

“Yeah, I mean there isn’t a better plan but hey if he pulls one out of his ass I’m game. What’s the bad news?” he asks and at this Sollux winces.

“You know how sometimes you think ‘hey it’s safe to have this conversation here, Vriska isn’t in earshot’ and then you turn out to be horribly wrong? This was one of those times.” Sollux says unhappily.

“Oh no.” you and your double say as one.

“Vriska pointed out that she can assemble a team that’ll take down Lord English and then said that she was so confident in that team that she’d make them fight anyone to prove it. And also maybe then Karkat would feel better about your odds.” Sollux groans, rubbing his hands over his face wearily.

“What?” you ask in horror. It’s bad enough that you’re going to have to fight the final bosses, you’re not down for some dubiously friendly strifing beforehand. You sidestepped all of Vriska’s invitations to strife her on the meteor for a reason.

“To be clear Karkat wasn’t down for making you fight to prove things for obvious reasons.” Sollux says quickly. You catch the way he moves his hand towards your double’s bare arm but then decides against touching him. His pyjama shirt is totally sleeveless and even you can see the pale lines of scars on his skin. Yeah, those reasons are pretty obvious.

“It’s… actually maybe not a bad idea.” he says. Uh, ok, maybe they’re not obvious enough to him!

“What?!” you demand.

“You’re joking, right?” Sollux says.

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not into this idea at all. But I’m also not into fighting Lord English or anyone else for that matter. What I really want to do is just sleep through this whole fight and have nothing to do with it but it don’t work that way so I gotta. Point is that it seems really dumb to have this huge important fight that the fate of the universe rests on and not practice at all, you know? I don’t think a big throwdown is the solution but seeing how whatever team Vriska picks works and gels would be smart. We can practice which breakdowns within that team mashup well and come up with signals and strategies. And if it helps people see that this isn’t a suicide mission then maybe
everyone will stop being so pissy about it.” He says thoughtfully. You can see the logic there but it
still sets your teeth on edge.

“There will be rules.” Sollux insists.

“Shit, dude, I wouldn’t be up for this in any amount if there wasn’t!” other you exclaims.

Sollux nods and turns his head slightly to look at you, though you’re not sure how you can tell if he
really is looking at you. There must be some way of knowing like you could with Bro without seeing
his eyes but you’ve not cracked it yet for this guy. He pulls your double closer by his shirt and tucks
him under his chin, a gesture that is both sweet and weirdly possessive. You have the advantage of
having at least heard it described in Karkat’s books before. It’s hella pale.

“What about you? You’re pretty much certain to be in the same team are you really cool with this?”
Sollux asks you. Your spine prickles at the blatant concern. Rose shows concern for you but it’s
usually so wrapped up in her psychology game that you can either deal with it or deny it. Karkat
does as well but he usually has to go through several rants before getting to anything resembling ‘I’m
worried about you because I care’. But this straight up ‘are you gonna be okay?’ is weird and jarring.

“Dude, you can’t have both of us. Your duality fetish is too much.” other you laughs into Sollux’s
shirt.

“That’s not- I’m just being nice!” Sollux squawks.

“Oh, no wait let me go back. Your duality fetish is TWO much!” your double puns and the troll
sparks in a way that you would find intimidating but he clearly finds it as threatening as you do with
Karkat’s teeth baring posturing that means nothing.

“Keep that up and I’ll stick your head in my armpit and I haven’t showered in two days so you won’t
like it.” Sollux threatens and Dave pushes away from him with a loud ‘BLUGH’ noise. Sollux
shakes his head and returns his attention to you.

“Uh,” you say smartly, “what kind of rules were you talking about?”

“Oh, right. Me and Dave set up rules a while back when he started training, mostly just extensions
on what Dave had been able to push Dirk into before the game. Stopping when the other person says
stop, making sure things are still cool if he stops talking. I mean sometimes that’s just concentration
and sometimes it’s something building up to a panic attack. No deliberately drawing blood and
stopping if it accidentally happens for anyone. Just lots of being clear on exactly what’s being trained
so you know what’s going to happen. Vriska always says that’s shitty training but I don’t think any
Strider needs more hypervigilance trained into him, so fuck that.” Sollux explains.

“That’s… completely different to anything I’ve ever done.” you say in shock and Sollux gives you a
wounded look, like it hurt him just to hear that. He shakes it off before you can get mad, though.
You guess he’s used to stepping around your prickly behaviour at times, or at least your double’s.

“That’s the point. Those are our rules, you gotta agree if you want to be involved in training.” Sollux
says firmly.

You look at your double, again he’s easier to read without your shades on. He doesn’t look pleased.
Not exactly like he’s pissed at you but more that he just isn’t into this whole idea, even though a lot
of it seems to be his own idea. You remember feeling that way, when you went to try to stop Rose
killing herself to blow up the green sun. You didn’t want to die but you didn’t want her to die even
more and when it came to it you didn’t want her to be alone. He looks almost like you felt, he
doesn’t want to train and he’s said he doesn’t want to fight either but it’s the best worst option.

“I don’t really want to do any of this. He’s right, sleeping through the whole thing sounds way better but if this is what we’ve gotta do it’s what we’ve gotta do. Practicing seems smart, at least.” that’s about as enthusiastic as you can get yourself to sound. Sollux seems to be satisfied enough with that because he nods.

“Hey, uh, Sol… when you talked to Karkat do you think he’s going to start talking to me again? I’ve tried messaging him and he’s not responding at all. Which is- I mean- normally it’s like ‘oh god Karkat make the talking stop my poor ears’ but now he’s not saying anything even though I’m just barfing words at him and-” other you says, his voice faster and faster as panic starts to rise.

Sollux sighs and pets his face but it’s probably not a coincidence that the heel of his hand is slightly over your double’s mouth just to stem the tide of bullshit.

“Given how much the two of you talk the odds of you not talking to each other ever again are zero.” Sollux insists. He looks down at how other you is scratching at his soulmark and there’s a snap of psionic energy, a bright red flash and other you jerks his hand back. You don’t even know if that hurt but if it did you bet it didn’t hurt much at all, maybe like a static shock.

“Cut it out, you’ll be fine.” Sollux tells him firmly.

Oh. So that’s the appeal.

They both look at you and oh joy what a great moment for you to be making your internal monologue external without realising it. You stand up awkwardly.

“I need to go now because, uh, reasons.” you mumble and sneak out of the door.

“Dude, wait!” your own voice calls after you and a hand tugs the back of your cape. You turn to see your double with a handful of photos in one hand.

“Oh, right. Thanks.” you say taking them from him.

“You can use my shit whenever for photo stuff or, if you wanted your own, the alchemy lab has a directory of all of the stuff that exists and things we’ve made so if you want your own you can do that. Later. See you tomorrow for training or whatever? I guess?” he says, backing up and then ducking into his own room. Your reply of ‘yeah, night’ is way too late to be heard.

You stare blankly down the hallway, blinded by the glare from the lightbulb that went off over your head. Moirails. Someone who cares enough to help you do what you gotta but also knows just when you need to be shaken out of a dumb idea.

You walk back to your own room going through the photos that your double printed for you. There’s the one of the light reflecting in Jade’s eyes as she causes chaos, there’s a shot of your room on the meteor, Rose reading a book with Kanaya. You have about five shots of can town and the Mayor proudly in them because fuck yeah the Mayor. There’s one of Terezi and Karkat colouring the walls with chalk.

Karkat does pale stuff for you, moirail shit. He listens to you and agrees with you that ‘yeah you’re right that is fucked up’ just so you can’t talk yourself out of that same conclusion later. He’s the one who shows up when you’ve been missing in your room for too long and drags you to do things. And you do it for him too now and then, or you visit him and distract him from his guilt over things.

You open the door to your loaned room and the light clicks on. You don’t have the string that other
Dave does but you have tape in your sylladex thanks to can town construction so for now you start just taping the pictures to the walls. Your counterpart’s thing with his moirail sounds nice and you do like those parts that you have with Karkat, for sure. It still strikes you as weird that it’s a full romantic relationship and you think that part of that is-

Your train of thought derails, flying off the tracks, killing hundreds and scattering goods across the train line.

There’s a picture of Karkat at the table on the meteor, his hands on your turntables and deep frown of concentration on his face. You remember trying to teach him, how readily he listened to you and how he wanted to do it just because it was something you liked doing. Your mouth is as dry as the no longer extant Sahara and you lick your lips nervously.

Yeah, other you’s pale relationship seems nice. Good for him, for sure. And the similar stuff you have with Karkat has definitely made you both better, more well adjusted. But maybe you’re more like Karkat than you think because though that stuff is nice and you don’t think less of it at all… it’s not enough. It’s not enough for you.

You stick the picture of Karkat to your wall. That truth is so bone deep that your whole skeleton aches just to think it. It’s a sort of a jigsaw puzzle piece thought. You and Karkat do pale things together but also pale isn’t enough for you. You know the edges of that idea, accept the thing as a whole. But there’s the thought that slots into that one, that follows the dips and ridges of that thought and it’s one you’ve been adamantly not been thinking.

Because you can see it for its absence, even if you’re avoiding it.

‘That’s not enough for me’ slots into ‘I want more’.

Staring at the picture on your wall of Karkat with his hands over the turntables that you let no one else touch you can’t even lie to yourself enough to act like you don’t know who you want more from.
You knock on Dave’s door and yawn as you do so. Terezi’s door opens down the way and she detects your yawning and immediately does the same again, her mouth stretching wide with it.

“Damn you, ‘s contagious.” she says smothering another one.

“Sorry. How goes things with your double?” you ask sleepily and Terezi shrugs apathetically.

“We’ve avoiding each other. But I’ve been talking to their Kanaya and Porrim a lot, they grew up on Alternia for a while so they’re not so weird.” she answers you.

She waves you off and heads down for breakfast. You hammer on Dave’s door more but it doesn’t open and so eventually you give up and walk down to the communal eating area by yourself. You spot Dave, your Dave, across the room. The trick for identifying him at a distance with his back to you is your one doesn’t have bare arms to expose a tattoo. Dave is there with Jade’s arm slung around his neck, although she seems to be pinning the younger Jake to her side just as firmly. The older Jake is gesturing wildly as he talks with a huge grin and a good time seems to be happening for all of them. The rest of the people from the meteor are spread out across other groups, integrating like you all agreed on.

With nothing else to do you walk over to the counter where all of the food is and help yourself to a plate as Signless fails to notice you, midway through recounting a joke about a legislerator to Mr Egbert. With food and then drink in hand you hover awkwardly, unsure of where to go. Dave is catching up with Jade and you don’t need to stick to him like boiled hoofbeast adhesive. The rest of your friends are all involved with others and you’d feel weird about interrupting.

You convince yourself that you don’t want to sit with anyone else and instead take the only empty table. You pull out your current book right away and hold it one handed as you stab some kind of tuber based fried thing with your fork. No sooner have you started getting settled than you hear the sound of another tray hitting the table you look up to see Kankri in the same bright red sweater that you saw the other version of him in the dreambubbles with.

“I thought you were god tier too.” you say, you swear you remember seeing him in the blood aspect tinted seer clothes before. At your words his nose wrinkles with distaste.

“I’m not a great fan of the outfits, I feel that they serve to emphasise a divide between those of us who are god tier and those of us who aren’t and that kind of gap can, I feel, serve to encourage life threatening behaviour in people trying to attain that level. Furthermore the look of them can remind people of the likely very traumatic experience of losing their lives, I wear mine when I must for combat but otherwise I prefer to eschew them in favour of my normal clothes.” he opines and sits down.

“Sorry I asked.” you groan.

“I thought you were god tier too.” you say, you swear you remember seeing him in the blood aspect tinted seer clothes before. At your words his nose wrinkles with distaste.

“I’m not a great fan of the outfits, I feel that they serve to emphasise a divide between those of us who are god tier and those of us who aren’t and that kind of gap can, I feel, serve to encourage life threatening behaviour in people trying to attain that level. Furthermore the look of them can remind people of the likely very traumatic experience of losing their lives, I wear mine when I must for combat but otherwise I prefer to eschew them in favour of my normal clothes.” he opines and sits down.

“Sorry I asked.” you groan.

“Think nothing of it. Do you mind if I sit here? Only I wanted to ask you something.” Kankri asks you even though he has already sat down. You want to tell him to buzz off but likely that’d prompt a lecture too so maybe you can just go with it and hope for the best. If you really must escape you’re fairly sure that lobbing your breakfast at John will cause a food fight to break out and you can escape in the resulting chaos. Besides he owes you in the throwing things at other people’s head stakes.

“Go ahead.” you say.
I wanted to- is that an Alternian book? Sorry that’s not what I came here to ask but I really must know.” Kankri gasps, looking at it.

“Yeah?” you frown.

“But printed on Alternia, I mean? Not from within the game?” he clarifies with hope shining in his eyes.

“Yeah, do you want to see it or…” you hold it out to him blankly and it takes it from your hand with excitement. You watch as he holds it gingerly and examines the cover, he takes a minute to read the title and rolls his eyes.

“The same kind of tawdry, problematic, trash that my Karkat likes too. Still the colours are different on the colour than Earth books and, oh the smell of the paper is different too. Less acidic. Karkat has a few Alternian books that we got him for birthdays and such but you always do wonder if they are genuine or printed convincingly on Earth as they are so rare and so have such a high resale value.” he says, actually fanning the pages and sniffing them.

“Oh, and the script is so precise as well. It’s such a pain getting books in Alternian, so few people on Earth saw the point of running things in both scripts as human languages were so much more prevalent and learning to read English when you can speak Alternian is-” he starts to say.

“Yeah, it’s easy. The keyboards are more or less the same too.” you agree.

“Still, I’m glad my parents found it valuable to teach us our own language. It’s nice to see books from home. Or, well, not my home I suppose but yours. All the same, thank you.” he says and hands the book back. You feel a little bad that he’s treating it like a museum piece and you’re holding it with one greasy hand as you eat with the other.

“I wanted to ask you something,” Kankri says as he looks down at his own food and pokes at it idly with a fork, “I wanted to ask how you feel about Signless and your counterpart.”

“What about them?” you ask.

“Well Signless is a great revolutionary leader, he stands for truth and fairness, love among all trolls. He is widely respected, and even on Earth when there were those who disliked his platform and pushed against him they still saw him as a leader, albeit of an oppositional force. My younger brother, by comparison, is highly regarded among everyone here. People respect his leadership decisions and even adults tend to adhere to his judgement, he’s been wise enough to form a political partnership with Vriska and barring the current disagreement regarding the lives of the time players people rarely go against his judgement.” Kankri explains.

You feel yourself prickle at his words because the contrast is obvious. Look at these great leaders, now look at you. See the difference?

“I am the eldest Vantas child and the second oldest son in my family and yet I have never been respected as Karkat and Signless are. It makes no sense, I’m genetically identical to him so any inbuilt tendencies to leadership within him should be within me too. Furthermore it cannot be classpect based as he was the same as me when he played the game. Nor can this discrepancy be put down to growing up on Earth rather than the crucible of Alternia and that being no good for forging a leader because Karkat is successful.” he continues and you start to get the feeling this is nothing to do with you at all, it’s about him.

“Well…” you say slowly as you put your book down and you’re surprised to note that this Kankri
actually stops talking. Maybe his ‘brothers and sisters’ helped him realise that if you want a
corversation you have to shut up sometimes.

“It’s pretty shitty seeing someone else succeed at something you want to be good at but failed at.”
you say flatly. Isn’t that much obvious?

“I just don’t see what’s so different about us that we can’t do what people we’re genetically the same
as can do. And it is hardly like I’ve not been dedicated. I went to every meeting, studied, paid
attention to people. I read all of my mother’s books and records. I studied culture both human and
troll and-” Kankri cuts off with a frustrated noise in his throat. You twist to eye your double across
the room, he’s talking to the older Dirk and a few of the other older teenagers and he’s not having to
throw a hissy fit to get his point across. He’s leading just as easy as breathing.

“Your Vriska keeps trying to get me help, saying my failure was on Gamzee and shit like that but I
think I’m just not meant for this.” you confess quietly.

“So what are we meant for? Not that there is any purpose in anything, honestly this game has given
me a very clear outlook on how uncontrolled and thoughtless everything seems to be.” Kankri
complains.

You frown at your food, you’re not totally sure that Kankri is right on this front. SBURB and
SGRUB may well be cold and uncaring but they’re not imprecise, there’s design in that chaos. If
Vriska was meant to lead your session and you weren’t then you can only infer that this was how
your game should have turned out, isn’t that the point of an alpha timeline? There were other
possibilities but this one is the right one?

“There was an Empress once, before the current one I mean. Eons ago, classical era, really. Her
Imperious Cauterisation.” you say slowly as an idea comes over you.

“I don’t know her.” Kankri says with a shake of his head. Maybe his history was different or maybe
he’s so far removed from it that he doesn’t know it.

“She was the one who united Alternia, previously territories within it had been subject to rule by
other tyrians and the like. She fused the whole planet together, hence the name. Great military leader,
ruthless of course but cunning as shit. She destroyed her competition, solidified her rule and crushed
resistance.” you explain.

“That sounds bloody, brutal and awful.” Kankri sniffs judgmentally.

“It’s war, of course it is.” you sneer at him.

You look around at Signless who from what you understood got to Earth and kept fighting shit, then
at your double who is leading what really is a fight for his life.

“The problem with her was she was a great military leader. Shit peacetime one, though. The next
heiress who sprang up swayed favour and Her Imperious Cauterisation was executed. Wartime
leaders don’t always make good peacetime leaders. If we win this shitshow and go through the door
then in theory we get a whole new world. A whole new universe, even. Maybe that’s what you’re
supposed to do.” you suggest. If he’s studied that hard he has to know his shit, maybe he’s just not
meant for this.

Kankri looks surprised at your words and then thoughtful, seeming to consider them with care.

“You’re a lot less irritating than the Kankri I knew.” you point out and he barks out a laugh that
sounds a little too much like your own, though he quickly smothers it with a hand.
“Technically speaking, given that from what I’ve learnt about the dreambubbles being a shared afterlife that may well eventually circuitously connect to our own where our dead went in it’s entirely possible that the Kankri you met was no version of me but rather my father’s former life. So if he can transition from that to a leader perhaps there is hope for me. And with any luck I won’t have to die to get there, or die again. Sorry, I shouldn’t have brought up death without warning you that was tactless.” Kankri says.

“Well, didn’t he come from a peaceful planet? He only became competent on a fucked up one. Maybe you’re the inverse, who knows.” you shrug.

Kankri chews on some of his breakfast for a thoughtful and, importantly, blissfully quiet moment. Then he opts to interrupt you yet again.

“And what about you, Karkat?” Kankri asks.

“What about me?” you groan and stuff half a tubular meat product in your face just to avoid having to talk. Unfortunately what that means is that it gives him time to talk.

“I think that you underestimate your skills. It’s… I’m starting to understand that the problem with being a seer is comprehending things that other people seem determined not to understand and then grasping that it’s not their fault. I think that your conception of what you would look like as a good leader is flawed, especially your perception of what you think that my brother does. Compared to this imagined standard and the way Vriska conducts herself I feel you have unfairly deemed yourself unfit. By all means decide that your skills will be more useful in peacetime or deem that you simply do not wish to lead but cannot understand you implying that my failure to lead is due to the wrong environment but you are somehow inherently incapable.” he says chidingly.

You’re still struggling with your food so he tuts and holds out a hand that glows in rusted red with a faint afterimage of your aspect’s symbol over it.

“Take my hand.” he urges you. You shake your head no.

Honestly this is like trying to lead a horse to water, or maybe getting blood from a rock is a more accurate metaphor. Listen, the essence of the knight class to to exploit and be exploited, to manipulate what is there rather than creating anew. A Knight of Time manipulates the time that is there, bends it back on itself but never breaks or makes any, witches and maids on the other hand are a different breed. A Knight of Blood leads purely on the power and strength that already exists, the bonds between people. All Karkat does is use the right tool for the right job or even still hands that to Vriska to get her to go wild with it. But you think you are different? Let me show you.” Kankri urges.

You glare at him and his offered hand. You don’t want some magical quest showing you what you could have done but failed to do. You imagine that well enough on your own, thanks. But Kankri clearly isn’t backing down and your food is nice enough that you don’t want to fling it at John to start a diversionary food fight after all. With little other choice you take his hand.

At first nothing is different until you see it before you, gossamer thin and emerald green. A thread running between you and him floating in the air like a cobweb. You reach out and touch it and visions of yourself in a crowd contrasted against your double flit over you, then yourself from his perspective here and now, an assurance that things will be okay, a shared insecure inadequacy.

“Blood is about bonds, connections. Between people and other people, people and ideas, things, concepts.” Kankri explains.
You twist a little in your seat and your eyes lock on Dave because you’re a reprehensible tool. He *glows* with everything coming off of him. There’s glittering green between him and Jade, thick and bright with affection, smaller and thinner connections to those he doesn’t know well and bigger ones with those he does. They stretch out across the room, a slightly different tinted one to Rose, his ectosibling. Another reaches to John and then thinner to the others on the meteor. When you look down you see your own beautifully brilliant cord anchored in your heart over to him.

You reach up, fingers trembling slightly with trepidation and touch it. It feels like sunlight on your skin, not the Alternian kind but the Earth kind, warm and happy. You can hear Dave’s laugh in your ears, see a flash of you scowling into a book on the other end of the sofa, watch the two of you shoving each other around, carefully stacking cans with the Mayor. You can feel the earliest amused bafflement at shouting grey text morph into genuine and deep affection.

You pull your hand back suddenly and stare, it’s everything of your friendship with him. It really is a bond. But at you look at it the connection shifts, a sort of transparent skin to it shifting into focus like one of those magic eye paintings, no longer green but a weird red/white/grey/black shifting spiral. Your fingers skirt it and you are overwhelmed.

A desperate *please, I want this so much* rings in your head and it’s not memories that flash through you but hazy hopeful pictures. Every time his rare smile has dragged too hard at your heart and made you wish he was yours, every time he’s teetered on the edge of tears that you wished you could calm him like you could if he was a troll. But there’s more, watching him glare at Vriska or argue with Rose and feeling the need to intervene, and every time he was just SO infuriating you could throttle him. Every goddamn quadrant, you’d hand them all over to him and that theoretical hope is covering your entire connection with him. But it’s not real, it’s just in your head.

“Careful, you don’t want to pull on that.” Kankri warns.

“Why, would it mean I want this so much if I did?” you complain, hating that Kankri can at least perceive some of this. Because you’re a moron you touch it, trying to see if you can get through to the actually mutual friendship below and not just drown in the things that just you want. The multicoloured covering of it almost squirms at your harder touch and you watch a ripple run down the length of it across the room, when it reaches Dave his back straightens and though you can’t see his face from this angle you can see how the back of his neck rapidly goes pink.

You jerk your hand out of Kankri’s and very much don’t look at Dave. You hope he’ll write off whatever he may have seen and felt as just a random passing thought and not something you sent his way by accident.

“If you are wondering if you manipulated him with that, you didn’t. Just… caught his awareness a little. Don’t look up if you don’t want him to see you looking.” Kankri says calmly and you keep your head firmly down.

When you hear a tray set onto the table you think that maybe Dave came over to you after all, maybe the game is up and you’ve been caught and he knows how you feel and it’s all TERRIBLE. Only you look up and see a face that’s eerily like yours but not. Too dark skinned, adult features and a calm smile.

“It looked like you two were having an interesting conversation, and I’ve not got to speak much to you yet, Karkat so I hope you two don’t mind me intruding.” Signless says pleasantly as he sits. You still feel yourself tense up at being so close to an adult but in a way it’s also hard to find him threatening, your face has never been super intimidating and his features are enough an echo of your own that the same happens with him.
“You caught us at a natural break in the conversation.” Kankri says mildly.

You scramble for something to say but every idea you have scuttles away like cockroaches exposed to light so you’re just sat in mute silence with mounting awkwardness and horror. Although this seems to not be mutual as the adult Signless drinks his coffee casually and leisurely and then sets it down to smile at you.

“So, Karkat, I’ve been hearing very interesting things about you.” he says.

“Oh?” you squeak, your voice cracking slightly under the stress. Signless looks at you curiously for a second and then shifts a little so that both of his hands are clearly visible on the table and empty too, a passive harmless pose.

“I’ve been hearing things about you from Vriska Serket. Or, more accurately, from both of them. From yours I hear the insistence that you’re no leader at all and from ours I hear that you very much are. I think that’s fascinating.” Signless remarks.

“Were you eavesdropping? We were discussing leadership earlier and I very much hope you weren’t.” Kankri protests, voicing the same concerns that you were already starting to form in the privacy of your own head.

“Oh, really? No, I wasn’t listening of course not but how appropriate that I arrived on topic. I would never violate your privacy by listening to your conversation without your consent, not deliberately at least.” Signless says, waving the concern away with one hand.

An interesting statement from someone with ship wide surveillance, but you bite your tongue and don’t point that out.

“Anyway, I wanted to know what you thought about your leadership status, Karkat.” Signless says, looking at you with his bright red eyes.

“I….” you hesitate. It’s both hard to think of all the different reasons and unpleasant to do so, much less to tell him about it.

“There’s no wrong answers. If you like I can tell you why I wanted to be the leader the first time I tried.” Signless offers.

“Well, another question first. Why did you want to be the leader before? Honestly, what drove you?” Signless questions you, resting his chin on his interlaced fingers as he watches you calmly.

“I…” you hesitate. It’s both hard to think of all the different reasons and unpleasant to do so, much less to tell him about it.

“There’s no wrong answers. If you like I can tell you why I wanted to be the leader the first time I tried.” Signless offers.

“On Beforus? In your game?” Kankri asks curiously and Signless nods. You hesitate for a moment and then nod as well, hoping it’ll buy you more time. You know a little of Signless from what you’ve heard from others and what you learnt from your own bubbles, what you know of him is that he remembered life from before the scratch in his game and it motivated him.
“Very well. In my last life I was young and somewhat idealistic. I had a very fixed view of how things should be, even though those views often conflicted with each other. And as a mutant I felt very much outside of the system and I suppose enforcing my rules on others helped me feel more in control, that I couldn’t be excluded if I was the one helping the most and leading. I did truly want to help my friends, to guide them in the game but I was so frustrated by the small things and so blinkered by things that conflicted with what I wanted that I missed so much. I wanted people to listen to me, to take me seriously. I was so busy trying to make sure things were going perfectly at the smallest level that I failed to be a leader of any kind and, honestly, not a great friend either. I lost control of things so much that our team had no real leader, control bounced from me to Meenah and Damara and none of us were right for the job. In the end it cost us all our lives. My motives that first time were all wrong and enacted so badly.” Signless admits.

“That... that does not sound like you at all.” Kankri says in shock.

“Hah, well... I like to think I learnt my lesson but no one has ever finished improving themselves. I still have much to learn.” Signless laughs.

Both of them turn to look at you, but meeting their gaze is too hard so you eye your food instead.

Why did you ever want to be a leader? What the fuck ever possessed you to think that of all of the qualities your repugnant husk of a body lugs around in your thinkspoon that LEADERSHIP was one of them? You raise your eyes a little to the mutant red trim of Signless’ cloak and the same hue on Kankri’s sweater.

“I don’t know what it was like on your planet but on mine in my universe being a mutant was a cullable offense.” you say quietly.

“That was the case for us on Alternia too. Less so before my revolution and attempted execution, more so after it. I suspect that if it was highly enforced on your Alternia it may be as a result of my double’s life and death.” Signless nods solemnly.

You nod and pick up your fork, pushing your food around for a moment.

“I couldn’t hide from the drones when it came time to leave the planet, I never could have fooled the tests or submitted a pail without being caught. Didn’t have the cash to even try to leave the planet illegally. But I didn’t want to die, so I tried to train. I wanted to be a threshecutioner, the best one. I trained and I was convinced that I was going to be a champion threshecutioner, that the fucking Empress herself would be so impressed with me that they’d overlook my mutation and I’d be great. Because I’m, I don’t know, fucking pan-damaged or something. So when the game came I was like, fuck, I’ll be the best at that instead. I’ll lead and prove I’m great.” you say in mounting disgust for how terrible you once were.

“You wanted to serve an empire that wanted to kill the innocent? To cull people like us? Like you?” Kankri demands.

“I understand that.” Signless nods.

“What?” Kankri demands.

“Kankri, you did not grow up on Alternia. You grew up on Earth and whilst your life was not without obstacles you never had to face the kind of oppression that Karkat here did. The situation he describes is the choice between conforming to a terrible oppressive structure or a painful death, given that he has already described how he felt the other options were either not available or not viable the choice was literally that. Plenty of people in similar situations chose to preserve their own lives even at the cost of adhering to the values of a system that abhors them. And you know full well that it’s
not even in such dire circumstances, even on Earth there are humans that conform to regressive systems as a way of proving that they’re ‘one of the good ones’ as a way to save themselves from oppression. It is perfectly understandable, if not desirable. Karkat comes from a dangerous, violent, oppressive culture and you did not. You are in no position to judge him and your safety was a privilege not afforded to everyone. You should be mindful of that.” Signless says firmly.

“I- fine.” Kankri huffs in a voice that suggests that it is not fine. You stare in confused awe. You were subject to the Kankri in the dream bubbles lecturing you on privilege so to hear a version of him get smacked with the same command to ‘check his privilege’ in a way that actually sounds reasonable is just mind blowing.

“Karkat, please go on. You were saying how your desire was to prove yourself.” Signless says pleasantly, turning his attention to you again.

“It wasn’t just that. I care about my friends and I don’t know exactly where I went wrong, I mean if I had John’s retcon power what point could I go back to and fix things? I’d probably fuck that up too, though. I managed to give the universe cancer after all, I’m sure I can fuck anything up.” you groan, putting your head in your hands.

“I tried to fix things when Gamzee lost his shit and Vriska, your Vriska, says that probably wasn’t my fault but I was the leader so I’m responsible. I tried to save Equius and Nepeta, I told them to stay away but they didn’t listen. I managed to save Sollux but he just abandoned me later, not that I blame him. If blood is all about relationships then I fucked up royally because that’s half of what screwed us over in the first place. After all that I just… I figured everyone was better off without my toxic leadership and Vriska took over. No one’s died since then so it’s a success, I guess.” you say unhappily.

“So would you say that you’ve given up on the idea of proving yourself?” Signless asks.

“I guess.” you nod. You’re already proved how worthless you are as a leader, what more would continuing to try prove?

“Well then, what is it that you do want?” Signless questions you.

You look over at him and glare at him, feeling tension build in you at his patient questioning as if he knows what’s inside your mind better than you do. It’s so presumptive! He might be different from Kankri but he’s not THAT different, clearly.

“I want for everyone I care about to not die in the final fight. I want to not die in that fight.” you hiss at him.

“Good goals, I share them too. Now what are you going to do about it?” he asks you.

“What am I- there isn’t anything I CAN do! Even before you all showed up in your ship for assholes who shit their pants and fuck timelines up I didn’t have anything good to do. Kanaya had to bring me to Jade’s planet, I was a fucking fetch quest item! I don’t have powers, I can’t fly, I’ve only got the one life and my combat skills are basically zero against anything that’s tougher than the basic game enemies. I can’t do ANYTHING!” you snarl at him.

“There’s a troll I knew back on Earth. Her name was Ellenk, she’s dead now unfortunately along with everyone else on Earth but she ran a restaurant. She had heard of me on Alternia but we never met until we both got to Earth. Ellenk wasn’t especially smart, or at least not the kind that you think of as smart. She wasn’t a coordinator of people, she wasn’t a technical wonder like Psii is. Nor was she especially brave, charming or outgoing.” Signless explains.
"Wow, don't hold back or anything." you say flatly.

"What I mean is by all obvious metrics she wasn't a leader or especially helpful in any regard. When she came to me on Earth I welcomed her as part of the movement but I couldn't think of any obvious jobs for her to do to support us. Her skill was in cooking but trolls could eat human food just fine and we weren't low on resources or dealing with a confined cooking space as is the case here. So I told her to simply be proof that trolls can live peacefully on Earth and so she did that. She opened up a restaurant." Signless continues on, ignoring your barb.

"So I should just... not worry about being a leader? I should just be happy?" you guess. You were already doing that, you don't need patronising encouragement to get there.

"That's not what I'm saying here. My point is I was wrong. Ellenk's restaurant was vital. She made food from Alternia, she was amazing at crafting recipes that were as close as you could possibly get with Earth ingredients, she experimented and worked out what you had to mix with what to get a proper appleberry like spice. She was so successful that people coming to Earth were encouraged to give her whatever supplies they had brought so she could try to cultivate things or combine them into her food. Trolls went there all the time to get a slice of home and it was trolls of all kinds. All castes went there and people who agreed with me and those who loathed me all went there because their draw was food." Signless says with a proud smile.

"Plenty of people blamed me for them being stuck on Earth and that's fair, but it meant they had decided to never listen to anything I said. I could never reach them. But when they all sat down in her restaurant they stayed there for ages, talking, eating, drinking and people wouldn't just stick to the people they went there with. It was a social hub. So often people I knew would come in with people I didn't because they'd met over dinner and discussed my work and they decided they wanted to learn more. I think Ellenk brought more new people to the cause on Earth than any other single person. And she thought she had no skills for us, nothing to offer." Signless says.

"But this is a completely different situation." you tell him.

"It is and it isn't. I am sure you have leadership skills in you but even if you don't I know that you have something in you that will help. And you don't even need to believe me to do it. People do bad things without realising it all the time, but that also means that people do good all of the time without realising it. Your past may have been a failure but that doesn't mean you shouldn't try to help the future in whatever way you can. I think you should try, you don't know what'll be important in the future." Signless says.

"God, you talk a lot." you complain. Doing good without knowing it, what a load of shit. All of a sudden you don't feel like eating much at all. You don't even bother with excuses and instead you just get up and walk off.

You wander the ship aimlessly for a while. You're not like your double, respected and strong. You're not like John who leads without a second thought, he just focuses on trying to help his friends and everything falls into place. If there's an example of doing good without realising it then it'd be John Egbert for sure. You're not commanding like Meenah and you're not so thickheaded as Vriska that you can just bulldoze through people objecting to you and still stay on task.

All you want is for your friends to be alright and you'd do whatever you have to if it makes that happen. You can't lose any more of them, you won't.

[turntechGodhead(alpha) began pestering carcinoGeneticist(alpha)]

TGA: hey uh so you know the gym
CGA: I KNOW OF IT. WE WERE JUST THERE YESTERDAY FOR COURTROOM SHenanigans FOR Morons.

TGA: it was a little judge judy wasnt it

TGA: or given the amount of drama like jerry springer

CGA: WHO THE FUCK IS JERRY SPRINGER? YOU KNOW I DON'T GET THESE REFERENCES.

TGA: it was a talk show i guess or maybe some other genre i think jerry just defined his own shit but whatever youd get people write in to him all my wife cheated on me with the pool boy and now theres twins and i dont think theyre both mine fix this jerry

TGA: and then jerry would invite everyone on and theyd all show up and give their highly trashy fuckin story and jerry would sort their shit out and take sides and sometimes thered be paternity tests and like *its your baby*

TGA: so many fuckin fist fights on that show man and jerry and his guards would just like break that shit up

CGA: THAT'S ASHEN PORN DAVE WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DESCRIBING ASHEN PORN TO ME FOR?!

CGA: YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE QUADRANTS ON EARTH WHY DO YOU HAVE ASHEN PORN?! WHAT THE EVERLOVING FUCK???

TGA: holy shit it is club porn

TGA: kar this was on tv all the time in public even

CGA: EVERY TIME I THINK HUMANS DON'T HAVE SOME WAY TO SCANDALISE ME FURTHER WITH THEIR INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR YOU GO AND SURPRISE ME AGAIN.

TGA: i need to get rose to explain jerry springer to kanaya i have a deep need to see her reaction this is amazing

TGA: but i did have a point that i messaged you for honest for realsies

TGA: theres uh gonna be a strife in the gym

CGA: WHAT.

TGA: its like a practice throwdown for testing what teamups make for good green skull man face kicking and i really didnt want to do it but theyve got like weirdo rules about this whole thing

TGA: tapping out and making calls on what is and isnt ok no drawing blood even

TGA: its kind of sad that this shit is wild to me

CGA: IT REALLY IS. DO YOU WANT ME TO COME TO THE GYM TO BE THERE? I'M CERTAIN THAT I WOULD BE NEGATIVE GOOD IN A FIGHT IN TERMS OF BACKING YOU UP, I'D LIKE JUST CAUSE MORE PROBLEMS BUT I CAN BE MORAL SUPPORT IF THAT'S WHAT YOU WANT.
TGA: that was 100% what i wanted man
TGA: please come be the only sane person in this room with me

CGA: QUESTIONABLE, BUT OK. ON MY WAY.

You rush down to the gym, it's almost funny how easily you've got the layout of this place. Perhaps it's just well designed but it never takes you too long to get from any one place to another, which is good given how many crises there are around here. But as you hurry in through the door you pause when you see a figure lurking in the dark under the hollow space of the bench seats from earlier, a lot of them are pushed back but not so many that they're flush to the wall. You catch a glint of shades and pause.

"Dirk?" you guess, though you're not sure which one it is though you think it's the older one from the other universe. He straightens up at the sound of his name and you catch the flash of coloured ink around his upper arm, it is the older one.

"You should just... go and do whatever you're supposed to be doing." he says quietly.

"And what are you doing, hiding down here like a creep?" you ask.

He frowns ever so slightly, his pale eyebrows caught in a sliver of light from between the benches at you look out towards the main part of the gym. You can see his Dave standing there, sword in hand, talking to Aradia.

"I thought you didn't want any part in him fighting." you say.

"I don't. I want this to prove to him how bad an idea this is but I don't want him to be hurt or scared, which are basically what'd have to happen to change his mind and maybe not even then. You're an Alternian troll, you probably don't get it. But I looked after Dave his whole life, from the day he was born. He's my kid. I hate what he's doing but I can't leave, I can't." Dirk says mournfully.

"Lusii can be like that sometimes, they're big and dumb and they don't always understand what you're doing but they care so sometimes they'll just follow you when they're worried." you supply helpfully.

"Well maybe you do get it, I'd like to think I'm not dumb but here I am hiding behind a bench so who fucking knows." Dirk sighs.

He looks out through the gap in the benches and shakes his head again, pacing away and then back like he wants to leave but just can't. Though you have no idea what conceivable help he can offer when you can already see two healers sat on the benches on the other side of the room, there's surely nothing he can do that they couldn't. Signless' words from earlier come back to you about helping however you can and it's dumb but... but maybe you can help at least a little.

"I don't know your Dave but if he's anything like mine there's lots of stuff you can talk him out of but being a self sacrificial idiot isn't one of them. Mine killed himself for Rose. You're probably better fighting with him than against him here, right?" you suggest.

"I already asked Vriska if I could do that but she's banning anyone who's ever been affected by Cal's mind control from having anything to do with the fight just in case Lord English has the same powers, there's supposedly some circular paradox thing to them both. And Cal used to fuck with my dreams so that's enough for her to bench me from that fight, which to be fair if I end up there and he does puppet me like Cal may well have done to Bro and did to to Aranea and I hurt Dave..." Dirk trails off with a shudder.
"Then... then fight the other fights. Free up people to go help them in person instead." you tell him.

"That's the plan but it does me no good now." Dirk argues.

"Then go out there and let him see that you're actually going with his plan so he's not secretly angsting over it." you say, waving your hand towards the open gym and the benches of people watching curiously. Dirk hesitates uncertainly.

"Or don't, whatever. Just swallow your fucking pride already, Strider." you say in exasperation, shaking your head and walking off.

Your Dave spots you first when you walk past the benches and he looks instantly relieved to see you. You wave a little awkwardly and shuffle onto a bench. Gamzee drops down from one of the higher up benches that you hadn't seen him on and lands on yours, unfolding himself into a casual slouch. You tense up in alarm until you realise that it's THEIR one and not yours, yours is still locked up. But Gamzee is still Gamzee so you're not exactly thrilled with this or at ease.

"There's a lot of motherfucking fear around but I think you just lowered it by some miraculous amount." he drawls and even his voice has a hint of Dave's accent which is so utterly bizarre. It's so strange that you don't see that he's pointing downwards to the floor of the gym right away, but when you see that you follow his point to see Dirk quietly walking into the gym proper and sitting down on the edge of a lower bench. Their Roxy materialises out of nowhere next to him and curls her arm around his back. It takes other Dave a moment to spot them but when he does you can almost see a weight fall from his shoulders and a small smile of relief ghost over his face before he remembers how cool of a kid he's supposed to be.

"Ya ain't my Kar but you're still the same kind of guy, huh? Always helping folks even those that don't got the sense to ask you to." Gamzee says lazily.

"Well, I..." you hesitate. Looking up at Gamzee's face you can still hear the terrifying honking of horns from the vents, slipping on stairs covered in the blood of your friends, seeing him tied up but then eventually released and allowed to just wander now and then. He terrified you, he still does. You've never been at your smartest when you're scared.

"Are you on sopor?" you vomit out in ill thought out terror.

Two greasepaint stained eyebrows raise at that and his gaze is very much trained on you. Why did you say that? Well, at least if he's going to kill you there are healers in the room to bring you back.

"Naw, man. That shit rots your pan. I ah... on Earth we didn't get none of that, just those blankets you've all been gifted and you can like chew the sopor out of them if you're hella determined to do it but even that stuff's weaker than the shit we found on this ship. The normal shit that y'all got. But even just on the weak shit that me and my bro got into now and then when we were hella lonely it wasn't good for us and them lot tried to keep us clean." he explains calmly.

"Besides, feeling the wicked creeping fear that comes from you when you see me and seeing how other me got his thinksponge blasted out from sopor and lil Cal, it's enough to make me all kinds of piously thankful that that weren't my road to go down. Naw, I'm here to see how those fools get their righteous smiting on for the sumbitch who MADE that puppet what fucked me over. I'd rip his skull off and wear it as a hat myself only spidersis says he might fuck my brain all over again, make me hurt my own and I'm not about that." Gamzee says with an angered hiss that makes you flinch.

"Aw, no don't feel that way. We're cool, man, we're cool." Gamzee assures you, lazily patting your
back. You're saved from having to come up with anything smart and not life endangering to say by Vriska loudly calling attention to herself from down on the gym floor.

"Alright everyone, pay attention!" she shouts, that basically is what she probably would be shouting at all times if she could get away with it.

"We're trying out a few team combinations based on what information I got from my counterpart here and what we managed to glean in our sleep from one of the dead Vriskas and some other players. There will be rules to this practice, it's so I can see how you work in combat in these new formations and what fraymotif powers you're able to jam together. As much as I usually think rules are for weenies on this occasion I would really rather one of you not dramatically die and cost us a resurrection." Other Vriska announces, looking up from her tablet at the assembled people in the gym.

"In that vein," your Vriska continues for her, "we have a simulated bad guy, courtesy of Hal and Sollux. From what we understand it Lord English's attacks are likely instant death if they're anything other than simple melee fighting, so it's going to work this way: if you get hit at all, you're dead. Hal has some weird laser setup that'll know if it hit you and the Captors here are going to be throwing around paint based weapons."

Hal fiddles with his sylladex for a moment and suddenly a large green dummy appears with a bunch of little flags in bright red hanging off of it.

"There are ten flags here, get them all and you win. Given that he's a Lord of Time simply freezing time to do it isn't going to cut it, you've got to be more creative than that. Hey, other me, read out the team list already." Vriska says, waving a hand at her. Other Vriska looks like she's considering beating your one to death with the tablet in her hands but valiantly seems to resist the temptation.

"Okay, first team is going to be our bare bones. I want to see in theory how many of you we can lose and cut down to the bare essentials to win. So, both Daves, our Kanaya, Aradia, Porrim, their Jade. Three time, three space. Everyone else off of the court." Other Vriska says and hops out of the way herself.

"So, maybe you two should go together, since you know each other best." other Dave says to your one and your Jade.

"Are we doing this in pairs then?" Jade asks.

"Mixing cardinal aspects seems like it'll make sense." their Kanaya says with a nod.

"Alright but wait, what weapons are we even all packing here? Are we gonna have a short range versus long range problem?" Dave asks and gets Caldescratch out of his sylladex.

"Well, I've got that one too, some shitty anime swords, the Hand of Time which is supposedly the big bad killing sword that I'm s'posed to use anmnmnnd some other random shit and a time hammer I made once to hit Aradia in the face with and close a stupid time loop and haven't used since." other Dave explains and then pulls out a giant bright ruby and steel hammer with a clockwork gear and hands on it.

"OH! I MADE ONE OF THEM BEFORE!" John shouts from the other side of the room.

"How do you even use it?" Porrim asks curiously.

"You just sorta..." Other Dave says and idly swings it, only it suddenly hangs stationary in the air and emits a loud clock chime. Dave looks at surprised by this as anyone, even more so when a chair
wildly launches itself out of the hammer and right at you. Gamzee honks in alarm and swiftly renders the airborne furniture into splinters with a swipe of his club.

"So that's what happened to that." Other Dave says thoughtfully.

"This isn't getting Lord English killed! Pick a strategy and go with it!" Vriska shouts.

The group seems to realise that they're all supposed to be doing something and as you brush splinters of chair off of you they arrange into pairs. Your Dave and Jade, their Dave with Porrim, leaving their Kanaya with Aradia. Well, she's their Aradia but fuck only knows where YOURS is these days. Hal straightens up a little and holds up a hand, on the wall far above him a screen comes to life with the names of all six time and space players, the ones from your universe are coloured blue and the rest are red.

"If you die..." Hal says and a loud buzzer sounds and their Dave's name greys out before illuminating again.

"And he's not going to ask if you're ready so..." Hal says and suddenly a bolt of red light shoots out from the machine before Hal and Jade lets out a startled little barkbeast sound and teleports her and Dave out of the way just in time for the laser to hit the wall far behind them.

"Come on, let's mash this shit up!" Other Dave laughs and Porrim grabs his hand. There's a spiral of time and space symbols in the air and game text appears reading 'PROBABILITY CLOUD' and suddenly there isn't one pair of Dave and Porrim but so many overlaid that you can't even distinguish between them all. A laser fires through them as the cloud of red and black surges towards Lord English. Two of the tags vanish and suddenly Other Dave and Porrim spring back from the dummy with gleeful laughter.

Except they've forgotten about Sollux and Mituna and their buckets of paint pellets, no longer using their fraymotief the two of them can be hit again. Dave just dodges backwards from the swarm of pellets with a flashstep but Porrim is hit. The loud buzzer sounds and her name greys out on the board above, she's now dead. Porrim huffs in irritation and ducks out of the way of the remaining players, wiping blue paint off of her neck.

"Enough of that!" their Kanaya declares loudly, whipping her chainsaw out. She drags it through the air and the world seems to ripple somewhat and suddenly there's a gaping hole in... in reality.

"Oh!" Jade gasps and leaves Dave's side to fly to Kanaya's. Each of them grab a hold of the space and pull at it, the air around the gym suddenly looks like it's being viewed through a kaleidoscope, shards of space interspersed in places where they shouldn't be. You watch as Hal tries to shoot them only his laser wildly veers off target.

"Go!" Jade shouts and at the same time all three remaining time players fling themselves towards the dummy Lord English. Only it seems that the closer they get to him the less fractured space becomes and though they all grab a decent handful of the flags Damara's name goes grey up above with a loud buzz and then suddenly their Dave's does as well. Both of them step out of the arena and you can see their Dave with a giant splash of blue in the centre of his chest.

The team is down to just your Dave and Jade and their Kanaya, but it seems like the two space players can't hold that kind of universe fracturing power for long and once the world returns to normal the three of them are taken out before too long, though Jade understandably is the last to go.

"Great, so at this stage what we're looking at if it's just the six of you is a total party kill. It looks like we can't afford to pare you down that much, so let's change this up." Other Vriska says with a shake
of her head.

The board on the wall resets itself and the two Vriska's converse for a moment, apparently agreeing to play together if it means that they get to both set up fights and boss other people around. You look around and see that by now almost everyone has shown up to watch what's going on.

"Let's try... Eridan for some destructive- hm, no wait that won't work with a dummy we don't want to destroy." Other Vriska frowns.

"Maybe having a target I can't stab the shit out of isn't a good practice." other Dave argues.

"Well sorry but I don't have anything big and bad enough here to present an actual physical obstacle to you monster humans, this is about your combinations. How you work as a team." Other Vriska argues.

"Let me join, and I'll take Terezi too." your Vriska asserts and from across the room your Terezi bounces over in excitement.

You look over the team as they set up again.

Your Dave, your Jade, your Vriska, your Terezi, their Dave, their Jade, Aradia, Porrim, Damara and Kanaya. It's more substantial but...

"Problem?" Gamzee asks at your side.

"I... I don't think it's gonna work." you say quietly.

"How'd you do it?" Gamzee asks curiously as the team below resets all of the flags and people partner up.

"If those humans work in packs then give them a pack, right? Give Dave his sisters, he probably fights best with them. And... our Rose can see the future here, I think their Rose is still unable to see ours for some reason, so maybe change them. And... and their Jake with their Jade seems smart and from what I hear he has some impressive powers." you guess.

"That's some pretty solid logic, little man." Gamzee drawls.

Movement erupts from down below on the gym floor, the fight has started. Unsurprisingly Terezi and Vriska have teamed up but what is surprising is that Dave has joined them. It seems that Dave and Terezi have some pretty damn good moves together and you watch as flares of her teal aspect powers spark out into places where Dave just dodged paint. You're not sure what she's doing to help, only that it is helping.

You spot Kanaya and Porrim teaming up to manipulate space this time. Porrim pulls out a giant sewing tool for ripping stitches, it has all of the ornamental ostentation that lets you know it's a game made weapon. Either way between the two of them they manage to fracture and alter the field and as that's happening Jade sneaks her hand through space and takes two flags. But unfortunately though they all survive longer it's not long until all the names on the board are greyed out again and the dejected players are sitting on the ground, some splattered wildly in pink paint.

"HEY! SPIDERSIS! My man here has a plan for ya!" Gamzee hollers into the brief restful quiet and then slaps you encouragingly on the back so hard that you fall down onto the next bench below. You really wish you could fall down through the benches and maybe out of the ship entirely but it's too late because everyone is looking at you.
"Well, finally. Come on, then." Their Vriska says, her hands on her hips. Yours glares at you from the floor and so it's sheer spite that moves you forward.

"What're you thinking, then? People are your thing." their Vriska says, handing you the tablet with all of the names on.

"Uh." you hesitate looking down at it. You pull everyone else off until you're left with the basic time and space players again.

"Try... my Rose, her seer shit should be helpful and she and Dave work well together, same with her and Jade." you say handing the tablet back because you're not sure how to use it, you don't know what system she uses to separate the doubles because they're not coloured red and blue like the board above is.

"Then your Roxy and your Jake. I think keep my Vriska, she's a ruthless bitch but that's what you want and... do you have any more knights? Me and Dave work well and we're both knights so maybe that'd work?" you guess.

"Latula is a knight, I could swap her for Terezi. Okay, I'll try it. Hal, put the names up. EVERYONE WHO'S UP ON THE BOARD GET DOWN HERE!" other Vriska bellows.

You watch as they step onto the gym's floor and just what you thought would happen does. Your Dave joins up with the girls from his team, their Roxy and Jake slide into place with their younger siblings and everyone else rearranges themselves accordingly. The field of play resets and shockingly it's Latula who moves first but it's only a feint to cover their Dave and Jade leaping into action.

There's a burst of time and space motifs and then they both vanish together. Game text floats above where they were declaring 'WELCOME TO THE JAM' which is probably a reference to something but fuck you sideways if you know what is.

Your Rose and Jade suddenly burst into a haze of light with another motif, the game declares 'WAVE-PARTICLE DUALITY' enlightening precisely no one. Unfortunately it leaves Dave entirely undefended and Hal takes that chance to shoot him but he's not faster than Roxy making him so void that the laser just goes right through him. All of a sudden people are mashing up their powers left and right and when Rose starts joining forces with Latula everything suddenly becomes so much more efficient.

It feels like longer but in two minutes your team steals every single flag from the Lord English dummy without a single fatality on their side. Whatever you did, this is clearly the right team.

"Well, this isn't a perfect replica of how the fight with go down but all of you are now in the team which I have named 'Make Him Pay', because you will. I want all of you here regularly practicing. But the plan is that any team who finishes their fight will come help you out, except for certain people who are banned." she says and shoots a dirty look at Dirk.

"So, proper strife matches now? Making sure we're on our game?" Aradia asks cheerfully and both Vriskas seem to agree to that. There's organisation of who is going to fight who but you're no longer needed. You instead climb up to where you were sat before next to Gamzee.

"See? Different guy, same wonder in that heart of yours." Gamzee chuckles.

"Shut up." you mutter and draw your knees up to your chest.

You kind of hate the idea that Signless might have been right, that smug fuck. As much as you want to be useful and help your team it seems dumb that if you do have a skill it's setting people up in the
right order and letting them do their own thing. Perhaps even if you're good enough at your job people might not know that you're doing anything at all. Which sucks because it's not a crime to want recognition but it's still a hell of a lot better than what you've come from which is getting a lot of attention for fucking up super badly.

You watch as the team below groups up and your Dave fights Latula, his counterpart is going up against Vriska which you feel bad about. Although he actually seems to be more than holding his own against her and even driving her back now and then, he doesn't even look like he's trying that hard. Your Dave on the other hand looks like he completely hates everything about this, the sound of metal clashing on metal across the room can't be doing him any favours at all. But Latula keeps pausing, asking him questions and inviting him to correct her form and she returns the favour to him. Her demeanour is so obviously playful that before too long Dave stops looking like he's going to barf just from being there. He still doesn't look pleased about it but you hear him laugh at something Latula says at least once.

"Dave, stop playing with her. You know the rules, just no serious injury or blood, you don't have to hold back thaaaaaat much." Other Vriska calls out to other Dave.

"You're not holding back on me! I was holding back on you!" Vriska shouts in offense. Other Dave shrugs and the two of them reset their stances, a couple of people stop their fighting and those from the other universe all look like they expect a show.

Vriska lunges for him first, her cobalt sword flying. Dave ducks, flashsteps to the side and knees her right in the grubscar. Vriska skids across the floor on her feet, clutching at her side and gasping for breath. Dave advances on her this time, parries her blade and twists so his back is at her front. He stamps on one of her feet, elbows her in the stomach and as she rocks forward automatically he grabs her by the horn and flips her over to the floor. He pins one arm with one foot and presses his blade to her throat. That was less than fifteen seconds, he could have killed her if he wanted to and he doesn't even look like he's trying hard.

"See why our species was so shit scared of those crazed Earth creatures?" Gamzee says under his breath.

"That's just Vriska being cocky." you say, even though you full well remember those videos Hal showed you.

"A while back on Earth the Empress tried to get her grabbing fingers on some of Signless' own. Scooped up a bunch of his family but more importantly they nabbed Dave, Rose and Roxy. Between the three of them they murdered or captured near everyone on that ship. I think the heiresses got a couple themselves and two defected thanks to our Karkat and Kankri but the twins took down adult trained soldiers. Saw footage of 'em on the news when they got back, all dead eyed and wearing half the motherfucking rainbow." Gamzee says in hushed tones. They're unnerving tones that very much suggest that he approves of that amount of blood and murder which is a thought you're not okay with addressing for many reasons.

Still, there's no sign of that down on the gym. The kids from their universe are laughing and giggling together, their practice fights seeming more like play than a real test. It's clear that even their Dave isn't totally at ease with it, not like his Jade is for example but it seems like he's still tapping into a kind of friendly competition that is normal for their species.

All the same it seems contagious, the humans on your side start getting into it. Again, Dave less so but still he's not actively upset.

This is the team that's going to fight Lord English. A bunch of children fighting a god with every
intention of winning and the thing is they just might. But you're not going to be part of it, maybe you
helped put them together but you're still on fetch quest duty. But... but maybe if that finishes quickly
you can join in, help them in the fight. Maybe you can try to be a hero too, maybe not a leader, but a
hero.

You get to see a few cool flashy things, Jake’s hope powers for one prove quite the barrier to the
hand to hand combat that she’s working with right now. It seems to just warp reality, like he believes
so hard that she can’t hit him that her fist simply slides away from his face. But evidently this takes
quite some concentration because at one point near the end of their spar she pops him right in the
nose and both of them have to duck out as Jake deals with the nosebleed that Roxy accidentally gave
him. You sneak down to their level just in case Dave doesn’t take well to the sight of blood, not that
you do after all, you remember when Kanaya cut Tavros in half and you just passed out.

The younger Dirk and Jake from your timeline are there as Jake deals with his bleeding face.

“I’m so so sorry!” Roxy apologises.

“No, no, don’t fret I should have been able to hold that old hope barrier up a mite longer to keep you
at bay.” other Jake assures her.

Dave has definitely noticed the blood as everyone else has stopped but his attention has been
thoroughly diverted by, ugh, Jade licking his face. You return your attention to the medical drama
before you, as a matter of fact you’re not sure that you’ve seen both Dirks and both Jakes there
together at the same time and everyone but the Jake who is bleeding from the face looks at least a
little uncomfortable.

“I’ll go get Hal.” the older Dirk offers and escapes. That leaves the younger Dirk and Jake who, to
your understanding, were kind of avoiding each other. Which they still seem to be more or less, it’s
more like their presence around each other right now is a game of social anxiety cluckbeast, both too
awkward to stay but also too worried about being weird to go.

“If it makes you feel any better I can’t do anything with my hope powers.” your Jake offers his
double in a desperate attempt at conversation.

“Well hope is pretty tricky, I think. It seems to me like it works just like in movies, at the moment
you really need it the most it comes in. Like an eleventh hour superpower, or the last few moments of
a bomb ticking down. Like the hero that fails until the last moment when it all counts!” other Jake
explains excitedly, only to set off another stream of blood from his nose.

“Don’t talk so much, maybe?” Roxy suggests and rubs his back as he leans over.

“All the same you can do small things right now, all I can do is-” he pauses and kind of sighs in
frustration, only for ANOTHER Dirk to appear behind him, and not the one that just left but a new
one. A new and slightly… slightly see through one.

“Hi.” he says, making Jake jump.

“Oh, great. Just what we need, more of me.” Dirk groans.

“YOU!” both Jakes exclaim in unison.

“Hey there, again.” the see through Dirk says with a slight grin.

“You cad! It is you, isn’t it?” the older Jake accuses the new Dirk.
“Wait, but he’s my Brain Ghost Dirk.” Jake says with a frown.

“Why would you call him that?” Dirk says in quiet horror.

“Shush, Strider. I made him exist, how can you know him?” Jake asks.

“Technically I’m a mix of both Heart and Hope aspects, though I exist because of you I also exist at least theoretically in any universe where there is a Dirk and a Jake. Practically speaking I exist in very few timelines, but I existed in his for a while. So yes, despite you creating me I do know him.” the- the Brain Ghost Dirk says.

“Oh, I see.” Jake nods.

“I know him… biblically, you could say.” Brain Ghost Dirk says with a wolfish grin and Dirk chokes on his own spit.

“What?” he gasps, looking over at other Jake who is scarlet up to his ears.

“Well that’s because I didn’t know exactly what you were then, I thought you were my Dirk that just kept- kept going all hot and cold on me! I didn’t know there were two of you!” older Jake snaps, pointing a bloodstained finger at the ghost.

“So wait, wait, you’re telling me that you boned a ghost Dirk? That one there? When the hell did THAT happen?” Roxy asks in what appears to be both shock and delight.

“It was… ugh, remember when he broke up with me? And I told you he kept being really confusing about what he wanted? I understand why it happened, I wanted Dirk back so badly that though I can’t make him do anything he doesn’t want to and thank goodness but the rest of reality kind of warped to give me the closest thing.” older Jake says with a sigh.

That’s pretty messed up. You don’t have any aspect powers as far as you know but you’re glad that you can’t want someone so hard you summon a double of them into existence, you really don’t need Dave seeing THAT because knowing your luck he would. Still, aren’t the Jake and Dirk in your universe broken up? Is that why this one exists? If so it’s a little creepy and sleazy to see Jake English’s magical sex fantasy just walking around. Perhaps Dirk is thinking the same thing as you because he’s suddenly focused very hard on the ghost version of him.

“The answer to the question you’re thinking but not asking me is no, Dirk.” the ghost says, though his expression still reads smug to you but maybe that’s just the Striderian default.

“Oh, wow, no! No, we haven’t- not ever!” Jake blurts out, looking from Dirk to the ghost and back again.

“It’s none of my business.” Dirk says with one of Dave’s signature ‘I don’t care’ shoulder shrugs that you know full fucking well means that he cares a lot. Hah, this asshole probably never banked on you having the keys to a good deal of his double meaning actions but he hadn’t counted on you knowing Dave and Rose. Not that there would be any reason for him to have thought about that at all. Still, your point remains in there, somewhere.

Regardless it’s BLATANTLY obvious that Dirk clearly is very invested in whether his ex matesprit is involved with some imaginary version of him and it clearer still that both of them still are interested in the other. In fact you are starting to consider if the ghost, who is apparently part of both of them, is being so blatant about it to stir those very facts up!

You consider pointing this out or offering your opinion on their feelings but… well, it’s not actually
any of your business what other people do with their relationships. And Kankri’s bluster about relationships being a blood aspect thing aside you don’t know these people at all. Maybe you should just keep your sniffnode out of the whole thing.

“So… so does Dirk know about him?” Roxy asks the older Jake as she still holds the bloodied cloth that right now is doing zero good to stem any bleeding.

“Not at the time obviously but that was then, and yes he knows now. I couldn’t rightly risk this fellow showing up again after I worked out who he was, could I? He could have ruined everything for good.” older Jake says accusingly looking at the ghost.

“Not my intention.” the ghost answers.

“Well you did a darn fine attempt at trying to mess things up! You made me think you were him!” older Jake argues.

“Didn’t I just say that I’m made of a shard of Dirk and Jake’s hope? Same deal when I’m in your universe, except it’s a part of him and what you want instead. I pull from his feelings and what you wanted. The only reason it’s different now is I have enough variety in Dirks and Jakes to balance myself out.” the ghost retorts.

“Well I daresay Dirk won’t be happy to see you when he gets back with Hal and I can only make you pop off into the ether but I’m sure he can do far worse. You are made of soul, aren’t you?” older Jake says coldly.

The ghost makes an offended noise and vanishes into the ether just as Hal walks up with an amused chitter in his throat.

“You should bring him back sometime, talking to other splinters is always entertaining. And if you’re worried about Dirk having seen that, Jake, you needn’t. He’s talking to Cronus.” Hal says lightly.

“What?!” older Jake yelps, forcefully enough that his nose starts bleeding again hard enough that he has to put his head between his knees.

You look over and sure enough you can see the older Dirk with his back to your group, talking to several other people one of whom is Cronus but you can see Eridan lurking at his side looking pissed off too. It’s clearly not a fun conversation as older Dirk is emphatically shaking his head no to something. The older Makara is there with him in whatever debate they’re having, signing away with great speed and Damara is also involved, from the way she’s talking at the same time as the older Makara you’d guess she’s translating for them. Either way although older Dirk went over there to get Hal it seems like he’s pretty well entrenched in whatever debate is going on and totally oblivious to the temporary existence of someone else who slept with his soulmate.

“I get the impression the two of you don’t like each other much.” Dirk notes, looking at Hal and older Jake.

“Perceptive.” Hal laughs and tugs other Jake’s head up to look at him, blood still streaming down over his lip.

“Perhaps it’s your terrible personality.” older Jake retorts.

“Uh-huh, forget about that hippocratic oath I never took. Let’s see where it hurts why don’t we? Now-” Hal starts to say, a mean grin spreading on his face.

“Hal, be nice.” Roxy warns him and Hal actually does pause and you hear a slightly wrong pitched
but clearly identifiable pale chirp echo from in his chest. Hal seems to shake himself out of the pause that Roxy put him into and instead peers carefully at the older Jake’s injured face, he gently and carefully touches a few places on his nose and then lets the man go.

“You’ll be fine, maybe some soreness from your glasses but otherwise I’d be surprised if you even bruised.” Hal tells him in a professional manner, totally devoid of the malice from before. A small stack of sterile cotton pads falls into his hand from his sylladex and he hands a few to Jake.

“Head forward, apply pressure. You already know all of this.” he says calmly.

“Thanks, sweetie.” Roxy smiles at him and again Hal chirps for her, his expression blatantly fond.

“Anytime, but next time you punch him in the face tell me first so I can watch.” Hal laughs.

“You’re rotten!” Roxy cackles and kicks him halfheartedly in the leg.

Across the room loud arguing breaks out between Porrim and Damara and Hal rolls his eyes.

“I better go stop that before my medical skills are needed there too.” he sighs and walks off.

“I didn’t know you were moirails.” you say as you jump down onto the floor from the benches. Dirk looks surprised at your words, apparently he understands troll quadrants enough to know what you mean. The older Jake clearly does as well but he just scoffs at you.

“What? No they’re not. Hal is… they’re friends, or possibly family. I mean Roxy and Dirk aren’t even properly related so they’re just friends is all.” older Jake says thickly through the cotton pressed to his face.

“Roxy?” Dirk prompts, looking at her.

“I just remembered I have to go talk to a guy about a… uh…” Roxy stands up and looks around obviously panicking, “about an excuse to not be here. Bye!”

You watch as Roxy dashes off, turning invisible as she travels more than three paces. Well, that was pretty damning. The others all seem to think so too but it’s turned the atmosphere around them highly uncomfortable so you think you’re going to leave. Looking across the room Dave is clearly more than fine, midway through some long winded rambling metaphor that has the other Dave doubled over breathless with laughter and Kanaya giggling into her hand. Whatever he feared was going to happen didn’t.

You look at Dave and consider going over there and telling him how proud and impressed you are that he kept his cool through all of this. How much you admire his power to claw something back from his awful guardian, to turn strifing from actual torture and life and death shit into something he’s good at. To have it be something he chooses to do for his own reasons and do it with people who are working with him not against him. His tolerance for that is so hard to predict and when it happens it always feels like someone jammed your pumpbiscuit through a mechanical paper chewer.

You certainly can’t do what you want to do. You shouldn’t even want it. But you do. You want to go over there, to tell him all of that and take his stupid, perfect, human face in your hands and kiss him. The whole heretical pale red smear of feelings all at once. You can’t do it, so you do the only other thing left to you. You leave.
You slip out of the room and make it halfway down the corridor before your palmhusk chimes.

[arachnidsGrip began trolling carcinoGeneticist(alpha)]

AG: I saw you leave.

CGA: SO?

AG: So I wanted to say thank you for finally pulling your head out of your ass and helping. I guess that what I said to you about your being in your own hands and your timeline not being proof of what you can do finally sunk in, huh?

CGA: YOU'RE MESSAGING ME TO THANK ME FOR SOMETHING YOU'RE TAKING CREDIT FOR?

CGA: I GUESS YOU REALLY ARE VRISKA AFTER ALL.

AG: Ha ha, you're soooooooo funny Karkat. Forgive me for wanting to reinforce positive behaviour, I'm just trying to make you useful in the future too but don't be grateful or anything.

CGA: DO I REALLY NEED TO BE PRESENT WHILST YOU FONDLE YOUR OWN EGO? REALLY GET ELBOW DEEP UP INTO YOUR OWN SELF IMPORTANCE HERE. I FEEL LIKE I SHOULD BE excused FOR THIS, ALONG WITH THE REST OF THE UNIVERSE.

AG: UGH, fine. Thanks for helping, coming across the right team combination may actually have saved lives. So thanks. Happy now?

You scowl at your palmhusk. You didn’t do anything, everyone else are the one who are winning the fight. Vriska’s making all of the tactical plays. You just called out some names. It was obvious. But... well, maybe it wasn’t because no one else had hit on that combination of people. So maybe they shouldn’t use it, everyone has seen what happens when people follow your leadership.

But it’s too late, you opened your mouth and now things are happening as a result. All you can do is when the final day comes you play your part as fast as you can and then rush to help in any way you’re able. Beyond that all you have is hope.

CGA: IF IT WORKS I'M HAPPY.

AG: Oh it'll work, I'm going to drill these morons into a team no matter what.

With the gym occupied you play a one man game of hiding from people who might want you for any reason. You certainly want to avoid either Vriska and their attempts to rope you into either embarrassing yourself in a spar or to try to be helpful and ‘leaderly’ in any possible way. Similarly you’re not keen to get into any more debates about your competencies, destiny or lack thereof with anyone who shares DNA with you. So you just generally poke about the place.

You investigate all of the weapons in the armoury and try them out a little. You find out which intra-deck tubes go to where as much as you dare and then because you’re paranoid you go to check out the cells to check that your Gamzee is still in there and not lurking in a vent somewhere. The gardens require some amount of checking out and eating of their various fruits, something that makes you wildly homesick.
You even find a good vantage point to spy on people in the gym and spend a good five minutes watching Sollux psionically pitch flirt with Roxy by moving her shit around when she’s not looking. Eventually you head back to your room and nap. The meteor messed up everyone’s sleeping patterns and you’re 90% sure that it’s screwed with your ability to sleep for the right length of time but you have pretty much mastered the art of the spontaneous nap.

But your peace can never be allowed for long. Your palmhusk buzzes its way right out of your sylladex and onto your bed, waking you up with a start. You hope that it’s important but, well, you also hope that it’s not important because important often means dangerous and you’re not keen on that at all. It’s in invite to a group chat, dubiously you click on the name.

[carcinoGeneticist joined board ‘:33 < impawtant young troll movie night!’]

-- Name filter applied --

-- Pinned messages:

Nepeta: :33 < hi effuryone! i know the humans have b33n getting together in their little groups so i thought we should too!

Nepeta: :33 < the majestic lioness ruling over this chat has only a few short rules! 1) no older siblings or parents! 2) only trolls (and no hal or else equius is just going to smooch him all night!) 3) attendance is mandatory!

End of pinned messages --

Karkat(alpha): WHAT KIND OF HOOFBEASTSHIT IS THIS?

Nepeta: :33 < did you not read the messages karkitty? or did i not pin them right? i thought i did it.

Sollux: they're piiinned fiine nep, you're 2tiill dodgiing the que2tiion about the fact that ii'm your older brother 2o 2urely ii don't have two come.

Terezi: 1 TH1NK TH3 3ST33M3D POUNC1LLOR H4S 3ST4BL1SH3D W3LL 3NOUGH TH4T YOU 4R3 W1TH1N TH3 4G3 BR4CK3T TO B3 CONS1D3R3D OUR P33R 4ND NOT 4N OLD3R S1BL1NG FURT3HR OBJ3CT1ONS W1LL NOT B3 H34RD!

Terezi(alpha): 4S YOUR L3G4L R3PR3S3NT4T1ON SOLLUX 1 SUGG3ST YOU T4K3 Th3 D4SH1NG PYROP3S 4DV1C3 L3ST YOU 34RN YOURS3LF 4 SW1FT DRUBB1NG FROM TH3 COURT

Eridan: wwhy am i havving to read this bullshit wwith my owwn eyes doesnt the genevva convvention ban cruel and unusual torture or somefin

Karkat: TECHNICALLY SPEAKING WE NEVER HAD HUMAN RIGHTS FOR OBVIOUS REASONS, ONE OF THE THINGS MY PARENTS AND REDGLARE WERE ROUTINELY TRYING TO FIX AND IF YOU PAID EVEN A MODICUM OF ATTENTION YOU WOULD KNOW THAT.

Karkat: ALSO OUR UNIVERSE NO LONGER EXISTS, ITS LAWS NO LONGER APPLY AND THE ONLY ACTUALLY QUALIFIED LEGAL PRACTITIONER IS REDGLARE WHO AS JUDGE, JURY AND EXECUTIONER IN THIS SITUATION IS PERHAPS THE WRONG PERSON TO THROW YOUR WRONGFUL SUIT AT THE FEET OF. SHE’LL PROBABLY TREAT YOU LIKE A DOG AND RUB YOUR NOSE IN THE MESS YOU MADE.
Kanaya: As Much As Faux Legal Advice Amuses Me Have We As Yet Settled On A Time And Location For This Group Meet Up

Vriska(alpha): No, there were faaaaaaar too much hysterics and roleplay going on to do anything practical like that. Let alone agree on a movie or anything. Although we did all agree to not invite Gamzee.

Gamzee: :o(

Karkat: NOT YOU, THE OTHER ONE.

Gamzee: BuT I ToLd y'aLl i cAn fOr sUrE KeEp hIm cOnTaInEd wItH My wIcKeD RaGe pOwErS, iT'S NoT JuSt mY BrO WhO CaN Do iT.

Karkat(alpha): I THINK WE’D ALL RATHER YOU DIDN’T ANYWAY, HE DID MURDER A LOT OF MY FRIENDS.

Kanaya: Would It Be Insensitive Of Me To Ask Why None Of You Tried To Even That Score Or Did You And It Proved Unsuccessful

Karkat: KANAYA!

Kanaya: It Is A Reasonable Question

Terezi(alpha): W3 KN3W W3D N33D H1M FOR TH3 3ND OF TH3 G4M3 SO W3 H4D TO K33P H1M ALOV3 4ND B3S1D3 3V3RY T1M3 K4N4Y4 TR13D TO CH4S3 H1M DOWN W1TH H3R CH41NS4W H3 JUST V4N1SH3D 4ND 1T W4S 4LW4YS 1N TH3 4SS TR4CK1NG H1M DOWN 4G41N

Kanaya(alpha): I Still Feel Like I Should Have Been Allowed To Continue

Nepeta: :33 < anyway! everyone be at room 105 in an hour and if you're late the mighty huntress can and will track you down and drag you there!

--Memo Closed--

Well then, that’s that you suppose. Only you’re not massively keen to be around the other trolls your age from either session. Spending time with not one but two Vriskas of your own free will sounds like proof that your permanently pan damaged. So you decide not to go, but by the time the end of the hour rolls around you figure that you might be dead this time next week so why not and if you hate it you can tell everyone to go fuck themselves in person and leave.

All of this leaves you outside of room 105 a little over an hour later unsure about whether to go in, but that’s decided for you when Feferi sees you.

“Oh! Karkat, can you get the door for me? Balancing all of the food Dad gave me is tricky!” she says as she struggles to hold several stacked bowls of popcorn in one hand and carry multiple bottles of drinks under the other. You open the door for her out of reflex and she smiles at you gratefully as she passes. You follow her in and find that pretty much everyone else is already there.

Sollux is cross legged before the TV, curled over as he tries to jam a cable from someone’s husktop into the screen. The stretch of his posture shows the long strip of spinal ports that you have to drag your eyes away from, they set your teeth on edge. Aradia has her arms hooked around the shoulders of your double and Tavros as they peer at her husktop screen in serious debate. The two Kanayas have makeup scattered on the floor between them as they compare their supplies. Feferi sets down
her retrieved food and drink and Nepeta waves at you from a padded seating platform a level above those on the floor but still below the bed that’s against the wall. She seems to have built a kind of tiered movie theatre seating arrangement.

With her patting the seat next to her you go over there and sit down, rolling your eyes the whole way of course. It leaves you with Aradia sat in front of you, her long hair trailing down to your feet and actually since everyone else has kicked their shoes off you decide to be polite this once and do so as well.

“Hey, break this stalemate or this is going to get turned over to public vote and that’ll take forever.” your double asks.

“Uh, I don’t think that’s fair for you to ask yourself in this situation, you can’t just double down on your own vote, I don’t think.” Tavros protests.

“Bold of you to assume Karkat would ever agree with himself.” Aradia giggles. Your double shoots them a flat and unimpressed look and flips them both off at the same time, one middle finger each.

“What’re the choices? Oh, they’re human movies.” you say with some surprise. They’re not any that you watched on the meteor though, nor can you see Nic Cage’s terrible face in the thumbnail for either movie.

“Yeah, well we’ve watched most of the Alternian movies since we’ve been in the game and of those that we haven’t horror movies tend to be banned but as are rainbow drinker movies and also anything that’s just pure romcom.” Aradia explains.

“Boo!” Nepeta jeers.

“Philistine.” your double agrees and they both reach past you to high five each other. Right, they’re littermates just like Rose and Dave. You can see that being a far better fit for you and Nepeta than the awkward crush that she had on you.

“Karkat, the rule was nothing that is SIMPLY romance, movies with romance in them and other plot happening are perfectly fine. You know this.” other Kanaya says sagely, not looking up from a bright green lipstick that your Kanaya is showing her.

“Anyway! I say Jurassic Park!” Aradia declares.

“I think I’ve heard of that, but I think Dave and Rose were just making shit up for fun.” you say with a frown. You remember Dave mentioning the movie and then lamenting not having it on him, it was supposedly all about creatures who lived on Earth before humans which is absurd.

“Oh, no, I used to think that the humans were making that up when I first got to Earth but then Disciple took me to a museum and the place is just FILLED with the bones of these giant animals that used to live on Earth before the humans evolved there. Dinosaurs and all kinds of other creatures! I mean Earth’s current megafauna is nothing compared to Alternia of course, but they still had some, but the things that were there before? Wow.” Aradia gushes excitedly.

“I’m so glad Dave’s not here to get sucked into an hour long dead things and creepy bones discussion with you.” your double groans.

“Are we doing Jurassic Park first then?” Sollux asks from his place at the TV.

“Yeah, Terezi says she’s nearly here with her double and their Vriska. Apparently they got caught up with Aranea talking.” Nepeta answers, putting her phone away.
“Hey, we didn’t agree on *Jurassic Park.*” other you argues.

“We voted on it, one man, one vote. And in this case I’m the one man that gets the vote, so to speak.” Aradia says with a wide grin.

“I didn’t crash a spaceship into the White House front lawn to have you besmirch democracy like this!” other you argues, which… what?

“OVERRULED!” Terezi declares, bursting into the room suddenly.

“You don’t even know what we were talking about.” your double protests.

“Hmm, let me think. Were you being long winded and overly dramatic about something dumb?” Vriska asks as she hops up on the bed behind you.

“Yes.” Sollux answers from the front of the room.

“Et tu Brute?” your double gasps in offence.

You have officially lost the thread of what’s going on but it hardly seems important. All you know is that with the arrival of the three girls everyone who was invited is here. Sollux starts the movie and slides back into place between Aradia and Tavros. Nepeta leans against Equius’ side and tucks her feet up by your side. The cackling Vriska/Terezi quad of trouble has firmly cemented itself behind you and before the title card of the movie can even come up your Kanaya joins you at your side, seemingly taking objection to Gamzee’s feet being too close to her. The clown himself is spread out on the floor like a rug as the seadwellers try to throw grubcorn into the air and have him catch it into his open mouth.

You pay attention to the movie and start to get the point. Earth was previously inhabited by giant monsters called dinosaurs who are now long extinct, the two dirt scientists who are experts in the bones are summoned to an island to talk about their work. There they meet another expert, human Jeff Goldblum who like Will Smith apparently also has a cross species double for reasons that escape you. You can only assume that these people are so integral to a functioning universe that they exist in all of them.

Regardless, the music swells and the title card plays, the plot truly begins as it comes about that the eccentric billionaire is bringing the dead creatures back to life. It’s a genuinely enjoyable movie so far but something takes you out of it. You stop paying attention to the sauve human Jeff Goldblum as he warns people of the danger of meddling with nature and instead you look around you.

You’re watching a movie with your friends. That shouldn’t be new or alarming but it is. Most of your friends have been dead or missing for so long that this is strange, even without several people having doubles it’d be strange. And you’re sure that things aren’t always this easy, it’s pretty plain to see that Eridan is more focused on making Feferi laugh than she is in him and every so often things between Sollux and Aradia seem strange. But even with all of that you don’t think you ever EVER got all twelve of your friends together in person just to watch a movie and be together.

You lost that chance when your friends started killing each other.

And yet… here you are. These aren’t the friends that you started with in your universe but they also aren’t NOT those people at all. Signless was once Kankri, was once the blustering windbag you met in the dreambubbles. He fucked up his chances there and he got a new start, not with quite the same people but with people who were similar. You failed your friends and you can’t undo that, but even with that being true you’re still here with these people, watching a movie and laughing when
someone jumps at the sudden appearance of a dinosaur.

You can’t be the Karkat that belongs with these people, that guy is too busy being that guy for you to be him. That’s not what you want here.

On screen human Jeff Goldblum intones ominously that life finds a way. And you would prefer to not think of yourself as a clearly antagonistic force to whoever the protagonists are supposed to be in your world but there’s a point in that thought. You were never supposed to make it off of Alternia with your mutation, but through some weird game loophole you did. You survived a failed game and then a massacre that killed people better and stronger than you. You met up with players from another failed session and made your way to one that’ll work to exploit the game in ways it was never meant to be exploited in. Only when you got here you ran into a whole new group of people who flipped off death and bailed out through the fabric of space and time. Ominous cliche or not it seems life does find a way. And not just being alive but living too, you’ve clawed happiness out of the stolen time that you got against all probability. Despite all of your mistakes and flaws you are watching a movie with your friends, with people you never thought you’d see ANY living version of again.

So you can’t change the things that you’ve fucked up before but maybe like your ancestor you’re getting a second chance, that life is finding a way here too. You slide down a little in your seat as onscreen a helicopter starts up and the main characters run. Maybe you’re not a leader, maybe you never should have been or maybe you have a secret talent for it that’s just VERY undiscovered. Either way you, a mutant blood, are sitting with friends who ought to be dead, all of you from a universe that no longer exists as you watch movies with people from another timeline that was made on a planet that also no longer exists. This is the alpha timeline that you’re in, uncountable numbers of Karkats couldn’t have this in their wildest dreams but here you are. At the risk of sounding like Gamzee that’s pretty motherfucking miraculous, so if this is your second chance you think you might just grab hold of it and never ever let go.
> Dave: Accept Your Death

[turntechGodhead(alpha) joined memo ‘four blondes walk into a bar’]
[name filter applied]
Dirk: I think you’re conflating two different types of joke there.
Roxy: maybe u just don’t have a sense of humour!
Dirk: My sense of humour is flawless.
Roxy: your sense of humour was trained on sbahj movies
Dirk: That’s what I said.
Rose: I have so very many questions.
Dave: wait you said other me made movies you didnt say they were sbahj or maybe you did and i was too busy trying to not obviously show that i was freaking out to actually listen i do sometimes zone out like that
Rose: He does do that.
Dirk: I HAVE ALL OF THE MOVIES.
Dave: whoa
Dirk: I mean, I have them all. If you want to watch them, ever. Or talk about them.
Roxy: ha! you two are adorable
Roxy: i did actually begin this board for legit serious bzns tho
Roxy: and that is that i have crafted a picknick
Roxy: *picnic
Roxy: *picknic?
Rose: Picnic.
Dave: no longer looks like a word just fyi
Roxy: shh! i have put food in a basket and spread out a fancy cloth on the floor in the ships garden and im just waiting for all of ya to come here and park ur butts, eat food and gossip
Dirk: Fancy high tea gossip at breakfast time? Why Ms. Lalonde, so scandalously avant garde.
Roxy: wonk
Dave: sometimes i swear if dirk wrote in purple id just assume he was rose right off how the hell is typing style genetic
Rose: It does raise fascinating nature/nurture questions, I must admit. With our counterparts you could argue nurture, although I would be interested to see if that pattern held true when they first met each other again which would suggest something biological.
Roxy: this is just the kind of fascinating chat we should be having in PERSON
Roxy: spent way too long just messaging dirk so im not gonna do it if i got the chance to see him and all of you in person so hope to it and come find me!
Roxy: *hop
Dave: sure thing mom
Dave: i mean roxy
Dave: FUCK
Rose: If you keep making these Freudian jokes so easy they’re going to stop being so much fun.
Dave: *good*
Rose: I will persevere though, in spite of that.
Dave: spite is your motivation for everything
Rose: I am far more multifaceted than that. Sometimes I do things because they amuse me, or I act out of love or malice. And sometimes I say or do things because your awful jokes and memes have infected my mind.
Dave: were making it happen rose
Dirk: Holy shit.
Rose: Hmm. Yes. Dave you should come to this picnic, I only probably won’t enact revenge on you
there.
Dave: so reassured

You roll out of bed, kicking the covers away and wander over to the bathroom. You brush your teeth and your hair (with different brushes, you’re not that tired) but having a shower or washing your face is for people who give more fucks than you right now. You regret that pretty much immediately when you step outside and find Karkat standing there talking to Rose.

Well, shit.

This is shit for two reasons which you intend to swiftly break down like cardboard boxes destined for the trash. Firstly you’ve long suspected that trolls have a better sense of smell than humans and though you can exclude actual vampires from your sample you would like to point to Terezi. Even if Karkat can’t smell colours you’re pretty sure he can do better than you and you do try to avoid drowning him in your teen dude pit stank. Partially because you don’t think they sweat the same way humans do, or at least you’ve never noticed Karkat smelling bad. Not that you sniff him. That’d be, uh, weird.

Moving swiftly to point number two for no reason, certainly not to derail the previous train of thought or anything. Reason two is that Rose knows where you’re going as she was invited and the smile that she is giving you is the kind of thing you see in horror movies. Somewhere between that clown in the drain in IT and what’s his face with the axe in the Shining. Very serial killer, your suffering will bring her happiness kind of vibe.

“Hey.” Karkat greets you because he has manners.

“Good morning, brother dearest.” Rose purrs.

“Aw, shit.” you groan.

“If you’ll excuse us Karkat we have to go have a family meal together. With our family, if that wasn’t clear.” Rose says primly, still sporting her slasher smile.

“Oh, uh, ok?” Karkat says clearly at a loss for what’s happening here.

“Actually, I just remembered Karkat needed me for a thing.” you cut in. You were up for hanging with Dirk and Roxy, or more or less at least but with Rose looking that malevolent you’re going to bounce. She already tried and succeeded at embarrassing you in your first heart to heart with your mom. You mean Roxy. Goddamnit.

“How funny because he was just telling me how he was meeting up with his double to go watch movies together as Karkat has some that his counterpart does not. Certainly a plan that does not include you, my most fraternal of friends. Surely you wouldn’t abandon your own blood.” Rose says silkily.

“Why are you like this?” Karkat demands from between you.

“I’m sure that would be a valid question in our family bonding session, which Dave won’t find out if he keeps dallying. Come on.” Rose answers and catches your arm, pulling you away to your doom.

You look over your shoulder to Karkat whose expression indicates that he understands the peril you will be under but also doesn’t feel like he can take Rose in a fight to win your freedom. Which, honestly, knowing Rose that is an accurate statement of actual facts. Your sister is fucking savage.

“Honestly, I don’t know why you’re putting up such a fuss.” Rose tuts as she pulls you along.
“Lies.” you say.

“What reason would you have to think that my intentions are anything but pure?” Rose asks with a sly smile.

“Knowing you for years?” you suggest and Rose makes a thoughtful sound.

“That’s probably fair.” she chuckles and steers you down a few hallways and through some doors. Then before you know it you’re in a new and bigger room that smells like dirt after rain and fresh green parks.

Large growbeds are placed about in ways that remind you of Jade’s home with plump alien fruits hanging from vines that are carefully wound up poles. Here and there though you see plants that look much more like they’re from Earth, not that you saw a lot of plants from the centre of your city but they’re at least familiar. The grass underfoot doesn’t feel like the grass from the shitty parks back home either, it feels tough like it was meant to survive under the blistering Alternian sun. Here and there across it slightly different little robots patrol the place. They look like what you’d get if a monster truck fucked a roomba, big wheels that jack the robot up and down so it can reach out with little droid arms to water and poke at the plants.

Loud, cackling laughter bursts out from further in the room. The kind of laughter from someone who’s never once been forced to shut up her whole life and instead just got to be happy. It’s definitely Roxy, although Jade laughs the same way, without any self awareness or self consciousness. The two of you follow the sound and finally see Roxy tipped over on her blanket clutching her sides as she wheezes with giggles and Dirk standing there with his sword unsheathed and resting on his shoulder.

“What did we miss?” Rose asks curiously and Dirk turns to look at her. In one hand he’s holding a sliced orange, no doubt obtained from the fruiting orange tree above him.

“Dirk- oh my god, Dirk found oranges an’ he didn’t know how to peel em so he just ninjaed the shit out of ‘em!” Roxy giggles.

“I got oranges, didn’t I?” Dirk says with a clear pout in his tone and bites at the sliced middle of the fruit slice.

“Oh, oh, gimmie!” Roxy gasps, sitting up and making grabbing hand motions until Dirk relents and hands her a segment with the rind still on it. She jams it straight in her mouth and then grins at all of you so that the rind looks like a sports mouthguard over her teeth. Dirks shoulders shake in silent laughter and Rose smiles.

Above where Roxy is sitting is another fruit tree but this one doesn’t have oranges. This has, holy of holiest fruits, this one has APPLES. You float up, carried up by sheer bliss and not even god tier powers, to reach up and pluck one of the perfect fruits. You bite into its glorious sweetness, savouring the perfect crunch as you drift down to lay on the ground.

“Well, now that we are all availed of our chosen fruit despite the bounty provided for us by Roxy here perhaps we can begin.” Rose says and pokes you on the forehead. You try to bat her away but her perfumy and elusive ways are no match for you.

“Oh hoh, Rose! Did you use your light powers to see that I was going to suggest another lightning round with all of us here?” Roxy gasps in delight.

“I think context clues was probably enough.” Dirk says and sits down by your legs so the four of
you are in a square. You figure you ought to sit up at at least if you’re going to be grilled and possibly also roasted.

“I have… a question about Kanaya.” Roxy begins and Rose blanches.

“Forrrrr DAVE!” Roxy declares pointing her finger at you.

“Curveball.” Dirk nods.

“What kind of question?” you ask.

“Well, I wanted you to tell me about Rose and Kanaya. Tell me how it happened and what you think of them!” Roxy asks gleefully. To your delight Rose looks horrified.

“They’re useless lesbians, really.” you shrug.

“Dave!” Rose shouts.

“No, you are though. They spent ages fluttering around each other convinced they didn’t like each other, only in a reveal that surprised no one but them, they did like each other. So they got together and they’re disgustingly in love and they act far more functional and better than basically anyone.” you shrug.

“Aw!” Roxy coos.

“Which is a lie, by the way. Kanaya might act very straight laced but she’s secretly fucking hilarious and absolutely savage, she’s great. And Rose is just as immature as me, she just does it differently.” you add.

“I am not.” Rose protests.

“Last week I caught you and Kanaya making up imaginary dialogue for an argument that you could see Vriska and Karkat having but not hear. And the week before that I saw you pretending a fridge magnet was a moustache.” you counter triumphantly.

“In fairness that does sound hilarious.” Roxy offers the scorned Rose.

“Well, however spurious your accusations as to my maturity may be I think what you actually said about Kanaya and I was very sweet.” Rose says.

“It was! Now, Rose, what do you think of Dave and Karkat?” Roxy asks. Ah, shit, you should have thought of that. Rose’s vindictive smile tells you that she knew this question was coming.

“I tend not to take Dave’s statements on things at face value as he wisely does not take mine all of the time, so I must tell you that he insists the two of them aren’t dating but the rest of us reserve judgement. Though I must confess that it’s a matter of some debate as to what quadrant if any they are in amongst the trolls in our party, though regardless everyone is supportive.” Rose says in her needlessly wordy way.

“Rose!” you snap angrily at her.

“But,” Rose counters as she holds up a finger to silence you, “whether they are or aren’t dating is none of my business. The question was to my assessment of their relationship. It amused me at first how different they were, how unreactive Dave could remain whereas I’m sure you’ve noticed Karkat is exceedingly animated and expressive.”
“He’s certainly loud.” Dirk agrees.

“But beyond that they’re exceedingly similar. Even on a superficial level. I mean we were talking about typing styles between the four of us earlier and the same goes for the two of them. Kanaya and I played a game a while back where I flipped their typing quirks and tried to get her to guess who really wrote something and it was harder than you might imagine.” Rose explains, though you had no idea she had done that or that something like that would even work.

“The things that they’re insecure about are highly comparable and though their lives have been different there are points of shared understanding. Despite the hostile start to their henceforth undefined relationship they’re close. They’ve both been exceedingly good for each other, they make each other happy and both of them have grown remarkably as people and probably greatly healed in each other’s company. I’m very happy that they’re in each other’s lives.” Rose says.

Something nebulous and strange flutters in your stomach. Rose is right, as she so often is. But shit like this is why you have no idea how to relate to other you. He was friends with his Karkat before they got together from what you heard and yet he risked all that hoping that their romantic relationship would work. The idea of losing Karkat who is as vital to you as your own internal organs is just… unspeakable.

“I think,” Dirk says slowly and you tense all over again in that stupid ‘he is secretly Bro’ reflex that you still can’t kick, “that this game is usually played with the person you asked the question to getting to ask a question. Not you just interrogating people.”

“I was hoping you wouldn’t point that out.” Roxy says with a guilty little smile.

“Since I was asked first do you mind if I ask the question, Dave?” Rose asks and you shrug. You didn’t have anything in mind anyway.

“So, this isn’t my question Dirk it’s more of a pre-question question.” Rose prefaces.

“Ah, so you’re cheating too.” you say but Rose ignores you.

“A point of order first, more like. Roxy already asked if she could call me Mom and I asked the same of her and Dave has wildly taken to calling her Mom too.” Rose continues.

“Wow, fuck off.” you say flatly and Roxy laughs.

“What’s that make any difference? It’s still the same.” Rose asks curiously.

“Listen, light might be the aspect of knowing things but heart is all about the self and who people are. Trust me, it matters. I feel responsible for my splinters and the shit they pull and how that reflects on me given that for large parts we’re basically the same people but trust me as the expert on this topic that we’re not. I’m not your father.” Dirk says firmly.

“I would say that you are in ways that matter to me. Daddy.” Rose says smoothly and to Dirk’s credit his face doesn’t even switch.
“Call me daddy again and I’ll decapitate myself.” Dirk says monotonously and yet somehow you buy it.

“No decapitations at breakfast!” Roxy interrupts.

“That’s really up to Rose, isn’t it?” Dirk shrugs.

Wow, they really are alike.

“Maybe you should get to your actual question-question and stop being sneaky.” Roxy chides Rose who doesn’t even pretend to be ashamed of herself.

“Dirk.” she says.

“Rose.” he responds.

“I understand that you knew you would be meeting up with us. Did you ever consider what we might be like?” Rose asks.

“Yes.” Dirk answers.

Well, Rose didn’t ask WHAT he thought they’d be like. The tiniest sly smile flickers across Dirk’s face and Rose’s eyes widen as she realises that she’s been beaten. The consortium of gossipy broads and sneaky sisters will demand her gun and badge for such a failing, she’ll have to leave the precinct and she was only one day away from retirement too.

“My turn.” Dirk says smugly and turns his attention to Roxy, you relax a little when you see that he’s not gone for you.

“Roxy, what do you think about your double having two soulmates and who they are?” Dirk asks.

“Oof, yeah that’s a thing.” Roxy nods.

“Gotta say I never thought any version of me would be dating a troll. No offense and all.” Roxy adds that last part hastily with a glance at you and Rose.

“Given that their species destroyed your world I can certainly see the basis for an aversion, it’s fine.” Rose assures her.

“Still, you never told me that you were into girls. Unless that’s just a variation their universe’s Roxy has.” Dirk says.

“I mean, I don’t think I am. But since I’ve been here I’ve kinda been aware that I only knew like, three people so maybe not a great sample size. I mean you- well, I mean Jake is like ‘damn son’ and John is hot in a dork way.” Roxy says. As she does Rose slowly looks at you with an evil smile, you know she’s long had a theory that your bromance with John over the years was less ‘bro’ and more ‘ro’. That your feelings for your best bro are full romo, full homo, pro bono. Thankfully she says nothing and Dirk and Roxy are too busy talking to notice.

“But Jane?” Dirk asks.

“I don’t know. She’s like- ok even you know that Jane’s a babe, right?” Roxy says.

“Of course I know she’s pretty. She’s very… classic movie actress from the forties maybe.” Dirk nods.
“Right! Exactly! She’s smoking and I don’t like her the same way that I thought, say, Jake was attractive. Like with Jake it’s like, damn son go flex near that waterfall and swing through the jungle on a vine for me.” Roxy says with a slightly lecherous grin on her face. Dirk looks slightly pained but you’re supposing it’s because Jake is his ex and not because he doesn’t relate.

“But I don’t feel the same way about Jane. I look at her and it’s like damn your hair looks good and dang girl you got curves for days. Because, duh, she does and she looks amazing. And Jane is just soft and lovely and built for hugs and all I wanna do is hug her and like then damn those things are right in your face and anyone would get the urge to be like-” Roxy says and holds her hands up to her face and motorboats them.

Dirk looks wildly lost and Rose looks like she’s not sure whether to laugh or not.

“Hey mom? I think you’re into Jane.” you announce.

“What? I don’t think so…” she says uncertainly.

“What about…” you try and think of the girls you know with roughly Jane’s figure, “Aradia or Porrim? I know they’re trolls but still.”

“I like them less obvs because I don’t know them but they’re smoking too, obviously.” Roxy answers.

“Mom, that’s kind of gay.” you tell her and Rose and Dirk both nod.

“Ah, shit. Like our group needed more teen drama, guh.” Roxy whines and drops her head into her hand.

Part of you wants to ask about that, probably the part that has had to listen to Karkat about his convoluted books and movies with their whole romance webs of quadrants and emotions. Your meteor didn’t have much in the way of human teen drama, just the usual thing every so often where Rose would be so annoying it’d make you want to look up what the female equivalent of fratricide is and then DO THAT. But that wasn’t drama. Nor is ‘Vriska continues to be a bitch, no one surprised’. Still they’d probably rather not talk about said drama and you’re not going to ask, besides it’s not your turn.

“-have every right to be annoyed.” a familiar voice says from somewhere over to your right, to the faint sound of a door opening. You all look over at the sound, Roxy’s sexuality crisis getting cut short. You think it might be Dirk but… no it’s a little higher and perhaps also a little less human, there’s that same slight growl you get when talking to the trolls. A somewhat inhuman voicebox producing the sound. Hal, then.

“Oh, come on, I wait ages to finally get a solid conversation in with the guy. I’m trying to give him his space and it turns out that he wasn’t adjusting or finding me hard to process but rather he was just obsessed with himself so much he basically forgot I was alive!” Hal says irritably.

“Shocking.” Not-Bro says flatly. You can hear the sound of plants rustling about distantly, maybe they’re getting food.

“I tried talking to him and it was all about how much smarter he was compared to my ‘feeble meat brain’ and then demanding that I feel his muscles or listen to him talk about himself at length.” Hal complains.
“How very self obsessed.” Not-Bro drawls.

“I know! It’s outrageous!” Hal says.

“Sometimes people ask me what it feels like to have created the first self aware AI and I have to tell them that I did not, you have the self awareness of a potato battery. He’s self obsessed because you’re self obsessed and you’re obsessed with Equius.” Not-Bro argues. At your side Dirk nods, seemingly in agreement with his other self.

“Wow go fuck yourself with your inferior anatomy. I am not self obsessed, you’re just drawing us off on a tangent because you don’t want to listen to what I was saying.” Hal argues.

“Yes, you’re right. Back on topic, tell me more about you.” Not-Bro retorts.

There’s a beat or two of silence and Roxy bites her lip to stifle a laugh.

“I’m gonna shove my feet down your throat and play DDR on your kidneys.” Hal threatens.

Roxy breaks the silence by laughing and Hal and Not-Bro stop talking immediately, you can hear them walking closer but it’s Hal who sticks his head around a tree first to peer at you all.

“We’re being spied on.” Hal announces.

“It looks like a picnic to me.” Not-Bro says with a shake of his head as he looks your setup over.

“Whatever, you’re still avoiding my topic. Here I am, coming to you on my metaphorical knees begging you for your wisdom and you ignore me.” Hal accuses, turning his focus back on Not-Bro.

“Can’t you seek my wisdom about something interesting? I don’t really care about the social skills of another version of you mashed with another version of your weirdo soulmate.” Not-Bro groans.

“In fairness Hal became pretty much useless to talk to after he became Arquius.” Dirk agrees, but Hal is clearly not listening.

“Listen, asshole, my soulmate isn’t a weirdo and if you keep saying he is this is gonna become a fuckin’ fight.” Hal snarls. Like, actually snarls, he sounds like a pissed off big cat.

“It already was a fight and besides you talk shit about Jake all the time.” Not-Bro says angrily. Oh no, is this going to become a fight now?

“That’s because Jake’s manipulative ‘sweet, bumbling, jungle-idiot’ routine is irritating as fuck and he has a list of personality flaws as long as my arm. I’d try to kick some sense into him if I didn’t think it’d be pointless and a total waste of an ass kicking!” Hal shouts.

“Stop that! I’m not getting involved in- look, just leave Jake out of this. And you not shutting your mouth about him well, that’s the whole reason we’re doing this stupid chore!” Not-Bro argues.

“You’re being punished with chores?” Rose asks in surprise, Not-Bro looks at least mildly embarrassed at admitting that but he nods.

“Yeah, apparently the eight foot tall vampire alien takes exception to people fighting in her kitchen and arguing with her isn’t smart. Plus Dad just gets this ‘I’m not angry I’m just disappointed’ vibe that makes me itchy.” Not-Bro says. He has a point, Kanaya is intimidating enough on her own when she wants to be so you certainly wouldn’t want to be on her ancestor’s bad side. Hal looks at Not-Bro and smiles, all sly and troll sharp toothed.
“Daddy issues.” He says smugly.

Not-Bro’s face goes suddenly blank in a way that reminds you horribly of Bro himself.

“Sorry to have disturbed your picnic, we’ll be going now.” he tells you all emotionlessly and then, without even looking at him, snaps his hand out and grabs Hal by one one the horns and hauls him off. Hal makes an outraged noise that sounds like a whistling kettle if that kettle was also a pissed off cicada and he struggles to escape Not-Bro’s grasp but clearly something attached to your skull makes for a pretty good leverage point.

“They are fascinating.” Rose says and takes a slow sip of her drink, you can tell from her expression that she’s sincere if malevolent in her interest. Dirk looks equally disquieted with Rose’s interest so it looks like you’re going to have to take the initiative to break up this awkwardfest of a moment. You grab two pastries and throw one at your mom who catches it on reflex.

“Your turn.” you remind her and take a bite of the fruit filled thing you scored.

“Oh! Oh, right. Uh. Okay, so I kind of missed the whole thing with you blinding your double. When I showed up Dirk was getting arrested for I guess being too much like your Bro, or suspected of it. But… well I never really got what the deal there was. So, Dave, what’s the deal there?” Roxy asks.

You look across at Dirk in surprise, you would have assumed he would have told her given how close they seem to be but evidently he hasn’t spoken a word of your tragic backstory™ to her. Rose isn’t avoiding your eyes when you look over at her but she is coincidentally focusing on pouring out more drinks for everyone. You know she knows some of it but you also know she’s a seer and a nosy broad at the best of times so she probably knows pretty much all of it.

“He was, uh, it was complicated.” you hedge.

“Really.” Roxy says, looking at Dirk but by the time you look at him whatever telling expression he had on his face that made Roxy doubt your statement has been wiped clean.

“He was bad, shit sucked.” you amend and this time you catch the pained expression on Dirk, like he wants to use your words to destroy himself all over again. To point out how your deranged guardian was the worst and therefore he is too.

“My perception of what’s normal is pretty warped but I know my situation wasn’t that.” you say. Roxy still doesn’t look satisfied with your answer and that makes you feel pretty guilty, she seems genuinely concerned.

“Look, I’m bad at talking about this how about- I mean it’s easier if you have a more specific question or questions I guess.” you offer.

“Like a minigame within our game?” Roxy asks, perking up. You nod and Roxy sits up a little straighter as she thinks.

“Well, where did you live? I know Texas but more detailed than that.” she asks.

“Houston, in an apartment building on the top floor.” you answer, that’s easy enough.

“I think it was the same building and floor as me, that seems to be uniform across our group. Jane and John, Jake and Jade, so I would assume the same holds for me and Roxy.” Dirk interrupts.

“Oh, neat. Ok, what did your Bro do for work?” Roxy asks.
You lean forward and rest your elbows on your knees where you’re sitting cross legged.

“A few things, he was loaded.” you say, working one hand up the sleeve of your other arm.

“He made smuppets, sewed them and sold them. All kinds, there were everywhere. Then a bunch of ironic websites, they had ads so I guess made money.” you say, scratching at your skin.

“I’m halfway convinced he actually wrote Game Bro himself but I can’t prove it.” you add.

“Oh, God, Dirk that sounds just like you!” Roxy cackles and punches Dirk on the arm. Dirk looks less amused.

You dig your fingers into your skin and make your mouth move.

“And. And porn.” you say.

Roxy stares at you wide eyed, her mouth open.

“Wait, alt-Dirk was in porn?!” Roxy gasps.

“ Mostly it was just smuppets but he was in some, sorry to interrupt Dave but you did once link me all of his websites that you’d found. Or at least you linked me a number.” Rose cuts in.

“I already knew that. I mean I tried to not see but sometimes he’d print things out and leave it around for reasons that… I don’t. Know.” you shrug. You stare at the picnic blanket, there’s a name for that pattern isn’t there? Gingham or something?

“And I was. Too. In porn, I guess.” your mouth says. Roxy drops her glass.

“What?” she breathes.

“Not like that, not with him. It was more…” you search for the words and shake your arms out, lacing your hands behind the back of your neck to suppress the way the hairs there are standing on end.

“Smuppet snuff, that kind of thing. And. Well there were cameras everywhere, you know? And at most I was only thirteen I couldn’t take them down, the one time I tried Bro knocked one of my teeth out though it was only a baby tooth so it doesn’t matter really. And like- I didn’t check to be sure if there were cameras in my bedroom or the bathroom because I wanted to not know that. Woulda been hard to change or shower if I knew for sure there was. But I guess he made money. From that. I know he did from the smuppet snuff ones with me, he said. So.” You feel a little like you might throw up, either way you’re suddenly not hungry anymore.

Roxy stands up and steps over the basket and crouches next to you.

“Can I hug you?” she asks softly. You look up in surprise and see how steely eyed she looks and at first you think she’s mad at you but after a second you realise she’s mad FOR you. Oh, shit, she wants to hug you. You try to do words like normal humans but what comes out sounds more like a baby crow peep. Davesprite would be proud.

Either way Roxy grabs you into a hug that ends up crushingly tight. A familiar warm hand touches your arm and after a moment’s shuffling you feel Rose against your side, her arm around your back.

“I’m so sorry baby, I didn’t know. And- and Dirk is nothing like that, I promise. And if your Bro was around I’d murder him myself.” Roxy hisses into your hair and sniffls tearfully against your
“It’s fine.” you say and Rose pats your back and pulls away. She knows what you mean, it’s not fine but you don’t want to talk about it anymore. Roxy takes a little longer to get the hint but when she does return to her place opposite you her expression is still angry and tearful.

“Dirk don’t look like that.” she reprimands him as she rubs at her eyes.

“I wasn’t looking like anything.” Dirk replies defensively. You didn’t see it but you’d guess he was looking guilty again, he thinks he’s responsible for Bro which is beyond stupid in your opinion.

“You were. And it’s not like anyone has anything nice to say about adult me either, not your mom Rose but the one who was the mom to the mini-yous. And, I mean, what was your mom really like anyway?” Roxy asks, looking at Rose. Topic change, that’s good. Or at least topic shift to someone who isn’t you.

“Well, like I said before I don’t think I really understood her at the time and I now don’t have the chance to see if I was mistaken in how I interpreted her behaviour or not. Perhaps I was wrong, perhaps I was right. She had an alcohol problem and that’s a mitigating factor to attributing intent to her behaviour.” Rose says hesitantly. She shoots you a look and you know what she’s concerned about, whether it’s ‘improper’ to talk about her mom after you talking about Bro. Or starting to talk about him and then losing your shit.

“I’d rather you talk about her than me talk about Bro.” you say, your voice rougher than you expected. Rose nods seriously and sits up, folding her hands in her lap.

“If you must know she was neglectful. She would vanish into the ether for days and days at a time, one of the things Dave and I- well, regardless. There often wasn’t food in the house and we were isolated enough that I could not simply go to the store, but I was privileged in the fact that I had access to her accounts and could order groceries online. When she did appear she would act like nothing was wrong, in fact she would be aggressively cheerful and enthusiastic about things. Swinging from ignoring me to not leaving me alone which was hard to take. It is hard to form a relationship with someone when their behaviour is too erratic to predict.” Rose explains.

Dirk laughs quietly, though it sounds bitter. Rose fixes him with a stiff look and raises an eyebrow.

“Did I say something amusing?” she asks coldly.

“I’ve heard you’ve got an interest in psychology, right? I’ve researched that a lot myself.” Dirk explains.

“Yes, it’s a fascinating subject. Why is it funny, though?” she asks.

“When you don’t understand something it’s overwhelming, frightening. How can you deal with something if you don’t get it? Hoarding knowledge on a subject is a way of coping with it, to try to control it. If you know everything then you can’t be caught off guard. It’s a coping mechanism, one of mine and not a great one. It’s funny that it seems to have been passed to you, my sympathies.” Dirk laughs mirthlessly. Rose watches him for a moment and then smiles a little.

“I won’t deny that my bafflement at my mother’s behaviour spurred on my interest to understand how the human mind works. But it became a genuine interest, I must say. But regardless my current view on my mother is that many of my earliest perceptions were right, though I foolishly discarded them at the time due to their implausibility. It so often seemed like she had just crash landed on Earth with no idea of how things were supposed to be and was just wildly trying to fit in only to be handed
an infant and compelled to raise it with no clue of how to do so. She was probably lost and alone, trying her best and coping in inadvisable ways. I can’t say that I blame her and I regret that I discarded that idea at the time and instead attributed her frequent abandonment to malice and passive one upmanship instead of the actions of an alienated alcoholic trying not to let me see her at her worst.” Rose explains.

“I’m sorry other me wasn’t great. I think I was only able to get off the sauce because I had my friends around me, if she was alone I can see how it’d be really hard.” Roxy sighs, resting her chin in her hands.

“Give yourself more credit there Roxy, I don’t think any of us were any help. You did something really hard all by yourself, don’t discount that.” Dirk corrects her firmly.

You look sidelong at Rose, you know it was hard for her but it’s another of the many things that neither of you talk about. But maybe you should.

“I used to wonder what my life would have been like if I’d got the chance to grow up with you as my mom in real time, like a real mom and daughter.” Roxy says with a wistful sigh. Rose’s mouth flattens into a thin line and if you didn’t know better you’d say that the drink she just sipped from was suddenly lemon juice.

“I think I am perhaps a figure best appreciated at a distance. Perhaps one day I might be a good parent but I think it would be unwise for me to do that alone, a mediating influence would be better. I don’t think my undiluted personality should be inflicted on anyone without the option of leaving.” Rose says diplomatically.

“Well,” you say as you make your voice normal and chill through sheer force of will and not like you were just freaking out earlier.

“It’s pretty obvious from Hal that it’s possible to splice troll and human DNA.” you tell Rose.

Rose goes perfectly still, like you can’t see her if she doesn’t move. You get to watch as her cheeks slowly flame bright red.

“Little green babies.” you whisper and Rose whips her empty plastic cup at you, though it bounces harmlessly off of your elbow. Roxy is giggling behind her hand and Dirk raises one eyebrow at Rose, like she just did something intellectually fascinating if dubious.

“Right, I think you and I ought to be going to battle practice. If you will excuse me!” Rose says loudly and gets up, floating over the picnic and out of the room.

“I better bounce or I’m just making it more likely I’m gonna get ‘accidentally’ tripped by her later.” you tell Roxy and Dirk. They both wave goodbye to you and you abscond with some pastries. You don’t really want them but… free food, and old habits die hard.

You arrive over at the gym and find everyone who is supposed to be on your team already there. Today it’s Sollux’s, uh, dad throwing shit at you and he seems to be faster and better than his kids and your team doesn’t do quite so well as it did before. Either way by the time you’ve broken for lunch your team has started developing a few solid plays, things you can lapse into just by being near each other.

You don’t know if you’ll ever be ready to face Lord English, but it certainly feels like you’re getting better.

~Voidy Chat~ is open
Vriska: Alright everyone, report time. How is your mission to integr8 with the crew going?
Karkat: OTHER ME ISN’T AS TERRIBLE AS I THOUGHT HE WAS, SO THAT’S SOMETHING.
Kanaya: I Have Been Spending Some Time After Meals With The Dolorosa And Mr Egbert And I Believe That They Like Me
Vriska: John's dad is apparently especially dangerous from what I've heard, are you sure about that?
Kanaya: Reasonably Sure
John: oh come on guys no version of my dad is a deadly psycho killer!!
Rose: He’s a different species though, remember?
John: still the same guy!
Jade: ive actually been spending a lot of time with their jake
Terezi: Y34H 1N TR41N1NG W3 4LL KNOW TH4T!
Jake: Uh, actually we both have outside of her training.
Vriska: No8ody asked you, Joke.
Dave: why do you have to be such a legendary bitch vriska were you forged in some insufferable furnace and honed to an edge of shittiness to be this way
Dave: mere petty peasants gasp in awe of the radiating aura of your jerkish personality for it is she the one true bitch
Dirk: If we’re following this metaphor does this mean that someone should fling her into a lake?
Roxy: is that why shes in charge? listen strange women lying in ponds distributin’ swords is no basis for a system of government
Rose: Actually I do believe that Dave is the expert in swords of potential Welshness and legendary status.
Karkat: IF THAT MEANS DAVE WILL END UP BREAKING HER IN HALF I’M ALL FOR THIS METAPHOR.
Vriska: Oh ha ha you're all so funny 8ut none of you are disputing that pages are categorically useless and Jape over here has done nothing that I asked of him. If all he's 8een doing is talking to his weenie other self then he'd have 8een 8etter staying in 8ed. Jade accomplished 8efriending the altern8 loser 8y herself, Joke was as always superfluous.
Jake: He isnt useless and that should at least disprove your theory on pages.
Jade: ignore her jake!
Jane: I’m sure I don’t know who you’re referring to Jade. Roxy, did *you* hear any especially mean girls in this thread?
Roxy: u know what babe? i do not and im straining my ears real hard
Vriska: Honestly, I just ask you all for a report and you can't all even manage to do that right! Give me a 8reak!
-Vriska was banned from responding to the thread ~Voidy Chat~ -
Karkat: ROXY IF I DIE LAUGHING WITH GLEE I BLAME YOU AND ALSO MAKE SURE TO SEND JANE AROUND TO REVIVE MY GLEE EXPLODED CORPSE LATER.
Terezi: =>[ Dave: ah shit
Terezi: 1TS F1N3 1LL ST4Y FOR TH3 R3ST OF TH3 M3M0 1 TH1NK VR1SK4 TH1NKS SH3S 3NCOUR4G1NG J4K3 BY G1V1NG H1M SOM3TH1NG TO *PROV3* H1MSLF 4G4INST BUT 1 TH1NK 1 H4V3 TO D1S4GR33 W1TH H3R ON TH1S ON3 Jake: What?
Terezi: SH3 TH1NKS SH3S H3LP1NG Dave: yeah young grandpa dont let vriska bother you shes all about headgames and shit and the only people who hold their own toe to toe with her are the girls and even then kanaya just like gracefully bows out
Kanaya: I Try Not To Engage In Pointless Activities And Curbing Vriskas Acts And Words Are Both Far Too Much Effort And Have Far Too Low A Point Of Success To Warrant Attempting Roxy: i think what everyone is saying here j man is that you should ignore her
Jake: Well i really didn't expect all of that, especially as it is pretty clear that unlike me Vriska is beneficial to this team and our survival. On the other hand I am about at chocolate teapot levels of usefulness.

John: actually thats not true.

Jake: What?

John: in the timeline me and roxy came from your hope powers basically nuked a whole battlefield or thats what i heard.

Rose: My understanding of the page class is that it has quite the slow power curve. Dave and I got our powers quite early on, I believe Jade and John are still increasing in power but page power curves could be better described as a firework with a long fuse. A lot of fizzle and a little light at the start and then wildly more power.

Rose: Honestly we learnt of your classpect beforehand and Vriska herself theorised that you would be our strongest player. She simply seems to think that discouraging you would make you push yourself forward because, I presume, that is how she would respond.

Terezi: PR3TTY MUCH

 Jake: Well its not working!

Karkat: SO JUST IGNORE HER, LIFE IS BETTER WHEN YOU DO. TRUST ME.
Karkat: AT THE RISK OF DRAGGING US BACK ON TASK HOW IS EVERYONE ELSE DOING WITH BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE OTHERS SO THEY’RE LESS LIKELY TO BETRAY US AFTER THIS LAST FIGHT?

Jane: Do you really think they’re going to do that though? I know that we saw they could be violent but they’ve been perfectly normal ever since then, why would they be so mean?

Rose: In fairness though it does present us a zero lose situation. If we become friends with their group it makes them less likely to turn on us in the worst case scenario. And in the best case scenario we have nothing to worry about.

Jade: i think you mean in the best case scenario FRIENDS!!!

Rose: Yes, and that.

Terezi: 1V3 B33N T4LK1NG TO N3P3T4 4ND H3R S1ST3R/4NC3ST0R 4 LOT
Terezi: 1 W4S GO1NG TO T4LK1NG TO JOHN BUT 1T S33MS MY DOUBL3 1S K1ND OF T3RR1TOR14L 4BOUT H1M

John: it is so weird that other me has two soulmates and its terezi and vriska and that he hates his terezi.

Karkat: JOHN HOW IS IT POSSIBLE THAT I KEEP CRAMMING KNOWLEDGE DOWN YOUR GAPING IGNORANT MAW AND YOU JUST FERMENT IT AND PROJECT VOMIT UP PURE IDIOCY DEVOID OF EVEN THE SLIGHTEST TRACES OF FACT? YOU ARE A ONE MAN REFINERY FOR IMBECILES. LEARNING GOES IN AND FOOLISHNESS COMES OUT.

Dave: karkat no
Karkat: MUST I SCHOOL YOU ON QUADRANTS AGAIN EGBERT?
John: uuuuuuuugh no one cares karkat!

Dave: i just remembered i need to go do a thing anywhere else
Rose: I think I left my excuse switched on in another room, farewell.

Roxy: your loss this sounds interesting!

--Dave has disconnected from ~Voidy Chat~ --

You toss your phone to the side and get up to pull your covers back. You fall into bed with a tired sigh, you’re not used to feeling tired from two days of training in a row. It’s been years.

“You windsock fucking, globe horfing bastard!” comes Karkat’s voice through your wall, unfortunately not muffled enough to be Vantas proof. You can hear him stomping down the hallway with vague threats to kick John’s ‘stupid buck teeth in’.
Morning comes and you find yourself drawn into what has become a routine, you get up at the same time as everyone else because otherwise someone’s gonna be knocking down your door to get you. Then you go eat breakfast with everyone and it’s cooked by people who are clearly culinary gods. With that done you go and head to the gym to train with the others, what’s not normal is the argument already going on when you get there.

“Well maybe you should just keep your meddling nose out of it!” Jake, the older one shouts. The younger one is right behind you and staring wide eyed at the shouting match going down. You know he was hoping to catch his older self and get some power tips after the revelation last night that it’s not him but Vriska’s just an asshole.

“You not pulling your weight could get my kids killed so forgive me if your delicate sensibilities are offended by me trying to make you better!” Hal argues, his hands on his hips.

You make eye contact with your double who left for the gym a few minutes earlier so he’s clearly seen more of this. He sidles over to you, abandoning the Megidos who are watching the fight unfold with mild interest.

“I’d ah… stay out of this. I’ve already called Roxy.” he whispers.

“I ought to punch you right in the kisser, you cretin!” Jake bellows at Hal. Everyone in the room is watching this go on but they’re just fighting anyway.

“Oh, typical Jake, talk about doing shit but no follow through. Jake ‘path of least resistance’ English.” Hal hisses, his lip peeling back to reveal very alien teeth.

“You total lunatic! You’ve always had it out for me!” Jake snaps and actually swings for him. Only Hal is quicker and ducks under his punch and shoves him back.

“Finally he gets it! I can’t STAND you!” Hal yells.

Jake abruptly goes ass over teakettle several times across the slightly softened gym floor, only it’s not from anything Hal did because he too has bounced away with a startled angry cat noise.

“ENOUGH!” a voice cuts in.

You expect to see one of the adults, someone with some sense separating the warring pair only instead you see a troll that you’re pretty sure is a teenager too, or maybe he’s just out of being one. It’s the Captor whose name you don’t remember, but he’s hardly mature. You walked into the room where everyone watches movies only to find him having hooked up an old playstation and breaking Grand Theft Auto 3 by making a tank fly in it. Yet he’s the one standing there between the two thrown guys.

“Everyone is sick and tired of your stupid POINTLESS fighting, so either go fuck or fuck off!” he yells. Ah, not that mature then.

“I would not- he isn’t Dirk!” Jake exclaims in offense as he scrambles to his feet.

“You have berated me for not being Dirk… 8673 times.” Hal says, pausing in the middle as he presumably makes that number up but who knows, maybe he did know it.

“I wonder if he used to pretend to be Dirk like my- like the auto responder from our universe did.” Jake wonders quietly.

“I don’t give a crap. No fucks given, I couldn’t give less of a shit about your drama if I tried. You
assholes are wasting my time, if you aren’t gonna hatefuck this—” the Captor groans irritably.

“I would never!” Jake exclaims and even you catch the way that Hal winces.

“Please. He makes Dirk dumber just by being around him, why would I even want that?” Hal says pissily.

“I can hear you, Hal. And everyone knows your responses to shit are jacked but I’m not my sister, I can still hear you making them.” the mediating troll says.

“Ouch, Mituna that was low.” Roxy says, suddenly next to you. The older one that is. She looks pained as she watches the exchange happening across the room.

The troll, Mituna, presses his hands to those weird mechanical parts on his skull and groans.

“Sorry.” he groans and looks at them both again.

“You need to stop aggroing him.” Mituna declares, pointing a finger at Jake.

“Me? He’s the one who’s always opening his yap!” Jake says defensively.

“And you’re fighting back! He’s low level newbie troll and you’re jerking his chain. If you don’t mean it then drop it and if you do then DO SOMETHING! And actually your timing needs work ‘cause we only got TWO FUCKIN’ days left before we gotta fight the final boss so maybe not the time for your romantic shitshow!” Mituna argues.

“I don’t know what you’re implying here but I don’t like it one jot.” Jake says huffily. You hear Damara tutting to herself and even Aradia looks sympathetic. When you look back at the progressing conversation which at the moment is just Mituna and Jake going back and forth over the topic of ‘no way you’re this fucking stupid’ you see that Hal’s body language is stiff. His hands clench at his sides and then, abruptly, he all but runs out of the room. Only running out would be too cliche and dramatic but it’s about as fast of a walk as you can get before you could be accused of running from the room.

“Hal, wait!” Roxy calls and flies after him.

“UUGH, great! I needed him to run this stupid training session so I guess you’re all just sparring each other or whatever. Nice job breaking it here.” Mituna bitches and then he too walks off, seemingly deciding he’s not needed if Hal isn’t there.

You suppose that today won’t be so routine.

“Poor Hal.” Aradia sighs and Damara concurs in some language you don’t speak. Or you assume she’s agreeing, it’s hard to tell.

“What was that all about?” you hiss at your double who looks away from the door Hal just left through to turn to you.

“It’s complicated.” the guy sighs.

“Hal and Jake never got on. I mean… imagine you’re a copy of a guy and he’s in love with his soulmate and that just makes it all the more apparent that you’re alone.” your double says obliviously because you are in exactly that situation.

“It probably made him feel like he was less real and I don’t think Jake was cool with Hal managing
as much of Dirk’s online life as he did, or that he confused them sometimes I think.” he continues.

“It’s infuriating having to go through all these different layers of damned obscurification to get to Dirk, having to play ‘is it him or is it the absurd AI’ is very tiresome.” Jake agrees at your side.

“Right, well so there’s that but Hal’s got this new mostly troll brain now and he’s still working it out. And the fact that it’s a thing and he and Jake don’t like each other and Jake keeps being, uh, kind of a tool to him out of reflex isn’t helping. Not that he’s the only one I mean Hal’s pointlessly hostile to him for no reason as well, it drives Dirk crazy but I guess maybe that’s part of it. But like I said new troll brain picks up continuous hostility differently and that plus Jake anything resembling Dirk’s brain in all the ‘yes please’ places then it’s…” other you shrugs as if to say there you go.

“He’s pitch for him.” you finish.

“Looks like. I figured he just didn’t like him until he stormed off then, or maybe he had a crush because troll brains are weird like this sorta pale thing he’s developed with Roxy. But I guess he actually really likes the guy. Or doesn’t like him but in the hot way.” he says.

“So my other self over there saying that he’d never consider such a thing was quite the harsh rejection?” Jake asks.

“Yeah, real fucking brutal. Drama, huh?” the other you sighs unhappily.

“And it don’t stop.” you agree.

“Enough talk all of you, it looks like we’re stuck with weapons training until Hal and Mituna come back from wherever they fucked off to. Everybody over here now!” Vriska hollers from across the room.

Well, great.

That evening after all day training, because Hal didn’t come back, Karkat ends up trying to patch you up. You didn’t get cut but you have some mild floor burn from trying to break a flashstep with your shin instead of your foot.

“Really, Karkat, I’m fine. I’ve had worse.” you assure him as he rubs your leg down with an antiseptic wipe, trying to buff out the powdered remains of alien sneakers ground into your flesh. Karkat just angry hisses in response and doubles down on his efforts.

“At least you’re not doing physical training tomorrow, they have the sense to not injure you the day before we have to fight. Well, you have to fight because I’m useless.” Karkat mutters angrily.

“You’re not useless.” you correct him.

“Fuck off.” Karkat tells you without venom and tosses the antiseptic wipe in the trash and opens the packet of another with his teeth. You like his teeth, they’re jacked up and pointy but entirely him.

“Do you think if you bit me it’d go through my skin?” you say without thinking. Karkat looks up from your leg with an expression of pure ‘what the fuck’ on his face. You should take a picture, make him into a reaction gif. You don’t, but you should.

“If I wanted to probably, your puny human skin lost a strength contest to the ground after all.” Karkat points out after a moment and unfurls the new antiseptic wipe with a snap of his hand.

“Your stupid mammal hair is in the way.” Karkat complains as he rubs your leg.
“It’ll be fine.” you tell him.

“You know, if you shaved your legs like you so studiously insist in shaving the pathetic amount of hair that comes through your face-” he starts.

“Hey!” you interrupt, offended. Karkat keeps going, ignoring you.

“-then maybe we wouldn’t be in this mess.” Karkat finishes.

“If I shaved my legs then physics wouldn’t have punished my leg on the ground? Shit best stay hairy then lest I break the universe.” you retort and then snag the pointless antiseptic wipe from him and toss it across the room.

“I’m fine.” you tell him firmly.

Karkat’s hands still on your ankle and he doesn’t look you in the eye, instead just looking down at the graze on your leg.

“I just don’t buy that everything is going to work out. Things never work out for me and I don’t know what’s going to go wrong but something will.” Karkat says softly.

“Hey, I’m completely positive that everything won’t go to plan.” you tell him, avoiding the image of your dead self that you saw.

“But that doesn’t mean that we won’t win, even if shit goes slightly sideways and we have to improvise or the life players get some use. It’ll be cool, Karkat.” you reassure him. Even though you’re gonna die.

“Mm, all I know is the combos I have. Some are just like a big power boost but some change how my power works, like with Rose.” other you says. He’s worrying at the dry skin of his lip, picking at it by chewing on it in every pause.

“Rose? What happened?” you ask.

“It was like… pchoo.” he says unhelpfully, making a gesture like his head exploded.

“Do you think we would get the same result, whatever that is?” Rose asks calmly.

“I mean…” other you falters, leaning back a little and biting at his lip more. “Karkat has this theory that part of how this stuff mashes up is just straight aspect compatibility or some shit like that. Doom is all about how things go and rules and shit and time is literally how things go through time, there’s overlap. But time and hope probably wouldn’t jam so well. And I think that’s it but he thinks there’s more to it.”

“He suspects it’s relationship based?” Rose guesses.

“Hah, Karkat, right? But yeah that’s his thought. The better you work with someone the smoother it goes, or that’s his theory. But I’m not so convinced. I can get blood stuff when we go together but I can’t do shit with it but maybe we’re both knights and, fuck this kind of theory shit isn’t my bag. So maybe you two will get what me and my Rose did but maybe since you’re different people and your relationship isn’t a carbon copy of ours it’ll be different. Who knows? Not me.” he shrugs.

Rose seems to consider this and you think it over too. It’s hard to not think that your double is judging how close you are or aren’t to your Rose when he says things like that but you suppose he’s right, it is different. Him and his Rose lived together as kids with a parent and shared older siblings
watching them, they lived as kids together. But you and your Rose clung to each other as orphaned teens left without adults to fend for yourselves. You’re more friends and roommates who are related than twins who grew up in a home together. It’s different. Not less, but different.

Rose looks at you over her shoulder and smiles, black lips tilted sly and daring you. She holds out her hand to you and wiggles long thin fingers with chipped black nail varnish on.

“Shall we remix this then, dear brother?” Rose asks sweetly.

You roll your eyes but figure why the hell not and put your hand in hers. For a second it’s just an awkward hand holding moment but then you focus. You don’t ‘do the timey thing’ because you’re not John and you don’t switch time on and off, it’s always there. Instead you just become aware of the flow of it over all of you, the ceaseless ticking and tocking of the universe. Like Poe’s goddamn tell tale heart just dropped the bass forever in your brain.

Suddenly it catches and everything around you falls away.

You’re not you and you’re not Rose but you’re… it’s as if she’s been sifted down to an elemental force and the light of Rose is glowing out through every gap between every atom of your body. You’re a lampshade to her light, filtering things through and projecting what remains out. You swallow and feel everything go sideways as the present ticking in your head loudly tocks. It feels like- well a little like your head exploding.

And then time flows and everything drops out from under you.

Bro took you swimming a few times when you were little. You suppose he thought he was teaching you how to swim and you did learn so in a way he was successful but he did it his way. You got woken up one morning to swim shorts thrown in your face and then you were taken in the car to a water park without a word of explanation. He had stood next to you at the edge of the pool, it was one of the ones with those machine generated waves. He had kept you at his side there, unmoving for ages. You watched people swimming, happy families, teens on their own. Then the waves had started, getting bigger and bigger and you’d watched in hopefully hidden awe. Bro looked down at you, wrapped a hand around your arm and then flung you right into the middle of the deep end of the pool and into the huge waves.

He’d thrown you in at the deep end in a literal sink or swim situation. If nothing else Bro was always perfectly on brand.

No thanks to him you’d worked out swimming. Gasping for air at the surface and coordinating yourself to stay there and be calm and then work out going somewhere. Here, surrounded by light, you do the same. You struggle to stay afloat and as you manage it you see that not all the light is so bright some of it seems… less likely, which is a strange thought that you just had but there it is. As you look around you realise that you’re IN TIME and what you’re seeing is light as an aspect, this is how likely things are to happen, how true they are, how real.

You focus and the faint image of other you still sat on the gym floor comes to you and you can see just how unlikely he is, so faint as to be barely perceptible. Then you look on and this is where things become familiar. You see a minute from now, the different paths people will take through the world and how things might change. Something insatiably curious pushes you on and you realise that it’s Rose you can feel, her desire to see. With your powers intertwined with hers you go where she does.

The future rushes at you and you’re dragged along on what is now Rose’s ride. It feels like the water slides at that park as you slide down the path of the most likely future, getting only flashes of what’s to come.
You see Karkat standing before a denizen and a steely glint to Kanaya’s eyes. You see the Empress on the floor in a pool of her own blood. You watch Lord English screaming and stamping his foot as he fires lasers around, younger you ducking out of the way. Just there you see a split where he makes the landing or doesn’t, but the outcome is the same so Rose drags you back. Jake floating blindingly bright and Vriska dropping a red chest on the ground.

You screech to a halt when you see your dead body face down on the floor, cape riddled with bullet holes and your hand loosely gripped around that shitty Welsh sword. The other you stands in the frozen moment with his back to you and his clock hand sword in the process of dropping to the floor. The frozen figure of Rose across the way suddenly makes eye contact with you and you’re dragged forward. Forward through time with a desperate sense of no, no, no. Rose is looking to see how it ends.

And there, at your feet is the lillypad with the doorway to the final reward on it. You’re there with Karkat in your arms, both laughing in relief. And you count heads you see that everyone is present and accounted for. You die but you get better, that had to have been heroic but that’s what Jane is for, right?

You feel the sigh of relief go past your lips. The most likely timeline is the one where everything works out, you’re going to be okay.

You feel time kick back in and swallow the lump in your throat as the world comes back to you.

“Oh, that was… far more vivid and controllable than I’m used to.” Rose breathes. She shoots you a worried look but she doesn’t seem to concerned, it works out alright in the end you guess. You’re there at the door when it counts. There’s bile burning up the back of your throat. You reassure yourself that there were a lot of bullet holes there, that was likely a quick death. Not one gutshot that you bleed out slowly from, but rather all of your organs perforated into instant shock and blood loss. It’s not like you’ve not died before.

You never want to again but you will.

You will.

Other you leans back, propping himself up on his elbows and bounces his knee in agitation.

“Honestly I hate light.” he says, his purple Rose eyes narrowing. When he frowns like that the scar you gave him twists and you think you still might throw up.

“Time sucks, don’t get me wrong. But aside from being kinda aware of it at all times I have to choose to use it. Rose has it worse than me, it took forever for her to learn how to shut it out so she only got the really relevant shit without choosing although now she’s mad that she did it well enough that she gets nothing here. I don’t like knowing what’s coming.” he says.

Rose hesitates. You’d never considered that her light powers might well have been part of what drove her to drink, you’d just assumed it was the end of your species, the separation from what was now half of the human race and the death of her mother all taking a toll. Plus the game as a whole still continuing to fuck with you. You’d figured knowing shit would help with that not make it worse. Are you terrible for never asking? But how do you ask that? You’re bad at asking about feelings and Rose is more likely to turn anything on you so she doesn’t have to talk and instead you’ll get your head shrunk. Dysfunctional avoidant assholes the both of you.

Rose picks at the hem of her god tier robe.
“It can be burdensome, especially as talking about what I see can alter whether those events come to pass. Keeping people in the dark can be a necessary evil.” Rose says with her voice carefully controlled.

“Yeah, well, don’t burden me.” other you says as he floats up and lands on his feet.

“I don’t wanna know what’s coming. It’s bad enough with time loops being stuck on a track, if I’m already on one then I don’t want to see it. Whatever though, your combo is just as combat useless as me and my Rose. I’ll go tell eight legged freaks over there to cross another off of her list.” other you says and strolls off.

“We should probably not tell anyone, a vision that specific is the kind of thing we shouldn’t alter.” Rose says quietly when your double is out of earshot. You nod and your stomach finally stills and goes cold instead. It’s going to happen no matter what. You’re doing it dog.

“It’ll be okay but- Dave, I’m sorry.” Rose whispers, touching your arm gently. You look up, her face is pinched in grief and you’re not dead yet. Though it’s just a matter of time.

“If that’s the end it leads to then it’s… worth it. If I have to die so everyone else lives, so I live too in the end, then it’s a fair deal.” you say.

Here’s a thought. You don’t want to be a hero, Bro ruined that idea for you. He got his gross leather clad hands all over it and tarnished it so bad that you can’t shine it up and make it something good anymore. But that death is heroic. So are you, or will you be, a hero? After everything you’ve tried to unlearn does Bro still win in the end? Get what he wanted? The only time he ever didn’t win as far as you know was when he died but maybe that was all part of his plan too. You die a heroic death and he made you a hero like he wanted. You’re not crying, not fighting what you have to do, you’re stepping up to the plate.

Now you really think you might throw up.

But the irony (hah) is that even knowing that you’re still going to do it. The idea that if you don’t it might not be your body on the ground but those of the people you love. That the door might not be there or it’s like one of those video games with a bad end, you wouldn’t put that past SBURB. You’d throw yourself in front of Lord English’s gun and take those bullets even if you didn’t get a 1-UP from one of the life players and get the big reward yourself. And that probably means more now that you know that there’s approximately fifty bullets out there with your name on them.

Oh shit Rose is talking.

“-not a reasonable thing to ask of anyone, Dave. No one should ever be ask to sacrifice their life, however temporarily. I understand your urge to do this, I do, and I too know that it is needed but this isn’t okay. I just need you to know that this is, by all metrics, entirely fucked up and you shouldn’t ever have to do this.” Rose rants.

“I think we passed the point of ‘shit is fucked and we should deal with this’ so long ago it ain’t even in the rear view anymore.” you reply.

“Quite.” Rose nods.

You suck it up. You’re going to die, so what? You’re not looking forward to it but you’ll do it. You’re going to have to stop Karkat from finding out before though or else he might try and do something monumentally stupid like saving your life or sacrificing his in exchange.

Rose seems similarly lost in thought until she speaks up.
“Do you wonder what’s behind that door? When we open it to get our reward will we make the universe whole cloth or will we just be repairing the Earth that we have already? That implies we’d keep our powers and I don’t know how I feel about that.” Rose says.

You hate your time powers but not having them would make you feel vulnerable as hell. You hate sword fighting but you never take your weapons out of your sylladex. Being unarmed is all kinds of terrible for your brain.

“I try to imagine what my life is going to be. Of course the big stuff is easy, I want a world where we never have to do this kind of thing ever again. Sometimes I wonder if the game with give me Mom back, a sort of ‘congratulations you beat the game’ prize but I think Roxy is the closest I will get. But just trying to imagine my day to day is… overwhelming and I wonder if the part of me that knows what normal feels like is broken.” Rose says.

What do you want?

Karkat. You want to be with Karkat no matter how the game shakes you out on the other side. And maybe that means a lot more than you’re totally okay with thinking about right now but all you want is to be near him and be with your friends again forever.

“I want to be with everyone.” you tell her, voice slightly rough.

“I want to be near Kanaya, of course. But our friends too, and you. I don’t want to be alone. But beyond that is a mystery. I want to have books if I can, a cat perhaps. It’s a pitifully weak projection, isn’t it?” Rose asks but you know her enough to know her rhetorical questions when you hear them. She tilts her head back and closes her eyes.

“I cannot possibly imagine who I will be in a year. What this will make me. But further than that, who will I be when I’m thirty? Will we age? Our powers prevent us from dying permanently except for heroically or justly. Will we age and then be reborn from our own ashes for all eternity like a phoenix? Will I remember being who I am now? Will any of us ever adapt from this?” Rose wonders.

“God, light really is the worst aspect. Can I just get shot now to get out of this conversation?” you groan. Make it a joke, deflect the idea. You don’t want to think of your future. You don’t want to think you’ll always be this fucked up but you’re also terrified of being okay. Terrified of fully sincere house, white picket fence, 2.5 kids and- and Karkat. Your guts tie themselves in knots at the mere suggestion of the hint of the thought. You’re sixteen years old and you’re realising that you don’t know how to be happy without also being shit scared as well.

You were happy on the meteor of course, not alway but a damn decent chunk that you’re proud of. But you were still scared. Scared of what it meant, of meeting up with your friends (you changed, did they, is that ok?), of seeing your brother, of the final fight. But on the other side of that door you may not have anything to be scared OF. No game and no deranged guardian. Just these people around you who for the most part you can say without ego deeply care for you.

What if you’re too broken for that? What if you can’t do it? You remind yourself that Karkat’s been scared of things for his whole life, he’ll learn how right there with you. You can fuck up together. And a good chunk of the people around you were basically raised by themselves, they won’t know how to do anything either. It’s a good thought but still frightening.

“I hear there’s a pool on the upper levels, I think I’m going to go swim instead of being around more fighting.” Rose says into the silence you dumbly left growing there.
“I’m gonna go do… a thing.” you finish lamely.

The two of you abscond from the room when Vriska isn’t looking and part without bringing up your mutually bad excuses.

There’s a knock on the door that night and you open it, expecting Karkat, only to find yourself there. Or rather the other younger alternate you with his scarred face and Rose’s eyes.

“Can I talk to you?” he asks before you can even ask him why he’s here and then he shoulders his way into your room without waiting for an answer.

“It’s about tomorrow.” he adds by way of an explanation.

“What about it?” you ask, shutting the door and figuring that the quickest way to make him go away is to get to whatever he wants to say and then tell him to go.

“It’s just… I know we’ve practiced and everything and your Rose says our shit’s basically on lock and all but if her vision is like my sister’s then I know it’s not always totally reliable or at least open to misinterpretation. Either way I know we’ve done all we can to make sure that this fight goes down smooth like a gallon of butter on a slip ‘n’ slide and I’ve been, like, telling that to my siblings and Karkat and Sollux so I know, you know?” he rambles on.

“Right?” you say because there was absolutely no question in there.

“Right. So I know that, I do. And you know that, so we should be in about the same place. Right?” he asks.

“Yeah?” you say because you’re really not sure what your part in this conversation is. You sit down on your bed and leave a space for him which he takes after a moment.

“So I know we’ve done everything, our odds are better than ever, we have healers for everyone else, a plan, way more people…” he nods, this time you stay silent.

Looking at him he’s stoic, or at least he would be if he was wearing your shades. His face is calm but the expression around his eyes shows barely restrained terror.

“Just… if… I don’t have any lives left. If I die then it’s for good.” he adds with a whisper.

You want to tell him that he’s not the only one, that the non god tiers live their lives like that too but it’s a lie. If Terezi died then Jane could bring her back, but if this guy did then nothing can.

“I don’t want to fight. I never want to. And I know I gotta so I will, you don’t need to worry about me pussying out on your or anything and I’ve reassured everyone that we’re cool and as certain to winning as we can get because I don’t want them worrying or interfering. This isn’t me backing out.” other you adds quickly, looking up at you to check that you’re not doubting him.

“I didn’t think you were.” you assure him and he nods.

“So this isn’t that.” he repeats and you wait, there’s a point in here somewhere.

“I’m not even fifteen yet and I’ve got to fight some roided out, laser breathing, incredible hulk rip off and if I don’t people I care about might die so I gotta. But I might die and I never wanted this, I’m fourteen and I just want to go home and go to the movies with Karkat and live with my brothers and sisters and not DIE.” other you choking out and covers his face with his hands.

It occurs to you as you stare at him, hunched over himself with his shoulders shaking softly that he
isn’t you. He might look like he’s you, although less than he used to thanks to you ruining his eyes, he might sound like he’s you but he’s not. He wants to go home and you never have, you’ve missed things about Earth for sure and wished you weren’t subjected to the terror of the game but you’ve never had a HOME to long for. But he has. He’s lived in places that were at least somewhat safe, though you doubt they were great since you’ve heard how his family talks about their Mom. But he’s always had people to hold onto, Dirk, Hal, Rose, Roxy and now Karkat and Sollux. And he’s got all of the rest of his friends too.

But now he has to be scared and act like he’s not to protect them and that truth makes him alone and unlike you he’s never been alone before, not like that. And clearly he’s wildly unprepared for it.

“I’m scared.” the kid chokes out and looks up at you, his eyes filled with tears, “I don’t want to die.”

And he just might. That kind of fear might make him falter tomorrow, might get him killed for real, no takebacks. You saw how things were going to go but if you handle this bad you might make that future impossible, he needs to keep his cool.

“No one wants to.” you tell him carefully.

“I’m scared to die.” he repeats, sitting up and a tear tracks its way down his cheek. You clench your teeth, you know what Bro would say if he saw any version of you like this. He’d tell you to man up, that Striders don’t cry, he’s say to do what needs to be done. But what should you say? He’s younger than you and scared, facing a bigger risk than you are, or at least facing worse odds. You should say something.

“I’ll… be right there.” you offer.

Good job Dave, remind him that you’ll be present. Very reassuring.

Should you tell him that it’s you going to die and not him? But Rose said there was that risk. What’s the balance? How do you weigh this?

“I know, I know. Augh, sorry. This is super lame.” other you laughs tightly and scrubs at his face with a sniff. You are starting to think you’re failing this social encounter. Other you laughs and you don’t think it’s the good kind.

“We’ve gotta fight this and we have a plan, we’ve practiced, got a good team, gonna do our best and believe in the power of friendship or some shit like that. Just gotta do that and hope no one bites it, or at best no one who can’t be rebooted by Jane, Jane or Fef. Sorry. Can we both just pretend this didn’t happen?” he asks, standing up and turning to look at you. His eyes are red rimmed but he’s got the patented Strider full poker face on now.

“Pretend what didn’t happen?” you reply right away.

“Hah, yeah. Good. Cool. I’m gonna ollie outtie and pretend I wasn’t here and go get some sleep before we fight laser face and save the world which I am totes chill with.” he laughs nervously and backs towards the door. He smacks the button and nearly runs into Karkat who was clearly just about to knock.

They both get startled and yell in alarm.

“Rightokbye!” other you calls and flashsteps away.

“The fuck was that even?” Karkat asks, looking down the hallway.
“The bro-code prevents me from telling you, it’s a very serious oath.” you inform Karkat as he
comes into your room. You don’t tell him that you were trying and failing to reassure your other self
that he won’t die because you’re the one who will.

“Are you sure you’re not secretly a Prince of Mind because I swear every time I talk to you I get
dumber.” Karkat snorts and flops down onto your bed.

“Why you gotta do me like that?” you ask and jam your hands into your pockets so you don’t fidget
and give yourself away.

“You deserve it. I’ve been thinking about what I have to do tomorrow and it’s still shit all, but I
guess it’s an accurate reflection of how useful I am.” Karkat says with both anger and sadness.

Rose’s words about the future echo into your brain. You get a flash of Karkat standing at a stove by
your side as you bicker over pouring pancake mix in a pan, shoving and laughing. An invisible hand
pries your ribs open, wraps around your heart and squeezes. You’d die for just a chance at that and
you’re trying to ignore the ache in your chest that tells you just why.

“If it means you’re alive I’m ok with that.” you say unthinkingly and immediately regret it from the
way Karkat’s eyes go wide.

“And, I mean, not fighting is pretty sweet. But let’s be real even if Vriska knew you were the most
important person in the fight she wouldn’t tell you that.” you babble.

“Well, that’s true at least.” Karkat concedes.

Karkat looks around your borrowed room with his signature frown on.

“Were you about to go to sleep before I barged in here?” he asks and worries sharp alien teeth on his
naturally black lips.

“I guess. I should probably rest before tomorrow.” you say.

Or not. You can sleep when you’re dead, which won’t be that long from now.

“Oh. Fuck, I should go.” Karkat says hastily, making to get up from your bed.

“Don’t.” you blurt out, getting one knee on your bed. Karkat is sat up now, staring at you.

Kiss him. No, fuck. Don’t do that. You can’t kiss a boy and then go and die on him that’s the worst.
And that’s leaving out the angst over ‘you can’t kiss a boy’ full stop.

“We could watch a movie. I always slept better when I’d fall asleep watching movies with you.” you
say because holy shit your mouth will not stop.

“You-” Karkat says thickly and then shakes his head.

“Maybe you shouldn’t fall asleep during my movies, they’re good, you know.” he scolds you.

“Yeah, yeah, man. That’s that primo quality bitching that puts me right out.” you tease and pull your
other knee onto the bed. Karkat’s leg falls to the side to make room for you but despite his
complaints he still gets his husktop out, even if he has to shuffle away from you to set it up on the
chair in your room.

You end up sat side by side watching trolls dramatically get their mack on. If you slump against his
side earlier than normal he doesn’t say anything. Your cheekbone rests on his soft shoulder and
you’re not sure if your teeth hurt from clenching them or from the repeated impact of all the words you’re biting back.
You wonder what everyone is doing right now. There are hours, and not many of them at that, until the fights begin. Until the literal battle for your universe and continued survival begins. You wonder how many of the people on this ship are awake like you, unable to sleep for nerves and instead awake and worrying. It’s not like you have a problem to solve, you can’t do anything about this until you get out there and fight what little fight you have been assigned to. You can’t protect any of your friends in their fights. There’s nothing you can prepare that will change the outcome. Honestly the best thing you could do is to sleep and you can’t even do that.

Some people will have managed to sleep, like Dave. He’s plastered himself to the side of your body, his head resting on your thoracic cage and rising and falling with each breath you take. You run your hand over his back and he doesn’t even stir, nor is he disturbed by the quiet laugh track from the romcom marathon you have running on your husktop.

This isn’t quite as romantic as you might have pictured it before, especially when you were younger. You wouldn’t have anticipated how Dave’s leg would jerk in his sleep like it did earlier and kick you in the ankle hard enough to sting. Nor would you have wistfully dreamed the way that a good portion of your sweater under his head is damp with drool because the dumbass still has his mouth open slightly as he sleeps. In fact you somewhat suspect that the toxic alien saliva will have fused your humble knitwear to your skin by the time he wakes up. All the same you’re not about to kick him off of you and for all the unairbrushed real life nature of the situation you don’t want to change it.

You don’t know what your feelings are beyond some kind of pan quadrant shitshow. But apparently that can work, even if it still fries your thinksponge to try to hold that idea. So maybe other languages are going to do it best. You crane your neck a little and bury your face in his weirdly human pale hair.

You don’t say it because you’ve seen enough romcom cliches to know how that goes, how he’d be awake without you knowing for the drama, but you think it real hard all the same.

I love you.

It’s on human terms. And in all reality if human romance is a messed up jumble of feelings then you’re probably the one to blame, you made them after all. You’re not the quadrant breaking shitlord you feared, you’re in human love. With a human.

Maybe this time tomorrow you’ll all be alive and well and you’ll get up the globes to say something about it. Probably not, you are a coward, but maybe post fight euphoria might spur you on. You doubt it though.

Instead you let your head fall back on the bed and just hold Dave close to you as he sleeps. He needs his rest, he’s doing actual things tomorrow unlike you. Time slides by in that bleary stop-start way that all insomniacs are familiar with and eventually Dave wakes up with a jerk as some dream startles him out of sleep.

“Karkat?” He rasps, his voice rough as he looks up at you. His shades are askew and you can see a sliver of bright red over the top of one. You can even see the pattern of the knit of your sweater in his cheek, making something tight happen in your chest.

“Congratulations on identifying people you’ve known for years, asslord.” you say as you force past
the lump in your throat.

Dave tsks and sits up, deliberately elbowing you as he does. He pushes his shades up into his hair and runs his hands over his face a few times before replacing them.

“Did you sleep?” Dave asks and you laugh hollowly.

“Who do you think you’re talking to?” you snort.

“Coffee, then.” Dave says and you jump as his hands lace with yours. He pulls you out of his bed and onto your feet.

“Coffee.” you agree.

Dave leads you out into the hallway and then you follow him down some stairs and towards the main body of the ship. The door to what has been dubbed the movie room slides open and you freeze when you see what’s inside. The room itself has a giant soft pit in the floor in place of any movable furniture, probably to stop highbloods throwing things around. But right now it’s a nest of humans, the not-human humans that is. In the middle Dirk and Roxy are slumped together, her head on his shoulder and his head on hers. In the vacant space between their bodies Rose is tucked up tight with Roxy’s arm holding her close. Dave is curled up in his brother’s loosely crossed legs, his head on Dirk’s stomach. Hal is similarly draped across Roxy’s middle with an arm thrown over Jane’s legs as she takes Roxy’s other side, though how she’s sleeping with John flopped over her legs with his mouth open wide snoring you’ll never know.

Not all of the humans are there but it’s the strangest thing and most alien thing you’ve ever seen. Dave says something but you don’t catch it, you’re too struck by the way Jane’s eyes slide open and her pale blue stare pins you in place for a good second or two. You’re reminded of nature documentaries where some hapless videographer walked into a cholerbear cave and the first and last thing they saw was its eyes. But then the humanity seems to click on and she blinks at you in bleary surprise and then smiles sleepily. She raises her hand and peers at the dainty red watch on the inside of her wrist.

“Roxy we should get up.” Jane whispers as Dave pulls you away, you can just hear Roxy’s groan of protest as you walk off.

“That was weird, right? Humans don’t do that.” you say. You’ve never seen the humans you know sleep like that. And that wasn’t just falling asleep in the same place after watching a movie, they were purposefully intertwined so everyone was connected to other people and protected. Pack behaviour.

“That was pretty weird.” Dave agrees.

When you go into the main dining area you find their Jake wiping tables down and his Jade, the one that’s not got dog ears, playing some game with Nepeta that involves string. Nepeta flashes you a smile as you come in and then pinches several of the strings and weaves her own fingers in it and pulls it from Jade’s hands.

“Is it meant to look like that?” Jade wonders as you walk past her. The two of you head up to the long wide window where food is usually served, as per usual Mr Egbert and Dolorosa are behind there talking to each other.

“-know the deal, as soon as we’re all done we can go help the children. You know how big of a threat the Condesce is, she needs to be dealt with. The children are more than capable of the other
tasks.” Dolorosa says. She’s leaning against the wall and glowing softly.

“I am not worried about the children breaking in to free my double, or those dealing with the- the-what were they called? The green ones?” Dadbert asks as he paces back and forth.

“The felt?” Dolorosa suggests.

“Yes, them. The children are capable, even without their fantastical powers. But the Condesce… she was undefeatable before, you know that.” Dadbert protests.

“Except for the part where she was, in fact, defeated.” Dolorosa points out.

“Because they used their time powers and got lucky, but we don’t have any people with time powers on the team that’s dealing with her. And she isn’t our Condesce either, this one actually took over the Earth. She was successful where ours failed. I’m sure you can’t help but notice that there’s no Dolorosa around here, or anyone else for that matter. This is one who won, we have no reason to assume we can win.” Dadbert insists.

You and Dave share a worried look, this isn’t the kind of shit you want to be hearing on the day when you all have to fight.

“She won on Earth because the humans are different, that’s all.” Dolorosa says patiently.

“Fine, but what about Alternia? If the humans are the only difference then why no troll adults? Everyone is so sure that she can be beaten and of course I will fight her with everything I have but—” he cuts himself off with a shake of his head.

“You’re not frightened that the children won’t make it, you’re frightened that they will and you won’t.” Dolorosa says softly.

“Aren’t you? I’ve heard what she did to their Earth, and I know ours would have done the same if she could have. I won’t see those children turned into her slaves, and we need to do everything we can to- oh.” Dadbert notices you suddenly, his argument stuttering in its tracks.

“Oh, sorry to eavesdrop Mr E. Not that we were, you were just loudly shouting in a public place but it’s cool it’s that kinda day I think. Do you have food or should we, like, uh, go?” Dave babbles.

“Oh, no, no. I’m terribly sorry young man. I shouldn’t have- well, enough of that. Both of you boys take a seat out there, I think young Jake has finished clearing up in preparation for everyone. I’ll bring you out something nutritious, don’t you worry.” the man says with a smile that feels fake even to you.

You and Dave back away to a table and sit down next to each other.

“So even the adults are scared, that can’t be a good sign.” you say under your breath.

“It’s a sign that they’re at least halfway sane.” Dave counters and you’ll agree to that. You’re glad that you’re not going to be the one fighting the Condesce, you’d sooner not die.

“Do you think they are going to take a time player from your team? It’d make sense but it’s a bit of a risk, besides it’s a little late to start changing shit around, isn’t it?” you say with a frown. You really don’t like the idea of there being fewer people on Dave’s team, it lowers the odds of his survival surely.

“Well if they do it won’t be me or other me.” Dave says with certainty.
“How do you know that?” you ask and Dave goes still then just shrugs.

“Oh, right, that stupid prophecy thing that you don’t believe in. Ugh, but I bet Vriska does. So Aradia or Damara then I guess if they’re going to take someone.” you say thoughtfully. You wonder if either Dave has a preference for who he’d rather work with of those two. You’re about to ask him when two plates of food are suddenly put before you two, filled with food that you have no idea how Mr Egbert had time to cook. You also have no idea how he snuck up on you and you don’t like it.

“There you go boys, a balanced breakfast.” Mr Egbert says with a smile.

“You’re not gonna-” Dave whispers.

“One plate in each hand!” Mr Egbert laughs.

You’ve never seen anyone besides Terezi look quite so much like a text emote. If even the most skilled painter depicted Dave right now you’re sure the face would be something like D:< or, no, wait his shades. More like D8< or something.

You start eating as Dave processes his horror at poor jokes, when you decide to try stealing some oinkbeast strips he recovers and bites it out of your hand and then shuffles his plate away from you and hides it with his body. You figured that’d do the trick. You wipe your hand on his cape to clear the grease much to his distress, but he’s the one with magic clothes so he can deal with it.

A few people from your side wander in for food and then all of the not human humans come in at once, clearly having woken up together. A couple of them are clearly worried, Dave bouncing from soulmate, to moirail, to sibling round and round and not shutting up the entire time. Hal for his part is keeping so close to Roxy that she nearly trips over him a few times. Pretty much everyone in the room is subdued in one way or another. You end up just pushing most of your food around your plate, unable to stomach much of anything more than the little you’ve had. Dave however is inhaling his food like it’s the last meal he’ll ever get. Which it- no, no, you won’t think that.

Needless to say you’re relieved when your double stands on a table and bangs two trays together, making a loud noise that has everyone looking to him.

“Karkat, don’t damage the trays.” Signless calls out from somewhere across the room and is soundly ignored by other you. He drops the trays and starts to talk, loudly and clearly.

“ALRIGHT EVERYONE, WE’RE HAVING A SHIPWIDE MEETING IN THE GYM.” he shouts, signing rapidly as he speaks which you don’t understand and honestly find a little distracting.

“WE’RE MEETING THERE IN FIVE MINUTES, NO IFS BUTS OR FUCKING MAYBES ABOUT IT. IF YOU’RE STILL EATING THEN BRING YOUR FOOD WITH YOU I COULD NOT GIVE LESS OF A CRAP ABOUT THE CLEANLINESS OF THE GYM. IF YOU’RE NOT THERE WHEN THE MEETING STARTS I WILL PERSONALLY DRAG YOU THERE BY WHATEVER GENITALIA YOU ARE PACKING, NO MATTER HOW TROUBLESOME THAT WILL BE FOR ME!” he shouts and then leaps off of the table and marches out of the room.

“I think I’ll pass on watching that happen. Are you coming?” you ask and Dave nods, licking his plate clean. Gross. You can’t believe you want to kiss him on the mouth at times like this, what an animal.

The pair of you and many others stream out of the room in a slow moving hustle of people. John bursts out of the crowd behind you to drape his dumb windsocked self over Dave’s shoulders.

“Hi Dave! Are you nervous?” John asks eagerly.
“What? No, who’s been telling you that? I’m so chill, not nervous. I’m cool, colder than the arctic.” Dave protests, tugging at his new John scarf around his neck but the windy fool doesn’t get the hint and keeps strangling him a little.

“Hmmm, but there was that global warming thing. Does that mean you’re not as chill as you should be, Dave?” John asks.

“No man. Anyway, there’s no scientists around saying that global warming is real, you have no proof.” Dave counters.

“Dave! I’m a scientist that says global warming is real!” Jade shouts from behind you and with a flash of green she’s right in front of him. You swiftly tune Dave out when he starts literally rapping about Jade being brainwashed by ‘big pharma’ whatever that is, especially as he seems to be using her protests of that not making sense as some kind of backing vocals. Instead you just pick yourself out a seat but it means that you still have front row tickets to the idiot squad’s daily meeting because they follow you.

You know it’s bad when you’re glad that other Vriska is talking up front. She’s standing side by side with your double who is floating there in his god tier outfit and a shower of mutant red glitter as his wings flap. You can see him counting heads and then frowning, pulling out his palmhusk to presumably remind stragglers.

“Everyone sit down and shut up already. I have a lot to cover!” Vriska shouts. She then decaptchlogues a big whiteboard and a large bag. The last few stragglers seem to have come in and your double is counting again.

“Their Gamzee’s in the brig, remember?” Vriska reminds him. You watch your double facepalm and shake his head.

“Right, yeah. So that just leaves… HEY DAD ARE YOU WATCHING?” he shouts up at the ceiling.

“Yes, Karkat. This is your god speaking.” comes a voice from the ceiling.

“That’s what I’ve called out before!” The Disciple laughs and you get to hear what it sounds like for eight people to simultaneously react with disgust. Or, rather, seven people as Damara just cackles madly.

Alright, enough! If you look here I have the final teams for the day but before I get into this here is how this will work. Everyone is assigned a primary team with an objective. Once you have completed that objective check in with Hal who will be monitoring the progress of the teams and will redirect you elsewhere if there’s still fighting happening. Don’t just go and throw yourself into whatever fight you please as we’re keeping some of you away from certain fights for very good reasons. Got that?” other Vriska asks and everyone dutifully nods.

With that done your double flips the board over and you can see several lists written in coloured marker on there.

“The first mission is ‘Regicide’. The Condesce wants to take our reward and she’ll stop at nothing to get there, but we’ve killed her double in our universe so we know it can be done. She has mind control on trolls and animals, the kind of eye laser psionics the Captors have and she’s also an old and legendarily strong bitch.” your double announces and points to a list of those points in hot pink on the board.
“Because you’re all desperately simple I’m handing out coloured balls so you know what you’re doing.” other Vriska adds and then starts flinging pink wiggler recreation pit spheres out into the crowd. All of the adults get one as well as their John, Rose, Meenah, Gamzee, Kurloz and Sollux. Your versions of Dirk and Roxy get the same colour too and the look on Roxy’s face is nothing short of gleeful murder, you suppose that trolls aren’t the only people with a score to settle here. Now it seems it’s your double’s turn to speak.

“The next mission is catching and containing the two dog based enemies, Bec Noir and the white dog one too. The danger with them is their ability to teleport and their fondness for murder, a bad combination when the Condesce can control people with animal aspects. But as- I don’t think you needed to throw that one that fucking hard Vriska, Jesus. But as we have Rufioh and Tavros on the case this one should be a relatively easy win but if John can do his windy teleportation thing I’ve heard so much about he should be able to keep up. Hey, Summoner if you get done with the Condesce real fast you’re to come help with this too.” other you shouts. Next to you John turns the white plastic ball that other Vriska tossed out around in his hands.

“The next mission- Karkat you throw these now. I want to talk.” other Vriska insists, pushing the bag to him.

“You’ve literally been in gym class with me, why would you give me this job?” your double groans.

“Fiirrrrrine, I’ll just do everything.” she sneers, “The next operation is just to defeat all of the remaining non-dog Jacks. One of them may have Lord English like powers so if you get any viable intel from them you should pass that on. Equius, Terezi, Dirk, Mituna and… dammit where’s the last ball? And Jake!” other Vriska says, throwing the last ball to your Jake, not the older one from their universe.

Jake catches it and you twist to see him stare wide eyed at it.

“This is a very important mission, I wish we’d got more time to practice combinations but the main fight took all of the time. Plus we went through a bunch of different team combinations up until now but this is the best. Mituna, Equius, you’re both on crowd control so you’re to keep your enemies contained and allow for the heavy hitters to do their work and all of you are following Terezi’s leadership when you get down there. Are we CLEAR on that, Dirk? No making up your own plan, let the seer do her thing.” other Vriska says pointedly.

“Did you really mean me, though? Not the other Jake?” Jake calls out.

“You’re pretty easy to tell apart, English.” other Vriska snorts.

“We’re sure. There was a lot of arguing from CERTAIN cretins but she’s outvoted. Jake English is supposed to be good against Lord English so we have one of you on each team, the older one fighting the real guy and you against the one who might have his powers.” your double assures him. Down at the front you can see your Vriska grinding her teeth in anger, you bet she did not like being overruled like that. Not one bit.

The pair continue dividing the groups. Meulin and Aranea pair up to rescue Jane’s father and to return him to the lillypad with The Mayor and the hunger trunk that’ll have your Gamzee in again. The delegation of the healers with Hal as coordination is no surprise and the plan to use the fenestrated planes to zip about to the healers is the same as before.

You, your double and your Kanaya will be heading to see Echidna as previously planned. Even though Jade is awake and not evil anymore she did ask for ‘the Knight of Blood’ so perhaps it’s something specific to either of you. Another group is sliced off to go deal with the green weirdos
stuffed in an oven which, honestly, you’re glad you don’t have to deal with. All of that leaves everyone down to the final fight.

Lord English.

Your double circles a title in red pen on the board, it reads MAKE HIM PAY.

“None of you should be surprised by this.” Vriska says, throwing red balls to all of the people who have been practicing over the last week. All of the time players and all of the space players barring your Kanaya. Backing them up is their Jake and Roxy as well as Latula, from your side Rose and Vriska make up the light players on that team. It makes sense, Vriska’s luck stealing gambit isn’t always successful but this is the time it needs to pay off and she’s the one who has managed to secure the “ultimate weapon” from her ghost. Add to that the girl who can see the future then it’s possible for her to adjust the plan in real time.

Your double stands at the board looking somber. He looks around at all of you and sighs.

“Killing Lord English is the single most important job and Hal will start directing anybody who finishes their task there if they’re not a risk. He’s destroying not just this universe but all of them in a childish tantrum, I don’t know what to anticipate when he sets himself to a real face to face fight. I know that most of us travelled here to the universe with the best chance of winning, so these are the best odds but even given that this is almost laughably insurmountable task.” he says slowly.

As your double starts to talk you can feel it, like water pulling you towards him. Somehow as he speaks you can feel the eyes of everyone in the room on him and feel something making your chest swell as he speaks. Being aware of it is jarring and all you can figure is that it must be from his blood powers. The same powers that you could have had if you had been any good at the game.

“He’s overpowered, we’re fighting on so many fronts and we’re operating on a lot of information that might not be accurate. It’s a shitty situation. But this garbage game has put us through this much crap already so what’s more bullshit on top of that? And- and I don’t know about the rest of you but I hold that motherfucker personally responsible for a lot of shit that’s gone down in our lives and if anyone deserves to get his face kicked in it’s him. And my life might be a giant cosmic joke but I am not willing to die to a guy who looks like the incredible hulk in shittier clothes who lost a fight to a billiard table. I just fucking won’t!” he shouts.

“And I might not be anything much but you’re all unreasonably strong, especially when you work together and I have seen the wild magical asskicking you can all deliver. And you adults- this game is the reason you all had to do puberty twice and if that’s not reason to start a fight I don’t know what is! And maybe we do have a one in a million chance of winning or some shit like that but we can’t go home, we can’t just not fight, the only way out of this game is through those motherfuckers so… so go commit multiple murders I guess!” he finishes loudly, although he looks unsure about where that last tangent went.

Several members of the audience cheer and many more are laughing, which isn’t a great result for a speech but you can feel how the bubble of tension in the room has popped. Even you breathe a little easier.

“We have a while left until we have to leave-” other Vriska speaks up only to be shouted over by multiple time players at once.

“One hour and thirty five!” several of them shout.

“I’m so glad you all heard the sound of me NOT ASKING YOU! Anyway, what I was saying
before I was so rudely interrupted was that when the time comes Psii will move the stealthed ship closer to where we were when we picked you all up. We’ll wait there until that ship jumps back in time and then move into its place. We will redeploy the lilypad and start up our fenestrated planes to the areas, setting the healers and Hal’s base up there. All this will be done in stealth so if you fly back to the lilypad remember this so you don’t fly right into the ship.” other Vriska explains.

“Have done that before. 0/10 do not recommend.” other Dave pipes up.

“On the subject of time,” Mr Egbert speaks up suddenly, standing up from his seat near his children. “Yes?” other Vriska asks, suddenly polite.

“Given that the defeat of her last time was largely due to freezing her in time I wanted to know why we don’t have any people with that skill on our team?” Mr Egbert asks.

Other Vriska swallows, you watch the movement of her throat and she seems to be working herself up to speaking when your double shakes his head and steps in front of her.

“The reason is that Lord English is a time player, we need all the resources there to fight him. Given that she can control trolls, or most of them anyway it’s smarter to keep the ability to use time powers away from her in case she turns it against us. You have Psii and Sollux on your team who can physically hold her in place and that should be all you need with the others you have with you. I wouldn’t be unhappy giving you a time player in theory but we just don’t have them to spare when the risk is that great, I’m sorry.” he explains. Mr Egbert doesn’t look especially pleased but it’s another adult who speaks next, Tavros’ ancestor.

“It’s ok guys, we understand. There’s no easy choices in war.” he says and Mr Egbert sits down but he does not look satisfied.

“Any other questions?” other Vriska asks, stepping around the other Karkat to look at the rest of the audience. Around the room there’s a lot of silence and shrugging but several very heavy seconds pass and no questions come forth. Well, you’re sure people have plenty of questions but they’re probably more in line of ‘am I going to die’ and your double and his Vriska can’t answer those.

“Well, shit I budgeted more time for questions.” your double finally says.

“Then we can talk about the exit procedure.” his Vriska says firmly.

“Oh, yeah, right. The lilypad will be acting as our central hub with the life players and other non combat people there. That’s where Jane’s father will be brought and it’ll have quick access to everywhere else thanks to Roxy’s gun. But that thing isn’t too big so we’ll try to send only a few teams through at a time. I want to say that we have a firm and strategic order but once the lilypad is set up it’s just whichever one of you doubles manages to get a whole team ready to go. The only restriction is team Regicide has to go last because Psii has to hold the cloak for as long as possible before detaching from the helm. So, in an hour and a half I want you all in the hangar at the lilypad, got it?” he says.

With that the audience splits into its own little organic groups and you find yourself on the edge of the group of everyone who was on the meteor, with Dave on the bench below you and his shoulder just pressing into your ankle.

“I must say that I feel somehow less prepared than I did a week ago.” Kanaya admits and several of you nod.

“Their plan is stupid, they should have listened to me more.” Vriska sulks.
“It’s too late now, Vriska. We just have to go with what’s been decided, be decisive and stick to it instead of changing things last minute.” Terezi says in a rare moment of reason. She pats Vriska’s knee consolingly and Vriska’s expression pinches but she miraculously doesn’t argue.

You don’t really know where the next hour and a half goes. Stupid conversation with your friends is a large part but you find yourself dithering. Your job isn’t really anything important, you’re an escort quest for Kanaya nothing more. But all the same you find yourself storing last minute supplies of food and drink and then rushing to the bathroom just in case. You hardly want to find yourself in the denizen’s lair and be like ‘oh excuse me Ms. Echidna but I really need to piss like a hoofbeast now because past me was an idiot and didn’t think of this’. Not ideal.

You figure you’ll be one of the first people at the hangar but you’re not. Your double is there already along with a lot of the adult trolls and a few of their descendants.

“Hey.” he says when he greets you. He’s standing nearby the empty lilypad looking at a large display screen held in two hands.

“Hey, what’s that?” you ask, pointing to it.

“You.” he answers and turns the screen around so you can see yourself outside right now. Or from your point of view you a week ago. Not everyone has arrived yet, Dirk hasn’t spectacularly introduced himself to Dave ass first yet.

“Are they…” you ask, pointing downwards.

“We’re not that close yet, we don’t want to interfere with the tractor beam that got you in here or be seen by Psii when he piloted the ship here because he didn’t see us then. Which means that it can’t happen, so-” your double shakes his head.

“Time is so bullshit.” you tell him sagely.

“It so is. Dave has been pretty clear to me that he doesn’t intend on using his time powers after today for anything other than really vital stuff. I think he just wants them gone.” other you says and looks at the screen again.

“I think mine said the same.” you agree.

“I’m sure everyone’s powers have their own downsides and I shouldn’t judge, blah, blah, blah, but fuck me sideways if life and space don’t seem unfairly awesome. And even hope, heart and light seem pretty great if you’re not stuck being a seer or prince.” he says bitterly.

“Blood seems fine even if it’s not especially useful.” you tell him. Behind you more people are entering the room now and nervous chatter fills the space.

“The physical stuff is fine I guess but I try to stay away from the more… psychological aspect of my aspect. Sure it gives me a… a passive diplomacy boost I guess if you want to think of it that way but I can literally manipulate relationships, entirely change how people feel about each other. I’ve never done it but I can feel that I can. I have the potential of being worse than Vriska. So, no, blood sucks.” he says.

“Dirk, you don’t need to-” you hear Rose say. You look around to see that it’s alternate Rose with all of her family clustered around her with the exception of her twin. She looks misty eyed like she might cry, their Roxy already is. Other Dirk has his hands on other Rose’s shoulders.

“I do need to. I know you can’t be safe with what you’re going into, none of us can. But just protect
yourself and if you get a chance stab that fish bitch.” other Dirk says to her and Rose sniffs and nods with determination in her eyes.

“I love you.” he says quietly and kisses her forehead. She makes a broken kind of noise and suddenly they’re all hugs and sniffles over there. Both Daves come in the room together and other Dave only needs to go near that cluster of human feelings before he’s literally dragged in by a patchy grey arm.

“Whoa, that’s something alright.” your Dave whispers as he comes to a stop by you.

Your double cuts off anything you might have been about to say as he flutters up in the air on glittering red wings.

“Everyone! Cut the tearful goodbyes short, if all goes well no one is saying goodbye to anyone and as it is we’re coming up on time. The lilypad is in the ship now which means we don’t have long until the time players send that ship back in the past. So- ugh, Gamzee no.” he flies off to fix some problem leaving you alone, Dave’s attention is squarely on the other people from his team who have arrived. Namely Aradia and the other Kanaya who are both wearing their god tier outfits. Instead you search your Kanaya out of the crowd and slip past people to get to her. You should be near your team members after all. Not that you’re much of a team but you at least don’t want to make this process harder than it has to be.

You’d be lying if you said that you didn’t slip away from Dave because you didn’t want to say goodbye. Part of you believes some stupid magical logic that says if you don’t say goodbye then he can’t go forever, he can’t die. It’s bullshit wiggler thinking but it’s what you have. Kanaya is with Rose and that is probably interrupting something but you don’t care.

“Kanaya I thought I should come be near you.” you explain.

Rose gives you a look that tell you she would have rathered you not, actually.

“I should go as well. Be safe Kanaya.” Rose tells her and kisses her quickly.

“And you also.” Kanaya says softly. Rose smiles and walks off to her team, Kanaya watches her back as she goes with an expression of worry pinching her face.

“Don’t worry about her, Kanaya. Rose is strong, nothing is taking her down ever.” you tell her.

“John and Roxy came from a timeline where Rose died, as did all of the rest of us as it happens. It can happen.” Kanaya says, her face serious.

“God, Kanaya. You’re a force of positivity and optimism in the universe, don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.” you say to her flatly.

Whatever response Kanaya had for you is cut off by the floor below you shuddering. You can hear the mechanical sound and feel the air moving as Sollux’s psionics lift the lilypad and lower it down out of the opening hangar bay to the place it had been before. It’s time. Your double and his Vriska are in the air by the wide open sloped entrance to the hangar. You can hear strange sounding gunfire but you don’t know what it is.

“Dogcatcher team, anyone with a white ball, through THAT fenestrated pane there.” other Vriska shouts. Oh, it must be that gun of Roxy’s that shoots portals.

“Black team, Jack of all trades are- Dirk leave them alone and come on! Right, through that pane, on the left.” other Vriska calls out.
“I suppose we’re waiting until the end when Karkat is done overseeing the others.” Kanaya whispers as people file out.

“Yeah, it’s taking a long time though.” you reply grimly.

The next obvious team to go is the one fighting Lord English. Your digestion sac lurches as Dave glances over his shoulder at you as he jogs down the slope. You watch Damara set one foot on the edge and then recoil back from it, bumping into your Jade who was just behind her.

“Are you okay?” Jade asks her in surprise.

“Feels wrong.” Damara says, shaking her head.

“It’s ok, Damara. We’re all nervous.” Jade says sweetly.

“No. Not that, wrong timeline.” Damara says and that gets the attention of the other time players in a hurry.

“I don’t feel anything.” Aradia says with a frown.

“What does it feel like?” Dave asks her.

“Like- here.” Damara reaches out and grabs Aradia’s hand and you see a flash of red fraymotif, though you didn’t know two same aspected people could do that. With it glowing between their hands Damara takes a step over the edge of the ramp and both of them recoil at once.

“Yeah, ugh, it’s that feeling you get when you get too close to messing with a timeline. Damara shouldn’t go.” Aradia confirms.

“Wait, what?” other Vriska asks, floating down to where they are with your double just behind her.

“You heard.” Damara says.

“Does it just happen with you? What if the rest of them go?” Hal asks, walking up the ramp and gesturing between Damara and Aradia. The two girls shrug and join hands again, this time Aradia steps onto the ramp with her hand still in Damara’s.

“Nothing that time.” Aradia says.

“Alright, let’s make this simpler, the rest of you who are fighting Lord English get down there and stop complicating things.” Hal orders.

“But-” other Dave starts.

“Now, Dave.” Hal says immediately. The younger Dave grumbles and stomps down the ramp leaving just Damara and the remaining two teams there with Hal. Everyone else is either already off fighting their adversary or in place on the lilypad already.

“ Doesn’t feel like anything we did.” Damara frowns, pacing back and forth at the edge of the ramp.

“The right moment then, maybe? But then why wouldn’t you feel it with the rest of the team or is that just because witches are more self focused than, say, a seer?” Hal muses as he stands there with the butt of Roxy’s gun balanced on his shoe. As he thinks he taps his claws on the barrel, it is an absurdly long and tasteless gun after all.

“Maybe-” Damara starts but a sudden mechanical noise starts up and the ramp quickly lifts up,
making Hal yelp and flail as he tries to catch his balance.

“Not funny Psii!” Hal shouts upwards. Your palmhusk buzzes and you pull it out, it’s Dave. Of course, he’s outside now.

[turntechGodhead(alpha) began pestering carcinoGeneticist(alpha)]

TG: what the hell man why is the ship shut?

CG: I DON’T KNOW, IT JUST SUDDENLY CLOSED. NO ONE HERE KNOWS WHAT’S GOING ON.

“Something’s wrong.” Hal says distantly, looking upwards unfocused.

“Well obviously something is wrong!” other Vriska scoffs.

“No, I mean usually I can feel Psii when I talk to the ship. Or whoever is helming. Feel where the circuitry interfaces with their brains. But Psii feels different and he’s not looking at us. Something’s… wrong.” Hal says and seems to focus on everyone else again.

“Mind control.” Mindfang hisses.

“But the ship’s stealthed how would she know we’re here?” Signless asks.

“We’re stealthed but the lilypad wasn’t! She must have got him and now we have to go stop him while we still can!” Mindfang declares.

TG: karkat what the hell youre moving

TG: holy shit that ship can fly!

“We’re moving! Really fast!” You shout, holding your palmhusk aloft.

“Shit!” Disciple curses and sprints for the door. Everyone rushes after her, even you though you have no idea what you’re going to do.

“It’s locked!” she howls, beating her hands against it.

“Not anymore!” Hal shouts, rushing past you and waving a hand at the door that obligingly pops open.

You group becomes a stampede, following Hal’s rushed path through the ship as he opens up door after door. You can’t stop running or else the adults around you might crush you so you desperately keep up. When you pass a sign for the helm you realise just what’s happening. You’re carried through the doors with everyone else and at first you don’t dare to look at the helm, you know how terrible they are. Except eventually you do dare to look and you see Sollux’s ancestor not bound up in biomechanical bonds but rather comfortably slumped over in one of those dumb ass looking ergonomic chairs that are always advertised as being better for your back but just look stupid as all hell. What it does do is expose the ports all along his back that connect him to the main parts of the ship.

“Psii, honey, can you hear me?” Signless asks, crouched by him and cradling his face in his hands.

“Snap out of it!” Disciple demands and slaps him but that achieves nothing either.

You look at Mindfang who has her fingers to her temples and is scowling with effort, she must be
trying to wrest control back from… well, you know who from. From the frustrated hiss she’s making it’s not working.

“Fuck this, I’m just unplugging him.” Hal snaps, pushing past everyone.

“No! You could scramble his thinksponge!” Signless shouts, getting between them.

“Good point but she could make him vent all the oxygen off of this ship and kill us all, it might not be a vacuum outside but these things are still airtight by design! Do you think he’d want to do that to us? Let me unplug him, I know what I’m doing. And if I do fuck up his brain then the life players will fix him. We don’t have time for this!” Hal shouts.

Signless hesitates and looks at the puppeted psionic with regret. Disciple lays her hand on his arm and squeezes.

“We can’t let her make him hurt anyone again, or let her get her claws on him again, we promised him that’d never happen again.” she says, her voice rough and pained. Signless nods and steps out of Hal’s way. The half troll shoulders his way through and reaches for the organic cable to the back of his head. You hear a choked sound from next to you and look to see Sollux and his matching ports, he’s standing with his hands over his mouth and horror on his face. This is a nightmare for him, you’re sure.

Hal braces his hand on Psii’s longer horns and slowly and carefully pulls the cable out. The ship shudders as Hal moves quickly down to the next port, and the next, and the next. Psii himself doesn’t seem to react but Mindfang elbows Dolorosa out of the way to get control of a console.

“You’re not going to be able to override his control like that, we revoked that access when we modified the helm. It was to protect us.” Sollux calls out.

“Well a damn lot of good it did!” Mindfang snarls and slams her hand on the console.

“There, he’s out!” Hal declares and the final wire drops to the floor with a splat.

The Disciple picks the Psiionic up like he weighs nothing at all and he hangs there limply until he shudders all over and jerks upright.

“She’s right outside, she made me fly us here she- she has her own ship right out there.” the Psiionic says, floating in the air now.

“We cannot stay in this ship. She obviously has some operation of her own even without a helmsman and it’s clear that we can’t let anyone helm this ship or else it’ll be taken by her. We’re in more danger in here than out there face to face.” Signless insists.

“She can control any of us anywhere, the humans and probably Hal excluded. Could see see through your eyes, dad? Does she know who’s coming?” your double asks seriously.

“No she only got about half of me. Helming always used to disrupt what she could control me into doing but the helm itself used to more than make up for the difference, but not this one.” Psii answers, jerking his head towards the modified helm.

“So we still have the upper hand. She knows someone’s in here but not who exactly, maybe you but not us. It’s still a surprise attack, maybe even more than it would have been if we’d just flown there ourselves outside of the ship.” Mindfang muses.

“Fine, but I have to go. I have a job to do with the life players and you have somewhere to be,
Damara.” Hal says as he jumps back down off of the slightly raised platform of the helm and back onto the floor.

“No, this is where I’m meant to be.” Damara states firmly.

“Let her stay, if I have my way this fight will be quick and you can have her back very soon.” Mindfang says.

“Regardless, we’re out of time. We need to go out there and face this, now.” Redglare says firmly.

“Back to the hangar again then.” your double decides.

“I’ll find my own way out, everything is unlocked now and even if it wasn’t you have Psii and Sollux.” Hal says and as the rest of you funnel out of the room leftwards he duck right and runs off down the hallway. You guess he wants to slip out unseen and get back to his post.

Once more you’re swept up in the group, but you try to keep close to your double and Kanaya. It’s her that asks the question that’s troubling you and for that you’re grateful.

“Are we still going to see Echidna because it looks as if we are being drawn into the fight against the Empress.” Kanaya says, peering over you to look at your double.

“I’d like to say yes but honestly I don’t trust that we can fly past her without being caught. Hal will probably scrape by because he doesn’t wholly look like a troll and his brain is probably strange enough that he’s immune to her control, I know he’s immune to Aranea’s. But with us... our resemblance to our ancestors is pretty goddamn blatant and using us against them is just the kind of shit I know she’d pull.” he answers her.

“This isn’t your universe, shitlord. We know what she’s like, unlike you we LIVED on Alternia.” you snap at him. His face flashes something genuinely pained before he snarls at you but he’s younger than you so his snarl is hardly that impressive.

“Well sorry I’m not ‘AUTHENTIC’ enough for you, you weeping genital sore of a troll. But unlike YOU I’ve killed this bitch’s double before so you’re taking my advice either by your own choice or with me stamping it down your throat with my foot! We aren’t going to try sneaking past her so we’re participating in this fight. Can you handle that, oh terrifying Alternian troll?” he hisses at you.

“This is not productive, if you want to fight then you can fight her.” Kanaya says, waving her hand between you and alerting you to the fact that the hangar door is opening.

As the ramp swings down, this time opening down onto the purple and black skyline of Derse. In the distance you can see another imperial ship hanging in the sky but you’re not paying attention to that. Instead your eyes are locked on the figure on the pathway below. She is standing on a round, central, elevated plaza from which three narrow wrought iron bordered paths lead. The ship itself is floating above one and from this angle the line of it leads straight to- to her.

You’ve never seen her in person, obviously. The ruler of your species, almighty tyrant, and likely the oldest troll to have lived in a long time. Most of those statements were more impressive when the remaining number of people in your species was so small that you were on first name terms with them all. She stands, feet astride in a powerful and intimidating stance. Fuschia stripes run up the sides of her legs and up the centre of her otherwise black bodysuit in a far less friendly expression of her sign than you’re used to from Feferi. She is positively dripping with gold and malice. Her earfins flared wide and her teeth bared. Her Imperious Condescension.

She sets eyes on your group and you see them widen in surprise, she hadn’t been expecting this. You
guess she really couldn’t tell who was connected to the helm after all. You cringe as a deep and very pissed off adult growl sounds, only to be echoed by many more. Signless steps forward, his sickles drop into his hands and he steps forward out of the pack.

"You look shocked, Meenah. Surprised to see us?" he hisses at her.

The Empress snarls and levels her trident at him but if it was meant to intimidate your ancestor it certainly did not. Signless sprints for her with a scream, sickles raised and instantly the rest of the adults follow him in a stream of rage. The younger players hang back for a moment and you're stuck hesitating. You're only going to get in the way and you weren't meant to be part of this fight anyway. Besides, as you watch the Psiionic drag the Empress back from your ancestor and Sollux fire lasers at her to make her dodge out of the way it's clear that you're outgunned.

Gamzee rushes forward and launches a club at her which she returns with high force. From the back of the crowd Kurloz floats in the air, purple lightning radiating off of him like a cheap science fiction prop. What you can only assume to be more rage powers manifested crackle through the air and strike at the Empress, though they don't seem to hurt her so maybe whatever they're doing is more subtle than that.

The Summoner lunges for the Empress, his lance just catching her arm as she dodges with speed that she shouldn't have. Your double gasps and rushes into the fight, jerking her off balance. It doesn't stop her tangling up other Rose and other John in her seemingly living hair. Both of the non-human humans cry out in alarm and you don't even SEE Mr Egbert move but one second he's not there and the next he's eight feet up in the air with his knee planted firmly in the Empress' face and then darting off to rescue the two children from his pack. He pulls them free of her hair and skids to a stop several feet away with them clutched to his chest. The look on his face is decidedly NOT human as you know it. He looks like he wants to rip her face off with his teeth, to remove her bones and beat her to death with them and he just might.

The Empress is outnumbered but it's no easy fight. There's too many people around for Damara to be able to do whatever time thing she's trying to do, or so you infer from the frustrated cursing coming from her. The two psionics are running themselves ragged deflecting every stab and jab with her trident that should be lethal. It seems that her concentration is too shot for sustained mind control but every now and then someone will spontaneously fling themselves off of the walkway and either have to be rescued by one of the godtiers or the Summoner. On top of that it's obvious that your team is having a hard time attacking her without getting in each other's way, they've no room to fight whereas she is happy to try to kill anyone near her.

You and Kanaya hang at the back with Kurloz and Damara, off to the side Dirk is trying to rouse a sleeping Roxy by slaps of an escalating level of roughness. You stare out at the fight and realise something truly terrible. You're not going to win, or if you do it'll only be after a lot of people have died and even then the strongest need to be left alive to make that happen. It's not the group, it's the terrain.

"This is stupid, they're acting like she's the one who hurt them. She's not even from their universe." you say numbly.

"Yeah, because she killed everyone in ours. She killed my bro and Roxy's mom, everyone on Alternia is dead. She deserves it!" Dirk snaps and Roxy finally rouses.

"I know but-" you stop.

She killed people, and ideally it's those people who have a real score to settle with her. But the dead are dead. Only they're not, not in this game, are they? How many ghosts have you interacted with
over the past three years? So maybe...

"Damara, Aradia- my one that is, she could do this thing with ghosts. She could bring them back, haunt people. Can you do that?" you ask Damara suddenly.

"Yes, but they have no real power." Damara answers and spares a questioning glance your way.

"Right but you're a time player. All the time players I know have a weird thing about dead things, maybe your ghost powers are part of that." you theorise. You know it holds for Aradia's spookiness and Dave's dead things collection that you saw in his room on Earth.

"Maybe." she concedes.

"Karkat, what are you thinking?" Kanaya asks.

"I'm thinking... I'm thinking that she deserves her ass kicked by the people she really hurt. Hey, Kurloz, you're a Prince of Rage do you think you could let some really angry ghosts hurt someone because they're really angry?" you ask.

The floating juggalo inclines his head thoughtfully and then nods ever so slightly, he might be able to, then.

"Not working, might as well try your thing. SOL! Need you here!" she shouts.

"BUSY, DAMS, BUSY!" Sollux shouts back.

"I need your aspect, need death!" Damara yells back over the noise of the fight that's still going nowhere. If anything it seems to be getting worse, John is shielding a fallen Redglare who is crouched on the floor holding her bleeding side. Doom makes a sensible addition to the theory that you're running. Doom, time, rage, the recipe for vengeance beyond the grave. Hopefully. God, why should they listen to you? You're a terrible leader, you got your team killed and this one that doesn't know better is trusting you!

Sollux hesitates and then flies over, looking at you and Damara.

"What're we doing?" he asks quickly.

"A... a three way fraymotif. Doom, time, rage. Everyone's getting in each other's way, ghosts won't. And trust me she has a lot of blood on her hands." you answer. Hesitating here is worse than enacting a bad plan, right? You hope you're right.

The three god tiers float close together and Damara holds out her hands, one to Kurloz and one to Sollux. You watch the fraymotifs whirling together until they seem to click, on the ground before them there's a flash of an image in white, an angry skull with gears for teeth. But it's quickly consumed by a large white portal.

"Is that supposed to happen?" Dirk shouts over the noise as he pulls the still dazed Roxy to her feet, though looking at the portal seems to wake her up really quickly.

There's white leaking out of the eyes of the three fraymotified players, not like they're ghosts but it's like how Aradia used to get when she was doing her spooky ghost shit. Just as you're starting to think that nothing is happening a spectral, semi-transparent, hand thrusts out through the portal and slams onto the floor. A figure hauls himself out, an adult man but surprisingly a human one. He turns back to face the portal and coincidentally, you. He's wearing a white T-shirt that has blood spilling down it from three sizable holes which mar a blown out jpeg fried icon in the middle that bears a
striking resemblance to the Prongle verified symbol. But what has you staring at him is not his poor
taste in shirts or his fatal wounds, no what holds your attention is the douchey Ben Stiller shades and
stupid haircut. You’d know the contours of Dave’s face anywhere, any any age, alive or dead.

“Bro.” Dirk gasps, clearly making the same connection.

Another hand bursts forth from the portal, followed by a second and instead of reacting to Dirk he
reaches down to pull another figure out of the portal, a woman. She’s dripping water that never quite
makes it to the floor but you can already guess who she is.

“Mom!” Roxy calls out and this time the ghosts respond.

The woman, an alternate Rose, turns to look at Roxy. She’s soaking wet but you’d bet it’s the
bloody mess on the side of her head that killed her. Dave reaches in again and this time Rose helps
him pull the ghost free, finally it’s a troll. And you’d know your line’s horn’s anywhere. Unlike the
living Signless who is almost holy in his cloak this one stands in just his body suit which is ripped
everywhere, his hands are bound in cuffs that match the sign on your chest and they glow with light.
An arrow is sticking from his chest and blood seeps from numerous wounds and his face is a mess of
bruises.

He stands there, shaking and gasping for breath. Perhaps he’s scared or just alarmed to be in the
world of the living again but when you catch sight of his face you realise that he’s furious. He sucks
in a deep breath and SCREAMS. The sound doesn’t do you the courtesy of travelling by normal
means, instead it resonates in your bone marrow, rattles your teeth and fills your chest with ice. He is
furious, a level of fury you have never experienced in your tiny pathetic life. Around you people are
coming to a startled halt and looking around at him. The ghostly Signless yanks his bound hands
upwards and you have to scramble backwards from the suddenly spreading portal. Spectral chains
run from his bound hands and they are rapidly reeling people out, doubles of the adults standing in
stunned shock ahead of you.

Redglare, a noose still strung around her neck draws her sword as she steps forward on translucent
feet. Disciple draws metal claws out, the Psiionic barely more than skin and bones floats in vaguely
tinted red and blue and turns his empty eyed face to the frozen Empress. The two humans are armed
as well but it’s Signless who moves ahead first.

He opens his mouth to speak, but no sound comes out.

Your mind is filled with the flickered dream of a utopia that could have been and then of a life on
Alternia, happiness and home found. Visions of brutal deaths flash behind your eyes, contrasting
views of seadwellers glittering with jewels and rustbloods with hollowed cheeks from starvation,
(drones and fire. The unfairness of it burns your throat like bile but there is hope, you see progress,
only to have it stripped away. The agony of watching innocent people die, of torture, of execution
and the sudden understanding that things will only get worse. Alternia devolving worse and worse
only to end with a great screech as billions on billions drop dead for NOTHING, of Earth then
subjected to eradication, the Empress spreading like a cancer. So much blood you can’t even
comprehend it and where once compassion lived for her there is now only a violent determination for
justice, for her to answer for what she has done. To answer to the dead, to avenge them.

Your mind is abruptly your own again, right on time for you to watch the ghost of the Signless sprint
towards the Empress. He runs through several people as he moves and you see their horrified faces
and those in the way back up to the edges of the middle walkway and those that can leap across to
the outside ones. Not off guard for long the Empress swings her trident at the ghost Signless,
seemingly trying to smack him away more than stab him. It doesn’t manage that, though, it just swirls
through his apparently intangible body. He raises his bound hands up into the air, jumps for her and
brings it down into her face. The Empress staggers backwards, blood dripping from her chin as she
stares in shock at the evidently intangible at will ghost.

As if following some silent signal the rest of the ghosts rush forward, swarming down the narrow
platform and even over it as several are just flying or running on nothing. The whole while more
ghosts are coming through the portal still. They’re ones you don’t recognise, some adults but a lot of
them are suddenly kids. Dripping seadwellers with royal signs on their chests and wounds to their
bodies, other heiresses killed so they couldn’t challenge the Empress’ rule.

The Empress screeches in anger and fear as she tries in vain to hold off her attackers, but nothing she
does can keep them away and the stream of dead with a score to settle with her is seemingly
unending. As they push towards her they seem to blend together, or at least occupy the same space
until the writhing almost indistinguishable mass of ghosts both human and troll bears more
resemblance to the horrorterrors than anything else.

The ghosts are shouting now, thousands of voices right into your head. She betrayed and
manipulated them, killed them, destroyed people for simply existing, for fun, because she could.
Lives that had meaning and connection snuffed out on a whim. And for what? You can feel their
challenge buzzing in the air. She did all this, and for what? To be the last adult in her universe, trying
to manipulate children all so she can try to do it again? They won’t let her.

She launches herself into the sky trying to retreat but gravity is just a suggestion and they flow
upwards. A chain flies out from the mass of ghosts and you see your ancestor break out after her. It
wraps around her neck and with a scream that burns your insides he drags her back down. You can’t
stand the noise and you’re glad that you can’t see what’s happening through the haze of ghosts. You
crush your hands to your ears and let the pulse of your own bloodpusher drown out the sounds.

You’re not sure if it’s better or worse when the screaming stops. But you’re probably going to have
bad dreams about this forever.

The crowd of ghosts recedes, melting down into a river of brilliantly white light flowing to the portal.
Only a few ghosts remain, a few of the ancestors and adult Dave and Rose. They form an almost
complete circle around what you will charitably call the body. You’re pretty sure normal bodies have
all of the parts attached and don’t bend like that. Kanaya steadies you as you gasp for breath,
presumably remembering that time when she performed spontaneous surgery on Tavros via
chainsaw and you passed the fuck out.

They’re waiting for something, you don’t know what. Ghost Disciple puts her arms around your
dead ancestor and suddenly his shoulder shake. He’s crying, and as he does the shackles on his wrist
clang to the floor. Ghost Rose and Dave lace their hands together and Rose seems to dry up, she and
Dave both now look unharmed without a scratch on them. The rest of the still waiting ghosts have
their fatal injuries seem to melt away and their expressions are pure relief.

All of that comes to a halt when a ghost sits up out of the mangled body of the Empress. The
glowing river of ghost... energy or whatever it is surges up in a tidal wave. It rushes down the
central path and washes over everyone on the main platform. The trolls seem to melt into it, with the
exception of the dead Empress who is resisting being dragged away but is being pulled down
anyway. Just ghost Dave and Rose are left. They turn to look at your group and suddenly they’re
right in front of you all, or right in front of Dirk and Roxy at least.

“Bro…” Dirk chokes out. Dave smiles at him, the same kind of genuinely pleased to see you smile
that you’ve seen on your own Dave’s face a few times. It’s strange on older features but still so
similar. He reaches out and puts his hand on top of Dirk’s head, messes his hair up with a grin and
leans in to whisper something to him. It’s quiet enough that his ghost speech doesn’t echo into your
own head but whatever he says causes a tear to swiftly rush down Dirk’s cheek under his stupid shades. Dave flashes him a thumbs up and then steps into the ghost portal and vanishes.

“No! Wait, come back!” Dirk calls after him desperately but the ghost is gone.

Rose stands before a sniffling Roxy with a faint smile. She’s elegant in that infuriating Rose way but Roxy is barely holding it together.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I’m sorry I got drunk, that I couldn’t take the Empress down by myself, that we fucked up our session so bad.” Roxy sniffs.

Rose just smiles, tucks her now dry hair behind her ear and leans in to kiss Roxy’s forehead. She seemingly has no words and walks towards the portal without saying a thing. Until she comes level with you and stops. She looks you up and down and gives you an infuriatingly knowing look. Rose changes her course from the portal to be in front of you. Her fingers wrap around your shoulders like frost seeping into your skin. She leans in and pulls you closer, your cheek prickling with strangeness and she whispers.

Green skull, black eyes, a ring toyed between clawed fingers. Eyes suddenly white and green instead of black. Your hand in hers, an understanding of location, green circles.

As soon as it started it stops and Rose releases you. She steps past the three still channeling players and fades into the light of the portal. With the last ghost gone the portal wavers and then snaps shut into nothingness, suddenly dropping Sollux, Damara and Kurloz on the floor.

Kurloz is sprawled on his back making a pained groan which is not helped by Damara suddenly scrambling over him so she can throw up over the side of the walkway. Sollux has his head between his knees but even like that you can see the stream of blood flowing from his nose.

“What the fuck was that unholy shitshow?” your double asks, landing next to you. Others start cautiously making their way over to your little group, though Dirk and Roxy seem lost to themselves.

“I’m dying, I’m definitely dying.” Sollux groans.

“No you’re not.” John argues with him.

“She did, though. That’s an awful lot of blood, and they took her ghost.” Rose says grimly.

“They busted her.” John whispers in excitement.

“John, no.” your double says.

“John, yes. They’re ghosts who ghost bust! Ghost Ghost Busters!” John exclaims in glee.

“I’m going to throw you off of this building.” Sollux threatens.

“John is capable of stupid windy flight so that’s really not going to do anything, even if his death would be just. What happened to summon those ghosts?” your double says and Kurloz, Damara and Sollux all point at you.

Now everyone’s staring at you.

“Hey, don’t look at me. I didn’t do anything.” you protest.

“It was your idea, the battle was too dangerous as it was, everyone was getting in everyone else’s way.” Kanaya says.
“Doom, time, rage… I can see why that’d work. That’s pretty clever.” other Vriska nods thoughtfully.

“We have people who need to see the healers, these three included. And I believe there are other fights still going on.” Mr Egbert says seriously.

“We need to get her body into the ship, I’m not turning my back on it. Not with all those sprites floating around and who knows who on Derse is still loyal to her.” Disciple says sensibly. Honestly, if your group really had never taken their eyes off of bodies then things would have gone a lot differently.

“We should all go back to the ship, some of us are very hurt. I believe one of Redglare’s bellowsacks has collapsed.” Dolorosa agrees, carrying a wheezing Redglare in her arms and walking right past-holy shit when did Mindfang lose an arm?! Is that a standard Serket thing?

“Everyone back on the ship then.” Signless says.

“You can all go but I think Kanaya still needs to take those two to see that denizen. And I’m going stay here, there’s another ship that I need to look at. It’s too dangerous to leave it like it is.” the Psiionic says, looking away from your ship and to the one hanging in the air in the distance.

“Psii, there was a ghost double of you in there. Your counterpart isn’t in there alive.” Disciple says gently and the Psiionic’s hands tighten for a moment before releasing somewhat hopelessly.

“I know. But I still have to see, and I have to contain that ship. We don’t know if we’ll need this one after the game and as it stands that may be the only way to get spare parts for it. Besides, I don’t want you to see any version of me imprisoned in a helm again. I’ll see you soon.” he says and bursts into flight.

“I can still fly this with the charge left in it.” Darkleer speaks up after a few seconds of awkward silence. He leads the way inside and most of the others start filtering past you, some carrying the injured or simply burnt out. In the distance other Rose and other Vriska are arguing about where they’re going next when they get back to Hal and honestly the snarky spades flirting is something you could do without hearing.

You, your double and Kanaya are the only ones outside now except for Roxy who is just staring at you. A slightly shell shocked looking Dirk stands just inside waiting for her. Roxy bites her lip and walks closer to you.

“What did she say to you? I’ve never got to hear my Mom speak to me but she talks to you? What did she say?” Roxy asks tearfully.

“It wasn’t words it was… like someone playing a movie in my head. I think I saw Calliope and-” you pause and realise that you’re not alone here. Your double is right there and he doesn’t know about the ring of life still existing or that Roxy gave it to the cherub.

“I think I know where she is. I was there, I think I’m supposed to find her but I don’t know how I’m going to do that.” you say, somewhat manipulating the truth.

“Light is truly an enigma of an aspect.” Kanaya remarks.

“Can’t say that I’m sad about you knowing where she is. The last thing I want after this fight is a prolonged ghost chase. And, hey, hopefully we can see if the light players can bring her back. And if we need her body maybe we can find a combination of powers to get that, it seems that the shit we can do is only getting weirder.” your double says, trying to reassure Roxy even though she’s already
assured Calliope’s future.

“Right.” Roxy nods. She looks up at Dirk and heads up the ramp which starts to close after her, leaving the three of you behind.

The ship pulls back, soundless and eerie as it moves. The three of you stand, alone, on a Dersite rooftop path with a puddle of blood not too far from you.

“Echidna, then?” Kanaya says.

“Right, Jade’s planet is… shit I’ve lost my bearings. Oh! There, that way.” your double says, floating in the air and peering at the dark sky and pointing. You pull a jetpack out of your sylladex that other Vriska had been thoughtful enough to dispense to the lowly mortals like you and Kanaya. If she hadn’t your counterpart would have had to carry you both and you don’t want to deal with that at all.

“I hope I can talk her into releasing the frog, otherwise all of this will have been for nothing.” Kanaya says.

“Same. Though what she wants with me and him I don’t know. Actually, probably just him. I know the denizens are aware of what happens in different realities and make deals that way but I never saw her then so who knows.” your double remarks.

You and Kanaya launch off into the Derse sky with your double easily keeping speed on his bullshit wings for losers. God, you’re so jealous of his ability to fly that it’s not even funny. You fly up away from Derse and then course correct to fly to your final destination which is a straight shot with not much in your way. You’re about as far from the real action as can be.

Carefully you slip to the back of the group and open the voidy chat on your palmhusk.

CG: I COULDN’T SAY BACK THEN ROXY BUT YOUR MOM SHOWED ME SOMETHING ELSE.

TG: really?? what?

CG: I SAW CALLIOPE WITH THE RING AND HER COMING BACK TO LIFE.

TG: i told her her hold tight on using the ring in case shit got dangerous and she got hurt or they tried to take her ring so maybe youre supposed to go there when its safe

CG: HOW THE HELL AM I SUPPOSED TO GET THERE THOUGH?

TG: you didnt see me at all

CG: NO.

TG: then ive no idea man maybe ill be obvious at the time i think thats how time and light stuff goes

CG: I GUESS WE’LL SEE.

CG: I HAVE TO GO DO WHATEVER IT IS I’M SUPPOSED TO DO WITH KANAYA, THE LONGER I’M ON HERE THE MORE LIKELY IT IS THAT OTHER, BETTER, ME IS GOING TO SEE ME TYPING.

TG: right! and dont think hes better man hes just another you

TG: but tbh i think we all feel weird about our doubles but still see you later and thanks
You leave your secret messages to focus on Kanaya ahead of you. As you draw close to your destination planet it’s her that leads the way, your double falling back to your level to follow her.

“How do you even know where you’re going Kanaya? It’s a whole planet.” you ask.

“I just… I have a feeling, I suppose.” Kanaya says unhelpfully.

“Jade said she pretty much fell into the place when she was on her planet, maybe it’s a space thing. Or an Echidna thing.” your double says.

“Have you seen her before?” Kanaya asks, looking back at him.

“No, I wasn’t there then. Dave was but we didn’t talk about it much on the day it was a… a busy day. I got executed for one and then, well, actually a lot of people died and Dave challenged Lord English to a fight. But all Dave could really tell me about was unintelligible monster speak, lava and crystals.” he answers her.

“That’s it?” you ask incredulously.

Your alternate self gets a mildly pained expression on his face and his lips flatten into a thin line.

“The only relevant information he shared, yeah.” he amends.

“What irrelevant information did he share?” Kanaya asks, obviously curious.

“He- alright, his exact words for this part was ‘enjoy the giant snake titties, man’. With accompanying childish giggling and hand gestures.” he sighs. He has the resignation of a guy who accepts that his soulmate is kind of a moron and suffers him with love and despairing understanding.

“Oh my.” Kanaya says and lands on the ground far more gracefully than you do.

“Yeah, the universe looked at that dumbass and went ‘hmm who’s the best person for this idiot? I know, that guy!’ and the thing is that I know if after this everything is ok that he’s going to ask me about whether or not I saw them because Dave is Dave.” he complains, the lucky fucker.

“I think that we are to go this way.” Kanaya explains and you see how the woods dip down into a crevasse in the ground that twists and winds every which way. You note that she doesn’t comment on the potential rumblespheres of her denizen.

Together you start walking and the path becomes a path in a canyon and then dips underground entirely. Before too long you can feel heat on your face and lava starts bubbling up through the rock in places.

“Are we heading towards a volcano or something?” you ask worriedly.

“That’d make sense. I think the denizens always live at the core of their planets, or ours did anyway.” your double replies.

“Our were the same.” Kanaya tells him.

“I’m interested about seeing her, not for what Dave said, but I never saw mine.” he says.

“Wait. You never faced your denizen?” you ask, coming to a stop.

“Are you kidding me? No. I had the same one as Dirk and he’s way too strong. Supposedly our denizen is the toughest in the whole game, or so the writings about him said and the light players said
it was true. Honestly I buy it after Dirk’s experience. Dirk’s whole quest was about destroying the bad parts of himself or fixing himself and when he went to see his denizen to see if there was a faster way out it went really badly. He never talked about what he saw or what it offered him but he looked terrified and Dirk’s not one to scare easily. But I know he didn’t make a deal or fight it either, he ran away.” your counterpart says with a shudder.

No, something’s not right here. You killed your denizen and he was embarrassingly puny, you’re sure he’s the training on they give to weak players.

“Who was your denizen?” you ask, maybe his was different.

“Yaldabaoth.” other you says, carefully pronouncing the name. It seems harder to spit out of his mouth than you know it is with yours, his human American tinged accent interfering perhaps.

“That was the same as mine.” you say.

“And you faced him?” your double asks in slack jawed awe.

“I killed him.” you tell him. Your double’s face is comically surprised, eyes so wide you almost worry they might just pop out entirely.

“Holy shit.” he whispers.

“He was easy, laughably so. I figured he was a dummy denizen for… for weak players. Don’t tell anyone I said that.” you add that last part quickly with an imploring glance at Kanaya. She nods seriously, she has your back.

“I don’t think that’s how it works. If you’re weak in your aspect I think you get a class like a page or a rogue, they start off weak and then get really strong. And knights are kind of a weird class but we’re not weak. But denizens… I don’t know, in our universe it was all about setting shit up so we could get here. They had something worth fixing. If yours wasn’t an obstacle then maybe things were going to turn out hard enough but get there in the end anyway, you are the ‘alpha’ timeline after all.” he says, making air quotes around the word.

“Or we’re fundamentally different people and you had room to get awesome powers and I got nothing. It doesn’t matter now anyway, can we just go?” you mutter.

You walk off and pass Kanaya and head further down the sloping path, simmering at yet more injustice. Not to mention the creeping doubt that if you’d kept your cool maybe you could have coerced some massive game changing boon out of your denizen. But that’s the thing isn’t it? Some version of you out there did that and then his timeline died. You’re useless by design. Fate is cruel.

“He does not mean it really.” Kanaya says softly behind you.

“Don’t make excuses for me, Maryam!” you snap, turning on your heel to face the pair of them. You point your finger accusingly in their direction and step back.

The ground suddenly gives way under your feet and with a very unheroic screech of alarm you tumble backwards into the ground. You roll and bounce off of rocks and gravel, finally coming to a stop at the bottom of the steep slope amazingly unharmed.

“Karkat? Are you alright?” Kanaya asks and leaps down the hole, skidding gracefully down the loose shale to come to a stop at your side. Your double just flutters down on his fucking wings.

“I’m somehow just fine.” you mutter, standing up and dusting yourself off.
“Is that lava over there? No wonder it’s hot as balls down here,” other you says, peering off into the distance. He ought to mean ‘hot as globes’ and you’re about to correct him when you remember that you’ve heard Dave say that warped version before. It must be a human thing, well, an Earth thing at least.

“We should keep going, this is the right way.” Kanaya says and walks ahead.

With little else to do you and other you follow behind her. The path you’re on gets narrower and you feel it getting even warmer still down here. Eventually lava starts to ooze from the walls into puddles of death and sunken pits of glowing heat. You are unsettled to an unspeakable degree to see a snake tail dipping in and out of the lava at points and trailing over the floor.

Just when the cavern is getting too hot to really deal with it widely opens up into a cave so broad that you can’t see to either edge, nor can you tell how far down the pit of lava at the bottom of it is. Jutting out all impudently into the cavern is half of a stone bridge that Kanaya starts walking down, beyond that are floating rocks that simply hover there uncaring of physics at all.

“Hello?” Kanaya equires politely from the edge of the ruined bridge.

Slowly and soundlessly a giant face rises up, followed by shoulders and a torso. At that point you hear other you whisper ‘fucking hell Dave’ under his breath and you know why, Dave is right that those sure are some weirdly static rumblespheres on that giant snake lady. God, you can’t not look at them now, fucking damnit other Dave.

Echidna coils some of her body over the floating rocks and peers at Kanaya, blinking Roselike eyes at her. A terrible screeching fills the room, and their pair of you reflexively slap your hands over your ears but that doesn’t seem to blot it out.

“You asked to see us.” Kanaya says in response to the unholy noise. Can she understand that thing?! The denizen reclines over an arch of her tail, propping her head up on it, you suppose it must be hard for her to lay any other way as the back of her is covered in crystal spikes. The monster bellows again, like someone sandblasting windchimes.

“Yes, but what do you want from me to get you to do that?” Kanaya asks.

Echidna emits a short, shrill howl and Kanaya turns to both of you.

“But- which one do you mean?” Kanaya asks, looking between you and your double.

“I don’t like this.” other you says under his breath. Suddenly he’s snatched up in the air by a coil of snake tail and Echidna peers down at him and then at Kanaya once more. Up close her voice is even worse, like someone popped the top of your thinkpan off like a softboiled cluckbeast ova and is scraping along the bone with a knife. As she screeches she looks at your double who is squirming within her grip but her expression is disinterested, she even shrugs as she talks about him. You assume it’s about him at least. She carelessly drops him and moves on.

“Wait, do you know what’s going to happen?” Kanaya asks.

You can’t understand giant monster screeching but even you can parse a ‘bitch, please’ expression, especially on a face as big as your body. Only now she turns that face on you and smiles with glittering quartz teeth and a flare of interest in her eyes. You try to step back only to find yourself as entangled as other you was before. You brace your hands on lavender scales and try to heave yourself free as she talks to Kanaya but you can’t so much as budge. Your double even flies up when Echidna has her back turned and tries to pull you out but that doesn’t work either.
“I can agree to that.” Kanaya says and suddenly you’re released and left dangling in the air by other you. With one last screech and a nod Echidna dives from view, her transaction seemingly done.

“What was that about?” other you asks as he lands by you.

“We came to an agreement, she will do her part to release the frog when the time comes. I think in part Vriska’s first assumption was right, she wanted to get a look at us. She was concerned about the creation of the universe after this one and wants it to be perfect, as such I had to make some agreements but it’s nothing unreasonable at all.” Kanaya answers.

“Alright, but what did she want with us? She seemed pretty interested in us.” he asks.

“Actually, she didn’t want anything from you at all. Apparently you don’t need to do anything more, you have played your part already. Not that she was displeased, of course, but I don’t think you really even needed to be here. Or maybe you did, she said everything else involving you from this point on is inevitable.” Kanaya elaborates.

“Great.” your double says flatly.

“I’m so glad this was not only a waste of my time but that apparently also I have peaked in usefulness and it’s all going downhill from here. Quick, before I lose relevance set me down by a door so that I might be somewhat helpful in excluding a fucking draft.” he adds in a bitter mutter.

Hah! Now who’s the irrelevant one? Perhaps the boot is really on the other strut pod now!

“What about me?” you ask, hope bubbling inside of you even though you try to keep the heat on it low, to keep it contained.

“She…” you see Kanaya hesitate and feel less hopeful, is she sparing your feelings?

“She said that you still had much left to do after the game. Important things, leaderly things.” Kanaya answers.

“I’m not a leader. I haven’t been for a long time.” you groan. Really this is just salt in the wound.

“You led people into a successful fight within the last hour, that was your idea. How is that not leading?” other you challenges you.

“Oh fuck off, it was a panicked idea and they did all the work. I’m not a leader.” you say.

“Statements like that are also why you are our leader.” Kanaya nods.

“And I couldn’t be happier about it. As soon as today is over and life gets back to something like normal I swear I don’t want to organise so much as a birthday party. You can lead. I’ve no intention of taking that job.” other you says and heads back the way you came.

“Oh fuck off.” you growl.

“Echidna also said that you were our leader, Karkat.” Kanaya adds and follows you both.

“Yeah, well, she doesn’t have arms so what does she know?” you grumble.

“I fail to see how that is related at all.” Kanaya replies but you ignore her.

“What’re we doing now? Going back to Hal?” you ask other you. Hal was the one coordinating everyone and you’d been instructed to return to him, you all had. But maybe that doesn’t apply to
you, after all what can you do? As insecurity wells up in you it starts to bother you that for someone so supposedly tired of leading your double is physically leading the group out of Echidna’s underground base. You quicken your steps so you’re ahead of him but he doesn’t seem to notice or maybe just doesn’t care, he’s even looking at his palmhusk instead of you.

“Are you messaging him?” you ask.

“I was thinking about doing it, I want to see where we could go but I’m also thinking I shouldn’t distract him. We’d have to go there anyway so maybe we should just fly right there.” he says uncertainly.

“I think that would be best.” Kanaya says, cutting in. She looks a little uneasy, perhaps she’s worried about what she’s doing after this.

You don’t know who you’ll be assigned to fight but you’ll get that you won’t be anywhere near Dave. You don’t know how long his fight has been going on for or if it’s even started but you know better than to message him and distract him. What if you got him killed? You just… you hope he’s okay.

“Do you know where he’s going to put us? He’s got to be working off of your plan, right?” you ask.

“If he’s not free already then I’ll probably end up rescuing Jane’s father, Derse always seemed pretty fractured so exploiting that wouldn’t be hard with my powers. Kanaya’s space so maybe she’ll be against Lord English if that’s still happening and I would guess either the Jacks or the Green guys for you depending on how those fights are going.” your double says distractedly and puts his phone away anyway and rubs at his arm.

“That all sounds… very dangerous.” Kanaya says dubiously.

“Of course it is. But I just want a chance to do something myself, not possibly give someone else the idea to do something. I want to really contribute, I’m going to be living in this new universe, I should do something. I know I’m not badass with a chainsaw like you or godtier like him but I want to try at least.” you argue.

“Echidna asked me to protect you. Or not asked, it was a specific arrangement of our deal.” she says specifically to you.

“Oh, then you can go together wherever you go I guess.” other you shrugs and scratches at his arm.

“Great, even the denizen thinks I need grubsitting. Do you have fleas or something?” you demand of other you.

“No, it’s not me it’s Dave. The fight must be making him panic or maybe he’s injured, it’s making my arm hurt.” he hisses.

“That sounds like a sane reaction to being in that fight if you ask me.” you tell him.

“True. Ugh, I need to get to Hal soon.” he says and picks up the pace, you speed up as well so you’re still ahead.

“So, Kanaya if you’re coming with me that’d fulfil your deal, right? I’m pretty sure I’d feel better with you and your chainsaw with me.” you say without looking back.

“That is one way, I suppose but not what I had in mind.” she says
You hear a loud thud and screech to a halt, looking back to see your double crumpled up on the floor. Kanaya is standing there wide eyed with her fist in the air. You look from her to him and your mind boggles in disbelief.

“Did you hit him?” you ask.

“No.” Kanaya says, sounding as suspicious as all hell.

You crouch down, trying to investigate what happened to other you to drop him like that and highly suspecting that you’re going to find a bump on his head. Only a fist collides with the back of your head before you can check. You have enough time to think that Kanaya is a slippery fucker before you black out over the fallen body of your younger double.

Sitting up you find yourself in what seems like infinite blackness, you don’t want to question what or if indeed you’re actually sitting on anything at all. You’re aware enough to know you’re probably dreaming, or unconscious, or dead, and you’re practiced enough at the first two to know better than to question things too hard. Standing you turn around and around but it’s nothing at every angle.

With nothing else to do you start walking, not that it seems to change anything at all but you keep at it. Just when you’re about to give up and change direction you spot a flickering light in the distance. Cautiously you stop walking and eye it, it’s getting closer and is brightly flashing. Before you have time to think more on it or consider that it could even be something bad the neon whatever it is streaks past you in a flashing blur.

“Wait!” you call out on reflex and to your surprise, the thing halts.

Or, you realise as it stops, not something but someone. The person’s colour is flashing disorientingly from green to orange back and forth at speeds probably not good for your ocular health. Large feathery wings flap as the person comes to a halt and turns.

“Dave?” you ask out of reflex, seeing the shades and the hair. But then you look at the shape of the person’s lips, the coat, the claws and even face shape.

“Nepeta?” you try again.

“Right on both counts and also wrong.” the person laughs, still flashing wildly.

“I don’t- what happened to you? To both of you?” you ask.

“It was… it was… shenanigans.” the obtuse fuck laughs.

“So you’re a sprite, one of the weird double ones like that Rose-cat one that Rose can’t stand.” you guess, it’d explain the seizure inducing flashing at least.

“Correct! That’s Jasprose and I’m Davepeta. Purrleased to meet you as myself.” it- uh, they, say. Is it rude to say they just because they’re two people in there or not? Jasprose was one person and a cat so she’s probably not a good person to base this off of.

“So… so you’re part Nepeta which I get but I didn’t think we had any Dave corpses around, not unless that fight has gone really badly really quickly. Unless, oh! Wait Dave was his own sprite, right? Davesprite? He told me about him, I saw him a few times too but only through the viewports, is that you?” you guess.

Davepeta’s eyes go wide enough that you can see over their shades and in surprise they drop completely to the floor.
“You remember me? I mean him, everyone always forgets Davesprite.” they say softly.

“I’m sorry.” you apologise.

“Hah, don’t be silly, you didn’t forget anything! Besides I’m me now, but for what it’s worth trolls got that Dave killed, stupid girl battles. And his friends too, all of them. But he at least always thought you were funny. And Nepeta really liked you too so I’m feeling purretty partial to you myself.” they smile and your nutrition sac flutters stupidly.

“So… so what’re you doing out here? Where is here? When were you made and what did I miss?” you ask, looking around at nothingness.

“That’s a lot of questions Karkitty, but I got remixed up after you took your wild little ride. As for what I’m doing here I’m on a secret mission.” they say secretively, lowering their shades to wink at you.

“I- okay but where is here and what’s the mission?” you press on.

“Well, you know how when something spins things get pushed to the outside? That happens out here too, most of the dreambubbles end up in a ring more or less. One that’s got destroyed from what I hear it by Lord whatever smashing shit. Cutting through the middle is, well, this is the middle of nowhere. You could get lost forever out here, the horroterrors could eat you. I’m here so I can quickly get to over there, I’m on a mission to find two people.” they say.

“Who?” you ask curiously.

“Aradia and Pawlux! I mean Sollux. From what Vwiskas tells me he’s only half dead and she’s alive so if we’re bouncing we oughta get people who can come with. Or even maybe be helpful in the fight or something.” Davepeta says.

“Shit, why didn’t I think of that?” you mutter to yourself. Some ‘leader’ you are, what the hell does Echidna know? You FORGOT two players and you were just going to leave the game and leave them behind, what the fuck even?

“The better question is what’s a pretty guy like you doing in a place like this?” Davepeta grins, leaning into your space. You have no idea if it’s the Dave part of them or the Nepeta part that’s flirting with you but you are confused and mildly flustered.

“I don’t know, I just woke up here.” you answer.

“Hmm, but why would you wake up here? People wake up usually in places that mean something, bubbles of their life or their death. Not just nowhere, not unless you meant to be here.” they muse, pacing around you like a hungry meowbeast.

“I don’t know why I’d want to be here.” you tell them.

“Hmm, do you remember what you were doing before you woke up here?” they ask.

“I…” you hesitate. What were you doing?

“I was on the ship and we were all going to our different fights, I was supposed to be going off with other me and Kanaya to talk to Echidna.” you say slowly as you work back from what you remember.

“Sucks not being the ‘good’ version of you, huh?” Davepeta says sympathetically.
“You can say that again.” you agree miserably.

“If it helps, I think you’re the cat’s meow.” they say and stroke under your chin only to dart back with a giggle. Your skin is hot with embarrassment but you push through like this isn’t happening at all. (God, is this what your Dave would do if he wasn’t trying to be cool? Does he- no.)

“But we didn’t go there right away, we went and fought the Empress and then- yeah, then we went there. Then there was monster screeching and we were leaving and… and I was still in her-” you say and suddenly the scenery around you changes and Davepeta disappears.

“-lair.” you finish.

Davepeta is suddenly gone and instead of standing in blackness you’re back in Echidna’s lair again. Only there’s no Kanaya or other you so you’re pretty sure that you didn’t just wake up. Everything still has that hazy dream feel that you’re used to by now.

“Well that was no help.” you complain to no one in particular. All you are now is lost somewhere new, all while being hot under the collar and questioning the affections certain people might maybe have for you. Well, whatever. You wonder if it might be worth seeing if there’s a dream Echidna here, maybe if this is the memory of a space player her shrieking might be intelligible. It’s the best guess you’ve got right now and it’s not like you can just wake up out of sheer force of will, you tried that enough on the meteor to know that.

A soft gasp makes you freeze and look around, there’s no one obviously on the pathway that you’re walking so you walk through into Echidna’s lair. It’s different than where you were before but there’s not Echidna, not that you’d suspected her of making so quiet a sound.

Across from you is a set of stairs that goes up a plinth-like platform to nowhere, but still you definitely heard something.

“Hello?” you call out.

Look, ordinarily you’re not the kind of moron that you get in horror movies who hears a noise, follows it and dumbly calls out hello. But the thing is you really need to get back to being awake again and as far as you can tell getting hurt or killed in a dreambubble will wake you up, in the ones you travelled through you woke up when you got hurt before. So really you have nothing to lose and you should be doing something more productive in this final fight than sleeping. In fact there’s fewer things less productive you could be doing right now.

You hear a slight shuffling and you zero in on the stairs and the platform. Cautiously you walk around it, hearing more scuffling as you go. You speed up and leap around the back to see…

A… well, a green skeleton in a little green suit. It yelps in alarm and whirls around to face you, shaking like a leaf. You take into account the green swirls on prominent and literal cheekbones and the neat little suit.

“Are you Calliope?” you guess. She’s pretty obviously not the other one.

“I…” she sniffles and lowers a clawed hand that had been protecting her.

“I am. You’re a troll, I like trolls.” she says softly. You don’t really know what to say to that, given how one of them is threatening your entire existence you’re not over the moon about cherubs but you shouldn’t really say that. You have some tact despite what certain condescending, smug, light-player humans might say.
“I’m Karkat.” you introduce yourself and offer her a hand to help her up.

“Calliope, but you knew that.” she says and takes your hand. Her hands are bony and claw tipped.

“I also… I already knew who you were. I’ve seen the other you from the other timeline, not that you’re the same person but you look the same. But I have heard about you -you before, Jade and Roxy mentioned you a little, it’s nice to meet you.” she adds softly.

“Oh. I don’t think I want to know exactly what they said, partially because I don’t want to fight Jade. I’m pretty sure she could turn me inside out by thinking about it hard enough.” you say with a grimace. Calliope laughs and looks as startled at it as you are.

“Sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean that’s funny. And I don’t think she would, she’s nice. Just the idea and the way you put it was- it was a funny way of saying it is all.” Calliope apologises hastily.

“Glad someone’s amused.” you mutter and hop up onto the platform to sit down with your legs dangling off of the edge. Calliope doesn’t join you but instead sets her elbows on the edge of the platform and rests her chin in her hands and looks up at you.

“So why are you here?” she asks.

“I’m pretty sure I’m not dead, I think I just got knocked out. And Davepeta had me remembering what I was doing before and I remembered being in Echidna’s lair so…” you shrug.

“This isn’t even my memory of her lair, this is someone else’s. Weird that you would come here. So you weren’t looking for me?” Calliope asks. You think she’s looking at you but it’s even harder to interpret the expression on her all black ghost eyes than it is the normal ghosts with white eyes. Sure you’re practiced at holding eye contact with people who make that hard like Dave, Sollux and Terezi; but still it’s unsettling.

“Looking for you? No I wasn’t. How would I even know where you…” you trail off as the memory returns of ghost Rose leaning down to your level and whispering knowledge forcibly into your thinkspoon whether you wanted it or not.

“Wait. I think I was supposed to find you.” you blurt out.

“Did Roxy send you? She said that she would let me know when it was time to put the ring on, she said that other people might want it so it was dangerous to do it too soon. But to be honest if other people need it I’m pretty sure it’d be wasted on me, I’m not really worth saving.” she says, trailing off into a mumble at the end.

“Hopefully it won’t come to that. But I think it’s pretty shitty to have to choose who lives and who dies anyway, I don’t think you can just decide who is and isn’t worth saving. I don’t think even you can decide that about yourself. And from what I heard you helped all those assholes from the other timeline get here so they wouldn’t die because you didn’t think they deserved it, at least that’s what I heard from them in the many goddamn meetings I was subjected to.” you point out.

“Wait, yes, but they did all the work I just nudged them along in the right way. It just seemed wrong for real living people to be my brother’s playthings.” she says with a frown. You didn’t know a skull could frown but there you go. Though in fairness she does have some kind of skin over her bones but it’s… yeah, her anatomy is pretty baffling to you.

“Well if it helps I think you deserve to be alive more than your bastard hatchmate.” you tell her.

“My brother is the worst, he’s caused so much misery. I wish I’d been strong enough to dominate
instead of him but I’ve met the me in the timeline that did that and it was doomed. What does that say about me?” Calliope sighs.

“Every version of me who managed to be any way competent existed in a doomed timeline, and I’m including the leaderly version of me in the timeline you saved. What does that say about me? Are we both just failures, extras? This fucking sucks!” you snarl. It’s so unfair. It’s not like you didn’t try but, well, paradox space is pretty clear that there’s no prizes for second place.

Wait, you were off to try to make a difference when-

You touch the back of your head and sigh.

“What is it?” Calliope asks curiously.

“I think I just worked something out. I think my friend knocked me out so I couldn’t fight anyone, she must know I’m too weak to do that. At least she knocked the other guy out too, or I think she did.” you answer her. Even Kanaya knows you’re no help.

“This is really depressing.” Calliope says sadly and you figure that she’s talking about her own situation as much as yours.

“Yours isn’t though. You’re going to be alive again, you’re getting rescued.” you tell her.

Calliope sighs and hops up onto the platform next to you and pulls one taloned foot up onto the edge, folding her arms on her knees and generally looking small and sad.

“That’d be lovely, of course. I’d give anything to see my friends in person again and there’s some I haven’t even met yet. Not to mention meeting everyone from that timeline my terrible brother revived, I’d love to see them go free.” she says slowly.

“So what’s the problem, it sounds like you’re getting just what you want.” you reason.

“I know, I know. It’s just so- this isn’t the kind of story I write. I don’t mind characters being rescued or anything, honestly a daring rescue can be really thrill inducing. But I can’t stand characters who do nothing but get rescued, who are so passive and helpless as to be useless. I wouldn’t write a story like that.” she says, shaking her head.

“And the worst thing is that my brother, who doesn’t know anything about anything when it comes to art or literature, is actually being a hero. Well, a hero character at least, the protagonist of his own story. He’s still a villain of course, a monster, but he does things. But me… well I’m just useless. Even the most accomplished version of me agreed to die just to get her power, that’s so terribly passive too.” Callope sighs.

“But,” you say as you chew over the idea, “isn’t that how it works?”

“What do you mean?” Calliope asks, turning her empty eyesockets on you.

“He’s a Lord of Time which Rose says is the most active class there is, it’s what makes him so powerful. And you’re a… a…” you flounder, not knowing what she is.

“A Muse of Space.” she fills in for you.

“Right, that. But active and passive aren’t strong and weak, if it meant that it’d say that. If he’s the strongest then if you’re the exact inverse then that means-” you begin.
“That I’m the weakest.” she finishes.

“No! You’re thinking of it wrong. If he’s- I don’t know, if he’s plus one hundred and you’re negative one hundred that makes you-” you try again.

“Zero?” Calliope guesses.

“No, dumbass. Let me put it this way. If his skill is in pushing shit around and he’s super good at it and your powers are as extreme but opposite, that doesn’t make you an expert in not pushing shit around, that makes you savant in…” you trail off but she just stares at you.

“Come on, don’t make me schoolfeed you everything.” you groan.

“I’ve never been ‘schoolfed’ like trolls were and I never went to school. The only person I ever interacted with in person was Gamzee when I was younger. If you were to ‘schoolfeed’ me then it would be the first time anyone had done that!” Calliope protests.

“I take it back, I’m amazed you’re as functional as you are.” you mutter.

“No, look. In that example the opposite of pushing someone around isn’t not pushing people, it’s pulling them. If his way of doing things is so obvious and active then of course yours would be subtle. You got everyone in the right place, right? That’s got to be a space thing.” you say. Calliope frowns, which is a little disconcerting to see a mostly skeletal face do.

“I think you might be giving me credit for things I didn’t do. And besides, that’s influencing people and that isn’t my aspect is it? That’d be heart or mind.” she says glumly.

“Or blood.” you answer out of reflex.

Hm.

“Yes, blood would be something you could use for that, I think.” Calliope nods.

Blood…

“What’s wrong?” Calliope asks, and with good reason. You’re just staring ahead like a jackass without sponge to think with.

“I think I just realised something, or maybe I didn’t and I’m just being stupid. I think I just got how something works.” you say uncertainly. Calliope perks up at your words and turns to face you a little more. A book falls out of her sylladex and she picks it up and flicks to an empty page.

“I love theories, maybe we could work on it together!” Calliope says, pencil poised over the paper.

You look at her sidelong and consider it. You’re probably wrong but maybe it would be a good idea to bounce your thought off of someone else. Besides it’s not as if she knows you or has reason to spare your feelings. You give yourself a second to try to compose your thoughts before speaking.

“You said there was another you out there, and she managed to be successful. She actively went out and did shit.” you begin.

“Right, but she was doomed.” Calliope agrees with a nod.

“Okay, but there’s another me running around out there and he’s an active leader and everyone respects him and he’s like a military hero to people. He god tiered too and he even has quadrants. He’s better than me in every way.” you say bitterly.
Calliope taps her pencil on her chin thoughtfully and inclines her head.

“But he was doomed too,” she concludes.

“Yeah, and I’ve seen other versions of me out there in the dreambubbles who went god tier and they all were doomed. So this must be how we’re supposed to be, right?” you say.

“There are so many timelines out there that I can only assume that this very one is the one where we all are exactly as we are supposed to be.” Calliope agrees.

“So however they are isn’t how we’re supposed to be. Which makes sense for you, if you’re meant to be passive then a version of you that goes out and does things in an active way would be going against your design or something. So there are active classes and passive classes, we’re agreed on that?” you ask her.

“Yes, I have mapped my speculation out about that before, here.” Calliope says and draws a line across the middle of her page and starts writing the classes in. Lord on one side and Muse on the other and then adding the other classes in on the way. To your surprise she puts knight in the passive side.

“Is that right?” you ask, tapping the knight part with your claw.

“I believe so, yes. You see active classes like a Lord or a Thief use their aspect to benefit themselves mostly, but it’s not always that simple. Sometimes it’s allowing your aspect to do its work or to be a conduit for change with it and sometimes it’s the power for which you use it. A knight exploits their aspect to do things for others, they serve like their namesakes. It’s not a measure of power as you well pointed out and this isn’t a good/bad dichotomy either.” Calliope explains. You consider that, passiveness. Dave is pretty reactive to things and the two of you both struggle to be the first one to make a move in any way, that’s why everything is such a fucking production with the two of you. But still…

“But Dave initiates his own loops, he takes the lead in fights and he actively manipulates time. He’s not- I mean I get seers just observe things and that’s passive, but him?” you say.

“Well, the classes also come in pairs. And my theory is the counterpart to Knight is Page, they’re named on the same theme after all. And in the pairs one is active and the other passive.” Calliope says.

“Tavros was a page and Jake is too and not to be an asshole but they’re both kind of pathetic, the older one is a bit more self assured but even so. If I had to say which out of Dave and Tavros was active I know who I’d pick.” you argue.

“I can’t say about your friend Tavros. But Jake is actually a very good example, but don’t tell him I said so. Jake is… Jake is a little self centred and I don’t mean that badly! He’s just a little short sighted, metaphorically and literally. He likes his friends immensely and he wants them to be happy but when he tries to manage others expectations of him it can be pretty defensive, he knows who he wants to be and he’d rather focus on that than deal with the world outside.” she explains.

“Tavros was like that, lost in fantasy a lot and usually if he tried to step up and do something it blew up in his face. Or, well, stabbed him in the chest.” you say regretfully.

“Well there you go! Pages have a slow start but they have so much potential, once they’ve dealt with their crisis they become very strong indeed!” she says brightly.

“But that sounds passive to me.” you point out.
“No, no, not at all! The powers of the page are about themselves, they affect other people too but it’s self directed. That’s active. Jake suffers from a lack of hope but when he does believe in himself, as he should because he’s stellar really, when he believes he’s incredible. His power calls things into being and they’re powered by him and are about him.” Calliope explains.

“Tavros is leading a ghost army right now I think, or one of them is.” you concede.

“Knights are a mirror to this, I think. There tends to be a theme in these pairs, like seers and mages are both about knowledge, thieves and rogues are about taking things. From my best guess, pages and knights feel a shortcoming in themselves. Pages are weak at the start from it and eventually grow and I think knights tend to overcompensate.” she says.

“Hey!” you protest.

“I mean no offense. And honestly I think knights are great! I’ve heard tell of the Knight of Mind and seen other versions of you and Dave and the pattern seems to be the same. You know what it feels like to feel bad and you help people. Not in a healing way but to prove yourselves, to earn your place or- or to protect. There’s an insecurity or a weakness but it’s not about the knight but it’s about everyone else, how other people see it or them. And so they bend their aspect around them in aid of others. I think Knights are passive, a borderline case that you could maybe argue for the other way around perhaps but that’s my theory and I’m sticking to it.” Calliope states.

You’re not sure you agree. There’s parts you can see, you know Dave once craved the genuine affection of his lusus and then very much hoped to not be noticed by him at all, either way he’d felt that the thing lacking there was himself rather than Bro’s demented view. With you your defect is clear, pumping through your veins like heresy. You don’t know Latula enough to comment on her.

For all that you’ve said to Calliope that passive isn’t a bad thing it certainly feels it when it’s applied to you. But you look at the list of classes that look active on her chart and consider. Vriska as a thief, Eridan as a prince, Sollux as a mage, Equius as an Heir. Three out of four of them are deranged and concerned with only their interests and even Sollux dumped you to go fly off through space, though given all that he sacrificed for all of you it’s not like you can blame him or even call him selfish.

Who knows which way around it is, active or passive. But for now Calliope’s logic seems as good as any and actually passive kind of furthers the next point you were going to make, so you move on.

“Alright then, I have another theory.” you say and gently tear the page out and set it above and out of the way. You turn her book around and draw an up-down line instead of a left-right one.

“Classes have this scale but what about aspects? Time is pretty goddamn showy and light is all about being the centre of attention.” you point out and write time and light at the top.

“Are you suggesting perhaps subtlety as the counter measure? Void certainly is by nature less attention grabbing and my space powers are very subtle to the extent that I’m not sure I have any.” Calliope says with a touch of bitterness.

You nod along and put blood down on the subtle side and continue to fill things in. Then when you’re done you lay the two charts side by side. You track across the people you know and start setting them out.

Dave: passive but flashy powers.

Terezi: passive and subtle powers.

Rose: passive but flashy powers.
Vriska: active and flashy powers.
Kanaya: passive and subtle powers.
Calliope: the most passive and the most subtle.
And then you: passive and subtle.

“But what about Jade, that doesn’t seem to fit her.” Calliope points out.

“Right, but she’s very actively using something very subtle. I mean, Dave could go back in time and make someone not be born probably. That’s way more impressive than Jade being able to make your insides be somewhere else. It’s an impressive use of something that’s understated. Jade’s powers are all where and how big or small, which is cool when you use it like she does but with Kanaya or you…” you trail off pointedly.

“It’s subtle and passive.” Calliope nods.

“But that doesn’t mean less powerful, right? Push and pull.” you say, trying to convince yourself as much as her.

“So you’re saying that if you’re trying to look for your powers in an active way or a showy, flashy kind of way a passive-subtle player will always be disappointed. And if we are as we’re supposed to be it makes sense that we’d stick to those rules rather than break them like our doomed selves did. So… so what do you think your powers are then?” Calliope asks you.

You consider this carefully. Your double is passive by Calliope’s logic, what he does he does for others and he’s manipulating the people around him to protect them. But what he does is very obvious, he’s a leader, he has followers. You can point to what he does and say that he did it. But that’s not subtle so it wouldn’t work like that with you, if your theory is correct that is.

So what have you done that you’re not sure you could claim credit for? Something subtle enough that you did it but you’d feel weird saying that OBVIOUSLY it was you. Something to do with blood.

“I… I introduced most of my friends to each other. If I hadn’t then we wouldn’t have all played the game, though I’m not sure they appreciate that. I- uh… I made friends with the Jack in our session and from what I’ve heard of all of the ones in the others he was the least like an asshole after that, that’s a blood bond thing, right?” you say slowly. Actually, your whole deal with him started after you seeing each other’s literal blood. Maybe you really are onto something.

“I tried to help Dave prepare for meeting his brother, his blood relative. And I think I just gave a few other players the inspiration to bring the dead back to avenge their murders and kill the tyrant Empress of our species.” you say as you pick up steam.

“That’s really good! And you’re right, it’s subtle too! Not shooting lightning or ripping souls out but just as powerful.” Calliope says, clapping her hands in delight.

“And you rescued people from a whole different universe, different space. Or you inspired them to rescue themselves. You found the perfect hiding place to wait for the right moment and inspired people to get you a ring to save your life and set things up so your brother would be defeated. But it’s not just so you can get out it’s so we all can, right? He’s acting for himself and you’re acting for everyone. And from what Vriska told me Lord English chasing you around the dreambubbles led her right to the space that the weapon that can defeat him is.” you tell her.
Calliope slumps a little and shakes her head.

“I’m really not sure about that.” she says.

“I came here because a ghost told me to find you, I got a feel of where you are but had no idea how to get here. But somehow I managed it. So maybe we’ve both got to accept that our hoofbeastshit powers work in absurd goddamn ways and try to do what we can. I think you should put that ring on. There’s a lot of fighting going on out there to defeat your shitlord brother and if you can do your inspiration thing to help the people that I care about who’re fighting him then that’s what you should do.” you tell her as you jump off of the platform and stand before her.

Calliope puts her book away and then holds her hand out and opens it to show the ring of life sat right there.

“You said you didn’t want to be rescued then put it on and get us both out of here. If anything you’re rescuing my dumb ass.” you point out. You don’t say that you’d wake up just fine where you were before, but you’d also rather not wait until you wake up to help. The nice thing about dreaming is that you can still do things when you’re asleep.

“You’re right. I’ll do it.” Calliope nods and jumps down as well. She extends one finger and then slides the ring onto it.

Her eyes suddenly fill in, white with bright green irises, almost like Jade’s. She must feel the difference too because she beams and bounces with excitement.

“Let’s go then.” you say.

“Where to, though?” she asks.

“To… to wherever we’re needed. That’s a space thing, right? Working out where that is?” you say and hold out a hand.

“Right, I think I can do that actually. But- oh, I saw this in a movie Roxy sent to me once so let’s do it this way.” Calliope says brightly and takes your hand.

“Hold your breath.” she tells you and so you do.

“A blur of red cape flashes down below and a loud gong rings out almost deafening you.

“What- what is-” Calliope cries out and you look over at her to see the green swirls on her cheeks turn into solid green circles.

You look back down at the battlefield and your jaw goes slack with horror as you see the distant figure of Dave face down on the floor and not moving. Dave. Dave is dead. Dave is-

The terror mounts in your gut and you feel yourself falling and with the movement you jerk back into
wakefulness on the floor of the passageway out of Echidna’s cavern and eye to eye with an alarmed Kanaya.

“Dave, it’s Dave. He’s dead.” you cry out, reaching for her.

“I know.” Kanaya says grimly.
> Dave: Game Over

Chapter Notes

I had so many technical problems with this and yall owe ShikiMagica for there being a damn chapter at all and for stopping me having an entire meltdown over this!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The giant red ship flies away from you at mind-bending speeds and you lower your phone from telling Karkat as such. Honestly, you feel a little disappointed that the ship doesn’t make the kind of noises that ships in Star Wars used to make, even though it made no sense it was a hella cool sound effect. You’ve sampled it before. But… still.

“Less than two minutes for the plan to go off course, glad y’all spent so much time on it.” you say flatly to Vriska who looks at you with loathing.

“At least I didn’t get stuck on that ship with other me, that’d be the worst. But still if we’re just down one time player we should be fine, and Hal still has that absurd gun, so Damara should be able to get to us just fine.” Vriska says with some consideration.

“So what now?” your double asks, tucked under his big sister’s arm.

“Now we go fight!” Vriska declares, jumping up on the fridge which lets out a muffled but startled honk. You’d feel bad for Gamzee if not for all the murders and shit.

“Actually, we need to wait for a moment, there was an event that I anticipated that I neglected to tell you about.” Rose says simply and Vriska’s eyes bug out in alarm.

“What? Why wouldn’t you tell me?!” Vriska demands, leaping off of the fridge to confront Rose.

“Because she likes to think she’s sneaky.” Jasprose snickers from a few feet in the air. Rose shoots her sprite double an evil look and pulls one of her needle wands out and then rests her free hand on the refrigerator. She fiddles with the combination lock, though you’d guess that no one has ever told her the combination but being Rose she just knows.

“You’re not letting him out!” Vriska snaps.

“Rose, you know this physically pains me whenever I have to say it but I agree with Vriska.” you say and Rose rolls her eyes at you. Vriska shoots you a sharp and disapproving look and so you fake gag just to prove your point.

“You’re not letting him out!” Vriska snaps.

“Rose, you know this physically pains me whenever I have to say it but I agree with Vriska.” you say and Rose rolls her eyes at you. Vriska shoots you a sharp and disapproving look and so you fake gag just to prove your point.

“Of course I’m not letting him out, calm down both of you. I’m just waiting for the right moment aaaaand…” Rose trails off, seems to count and then suddenly hauls the lid of the fridge open.

An angry honk comes from inside but Rose simply holds the lid open with her shoulder and points her wand at Gamzee with one hand. Eldritch energy boils off of the thing, making the air above it warp in cephalopodic ways.

“Don’t even think of it.” Rose warns and grabs something from the fridge then slams it shut again. Vriska hurriedly locks the chains and then peers at what Rose has in her hand which is… a severed
head. Great.

“Oh GOD Nep.” Other Jade gags and turns her face away from the head. Jade’s never been particularly squeamish but given how this one is clutching at her arm you wonder if her and the Nepeta from her universe are soulmates or something. You suppose you did see them hanging out this morning.

“Sorry about that, but it’s about to be better.” Rose apologises.

Though she has her back to it you see Rose squint slightly, like she’s using her seer powers to perceive the sprite kernel that’s rising up behind her around the rim of the lilypad. Which is dumb because she could just turn and look. Only apparently she can’t because Rose suddenly throws the head in the air behind her, landing it squarely in the kernel. Holy shit it’s Lalonde from the half lilypad line with a trick shot, the crowd goes wild, mission status: sick!

The sprite suddenly transforms into a Nepetasprite and she looks just as confused about this development as the rest of you are. That’s good at least no one knows what’s going on, being real here you’re committed to knowing fuck-all about anything forever. You’re interrupted in your resolution to be a dumbass when Jasprose, who until now had been lingering up in the air with her head cocked to the side watching the ship vanish into a speck, suddenly sees Nepetasprite. She claps her furry, clawed hands together in delight and squeaks gleefully.

“Oh, my, you perfect and wonderful creature!” Jasprose coos, zipping over to her.

“I- what happened to me?” Nepetasprite asks, looking down at herself.

“I turned you into a sprite.” Rose explains.

“Thank you.” Jasprose whispers loudly to the real Rose who simply looks smug.

“No, I mean what happened to- wait! Where’s Equius? What happened with Gamzee?” Nepetasprite asks quickly, turning around. You look and it seems that the other sprite isn’t here and the living Equius guy has already gone off elsewhere.

“Equius is a sprite just like you now, Nepeta. He seems perfectly happy. But Rose why did you- oh for goodness’ sake, more of them?” Vriska groans.

You turn your head and see familiar creamsicle orange wings and body flying up over the edge of the lilypad, it’s Davesprite.

“Fuck, dude, I’ve not seen you in a long time.” you say and your younger, more orange face turns to you.

“Looks like there’s just an abundance of Daves up in this place now, huh?” Davesprite notes, presumably meaning you and your double.

“He’s me but… but like Halbirdsprite.” other you says in wonder, though you’ve no idea what he means.

“Hi Davesprite.” Jasprose greets him with a wave.

“Hi… cat… Rose. What?” he says in confusion.

“This doesn’t really further our goals, Rose. If you’re going to change the plan you ought to fill me in.” Vriska says moodily, her hands on her hips. Rose just shrugs.
“Whether I fill you in or not has no bearing on whether this happens as it should and I only just saw
this most fortuitous turn of events happen recently so I had no time to inform you.” Rose says.
Above her Rose’s sprite is talking to a slightly lost looking Nepetasprite, clearly flirting because if
there’s a universal constant it’s that Rose likes girls.

“We should go on a date, perhaps!” Jasprose says gleefully. Davesprite flutters over and curiously
looks Nepetasprite over.

“Oh- well, um…” Nepetasprite hesitates.

“Hey Rose, what happened to you then?” Davesprite asks, floating over to the two other sprites.

“So what happened with him then?” your double asks, looking at you around his sister’s arm that’s
draped over his shoulders.

“It’s a long and bullshit story.” you say. It really is.

“You’ll have to tell me sometime. Throw down that Sicknasty Strider StorytimeTM.” other you
suggests.

“Not that I’m not pleased to see you, Davesprite, I am. But as you can see here I was in the middle of
asking this lovely young lady out for a good time.” Jasprose says, waving her clawed hand at
Nepetasprite.

“Alright, I get you. I’m not gonna get in the way of your lady time, wait no I meant the sexy kind not
the once a month- oh fuck stop me now. HI I’M DAVESPRITE.” he blurts out, aborting right out of
that terrible conversational train and into a new one at almost Vantas levels of volume. He turns and
faces a slightly confused Nepetasprite and holds out his hand.

“Wait, Dave no!” Jasprose yells but it’s too late.

Nepetasprite’s green hand touches Davesprite’s orange one and you’re all blinded by a giant flash (or
at least you are, maybe people with functioning eyes like your double are fine, fuck that guy). In their
shared place is a floating figure in a Derse cut dress and trenchcoat but with your hair and shades
plus Davesprite’s wings. Oh, and the eye searing flashing from orange to green.

“Nooooo!” Jasprose wails mournfully and beneath her Rose’s grin turns evil.

“Oh no, who could have foreseen this? I’m so sorry Jasprose.” Rose simpers.

“As much as I’m impressed by your evil, Rose, we’re now one sprite down for no good reason.”
Vriska says with a shake of her head.

“Well YOU may not care Vwiskas but I’m DELIGHTED to be me. Purrleased as can be, in fact.
Actually, I don’t think I’ve ever been happier and- oh wow look!” the sprite exclaims and spins
around in a flutter of skirts, coat and wings. Honestly, the sprite’s expression is far more gleeful than
you usually get.

“Roxy, Roxy your face says you’re getting halloween ideas.” other you says, looking up at Roxy.

“I SO AM.” Roxy squeals and squeezes him.

“It’s not for nothing, I know that this sprite is instrumental in ending our fight on time I’m just not
clear on the how.” Rose muses, though you’ll bet she cared more about pissing off her spritely
double. Vriska seems similarly convinced and too busy disapproving of Rose to do anything so it’s
you who steps forward to your former sprite.

“So what’s your name now?” you ask and the sprite stops whirling in place in awe of the general majesty of skirts and looks at you.

“I think… I think Davepetasprite? Or just Davepeta maybe!” the sprite says with glee.

“Well, hi then. You look pretty pleased.” you say and the weird little cat mouth that the sprite has curves in a smile.

“I so am, like, dude I can’t even tell you. Everything just makes sense now, I’m so… it’s so good!” the sprite declares and jumps up in the air and hangs there.

That’s actually pretty good to hear. Davesprite came from a pretty dark timeline and you know if it had been you in his place, and it so easily could have been, you’d be destroyed by losing everyone that way. He came up to the plate for you and got you to where you needed to be, for sure, but he wasn’t happy about any of it obviously. You’d hoped wherever he’d gone off to he was happy and you don’t know if he was but becoming Davepeta is clearly a good thing.

“Not that I’m not happy that you’re loving being you but we’re on a pretty strict time schedule here so Rose if you could try a little harder to tell me what it is she’s- uh… he’s…” Vriska trails off and looks questioningly at the sprite.

“OH!” Davepeta perks up and then frowns thoughtfully, folding new spriteley legs up so the whole pose is like… floating meditation almost.

“I think… they. Yes. That seems good. And gender rules on Earth are bullshit and Nepeta barely cared anyway so, yeah, they!” Davepeta chirps, actually slightly bird chirpy in fact.

“Right. Tell me what they’re supposed to be doing before we get game over-ed from your delaying!” Vriska demands of Rose.

“I don’t believe that ‘they’ is grammatically accurate, Davepeta is clearly one person so-” Rose starts to say.

“Oh Rose, you humans are so backwards. I’m embarrassed for you really, this is my embarrassment face, see?” Vriska sneers.

“I’m sure you can understand why it’s unfamiliar to me.” Rose says flatly.

“So…” you turn your attention back to Davepeta who is still floating there.

“Instead of saying he or she.” Davepeta clarifies. You try it out in your head and they’re watching you carefully, part alien, part bird or not you know humans and especially 13 year old you had pretty fixed views on girl stuff and boy stuff. But whatever, you’re kind of past your dead planet’s expectations or most of them at least, why shouldn’t Davepeta get to be as well?

“My dude, my good bitch, my semi-spectral homie from another timeline, there’s so much weird about you that I’m not even going to start asking questions. You’re a magic video game epilepsy ghost that’s a human, troll, crow remix. And since we were once the same person before the timeline forked I straight up know you’re cool so we’re cool.” you tell them.

Davepeta waggles their eyebrows at you and lowers their shades, showing off trollish orange eyes with candy green centres.
“Hell fucking yes.” Davepeta asserts.

They look over at the other you who is currently distracted talking to his Kanaya and isn’t paying attention to the two of you.

“Their timeline is way WAY out. I can feel it, they’re all mixed up in time and their hearts are all shifted out. He’s you but not, even more than me.” Davepeta says quietly as they look at the people from the other universe.

“It’s a long fuckin’ story.” you sigh.

“I bet. It looks like you’re hoarding time players over here but where’s our Aradia?” they ask, looking around.

“Oh! She’s actually alive unlike a lot of people.” Vriska answers, apparently she’d be listening in.

“Purrfect, where is she?” Davepeta asks.

“She’s in the furthest ring with half dead, half alive Sollux. They said they didn’t want to join the fight.” Vriska informs them.

“But from the point you’re at in the game isn’t this final fight territory? People can’t just sit that out!” Davepeta exclaims and you agree.

“You don’t need to convince me, I think they’re being stupid and selfish but I couldn’t convince them to be of any help. All Aradia wanted to do was watch the outcome.” Vriska tuts.

“Yeah, well if I was Aradia or Sollux I’m not sure I’d wanna go anywhere with you either. I- oh, I think that might have been meaner than I meant it or- no, I don’t think it was. You’re kind of the worst, Vriska. But besides we can’t leave them out there in the furthest ring, they need to be here when the game ends. Do you know what’ll happen to them if the game finishes and you all get your reward without them there?” Davepeta demands.

“I can’t say we’ve considered it.” Rose admits.

“They die, Rose! They vanish, obliterated! Poof! I’m, ugh, I’m going to go find them. Whether they help or not doesn’t change that they don’t deserve to die here.” Davepeta says and flaps their wings a little to get some height.

“Wait! What happens to you when we go? I already lost my Davesprite, I don’t want to lose… well, to lose you too.” Jade calls out and Davepeta halts and sinks a little lower in the air.

“What happens to a computer program when you turn the computer off?” they say softly. Jade looks horrified at the prospect and you’re not thrilled either.

“Hey, no, that doesn’t have to happen. My brother Hal was a sprite for a while but now he’s part human and part troll, I’m sure Roxy could magic up the ectobiology equipment for it. You could have a physical body and then that’d be alive and the game would have to take you, right?” other you says.

“I suppose. I’d be an NPC like the adults were but I’d still be alive.” Davepeta says slowly.

“Well then, that’s settled.” Roxy nods.

“I guess I’d better find my friends then!” Davepeta nods and with a flap of green/orange wings they
shoot off into the distance.

“I can’t believe you did that.” Jasprose says miserably.

“Oh, yes you can.” Rose shoots back and walks forward a little into the main part of the group.

“If that nonsense is all done then we had better be getting to the final fight with Lord English. That ghost army won’t keep forever.” Vriska asserts.

You already know what to do, pair up. You catch the eye of your Jade across the way and the two of you meet each other with grim determination on your faces. Jade thinks that she knows the odds but like Rose you know what they actually are, no matter how hard she tries you’re going to die today. Caldescratch drops into your hand, you should probably use the real deal legendary piece of shit for this fight but you KNOW this isn’t going to be a one hit KO and you value being able to repair your sword on the go for now. Fight him with this, swap when you think you’re near a win. And then… die.

You’re going to be ok. You win in the end.

“The moment you need us let us know.” Feferi implores you all and your group gets into a line and walks through the window.

Stepping through it has the same filmy soap bubble pop feeling on your skin, you get the same with all spacey things really. Maybe it’s just because your aspect is the opposite that you feel that way. Either way, it certainly is jarring to leave one step on a large metal lilypad in space and start the next on desert sands. Huge dunes roll wide across the landscape and a marching ghost army follows a ghostly Meenah and Tavros, though they’re too far away from you to see you know who is in the lead. You feigned attention for a lot of briefings but some things you picked up.

You look over at your double, from the fear he had of dying you’d expected him to seem nervous but he doesn’t. His face is impassive, cold and schooled blank. A hallmark of Bro’s teaching, one you’ve seemingly forgotten because it takes effort on your part to stomp the fear down and focus on controlling the shake in your hands. Your sword is nowhere near as steady as the giant clock hand that he holds.

“There.” Vriska calls, looking up.

You tilt your head as the others do and see a rainbow flashing sarcophagus floating in the sky. He’s already here.

You run, skid and eventually fly down the side of the dune you’re on to get to where you can see the sarcophagus is going to land. The army is huge but you’re pretty sure this is one of those things where numbers aren’t going to be in their favour. With a bang and flare of fire that turns the surrounding sand to glass the sarcophagus lands and explodes into the full form of Lord English.

He’s huge, easily three times your height and he’s probably as broad across as you are tall. His muscles look absurd, like The Hulk’s wet dream. Incredible, that is, not Hogan. Though maybe him too, who are you to judge? But he’s still far off, you weren’t fast enough. None of you were fast enough to stop him from rearing up, opening his nightmare mouth and breathing crowd destroying lasers into the ghost army. You don’t know if it’s better or worse that they don’t even have time to scream.

“You know the plan, go!” Vriska shouts.

Jade grabs your wrist and pulls you forward, the static space tingle flaring over your skin again.
You’ve all practiced this, drilled it, you know what will happen. Your job is to get in and attack where you can and leave avoiding being hit mostly to Jade. You’re less a fighter of your own will than you are a projectile for your assigned space player to deploy at will.

You wish that you could say that it’s unfamiliar to feel terrified when holding a sword, facing down an opponent so much physically bigger than you in a fight you know will go badly for you. But it’s not. It’s almost comforting in a way. Even years later things still make you jump, echoes of growing up with Bro. Feeling things and thinking things fuel your paranoia that somehow he’ll know even though that makes no sense. To find yourself in such a familiarly unfair fight is almost comforting, you always hated fighting but at least you knew what you were in for.

This time you’re not alone. You catch a flicker to your right as your double pops into view, space warping to kick him out there. He skids in under ghost Meenah and slices at Lord English’s leg, breaking into a roll on the other side to get away from danger. His sister makes him intangible and he glitches into the ground and out of harm’s way.

You’re not alone.

You grip your sword tighter and with a backward glance at Jade you throw yourself forward. Space parts for you and suddenly you’re confronted with Lord English’s big green back. Aradia is currently strangling him with a whip so he’s not noticed you at all yet. You brandish your sword point first and decide that a good stab through the ribs ought to slow anyone’s roll. Hurtling forward you stab for his exposed back but as your sword touches his skin it bends and the blade shatters, leading you to bounce off of his spine.

“Legendary piece of shit!” you curse at the broken blade. Jade warps you back before you can do anything else.

“It broke?” Jade asks. You nod and spin the disc on the sword handle setting it back to its unbroken state again.

“Use the other sword!” Rose shouts at you, combining her powers with Latula’s to make sure her eldritch lasers only take paths where no time players are going to be positioned by the space ones.

“The shitty legendary Welsh one?” you ask.

“Yes!” Rose shouts.

Well, you’re not one to question the seer, not at a time like this. You swap swords. Jade nods at you and throws you into the fight again. You skirt around Damara who is dodging attacks and keeping Lord English interested in her. The pull of time goes strange around her and you watch as she tries to manipulate his to slow him down but it’s not working, or barely doing so. You’d all feared this, that his time powers would out match all of yours.

“LORD OF TIME!” he screeches at her and breathes lasers that you just dodge on your own, the space players are too concerned with getting Damara and everyone else clear of that blast and you could handle yourself there. On the hill behind him you can see Vriska trying to open the box of her magic weapon and you can’t win until that happens but also you’re pretty sure that you don’t die until after.

Which might mean you’re technically temporarily unkillable. Unless you doom the timeline but it doesn’t feel like you’re going to.

Emboldened you duck under the gap caused by the lasers and drive your sword upwards into the
underside of his green chin. It doesn’t go through into his brain, you’re not that lucky, but it does break through into his mouth if the pained screeching and halting of laser fire tells you anything. You brace your feet on his absurd abs, trying to hold on for as long as possible to do as much damage but a giant, clawed, green hand is coming for you.

Your ears pop and you and your sword are suddenly about the size of a fruit roll up (really, Dave? Why is that your unit of measurement?!). You’re popped out of place just as two oversized claws screech through the air on either side of you. All at once you’re back in Jade’s hands and then she’s resizing you.

“Sollux!” other Dave gasps and you look up to see… well, it looks like the troll you’ve seen on the ship except with two eyepatches which you can’t imagine helps anything. On one side of him is Aradia, holding his hand and on the other side floats a grinning Davepeta. They did it! You’ve no idea how they got here so fast but holy shit reinforcements are absolutely welcome.

With them there and the fight more evenly on your side shit gets thrown around, lasers fired, etc.

Listen, you get that this would be exciting for someone uninvolved to watch. A flashy kind of fight with kids in fancy clothes attacking a god to fast paced music, maybe. But for you it’s waiting next to Jade for her to either find the right time to throw you back into the fight or for Rose to direct her as such. Then it’s making an attempt at killing someone that goes no farther than lightly maiming them only to either be yanked back right after or if Jade isn’t quick enough to be slammed down the to the ground. You’re not exactly having a good time here.

And sure, there are moments where you mix your godtier powers up with someone else and come out with some cool joint attack and that’s all well and good but it’s not your focus. In your head you’re wondering how long you have left. You watch as other you takes that fall that you’d foreseen, the one he either lands or hurts himself on but you know it changes nothing. You hack at Lord English’s thigh and get a spurt of blood for your trouble and watch as your counterpart lands like a tool and gets zapped away. Jade hauls you back.

Distantly Vriska kicks the chest lid open and Jake glows with hope so bright you can scarcely look at him. Below Aradia and uh, other Aradia haul Lord English’s arms back enough for the ghosts on the ground to surge forward and attack. They’re still getting their asses kicked and double killed left right and centre.

“We gotta wait.” Jade says quietly, her eyes flicking around for any opening.

“Fuck, I basically sandpapered my whole arm, ow!” other you hisses, stabbing his sword into the ground to peer at his red and raw arm.

“This isn’t working.” Other Jade says.

“Well, it should do! We have the sword that we agreed to get, we’re in the fight, everything is what we agreed with your denizen.” other you argues.

“Wait, it is but it maybe… I agreed that we’d fight him, that you’d get the sword, I didn’t agree that YOU would fight him with THAT sword. Or not you-you at least. I just assumed.” Other Jade gasps.

“My Dave has had more success at hurting him, they can swap.” Jade nods and snaps her fingers.

The shitty Welsh sword in your hand becomes a long, heavy, clock hand. Down in the desert Lord English throws one of the Aradias off and sprays the ghost crowd with machine gun fire from a
weapon he presumably pulled out of his ass. Your throat seizes shut at the sound and you miss other
you leaping into the fight again, you only realise when you see him slice at Lord English’s arm with
your sword.

He has the wrong sword.

“No, wait, no!” you gasp and throw yourself forwards. You try to force time to inch slower but it
won’t listen to you. You watch Lord English pull the gun out again, but you have to make it in time,
you have to. You fly towards him like a missile. Lord English is lit up from behind by the glowing
giant house of the ultimate weapon that does who fucking knows what but so far jack shit.

Numbered ball eyes lock on you and he raises his gun and fires. Tiny green fireworks streak the
bullets out of your way and then you’re too close to shoot.

The borrowed sword lodges deep into his chest and time stops.

Time is a strange aspect, fickle and uncaring sure but there’s a logic behind it. It cannot abide a
Paradox. But yet this game creates them naturally like they’re going out of style. Lord English
fucked with the game enough now that he’s basically immortal, an immortal Lord of Time who
almost exists outside of time itself. It’s wrong. His very existence sets your teeth on edge for reasons
entirely unrelated to how awful he is. He cannot, should not exist. Little paradoxes are fine if they’re
closed off, circular and neat. The whole ectobiology shit is a good example, it’s a paradox but it’s
contained, under glass and preserved.

You breathe in and out and look down at your hands around the hilt of the clock hand. You can’t
make him unexist or stop him from having been born, that’d break things. But he cannot be allowed
to keep on like this. So you need to contain him. A smaller hand separates from the larger one and
spins around just under you, cutting Lord English in half in the middle. There’s no blood but rather
red threads of time flow out and you can see that it’s his future, stretching out from second to second.

With one hand you let go of the sword and reach out to grab them. Just like that you have his life in
your hands but you can’t just kill him, paradoxes, remember? So instead you look at his time and
follow it back, let it flow through your mind like water in a river. You need to fix this so you’re
looking for any point to do that, but you’re all the way back at the moment some giant snake laid him
on a desolate Earth and you’ve found nothing.

Curiously you look up in the frozen moment that his parent flies away. The old go back in time and
kill someone’s parent to stop them being born is tempting but you can’t do that. You come from a
timeline where he exists and that motivated you to be here, if you kill his parent this you doesn’t
exist. Basic paradox shit. But… BUT… you could do something else. You scroll back in time and
find the moment his parent, his father, is first sensed by his other parent. God, cherub biology is
fucking weird. This moment in time is key, if it doesn’t happen he doesn’t exist.

You eye the thread of the current moment in your hand and with your other shift your grip on the
sword, it slices through the air again and you now have two ends. Paradoxes are fine, if they’re
contained. And what’s the first thing you learnt about time travel?

Always close the loops.

You pull on the time you have until the ends are close enough to each other to fuse together. After
the moment you left him in during the present he’ll end up back here and he can either play along
and ensure he exists or end up in a doomed timeline. You’ve got him, like a dead thing in a jar. He’s
still immortal, still alive, you can’t take that from him, but he’s trapped. Stuck.
This isn’t the end for him, a circle has no end. It is infinite and unchangable which is powerful on its own but you get to go on forward after this, you don’t have to loop back but he will. It’s not a death but it’s still a victory.

You let go and time kicks back in, he’s impaled on your borrowed sword still and it takes only one shove to topple him into the glowing weapon that bought him so much of his power before. It’s going to be the thing to send him back to where he came from, the start of that loop that you sealed. With a flash he’s gone and the sword clatters to the floor. You swoop down and grab it as Vriska kicks the box shut, only for it to crumble to dust as she does so. It must have been some combination of that box and your borrowed sword that did it, the right stuff at the right moment.

It’s the scream that makes you turn around. Your name being screamed, in fact.

Your double has one hand pressed to his chest and when he pulls it away it’s stained with red blood. He stumbles and falls to the ground, face down. Your sword tumbles from his hand in the worst kind of deja vu. You don’t know how this happened, Lord English shot at you! Not at him! You run over and come to a stop a few feet from him, and realise that you’re not seeing exactly what you saw before. Before you were watching from behind yourself, you saw your own back and the sword that wasn’t yours and you just assumed that the Dave on the ground holding your sword was you. His cape is settled over the small differences in his god tier outfit and face down like that you wouldn’t have-

But how did he get shot? Lord English aimed at you!

Oh but… but Jade was guarding you, shifting the bullets out of your way and maybe she didn’t realise just where she moved them to and other you was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Those bullets were literally meant for you.

His sister screams, flips him onto his back but he’s clearly dead. The window fires up and life players are speeding towards his body but he’s dead and he had no more lives left. Fuck, he was fourteen and scared of dying and this…

Rose looks as shocked as you, you guess you weren’t the only one who made the assumption.

“Jake, Jane, come on you did it before. Please!” other Roxy sobs, holding her brother’s hands.

“Right, right everyone back up.” other Jane orders all of you and crouches down, rubs her hands together and sets them on your double’s chest. Other Jake sets his hands on other Jane’s shoulders and glows with light.

“Come on Janey, we can do this. I believe in us.” he tells her.

Other Jake glows and his Jane strains with effort, her hands pressed to your double’s chest. Other Jake is almost blinding and suddenly grass starts pushing out of the desert below your feet. They’re pushing life on him so hard the desert is coming alive. But it’s not bringing him back. He’s still dead.

As they stop the plantlife wilts and fades away. Other you remains distinctly dead. The others from his timeline in your group are gathering around him, tears are shed and to the side your timeline’s people cluster together.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen.” Rose whispers.

“It’s my fault, I must have- I was just trying to stop Dave getting shot I didn’t know he was going to-” Jade says, horror and guilt filling her tone.
“There’s nothing we can do. I’ve already put out the word about his death, we were the last group to win so everyone’s on their way here.” Vriska says quietly.

All of the life players are around him now and above you the light blots out as the ship hovers and then a platform lowers, that is for those who can’t fly. Like his other sister.

Other Rose streaks out of the ship like a yellow and orange bullet, hitting the ground and skidding to him. She’s screaming his name and shaking him and it’s no better when his brothers arrive, looking like their hearts have been ripped out.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling turntechGodhead]

CG: ARE YOU NEAR PEOPLE THAT HAVE SOULMATES BECAUSE I HAVE AN URGENT QUESTION AND I THINK WE MAY NEED A LIFE PLAYER!
TG: holy shit what’s happening
CG: OTHER YOU DIED, RIGHT? WELL, THE MOMENT THAT HAPPENED OTHER ME DROPPED LIKE A ROCK AND HE’S NOT WAKING UP.
CG: WE’RE ON OUR WAY TO YOU BUT I NEED YOU TO WORK OUT IF THERE’S SOMETHING THAT WE CAN DO.
TG: on it
TG: its my fault hes dead anyway it should have been me
CG: DON’T YOU EVEN START WITH THAT STRIDER, I WILL FIGHT YOU.

You shake your head and approach the crowd.

“I uh, I have a question from our Karkat about yours? He’s not right.” you say uneasily, aware that you’re talking over an actual corpse to ask a question about someone passed out.

“He’s his soulmate, where are they? I need to help him, he’ll be in so much pain.” other Kanaya says, looking up from Rose who is sobbing loudly.

“Apparently he’s passed out so maybe he’s not in pain but-” you start.

“Oh, oh shit. Let me…” Hal says and squints at you. Your phone buzzes in your hand.

[Hal joined the conversation]

CG: WHAT THE FUCK?
TG: i dont know i didnt invite him hes just sitting there staring at me
Hal: Technopath, stupid. Tell me about how Karkat is, what happened to him?
CG: HE JUST DROPPED TO THE GROUND, I ASSUMED THAT KANAYA HIT HIM LIKE SHE HIT ME BUT SHE SWEARS SHE DIDN’T.
TG: what why did kanaya hit you
CG: THAT’S A LONG AND NOT RELEVANT STORY.
Hal: Most likely Dave dying sent him into shock, he’s powered through it before but the difference this time
Hal: the
Hal: unless someone comes up with a solution the difference this time is Dave isn’t waking up. Karkat knows that.
CG: THAT DOESN’T EXPLAIN WHY HE WON’T WAKE UP.
Hal: The soulmate bond is very sensitive, it’s not rare at all for the death of one half to cause the death of the other. It’s a kind of biological shock. But he may have just fainted, I need you to test some things for me. I don’t want to tell his family their kid is going to die if he’s going to live.
TG: but hes god tier even if he dies hes gonna revive though
Hal: And when he does my brother will still be dead. Unless Karkat gets over it somehow he’s just going to be stuck in some kind of death loop.
TG: oh shit
Hal: I need you to see if you can wake him.
CG: KANAYA HAS ALREADY TRIED TO SHAKE HIM AWAKE AND ALSO SLAP HIM BUT THAT DIDN’T WORK.
Hal: How’s his breathing?
CG: HE SEEMS TO BE HAVING A REALLY HARD TIME WITH IT AND HIS PULSE IS REALLY LOW.
Hal: I can’t fix him, he’s too bad off. When you get here give him to his parents.
[Hal left the conversation]
CG: THAT’S IT? THAT’S ALL HE CAN DO FOR HIM?!
TG: shit
CG: WE’RE ALMOST THERE
[carcinoGeneticist ceased trolling turntechGodhead]

Your stomach churns anxiously, you’d been prepared for it to be you peppered with bullets and dead on the sand. You’d gone to sleep last night with Karkat knowing that was going to happen but here you are. Fuck he was just a kid. Well, you’re just a kid but he’s even more of a kid than you are. He’s got a family mourning for him as well as his friends. His Dirk has known him his whole life, he’s basically his kid.

“This wasn’t supposed to happen.” Rose says loudly, stepping up to your side.

“No FUCKING shit!” her double snarls at her.

“No, I mean that I’ve seen us all at the door to the final reward. All of us, alive and well. This isn’t what happens, there’s some way to fix this.” Rose says patiently.

“Wait, really?” their Roxy asks, looking up. There are tears all down her mask which doesn’t help the guilt stampeding about in your chest.

“Great, how do we fix this?” their Sollux asks, turning on you all.

“I don’t- I don’t know. I’ve been trying to see but my vision is all voided out which suggests some use of void powers are either obscuring my sight or are part of the solution. But it’s possible, I’m sure.” Rose assures him.

To your right three figures burst through one of the fenestrated panes and slide and stumble down the sand dune. Considering that Kanaya is carrying an unconscious Karkat in her arms you suppose that if one of them had to trip and fall spectacularly ass over teakettle down the sand it was best that it was your Karkat but still, ouch. He flails upright and then marches over to you.

“What’s happening then?” he demands.

“Dave’s dead but apparently there’s a way of bringing him back that’ll absolutely work but Rose doesn’t know what it is.” John answers for you. Wait, when the shit did John get here? Actually, everyone is here now. Well, you’re glad someone is paying attention because that person is not you, that’s for sure.

Kanaya sets the other Karkat on the sand relatively near to his soulmate and his Kanaya and his family surround him instantly. Mr Egbert is talking to the adults in low tones about his condition which you suppose as an adult human from that universe he probably knows something about.

“Actually, fuck this. If there’s a solution to this problem we just need to find it. What’ve we tried already?” Karkat demands, pacing back and forth.
“I’ve tried reviving him with and without Jake’s help, neither worked.” other Jane responds.

“And we’ve all tried reviving him as well.” Feferi adds from nearby and the other life players all nod.

“I’m not surprised it didn’t work with me, but still.” Meenah adds.

You eye her outfit up and realise that it’s a colour swapped copy of Vriska’s she’s a thief of life. Yeah, no shit she can’t just… hm. She’d need to take a life before she could do anything with it surely.

“I’m not sure if this is a brilliant idea or a stupid one.” you say slowly.

“That doesn’t fill me with confidence.” Karkat replies.

“Meenah’s a thief of life, she can take life and give it to someone else. So, she could take someone’s life, give it to him and then he’d be alive enough either to outright heal or for the other life players to fix the many holes shot in him and then he’ll be fine. Right?” you say.

“Won’t that kill you?” John asks.

“Maybe? He might not need all my life, maybe it’s like your liver and you can lose ninety percent of it or whatever. But I’ve got a heroic revive left, Jane can bring me back if it comes to that. Right?” you ask and Jane nods but doesn’t look pleased about this.

“This is a stupid plan!” Karkat snaps and actually stamps his foot on the sand in protest like a sulky toddler.

“It might not be. I know the Condesce kept her helmsman alive for far longer than his regular lifespan with a similar method.” Vriska theorises.

“He was very dead when I found him, I doubt she can bring people back from the dead or she would have.” the Psiionic argues from across the sand, clearly everyone is listening in.

“But I assume the glub killed him and everyone else on the ship but her, if she had no one else to use to bring him back then of course he stayed dead. This could still work.” Feferi argues.

“It should have been me, I have to try.” you announce and with a glance at Meenah you walk over to your double’s body. Meenah comes over as well, and his family shuffle out of the way to the other side of the corpse to give you room. You lay down on his left side and wait as several of the life players nestle themselves between you.

Your hand brushes his and you’re not sure if it’s weirder or not that his hand is still warm. It’s warm here anyway and he’s not been dead long but you’d swear he was alive. The blood splattered all over his chest shatters that illusion. At least someone’s closed his eyes now. Meenah leans over you both and you can feel the eyes of everyone, living and ghostly on this little scene.

“We’re gonna give this a whirl, in case we fuck this up and you don’t come back you got any last words buoy?” Meenah asks and arches a pierced brow at you.

You consider that for a moment.

“Fuck this game.” you say.

“HAH. Amen to that. Alright!” Meenah laughs.

She presses one hand to your double’s chest and other one to yours, right over your sternum. You
feel a tingle and have just enough time to stupidly think ‘hey this isn’t so bad’ before it becomes REAL FUCKIN’ BAD. It’s like being electrocuted and having your soul ripped out at the same time like you’re some kind of ghost. It’s almost like you’re-

You’re so disappointed in yourself that your last living thought is a half finished ghostbusters reference. You’d tell yourself to go to your room and think about what you’ve done if you weren’t already there.

Except it’s not really your room, it’s his. But the stuff on the walls is yours, the dead things are yours, the turntables are yours. You even have most of the same posters and the ceiling is strung with drying photographs. But the layout of the room is different, the building is different and everything else about the room looks nicer. There’s a version of you sat on the bed looking out of the window. You take a step towards him and he jumps, looking around at you.

“Is that you? I thought you were winning, why’d you die?” he asks, and you know it’s the you that you’re trying to help because you recognise the scar over his eye. You ought to, you put it there.

“We’re trying to bring you back, is this your house?” you ask, looking around a little more.

“No, it’s my Mom’s. Don’t open that door.” he tells you, though you’d barely looked at it. You decide not to press the matter and instead focus yourself on the actual problem.

“You’re out of lives.” you tell him, sitting down next to him on his bed.

“Yeah, I know that.” he says miserably.

“But we’re trying to bring you back, Rose said she still sees you at the final door. Somehow we get you back.” you tell him. He doesn’t seem as overjoyed as you’d hoped he might, instead he just leans his head against the window frame and looks out with blank eyes.

“When I lived in this house I wasn’t that far from Karkat. I’d run by his place almost every day and he’d climb in my window all the time. My mom fucking sucked but I liked living in this house, near him.” he says softly.

Outside the window is a front yard and a little street, that’s all that remains before the haze of the bubble takes over.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed but Rose’s visions aren’t always accurate, even your Rose’s. Or did you know I was going to die ahead of time?” he asks, turning his blank gaze on you.

“I didn’t know you were going to die, not until it happened.” you swear.

“At least you didn’t listen to me freak out about it the night before knowing I’d get murdered the next day.” he says.

“I saw her vision, I thought it was me. Because of the swords.” you say weakly and he laughs without amusement.

“See, light isn’t always accurate. Maybe the me she sees at the end is just… Davepeta split back down to parts and alive. You don’t know it’s me.” he says.

You try desperately to remember if the him you saw in your shared vision really was him, if you saw his face, if it had his scar and his eyes. You don’t remember.

“We’re trying something now to bring you back, it might work.” you say instead but you’re pretty
sure that he catches your moment of uncertainty.

“What’re you trying?” he asks and doesn’t sound too hopeful.

“Meenah is a thief of life, we’re trying to get her to give one of my lives to you.” you explain.

“But you’re dead.” other you says slowly.

“Yeah.” you agree, you’d known it was a risk.

“You’re a moron, it’s not going to work!” other you says, throwing his hands in the air in exasperation.

“Why not?!” you demand.

“Because I can count to two, idiot! Look,” he says and holds two fingers up.

“This is the life you had when you laid down to try to help me back to life. This is the life you’re planning on giving me.” he says, wiggling his first then his second finger. You get that, two lives, one for him and one for you.

“You’re DEAD! That means there’s only one ‘get back alive’ ticket going and it’s already yours! Meenah’s not a rogue of life she’s a thief, she stole your life whether she meant to or not. If it’d worked right neither of us would be here.” he snaps.

“I’m not sure that’s right.” you mumble. The plan made sense when you made it, he gets the life you currently had and IF that kills you then you get brought back. But- no, wait he’s right. If you’re dead because he got your life then you’d be here alone because he would presently be alive. Shit.

“My family must be- no, no I can’t think about that. How’s Karkat?” he asks hurriedly.

“He’s- he’s not doing well. Hal says he’s gonna die.” you confess. You’d try to assure him that they’ll be together again soon but as has already been pointed out he’s just going to revive unless someone can find a way to bring other you back to life for good or kill Karkat for good.

“He’s godtier though.” your double says, having worked the same thing out.

Your double looks like he’s going to throw up, and honestly if you’d been told that you dying would put any of the people you care about through a constant cycle of death you’d feel the same. He looks up at you pleadingly.

“I need you to tell Dirk something for me. Tell him that when they accept that this isn’t going to work he needs to destroy my connection to Karkat, if I’m not dragging him down here like the worst soulmate ever then he can live. And he can hate me for it if he wants but I’d rather he lived.” he says seriously.

Your hand grips the soft comforter on the bed. You didn’t grow up in a world with soulmates and you know that you must be missing some cultural implications here, hell you don’t even fully understand how it can be killing other Karkat in the first place. But even so you can tell that ripping that bond apart must be something huge and awful. Will his soulmate hate him? Forget him? Will that kill him too but then leave him safe to resurrect without dying again?

“Promise me.” your double urges you.

“I’ll- I’ll pass the message on, I can’t make him do it.” you hedge.
“Yeah, well,” other you laughs quietly as he leans back against the window frame, “that ain’t nothing new.”

Your eyes are stuck on him. He looks younger here and maybe in the bedroom he lived in before the game he would be. Either way it doesn’t seem fair, not for this whole planet to have died but this kid actually tried to save people and managed it only to die an inch from the finish line. You’ve seen more dead Daves in your life than you care to think of but you’d always been able to let them go, it was just random chance that you got lucky each time and ended up being the alpha one. This kid though, you knew him. He was you but different and it’s not fair.

“I’m sorry, I really thought it was going to be me not you.” you apologise quietly. You don’t deserve this luck and he doesn’t deserve this misfortune.

“I get it. Besides, it’s like… time and light, right? It’s all already happened.” he says.

“If this doesn’t work we’re going to keep trying things.” you say.

“I’m sure, but I don’t think it’s going to work. It’s like… you’re the real one. The Alpha Dave or whatever that is supposed to mean. I just hope everyone else gets out, you know? Just be cool to them for me, ok? My siblings are gonna be fucked up and my moirail and… and whatever happens to Karkat. And my friends and…” his voice catches and you do the guy a solid and pretend you absolutely believe that he just has something in his eyes.

“I know you can’t be me, I don’t want that but help make it better. And- and fucking tell your Karkat you like him already. The last time I was dead for ages I was kicking myself for not telling him sooner and you’re going through dangerous shit without saying it and if you try to say you don’t like him I’m gonna find a way to steal your life from you cause you don’t deserve it!” he says, throwing his hands up in the air.

You and Karkat… that’s a minefield. It’s all complicated and snarled and up, you’re too scared to do anything because of what it might mean or might change and… yeah, you’re a coward. But this kid is asking you to use your life and live it properly since he can’t because the game decided so.

“I’ll try.” you agree. He seems to relax slightly and smiles at you, a small and sad thing.

Your breath hitches and you feel the same jolt you get from those dreams that make you jump awake and instantly you’re not in a bubble but sat upright on the desert floor. You look up at a distressed looking Meenah and Jane who has one hand on other Dave’s forehead and the other between you and her where she must have brought you back.

“It didn’t work.” you breathe, your voice barely audible. You don’t need to say it, it’s obvious. You’re here and the other guy is still dead. He’s still soaking the sand with blood and getting colder by the moment.

Hal is whining like a kicked dog but he still looks up at you and sniffs.

“Thanks for trying at least.” he says hoarsely. The rest of his family, God, his family hurt to look at. You can almost point them all out. His older brother Dirk is frozen seemingly unable to process that this is happening at all, that’s shock right there. His Rose is swinging wildly from insisting that this can’t be happening to fury that it has, denial to anger. Other Roxy is clutching to your double’s hand as she talks desperately to her soulmate and the other life players about some other way to fix this since trading your life didn’t work, bargaining. And the part human Hal is sat with slumped shoulders and crying softly, you don’t know how much hope he had that your attempt would work but whatever hope he had he’s lost it now. Damn near every stage of grief here.
On your left there’s more tragedy. Other Karkat is resting in the arms of his ancestor, the other two adults in his family (are they his parents as well?) are on either side of him. As you look you can see the weak way his chest rises and falls, each breath rattles in his chest as he drags it in. You’re no expert on trolls but he looks far worse than your Karkat did that one time he got some kind of space flu on the meteor and then didn’t sleep. His skin has gone a strange ashy colour instead of the warm slate they usually all are and it’s not helped by the tear tracks you can see down the sides of his face.

“-seen people in hospital like this. When they’re this bad they don’t ever get better, I’m so sorry.” Mr Egbert says sadly, patting Disciple on the arm. His sleeves are rolled up for the first time and you can get a glimpse of the solid black tattoo sleeve on one arm that matches the same on the dying Karkat’s where before there had been patterns and colours. Now it’s just blacked out.

“There must be something we can do, something!” Signless pleads. Mr Egbert shakes his head sadly.

“There is, actually.” you blurt out and everyone looks at you. Your neck flashes with heat under their scrutiny but you power through it.

“I saw him, other me, when I was dead just then. He talked about your Karkat and he knew he’d be like this.” you explain and point to the dying troll in their arms.

“If you have a solution please tell us, we can’t leave him like this.” Dolorosa pleads.

“I don’t know if it’ll work, I don’t really get how this works.” you warn them and gesture between him and your dead double. It seems crazy that losing someone you love can literally strike you dead just from it happening.

“It was something he said his brother could do, actually. Dirk, I mean.” you explain and at this Not-Bro, no, just… you really should think of him as Dirk. Other Dirk at least. Watching him cry over someone who is almost you is all the proof that you need that he’s no Bro. You highly doubt that your Bro ever shed a tear over anything and you certainly doubt that your death would have done it, he never cared about you. You’ve accepted that now.

“What?” other Dirk asks, wiping at his face and seeming to tune back into what’s going on. Unfortunately doing so means he accidentally smears a little of your double’s blood on his cheek, you probably shouldn’t tell him though.

“I don’t entirely understand but I think it’s because of your whole Prince of Heart thing. He said Karkat was only like this because of him and their bond or whatever it’s called but you could break it, then Karkat would get better.” you explain. Or you suspect that he won’t get better, it’ll probably kill him but at least he ought to revive all better or if it doesn’t kill him then one of the life players can heal him better surely.

You must have said something culturally inappropriate because all of the humans from his universe and the trolls with soulmates look at you like you just suggested gutting your double and ritually dancing around with his entrails or something.

“I can’t do that! I- well technically speaking I probably could but I would never.” other Dirk says in horror.

“If it saves his life you shouldn’t even question it!” the Psiionic snaps.

“No, no, let’s not jump the gun here. Their Rose said she still saw everyone alive and well soon, which means there’s still hope for another solution, yes? I get why Dave suggested it but he doesn’t know that there’s still hope here.” other Jake points out and looks to your Rose for confirmation who
“Then keep thinking of a solution or else save my son.” Signless insists.

Well, you did your thing. You take the chance to get away from the dead body and return to your group who are uneasily watching the scene play out before them. Karkat gives you a weak little smile as you go to his side.

“That was pretty heroic of you. Stupid and dangerous but heroic.” he says quietly and you almost don’t recognise quiet Karkat.

“It should have been me. Rose showed me this future and we both assumed it was me dead, but I was going to get better but he…” you trail off. The corpse on the sand is evidence enough that he’s not getting better.

“It’s not as if you chose your life over his, not like you put him in harm’s way.” Karkat counters.

“No, that’d be me. I’m the one who moved the bullets out of Dave’s way, I didn’t know that he was going to end up right there. I basically shot him myself.” Jade whispers, she’s trying not to be loud and not to cry obviously and draw attention to herself but her cheeks are still wet with tears.

“It was clearly fate, Jade. Nothing you could have done about it, I just can’t see how we get from here to the end where he’s alive.” Rose says in frustration.

“Oh no.” Roxy hisses. You look over to see her staring wide eyed into the distance, not at the group in front of you. You try to follow her gaze but there’s so many ghosts out there that it’s hard to know what she might be looking at.

“Why did she put on the ring already?!” Roxy demands under her breath and Karkat grabs your arm, his needle claws pricking through your shirt sleeve. He leans past you to her.

“That might be my fault, or it absolutely is. I didn’t know this was happening at the time!” Karkat whispers furtively to Roxy.

“Shit, I gotta stop her from coming over here, if they see her this is going to go REAL BAD. Cover for me!” Roxy insists and then vanishes.

“What’s going on?” John asks in hushed tones.

“Calliope has the life ring on.” Karkat explains, using Rose’s back as cover to lean across and talk softly.

“Oh shit, if they find out they might try to take it from her.” John curses.

“Well, they shouldn’t! I definitely saw her alive at the end and I don’t know if you take them off if they work again after that and it certainly won’t help to mess with it.” Rose says with a frown.

“What if she has it, takes it off, is dead and we bring her back and give the ring to Dave?” Terezi asks. Oh, oh shit! That could work, couldn’t it? Rose wrinkles her nose and then shakes her head firmly.

“No, that wouldn’t work.” she says.

“What? Why?” Karkat asks loudly enough that several people shush him.

“I don’t know, I can just feel that it’s not the right answer.” Rose answers, full of mystic bullshit as
usual.

“That seems like a weak answer.” Jake points out correctly.

“Fine, fine! Try it anyway and doom the timeline and see how that goes for us. I can’t tell you why it wouldn’t work only that it wouldn’t but by all means doubt me, I’m only a seer of light!” Rose hisses and Jake winces back.

“Hoofbeast shit or not Rose doesn’t close off whole avenues of possibilities for no reason and I’m more interested in working out what the right answer is. All I know is those people over there aren’t stable and when their Karkat dies things are only going to get less stable. Sooner or later they’re going to spot that Roxy is missing or that we’re all acting off and they’ll suspect us and I don’t like our odds.” Vriska says.

You all look over, things haven’t progressed well. Other Karkat looks dead but you suppose he must still be clinging to life, though you wouldn’t give him that long left. Their StriLondes are still grieving and several of them are still trying to work out a better solution to fix things, now with more trolls involved. Currently, they’re talking about time-based solutions which worries you deeply.

“You can’t, that whole thing hinged on a stable loop. Changing the past can’t be done.” Aradia explains with the other Megidos nodding along firmly. You suppose they want their Dave and Karkat back as much as the rest of them so that’s a good reason to listen.

“Could we take him to a denizen?” you ask, stepping back over to their side. Closer to the dead body that looks like you.

“A life one, maybe? If your planet is here Jane then we could go there, both of you even.” their Roxy says, looking between the two iterations of the maid of life.

“I can take her there right now to ask if it’s possible. It’s the least I can do.” Jade says stepping out as well and wiping her face with her sleeve as she holds out her hand. Their Jane looks around and nods, she pauses to give her soulmate and squeeze and then leaps to her feet.

“We’ll be right back once we’ve talked to her, I promise. Do you want to come as well? It’s your planet, after all.” Other Jane asks the one on your team.

“Right, yes, if the plan changes people can contact us. Jade, shall we go?” Jane asks and Jade nods, taking hold of both of their hands and vanishing in a flash of green.

With them gone things are not quiet exactly but quieter for sure. The troll family and the Strilonde ones are clustered around their fallen kids, though there is cross over. Sollux has moved over to look down at other Dave with blatant grief. It seems that Kanaya has prioritised Karkat over Rose but they were sort of related and also dating so… also wow that’s a hell of a sentence to say.

You’re all just waiting, waiting and trying to think of better ideas. It’s all too soon when Jade pops back with the two Janes who just shake their heads sadly. The denizen of life won’t help it seems. Now what?

Sollux, Mituna and The Psiionic all flinch at once. Mituna claps his hands to the sides of his head and wails and his ancestor (father?) pulls him tight and clings to him. Sollux looks like he’s going to throw up.

“Psii? No, no he can’t- Karkat, Karkat come on!” Signless chokes out and you watch as his fingers press into other Karkat’s neck.
You’ve seen enough dead bodies to know one when you see it. Other Karkat is stock still in the arms of his family, no movement and no breathing. He’s dead. Other Karkat may have been doing heroic things, taking part in the final missions to save you all but he didn’t die for heroic reasons and he also, as far as you know, did nothing wrong, certainly nothing to warrant his death. Not heroic, not just. If it wasn’t non-diegetic from where you are right now you could hear some kind of great pendulous device swinging between the two. Not heroic, not just, but-

Other Karkat’s body convulses back into life, arching against the ground as he sucks in a breath. A neutral death, conditional immortality gives you a free revive you didn’t want. How very on brand for SBURB.

“Dave.” he chokes and scrabbles at his arm in obvious agony. His family at least have the sense to stop him looking at his soulmate’s corpse. If it’s a kind of psychic shock that does them in then that’ll only make it worse.

“You need to stop this, Dirk!” Signless shouts over but other Dirk just seems frozen.

Standing between the two groups, although not actually right in between them, you’re close enough to hear what Sollux says when he speaks again.

“Fuck, shit, this is all my fault. I did this, it’s my fault.” he curses, shoving up his double coloured glasses so he can rub at his eyes.

“This isn’t on you, man.” you try to reassure him.

“Can you not try to reassure me in my moirail’s voice right now, please? And I’m not being overly dramatic, this is entirely my fault. I coded this stupid game, I made the rules that are keeping him dead. It’s my fault!” Sollux snaps at you.

“Actually, I coded this game. You coded some other version of it. Not that this is my universe either but it’s, what, a derivative of a derivative of mine so whatever.” double eye patches edition Sollux across the way pipes up. He’s also looking in slightly the wrong direction, or not looking as such but his head is pointed in not quite the right way.

“Great. Great! Are you fucking DONE? I coded the game in the universe we came from, the rules that govern the universe my moirail came from. The ones keeping him dead now. But if you’d like I can test out mortality in this universe on you if you want!” he says furiously, his hands clenching and his eyes sparking.

“Shut up both of you!” other Roxy shouts, leaping to her feet.

“You, say what you said again.” she says, pointing at the one by you.

“I can’t shut up and talk.” he points out but seemingly reconsiders when her face takes on an expression that suggests that she may actually shoot him for that.

“It’s my fault that he’s dead, I wrote the game with the information Aradia gave me. So the rules keeping him dead, the code that they work on, it was made by me. I may as well have killed him and Karkat myself.” Sollux repeats.

Other Roxy steps over her sister who is bent over holding your double’s hand. She has a slightly unhinged look in her eye that smacks of desperation.

“Could you change those rules, mod the game?” she asks hopefully.
“No, obviously not. I- we’re in it. I mean sure there are games you can get into some of the code of when you’re in them, I mean some speedrunners did and… but I have no way of doing that. Not that I don’t know what to change, it’s just a data sheet somewhere, I wouldn’t even have to change the rules exactly, just hack the number of heroic deaths Dave’s had back to zero.” Sollux says.

“But it can be done?” other Roxy asks persistently.

“In theory, yeah. In practice I’ve no way to get to that shit because it’s everywhere around us!” he snaps and waves his arms around gesturing at everything as if to prove his point.

“It’s hidden, then?” other Roxy asks.

“Maybe hidden in the void? And isn’t doom about death and rules and breaking that shit? So mashing up doom and void’d make sense to find that code.” she says before Sollux can argue. He pauses at her words, clearly considering it.

“You’re a rogue, using the void to benefit someone else is very within your capabilities. Besides if what you do to him involves the void it’d explain why I can’t see how we get from here to everyone being safe at the end.” Rose says keenly.

“But I’m not god tier, I have some power in a fraymotief but I don’t know if it’s enough. But… but we still have the beds in the ship, I don’t know if they work here but I could try and god tier.” he says and looks back at the ship.

“No! No plans that begin with suicide! I’m not losing another child!” Disciple snarls, leaping to her feet. It’s weird seeing adult trolls pissed, and bad too. You catch the little noise that you guess is meant to show submission or something because when Sollux makes it Disciple seems to stop bristling so much although it is clear that she’s not backing down from her ban.

“I’m god tier, I know it’s double doom but we’re different classes. And shit if you can fucking double something you just gotta.” Mituna says, walking forward with his stupid green windsock hood trailing behind him.

“Wait.” Kankri pushes away from his younger brother/descendant and walks over to the forming cluster of people. He wipes his face on the sleeves of his god tier robes and sniffs.

“From that army it’s clear that there are an uncountable number of dead Daves out there, you don’t want to bring the wrong one back and it’s obvious Karkat doesn’t have time for us to make mistakes. I can show you the way to the right one.” he says seriously.

Not even turning around he holds a hand out towards his brother and his hand and eyes glow bright red. You see a line unspooled from other Karkat’s chest but it doesn’t lead to the dead body across the way, it trails upwards into the sky. No doubt it leads to the dream bubble you were just in, of course it would lead to his soul and not his body. But the colour of the connection looks rotting and dying, like toxic black mould growing over something previously healthy. No wonder it’s killing him.

“Blood to find him, void to get there, doom to change it. Do we need anything else?” other Roxy says slowly.

“If you’re trying to bring someone back to life it seems pretty weird to leave us life players out of it.” Feferi points out.

“Life might counteract doom, safer not to. Better to fix the numbers and have you revive after.” Terezi suggests.
“Hope then, perhaps? Or is that over-egging it?” other Jake asks, offering his hands out in service.

“More things to go wrong.” Sollux says grimly.

Their Roxy nods and she, Sollux, Mituna and Kankri arrange themselves into a little square and with a shared settling breath they begin. A combined red, green, blue fraymotif springs up and swirls between them. All you can see of the void one is the dragging swirls of deep blue, the body of the motif itself is dominated by dark green that seems stitched together by the lines of blood.

Around you the world goes dark, it’s distilled but still there, like looking through thick dark blue glass. Sound itself seems to muffle so when Kankri speaks it drags all of your attention to him.

“Okay, just let me start.” he says softly and suddenly the world is a technicolour fucksplosion of coloured string stretching every which way between everyone in every hue and every size. Like the universe was suddenly attacked by giant silly string spiders and no one noticed until just now. As abruptly as it came it goes again and as before you can see the dying connection stretching from other Karkat and up into the air.

“I think I can get that.” Mituna says thoughtfully.

Your attention snaps from him to other Rose as she leaps from the ground by her fallen brother to her feet, her eyes locked on something behind and to the left of you. Her expression is livid and she points her finger, opening her mouth to shout.

“Oh no.” an unfamiliar voice behind you says and you twist to see familiar green skin but this time not on a hulked out seizure inducing murder body.

Hal lunges over other Dave, accidentally kicking other Dirk in the chest in his haste to clap a hand over other Rose’s mouth as he drags her to the ground. From the gesture he’s making towards the four people trying to save her brother you’d guess that he’s trying to get her to see sense and not distract them. You really hope that their plan works because if not you are certain that this Rose will square up to rip that ring from the cherub’s finger herself.

Mituna laughs in triumph and floating in the air before him is a picture of other you. He’s smiling and his face is scarred over his eyes and they’re purple instead of red. Under the photo it reads ‘Dave Strider, Universe:’ and then a number that’s some bonkers level of high, like eight thousand to the bajillionth power. It’s more an equation than a number.

“It’s him! All I need to do is…” Sollux says and reaches out to touch the photo.

Suddenly it explodes into floating text all around you, orbiting the four of them like planets around a sun. The information closest to you doesn’t even seem to be what they want. It lists his species which is more complex than just human. His height, weight, age based on personal timeline, age based on the timeline taken straight not counting loops, time living, time dead. Looking around there’s information on everything. Number of conversations had with consorts, sprite prototyping, number of hours clocked drawing, sleeping, showering. Every fact you could care to put a metric to is swirling around in information soup. If you peer harder into the distance you can see that what you’d thought was a grey haze is in fact small floating white letters.

ACGTTGCAAATTCTGGGTCACTTCTTTAACGTACTACGGTACTGGTATTGCAGTTACAATTCA

On and on, his whole genetic code spooled out in endless reams of data.

“How are we ever going to find it in all this shit?” Mituna exclaims.
“Roxy,” Sollux says slowly, “magic me up a keyboard, a voidy one.”

Other Roxy squints at him but dutifully she does as he asks, a black and blue keyboard without any wires popping into existence between her hands. Sollux takes it from her and floats from the ground, his legs crossed and the keyboard balanced on his knees.

He presses two keys and everything goes muted except for a new box that pops up before him, blank and empty save for a flashing vertical line.

“Did you just Ctrl+F my brother’s… his soul or something?” other Roxy whispers.

Sollux types.

heroic

The data around you filters, shuffles and spits out streams of information, opening files and presenting lists of headers. Clearly, it doesn’t care about his troll typing quirk, how that works you don’t know but maybe he coded it so that’s how it thinks anyway.

Number of heroic deaths witnessed, time spent contemplating heroic death, number of doomed timelines branched via heroic death…

The list goes on. Sollux keeps typing, refining his search.

heroic death count.

Nothing. He edits it.

heroic sacrifice

Two results pop up and open of their own accord, listing the date and time of each entry.

‘Heroic sacrifice ruled.
Cause of death: aspect exhaustion leading to time burnout in travel through timelines. Resulting heart failure and instant brain death. Post-mortem breaks of C4 and C5 on landing.
Reason for heroic judgement: Knowing sacrifice of wellbeing and possible death to save inhabitants and loved ones from death. Selfless act rules death heroic.
Revived by: Jane Crocker universe—’

There again is the hugely long number dictating that it’s the other Jane who brought him back but you know about that, you were there. The second entry is just as upsetting to read, its timestamp is so recent.

‘Heroic sacrifice ruled.
Cause of death: 18 bullets to the chest. Bullets perforated left and right lungs, heart, stomach, spinal cord at T8. Resulting cause of death combined heart failure, asphyxiation, exsanguination and massive shock.
Reason for heroic judgement: Knowing entry in combat to protect universe, defeat evil and protect loved ones from death. Selfless act rules death heroic.’

“It’s not going to work, there’s no box for number of revives left that you can fuck with.” Mituna says into the tense silence. Other Rose’s muffled protest doesn’t quite distract them because Sollux is hissing like a pissed snake and shaking his head.

“No, I have to fix this. Maybe I can just change it.” he mutters to himself and taps at the keys. He
highlights the section on the latest death covering the reason for the judgement. Before anyone can ask him sensible questions like ‘hey won’t dicking with that corrupt the timelike?’ he just deletes it and then backspaces some more.

He begins to type his own words instead and as he does it alters the text from his quirk into its own text.

‘Reason for neutral judgement: Player had free will removed from him, refusing to fight risked causing the death of loved ones and dooming of the timeline which would kill them and himself. Maintaining life of self and loved ones is evolutionarily coded into player’s species and the doomed timeline mechanic of the game removes meaningful choice. Therefore the death is neither heroic nor just. Judgement - neutral.’

He goes back and edits the heading and all the other tags that sort the entry into heroic deaths until it seems to make sense. The thing is he’s not lying as such, the rules he references are the same as the ones the game was using. He’s just applying the logic differently. He’s not making the death not happen, just arguing the judgement. It’s clever and maybe SBURB will go for it. The game itself is alive in a weird kind of way and it’s not kind but not exactly evil as such. It’s more like those asshole genie things, where if you bend its rules you’ll get what you ask for but probably not what you wanted or it’ll come at a cost. Some monkey’s paw bullshit. Like Rose’s grimdarkness, Davesprite’s self-prototyping to avert disaster, the people from the other universe coming here at a cost of their time players lives. So maybe this works but then where’s the catch? You’re not the only one suspicious as several life players shuffle into place at your double’s side and at his soulmate’s too. That’d be the kind of trick SBURB would pull, bring him back and kill the other with the shock. Grant him a life he doesn’t want anymore or that his own trippy biology would rip from him in an effort to get their souls together again.

The four of them worry over the text before Sollux finally hits a key and everything hangs for a moment, the entry vanishes and doesn’t reappear until Sollux clears his search. It accepted the change, but nothing has changed, has it?

Other Karkat stirs and hacks a cough so bad that the life players reach for him, only when he stops do you hear it. It’s a bubbling sound, like blowing air through a straw into a drink. Wet and bubbling like lungs trying to work with blood in them. Jane- or rather Janes roll him swiftly onto his side, one rubbing at his back as the other heals. You’ve never seen a resurrection like this, usually it’s just bolting up into life again but this is SBURB’s catch. You get him back but it won’t heal him and it looks like it’s fighting all that Jane tries to do.

Karkat’s hand finds your own, squeezing tight as you watch a golden bullet push out of your double’s body and drop onto the sand. Other Karkat finally squirms free of his family’s hold and he staggers across to the younger you and drops to his knees there.

“You… you son of a bitch you swore you wouldn’t do this to me. Open your goddamn eyes so I can… so I can rip you a new one you fuck.” he hisses and even through his pained tone you can hear that Karkat ‘angry because of worry’ tone.

The life players work diligently, holding him to life where any reasonable person would have died and keeping him there as each injury heals. He must be in unspeakable agony. When they’ve finally done enough to him that he can speak he chooses his words carefully.

“Oh.” he says, perfectly deadpan even if he wheezes a little on the words.

It’s a green light as his loved ones swarm him as much as the life players allow, but that only gives so much space. Other Roxy grabs Sollux into a tight and grateful hug and then they wait their turn to
get their hands on the real living body of other Dave.

“I’m so glad that worked.” Roxy says in clear relief from behind you. You turn and look at her and take a closer look at the timid looking green skull girl clinging to her arm. Around one finger you can see the ring of life.

“You’re lucky it did because you were spotted.” Rose says. She’s not looking at any of you but across the sand at her double. The younger Rose stands up vacating her spot which is immediately filled by someone else desperate to try to crush the life right back out of other you with hugs.

Other Rose has a wand in one hand as she marches closer to you. Magic or not her godtier robes are stained in blood, her orange leggings stained red at the knees, smears of it cover the rest of her outfit from her alternating between holding his body and trying to almost literally hold herself together. It does nothing to undercut the malice rolling off of her.

“My brother, my twin was dead and you-” she hisses at all of you.

“Knew that the ring wasn’t the way he was supposed to come back. Trying that would have doomed us all and if you’d seen it too you’d have known that and not done it either.” Rose says simply.

Other Rose looks less like she’s considering shooting eldritch magic at your Rose and more like she’s planning to just straight up shank a bitch. In the end she stows her weapon back in her strife specibus and gives her double the filthiest look.

“It’s funny.” she says in a voice that shows no humour.

“I never lived with him and you never even met the man, but you’re just as ruthless as my father. I’m sure he’d be proud of you.” she sneers.

Rose knows some things about Bro but she mostly knows them academically, you never told her at the time and you’ve left out so much in the details since. No doubt she’s seen more than you’ve said through her powers and inferred plenty from what your alternate selves have said. But despite what you’ve told her and how you know she feels for you about the pain you were put through it’s still not something that happened to her. Clearly, these aren’t things that you can say about her double. Even if she didn’t live with him it’s obvious that hearing that she had taken after Bro would devastate her and she hopes it’ll work that way on your Rose. But it doesn’t really, it misses the mark for her.

“God, Rose leave it.” other Vriska huffs, walking up to your group.

“Don’t ask me to drop this, look what they were hiding from us. What they risked!” other Rose argues.

Other Vriska looks at your group with bored disinterest, even when she catches sight of Calliope all she does is shrug.

“So it wasn’t meant to go the way we planned. Everyone’s alive aren’t they? The ends justify the means, you’re just pissed you got played.” other Vriska scoffs. Other Rose’s face twists into an expression of blatant offence as she turns and starts arguing with her kismesis.

Having seen what Kankri can do you can almost imagine it being like a plucked string that ripples out. Other John and other Terezi take note of the rising argument about how valid other Rose’s concern is and whether the ends do indeed justify the means. Accusations of being a ‘deranged and callous harpy’ fly around as well as accusations of being an ‘overly emotional and mentally simple mammal’. Eventually, other Karkat screeches at them both to shut the hell up and not to make him come over there.
Other Rose legitimately listens, although her expression is still sour.

“You should probably go see him. Unlike certain people you tried to help. You risked and lost something in an attempt to bring him back.” other Rose says to you.

On the one hand, you feel a little awkward doing so but being in the way of a cross Lalondian ethics debate is far more uncomfortable so you move on over to your double. There’s still a crowd of people around him but other Roxy moves out of the way to pull herself into other Dirk’s arms and sob in what you guess is relief, he’s ugly cry/laughing too which is unsettling on what is functionally Bro’s face. You ignore them and crouch down next to your double. Other Karkat is clinging to his arm, their tattoos pressing together. The three functional healers (sorry Meenah, you tried) are clustered together talking quietly about any way to speed up the healing.

“Hey man.” your double says raspily. As he talks you can see that there’s still some blood leaking out of what now are shallow wounds rather than full holes punched through his chest.

“Told you that you were gonna come back.” you tell him.

“You told me dawg.” he laughs weakly.

“I warned you bro.” you agree.

Other Karkat looks at you both scornfully.

“Really? You’re doing this right now? Every time this happens.” he complains. He seems to consider you both for a moment and then continues entirely straight faced.

“It keeps happening.” he says seriously.

You and your double are united in your gleeful reaction and other you laughs so hard he starts choking a little and Jane has to tell you all to cut it out and focuses on healing him a little more.

“So,” other you finally says with a cough when Jane lets up on him some more, “we really did it? Lord English is dead?”

“Not dead, I crammed him in a time loop that he can’t break out of without dooming whatever offshoot timeline he’s stuck in. But he’s not getting out and if he was going to he’d have done it already, right? So we’re clear.” you explain.

“Pretty ironic punishment for a Lord of Time.” other you says with a nod.

“You must be hurt, you just used irony correctly. Him being defeated by time being contrary to what is expected from someone with supposedly boundless dominion of it, it’s actual irony.” other Karkat explains.

“Shit man are you trying to drag me into a just death here now too?” your double says, dramatically pressing his hand to his forehead like he’s going to swoon. As he stretches to do it you can see that his wounds have healed. Barring what you’re sure is going to be some really nasty bruising he’s basically fine again, the monkey’s paw wish didn’t backfire too badly.

“Don’t even joke about that.” other Karkat says stiffly and even you cringe at just how much foot your double just crammed in his mouth.

“Oh, shit, Karkat I’m sorry.” other you apologises but his soulmate is already standing up.
“Don’t just- look we’ll talk about- about all of this shit when we’re safe in whatever place we end up after this. You’re alive, I’m alive, it’s fine. I should go talk to my parents, they just had to hold me and watch me die and the moment I’m ok again I run off to you. I’m probably grounded until I’m in my twenties anyway for that so I’m going to go do damage control.” other Karkat says and then walks off, his knight cape flapping behind him.

Ouch.

“I… deserved that.” your double says.

“You certainly did. Hal can you come back here and check him over?” other Jane calls out and the half troll reappears. You end up taking a step aside so he can get in next to him and check that his breathing sounds right and he’s not still got any broken parts that he needs. You return to your group and wait.

Eventually, Dave is cleared and it falls to other Vriska to get everyone back on the ship that they came from in order to fly to the final exit. Other you is also spirited off to the medical area with his soulmate to check for any lasting damage with real medical equipment and those with minor injuries get the attention they need from their healers. You pass on that, you’re basically fine. Bruised to shit but nothing compared to back on Earth so you can roll with it just fine.

You know that now Echidna will be doing something or other with the frog, tadpole, universe whatever thing. Look, it’s space and not really your thing, your job was the fight and you did that. Besides you’ve got bigger things on your mind right now.

Seeing your other self in that dreambubble just waiting for Karkat, hoping and not hoping to see him again and the palpable sense of regret haunts you. He made you swear to do something about Karkat. It’s stupid, you could just not do that and even if you did do something about it there’s no telling that it would end well at all and quadrants confuse the shit out of you. Not that Karkat even understands what he wants with his quadrants as he so often lamented to you in your mutual therapeutic bitch sessions about your varied societies expectations of you both. It’s easier to not do anything.

Here’s the thing though, you don’t know what happens next. Sure you know the door thing happens but no one knows what happens after. Your universe was made when Karkat opened his and it got fucked up thanks to Bec Noir. Who says that when that door is opened it’s anything good? What if you all go to your own game overs or back to your own universes? Like maybe SBURB is the super smash brothers brawl of universe destroying games but after the fight’s done Mario goes back to Mario games, all the Pokemon go back to their world and so on. What if that door opens and you never see Karkat again? You get your reward and he gets his. What you asked for but not what you wanted.

It’s not likely. You’re all expecting to share the reward, one win one reward type situation. But you don’t know for sure. You could be stuck in a universe waiting and hoping for Karkat to find you and knowing he may never do. Even just imagining it you’re kicking yourself for never being able to man up and say something.

So you message him, ask him to meet you near the front windows of the ship where you two met before. Of course he shows when you ask him to.

“Dave?” he calls out and you stop making yourself cling to the railing nauseously and look at him.

“Are you alright?” he asks, coming closer.
You’re drumming your thumbs against the cold metal of the railing, beating out an uneven and nervous pattern. How do you begin? Maybe you shouldn’t at all. Maybe a promise made to a dead alternate teen version of yourself doesn’t count, and it wasn’t really a promise either. You don’t have to do this. You can play it off, back out. Or just give him a hug because he’s your friend and ask him how his mission went and say you just wanted time to hang with him. You breathe a little harder and consider that door slamming behind you, being in a universe without the guy who kept you sane on a rock in space and even made you saner. More sane? Just- Jesus just start talking you can do that much.

“Dave?” Karkat prompts, his voice edging into concern.

“What if we go to different universes?” you blurt out.

“What?” Karkat asks, squinting at you in confusion. Right, back that train of thought up.

“You played SGRUB, this is SBURB. What if we get the reward and you get the one you were supposed to get before shit went sideways in biblical proportions and you made us? What if we go on to our reward and you’re off elsewhere?” you say nervously.

Karkat grunts and heaves himself up so that he’s sitting on the railing by your hands, making you have to look up at him.

“I hadn’t thought of that. I was slightly paranoid that it’d get taken from us again and we’d be trapped in a cycle of games for eternity but that particular horror hadn’t crossed my mind. Quit trying to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory already, that’s my move, asswipe.” he lectures you.

“Geez, sorry.” you say, rolling your eyes. He can’t see you do it but you know that he knows you are.

Karkat’s usual surly expression melts into something concerned and he nudges you with his foot.

“Is it really worrying you?” he asks gently.

“A little, it’s not really that. It’s something else.” you tell him and his expectant look tells you that you’re going to need to provide him with details ASAP.

Suddenly that spot on the window over there is very fascinating indeed, you stare at it intently.

“When I saw other me in that bubble he was sat waiting for his soulmate but I’m pretty sure he didn’t want him to die to be there and there was that whole non-heroic death cycle too. He knew that he wasn’t going to get to see him really. I think he knew that.” you say quietly.

“You lost a life trying to get him back, you did everything you could and he made it in the end anyway. You should be proud of what you did for him, hell, for both of them.” Karkat says. He’s nice and he’s so good, all the yelling is just because he cares and has passion for things. People don’t always get that, but you do.

“It’s just it was a while I think between when they met to them sealing the whole soulmate deal and facing down eternity he pretty obviously regretted lost time. I know I would. If I ended up in a different universe I’d regret things and you know you get freaked out about stuff or let bullshit hang ups stop you and it seems like you’ve got forever to be a moron but you don’t and I don’t want to be a Dave sitting there regretting being a moron and a coward and all that shit.” you blurt out.

“Dave…” Karkat says quietly, but you can’t stop this conversational train in its tracks and Karkat is the damsel tied down in front of them. Choo choo word vomit time is now.
“It’s just stupid fucking excuses like not being sure about things as if half the time you don’t have to just test something to see if it works and I’m like nah dude I’ll just meditate on this shit for ages to be sure I’m ready like some buddhist monk. Wait, you probably didn’t have buddhists, right? Just clown cultists, man fuck that. Still I’m conditionally immortal, sure, but I don’t know how that works and I’m acting like I’ve got eternity to puzzle this shit out when I don’t. Who knows when some jacked up mega boss is gonna shish kabob me? So what does it matter that, like, I don’t know how you feel about quadrants anymore and I know I sure as shit don’t get them and how the fuck would that even work anyway and maybe I should wait but I could do that forever because I am the master of not thinking about uncomfortable things, you know that.” you burble on anxiously.

“Dave! What are you- ok, no, stop staring over there and look at me.” Karkat demands.

“I could do that,” you concede as you don’t do that, “but the thing is that I haven’t spent several years building the most important and closest relationship of basically my entire life with this wall so looking at that is honestly easier, the window right by it is pretty good too.”

“You’re insufferable. What are you trying to say here? I don’t- I need you to be clear here, Dave. Short, single sentences kind of clear. What are you trying to tell me?” he asks from somewhere out of your field of view.

“Shit, man, you can’t just distil my thoughts down into such small bitesize things. But maybe I could meet you in the middle and maybe rap you out my thoughts, I’m sure I’ve got some pre-recorded back beats that I can bring up to lay down for you.” you say.

Warm hands catch the sides of your face and turn you so you’re looking up at him. His blunt claws are at the edge of your face and filed down or not they could still do serious harm to you. You don’t care, he never would. Karkat’s eyebrows are drawn down all serious like.

“You are infuriating. What are you getting at? I’m… I have an idea but I don’t want to read into things here.” Karkat says seriously.

He holds you there as you stare dumbly up at him. Today you fought and defeated someone who was basically an actual god, you died trying to save someone’s life, but your big problem today is standing here near the boy you like more than you ever should have. The guy who everything in your upbringing told you to shun and crush for his weakness but instead you- you…

He’s looking at you expectant and hopeful, maybe he feels it as well. You hope he does, it’ll break your heart if he doesn’t like you too. Swallowing thickly around the lump in your throat you try to speak but your voice just squeaks. Fuck, just say it already.

Your voice is still gone. Just say SOMETHING already!

SAY IT!

“I-”

You swerve swiftly out of the first thing to leap into your mouth because you’re not a romantic guy but Karkat is, he certainly doesn’t want to hear your confession of ‘I have jerked it to you before’ because, yes, you needed to say something true but that’s not the ‘it’ you need to say right now. Or probably ever for that matter. Try again, dumbass.

“I like you.” you say, your voice more of a high pitched terror squeak than anything real.

Your hands are shaking and you can’t help the senses that are warning you that a beatdown is heading your way for that.
“I… like you too? This isn’t new information, Dave.” he points out kindly.

You suspect that the cultural implications of ‘no I like you’ will be lost on him and he may then justly consider your species a mistake.

“I don’t think I can say it, I think that might actually have to wait.” you croak.

You don’t think you’re imagining the flash of disappointment over Karkat’s face. So, fine, you can’t do the words. Karkat’s smart, he can work it out.

“Look, if you don’t- just don’t claw me up if you’re not cool with this. I know this isn’t right but I’m trying, man.” you mumble and kick up off of the ground to float level with him.

Karkat looks at you completely baffled, his hold on your face broken by your ascent. You can’t tell him because you’re useless with actually telling people your sincere feelings, but you can do this.

The graceless crash of your face into Karkat’s isn’t how you’d ever thought of it. The way your nose bumps his because coordination for the day has apparently already been spent on sword shit. You also hadn’t ever pictured your shades digging into the bridge of your nose because you basically headbutted the poor boy with your face. At the very least you manage to kiss him on the mouth. You get to feel the startled gasp that he makes.

Like a considerate man you try to pull back a little so that you’re not just gracelessly mashing your face into his, also you should be thinking that maybe he doesn’t want to kiss you and you should stop. You should be thinking that but the very sudden and insistent grip on your god tier robes and the foot that’s wrapped around your leg to dig into the back of your thigh makes you think that you probably have the right idea.

Karkat makes this cricket in a blender sort of noise which your mammal brain has no way of interpreting, but you’re smart enough to guess that him shifting enough to change the angle and kissing you back just as intently is a good sign. It has to mean that he likes you back, that maybe you weren’t the only one thinking about the other in ways that weren’t entirely a just bros kind of way. Although actually now that you’ve met two Dirks you have to wonder if by definition ‘bro’ is kind of gay, capitalised and not. You’re getting distracted here, nervous mental rambling that if your mouth wasn’t occupied right now would be verbal muttering.

New focus instead, pawing at Karkat’s soft sweater to try to get an undisguised feel of the troll underneath. Of course you’ve touched Karkat before, fallen asleep on his lap more than once even. You’re not exactly at arms length with him, but there’s a wild difference in sitting close to him and brushing his side with your arm as you teach him music and this. Karkat ups the ante into trying to get his tongue all exploring in your mouth, and hell there’s no trying about it. You don’t need to see his identification, go on through, have a nice day sir.

Jesus fucking christ thank god your mouth is occupied with this kiss and you’re not doing anything else, you will never be able to seductively talk dirty to anyone as long as you live.

Still, you’re hardly complaining at the change and you’re pleased that at least here his whole mouth anatomy is basically like yours, no secret xenomorph tongue or anything (why are you like this? Just kiss the boy!). Still, his teeth are pointier than yours. Or, not pointier exactly, more like he has a mouth full of what is basically your canines but a little bigger and wider without being any sharper. They’re actually pretty interesting.

Karkat pulls away from you, a little out of breath and holds you at arms length.
“Don’t just lick my teeth, what is wrong with- is your whole species this incompetent or is it just you?” Karkat barks at you without any real bite.

“I think we both know the answer to that.” you shoot back.

The eye roll Karkat gives you is so extreme you worry for his future visual health. Unfortunately, it about times you out of the length of time you can act chill and joking about this thing that you’re very serious about so it’s up to you to make things awkward again.

“So. Yeah. I, uh, like you.” you confess. To his knees. You’re the most mature person, it is you.

“I got that impression. Not that I… since when did- no.” Karkat hisses in frustration and covers his face with his hands. When he pulls them away he’s not looking at you and honestly that fills you with dread that has you unconsciously sinking back down to the ground.

“Can we just not talk about quadrants with this? I’ve tried to explain them to you which may honestly be the most fruitless task I’ve ever undertaken and you know the kind of shit I’ve done with my life. I’m pretty sure I’m broken for quadrants on a genetic level having heard of my ancestor and seen the other Vantases from the other universe, so me trying to explain them to you is probably futile. I want…” he trails off even though you’re hanging on his every word.

“You want what?” you ask, daring to hope.

Karkat flushes dark and pretty and finally manages to look at you again.

“I want to still talk to you like we did, to be there for you and listen to you so that I can help. Things we should call pale or near enough. But I want that too, I want to- I want to kiss you, alright?! I basically always-” Karkat cuts himself off, clearly mortified.

Emboldened by his words you rise up in the air enough again to where he’s sat on the railing, close enough to lean in and gently kiss him a second time. It’s better the second time, he softly goes ‘oh’ against your lips and then melts against you as he wraps his arms around your neck. You feel like you should have known how he felt but with his whole quadrant deal and literally being a totally different species from you it was hard to pick anything up beyond that he cared for you a lot.

“It’s just unbelievably, reprehensibly selfish of me to ask that. To just ask you to not have anyone else because I can’t stay put in one quadrant or even- just because of me. It’s not like I’m enough.”

Karkat protests quietly when you two part. He’s so uncertain about this whole thing, or maybe just of himself.

“It’s cool, man. I don’t want anyone else.” you assure him.

Karkat stares at you like you’d just declared half of your body to be not only optional but detachable too, it’s that level of disbelief. Or- no, it’s something else because there’s more than a dash of him not looking like someone could say something that wonderful to him.

Oh shit, he’s getting all teary eyed. He’s not sad though, not with a wobbly little smile like that building on his face until it’s showing off all of those pointy teeth of his.

“If it makes you feel better,” you offer, “I don’t know what I’m doing either.”

“Great we can be a couple of know-nothing dumbasses.” Karkat giggles with a wet little sniffle.

“A couple.” you echo with wonder.
Karkat smiles at you and you think that the universe can pry him from your cold dead hands if it wants to split you both up. You sincerely hope that won’t be tested. You also both agree that though you’re not hiding whatever you’re going to call this thing between you that you’re also not going out and making a big public announcement. People already speculate enough about the two of you being more than friends, they can go on doing that. Besides, right now people are focused on other things.

Later that day you run into a now living version of Davepeta who is now part human, part troll and still rocking anatomically improbable orange wings. Without glowy game sprite bullshit you can actually appreciate the almost parrotlike vividness to the feathers and honestly, you really want a look at how a real skeleton works with those wings and arms. You don’t get any time to ask because they’re too caught up in talking to another half-human, half-troll person. What was he called again? Arkwuss or something? There probably ought to be a species name for those guys now that there’s at least three human-troll hybrids that you know of but they should probably name themselves. God, what’s Jasprose going to be? Or the Tavros one?

There’s also a lot more carapacians on the ship than there were before, as you pass him you wave at The Mayor who is mediating a conversation/argument between the formerly dog based Jack Noir, a different Jack Noir and the white one that wanted to stab. You think she might still want to stab him. Still, The Mayor is calming them down with supervision from Signless. Look at him go, the little guy. Everyone loves The Mayor and those are just the stone cold facts.

But the long and short of it is that yet again you’re dragged into another meeting. Surprisingly you don’t have Karkat’s attention as he’s talking intently to Double Eyepatch Sollux intently as you wait for the no doubt long and arduous meeting to begin.

“I’m really glad you’re coming with us. I know you were obviously happier in the bubbles and everything but it’s not- I mean-” Karkat says stiffly.

“Did you miiiiss me?” patches teases him, bumping their shoulders together.

“Absence makes the pusher grow fonder, but now that you’re here it’s fading. Fuck off again why don’t you!” Karkat snaps and snarls but the guy obviously knows him enough to not care about the literal meaning of his words and get the actual one instead.

“It’s cool getting to see you again. Well, not see but- you know. Aradia at least thinks that it’ll be fun seeing what the new universe is like, she’s full of zest for life or whatever now.” he explains.

“Think you can borrow some?” Karkat snorts only to get a middle finger shoved in his face.

Vriska, no wait it’s other Vriska check her arm tats out, comes out into the middle of the room. You’re all on the benches again as you were this morning.

“You’re all on the benches again as you were this morning.

“So, that went well. A little sticky at the end but whatever.” she says.

“STICKY?!?” an outraged voice calls from the benches further below you and there’s some scuffling. Other Vriska backs up a little and powers on through her speech.

“The next step, now that we’ve got a working ectobiology machine on board as well as a viable matriorb, is to head to the final platform and go through the door. Other Jade zapped her way over to Echidna who confirmed that she’ll release as soon as we get there and it’ll all be ready to go. Then we just open the door and get the reward, job done!” she says gleefully.

There’s relieved applause from the crowd but Karkat sits up a little straighter next to you and shoots you a worried look.
"What’s the REST of your plan?!" Karkat shouts over the noise which cuts down on the celebration pretty rapidly. Other Vriska pouts and sets a hand on her hip.

"We open the door, we get the reward.” she re-emphasises.

"And the reward is a brand new universe, great. No one said there’d be habitable planets in there, or that we’ll get kicked out anywhere that we can survive. I may not be a space player but even I can tell you that you’re not getting this ship through that door, at best you can manage it in a sylladex if Jade shrinks it down or if you have some absurd modus.” Karkat rants, getting up on the bench. You reach out and steady his leg with a hand so he doesn’t fall over, you’re literally a supportive boyfriend. Holy shit you’re his boyfriend!

“I have the Earth, or an Earth I guess.” Jade calls out.

“Great, is it livable?” Karkat demands.

“I wouldn’t recommend it right now, 0 out of 5 stars on tripadvisor, everything is wet.” Dirk mutters from behind you. Karkat obviously heard him too though and Jade’s dog ears can’t be beat.

“Alright, but between Space, Time and Breath we can absolutely mess with the ecosystem on the planet to dry it up. I’m sure the Life or Void players could even whip up some of the right kind of algae to manipulate the CO2 in the atmosphere. We can fix it.” Jade insists.

“Fine, great, but THEN what?” he challenges her.

“Then we live there and do whatever we want! I’m sure the jadebloods will be all about getting a mothergrub back again because that’s their thing.” other Vriska sneers.

“EXCUSE me?!” the middlest Maryam gasps in blatant offence.

“Shut up! I mean where are you all going to live? Buildings? Do any of you know how to build and I ask this as someone who played a game with construction elements in it and I know most of you do not despite trolls building their own hives very young but the construction drones had more sense than you. As for the humans don’t even try with me, you can’t even keep a building with plumbing functional! I mean even if Roxy voids some buildings up for you or we take Dave and the Mayor’s can town as literal goddamn plans for a town there’s still power, sanitation, infrastructure that you haven’t considered! What’s the PLAN?!” he shouts.

“Don’t look at me, I got us here I’m out. Work with him or don’t I am out of fucks.” other Karkat says wearily, he’s down near the front.

“I think it’d make sense for us all to live close together and perhaps it would actually be best if we stuck in family groups. Despite most of you being ‘gods’ I think you’re very much too young to live on your own, nor do I think it would be psychologically healthy. I know we’re more than happy to accommodate every Captor, Lejion, Vantas and Megido under our roof and I daresay that Dirk and Roxy feel similarly about all of the Strider Lalondes.” Signless says.

“Hell yes!” other Roxy shouts.

“Jesus, Roxy, my hearing. Yeah, I’m fine to have all of ‘em, including any of the former sprites if they think of themselves more Strider than troll or particularly Lalondian. But I’m not going to make anyone live with me who doesn’t want to.” other Dirk says and you catch the look he sends your way. He won’t make you, you can choose. You think you might like that though, getting to know him and Dirk as well as Roxy and, uh, Roxy. Having brothers around you that don’t hate you would be novel, it could be nice actually.
“I don’t think we need ‘adult’ supervision. He’s barely older than me. Besides, me and Roxy raised ourselves our whole lives and Jake basically did too.” Dirk points out, clearly not as keen on the idea.

“Not to be impolite, young man, and I know I have only known you for a comparatively short time but it shows.” Dadbert says. Holy shit, sick burn. Dirk looks scandalised, hot damn. But the man isn’t pausing to let Dirk defend himself but rather he rolls on.

“I assume that the rest of your proposal, Signless, is for the Maryams to stay with the Maryams, the Nitrams to stay with the Nitrams and the like. Of course, I will gladly take my own children and if John here would rather live with me and his double rather than Mr Crocker here and his Jane he’s more than welcome. But I can’t help but note that you didn’t mention the Makaras who have no guardian as well as the one that’s still locked up. I would be happy to take them on, I’m less susceptible to accidental psionics than many and I’ve noticed that they’ve been calmer the last few months with more people around than they were at the start.” he says.

You’re not really sure what to make of a man who is openly offering to live with three deranged murderclowns but you’re very glad that you’re not going to be in that household yourself. Karkat looks similarly unsettled.

“In addition, given my… past with the former Empress it stands to reason that Feferi and Meenah are my family also. I know Meenah is the same age as the other older kids and can live on her own if she wants I can also see how it might be nice to not have to be in charge of things for a while. So my door when I get one is open to you both.” he adds.

“Well that’s just swell but me and Eridan have been living on our own forever so you can stop your game of troll pokemon right there, you don’t gotta catch ‘em all. We’re fine on our own.” one of the other fishtrolls says even though no one asked.

“That still doesn’t answer questions about what we’re going to do with the world once we’ve taken care of shelter. Are we restarting civilisation and giving them cheat codes to everything we know how to make which I can’t help but point out isn’t fucking much. Are we going to live with the people that we make there or not? Are we going to intervene in their lives, should we?” Karkat asks.

No one seems to know the answers.

“Maybe you should be in charge of working that out.” Calliope suggests from the row behind you both.

“No! I don’t- I can’t be a leader.” Karkat protests, turning around unsteadily on the bench to look at her.

“Didn’t you want to before, though?” she asks. She probably doesn’t know how sore of a spot this is for him, as far as you know they’ve never even really talked.

“Yeah, but I messed up and there were awful, fatal consequences. I wasn’t good enough, no matter how much I wanted to be.” Karkat says. You reassuringly pat his, uh, his calf. It’s a weird place to pick but he’s standing on the bench you’re sitting on and you’re really not at the congratulatory ass pat level with the guy yet, especially in public. Also, someone probably has to be doing sports for that to be a thing in public.

“Yeah, you sucked, remember?” Vriska shouts over. Karkat certainly agrees with her but he’s absolutely going to flip her off anyway.
An expression flickers over Dirk’s face that you know from Bro’s, a considering and evaluating kind of expression with more than a hint of strategy. Sometimes you’d wind up dealing with some new, terrible and bonkers kind of ‘training’ being thrown at you but more often than not it’d be the few times that you’d passed some metric of his known to only him and get something good. Something like your turntables or brand new bottles of developer for your photos, random big ass gifts for no reason at all. But he’s looking at Karkat.

“So you found out that leadership was serious and in respect for the position you don’t consider yourself suitable.” Dirk states.

“Basically.” Karkat says even though Dirk wasn’t asking.

“I read somewhere once that wanting to be in office- to lead and even more so being able to claw your way into that position is precisely the kind of thing that makes someone uniquely unsuited to such a role. And on my planet leadership positions were eventually taken by Guy Fieri, several deranged evil clowns and the Batterwitch, so I know I’m pretty qualified to agree with that notion. Choosing not to put yourself forward to fix a problem only you were aware enough to spot is probably a ringing endorsement for your qualifications.” he explains calmly.

“I think you’d be great.” Calliope says happily.

Around the room there’s a general murmuring of agreement from the crowd.

“Looks like you’re being a leader again, KK.” eyepatch Sollux says with some amusement in his voice.

“It keeps happening.” you agree.

“I hate you both.” Karkat concludes and sits down again.

“In any case as we are fast approaching meal time I think it would be best to eat now and then leave this game, as Karkat says who knows what we might face on the other side. Best to do that on a full stomach.” one of the dads says, you’ve lost track of them now.

You’re stuck having to eat a meal before you can move on and see just what kind of bullshit is going to happen next. Between that mental distraction, sitting close to Karkat and knowing that you don’t have to concern yourself with him somehow psychically knowing what you’re thinking and then also watching the former sprites talk you find you’re pretty distracted. Seriously Hal is explaining the weird mishmash of their hybrid species biology to the part trolls and as for those who are mostly one species with a bit of animal in them he’s consoling them on the weird sensation of having legs again. To tell the truth even five minutes after you’re done eating you don’t think that you could tell anyone a single thing that you ate, that’s how little it registered with you. You arrive at your final destination and Jade does her thing with the ship to make it fun size so that it can be carried and you guess she did the same with the other one when you weren’t looking. You hope so at least, it’d be a shame to abandon all those spare parts that you may well need. Whatever, it’s not why you’re here.

You’re antsy enough to see the end that you forget what you’ve already seen. Karkat sees the door appear as the universe is made and this unbelieving and joyous laugh bubbles out of him and he throws his arms around you. You return the embrace of course and laugh yourself when you realise that you’ve already seen this part. You’ve seen this relief on your faces, of everyone else around you alive and well, this was the good end that you were all supposed to get. This is what you’ve all fought for and what so many people have died for.

The door needs opening but it’s not you that does it.
Your heart is in your throat as John, your John, reaches out for the door. He sets his hand on the handle and then with a breath that even you can hear in the quiet, turns it.

Everything goes white.

The only thing that lets you know that you haven’t immediately gone blind is that you can hear other people grimacing at the brightness. You blink a few times and see everyone else standing all around you, looking just as bewildered as you feel. Aside from them and the platform that you’re all on and all the people everything is gone into infinite whiteness.

Karkat squeezes your hand a little harder and your chest feels like someone jammed that foam insulation stuff in it, the squirty kind that expands like mousse and sets like cement. It’s filling up your ribcage and stealing your breath. Rose never saw this far, what if this is isn’t good at all?

GAME OVER

Suddenly appears in the air ahead of all of you in giant black font.

“What the fuck?” Karkat demands from your side. What the fuck indeed.

The text changes.

UNIVERSE CREATION STAGE COMPLETE!

Why does that read distressingly like there is still more game to come? The words fade and then the word SCORE flashes up, below it a huge number pops up. The score floats a little higher up and then more writing appears below it, flashing in and out of view as each new thing replaces it.

ACHIEVEMENT BONUSES!
SESSION SCORE MULTIPLIER - X5
GOD TIER PERCENTAGE MULTIPLIER - X64.58333333333334
PERSONAL QUEST ARC COMPLETION REWARD - GRANTED

At that last one a bright red glowing ball drops out of the sky and stops in the air before you, and you’re not the only one. Multiple other players, but notably not all of them get a reward in aspect appropriate colours. Yours is a bright time aspect red. This is a prize for you, for completing your ‘quest arc’ or whatever but you’re not sure you trust this game enough to not give you a poisoned chalice.

There’s a pop from somewhere to your right and you look around your own bubble to see that Roxy no longer has her bubble but she does have some kind of tablet in her hand. Curiously she taps at it and gasps when it starts playing Dirk’s voice out loud, not super loud but in this void everyone can hear it.

“Want to know what I really think of Roxy? I'm proud of her. She's the only one of us who could face her problems and then get down to business and actually solve them. No endless hand wringing or suffering in silence or any of that bullshit. She saw she had an addiction. And then decided to fucking fix it. Just like that. She's probably stronger than the other three of us put together.”

Roxy whips around to face Dirk, her eyes brimming with tears.

“Did- did you really-” she gasps.

“I wrote it but yes, of course. I meant it, I still do. You’re the best and that I let you feel like you’re not is just- OOF!” Dirk’s attempts to speak are halted by Roxy basically body tackling him and
happy crying all over Dirk’s semi terrified form.

After that pretty much everyone who got one decides to accept their prize. So, curiously, you do too. You reach out to the red bubble. It doesn’t really have a texture as you touch it but it bursts all the same. A bright red vinyl record floats down into your waiting hands. You hold it up, it’s slightly translucent which is cool but this is hardly that- wait does it have a shitty watermark of your face on it? You peer closer at the record and see that no, it’s not a watermark but rather a frozen image of a young version of you in your old room. You turn it to see better and the young Dave inside moves a little too. Ah, you get it.

You spin the record as you throw it up in the air slightly and it hangs there. As you do the image in it becomes clear, so clear that you’re no longer standing next to Karkat in the void but you’re experiencing the image you saw.

Your door bangs open and you whirl around, sword out immediately but the door is already shut again. Bro is gone. But on your desk where before there had been nothing unusual there is now a square blue box. Your Bro doesn’t give out a lot of presents and wrapping them isn’t really his style so this merits investigation. Lowering your sword you get closer to the box. On the top is a label with your address in somewhat clumsy handwriting, one of your friends sent this to you and you’ve already got a present from Jade and you know Rose would have better handwriting than this. You open what must be John’s present, bubbling inside with glee. Inside is a pair of aviators and a note from, you guessed it, John. Just reading why he chose these for you makes you want to laugh and as you change your pointed shades for these cool ones from your very best bro you know you’re going to treasure them. You’ve never really had friends and then suddenly these three came along more or less at once. It sounds lame but you’re not sure you’ve ever been this happy before in your life.

You catch the disk as it stops spinning and drops. It was a memory, a moment of time and a nice one too. You tilt the record just so and see other instances of yourself through time, memories that you can place as moments when you felt genuinely happy. Your reward is… it’s good times. More accurately, good times that you can reliably repeat without fucking with the timeline and that you can’t misremember. No matter how shitty you feel you can spin this thing and feel differently. That’s actually a hell of a reward.

You turn to look at Karkat but he’s already jamming something down his sweater, his face all dark. You open your mouth to ask him what he got but he doesn’t even let you do that.

“Shut up!” he squawks at you. Ok, interesting, note to self: investigate that later.

Oh, the text is changing again. Your shared score is displayed and being altered with each new addition.

GUARDIAN SURVIVAL BONUS - X11
NEW SPECIES CREATED BONUS - X5
ZILLY MULTIPLIER - X2
UNLOCKED! PAN GOD TIER MODE!

With a burst of colour Karkat’s clothes changed from his grey hue to the same knight god tier robes as yours, only in the blood aspect colours. Neon red wings flicker around on his back, just separated by the cape running between them. Karkat is staring down at himself in dazed amazement, distantly you can see Kanaya fluttering up in the air in delight but Karkat is starting to frown.

“This feels like a handout.” he says quietly and bitterly.
“A reward. It’s not like I didn’t anything special for mine, I just died in the right place. Do you want to die because I think there’s been enough of that around already.” you say to him.

“Oh fuck that, and I’m not giving it back either. I’m just saying I feel… I feel black and white forest bear’ed to.” he scoffs and tugs at his cape.

Black and white… panda? He feels ‘panda’ed to?

“Alright, that one can’t be real. That stupid word only works if you already know the word for panda and also I know you know the word pander because you accused Vriska of doing it when she was getting snotty about the Dungeons and Dragons rules when Terezi was trying to get us to play.” you accuse him.

Karkat pauses in fussing with his own cape, having been so obsessed with yours before, and looks up at you. An evil little smile spreads over his face and he leans in close to your side.

“Sometimes,” he whispers conspiritally, “I make things up just to fuck with you.”

“How dare you!” you gasp. Wait, no you do that too, don’t you?

“How dare you do the thing I do.” you add but you’re actually kind of impressed and desperate to know how often this happens.

“You’re just jealous that I’m better at it.” Karkat accuses you and flashes a smile of pointy teeth at you. The thought occurs that maybe he might bite you with those and maybe you might like that. From the way his smile goes a little more sinister you think he just read your mind, or at least your failing poker face.

THANK YOU FOR PLAYING!

NEW UNIVERSE CREATION AT… 54%
...FINDING HIGGS BOSON... 59%
...PAIRING DNA… 69%

“Nice.” someone across the lillypad says and you feel the vague urge to track them down to give a well-deserved fistbump for that.

...INSERTING DARK MATTER… 76%
...RETICULATING TIME DILATION… 83%

“I think it’s fucking with us.” other Dirk says suspiciously.

“You only noticed that now?” Hal scoffs. A muffled scuffle breaks out from that direction.

...IGNITING STARS... 89%
...CONSTRUCTING LOCAL SOLAR SYSTEM... 95%
...TRANSFERRING GRIST AND OTHER CURRENCY 97%
...IMPORTING PLAYERS, NPCS, GUARDIANS… 100%
NEW UNIVERSE INITIATING. HAVE FUN!

“Uh, my hand won’t come off of the-” John starts to shout in panic and then everything vanishes.

The ground falls away from you and you flail, the world around you inexplicably blacked out. You’re weightless and for a moment, a terrifying moment, you feel like you’re falling. Then a hand smacks into your arm. You pinwheel away and then manage to remember how flight works and halt
yourself. Facing the right way now you can see those who are used to being god tier orienting themselves in the void properly and those not used to it failing around wildly. Huh, the adults got god tiered too, not just Karkat. You suppose it did say pan god tier.

Karkat(alpha): WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS SHIT?! WHAT’S HAPPENING?!

That… alright you didn’t hear that but it was more like a text box. In your brain. It’s also rapidly filled up with people around you also exclaiming how the hell did that happen and oh shit it’s still happening now.

Jade(alpha): everyone shut up!!
Jade(alpha): we are obviously all in space and i guess its in our new universe!
Jade(beta): except we are all breathing fine even if it is kind of cold out here…
Jake(beta): Perk of god tier maybe?
Psiionic(beta): Well I’m glad you unlocked that for all of us because I don’t want to see what happens to people thrown out into space. That said I have the ship here if Jade could fix the zeit.
Jade(beta): I think I am closer so I’ll do it!

You flinch as the space above you is suddenly filled with giant red spaceship and you end up being dragged in a glow of red and blue towards part of it, you guess an airlock of some kind. You don’t know if this private god tier space message system does private yet so you just have to reach for Karkat and point out the adults.

Unsurprisingly the troll ancestors are all the same god tier classes as their eldest children, the functions of the scratch still affecting them and you suppose reading off of their previous game data. But the two human dads on the other hand were never players, always guardians. The short cuffed sleeves of the mage outfit let you see that it’s the other universe’s dad you’re looking at, his clothes are the same shades as Karkat’s own so you suppose he must be a mage of blood. You’re not sure you know enough about mages or blood to comment on that but it’s his counterpart that’s more interesting.

Not only is Mr Crocker an entirely different class to Mr Egbert but he’s a different aspect too. His clothes are the same bright blue as John’s but the same poofy pants and silly crown affair as Dirk’s. A Prince of Breath. Given what you know about how important breath is and how princes are all about destroying shit you suddenly have a lot of questions about what Mr Crocker is like. You do enjoy how his little tiara is balanced on his dadly hat though, that’s delightful in ways you can’t fully explain.

The door goes past you and you watch it close just like this morning, only this time you’re on the inside. It seals and the artificial gravity comes back on so fast that anyone who doesn’t have police light coloured eyeballs drops to the ground in a heap.

"John get your elbow out of my ear." you complain and shove him away.

"I just realised I could have made a bubble of air out there and we could have just talked in it rather than… than whatever that was." John says as he sits up.

"Yeah, what was that? I'm not keen on people being able to beam their thoughts into my brain all the time. I've got enough of my own to deal with, thanks." Dirk says as he stands up.

"Another game mechanic I guess? If it planned on ditching us in space it'd make sense to give us all a way to communicate." other Dirk suggests.
"Well, obviously." Dirk replies. Ok, you're tuning out on that weirdly confrontational conversation.

You look around to check that you have everyone but see that Signless is floating up in the air in his Seer of Blood robes visibly counting everyone down, you can see him subtly pointing to each of you with his finger and his mouth moving as he counts.

"That would have killed us if you hadn't unlocked that pan god tier thing." Karkat says. He doesn't sound angry, his voice is tight and quiet. That means he really is angry, like REALLY pissed.

"I think we all unlocked it. I mean, it had bonuses for species creation and you made us, right? So it's not like it wasn't counting your session. I think the humans among us are lucky we didn't get caught cheating. I'm sure what me and Roxy did was cheating, not to mention bringing other Dave back to life." John points out.

"Yeah, listen to John. You did important shit." you agree.

"Sure. But given that we still are wearing dumb clothes and have weird space trollian in our heads now I think it's pretty clear that the game isn't entirely gone so maybe don't stand around confessing that kind of crap." Karkat says, raising a very good point.

"Alright, everyone is here. I think that we need to have a serious talk about what we're doing now and I think we need to get some information about what's going on outside. Maybe see if all of your powers are working, I know mine are again." Signless calls out.

"Again?" John whispers and you shrug, that can stay a mystery as far as you care.

There's a flash of green space powers and Jade blinks back into the room, her dog ears twitching. You guess people's powers still work then, you're good with not testing your own again if that's cool with everyone else.

"Right." a loud voice says from the ceiling, it's the Psiionic through the speakers again. Jade must have plugged him into the thing in the ship's core, or taken him there to do it himself.

"Locally we're in a star system that isn't too dissimilar from Earth's, the star's a touch younger maybe. No habitable planets in this solar system unless you're feeling very adventurous and have secret terraforming tech I don't know about." Psiionic says. Great, you guess you're living on this ship then.

"There is a suspicious absence of a planet in the star's goldilocks zone, though." he says.

"The what now?" you call out and several other people are asking the same thing.

"Oh! I know this one!" Jade pipes up and floats up again, presumably excited to geek out.

"The Goldilocks Zone is the area surrounding a star which supports planets that are habitable for humans, specifically planets that allow for liquid water. That's the zone that we found all Earthlike planets in. Not too hot, not too cold, just right. Get it?" Jade explains.

"Human centric or not the zone still basically lines up with what trolls can take too, obviously we can tolerate slightly hotter and brighter but even those of us without gills still need a planet with water. Can't help but wonder if this suspicious blank spot is deliberate. Planets clear their orbit of other space rocks and shit, that's what makes them planets, and maybe if the planets on either side of us were huge I'd say they cleared where we are, but they aren't. Instead, we're in an Earth sized blank band, there's nothing hiding behind the star, no sign of something that was here and got blown up, nothing." Psiionic says. Jade chews on her lip and the tiny ball of the Earth floats around her hand.
"Insert token to continue, great." Other Dirk mutters.

"What?" Dirk asks him.

"Old arcade games used to have tokens or even just a slot for cash to play it. What we've got is a suspicious slot in space and something that goes right in it. Might as well have slapped a billboard down saying 'insert Earth here'. It just feels like the next stage in the game." Other Dirk says unhappily.

"We don't have to do it and it's not so simple as just putting it down, there'd be a lot of work. I mean for one thing I don't have a moon here and I'd need to make one, either that or steal one. Not to mention the state this thing is in. It doesn't have to be the next stage, just a reward that requires a little set up and maybe some creativity as to what we want it to look like. If we just woke up on Earth again that'd be taking away the whole 'create your own world' or whatever the reward was meant to be. Right?" Jade reasons.

"Maybe we don't need to be so pessimistic about it." other Jake agrees with her and squeezes his soulmate's shoulder.

"I think we should all think of what we want to do, some serious thought. Then we can meet up again and decide what we want and how we move forward. We don't have to do this now and I think we've all been through a lot today. I- I know I have so... let's just all take a break. Meet back tomorrow evening in the gym, talk there." Signless suggests.

Unsurprisingly the motion to procrastinate shit and do your own thing goes down remarkably well.

Sleeping that night isn't something that goes well. There's no dreambubbles thankfully, maybe this universe is far away enough from the game to not have them but you're glad. But when you dream it's a mix of memories of terrible things that have happened and your mind making up other things. The usual nightmares of blood and dead friends, your dead double features pretty heavily that's for sure. What you hadn't expected are the dumb nightmares. Pedestrian shit like realising that you're late for school and you have a big test today but you can't find your things, but you're dreaming of a house you've never lived in and you've never been to school. Not a physical one anyway. Then there's a dream where you're working in some kind of restaurant and people are shouting orders to you but they just get faster and faster and you simply can't keep up.

You think you manage to confuse yourself awake because it's such weird shit to dream about.

When you wake up you're all for breakfast and checking that people are alright. Despite not having spent much time here it's routine to go to the dining hall and grab food and a seat, only when you sit next to Karkat who's not wearing his god tier clothes anymore he gives you a flat look. You catch the mark on his arm too late.

"Wrong one." he grumbles and bites his breakfast. He's eating a fried egg sandwich and as he turns his alien teeth on it it all but disassembles itself and falls onto the plate.

You look around and catch the figure of other Dave and the back of a god tier Karkat and you'd just assumed and they were the correct pair, even now knowing what you do with them both facing away from you it's hard to tell. Here you are, still making that mistake again.

"Can I sit here anyway or are there Mean Girls rules I have to follow to make the cut?" you ask him.

"That's an excellent movie, fuck you if you think otherwise." he says with a mouthful of food. Of course he's seen Mean Girls, he grew up on Earth. There's probably so much trash that he has seen
that you can tease him for, and movie titles that don't take ten minutes to say no less!

"They seem eager." you say, pointing to your doubles who are clustered with the group of what you will kindly call your nerdier friends. Or your science and tech nerdy friends and other assorted dorks. There's a lively debate happening about something or other.

"Don't know how Dave can even want anything to do with it. I get we need a planet and he's 'representing the time team' or whatever but after yesterday I don't want to ever do anything again." other Karkat mutters and uses the crust of his bread to paw at his plate that is covered in the egg equivalent of a Tarantino movie.

"Never doing anything again sounds so sweet to me." you agree.

"Finally some sanity in the Strider clan. Dirk and Hal are in damage control 'we know everything' mode and that's only being echoed by the younger Dirk who seems set to prove that he's just as dumb as our one. Both Roses are being all light player about it, the younger Roxy is talking about making an entire goddamn moon with the older one. Aside from the two sprites who are fuck knows where you're the only sane one." other Karkat says, pointing everyone out in turn as he dunks on them.

"Now I feel special." you tease and he grins.

The smile falls off of his face a little and he wipes his hands on a cloth serviette that you guess one of the adults put out in an attempt at civilisation.

"I, ah... I didn't get the chance to say yesterday but Dave talked to me after. Well, we talked a lot. But he told me about you and him in the dreambubbles, what he asked you to do and you telling him you weren't going to stop trying to bring him back." he says.

"I promised to pass that message on I didn't want to make not- I mean, make other Dirk literally break you two up. It seems important. Plus, Rose said something'd work and it did. I really thought it was going to be me and not him, I didn't know." you say hurriedly.

Other Karkat rolls his eyes and basically his whole head too in the gesture, always over the top in every iteration.

"I wasn't berating you for stupid light fuckery, and I'm not even touching how willing you lot are to throw yourselves on your sword for any fucking person around. I wanted to thank you for trying to help, I know you trading your life for his didn't work and you just lost it to Meenah but you gave your life to save my soulmate. That means a lot to me. Thanks." he says.

"Oh." you say.

"It feels weird to say you're welcome but I also feel like a dick if you say thanks and I don't say that. It's not like I can be all 'oh it was nothing' because that's bad too but-" you continue but other Karkat holds a hand up to stop you.

"Stop the words, dear god." he says dramatically and you take the out you're given. The pair of you fall back into silence, watching the continuing meeting of the minds across the room. The time players are all rapidly conferring with each other and you don't like that one bit.

"Oh, just an FYI." other Karkat says with an awkward cough.

"I'm not a seer, obviously. But we have a bunch here, plus Kankri's a seer of blood and blood is relationships and bonds. I'm not a seer but I am blood and... what I mean to say is that more people
than you think know about whatever you and your Karkat have become. I'm not going to gossip but Kankri has a big mouth and bad timing, that and my sisters are all over anyone's unresolved romantic tension, so." he says as he very deliberately doesn't look at you.

"Oh." you say.

Well, shit, you'd not even talked to Karkat about who you might tell beyond agreeing to just not announce it dramatically to the world. Either way you're pretty sure that he's not going to like the idea that several people on the ship psychically know about you two.

"That said," he continues and sips his coffee, "I do have a bet going with my soulmate about which one of you made the first move, so if you could tell me so I can win that'd be just great."

"Motherfucker." you gasp.

Then you think about it for a second.

"What did you think was going to happen? What did you bet on?" you ask him, unable to resist the temptation to know more.

"Oh please, he's just like me in this. I was head over heels for my Dave for forever but I liked being his friend too much and respected his wishes too much to push it more when I had the idea that he didn't want that. He had to decide to tell me that he liked me, no way you weren't the one to make the move with yours as well." he says.

"So what've you won then?" you ask as you sink a little lower in your chair. Other Karkat laughs loudly and bangs his fist on the table.

"I KNEW it! Hah! He has to read a troll romance novel, the title of which I will spare you from hearing because your patience isn't that long. I'm so glad that I didn't have to play the entirety of 'Mad Snacks Yo' for his entertainment." he says grimacing as he pronounces the game's title with clear derision.

You consider this and rock back in your chair a little, chewing on your own breakfast as you do.

"We’re different species technically, me and him. Right?" you ask.

“I think different species just means you can’t crossbreed, doesn’t it? Wait, no, lions and tigers can reproduce so- ugh I should have spent more time paying attention to what they were saying in science instead of just crushing on Dave. Let’s just say you are for the sake of whatever you’re getting to.” he says.

Man, you have so many questions for them both about what school was like. How Earth dealt with trolls just showing up, what did they study together, how their culture worked. You could have asked more before now but there was pressing shit to attend to and not thinking about you and your Karkat like that to be done, but now you’re curious. Still as he said you did have a point.

“All timelines are connected far enough back, I think. You were way WAY over, obviously. If me and him are different species then that change had to be millenia ago. I’m sure there’s so much that’s different but society’s gotta still invent the same shit to move on, right? Someone on that Earth still discovered fire, worked out how to forge metal, make clothes and whatever. Different people than on mine probably but it’s like that shit had to be discovered, right?” you say.

“I get that, the same happened on Alternia obviously. Even on Earth the same stuff was discovered over and over again in different places at different times. Someone has to invent agriculture, right?”
he agrees.

“Right, so my point is that if something exists in my Earth and his it’s got to be a fundamental building block of society.” you continue.

“Like the internet, written word, ok. That’s an interesting thought at least.” other Karkat nods thoughtfully.

You shift in your seat until you are close to him and lower your voice as if you’re about to drop top secret knowledge on him.

“Mad Snacks Yo exists in both universes, so…” you say sneakily. Other Karkat’s eye twitches.

“So I’m going to keelhaul you out of this ship and I won’t even be a little sorry about it.” he threatens you. You are absolutely not in control enough of your poker face to not laugh at that.

“Hey, you’re here!” your double says brightly as he walks over. You guess other Karkat’s flailing around attracted his attention.

“He’s the worst, the worst Dave and the worst human!” other Karkat insists. Your double looks at you curiously, raising just the one eyebrow in a gesture of Lalondian curiosity.

“Mad Snacks Yo is a universal constant.” you tell him seriously. You catch the minute flash of expression on his face as he evaluates that statement, adds in other Karkat’s overreaction and how funny it is and then comes to evaluate just how much he wants to play along.

“That makes perfect sense to me.” he nods along in calm and serious agreement.

“I hate you both.” other Karkat informs you.

“Spadeways? Babe, no. I’m pretty sure you’d explode after seeing what happened with me and my time clones.” he says teasingly.

“I don’t want to know.” you insist.

Other Karkat glares at you both and then comes over all smug.

“You lost, by the way. I told you it’d be him.” other Karkat says.

Your double’s eyes go wide and he looks back at you as if to see whether his soulmate is telling the truth. You’re not sure exactly what you look like but apparently it’s incriminating enough to make other you groan in complaint and dramatically drop into the nearest seat.

“Here was me encouraging you to just not waste time and go be happy by actually being with him, I thought I was staying dead so I wasn’t exactly planning on losing the bet. Fucking hell.” he whines.

“I told you, no way it’d be me. I mean him.” other Karkat says all self satisfied.

“Don’t pretend like you didn’t chase me down multiple times when we first met, you may as well have written ‘LOVE ME’ on your face.” other you snorts. Oh, you need to hear more about THAT. Preferably with your Karkat nearby so you can experience his mortification at another iteration of himself, that’ll be entertaining.

“And I respected your obvious rejection.” he counters.

“Yeah, but that’s because you’re great and also I’m a moron.” your double sighs and he sounds a
little wistful as he does it.

“I want that in writing.” other Karkat laughs.

“No chance. Actually I did come over here for a reason and it wasn’t to just get owned by you, thanks. It’s about the new planet. Or old planet really, it’s your Dirk’s and Roxy’s. Well, and everyone else in that session I guess. Have you seen it? It’s flooded to shit and totally unusable.” other Dave says and focuses on you again.

“I’ve heard about it.” you say.

“So they want to fix the planet and the life and void players are going on about making things for the planet and all the science nerds are trying to engineer climate change that gives us actual land and then ice caps and shit without sending us all snowball Earth the other way. It’s hellaciously nerdlicious and all that but that’s not what I need you for.” he explains. You see other Karkat mouth ‘hellaciously nerdlicious’ out of the corner of your eye with an expression of utter despair and fondness.

You get his point, though. Your Earth had climate change and obviously shit was going badly way faster than it ever had but even so absolutely massive change still takes the one thing you have.

“Time. You need time. You wanna, what, set the planet up with whatever it needs to change the climate and then fast forward it through until we can use it? you say, smart enough to read between the lines.

“What?” other Karkat says, suddenly serious.

“We probably don’t want to do it all in one go, it’s probably going to take tweaks. But there’s two of us, two Aradia’s and one Damara, that’s five time players. It won’t be that hard to hop the ship and everyone in it through a few thousand years at a time if we work together.” he suggests and you nod, it’s more than doable.

“Whoa, no. Hey, I might not be leader anymore but the last time you did that you all DIED! You’re banned from dying forever, cut that shit out right now!” other Karkat shouts.

“Man, no, this isn’t like hopping timelines. That’s something we’re not supposed to do which was why it was way harder on us. That and we couldn’t stop so we got pushed too hard. But travelling forward and back through time is literally our whole deal and if we go too far we just stop doing it and have a break and oh no we didn’t travel a round number of years through time, the horror. Seriously man, I’m not eager to test how conditional my mortality is anymore either. We’re cool.” other you promises.

“We can’t just live in here forever so… yeah, just let me know when you need help with the heavy lifting.” you tell him.

“Great.” he says brightly and gets up to leave.

Later that day they hold the meeting but you don’t go. Everything with the game was either just one thing after another in an endless barrage of bullshit or it was anxious waiting, the sword of Damocles hanging over your neck just ready to drop just like the bass. Wow you mixed that metaphor. Wait, or is that a simile? Shit you never can remember, you should ask Rose when you see her.

It’s not that you’re avoiding people but there’s just something nice about knowing that when they need you to do your thing you’ll help but everything else can just be everyone else’s problem for a while. So you chill for a while. Dirk and Roxy are always involved in fixing their planet so you
don’t see them much so you play a lot of games with Mituna and Latula who continue to be cool.

Eventually Jade does pop Earth out into space. You don’t hear about it so much as you find out for yourself. Walking by one of the windows you bypass a group of consorts, and it’d taken you a day until you stumbled upon all of those that had somehow got on the ship and then been revived by over enthusiastic life players. You’ve got consorts out the ass now, nakkodiles nak nak nakkering away. Between them and all of the carapacians you’re finding that the homo sapiens humans are in the minority now.

Either way you’re getting around all of these other people as you go by a window when suddenly, BOOM. No more blank space, instead a glowing blue ball hanging in the sky. You damn near drop your soda as you turn to stare at it. With all the blue on it and the clouds wisping around parts of it you could be forgiven for mistaking it as Skaia at first glance and yet you know there’s no way you could.

The planet is so more than just blue. Blue doesn’t do justice to it, it’s cyan to navy, teals and deep dark blues. You know the shapes and here and there you can spot it, patches of sea where the shadows and highlights on the water hint at land below. You think you can just make out where Western Africa drops off into old school Atlantic Ocean. Something within you feels struck, like when you flick a glass with your fingernail and you can hear it reverberate. Maybe it’s deep down in your DNA but that blue ball out there is home. That in itself is a stupid idea, it’s not your Earth. You’ve never been there, some alt you has but not you. Rational or not your brain ignores the argument and makes your heart beat for home, home, home.

You’re running for the airlock before you can even think better of it.

You hadn’t expected to find Dirk already going in it, you sneak in with him just in time.

“You’re going down there too?” he asks as you bum rush the door and snatch your cape in just in time. Dirk has ditched the god tier robes of his own and to be fair if you had to wear tights and poofy pants you’d do the same.

“Yeah man, I gotta.” you say with a nod of great enthusiasm.

Dirk looks out of the window of the airlock and presses his hand to the glass.

“It’s stupid, I know. It’s just water and I know what that’s like, it’s all I ever saw for so long. Besides it’s not like my apartment is still there that’s… I guess that’s lost in the game now. Not that I care, I never left the thing aside from to go fishing and I’m really done with being stuck inside my home like that. But that’s still my planet, you know?” he says.

“I know what you mean. I saw it outside and I just- you know like when dogs get super excited to see you and they’re just like-” you pull the face of unbridled excitement to show him. Dirk’s mouth quirks into a startled little smile of his own that you reckon is probably half mirror reflex and surprise at you emoting so hard you could be Jade.

“I’ve never actually seen a dog but I’ve seen movies, I know what you mean. I think I need to decompress this thing, there’s a button I think.” Dirk says as he turns to look for it.

“Maybe we should call Hal and ask him to do it for us, open the pod bay doors or whatever.” you joke.

“Don’t encourage him to meme that hard, he might sprain something.” Dirk snorts and jabs at a button.
The pressure in your ears goes haywire and you have to work your jaw a little before you feel like your head isn’t going to pop.

Dirk(alpha): I’ve no idea how this works, how we’re not dying from this at all but honestly I’m not sure I dare to question it.
Dave(alpha): yeah man dont make this be like the alien movie where it gets sucked out the window or whatever

The doors slide open and you both float outside.

Dirk(alpha): It’s not quite audio in my head when you ‘speak’ but even so I can still hear your typing quirk.
Dave(alpha): man i dont have a quirk im not a troll
Dirk(alpha): You don’t have an identifiable typing style that you exclusively use? Or are you allergic to punctuation and capitalisation? That’s a quirk bro.
Dave(alpha): how dare you do this to me im going to find how to block you from my brain pesterchum
Dave(alpha): hey my hair feels like its going all weird

Dirk looks over at you and away from the Earth for the first time, you’d both just been hanging there staring at it. He pulls his phone out and floats over to you.

Dirk(alpha): I can take a picture.
Dave(alpha): oh shit yeah both of us with the earth in the background first totally cool ironic not-ironic earth selfie in space
Dirk(alpha): You know, I think if my brother had the chance to have done that he absolutely would have. Given that he filled the Earth with giant shitty JPEG artifact riddled statues of liberty I’m pretty certain he would have done this too.
Dave(alpha): oh hell yeah

You lean in and bump your shoulder up against Dirk’s and when the picture of you both comes up in his screen you both adjust yourselves in the shot. How has this phone not exploded in space either? Who knows. Shenanigans is how. What you do notice is that your hair is a halo around your head, without air or gravity it’s flowing like you’re underwater. Dirk’s however is not.

Dirk snaps the pic and you both lean in to look at it.

Dave(alpha): jesus h christ i forgot how much hair shit bro used to go through i guess you do too thats not even budging huh
Dirk(alpha): Does that bother you?

Dirk is looking at you, his face tight and controlled but for the little worried crease between his eyebrows.

Dave(alpha): youre the one who has to wash it out all the time not me
Dave(alpha): if that doesnt bother you then nothing should
Dirk(alpha): It is the terrible burden I carry. It did make getting in and out of the sea a lot a bitch to be fair.
Dirk(alpha): ...do you want to see where I used to live?
Dave(alpha): hell yeah

Flying down towards the Earth isn’t the kind of thing you can describe well. There’s not a solid moment when physics decides to start noticing you again but eventually you notice that the upper atmosphere is cold even when surely space would be colder. Most of all though you notice just how
big this planet is, how vast and wide it manages to be. Despite spending so much time in game flying in and out of worlds you realise how baby sized they are compared to this one. You’re also sure that you’re still somewhat exempt from some physics shit because you must be going absurdly fast and aside from your hair and clothes ruffling in the wind there’s no effect on you. You’re going at mach sicknasty and your skin’s not, like, ripping off of your body and you’re not catching fire or whatever would happen.

“This way.” Dirk shouts over the wind and you peel off to the right as you dip lower and lower. Finally when you breathe in you get that hit of salty sea air. Looking down you see a school of fish jerk out of the way of your shadow, fearing that you might be some big predator.

“There’s fish!” you yell. Dirk slows down a little to meet your side with his and looks down too. “Fish Hitler killed almost everything on this planet, but even she couldn’t kill everything. Rising ocean acidity killed a lot of big animals, there’s no more whales and I know orcas went extinct before man did. There’s still life here, though.” Dirk explains.

You look down again. You’ve never seen the real ocean, only Rose’s water covered land. It might be fried compared to the one that was on your Earth but it’s still kind of magical.

“It’s just up here.” he says and you drag your eyes away from the water.

A minute later you see something on the horizon and you speed closer and closer to it, something jutting out of the water. It looks like scaffolding or I beams or something. You both slow down and Dirk pauses in the air before dropping down onto a metal beam. It’s horizontal and part of a structure that makes out a large squarish block, the upright parts are sheared off into nothingness a little below your head level. Wrapped around the beam are a number of thin cords and cables, a net is tied up against a large beam with a few things held inside it. All around you as far as the eye can see is flat, peaceful water.

“Welcome to Houston.” Dirk says flatly and waves his arm out at the empty ocean.

“This was your building? Same as mine?” you ask, looking around. The size of it matches to your mental map of what your place was like.

“It was your Houston apartment. I mean, my Dave’s one. He fortified it to survive when nothing else did, he knew what was coming. Stood the test of time I guess you could say.” Dirk says with a touch of bitterness as he leans against one of the bars showing no signs of concern at slipping off. You’re a little unsteady on your footing and you can fly.

“Which side had the door out into the hall?” you ask, looking around at the water and trying to orient yourself.

“It didn’t lead anywhere anymore, but that way.” Dirk says pointing behind you.

You twist and then fly over to the beam on the other side, Dirk following. Your eyes scan the water below, subtle waves lapping against the struts of metal as they go into the water. You try to place your front door and superimpose it on the world ahead of you. Below the water you can see a subtle darker streak of what once was the road.

“The record store, corner store… down there was Denny’s.” you say quietly pointing them out.

“A little off. I found the Denny’s sign at the corner there. You’re a few floors lower than you think, it’s throwing off your depth.” Dirk says, moving your hand slightly.
It’s all still out there, though. The small section of the world that once was yours. Hanging in another net is a mask, a mirrored kind of snorkel mask. You pull your shades off, snap the thing over your face and leap off of the metal beam without a thought for how deep the water is or how you don’t know how to dive. You hit the water with a painful slap, not helped by when Dirk dives a few seconds later he slices through the water like an arrow and twists gracefully to look at you.

You surface with a cough and Dirk follows, floating so his mouth is below the waterline and absurdly his hair is still basically the same as it was before he jumped and in space. You wonder if the you that lived on this world left him a metric fucktonne of industrial hair products or something, you guess he must have. Priorities, other you, priorities.

“To Denny’s.” you declare, pointing onwards.

“Can’t make promises about their service but ok.” Dirk says.

You dive back under the water and, yeah, you can make out the shape of the road. It’s mostly under a lot of sand and, actually, you think a lot of it has become vaguely blackish sand. The concrete and bricks of the buildings are mostly rubble now, covered in sea plants and barnacles, here and there bright little fish flit about. You’re not the greatest of swimmers, not compared to Dirk who may as well have been born in the water. Actually, from what you know about ectobiology he may well have effectively been.

You try flying instead of swimming, it works in the air so maybe it’ll work here. Water is basically like air but wet, right? Shit, wait, Karkat needs to hear that. You wonder if your ‘can’t talk brain message’ system works underwater like it does in space.

You think REAL hard at Karkat.

Dave(alpha): water is like air but wet
Karkat(alpha): HOW THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING THAT?! ALSO HAVE YOU SUDDENLY FALLEN VICTIM TO EXTENSIVE HEAD TRAUMA OR ARE YOU DUMBER THAN YOU WERE LAST I SAW YOU?
Dave(alpha): technically i think i went ten minutes without breathing earlier
Karkat(alpha): THAT’LL DO IT.
Dave(alpha): harsh

It turns out that you can fly underwater and also that, as in space, breathing is optional here. You finally catch up to Dirk who is floating underwater near a sign that you do in fact recognise as the Denny’s sign from your road. You’re not sure you would recognise it if you didn’t know what you were looking for though. Dirk isn’t looking at it, or you for that matter, he’s staring out in the distance. You come a little closer to him, he’s either worked out that you don’t need to breathe here or he’s one hell of a free diver. Neither of those would surprise you in all honesty.

Dirk(alpha): Don’t freak out, ok?

Oh man, those words have never held good things. You look where he’s looking and it takes a second or two but you see it in the haze of the water in the distance. A shark!

Dave(alpha): HOLY FUCKING SHIT A SHARK LETS GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!
Dirk(alpha): Whoa man, it’s ok. It’s one of the leopard sharks that lives around here, they’re harmless and they don’t taste half bad either. I stopped hunting them ages ago because they’re honestly kind of sweet.
Dave(alpha): sharks man they eat people
Dirk(alpha): I don’t think they’ve ever attacked people, come on.
Dirk swims towards the shark because he has no sense of self preservation obviously. You don’t exactly want to follow him but you also don’t want him to die. Besides you just defeated a god of time, you can totally freeze time or alter shit if it goes wrong. Right? Right.

The shark itself has weird patterns on it that you’ve never seen before but you can see why it’s called a leopard shark. It’s big. Or big-ish you suppose, it’s probably not as long as you are tall but it’s still got wicked sharp teeth and it’s far bigger than all of the other fish around.

Dirk slowly swims a little closer and the shark startles and shoots off into the distance, leaving you both alone.

Dirk(alpha): Damn. I wonder where they’ll live if we manage to put the oceans back to just where they used to be. I guess its species will just shift back to the place they were before.

Dave(alpha): are you going to miss things being this way

Dirk doesn’t answer but instead swims to the surface with a few powerful kicks. You float up as well and Dirk’s shaking water out of his hair now, the water seems to have finally penetrated the gel or whatever and it’s now curling wetly around his face.

“It isn’t like there won’t still be oceans. I think I missed swimming more than I thought I would.” Dirk says and floats on his back.

“But I want the Earth to be what it was before Condy destroyed it. It never can be, of course, but I at least want it human habitable again. I want to see how much survived. I want to see cities with humans in, for real and not just in movies.” he says softly.

“Humans, trolls, carapacians, consorts. It won’t be like the Earth I came from either, we aren’t going back whether we wanted to or not.” you point out.

Dirk lifts up out of the water and looks down at you, dripping water onto the surface of the sea.

“Do you know why I played the game? Me and Roxy knew roughly what it’d do, Callie told us enough to give us an idea. We still willingly played though.” Dirk says.

“You knew you had to no matter what?” you guess and float out of the water. Like hell you’re going to stay in there alone with sharks.

“No, Callie said we’d meet our parents. That I’d meet my brother. I did sort of, or his ghost at least. Besides, I got to meet you. The world I came from, this world… my bro was a hero for sure. He fought against things that were wrong, stood up to evil, sacrificed himself to try to save humanity. But he spent over half his life doing that at least. I admire him but that’s a pretty shitty life, mankind’s greatest contributor to cinema or not. He should have been living, creating, doing what he wanted. Even if I had met him when he was alive it’s not the life I would want for him. And I know the me from your universe was- well, let’s not talk about that.” Dirk says with a grimace.

“Yeah, let’s not.” you agree.

“Everything that just happened to all of us was monumentally fucked up. The death count is crazy high and it’s ruined a lot of our teenage years for sure. Now there are different problems but they’re fixable ones with our skills, we can repair this planet and just live here. Maybe start civilisation going and skip ahead and blend in, be anonymous and live a normal life or stay with just our group and live in a quiet world for a while. I get to know a you who doesn’t have to spend his whole adult life fighting.” Dirk says emphatically.

He’s obviously concerned about things not going right, he’s been spending so much time helping out
the group of geeks working out how to fix things so that’s clear. But even so it’s just as blatant that he’s got a goal in mind of how he wants things to be for all of you. It sounds nice and you’d feel like an asshole if you pointed out that you still might have to spend your adulthood fighting, you’ve not fully relaxed yet. Everyone else might be breathing a sigh of relief but this game is just as cruel as Bro ever was and you’ve enough experience not to interpret a calm in the storm as being anything other than the build up to more shit. Maybe you’re wrong, you hope you’re wrong. You WANT to be wrong. As per usual though if things are going to go bad all you can do is wait and react so for now maybe you can go along with the plans to fix this world.

“For what it’s worth if I had your powers and I could go back to before I started the game I still wouldn’t go back and stop myself playing it. Even leaving aside paradoxes and all that, playing the game meant my world wasn’t just this.” he says, throwing his arms open at the endless ocean around you both.

The ocean might seem beautiful and new to you but you can see how looking at a drowned world for your whole life could be depressing. You know how small your apartment was and how much it felt like a too small cage to be trapped in but you actually could leave now and then. It might have been your world metaphorically but not literally.

“Like I said, you can’t go back.” you agree.

Dirk jerks in alarm and you whip around, sword out, ready to face…

Oh. You guess they managed to make a moon somehow because one is suddenly huge and hanging in the sky, pale and visible in the middle of the day. Before your eyes it shrinks, either actually shrinking or being dragged back you don’t know.

“They did it. I guess it won’t be too long until I need to help skip us through time and we get land back.” you say a little breathlessly. This planet is so different from the lands in the game that seeing your group’s powers working on them is genuinely godlike and awe inspiring.

“Roxy’s already designing a house for our combined family group.” Dirk informs you, floating a little closer and looking up at the moon as well.

“Should I be afraid?” you laugh.

“Your counterpart has already snagged the basement so if you have a preference I’d suggest telling her.” he says. The basement, huh? As far away from the roof as possible, clever. Honestly though it doesn’t matter, it’s all different. You’re on a planet you’ve never been on before, you have saltwater clinging to your skin for the first time ever, and you’re in Texas with a brother who actually desperately wants you to like him.

All change.

You stare up at the moon, pale now in the sky and barely visible.

“Hey,” you say to Dirk, “want to go be the first man on the moon?”

Dirk considers this for a second and then smiles slyly.

“We could race for it.” he says and takes off before you’d even agreed.

You rush after him like you couldn’t slow down time to get ahead with barely a thought. You don’t know if this will last but a healing and more hopeful part really really wants it to.
Some quick notes!

1) Yes, this is the penultimate chapter. There will be one more soon set about a year or so after this one. There may be more sidefics if I choose to add them so if you're interested in that I'd suggest subscribing to the series to catch them.
2) You can always find me on undanewneon.tumblr.com where I post all new work and you can ask me questions which I'm reasonably good at remembering to answer!
3) Just... thank you all. This was my first big thing writing for homestuck and the first thing I wrote as I was abandoning my last fandom but you were all just so cool and loving that I'm sure I'm going to stick around here for a good long while writing! Oh, also I've started a new trollstuck fic that's all about dave<>sollux and dave<3karkat which given that I'm writing it has way more intense drama and evil foreshadowing in as you might expect. So if that's your jam go check that out!
Your alarm blaring wakes you up but you slap it off and doze off immediately. The second alarm across your room going off for just this reason gets you up and out of bed. You scrub sleep from your eyes after silencing the beeping and thank past Karkat for having the presence of mind to set this thing up. Today is not a day you can afford to sleep in. Lifting up your phone you check for the message you know will be there.

[carcinoGeneticist(alpha) began trolling carcinoGeneticist]
CGA: ALRIGHT LACKEY FOR THE DAY, I HAVE YOUR LIST OF TASKS RIGHT HERE.
[carcinoGeneticist(alpha) ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist]

The hemospectrum is a terrible thing except for when large documents need colour coding it seems. All of you over the past year have compromised in changing things to differentiate yourselves from your counterparts, that is for those of you who have them. You’ve changed your text colour to the same mutant red as the rest of your line whereas your soulmate has straight up changed his whole chumhandle and you know he’s dialled back his investment in making music because it’s become more of other Dave’s thing. You think that’s pretty dumb and neither you or your double will be giving up the genre of romance any time soon.

You’ll get to your task list in a moment, you have a personal unassigned one first.

[carcinoGeneticist began pestering tenuouslyGaudiloquent]
CG: RISE AND SHINE. THE RISING AND SHINING IS MANDATORY TODAY.
TG: always rising for u bby <3
CG: WHY DOES THIS ALWAYS HAPPEN?
TG: hey i just woke up and also i was literally made to appreciate your divine beauty i cannot help myself
TG: like the tides to the moon my kokoro doth doki doki over that ass

[carcinoGeneticist began pestering timaeusTestified]
CG: YOU TAUGHT DAVE TO TALK AND I WISH TO COMPLAIN ABOUT YOUR JUDGEMENT IN THAT ENDEAVOUR, ESPECIALLY COMPOUNDED IN THE MATTERS OF READING AND WRITING.
TT: I’m sure I could set my watch by these complaints. Good morning by the way.
TT: Also poor Dave is only human, you can’t blame him.
TT: Don’t we all want senpai to notice us?
CG: I’M GOING TO FIND A WAY TO SUE YOU FOR THIS, YOU BASTARD.

You close your eyes and resign yourself to the fact that you will never manage to outdo any Strider this way, but you know their weakness by now. SINCERITY.

Oh, hey Dave’s still talking.

TG: look at that fine ass
TG: makes a man go hot damn son
TG: haiku for booty
CG: YOU’RE ABSURD.
TG: im sugoi
CG: YOU’RE A FUCKING NERD IS WHAT. LET ME GO ALCHEMISE A LOCKER TO SHOVE YOU IN.
TG: tsundere

Alright, fine, he asked for this.

CG: HEY DAVE, ABOUT THE WEDDING TODAY.
TG: yeah?
CG: I’M REALLY HAPPY FOR THEM, GETTING MARRIED. GETTING TO SHOW JUST HOW MUCH YOU LOVE SOMEONE LIKE THAT IS A PRETTY MAGICAL THING.
TG: yeah man especially today
TG: i know we would all rather be thinking of them getting hitched than this day last year when we all had to fight and some of us (not naming names here) died
CG: DEFINITELY.
CG: STILL, I KNOW DIRK HAS RULES ABOUT YOU STILL NOT BEING A *REAL* ADULT UNTIL YOU’RE EIGHTEEN AND MY PARENTS ARE THE SAME BUT YOU KNOW SOME DAY THAT’LL BE US UP THERE.
CG: GETTING MARRIED.
[tenuouslyGaudiloquent has disconnected]

Oh. That wasn’t the response you were expecting.

[tentacleTherapist began pestering carcinoGeneticist]
[tentacleTherapist attached photo 642.jpg]
TT: Please enjoy this photo of my beloved twin being firetruck red as his phone sinks to the bottom of his cereal bowl. Unfortunately Hal’s hysterical laughing came out somewhat blurry, but even so it’s a good photo I feel.
TT: Pray tell what did you say to get this wonderful reaction?
CG: TECHNICALLY I THINK I PROPOSED.
TT: What.
TT: Also you absolutely cannot get married before Kanaya and I, I will cut you if you try.
CG: SORRY, CAN’T POSSIBLY TALK. I’M VERY BUSY TODAY.
TT: Don’t you dare end this chat!
[carcinoGeneticist ceased pestering tentacleTherapist]
TT: Ohhh you’ll regret that.

You put your phone down and figure that you should get ready for the day. You have to share a bathroom on your floor with three other people but that’s fine. Of course, when your dad was building this place with a literal entire planet of real estate to work with he could have put in more bathrooms. He could have made the place look like the essential mansion that the StriLonde building is, but no. Apparently having to queue to piss keeps a god humble.

No queueing today though, the door is open but the room is occupied. Davepeta blinks sleepily at you as they brush their teeth, their glasses missing entirely. They say something around their toothbrush which you guess is probably some kind of greeting and with a little flutter of their wings they step to the side so you can brush your teeth also. Davepeta spits in the sink and turns a little.

“Can you do meow solid, bro?” they ask, gesturing at their back.

Davepeta is wearing a low cut spaghetti strap shirt over their cat paw print patterned boxers and the low back on it leaves their wings free and not rubbed on by fabric. Even so, you can see where a few of the bright orange feathers are misaligned and probably uncomfortable. You comb your claws
through them one-handed as you brush your teeth with the other. The smaller baby fluff feathers close to where their skin becomes more hybrid normal don’t seem to need any of your attention. Of all of the hybrids you think that Davepeta is the prettiest with their patterning, and not just because they look half like your sister who if anyone said was ugly you’d punch them. Nor because there’s strong hints of your soulmate in there. No, it’s because their grey patches of troll colouring over the pale hues of Dave’s are in actual patterns that are symmetrical and deliberate. More like the colouring of an exotic parrot than the Rorschach test look Hal has in places. Arquius for his part looks like a regular troll, except for the total redness of his eyes, bright red hair and claws. He’s more mutant red than anyone in your family which is pretty ironic for him.

“Oh, much better. Karkitty got you running around all day like his bitch, huh?” Davepeta asks with a happy sigh as they flick their wings in the confined space.

Yeah, other you is the one making all of the lists and job assignments for the wedding. On the one hand it rankles you a little, it’s your grandmother getting married not his. Except she is his, really. You’re as related to her as he is and it’s not like you can say he’s not really in your family because he’s adopted because YOU’RE ALL ADOPTED. You’ve just known her longer is all. You’re not bitter.

Okay, maybe you are bitter but it’s the stupid kind where you’re mad that another kid has a toy you don’t even want to play with. You don’t want to organise this whole thing, that’s way too stressful. You want to be useful and help Dolorosa of course, that’s why you signed up to basically be your double’s minion for the day. You’re just being petty and it’s something everyone more or less has had to deal with over the last year. When someone else is you as well who is the real one?

Some people have handled it with surprising grace, like Dave. Although maybe after the other one blinded yours there was no way for them to escalate that non lethally so they called it quits. Others handled it less well, like John.

“Yeah, we’ve got to make sure this thing goes off flawlessly after all.” you say instead when you’re done spitting toothpaste foam into the sink.

“Rather you than me. I’ll tell you when Kan gets here with the clothes.” Davepeta says and with a sleepy wave, excuses themselves from the room.

The official outfits that everyone is wearing to the wedding have been kept under lock and key at the Maryam household since they were made. Of course, everyone was consulted on what they wanted to wear and that was styled within the boundaries of the theme. People were allowed to choose which ‘side’ they wanted to be sat on, jade for the Maryams and blue for Jean Egbert’s side.

Without those to wear you go back to your room and dress in your normal clothes, the sign on your chest now red to help further separate you from him. Speaking of him it’s time to look at his list of jobs.

CHECK THAT JADE HAS ALL OF THE FLOWERS READY AND REMIND HER TO BRING THEM.

That seems patronising, but fine you’ll do it. You fly out of your window.

To the East is the sprawling StriLonde estate atop the giant hill it rests on. To their credit you know they hadn’t intended on making it that big, it had just been added to and added to. At first it was simple, a square structure not unlike their old home giving each of them their own rooms as well as a main kitchen and living room. But then Rose and her double wanted a library and the younger Dirk was just as keen, so they built one. Then, well, you just needed a room for all of the computer servers
and an adjoining workshop to do robotics in of course because apparently, other Dirk had robots he wanted to rebuild. Then people told other Dave to go play music somewhere else and not keep people awake and well then what about a pool? As it always does with that family, things escalated.

The West side of your little town is far more modest, the suburban houses of Crocker and Egbert and what passes for the same on Alternia for most of the rest of the families. Well, except for the Serket house which is on another hill and looks like castle fucking Frankenstein because of course it does. You don’t want to deal with those losers right now, you want the ones who raised an island out of a lake and built a home for reclusive weirdos on it. Oh, sure they call it a nature sanctuary where they start raising new and endangered species before distributing them across the world but you’re onto their Jurassic Park shit. Sooner or later it’s going to be a disaster, people had better mark your words on that!

Flying over the island is nice enough. Below you a herd of deer scatter at the sight of you and you’re actually quite looking forward to seeing those in the wild. A high fence whizzes by underneath you and you’re in a new animal enclosure, this one makes you stop. You know these animals, you’ve only seen them in a zoo before though and never this close.

Slowly you descend and a curious giraffe lumbers over to you on its long knobbly legs. You’re at about head height for it and this close you can see just how long and soft its eyelashes are.

“Hey there.” you say, sweet and soothing to try to lure it closer.

It has no fear of you and why would it? You’re probably the first troll it’s ever seen unless Davepeta has been flying around here and even then they’re different enough to you in appearance that the giraffe doesn’t know. Plus it has no predators in its enclosure so it has no qualms about shoving its giant face into your hand and snuffling at you curiously.

“Oh wow…” you whisper in awe.

Well, you’re in awe until it sticks out an unfeasibly long tongue and tries to lick you. You’re well away by then, no thank you to that! The Harley/Englishes take requests for what animals to bring back but you had no real requests. Besides you think if anything you’d put in had taken priority over the very firm request from both Dirks, Hal, Arquius and all of the Zahhak’s for horses you think you might have been stabbed.

Past the animals there’s the flora section of the island and you’re pleased to see that it’s full to bursting with just the sorts of flowers needed for the wedding, grown especially for that. Jade said that she’d pick only the very best ones and as you land at their towering home you feel confident that things are going well.

Why did you have to think something so stupid as that? As you walk into their house you find Jake sat on a stool near the kitchen counter, tipped back against the work surface with a steak over half of his face.

“I’m pretty sure that’s an urban myth, I don’t think steak works.” Jade says slowly.

“Oh course it’ll work, I’ve seen it in movies.” Jake insists.

“There’s so much wrong with that whole sentence.” other Jade sighs and combs her hand through her much shorter hair. See, even she’s making concessions to be different to her double though you would venture that the dog ears do that by themselves.

“Jake English you tell me right now that you don’t have a black eye on the day of my grandmother’s
wedding.” you demand and they all look at you.

“Oooh, you’re in for it now.” Jade teases him.

“Well, if that’s what you really want, Karkat. I don’t have a black eye on the day of your grandmother’s wedding.” Jake says confidently. He’s definitely lying!

You lean in and rip the steak from his face and, yes, that is one hell of a black eye.

“How. How did you do this and why would you do this TODAY?” you demand, wagging the steak at him accusingly.

“Well, it’s just that we have kangaroos now and, you do know what those are yes? Ok, right, good. Well they’re lovely animals and I’d never seen one up close before and I’ve seen in cartoons that they like to box and they really do!” Jake says brightly.

You pinch your nose and remind yourself that you cannot murder Jake, he has to be at the wedding. Maybe… maybe there’s some way to fix this. You really don’t want to have to go back to your double for everything, you can fix this problem alone.

[carcinoGeneticist began pestering tenuouslyGaudiloquent]
CG: PLEASE TELL ME YOU’RE NEAR SOMETHING ELSE THAT GETS MESSAGES RIGHT NOW.
TG: if i didnt carry at least five computers on my person at all times jade would disown me and we both know it
TG: which is good because my phone just died mysteriously
TG: under mysterious milk based circumstances
CG: YES, YOU’RE A DISASTER I ALREADY KNOW.
CG: YOU LOVE ME AND WOULD DO ANYTHING FOR ME, RIGHT? SEEING AS I AM YOUR MOST BELOVED SOULMATE AND LIGHT OF YOUR LIFE.
TG: wow exactly what do you want
CG: JAKE IS A FUCKING MORON LOOK AT HIM
[carcinoGeneticist sent photo ‘AND THEN THERES THIS ASSHOLE’.jpg]
TG: yowch that had to hurt
TG: wait how long as he had that
CG: HE SAID HE GOT IT THIS MORNING, WHY?
TG: bruise like that right there his eye should be swollen shut trust me man id know
CG: OH WELL HE DID HAVE A STEAK ON IT WHEN I GOT HERE.
TG: nah dude that only works in movies
TG: oh wait right jakes hope bullshit he believes it works so it does
CG: EITHER WAY HE CANNOT SHOW UP AT THE WEDDING LOOKING LIKE THAT, OTHER ME WILL LOSE HIS MIND AND PEOPLE WILL WORRY AND THE *PICTURES* DAVE, THE PICTURES!
TG: fair but what do you want me to do?
CG: BLACK EYES HEAL IN WHAT, A WEEK?
TG: try longer than that but you could hide it a lot easier in a week sure
TG: tell me youre not angling for me to loop a whole week just for jake so his face can heal just for wedding photos
CG: PLEASE DAVE IT’S IMPORTANT!
TG: no fucking way dude looping with non time players is dangerous and you know that shit aint risk free for us neither
TG: plus that hope shit fucks up all sorts of logic and how many time travel movies with inaccurate shit do you think hes seen and bought into
TG: looping jake could doom the universe and we went through enough to get this one im not risking it for photos
CG: WELL WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO THEN??
TG: ugh
TG: fine looking at the picture again it doesnt look too bad and dirk was always the genius at fixing and hiding black eyes and bruises so if anyone can do it he can and roxy is a wizard with makeup too
TG: but you know jakes officially dirks problem so go ask him
CG: I GUESS THAT MAKES SENSE. IF THAT WON’T WORK MAYBE ARANEA MIGHT BE ABLE TO HELP, I KNOW IT’S NOT HIS ACTUAL EYE BUT IT’S CLOSE, RIGHT?
TG: maybe but id say dirk first
[carcinoGeneticist ceased trolling tenuouslyGaudiloquent]

“Well?” Jake asks curiously.

“I’m getting you to your soulmate, he’s the one who’s supposed to deal with your shit anyway.” you grumble as you open a new chat.

“How would he be able to help?” other Jade asks.

“I think hiding things like this is unfortunately in his wheelhouse of eclectic skills.” Jake says softly and you can actually see the moment other Jade catches on and then cringes at having asked. People tend to forget about Bro, mainly because both Dirks are so well liked it’s hard to think of there being a terrible version of him, same with their Mom. People don’t like to think about them so they’re sort of a conversational black hole.

[carcinoGeneticist began trolling timaeusTestified]
CG: I REALLY NEED YOUR HELP IT’S AN EMERGENCY. YOU NEED TO FIX THIS.
[carcinoGeneticist sent photo ‘AND THEN THERE’S THIS ASSHOLE’.jpg]
TT: Holy crap what happened to him?
CG: IT’S A STUPID STORY INVOLVING KANGAROOS CAN YOU FIX HIM OR NOT?
TT: Uh, shit. I actually threw away all of my makeup when Bro died, I was never going to need it again.
CG: OH GOD.
TT: But, Dave might still have some, you know what he’s like with hoarding.
CG: DO I EVER.
TT: Failing that I can see what Roxy has and I’d need to alchemise different stuff anyway, Jake’s hardly the same skintone as me after all.
CG: ALRIGHT WELL I’LL BRING HIM OVER AND YOU DO THAT THEN?
TT: On it.
[timaeusTestified ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist]

“Hell, did you just rat me out?” Jake demands, peering at his phone.

“You deserve it. Anyway, I didn’t come here for you but you’re my problem now. Jade are all the flowers ready to go over to the venue?” you ask and turn to her.

“Yeah, we were just about to go. Me and Nep are decorating and Jade’s delivering all the handheld stuff and buttonholes and that.” Jade says with a nod and her double nods along as well.

“I appreciate that the pair of you are always relentlessly competent and can always be relied upon. You’re a credit to your family, UNLIKE CERTAIN PEOPLE.” you growl and grab Jake from his seat.
“Hey! I am older than you, you know. If me and Dirk get married and you marry Dave I’ll even be your father-in-law so be nice!” Jake protests.

“Yeah well my dad was Jesus on Alternia so I think I win in intimidating father figures. Where’s other Jake anyway?” you ask and Jake helpfully shrugs.

“Tell me if you haven’t found him closer to the wedding, alright? I’m not standing for his nervousness around Dirk bullshit, alright?” you tell both Jades and they nod then you drag Jake outside and take off.

The dumb thing is that you know the other Dirk and Jake both really like each other but it’s almost like they take turns trying to make it work while the other one thinks that pretending things are normal is the best way to deal with it all. It’d make you think that people are lost without actual soulmates but you and Dave were also pretty disastrous at getting your shit together.

You’ve vowed to leave the pair well enough alone to sort their own shit out. All of the heart players, Hal and Davepeta included have promised no such thing and you know Callie is orchestrating some shit with that too but you’re staying so far out of that disaster.

“I really wasn’t trying to ruin anything you know, I didn’t mean this.” Jake says nervously from behind you, presumably having interpreted your silence as you flew to seething rage.

“I know you didn’t, I’ve just got a lot of shit to fix today. Everything has to go smoothly so I need this fixed.” you tell him.

“I know, I know. I’ve never been to a wedding before. I’ve only seen them in movies, I didn’t mean to risk it with my escapades although from what I’ve seen in movies that’s very par for the course.” Jake says with a beaming grin on his face.

“It’s not like I’ve ever been to a wedding either, it’s not something trolls used to do and even though Signless got invited to a few cross species ones back on Earth I didn’t get invited. Still, you’re not the comic relief in this so stop using that trope as an excuse.” you say and start to descend through the air towards the StriLonde grounds.

“Dirk!” Jake says in delight and zooms ahead of you to where his soulmate is waiting at the sliding glass doors. They’re always so pleased to see each other, it’s so sweet. You get a flash of Jake’s mark on Dirk’s arm, long since repaired from the darkness that once marred it when they split before.

“What did you do?” Dirk sighs, holding Jake’s face in his hands.

“Got in a boxing match with a kangaroo.” Jake replies brightly as if that’s a thing that normal people do ever.

“Naturally. Thankfully this isn’t that bad, come on let me fix this.” Dirk says and pulls him inside.

You have a lot of things to say about Mom Lalonde and Bro Strider and basically nothing good about either of them but given that you know they’re alternate highly fucked up versions of the generic Roxy and Dirk starter genetics a lot makes sense. Bro’s place was shitty but clearly everything was calculated to be not what was expected, all except the things he had to entertain himself like the outlandish TV, games systems and music equipment. Of course for him ‘not what was expected’ was mostly a horrible journey into puppets and psychological horror. Also child abuse. Mom Lalonde however had a very clean, polished, high class aesthetic broken up with inexplicable wizards.

The shared areas of the StriLonde building are a nice fusion of both styles done well by people who
aren’t deranged. Everything in the kitchen is some kind of warm coloured stone and wood with bright cheerful lighting. If it can be high tech it is and you think their fridge is only the size it is to hold all of the photos pinned to it. There’s evidence that people live here even if, like with the huge ‘sweetest bro and most hellacious of jeffs’ crystal mosaic on the wall, it’s evidence that those people are bonkers.

Since you’re here you can leave Jake in Dirk’s capable hands, he’s already smearing some kind of liquid something or other on his face which you guess will do something. But as you’re here you may as well head down and see Dave. Not that you need to or anything, you could easily not do that.

Yeah, who are you kidding you’re scampering off down the stairs like the desperate tool you are.

Dave’s room is, as ever, a total clusterfuck of stuff and you have no idea how he finds anything in it but you’ve seen him easily locate stuff so his system must be beyond you. The ceiling is a twinkling net of tiny lights and there are lamps and glowing things in bottles on shelves to compensate for how dark it can be down here. At least there’s no red lights about, he has an actual room for his photograph developing now and the results of that are plastered all over the walls. Despite the Daveness of the room, that you will never aloud admit to being cosy, there’s no Dave in it. However the sound of running water and the open bathroom door down the way gives you a clue.

“It’s just me.” you call out as you come closer. Dave sticks his head out of the door half of his face covered in shaving foam, he waves at you and ducks back inside.

“Ha ha. Stupid mammal with your body hair.” you tease, leaning against the door. Dave shaves another stripe through the foam, washes the razor, flips you off and continues. It’s certainly not a hardship having to watch him do this, but maybe that’s just because he’s shirtless and leaning over the sink. He raises his hand to shave the last of it away and you watch the way the movement shifts the mark of the Earth on the top of his shoulder. It’s the newest one and it showed up not too long after you all started living on the planet again. Doing that was such a momentous event, such a clear after point to the game that pretty much everyone with soulmarks has something thematically similar. On your arm you have the Earth held in a grey hand, protected and enclosed. Dave’s got this Earth in front in his with shadowed images of the old Earth and old Alternia behind it, a sign of moving forward but maintaining connection.

Dave emerges from the towel that he’d been drying off with and comes up to you.

“Better? Less like a stupid mammal now?” Dave asks, offering his now smooth face to you to feel and you do with eagerness. It’ll probably stay that way for, oh, maybe a day at most before starting to head back to roughness again. At least he’s not Jake, from Dirk’s bitching it seems Jake’s basically got outrageous stubble mere seconds after he’s done shaving.

“Yeah, but it’s fine. You’re my favourite stupid mammal.” you assure him and squish his cheeks.

“Aw, babe.” Dave drawls all over exaggerated Texan accent even though you both grew up there and talk the same way. He only does that when he’s trying to be sarcastic and you know him well enough that he’s bluffing and actually is touched at you declaring him your favourite stupid mammal. He actually is your favourite but he’s not stupid really, despite the dumb shit he does regularly.

“Can’t believe Rose took that picture of me this morning.” he complains as you slide your hand around the back of his neck.

“Rose missing a chance to showcase you doing something embarrassing? You really think that’s more likely?” you say.
“You have a point.”

“Besides I was delighted that I managed to fluster you into dropping your phone into your breakfast.” you tease him.

“Pssh, you’re just a tease.” Dave scoffs, rolling his eyes.

“I wasn’t teasing about wanting to marry you.” you say softly and you get to watch him slowly start to go red. You can feel how tense he’s gone in the way that having too many feelings makes him go sometimes.

“You weren’t?” he asks, his voice a touch strangled.

“Of course not. I mean, sure the age thing. I know Dirk and Roxy would have a shitfit if we eloped and declared ourselves married or got the mayor to do it with his understanding of love and possibly shakier understanding of old Earth laws. So not next week or whatever but… I’ve thought about marrying you since you showed up on my skin.” you tell him.

You don’t need or want to ask if he thought the same back then. You know you being on his skin was not a good thing for his safety for a lot of his life, things changed and got differently complicated when you met and weren’t the girl that he’d assumed you must be. That doesn’t leave a huge window between when you got together and when your planet was destroyed for him to have daydreamed about tying the knot with you. You’d just figured he might have thought about it with Dolorosa’s wedding coming up and how much everyone’s been talking about it. You certainly have thought about it more.

Dave catches your hand, the marked one with your ring in your reds wound around your finger.

“I know we make rings for weddings, so it’s like a man made thing as well as the one you get. And great if you can get one that still shows the pattern of the marked ring and all. That’s fine, but why the hell do the other humans do it too? I’ve seen their movies and it’s such a specific symbol but they have wedding rings and no soulmarks like what the hell?” Dave rambles and rubs his thumb over your ring around your finger, you wouldn’t want to hide yours even if some people like that so that only they see the real one. It’s a personal choice but whatever, you have a preference.

“I asked John about that at one point and he said it was something about… about that finger having a vein that connects directly to your heart so it was a kind of a romantic symbolism about being connected to your heart at all times.” you say thoughtfully, it’s a nice idea actually. You especially like the repetition that inexplicably shows up between all of your worlds.

Dave laughs more or less right in your face, effectively ruining your mood and when you don’t laugh as well he just giggles harder.

“Wow Karkat and you called me stupid. I know we’re all homeschooled and all now but how’s that high school biology treating you?” he giggles.

“What are you talking about?” you demand.

“Ok, cool, how many blood vessels of any kind do you have that don’t connect to your heart eventually, huh?” Dave asks with a shitty grin all over his face.

“I…” Oh. Wait. That’s how the circulatory system works, everything’s connected to the heart. Now the question is not whether you’re stupid because clearly you are but whether John is also stupid or if he deliberately made dumb shit up and you bought it.
“You’re my favourite stupid troll.” Dave says and catches your face in his hands, squishing your cheeks undeterred by you glaring at him.

“You’re going to be smug about this, aren’t you?” you ask and your leg hits the edge of his desk and Dave seems to get the idea to crowd you up against it looking exactly as smug as you know he is.

“I would never, I am a benevolent god. Really.” he says.

“Mmmhm.” you mumble, getting your hands on his warm bare sides. Maybe this day isn’t going to be that bad after all, it’s certainly looking better right now at least.

Or it was until your phone starts pinging like crazy, stupid goddamn apple text tone filling you with rage. Dave raises an eyebrow and you hiss in irritation and fish the thing out, you’ll check it and if it’s not serious the thing’s being thrown across the room onto his bed and you can let Dave distract you for a while.

[twinArmageddons began trolling carcinoGeneticist]
TA: kk ii don’t know where you are but we have an emergency and ii really don’t want two have two go two the other karkat about iit 2iince he ju2t had a fiit at mom and dad about the tiimiing2 for the food.

“Ah, shit.” you mumble.

CG: WHAT’S WRONG EXACTLY?
TA: ii't2 john.
TA: not eb ii mean our brother john. kan deliivered the clothe2 and we were all gettting changed and now he’2 locked him2elf in the room and whenever anyone trie2 two get hiim two come out we get thii2 indoor hurriicane.
TA: he’2 not an2weriing pe2terchum eiither ii already triied that.
CG: SPECTACULAR. LET ME JUST CHECK THAT MY CURRENT DISASTER IS TAKEN CARE OF AND THEN I’LL TAKE CARE OF THIS ONE. HE’S NOT AFFECTING THE WEATHER OUTSIDE YET IS HE?
TA: not yet but ii wouldn’t rule that out. where are you anyway?
CG: AT DAVE’S.
TA: what happened two you 2uppo2edly beiing on 2triict weddiing bu2iine22 today then, huh?
CG: I *AM* HERE ON STRICT WEDDING BUSINESS, I NEEDED DIRK TO HELP ME AVERT A JAKE DISASTER THAT I WILL TELL YOU ALL ABOUT LATER. DAVE JUST HAPPENS TO LIVE HERE AND I HAPPENED TO BE CHECKING IN ON HIM TOO.
TA: came for the bu2iine22, 2tayed for the plea2ure ii 2ee.
CG: YOU’RE THE WORST.
CG: FRATERNITY CANCELLED WITH SOLLUX, JOHN IS MY BROTHER NOW.
TA: ehehehehe when ii'm done puttiing thii2 fancy 2uitt on iim 2o makiing that meme.

You shake your head and put your phone away.

“Sorry duty calls.” you sigh and move past Dave to leave.

“See you later.” Dave calls after you.

You jog up the stairs and go back to the kitchen. Jake is sat on the counter with Dirk between his legs leant in dabbing carefully at his face.

“I’m not done yet.” Dirk says, without looking around.
“But it’s fixable?” you check.

Dirk moves back a little so you can see. You can almost scarcely tell anything was there before at all.

“I’m having to mix shades so it’s harder but I’ll have him good as new, I swear.” Dirk says, patting at the back of his hand with a sponge and alternating between that and another slightly different shade.

“Ok, excellent. I gotta go.” you tell them both and rush out.

You fly home through wind that is definitely picking up and rush up the stairs to John’s room. At first everyone had assumed that he would live with Mr Egbert or Mr Crocker but he just couldn’t cope with living with a guy who looked like his dad but wasn’t, especially one who knew a lot about the John from your universe. Moving in with a bunch of non humans seemed to be the ideal fix for him, none of your parents are like his at all and you have so many siblings that there’s not such an intense focus on him.

It’s all been fine until now.

“Go away!” John shouts. You round the corner and see Sollux floating, leaning into a torrent of wind before giving up and dropping down. There are smashed photo frames on the floor down the stairs where they no doubt got blown off of the walls.

“There you are. I can force my way through it but I’m worried he’s going to total the house or me pushing against him will.” Sollux sighs. He’s already in his jade coloured outfit albeit looking a little windswept.

“Parents are already at Dolorosa’s?” you ask and he nods. Damnit.

“Shit. SHIT. You should go, take some of my list, check that all the chairs are in the right place and that the lighting for the evening is working, yeah?” you say.

“Sure I can but what’s your plan?” Sollux asks.

Diplomacy clearly hasn’t worked, he’s not calmed down over time and force isn’t the way. But there is always another way, if your life has taught you anything so far it’s that there is always a solution to a problem, even if that solution is weird as hell.

“I’m going to annoy him out.” you declare and run down the stairs.

“You what?” Sollux demands, flying after you.

The basement of your house is filled with all sort of shit, supplies for things, spare parts, a multitude of laundry machines, and the controls for the things that run your house. The water, electric, heat and so on. You flip the big fuse box open, it’s labelled so that each room has its own fuse. It’s set up this way so that if certain Captors in the house blow the power it shouldn’t fuck you all over. The big yellow warning sticker that Psii must have re-written for this house, because you remember it in your last, is a testament as to what else it was used for.

DON’T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT!

Yes, the downside of having a lot of kids and a highly selective fusebox is the temptation to get revenge on an annoying sibling by either disconnecting all of their power, plunging them into darkness or rapidly toggling either of those off and on until they hunt you down and hit you or something breaks. There was a very stressful two months where this happened a lot before Psii made
it very clear that doing this was a way to get into VERY BIG TROUBLE and violators would be grounded and have all of their tech taken away for a month. Poor Meulin was the one who got caught for the last time and Psii stuck to her punishment so unwaveringly that no one ever tried it again since.

Desperate times call for desperate measures.

You consult the map and work out just which switches are for John’s room and grab the one for the power and the lights. He might not have the lights on at this time of day but it’ll be extra annoying if he does. You hold onto them tight and then start wildly switching them off and on.

“Pester him and tell him that I’ll stop if he lets me in!” you shout to Sollux over your shoulder. You keep flicking them until John messages him back and then you leave things on.

Carefully you close the fusebox and back away hoping that possibly Psii just might not need to find out about this. You hope if he does he’ll at least understand that it’s an emergency. Sollux heads off to do some of your work and as you’re climbing the stairs it occurs to you that you could have just asked Jade to teleport you into his room, goddamnit.

“John let me in!” you shout and shove his door open with none of the wind resistance you were expecting.

He glares at you from where he’s sat on the bed, his blue eyes all bloodshot.

“I guess we’re lucky I’m not EPILEPTIC or something!” he snaps at you.

“Oh shut up you’d know by now if you were. What’s wrong?” you say and kick the door shut behind you.

John is mostly dressed for the wedding. His jade waistcoat is open, his shirt is tucked in if a little crumpled, he’s missing his tie but otherwise all looks well.

“I can’t go to the wedding, you’ll have to go without me.” he says sniffling and wiping his nose on the back of his hand. You grab a tissue out of a box and shove it at him before he wipes his hand on his pristine dress pants like some kind of savage who will be skinned by your moirail.

“Why not? You have to go, you’re family!” you insist.

“He’s not my family! He’s not my dad!” John shouts and things fly off of his desk onto the floor. Ah, this is about his dad.

“I meant Dolorosa. You’re her grandson.” you tell him quietly and sit on his bed with him.

“I’m not really. I’m not. Just because your parents say they adopted me-” he begins.

“Did adopt you.” you correct.

“Doesn’t mean I’m part of your family really.” John says.

“Newsflash moron, we’re all adopted. But maybe you mean I’m Signless’s direct descendant and that argument works until you get to half of my sisters. Aradia and Damara aren’t the descendants of any of my parents. They’re adopted. Sure my parents adopted me as a wiggler and the jades delivered me and they adopted Aradia and Damara when they landed on Earth years later but they’re still my sisters.” you reason with him.
“I’m not even the same species.” John argues.

“Neither’s Davepeta. Besides Jean’s gone and adopted the Peixes and the Makaras and they’re not the same species as him. My parents didn’t spend decades on Earth fighting to be included in the same culture just so they could not consider a human they adopt to be their kid. Give us more credit.” you say patiently.

John nods mutely and snifflles a little. You hand him another tissue.

“Want to tell me what this is really about?” you ask.

John scrubs at his eyes and drags in a shaky breath.

“I don’t remember how to tie a tie.” John whispers.

“That’s it? John, I’ve no idea either. I was planning on messaging Dave who can be unfairly debonair in a suit for a guy who also walks around with a shirt with a wizard dick quote on it. That’s if Kanaya hasn’t printed me instructions, or there’s always youtube.” you say brightly, finally a problem with an easy solution!

“No,” John hisses and looks at you, “my dad taught me when I was younger. When he was still—”

Not an easy problem then, oh no. The topic of John’s dead father is never a good one but given that he has two virtual clones running around it’s hard for John to forget the issue entirely.

“He taught me and I’ve forgotten. It’s one of those things dads are supposed to teach their sons, tying a tie, learning to shave, how to- to do your taxes or some shit like that. But he taught me this and I don’t remember it! I’ve forgotten already, how much else am I going to forget?” John chokes out and smother his face in his hands.

John drops onto the bed, his hands still over his face and you can hear him sob wetly. Oh… John.

“I’m going to tell you something, I’ve not told you this before because I don’t like talking about it.” you say slowly and sit with him.

“The revolution, what my parents did, it was huge. On Earth we had trolls who loathed them and trolls who basically worshipped them but everyone agreed that my parents and Signless especially was probably the single most important troll on Earth.” you say.

“You should have seen him talk, to preach to hundreds and to work to change things. He was always the most compassionate, forgiving, compelling man ever. I was this snot nosed kid who wasn’t good at anything and I lost my temper all the time, I wasn’t a leader. I was nothing like him.” you continue. John is frowning at you, having started to peer out from between his fingers as you talk.

“I idolised him, I wanted to be him but that gap was so great. I was shackled to this legacy and totally incompetent at it, in fact that chain that Dave has on his wrist is all about this. But throughout my life I’d watch him do all of this and I’d listen to him and I wanted to be like that.” you say.

“But you are a leader, it worked. I know you don’t lead much now but you did.” John points out.

“Shut up, you’re getting ahead of me. My point is when the game started all that changed.” you say.

You look down at your hands, clench your fingers together and try to supress the shake. It’s been so much time but it still feels as fresh as it did the day it happened. Rose says that’s trauma for you. You remember fumbling through the opening gambit of the game, the kernel, the house structure not
holding. The blood.

“Signless died when I was getting into the game.” you say.

“He ended up a sprite but all of our parents went missing at the same sort of time, Fish Bitch got them and when she found Signlesssprite she stole the life from him. She left him empty, cold and weird. He wasn’t himself, not a leader but so close to who he was that just being around him hurt.” you say.

“I know what that feels like.” John says bitterly and yeah he does know.

“I was left trying to lead all these kids, most of them older than me. I was a leader and totally unprepared for it. This was what I wanted but not how I wanted it and I had no adults to guide me, my parents were dead, captured or captured and tortured. I had to lead and all I had to do it was everything I could remember about what Signless had said about leadership. I could barely remember a fucking thing that was helpful. Either because I was too dumb to understand when he explained, too young or I was being a kid and half listening and half watching TV or something else because I was a kid and that’s what kids do.” you say.

“I felt like a shitty leader and I got through by compromising and working with other people which is maybe the point but even now I’m nothing like he is and I’ve just abandoned the concept all together. But for that time I felt like the biggest failure going. I had the best example of leadership to study and pay attention to. Yet when it mattered I seemingly forgot how to do any of it and I was letting down everything he stood for, not only was I the worst leader but I was a terrible son.” you admit softly.

Silence hangs between the two of you and you sigh and look up at the movie posters he has tacked to the wall. His friends made them for him as moving in gifts. There’s a bunch of photos taped up as well that you know your soulmate took. John always seems to feel isolated from his friends, the whole resetting his universe thing did a number on him but at least he talks to his Roxy a lot. Plus being in a house with so many siblings ensures he doesn’t get quiet for long, not to mention having seen both Psii and Mituna go through separate downswings in their mood since he moved in has probably helped him feel less alone about feeling shitty.

“We had a plan to get our captured parents back and we were able to bring Signless back. We got lucky, I know we did. I got my parents back the way they always were. You got unlucky and it’s not fair and it’s never going to not be fair. Maybe you forgot some things like I did and unlike me you don’t get to make new memories with him but you have us.” you offer.

“You think I should just suck it up and go.” John says bitterly.

“No, you insufferable windmill of ignorance, I don’t. Like I think that idiocy is gone but no it’s just whirling around ready to appear again, joke’s on me! So no, I didn’t say that. I think we should go to my room so I can get dressed and we can both fail at remembering how to tie a tie together, follow some bad guide on old youtube and then show up because this is going to be fun and Kanaya’s just going to fix our ties anyways so it barely matters.” you tell him.
John still has this uncertain little frown on his face so you continue, a little more gently.

“I think you should be there because it’s historic and there’ll be a party and food. If you can’t hack the whole night you don’t have to, we’d all understand but you shouldn’t miss it all.” you say.

John sighs, blows his nose with a loud honk that you have no idea how he managed to produce, and then gets up.

“After you then.” John says.

You lead the way up the stairs to your room and right where you expected it to be is a garment bag draped on your bed. You unzip it and start taking things out.

“Do you think Sign, Dis, and Psii are ever going to get married since that’s a thing people are doing now?” John asks, his voice still sounds a little flat and unenthusiastic but he’s trying and that counts for a hell of a lot.

“It’s not a thing that trolls do on Alternia. Sometimes you’d announce that someone was officially in a quadrant with you for the purposes of being sure the military would let you see them near drone season I think and of course people did jewelry as gifts there. Trolls on Earth got married to humans when that became legal and I think a few trolls married each other but none I ever knew. There were laws about marriage, soul marks and polyamorous relationships. Roxy knows more about it than me seeing as she’s got Jane and Sollux on her, ask her sometime.” you say as you kick off your shoes and socks because Kanaya’s even put especially coordinated socks in there for you.

“So trolls getting married is only controversial if they’re marrying other trolls then?” John asks.

“It’s not controversial, it’s just weird. If you’ve already claimed that they’re your whatever they are then that’s that. I guess for them it’s like ‘yeah, we already knew you were together why all this fuss?’ It’d probably have felt totally different by the time I was an adult and there were even more trolls who’d been hatched on Earth. I only think it’s a little weird because I never saw any adults doing it, it was always a human thing or a humans with trolls thing. Still, stuff changes. Especially here. The thing that would have been real controversial on Earth is Jean remarrying at all.” you say as you pull your sweater off and pick up the shirt from the garment bag.

“Because his soulmate’s dead?” John asks.

“Yeah. It’s not like the system was perfect and I’m sure the StriLondes can tell you in detail how much not being straight could suck even with you having literally no choice about your soulmate’s gender, adding the legality of marriage to that is a whole different thing. But it really wasn’t that long ago that you just could not get married to someone if they weren’t your soulmate, even if both people’s soulmates were already dead and gone. It’s a serious thing, you belong to your soulmate in real legal ways. It’s taboo enough loving someone else after that but to want to marry them like that relationship is in any way comparable to a ‘REAL’ one is a lot.” you explain, sounding scandalised and appropriately sarcastic.

“But, of course that’s a load of shit. They obviously love each other and I’m happy for them. Everyone is, but it probably helps that we never knew his soulmate and everyone likes Dolorosa. But if, say, Roxy died and Jane decided to marry someone else I would not be surprised if people around here had bad feelings about that. Culture’s tricky like that.” you say.

“I wonder how it’ll work out when we repopulate the Earth, if it’ll be humans like me and humans like them. I wonder if our species will deal with them like trolls did.” John says thoughtfully.
“If by that you mean that they’ll all get infected and soon enough everyone will have marks. That’s what they started doing to us. It’s contagious. Even if you start off with homosapiens humans and psychovirales humans I’ll bet that within, what, ten generations they’ll all have soulmarks and be batshit nuts.” you scoff and wrap your tie around the back of your neck with your shirt collar flipped up and your waistcoat still open.

“Hey, don’t take my job. Knowing stuff about science and shit, I’m the ectobiologist here.” John teases. It’s good that he’s making jokes again, even if his heart doesn’t sound like it’s quite in it.

“I’ll step right off then.” you chuckle and flip your husktop open.

You really need to thank Hal more often for downloading as much of the internet as he could before your planet was destroyed. Being able to open up a cached version of youtube and find anything that was still uploaded when the world ended is wonderful. There’s hundreds of videos about how to tie a tie and as you pick one John comes and stands near you. It’s a bittersweet thing, having this close of a connection to Earth culture but watching a man explain about tie knots and knowing that not only is he dead and gone but that this is likely the only lasting evidence any of you had that he ever existed. But maybe it’s not sad, despite his world being destroyed this man still gets to help two very lost teenage gods work out how to dress appropriately. Perhaps there’s something beautiful in that.

You both stand elbow to elbow as you watch the video, trying to follow along. It ends the first time and neither of you have a tied tie, you just have a spiral of fabric and John’s appears to just be knotted.

“Uh, maybe again?” John suggests and you play it once more.

You are not willing to admit how many repetitions of that video and then two different videos it took before the pair of you both manage to get your ties tied in anything resembling halfway decent. You smooth your jade tie down and button up your jade detailed waistcoat over it because that’s the colour theme for the bride’s side and the four Maryams absolutely ran with it.

“Thanks, Karkat. I know this was probably a lot of trouble to put you through, you had other things to do and—” John says.

“This was important too. But if you’re feeling really guilty I’m sure you can help me with the few jobs that I’ve got next.” you say brightly.

“I guess I did offer.” John laughs.

The rest of your list is simple enough to do, given what you’ve already delegated. It’s mostly counting things. You and John check that all of the tables are set right for the meal, that your parents have the cooking under control and that they don’t need anything brought out. You check that none of the bottles behind the bar are alcoholic, the Lalondes have all long been sober but it’s an unspoken rule that even if other people want to drink themselves they don’t do it around the Lalondes. It’s just thoughtless. Thankfully no one has been foolish enough to forget.

The flowers are all in place and as you go around counting the guests up you have only a few people to round up. Other Jake is running late but his Jade is there with him and vows to pop him right to you when he’s done. Your Dave had to go back to the house to get a different camera but you know he’d never be late, even if he had to loop time. All of the carapacians are here already, including Noir, both the solo version and the one who is currently shooting spades at PM from across the crowd.

Kanaya catches you early on, fixing your tie entirely with swift fingers and a kind smile. You
whisper a warning about John who will certainly need his tie fixing as well but could she please be cautious about it. Your beloved moirail of course agrees and you know she will be as gentle as a lamb with him.

“Are you nervous?” you ask her as you check out the back of her hair for her.

“It isn’t me getting married.” Kanaya points out.

“No, your mom is and you’re a bridesmaid. Still enough room to be nervous, I’m nervous!” you laugh. Her hair, of course, is perfect.

“I’m not, really. Have you seen Rose? Do I look ok?” Kanaya asks, sweeping her hands over her jade and white dress and twirling a little so you can see the full effect of its floaty length.

“She was helping Equius with the lighting, now who’s not nervous?” you tease and Kanaya shoves you in the arm.

“Fine, but the possibility of other people’s weddings can’t have slipped your mind now that this one is happening. Namely ours with our soulmates.” Kanaya hisses and scratches at her arm anxiously. You bat her hand away and gently kiss her upper arm right where she was scratching over her soulmark of a glowing Earth with a rainbow of people around it.

“If by that do you mean have I already accidentally sort of proposed to Dave this morning, then yes.” you snort and Kanaya looks at you eyes wide and mouth open in shock.

“Also Rose said if I get married before you and her she’ll kill me.” you add.

Kanaya makes a strangled sound and hides her face in her hands.

“You’re going to smear your mascara.” you warn.

“As if I would. Oh my, oh wow, oh… I really don’t have the brain power to think about something like that today.” Kanaya whispers and drops her hands. Her makeup of course is pristine. You wrap your arm around her shoulders comfortingly and then you’re treated to the sound of a camera shutter going.

You follow the sound to see Dave floating about six feet away, camera in hand. You’d be more annoyed if he didn’t look so breathtakingly good. His crisp white shirt is perfectly neat on him and the jade green waistcoat and tie are unfairly attractive. His shoes are shined, his pants are perfectly pressed and even his hair is smooth and behaving despite flying back here from getting his camera. His camera that he just took a photo of you with.

“Shouldn’t you be doing something important?” you sigh.

“Like taking photos of the two prettiest people here you mean? Wait, no, it should be three I didn’t get myself in, hold up.” Dave says and spins around so his back is to you both and takes a shitty selfie with you two in the background on a very advanced camera.

Your soulmate, everybody. This is the loser you plan to marry someday, good god.

“Actually, speaking of taking photos have you seen Davepeta around? Kan you said their outfit was going to be hella, I gotta get that on film.” Dave says eagerly.

“Did you Kanaya? Did you in fact say that their outfit was going to be ‘hella’?” you ask sarcastically.
“Actually no. I believe I said it was going to be ‘off the chain’ and ‘bitchin’ actually. I am offended that you would misquote me like this Dave, you slander my good name.” Kanaya answers smoothly and by all appearances totally seriously.

“Fuck, Kan, you’re the very best.” Dave laughs.

“I know. They were over that way.” Kanaya says, waving her hand.

“Yesss. Later.” Dave says and flies off. You shake your head in very mild and at this point almost obligatory despair at Dave’s general antics. This is clearly a good use of his second camera.

“I had also better find John and fix him up, I will see you later.” Kanaya nods and slips off.

You had better return to your shoutier double with your near completed task list. Not that there’s any of your remaining jobs that can be done now as they hinge on the wedding actually happening. Needless to say he isn’t hard to find.

“Calliope, no. Not after what I’ve heard from Dirk about what that does to humans and certainly not before the actual ceremony.” he says to Calliope who appears to be holding what looks like a giant lollipop.

“I’ll go talk to Dirk about it, see what he said.” Callie says, undeterred and walks off quickly.

“No- I… ugh. Oh, there you are.” your double says as he sees you coming.

“Here I am. Everything that should be done at this point has been done.” you tell him.

“That’s good. I saw you outsourcing to Sollux though, what’s that about?” he asks suspiciously.

“There was a crisis, I delegated so I could handle it. It’s fine now.” you assure him. You’re a little light on the details because John deserves his privacy, especially on something so personal. Besides you might be slightly smug that despite being from the same game instance (despite a rebooted timeline) John seems to prefer you to him. Actually he tends to prefer the company of people who never interacted with that timeline’s John that he ‘replaced’ or whatever you want to call it. God, you’re so glad you don’t have to deal with game bullshit anymore.

“At least I know coming from you that when you say it’s handled that you’re not blowing smoke up my wastechute.” other you sighs. It’s strange sometimes still, hearing such a strong preference for Alternian terms that dropped from your vocabulary the more time you spent in American schools. Not to mention the Alternian accent that you never got. It still gives you a weird pang of homesickness for Alternia despite never having been there.

“Right, let’s headcount and both meet up here once we’ve got everyone to be sure we got the same number of people. Then I’ll get things started.” he says and you both take to the skies.

He actually coded a little thing for this, a checklist of people but you can see live who he’s checking off as you go around and do the same for the people you see. In five minutes or so you’ve returned with a full list. He goes off to get things started, he doesn’t need you again until afterwards and then it’s really more waiting to see if the adults need your help with serving food.

Most everyone is gathered about away from the chairs talking to each other. You spot a StriLondian cluster and veer that way. It’s your Rose who spots you first, she turns to you with her floaty jade dress ruffling with the movement, the shorter front directing the movement of the longer back. Wow, you’ve spent far too much time listening to Kanaya’s fashion talks it seems. Rose is a stark contrast from her double’s crisp Egbert blue suit that is a matching twin to her actual twin’s.
“Karkat, all done with rushing around like mad?” Rose asks you.


“What’s wrong with Jake’s face? Aside from being perpetually attached to Dirk’s that is.” Roxy laughs. She’s in blue, a somewhat tense choice for a while what with having soulmates on either side of the aisle but eventually she opted for blue just to help balance the numbers.

“He got punched by a kangaroo and got a hell of a black eye.” you answer. It speaks volumes of Jake that not a single person considers this surprising for him.

“I saw him earlier and I couldn’t have told you that. Dad-Dirk’s makeup skills are truly impressive, I should ask him to teach me sometimes.” other Rose says and sips at something elegant with a cherry in it.

“I saw him too, it’s fine.” other Dirk agrees and you relax a touch.

“If you’re looking for Dave-” Rose starts to say.

“No, he’s about taking pictures. I know. I’m sure I can find him, literally the entire world’s population is if not here then within a mile.” you say.

You’re sure you’ll find each other again soon enough, if nothing else your assigned seats for the wedding are next to each other. He’s not allowed to take pictures during, there’s just the cameras set up to take them every so often and one to film. Jean and Dolorosa wanted to be clear that everyone should be taking time to be in the moment rather than working. So, yeah, you’ll see Dave soon enough.

“I know we should be thinking about the wedding, that it’s the whole point of the date to do that but it’s been a year.” other Roxy says into the small silence that formed after your answer.

You remember the end of the game. Blood, agony, then the door and all of the rest of it starting. The passage of a whole year wasn’t smooth for any of you, especially with time players around keenly aware of what was happening on X day last year throughout the whole time. The anniversary of the game beginning, the day Mom Lalonde got sprited and died, the anniversary of Dave and Rose being taken by Bro and going god tier. So many bad days. There were good ones too of course. Hal had a proper birthday in his current body, as did all of the former sprites.

“I’d rather be doing this than just waiting, feeling like at any moment it’s going to be a ‘gotcha’ just waiting for something peaceful and happy like this.” other Rose says tightly.

“You’re not the only one, betcha all the boonbucks that the LOHACSE ever gave me that there ain’t no one here with an empty strife deck right now.” other Dave says, speaking for the first time since you got there.

No one says anything to that and the sickles that you purposefully kept in your specibus today burn in accusation.

Your double is calling people to come take their places so you allow yourself to get swept up in the hustle and bustle of people slowly ambling to where they’re meant to be. There’s a pop of green light and you see other Jake and Jade appear across the way, good just in time.

You know where your seat is, you’ve seen the seating plan a hundred times at least. Rose sits in the seat but one to your right, the empty place between you should be filled by Dave but it is, as previously stated, empty. You scan the crowd but can’t see him.
“What is it? You’re bouncing around like crazy, did you forget something or what?” Sollux demands from your other side.

“Don’t you think something’s missing from this picture?” you reply and jerk your thumb in the direction of Dave’s empty seat.

Instead of looking around for his moirail Sollux looks up and then points to a spot up and behind you. You twist and see Dave taking more pictures even though he’s not meant to be doing that now at all. You grit your teeth a hiss Dave’s name loud enough to draw the attention of several people, including other Dave who shoots you a bewildered ‘what did I do?’ look. Your soulmate looks down at you from the air.

Glaring right at him you snap your fingers and point down at his seat. Sollux snickering to himself is not helping your composure. Dave rolls his eyes and his whole head too before swooping over and dropping into his seat.

“Bossy.” Dave says, points the camera at you and snaps a close up right in your face.

Long gone are the days when him photographing you with your knowledge used to fluster you, if you got in a twist every time Dave pointed a camera at you because he felt like it you’d do nothing else. Besides, letting him indulge himself is the quickest way to get the impulse to pass.

“What about the clear instructions to not take pictures and simply be in the moment for the ceremony eluded you?” you challenge him.

“I blame the far too cute bearer of the message, how can I pay attention when he’s so cute?” Dave says in mock offense.

“He is but a mortal man, Karkat. Have mercy.” Rose agrees, throwing an arm around Dave’s shoulder.

“Bzzt, he’s a god. Request for mercy denied, smiting will commence shortly.” you counter.

A decent sized pop of red and blue makes you jerk back and at first you’re about to accuse Sollux and then you catch Psii’s eye. He’s slightly turned in his seat to look back at you and he raises one scarred eyebrow and conveys quite clearly an aura of ‘don’t make me come back there’. It’s the same shit you’d get as little kids for squabbling in the back seat of the car.

The John you’re not related to (though soon by marriage you will be) has already started playing a church organ thing, and boy was that a pain to alchemise, so yeah you’d better shut up. Dave and Rose’s faces are identical mirrors of ‘ha ha you got in trouble and we didn’t’ so you just silently scowl and sit back in your seat.

You look around for the John who is your brother and find him at the end of your row. Davepeta has a wing around him but he looks to be handling this fine so far. That’s good.

Jean is already at the altar with Signless, though you don’t know when he got there. There had been talks for a while about whether Signless would walk Dolorosa down the aisle before marrying them but she had decided that’d be silly for him to do both and no one should be ‘giving her away’ anyway. So as such Dolorosa sweeps down the aisle in a physics defying gauzy white dress, flanked on three sides by Maryams. They look more like high class bodyguards or assassins than bridesmaids, like an all female Reservoir Dogs or something. Classy and intimidating is very on par for them.

Having delivered the bride the three younger Maryams take their seat in the front row, leaving just
Signless, Dolorosa and Jean Egbert up at the front of you all.

Signless stands in the archway with notecards in his hands. He looks at the couple and then out at all of you and you can see the uncertainty on his face and then familiar calm as he throws the notecards over his shoulder. He speaks and as they always do, everyone listens.

“For all our similarities, humans and trolls are very different.” He begins.

“On Alternia things are supposed to be like this: you’re hatched, you get a lusus and everything else is on you. You choose your own friends, your own quadrantmates, it’s very much a choice. On Earth, on your Earth, things are different. Your parents do not choose you, you do not choose your soulmate, it’s down to fate. Certainly it does not always work out and naturally circumstance and free will play a part but the two are starkly contrasted.” he says.

“My mother chose me and broke tradition and law to do it, my own sister has a human soulmate also counter to troll culture. Maryams do not do tradition or expectations it seems. Jean Egbert on the other hand dearly loves the children fate handed to him, but he also chose to take in and love many more children just as much when he didn’t need to. I think it is safe to say that even without marrying my mother your family is not traditional by Earth standards.” your dad says with a slight smile and you breathe a slight sigh of relief that he didn’t mention the man’s soulmate. Your dad has more tact than that, though.

“It was tradition that I was thinking of leading up to this. You two know how you feel about each other but it means something to make it official in some way, but we don’t have traditions. We have no culture but the one we form here, all that came before belongs to dead universes, extinct planets and history. History is important of course, but in front of literally the entire population of this planet we begin a new tradition and one of choice.” he continues.

“So, does anyone here have any objection to these two choosing to officially join their lives together?” he calls out.

You turn to eyeball Mituna to make sure he doesn’t think he’s being funny but you’re surprised to see him all misty eyed and clearly not intending on interfering at all.

“Somehow I thought not! So, Jean Egbert, do you take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to love, honour and respect her?” your dad asks, focusing his attention on dadbert. They must have practiced this at least a little because he already has the ring in hand.

“I do.” Egbert says and slides the ring onto your grandmother’s finger.

“Dolorosa. Porrim Maryam, mom. Do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, to love, honour and respect him?” he asks turning to her.

“I do.” she says quietly and literally beams as she puts the ring on Mr Egbert.

“Then by the power vested in me by literally the entire world’s population, I declare you man and wife you may- oh wow.” Signless cuts off as Dolorosa rushes Dadbert to kiss and dramatically dip him which doesn’t seem to surprise him one bit.

You can hardly hear over how loud everyone is clapping and cheering.

The smile that you have no control over stretches your face and within you joy bubbles up hot and bright. This is love on the Earth that you all brought back to life. Love and new things, a whole future like this for so many people including you. You died fighting for this and you weren’t the only one. But, oh, it feels worth it right now. Dave snaps a picture of the happy couple as they walk down
the aisle, their kids following after them in a rush with jolted piano keys from John.

Dave darts off with a job to do. You have your own work in a while when it comes to the food but for now your double and Kankri are using their blood powers to locate and retrieve people for specific picture set ups. Everyone else is milling around so you just kind of stand there uselessly.

“I think it’s really nice.” The Summoner says from somewhere behind you and you turn your head and watch the exchange out of the corner of your eye. A lot of the troll adults are gathered together, your mom included.

“Not that I don’t appreciate the promise of food, cake, and the chance to dress fancy but we all already knew they were together. This whole thing seems like a waste of time.” Mindfang says huffily and sips at a drink that Davepetra or Arquius must have handed out, that was their task at this point in the day.

“Jean is human, it has a lot of meaning to him and the other humans.” Darkleer points out.

“It just seems so arbitrary, did he have to decide he felt a certain strength of affection for her before this happened? Is there some formula for picking the right time? How do people decide something like that?” Mindfang says.

“The day is hardly arbitrary Mindfang, I know you know that.” Redglare says in her crisp District Attorney voice.

“I concede the point for this wedding alone, but I maintain it for all others.” Mindfang says.

“People pick dates for all sorts of reasons, for convenience so choosing a weekend rather than a weekday or something. Then people wait for milestones, things like ‘when we both finish college’ or something like that. Then there’s dates of significance to either of them, like the day they matched is often chosen with humans.” your mom explains.

You’re pretty sure that if you set Christmas eve as the date of yours and Dave’s wedding people would strangle you, forget being close to Christmas, it’s right on Twelfth Perigee’s Eve for the way the Alternian and human calendars have been condensed. Doing that was a real brain ache for the time players, to make sure no one lost a wriggling day and to merge calendars that didn’t neatly divide into each other. But now that it’s done to pick such a date would be absurd.

Not that picking the date you met would be any less disastrous, given that you met Dave right after Bro died you imagine the timing might be a little touchy.

You pay attention to their conversation again only to find that they’re discussing the differences between quadrant love and human non quadrant love. Also Darkleer is awkwardly pale flirting with your mom again, time to leave.

You wander over to the cluster of your friends who have dragged a group of chairs together, caring not for all the work and planning that went into that seating arrangement.

“Hello Karkat, come sit here.” other Terezi says brightly, patting the empty seat on her right hand side. Naturally other Vriska is on the other side. You know she knows which one of you she’s addressing, never have you ever seen either Terezi slip up on that and yet everyone else has mistaken at least one person for the other version of them. You wonder if you smell different to her, you must but you doubt she could describe just how.

“Blugh, all this jade around is making me feel green in a bad way. Not that I don’t like ms. Mint Julep and her whole cut grass, spearmint, fresh pea, little family but there’s only so much I can take!”
Terezi whines.

“You could always go sit with more blue people.” you suggest.

“Apparently we’re the wrong shade of blue.” other Rose says with a shake of her head.

“You’re all talc and lavender.” Terezi grimaces. That sounds unpleasant in a retirement home full of old ladies kind of way to you, no wonder she’s not a fan.

“Gee, ‘rezi, if I’d have known I’d have bathed in Axe just for you.” other Dave scoffs.

“No, absoluteleyyyyyyy not! That stuff is banned, it gives even me a headache let alone poor Terezi.” Vriska declares.

“Wait, what’s this about? I’ve not heard about this.” you say. Sure, you went to school, you know the perils of teenage boys and far far too much body spray. But it’s never been a Dave thing, not yours at least and if Dirk ever went through that phase he finished it long before meeting you.

“Other John was wearing it to aggravate my double, only when your pitch flirtations make everyone in the same building as your kismesis want to break your legs-” she says with a hiss. You bet Latula is glad that she can’t smell in that situation.

“Then you’re just being a dick.” you conclude and Terezi nods.

“Naturally this is hilarious.” Rose fills in for you.

“Of course it-” you cut off when you feel a sharp jerk within you which at first you misattribute to Dave. He’s long since been the source of strange and sudden feelings that you can’t explain, thanks to his mark on your arm. The best explanation anyone has still for that is that it’s a blood thing. But, no, this isn’t Dave who you can see is calmly directing some people to stand a little closer together. Instead this feels like Kankri just outright jerking on your sibling bond instead of bothering to come get you or troll you.

You bid the others goodbye and fly over to Dave’s camera where you notice behind it a good number of your other siblings are gathered, including a slightly uncomfortable looking John.

“Did Kankri just jerk you over here with his stupid blood powers?” you ask Mituna.

“No, just… shoo, shoo, over there.” Mituna says in a falsetto that is nothing like Kankri’s voice but makes you laugh anyway.

“Good to know I’m special I guess. I’ll give him a piece of my mind when he shows up.” you complain.

“Karkat.”

You wince and figure maybe you won’t do that, not with your moirail standing just on the other side of Dave’s camera, her voice warning you. Also if you make her break from her place in the photo currently being taken to shoosh you out of an argument your soulmate won’t be best pleased either.

Your mom and dad walk up to the cluster of family members as your double swoops over the crowd directing more over to you. You guess word has spread about John because Psii makes a, hah, a beeline right for him.

“How’re you holding up at the most family of family events in way more green than we’re used to?”
Psii asks and Kankri pushes Meulin over to your group.

“Kind of a jump from being an only child.” John concedes.

“I bet. You know there was a point in time when Mituna was an only child.” Psii points out.

“You should have stopped then!” Mituna cackles and Meulin shoves him by the shoulder.

“It wasn’t really a choice, mother grubs are complicated like that and we got somewhat more than we anticipated.” your mom says reasonably.

“Hm, yeah, I still remember you being like ‘hey Psii, let’s have a kid it’ll be great’.” Psii scoffs.

“I am great.” Mituna adds.

“And that is definitely not how we made that offer to you.” your mom says slyly, ugh, gross.

You gag loudly as the rest of your siblings laugh around you.

“But thanks, Psii, I’m glad I came. Some things are… a lot but I’m glad Karkat annoyed me into letting him in so he could talk me into coming.” John says.

Oh crap. You try to convey through silent and desperate facial expressions that John needs to shut up right now but as per usual your dumb human brother just blunders right on heedless of your good advice.

“Well I’m glad.” Psii nods.

“Yeah, I said to him it’s lucky that I’m not epileptic or anything given how he got me to open to the door.” John says, dropping you right in it.

“Why would…” Psii trails off and turns to look at you suspiciously as Sollux does a highly convincing impression of someone who not only was not involved with your rule breaking but has also never seen this man before, officer, really.

“Karkat. Were you fucking with the fuse box?” Psii asks stonily. Sollux inches away from you, the traitor.

“It was an emergency!” you insist.

Psii narrows his eyes at you and then glances at John who seems to be understanding that he just dropped you in major shit over here.

“I don’t think I could have come here if he hadn’t.” John chips in. You revoke your earlier slander of him, he’s a good brother.

“On this ONE occasion, I’ll let it go. But if anyone else takes that shit up again you and they will both be grounded, understand? No fucking with the fuse box!” Psii insists and you all nod.

Dave dismisses half of the people in the photo currently being taken and starts ushering people into place for this one. Dolorosa wants all of her family and all of Mr Egbert’s family in this one. You watch as he trollhandles other Gamzee into place, his face paint pristine even over his scars. It took a long time for Egbert to bring him back to something close to what the people in his session consider normal but he’s done it.

“Wait, no, Kurloz here and then Mituna swap with Kankri ok?” Dave instructs and then considers
that row of people done.

Dave shuffles people into place and when he gets to you he kisses you quickly on the cheek.

“Boo, unfair. Favouritism.” Sollux jeers jokingly but all the same Dave rolls his eyes and then gently paps Sollux on the cheek. He pauses and pulls out another camera, how many does he even have? Then he takes a quick candid shot of the Egbert side talking to each other as they wait for Dave to finish lining the last of them up. You bet it’ll be a great picture, Dave’s so skilled at photography and you’re fiercely proud of him for it.

“Alright, let’s go. Over here everyone.” Dave says from behind his mounted camera now and everyone quiets down and smiles for the photo. A year ago you’d have never believed that you’d be here doing this, not with the bloodbath that fight was.

Eventually photos get done just in time for the food to be ready and you help with getting people seated. The flowers from Jade’s gardens look amazing on each table and the food is incredible as always. The next table over from you your sisters are teaching John more sign language for the things around him, naturally beyond the basic things the first thing everyone else taught him was curses and insults. It helps that he’s not the only one who doesn’t know the language and has to learn. Davepeta and your double are still learning. Other Sollux doesn’t know it either but he and Meulin have mostly resorted to trying to make sure that they’re looking at each other and talking aloud so she can lipread or else her just trolling him because he’s learnt enough from Terezi to be able to read text. It’s complicated.

The Sollux from your universe can’t imagine wanting to stay blind for something so recent when Aranea could so easily change that for him, but other Sollux can’t imagine ever being okay with getting ports put in and then leaving them in. Then the great debate about medication and treatment for their other brain shit. There was a fair bit of arguing until Psii intervened with a ‘your choice is not my choice’ lecture and they should both butt out of each other’s business. That works with… mixed results.

“Hey, I wanted to say thanks for today. And also pass that plate.” your double says, breaking your train of thought and pointing at the dish of chicken next to you.

“It really adds to the sincerity when you pair those two things.” you tell him as you pass the dish.

“Suck my globes.” he responds without feeling, takes some meat and then hands the dish back. You set it back where you got it.

“No, what I meant was I know you hate the whole leadership thing despite being obviously hatched for it—” he begins.

“Disagree. Also seeing as I did the ectobiology for our session and sent us down as grubs I know I didn’t hatch full stop, much less for leadership.” you say flatly.

“See my earlier point about my globes.” your double retorts.

You take a sip of your drink, entirely ignoring the despairing look he’s giving you.

“My point was I really needed you to hold up your end of things today or everything would have gone sideways so fast and you handled it all as well as the extra emergencies that came up. I had other help of course but I knew I didn’t have to handhold you through it, it was really important so thank you.” he says.

Okay, you should try to be less of a tool to him, he is trying to be nice.
“It was a team effort. Thanks for organising it all, everything’s gone really well.” you say.

You’re being honest too. The sun is starting to set and the twinkling lights strung up around the outdoor area with all of the tables make everything look magical. There’s a bright buzz of happy conversation around you as the day has passed without the feared chaos and instead you’re all together having a good time, celebrating love, surviving and the future. It’s a community, just like Signless’ followers at the community centre were and how those seasonal parties felt like belonging and hope.

It’s not your old home but this place and these people together like this absolutely are home, you didn’t lose that. A lot of people have finished eating and are drifting from their tables. Jade has wandered over to your table and is talking brightly to John and Davepeta, the group that you’ve privately come to think of as the geek squad (the Dirks, Hal, Equius, Arquius, and Horrus) are clustered together no doubt shooting the shit about robots or maybe horses.

“Oh they’re doing the cake early, makes sense as the food went fast.” your double notes and you peer around him to see Mr Crocker and Other Jane carrying out a cake that can probably feed hundreds and hundreds, let alone the smaller number present

They’re clearly looking around for the knife to cut it but can’t find it and you watch as your grandmother innocently whips out her chainsaw and revs it threateningly. Mr Crocker looks on in alarm but you watch as Jean Egbert’s face cycles from ‘swoon’ to ‘wait that’s probably a bad plan’. Yeah, that guy’s gonna survive your family just fine. Dolorosa laughs, puts the chainsaw away and pulls the cake knife out, she was just teasing them this whole time! They cut their first slice together as photos are taken and a dawning and terrible idea steals over you.

“Wait he knows not to do the cake in the face thing, right?” you ask hurriedly and quietly.

“Yeah, John told me. Don’t worry, Mr Egbert has been warned that if he shoves cake in Dolorosa’s face he’s a dead man. Earth has weird traditions.” other you says with a shake of his head.

“It’s not an Earth tradition, it’s an American thing. The whole world wasn’t America you know.” you counter.

“You’re all American.” he says.

“Oh so just erase everyone else’s culture.” you sneer.

“I finally get what everyone is going on about, it is strange hearing your own words from someone else’s mouth.” Kankri interrupts.

Did- did Kankri just accuse you of sounding like him? Of being his double?! He just-

You can hear multiple people around the table all trying not to bust out laughing when Dolorosa and Jean are cutting their cake and having a moment but it’s not helped by Kankri looking more smug than you ever thought was physically possible. Mituna leaps across the table and high fives him impossibly hard, you’re pretty sure you’re going to die now.

“Oh, oh Karkitty you’re never living this down.” Nepeta giggles into her napkin.

Ahead of you Dolorosa takes the initiative and smears cake in Jean’s face instead and people in the audience who haven’t heard of your humiliation laugh and clap, giving your siblings the cover to openly drown you in their mocking laughter. You push yourself out of your chair and stalk over to the StriLonde table, you drop into Dirk’s unoccupied seat.
“My family is terrible I’m emancipating myself and joining yours.” you inform them all.

“Is this because you sound like Kankri?” Roxy asks with a devious grin.

“I do not and how do you know about that?!” you demand. Roxy holds up her phone and you can see the splash of treasonous mustard text over her screen.

“Goddamn Sollux you gossipy fuck. Bros before spades, what the hell?” you hiss, making Roxy giggle.

“It’s okay Karkat, you can sit with us.” other Roxy assures you.

“He requested to join our family though, surely that presents some complications with Dave?” Rose asks, flicking probably nonexistent dust off of the shoulder of her dress.

“Wait, no-” you begin.

“Well, shit,” other Dave says as he balances on the back two legs of his chair, “accidentally implying something weirdly sexual about someone you’re related to is basically the entry criteria for this family.”

“One of us, one of us!” other Rose declares and bangs her fist on the table, suddenly all of them are laughing and chanting along.

“We accept him, we accept him. One of us, one of us!”

You put your head down on the table and accept your fate, hoping for the mercy of any god watching to spare you this agony. But there are no gods, just these fuckers.

“Why are we referencing Freaks? I want in. Hi Karkat.” Dave says from behind you, his hand patting your back.

“We’re accepting Karkat into our family, he declared his intention to be one of us and immediately fell into a Freudian slip. A speed record.” the other one explains.

“I’m the proudest, dude.” Dave says and sits down, the chanting breaking off into laughter.

You take your head off of the table and accept your teasing like a man.

The evening progresses much that way, people swapping places to talk and hang out. Space is cleared and music starts, a first dance is had. Your sisters drag you to dance with them before you get to even ask Dave. When you turn around to look for him Jade pulls you into a quick and dizzying dance with her, the two of you conspire to knock your double into his Dave because he’s been trying to ask him to dance for a while and not got the balls to do it. It’s dumb, they’re together so it should be easy. They both stare at each other when Dave catches him and then with quiet teasing and shy smiles they do actually go and dance together.

You’d ask your soulmate to dance if only you could find him. You get waylaid in your search by Dolorosa throwing her bouquet and Jake catching it right in the face which makes you wince because that can’t be fun on that black eye that’s under all that makeup. But also you get to watch Dirk stare at him and slowly turn tomato red from the shirt collar upwards.

You stand on the edge of the dance area looking around, you’re happy to be around so many happy people. It’s great that the game is all done and over with, that you’re free. To be here on the anniversary with two kinds of humans, trolls, carapaces, consorts and even a cherub. It’s great, peace
on Earth and all that.

You still want your soulmate and he’s not here.

You doubt he’d have gone back home, he seemed fine and Sollux is over there and Dave’s presumably told neither of you where he is. He’s not gone-gone as it were, just stepped away. You push up into the air, your wings fluttering behind you as they appear. You’re just going to have to look harder for him.

It’s not his pool but it is a pool, that’s where you find him. Alone and away from the party. The music is a distant hum and thump of bass. Dave is sat on the end of the diving board, his shoes a little way up from the water and his phone left on the side on the tiles. There’s a party, a pool and the boy you’re desperately in love with. You’re a whole universe away but this feels just like it did before, before you were together and still trying to be a good friend despite how deeply you ached to be with him. You had sat on his diving board with him, talking and having a good time. You could sneak up on him, shove him in the water, but why scare him?

“Hey.” you call out and Dave looks back at you. He raises one hand in a silent wave and you catch the flash of your red on his wrist as he does.

You flit up in the air just a touch and land gently on the diving board. As you do Dave gently falls backwards so he’s laying down, you settle down just by his head.

“Wondered where you’d gone off to.” you say.

“Sorry, I just needed to think.” Dave replies.

“Is something up?” you ask and reach out to neaten his hair up a little. He frowns and you follow the expression with your fingers, fingertips tracing over his scarred eye.

“Thinking about time.” he says cryptically.

You don’t want to guess what he might mean, whether this is sentimental stuff or whether this is worrying aspect concerns is beyond you but he’ll keep talking. He always does.

“Trolls live for different lengths of time and humans, well, we have a range. Are we going to live forever because we’re gods? Are we going to age and do I need to do something to change that? Should I do something to change that?” Dave says in a rush.

“Those are… big questions.” you say slowly, though you can’t say that you hadn’t considered several of them before. The prospect of spending eternity stuck in your mid teens isn’t exactly appealing if you’re honest.

“Yeah. Sorry.” Dave mumbles.

“No, don’t be. I guess it makes sense, big milestones like this wedding, like the year mark of being here… it makes you think.” you agree.

Dave sits up, swinging his legs over the side of the board so he can sit next to you. His hand shyly inches across the board to touch yours.

“I was thinking about all that, about how I don’t know how much time we have and about how much we lost through me being stupid and then the game. Even if it is infinite it seems stupid to just dick about doing nothing. And- I’d thought…” he says.
He frowns, he’s not looking at you but his purple eyes look dark in the moonlight. He glances around but you’re still both alone.

“You know how younger Jake and Dirk- his Dirk I mean not dad-Dirk,” Dave says quickly. You don’t think that the Dirk from your universe knows that a lot of the StriLondes call him that but it shouldn’t surprise him, he’s still acting like he’s the parent of all the people in that house.

“What about them?” you prompt.

“They’ve been seeking out, like, notable sites from their Earth’s time in here since we dried them out and going on digs to break into ye olde Fort Knox or something.” Dave explains.

“I was mostly under the impression that they were flying off around the world to get some peace and quiet and probably fuck in the forest.” you say flatly and Dave crows with laughter that is almost eerily Davepeta like.

“That too probably.” Dave sniggers.

He bounces the diving board up and down a little as he swings his feet back and forth over the water. He clearly still has something on his mind so you wait him out.

“I was thinking we could do that.” he says softly.

“Fuck in the woods?” you ask as seriously as you can manage but you break down laughing when Dave slaps you in the arm.

“No you- I thought you were supposed to be the romantic one of us here.” Dave groans. That, of course is a complete lie. He is absolutely romantic, every gift he’s ever given you is thoughtful, he confessed to you on Christmas eve, he is absolutely a romantic.

“I meant I’d like to see our world. I want to see if the pyramids are still there, I want to fly through the grand canyon with you, see if the Great Wall of China is still standing. I want to watch the stars we made exist from the middle of a desert and sit around a campfire with you. We could go swimming in tropical reefs, fly to the north pole. I want to see the world with you. And it’s not like anything could go wrong really, I can stop time, we’re both immortal, we can make any supplies we need to take and if we got in real trouble Jade could pop us back.” Dave says hurriedly, not looking at you as he talks. His cheeks are going red.

This is Dave, Dave the ‘not-a-romantic’. Dave who was made for you down to his very atoms, whose loss wrenched the life from your body before. Dave your soulmate who upon seeing a wedding, an expression of love and joy, is trying to gift you the planet to show how much he wants to be with you.

“We could be the first people to see some of those things again,” he blathers on, “I was thinking maybe six months or so. I know we couldn’t go for too long because family and moirails and all that. But we could go to space too, I know other Jade has checked out the nearby planets but we could spend some time on that planet that’s basically Mars. Or we could hoof it out to the Jupiter look alike, I wasn’t really in an ‘enjoy Jupiter’ mood when we were near the real thing the first time but I could try again for you. There’s planets out there that rain diamonds, I could ask Hal to find me one and we could fly there and I could catch you a diamond from the actual sky.”

You nearly knock him into the water with how suddenly and forcefully you kiss him. It’s ok, it’s been a long time indeed since Dave’s had anything other than a positive response to getting kissed by you. He’s your perfect soulmate, as if such a thing even needed saying. All the same you’re so often
surprised by how great he is. He’s supposed to be everything that you deserve but you know how little you feel that is, but he is consistently better than you could have ever dreamed. Little Karkat clutching his arm in the hospital the first night his mark came in could have never imagined Dave in all his multi-faceted perfection.

“We should do that.” you agree a little breathlessly.

“See the world? Or the planets?” Dave asks with hope in his eyes.

“Either. Both. Earth first and then maybe go out further. We’ll probably have to come back a few times since we have no clue what we’re doing but yes.” you say.

Dave’s smile is blindingly beautiful. After everything that’s ever happened to him, Bro, his Mom, being abducted by trolls, the end of the world, being forced to play the game, dying over and over, given control over time itself, being killed by a god and starting a new world he is STILL able to be happy. He’s still able to be the impossible boy that reached through the species barrier to write himself into your dna and show up on your skin, to look you in the eye and smile because he’s happy to be around you. Because he wants to show you the world and the universe. Because he loves you.

“Hey, Dave?” you say softly.

“Yeah?” Dave replies.

“I really love you.” you whisper.

Dave looks back at you, his purple eyes meeting your grey ones. He sets his hand on yours.

“I know.” he says solemnly.

The startled screech he makes as you shove him backwards into the water is deeply satisfying and you don’t even care that Kanaya’s going to skin you for ruining her hard work on his clothes. You care more when Dave bursts from the water to drag you in as well.

“How could you do this to me, Karkat? You know I can’t swim!” Dave laughs, kicking backwards through the pool.

“I’m going to drown you, you useless mammal!” you shout and swim after him even though you’re laughing along just as hard.

Yeah, you couldn’t have ever wanted anyone else but him. He’s your soulmate.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to Sam (notedchampagne.tumblr.com and apocalypticTaco here) for doing the awesome ending art for this chapter!

So... yeah. It's finally the end of MC Escher after 797,169 words between this and all
the published sidefics it's all done. I'm both really happy to have completed it and kind of sad too, it's bittersweet in a way. You guys have all been so amazing though and made me feel so welcome, I'm sorry I stopped replying to comments or did it on and off, I just kept getting overwhelmed but I'm so grateful.

This probably sounds tacky and silly but thank you all for reading all of this, it's meant the world to me.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!