Straw Soldiers

by Lucid_Dream

Summary

Karkat always assumed that his life would be over as soon as the Empire caught wind of the cherry-colored sludge pumping through his vascular system. No muss, no fuss--just a good, clean culling fork to the chest. Little did he know that there was something far worse in store...

"Please tell me my auricular sponge clots are failing me here. Tell me I did not just hear you say that you are sending me to some shithole alien planet where I will be nook deep in squishy hairless monkeys."
Meanwhile on Alternia: the political tides are shifting and the disappearance of a certain mutant blood sets into motion a revolution which could entangle Alternia and Earth together forever—or destroy them both.


Straw Soldiers: Part 1

From the June 15, 2013 Seattle Times:

> Sweeps in the past, but not many...
The first thought that graces your thinkpan when you open your eyes is, *Fuck it’s early.* (The next several thoughts involve something along the lines of: *Wow, no shit troll Sherlock. Your unmatched observational prowess is a fucking wonder to behold.*)

You half-consider closing your eyes and falling back into the comforting embrace of sopor slime-induced dreamless slumber because fuck anybody who has the gall to spout bullshit idioms like “the early chirpbeast catches the slimy dirt tunneler.” Seriously, trolls who roll out of the slime all bright-eyed and eager to face another glorious night of doing whatever the everloving fuck it is that they think is so wonderful about being themselves piss you off to no end. That’s not surprising, though. You’ve never met another troll who failed to piss you off in some way, shape, or form at some point during your acquaintanceship.

Your eyes are already closed and you’re hovering in the colorless void between awake and asleep when somebody is knocking on the door of your hive and goddamn it is so loud you half-jump out of your recuperacoon. Well. Now that you are hanging ass-end up out of your recuperacoon like a complete tool, you suppose you might as well get up and find out what this nookstain wants. You take your sweet time wiping off the slime and pulling on some clothes. You figure that since this inconsiderate douche thinks whatever he has to say is so important it merits waking you up with the moons, it’s also probably important enough that he will wait while you make yourself presentable. Not that you’re self-conscious about your appearance because what self-respecting troll gives a fuck about that? Your only aim is to arrange yourself into something that is not vomit-inducing.

The douchebag at your door continues to pound away as you leave your respite block and it is getting louder. You can’t help wondering, *is this pathetic excuse for sentient life wearing brass knuckles? Chain mail gauntlets? Is he pounding with a fucking sledgehammer?*

It occurs to you to wonder where your lusus has gone. You rarely have visitors this early (strike that; you rarely have visitors, period), but the few times it has happened Crabdad has always been the one to deal with the nookwhiffer who got it in his thinkpan to come calling at such an ungodly hour. *He must be out hunting or some other equally stupid shit,* you decide. You wince as a particularly enthusiastic pound seems to resonate through the very foundations of your hive. *I swear to fuck I am making Crabdad fix the door if this bastard breaks it down.*

It is a testament to the fine integrity of your hive’s design that the door it is still standing when you finally reach it. The thing is practically jumping on its hinges, but somehow—and fuck if you know how—it’s managed to stay intact.

You grab the doorknob and the force of the pounding zings up your arm, strong enough to rattle your teeth. “*All right! I’m here!*” you yell as you fumble with the latch, and glory mothergrub hallelujah the knocking stops. *Why didn’t I try that sooner?* You wonder. But then, you already know the answer: *Because past me is an idiot. Of course.*

Grumbling under your breath, you open the door.

You’d been expecting a delivery drone, a neighbor, maybe even Sollux or Terezi because you wouldn’t put it past either of them to turn up on your doorstep with nary a word of warning like a complete douchelord. You had not been expecting to see two adults, both standing tall enough to need to duck in order to leer at you from under the doorframe.
The one on the left has a scar; a slash of fibrous tissue that runs straight across his eye and pulls half of his face into a grimace. His caste symbol is unfamiliar to you, but the indigo color is enough to tell you that he’s a highblood. The one on the right is a tealblood, a fact which he proudly proclaims to the world by wearing his caste symbol on every visible piece of clothing, including an ugly headband that looks like something troll Rambo would have worn if troll Rambo was in fact a complete piece of flaming barkbeast excrement. In contrast to the scowling indigo, his mouth is twisted into a cruel grin and he looks as though he is about to start giggling at the sight of you. You don’t notice any of this. Your eyes are glued to the high-grade military-issue sickles that they hold in their hands.

“Karkat Vantas,” says scar face, and you wince because oh shit, they know your name which means that they are actually looking for you and this is not just some outrageous and possibly humorous mistake like something out of an episode of Thresh Prince. These are real Threshecutioners here on real Imperial business which is likely to end with your real death.

You don’t waste time listening to the rest of what he has to say. Instead, you equip your sickles (which, you notice, are flimsier, duller, and altogether woefully inferior to the ones your opponents have at their disposal) and lunge. You don’t try for elegance and you don’t try for technique. Facing down two fully-trained and experienced Threshecutioners, you know the only scenario that does not involve puckering up to kiss your own ass goodbye involves a quick and vicious surprise attack followed by absconding the fuck out of there.

Somebody grabs you from behind before you manage to take a proper swing. Or, to be more precise, some bastard grabs the back of your shirt and your feet fly out from under you. Your shirt hitches up and you gag as your momentum causes the collar to dig into your neck. A callused hand grabs your left wrist. The thumb digs into the soft flesh on the underside of your wrist and burrows in until your arm goes numb up to the elbow and the sickle falls from your boneless hand.

You sweep your right hand back in an attempt to slice off the hand that’s holding you back, but another rough hand grabs your forearm and forces it against your back, sickle and all. A grainy voice snarls in your ear: “Drop your weapon.”

You tighten your grip on the sickle because fuck that noise you are not going down without a fight. The hand forces your right arm up, fast and hard. Something audibly pops. Pain roars through you; white pain that steals your breath and blots everything else out of existence.

The first thing you notice when you are able to process something outside of the pain is that whoever had hold of your shirt now has you in a one-armed bear hug with both of your arms pinned between your body and his. Your sickle is no longer in your hand. You don’t know whether you dropped it or whether he pried it away from you. Your shoulder is a tight knot of stabbing pain.

You hear voices arguing—one of them light and bouncy as though the whole situation is a big joke, the other the rasp of the troll that has you trapped. You think you hear something that sounds like “no damaging the goods” which makes not one single lick of fucking sense. You decide to puzzle over it later, after you’ve gotten the hell away from this awful clusterfuck.

You jerk against the arm that is wrapped around your chest. The movement causes the ball of fire that is your shoulder to flare, sending lightning spots snapping through your thinkpan. The edges of your vision begin to grow dim and oh fuck you can’t afford to pass out now nononoNO! You clench your jaw until your teeth hurt—a good, dull pain that chases away the shadows threatening to swallow you whole.
The Threshecutioners are still arguing.

“…need to confirm it,” says a voice that sounds as though it belongs to somebody who goes through life with a stick permanently inserted up his ass. (That one belongs to the scar-faced indigoblood, you decide. Because the only trolls who can manage to produce that intricate blend of bored condescension and douchey arrogance are pretentious highblood nooksuckers.)

“And here I thought we weren’t supposed to damage the goods,” rasps the troll who is holding you back.

“Ugh, not this hateflirting shit again,” groans the laughing voice. “Are you guys seriously going to make me have to auspitize your asses here? Because I will.”

The other two voices offer up appropriately scandalsied variations of protest.

A hot spike of rage twists through your chest. These fuckers aren’t taking this seriously. They aren’t taking you seriously. To them, executing you is a throwaway chore; one that is so boring they have to make stupid quadrant banter just to stay awake. You are about as significant to them as a festering pustule on the backside of one the tiny creatures who inhabit the motes of dust swirling in the air around them. You decide then and there that just because you are unarmed and injured and just because your death is a cold, inevitable fact, that doesn’t mean that you need to make things easy for these bastards. No; if this pustule has to die, he is going to do his damndest to fuck these assholes up on his way out.

The Threshecutioners continue their banter as you consider your options. From the way your shoulder reacted to your previous attempt, ineffectual struggling is a terrible idea. Fighting your way out with your minimal self-taught Threshecutioner skills is an equally dumb idea, especially since your sickles are on the ground and you have no way to retrieve or use them. You do the only thing you can do: you twist your head and sink your teeth deep enough into the beefy bicep you find there to taste blood.

The troll holding you lets out a bellow and boxes your ear. Stars scatter through your thinkpan but you hang on, refusing to let go until—OW FUCKING HELL GODDAMN SON OF A BITCH THAT ASSHAT HAS YOU BY THE HAIR! The pain is so unexpected you open your mouth to gasp. He takes the opportunity to pry you off.

You try to take another chunk out of his arm, but he still has hold of your hair and you can’t get close enough. You can, however, see the ragged wound you managed to tear. It’s weeping a steady stream of cerulean and it looks like it hurts like hell. You have just enough time to feel a vicious thrill of pride (because you did that; you made that douchebag bleed, never mind the fact that you had to resort to fighting dirty to do it) before he jerks on your hair again. This time you are ready for it, and the pain doesn’t make you gasp. Instead, you scream.

You keep screaming because you know you are now officially out of options for fighting back and you are pissed off and scared and in pain and you think that maybe, just maybe if you scream loud enough you can burst their eardrums and escape while they are busy writhing on the ground in abject misery. (At the very least, maybe they will think you are shithive maggots enough to actually be a threat to them and they will retreat to come up with a different plan, leaving you just long enough to run. The blood smeared across your chin certainly lends itself to the fuck-all crazy image you are going for.)
Over your own screaming, you hear the Threshecutioners shouting at each other, their interest in romantic overtures abandoned.

“Little shit bit me!”

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?”

“You can’t kill him. Not until we know for sure. That would be a severe breach of protocol.”

“Protocol? Protocol? He bit me! Fucker’s got it coming!”

“Just calm your ass down and confirm it, you imbecile.”

“Fine,” huffs the troll holding you.

Something swipes across your good shoulder, drawing a precise line of stinging pain. Your furious screaming dissolves into mute horror because oh fuck the cut is deep and they are going to see. You struggle against the troll’s hold, the pain from your shoulder overwhelmed by a combination of thinkpan-melting terror and the sweeps-engrained instinct to do everything in your power to avoid being branded as a freak with a capital “F.”

Apparently, that capital “F” also stands for the giant FUCK YOU the universe has served your sorry ass because your desperate struggling has done nothing to prevent the inevitable. You can feel blood—your disgusting mutant blood—oozing from the wound, hot and sticky.

There is a long stretch of silence. You can’t see the expressions on the Threshecutioner’s faces, but you can practically feel their revulsion rolling off of them as a palpable, smothering force. Not that you blame them. Seeing the repulsive sludge that runs through your vasculature is always enough to make you nauseous and you’ve had sweeps to become desensitized to it.

Finally, one of the Threshecutioners—the giggly one—says, “Huh. Just like the lusus.”

The words send a numbing chill through your bones. You know that you could pretend that the Threshecutioner might have obtained that information without killing your lusus, but you also know goddamn well that make-believe hoofbeast shit is for wrigglers and FLARP-playing losers. Goddamn it, Crabdad, you think. You’d better have given them hell.

“Confirmation complete,” says the asswipe indigoblood. “Proceed.”

On a purely logical level, you are acutely aware of the fact that you should be fighting back. The word “proceed” should not have merely lit a fire beneath the asshole of your survival instinct; it should have set off a GIANT FUCKING EXPLOSIVE FORCE deep within its bowels, triggering a shitstorm of desperate violence of such magnitude it would cease only with the Threshecutioners strewn in pieces around your hive and yourself completely empty and spent. Your limbs, however, have decided not to listen to logic, the traitorous bastards. No; your arms and legs have come to the consensus that they are perfectly content to dangle, limp as cooked noodles and just as useless.

You close your eyes, knowing that the end is about to come. In a way, it is a relief. You’ve known all your life that this was coming, and now it’s here. There will be no more hiding behind an unaffiliated caste symbol, no more going out of your way to avoid contact with other trolls, no more
worries or fears about that far-off day when the Imperial ships will come only to brand you “unfit for contributing to the genetic slurry” and leaving you behind, dead with a generous side helping of humiliation permanently affixed to your memory. Instead, you get to die at the hands of Alternia’s most ruthless and lethal killing force. It’s an honorable death, which is more than you had hoped for and probably more than you deserve.

You are so wrapped up in coming to terms with your imminent death, you barely hear the indigoblood add, “And while you are at it, clean up your mess.”

There is a sudden, blinding pain, but the pain is coming from your shoulder of all places. For the barest instant, you can feel the dislocated joint straining against an immutable force until something gives and you are screaming because holy fuck, holy fuck, holy fuck it feels like there are a million hot needles buried in your shoulder and they are TWISTING and you are retching, you are going to be sick, you are going to—

It is at this point that everything goes mercifully dark. You slump forward against the Threshecutioner’s arm and into blissful unconsciousness.

> Gamzee: Troll best friend
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terminallyCapricious [TC] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TC: hEeEeEeYY hEsT fRiEnD!
TC: ArE yOu AIl uP aNd MoThErFuCkIn AwAkE yEt?
TC: gUeSs YoU’rE sTiLL AsLeEp.
TC: NoThInG wRoNg WiTh A MoThErFUCkEr tAkInG iN a LiTTLe ExTRa aR aNd Ar ALl
cOzY wArM iN bItChTiTs WiCkED mIrAcLe SoMEn.
TC: aCtUaLLy ThaT SoUnDs LiKe A pReTy ThaT SoUnDs LiKe A pReTy mOtHeRfUCkEn iN gOoD iDea.
TC: I tHiNk ThIs MoThErFuCkEr Is GoInG tO hAvE hImSeLf a nIrAcLe fUCkEn lAyDoWN.
TC: mAyBe I’LL hAvE mYsElF SoME bItChIn DrEaMs.
TC: FuCk, WhErE dO dReAmS eVeN CoME fRoM?
TC: aRe ThEy AIl uP iN a MoThErFuCkEr’S hEaD oR wHaT?
TC: ThEy JuST CoMe OuT oF nOwHeRe LiKe A MoThErFUCkEn mIrAcLe In YoUr SlEEp.
TC: dReAmS aRe MoThErFuCkIn MiRaClEs, My CrAb BrO.
TC: I’LL bE tAlKiNg To YoU wHeN i’M AIl Up AnD dONEn gEtTiNg My WiCkEn ShIfT SlEEp On.
TC: :o)

terminallyCapricious [TC] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

> Karkat: Wake
You wake up in an unfamiliar room. It takes you a full thirty seconds to process this fact through the groggy haze swirling in your head. Your body feels weak and clumsy. You try to make yourself care enough to wonder what is going on, but your thoughts keep slipping in and out of one another in a senseless jumble:

Who’s knocking on my—

Head hurts I should—

Troll Gamzee, stupid fucking—

Crabdad where are—

You really need to focus on….

A distant notion that you have been drugged begins to make its way through the tangle of nonsense rolling around in your mind. You would be surprised if you weren’t so fucking tired and dizzy.

You lie there, letting your thoughts drift for you haven’t got the foggiest clue how long. The first concrete memory you have is realizing that your right arm—the one that had hurt so badly—is immobilized against your chest. The shoulder still aches, and it spits an angry bolt of pain through your side when you give it an experimental flex, just to remind you that hey, dumbshit, I’m still injured!—but it is nothing like the thinkpan-obliterating agony you had experienced before. In fact, you’d go out on a limb and say that it is pretty bearable—which makes absolutely no sense.

The room you are in is too dim to see much detail, but it doesn’t look as though there is much detail to see. Your ocular globes feast themselves upon a boxy shadow that looks like a desk, another boxy shadow that looks like a chair, and yet another boxy shadow that looks like another chair. It appears as though the only other thing in the room is the couch you are lying on, half-propped into a sitting position. You can’t see the couch and you can’t see the cushions that you are leaning against, but you would bet your bulge that they are boxy, too.

There does not appear to be anybody else in the room with you. You see nothing troll-shaped in the shadows and you don’t hear anything such as breathing, rustling, ass-scratching, or—fuck, why not?—bulge-stroking that would give away somebody trying to hide.

Cautiously, you start to sit up. There is an electronic click as the motion sensor on the ceiling registers your movement and suddenly the whole room is bathed in light. You suck in a gasp through your teeth, your ocular globes stinging and then you look around.

The room is exactly as bare as you had thought it was. The desk and chairs are all shades of metallic gray. Everything else—the walls, the floor, your couch—is stark white. Something unpleasant unfurls deep in your digestive sac in reaction to the room’s clinical feel; something that screams at you to get the fuck out of there right now.

You maneuver your legs over the side of the couch and only just begin to stand up when the door opens and two adults walk in, one male and one female. They are both tall, but not as tall as the Threshecutioners you had seen earlier. They also look…softer than the Threshecutioners. Their faces are rounder and the muscles in their arms and necks, while more mature and defined than your own, are nowhere near the tight cords of bulk you’d seen in the arm that had held you helpless back at your hive. Neither appears to be armed, but both of them are wearing long, white lab coats which
make that uneasy feeling in your digestive sac intensify.

One of them, the female, takes a step towards you and says, “Karkat Vantas?”

The only response you give her is a scowl. You consider all of the ways you might conceivably manage to fight your way past her and get through the door, which is still hanging open. The male seems to follow your sentiments, as he casually flicks his lab coat back to reveal a wicked curved dagger hanging from a sheath on his belt. You hastily abandon any ideas about escape because you have already had one fucking awful encounter with adults today and you are in no hurry to subject yourself to more general unpleasantness.

“You are Karkat Vantas, are you not?” the female asks.

You give her a wary nod.

No sooner have you given your affirmation when the male lunges forward, dagger out. You take a surprised step back, cursing yourself because past you is seriously the worst you for taking his eyes off the guy with the weapon like a complete moron. The backs of your knees run up against the couch behind you and suddenly there is nowhere to go to get away from the dagger-wielding psychopath.

You see the dagger coming and try to throw up an arm to protect yourself, forgetting that your right arm is pretty much the worst thing in the world. You manage to throw up your left arm just in time. The dagger nicks your forearm. It’s a shallow, precise cut that barely even hurts, but it’s enough to allow a few drops of blood to well up.

You stand there, waiting for the killing blow to land because even though you haven’t got the slightest clue as to why the Threshecutioners didn’t kill you the second they saw that hideous candy red color, you know that there is no fucking way you are dodging death twice in one day. Except, apparently, you are.

The male is standing in front of the door, back where he started and he is looking at you with an expression that makes you exceedingly uncomfortable. The look in his eyes is nowhere near the revulsion that should have been there. Instead there is a hungry quality to it, so intense it is bordering on the edge of perverse arousal.

You quickly turn your attention to the female, whose slack-jawed surprise is far closer to what you might have expected. Well fuck me, you think. At least somebody has the sense to be appropriately horrified here. And then she shakes her head and whispers, “Remarkable.”

And that’s it. It is official. Your quota for bizarre-ass shit has been filled and you can take no more. You forget the fact that these are adults and that it is very likely that their blood color is much, much higher than your own and you squawk, “What the fuck?”

Neither of them seems to be fazed by your outburst. The female says, “I apologize for our forwardness, but we needed to see that…extraordinary blood color with our own eyes. Have the Threshecutioners told you why you were being brought here?”

“No,” you shoot back. “They had a hard time fitting that in between all the blackrom flirting and trying to tear my arm off.”

A frown passes over the female’s face; a quick, downward pull at the edges of her lips that passes like a spasm. “How is that shoulder?” she asks.

“I realize this must all be very confusing to you,” she replies. “If you will calm down, I will explain.”

Somehow, you swallow back the urge to snap, “FUCK YOU, I AM CALM!” and instead you nod your head.

“My name is Cennia Ettino.” She gestures to the male behind her before adding, “This is my associate, Torkal Anorst. We are Aggressanalysts.”

Wow, no shit, you think with a pointed glare at her white lab coat.

“It has come to the attention of the Empire that you have an abnormal blood color,” she continues. “Under normal circumstances, this would be grounds for immediate culling, as I am sure you are aware. However, your unique blood color has qualified you to participate in a very prestigious and important program, should you choose to do so.”

She looks at you as if she expects you to commence having sloppy makeouts with her shit-kicking feet. You raise your eyebrows and say nothing, fuck you very much, so she reaches into her pocket, withdraws a photo, and hands it to you.

You take it from her and your lip curls at what you see. The thing in the photo looks like a troll that fell out of the highest limb of the ugly tree and hit every branch on the way down. Sure, it has two arms and two legs, but beyond that it’s a hot mess of pathetic. It has no claws, no horns, and its teeth are far too dull to be used for anything other than eating. (Seriously, you think, how the fuck did it make it out of the brooding caverns with nothing to use for self defense?) The yellows of its eyes are a sickly white. Its skin is a weird color that you have never seen before. It looks terribly vulnerable, and it gives you an acute sense of discomfort.

“What is it?” you finally manage to ask.

“That,” says Cennia, “is a human. They inhabit a planet far away from here called Earth.”

You glance back down to the photo in your hand with a sense of relief. Of course that’s not a troll, you stupid nookwhiff, you think. Holy shit, did I really think that was a real troll? Apparently I missed the schoolfeed that included common sense.

“Earth is a newer planet than Alternia,” Cennia says. “It is still rich in natural resources that have not been present on Alternia in thousands of sweeps. Her Imperious Condescension has also expressed interest in the humans’ weapon-making capabilities.”

You don’t understand why she is bothering to give you these inane details. It’s not like you haven’t heard all of this before in practically every newsfeed ever in the history of your sad and pathetic excuse for a life. You can hardly turn on your husktop without hearing “Blah blah blah conquering planet bulgemunch in galaxy who gives a fuck blah blah natural resources blah boon for the Empire blah blah blah.” Cennia is still listing off all of the ways Earth is just so fan-autoerogenous shame globe fondling-tastic and you find yourself thinking, Thank you, captain exposition. Fucking hell. Will you just get to the point already?

No sooner has the thought rolled through your thinkpan than Torkal clears his throat and says, “The point, if you are going to insist on acting like a rude little maggot, is that attempting to conquer that pretty little planet and get all of these lovely assets for ourselves the traditional way would be a Very Bad Idea.”

You cringe and you are not sure whether it is because his voice is a weird, mumbling hiss that makes your skin crawl or whether it is because you don’t know how long he was poking around inside your
thinkpan, rifling through mothergrub knows what thoughts, memories, and otherwise deeply personal shit without your knowing he was there. Cennia gives him a look as though to say, *Oh look who’s talking about being rude you fucking hypocritical sack of shit* before resuming her monologue.

“Preliminary observations suggest that humans tend to react to unfamiliar situations with suspicion and hostility,” she says. “They have had no interplanetary contact, so it is likely that they would react negatively to an emissary visit from Her Imperious Condescension. Even if they were to react more positively, the fact that they lack a standardized language or culture presents its own complications. Her Imperious Condescension, in her infinite wisdom, has prudently decided to forego her customary visit in this instance.”

You find yourself wondering whether these two fucktards actually subscribe to this “prudent and wise Imperious Condescension” crap. Despite your respect for her excellent qualities as a leader, you are pretty sure that the Condesce doesn’t give a shit about anything other than conquering alien planets and having every subject under her reign submit to her every whim, neither of which lends itself to “prudent” or “wise.” Ruthless? Yes. Bloodthirsty? Fuck yes. But prudent and wise? *Fuck, maybe they mean it ironically,* you think, only to end up feeling like a complete asscracker when you remember that yep, Torkal is still psychic and yep, he is probably still reading your mind. He doesn’t say or do anything to indicate that he has heard you. (Though you can’t be sure without looking in his direction and there is no fucking way you are resting your delicate ocular globes on his ass-ugly face any more than strictly necessary.)

Cennia is still talking. “A full-scale military attack is likewise inadvisable,” she says. “If we were to launch an immediate assault—”

Torkal cuts her off with a snort, and fucking hell you are pretty sure you hear something that sounds like a giggle bubbling up in his voice like a fart under water as he adds, “Those stupid creatures would destroy their own planet trying to prevent the inevitable. Remember those weapons Cennia mentioned earlier?”

You want to tell him that yes, of course you remember the fucking weapons she mentioned earlier because what does he take you for, some thinkpan-impaired imbecile? but Torkal doesn’t leave you any space to answer. “Detonate enough of them close enough to the atmosphere of a planet and you’ve got yourself a barren wasteland. And believe me they would need to detonate plenty of them just to make a tiny, insignificant dent in whichever brigade we sent their way.”

Cennia glances at Torkal as though she is trying to gauge whether he has decided to stop his cascade of verbal diarrhea before she starts talking again. “Of course the potential losses to our side are of little concern. However, if Earth’s natural resources are destroyed or made otherwise inaccessible, conquering it would be counterproductive. Her Imperious Condescension has developed a solution to this dilemma that demonstrates both her flexibility and cunning.”

Whatever this plan is, you very much doubt that Her Imperious Condescension was the one who came up with it because the Condesce you know is a supreme badass who would never resort to anything resembling the likes of flexibility or cunning. No, you (platonically) pity the poor bastard who was the one to present this idea to her. More likely than not, that chump ended up with a trident to the face.

“Pay attention,” Torkal breaks in, and fucked if there isn’t something in his already exceedingly fuckered slitherbeast hiss of a voice that makes you feel even more uncomfortable. “This is where you come in.”

Cennia gives Torkal another look that says *Oh my fucking God do you ever shut your stinking gape-hole* before she continues. “Our covert invasion operation of Earth has been in effect for several
sweeps now. As an agent of this operation, it will be your responsibility to live among the humans, gathering information and carrying out missions undetected.”

Cennia keeps talking but you aren’t listening because that is it; you are done with this. You have bitten your tongue and let them have their say like a good little barkbeast because you thought this was all going to end in a nice, clean culling, but what they are suggesting is so much worse.

“Please tell me my auricular sponge clots are failing me here,” you say. “Tell me I did not just hear you say that you are sending me to some shithole alien planet where I will be nook deep in squishy hairless monkeys.”

Now it’s your turn to be on the receiving end of one of Cennia’s looks. This one says Wow your mental abilities are significantly slower than my already extremely low assessment of them and that’s sad. “That is correct, in essence,” she says.

You shake your head and try to take a step back to put just that much more distance between you and this fucking terrible idea. Unfortunately, the couch is still immediately behind you. Your knees hit the edge and you half-sit half-fall onto the couch like a tool. In the doorway, Torkal is laughing. You are too horrified to care.

Cennia appears to notice your distress. Her tone shifts away from the politely clinical tone to something that is almost sympathetic. “Of course we would not send you to Earth unprepared! Learning the language and cultural customs of the region you will be living in will require sweeps of intensive training. It will also take a significant amount of time for you to complete all of the necessary cosmetic alterations.”

“Cosmetic…alterations…?” you repeat. And oh, fuck you, you have gone from feeling horrified to feeling horrified and ill and your voice is little more than a sad croak.

“Surely you understand that going to Earth as you are now would defeat the purpose of a covert operation,” Cennia replies. “Knowing cultural customs and behavior patterns will not be enough. The only way to live seamlessly with humans is to look like a human.”

You look down at the picture that you are still holding in your hand, and then you quickly look away. They want to turn me into that, you think, and the thought makes you want to puke. You are pretty fucking sure that you can taste a hot wave of vomit rising up in your protein chute.

From what seems like very far away, you hear Torkal cackle, “I hear the horn removal surgery takes a long time to recover from; although in your case it probably won’t be much of an adjustment.”

And that’s it. That’s all you can take. You are not doing this. Fuck whatever happens, you are not letting them turn you into one of those things with dull teeth and dull claws and ugly as fuck everything. “You said I had a choice,” you say. “Well, I say ‘no thank you’ and fuck you for even planting such a repulsive idea in my think pan.”

Cennia seems to be put out by your bluntness, and Torkal’s face twists into an angry scowl. You don’t give a flying fuck. I’m going to die anyway, so fuck their hemospectrum decorum and fuck them, too, you think.

There is a long silence. Finally, Cennia says, “You are right. We can’t force you to participate in the program. I simply assumed that you would prefer this to the alternative.”

“Well I don’t!” you snap. “Just cull me and get it over with already!”

“Cull you?” says Torkal. “Oh, no. That’s not an option.”
“What the fuck do you mean ‘not an option’?” you demand, twisting your voice into a caricature of Torkal’s muttering hiss.

Torkal raises himself up to his full height, teeth bared in a snarl. You can’t read his mind, but you don’t have to be a psychic to know what he is thinking. It’s probably something along the lines of Oh my god you little piece of shit I am going to kill your insolent little ass, and then I am going to resurrect you just to kill you again, preferably in the most painful and messy way imaginable even though that impression of me was completely accurate and perfect in every way. For about half a second, it looks as though he really is going to go ahead and kill you. Then Cennia is papping one of his arms and murmuring something that would probably qualify as sweet pale nothings if she would have the courtesy to speak loud enough for you to hear it.

You are on the verge of shouting, “OH MY GOD GET FUCKING PILE” when Torkal deflates into a surly slouch. He sends a smoldering glare in your direction, but he manages to refrain from trying to strangle you with your own entrails. Cennia keeps her hand on his arm as she turns her attention back to you.

“All humans have the same blood color; one that does not exist on our hemospectrum,” she says. “Until now, we have recruited only rustbloods to act as agents because we believed that their blood color was the closest approximation to human blood color available. Yours, however, is a perfect match.”

And now it all makes sense. The final piece of this what-in-the-name-of-shit-is-going-on puzzle has fallen into place. You understand completely and now you know you are going to puke. I’m already halfway there, you think. I bet that’s what they are thinking. I bet they are thinking ‘fuck it; he’s already one of those things on the inside, might as well make the outside match.’

You don’t need to look at Torkal to know that his glare has evolved into a vicious leer. You can feel the bastard’s psychic footprint inside your thinkpan as vividly as a kick to the autoerogenous shame globes and it is practically screaming arrogance and cruel pleasure in response to your distress. You want him to get the fuck out oh my god seriously just go the fuck away but you have no idea how to block the assface out and your attempts to do so only seem to amuse him.

Cennia just keeps talking as though she does not seem to notice her moirail bad touching all of your most private and sacred inner musings. “We cannot allow this rare opportunity to go to waste,” she says. “If you refuse to participate in the program as an agent, we will need to analyze the mutation that produced your unique blood color. If we can isolate the cause, we might be able to induce a similar coloration in future agents.”

“In other words, you’ll be our personal lab rat,” Torkal sneers. “And I’ve got to say I can’t wait to open you up and see what makes you tick.”

Your mouth goes completely dry because the idea of Torkal—sketchy-ass creepy as fuck Torkal—grubbing around your insides is terrifying. You try to sound ominous and threatening, but your voice comes out about an octave higher than normal as you squeak, “Why the fuck would you have to do that?”

“Vivisection is one of many standard procedures for analyzing biological anomalies,” Cennia answers.

“It also happens to be my specialty,” Torkal adds, and goddamned son of a bitch the smile on his face is enough to send a cold shiver down your spine.

Cennia gives him a quick glance and paps his arm again before saying, “If you honestly prefer this
option over going to Earth, we will be more than happy to honor your wishes. Are you certain this is what you want?"

“No!” you exclaim—too quickly. You hadn’t wanted them to notice just how shaken you are, but your abrupt, half-sobbed answer is pretty much the same as sparking up a giant neon sign that says I AM SO AFRAID AT THIS VERY MOMENT THAT I AM ABOUT ONE MORE HORRIFYING TURN OF EVENTS AWAY FROM SOILING MYSELF IN TERROR.

“Would you like a moment to weigh your options?” Cennia suggests.

You nod vigorously because yes you would like a moment to process all of the bullshit you have just been fed, thank you very much.

“We will return in a few minutes,” says Cennia as she herds Torkal out the door.

You hear Torkal say, “Choose carefully. I’d hate to lose a perfectly good test subject.” And then the door closes, a lock clicks, and you are finally alone.

For the barest moment, you consider trying to escape. A cursory glance around the room erases the idea from your head. The door is bolted shut and there is no other way out. No windows, no crawlspace, and the ventilation shaft on the ceiling would barely manage to accommodate your fist, let alone the rest of your body. Your sickles are gone. There is nothing in the room you can use as a weapon, and even if there was, your best arm is useless.

The photo is a crumpled mess in your hand. You had forgotten that you were holding it the second you heard the words “lab rat.” You smooth it out and stare at the ugly thing unblinkingly until your eyes begin to water and all the colors seem to run together. Then you roll it into a tiny ball and throw it across the room.

You want to go home. You want to go back to your hive and argue with Crabdad and watch romcoms and sleep in your recuperacoon until all of this bullshit goes away and leaves you alone—but you can’t. You can’t because Crabdad is dead and your hive doesn’t exist anymore because you know what happens when young trolls get culled; you have seen what the drones or the Threshecutioners or whoever did the deed does to the lusus and to the hive. You aren’t getting culled, but as far as that goes, you might as well be.

You can’t believe you ever thought that getting culled was the worst thing that could happen to you. You should have expected the universe to come up with something worse because if there is one thing you have learned it is that the universe is far more creative and spiteful than you could ever hope to be.

You already know what you are going to do and you platonically hate yourself for it because you know it is the coward’s way out. You know just as well as the next assmunch that the correct thing to do—the honorable thing to do—would be to refuse to die as anything less than a troll, and you know that you can’t do it. The idea of being poked and prodded and treated like a fucking freak by a bunch of Aggressanalysts for the rest of your life strikes a nerve in you which has been exposed and aching for sweeps. It hurts; it actually physically hurts to think about it.

When Cennia and Torkal come back, you look at the ground as you say the five words that will change your life forever: “OK. Send me to Earth.”
> Nepeta: See what Karkat is up to
arsenicCatnip [AC] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]
AC: :33 < *ac stealthily pawsces through an open window*
AC: :33 < *ac stretches luxuriously a bit sore after such a big leap and p33rs around the room wondering if cg is still asl33p*
AC: :33 < *ac curls around karkittys legs and purrsents him with the freshly beheaded corpse of her latest kill*
AC: :33 < *cg makes some remarks about how stupid role playing is but then he notices the generous offuring and decides to play along*
AC: :33 < *he says what do you want? I am tired and in a bad mood!*
AC: :33 < *ac is starting to f33l silly role playing all by herself*
AC: :33 < karkat?
AC: :33 < where are you?
AC: :33 < if you dont f33l like role playing thats ok!
AC: :33 < i can stop
AC: :33 < s33?
AC: :33 < its safe to come out now karkat
AC: :33 < i purromise i wont make you role play anymore! h33 h33
AC: :33 < ok i guess you dont f33l like talking right now :((

arsenicCatnip [AC] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

> Karkat: Have first encounter with human aesthetic sensibilities
Karkat: Have first encounter with human aesthetic sensibilities

You feel exactly as though you have been kicked in the teeth by a hoofbeast. Actually, no. That’s stupid. If you had actually taken a direct kick to the face by a hoofbeast you would be dead, and you most certainly are not dead. The relentless, throbbing pain currently emanating from your teeth and causing you untold worlds of grief is testament enough to that.

What you are feeling is something more akin to a hoofbeast standing on your mouth. No; that’s also an incredibly stupid analogy because a hoofbeast standing on your face translates to the same fucking thing as a hoofbeast kicking you in the head: dead as a door hanging post.

There is something attached to your teeth; something that feels metallic and rough against the interior of your lips and cheeks. You have no idea what it is, but it is pushing on your teeth and you want it off. You try to prod at it with your tongue only to discover that your mouth is full of something dry and cottony.

A voice says, “Do not spit out the gauze yet, Karkat.”

You know that voice. It belongs to an adult, and that makes absolutely no sense because you have never spoken with, met, or otherwise engaged with a fully-grown troll in your entire life. Except oh, wait. Fuck. Yes you have.

You very suddenly remember that this impersonally polite voice belongs to an Aggressanalyst named Cennia Ettino. You also remember the circumstances under which you met this particular example of trollkind, up to and including your unbelievably stupid decision to let her send you to an alien planet.

Oh fuck, you think as it all comes rushing back. The Threshecutioners. Your arm which still hurts like fuck—all the second you remember that it is supposed to hurt. Torkal molesting your thoughts like a flaming piece of shit. The picture of that ugly-ass alien.

Son of a bitch, you think as that last one crosses your mind. You try to sit up but the room won’t stop moving and you crumple back onto the operating table. Part of you is distressed by the realization that this is the second time you have woken up drugged in this shithole in as many hours. A much, much larger part of you is preoccupied with raking your fingers through your hair like an idiot.

“Are you all right?” says Cennia’s voice. “Please allow me to help you sit up.”

Fuck you I am not all right, you think. Where are my horns? YOU CUT OFF MY HORNS AND TURNED ME INTO ONE OF THOSE HUMAN ALIENS YOU FUCKING—it is at this point that your fingers brush against the base of one of your still very much present horns. You breathe a mental sigh of relief at the realization that you are still much more troll than you are ugly alien thing.

“Ugh,” you groan as she maneuvers you into a sitting position. “What the fuck did you do?” That is what you try to say. Around all the wads of gauze in your mouth, it comes out sounding more like “Aww wadduck oo?”

“Try to refrain from speaking for the moment,” she says. “We have removed four of your teeth and you need to continue biting on the gauze until we get back to your room to ensure proper clotting.”

It takes you a moment to process what she has just said because even though your senses have stopped swimming enough to let you sit up, the anesthetic is still making your mind move about ten steps slower than usual. When the meaning finally catches up to the words, you shout “WHAT?”
She gives you one of her looks. This one seems to say, *Oh my fucking Christ did you not hear what I just told you, you ignorant douche I mean really, what the hell is the matter with you?* “I apologize,” she says. “Tooth extraction is often the only way to ensure that the dental straightening devices produce the desired results. Can you stand?”

You take your sweet time sifting through all of the bullshit that just came out of Cennia’s mouth. You have a fuckload of undoubtedly witty and appropriately scathing responses. Rather than gracing her with one of them, you settle with nodding your head because you are just too tired to be assed.

“Excellent,” she says. “Continue biting down on that gauze. I will explain what I can while we return to your room.”

She keeps a hand on your good shoulder as you slide off the operating table. You would slap her hand off, but you find that you do in fact need the support the second you are in a standing position and your legs suddenly decide fuck you, we are going to do whatever we feel like doing and right now we feel like making you look like a huge jackass.

It occurs to you as you wobble through the door and out into a white-tiled hallway that you and Cennia are alone. You realize that you should probably be using this opportunity to do something productive like FIGHT YOUR WAY FREE AND GET THE FUCK OUT OF THIS SHITHIVE MAGGOTS INSANE ASYLUM. You attempt to shrug her hand off your shoulder in order to make a break for it and promptly stumble into a wall. She doesn’t even break step as she grabs your arm and steers you in the correct direction.

She also never seems to shut the hell up. You are so preoccupied with not falling over your own feet like a complete fucktard that you don’t catch much of what she is saying. What little you do hear does nothing to make you feel any better. (“…rather silly, though ingenious invention.” “…a common practice on Earth.…” “…at that point we will need to file your teeth down…”)

You are exhausted by the time she steers you into the featureless room with the boxy furniture in which you first met her and Torkal. You notice that somebody has swapped out the couch you had lain on earlier with a recuperacoon. It is as stark as everything else in the room and it doesn’t look half as comfortable as yours, but at this moment you don’t give a squeakbeast’s ass. All you want to do is sink into some nice, fresh sopor slime and go to sleep.

Fucking hell, Cennia is still talking. “I realize you must be tired—* (No shit, you think. *If you would fuck off and let me sleep I would be eternally grateful. I will build you an altar and make a blood sacrifice to it for you to analyze every day if you will just shut the fuck up and go away*)”—but try not to go to sleep until after Averic has come by.”

*Don’t care; go away,* you think.

“You may spit out the gauze now. I will take it.”

*Wait. What’s this? Was that actually something I give half a shit about? As a certain assfaced clown dumb shit would say, what a motherfucking miracle. You feel a funny twinge when you realize that you are probably never going to see said assfaced clown dumb shit again and—oh fuck you, you are not going to cry. It’s not as though never talking to him or any of those other bulgebiting lunatics again is that big of a loss or anything. In fact, maybe you’ll start regenerating all the brain cells you lost just from associating with them. Yeah, that’s it. You are certain you can feel yourself getting smarter already.*

You quickly pry your thoughts away from that subject and resolve not to think about it again until you are alone (or preferably never again, though it’s likely you will agonize over it time and time
again because you are just such a glutton for misery) and turn your attention back to Cennia. You take a certain amount of satisfaction out of spitting the slobbery wads of gauze out of your mouth and into her outstretched hand. You sneak a quick look up to her face to see whether she is properly grossed out and you are disappointed when you realize that her expression remains an unchanging mask of clinical professionalism.

“Remember to stay awake until you have seen Averic,” she says as she walks out the door.

“Fuck you,” you mumble after her (and god is it nice to be able to enunciate again, even if the shitload of metal on your teeth makes some of the consonant sounds come out weird and fuzzy). “I will sleep when I want to sleep.”

You start toward the recuperacoon with every intention of climbing inside just for the privilege of issuing a giant middle finger to Cennia and her orders. Halfway there, you end up plopping down on one of the chairs instead. If I’m going to sleep it is going to be uninterrupted and completely devoid of any more bullshit, you decide.

The shaky feeling that has been dogging you ever since you woke up on the operating table begins to recede, leaving behind a dark weariness that settles over you like a physical force. Slowly, your head begins to droop. You slouch forward to rest your head against the cool, metallic surface of the desk and your eyes are heavy.

I’ll close my eyes for two seconds, you think. Nobody will ever have to know.

No sooner have you closed her eyes when the door crashes open. You sit bolt upright, and then you try to put on a nonchalant face that says Sleeping? Fuck no; sleep is for losers and brainless shitheads! The expression that actually appears on your face does not convey this in the least. It looks closer to Shit; you caught me. I am a loser and quite possibly a brainless shithead as well. Man, I suck.

The troll standing in your room doesn’t seem to care that he caught you doing the one thing you were explicitly told not to do. He is also huge; bigger than even the Threshecutioners who kidnapped you earlier. With his biceps easily as big around as one of your thighs and a stony expression, he looks as though he would be perfectly at home in a Ruffianihilator squad. His Aggressanalyst coat seems like a joke. (It does not help that the damn thing looks to be about two sizes too small and ends a good two inches above his belt line.)

“Averic, I presume,” you say.

He grunts something unintelligible that you choose to translate as, “Yes, you extraordinarily intelligent and charming example of trollkind. It is indeed as you say.” He follows this up by roughly grabbing your good arm and grunting something that you take to mean “I would be most delighted if you would be so inclined as to come with me, good sir.”

You have a hard time keeping pace with Averic as he leads you down the hall. Averic’s legs are so long that one of his strides is equivalent to about three of yours and you are forced to trot just to avoid being dragged. You are tempted to tell him to slow the hell down, but you doubt that his response would be anything resembling “Why yes, of course I will slow my admittedly uncomfortable pace to a more reasonable speed and might I add that I am deeply sorry for being such a terrible douche.” Instead you content yourself with trying to memorize the route back to your room because—who knows?—it might be useful to know your way around if you ever get the chance to make a break for it.

Averic finally stops in front of a door and enters something into the keypad on the wall beside it.
(How he manages to avoid hitting two buttons at once and fucking up the input with his sausage-sized fingers you have no idea.) The door opens to reveal a room with a sink, a stainless steel load gaper, and a tiny ablution trap. Averic shoves you inside, and snarls “Ten minutes” before closing and locking the door behind you.

The first thing you do is take a look in the mirror hanging on the wall above the sink. You are relieved to find that you look the same as you always have. Your sclera are still a healthy yellow, your skin is still a robust gray, and your horns are still…er…nubby. You take a deep breath and then you bare your teeth.

You are surprised. From the feel of the dental straightening devices in your mouth, you had expected them to be a horrifying conglomeration of twisted metal. The neat rows of brackets and wire that greet you are downright inconspicuous in comparison. That doesn’t make them any less repulsive, you remind yourself. Less hideous than expected is still hideous.

You proceed over to the ablution trap and find a white towel with a bar of soap folded inside. You almost decide to skip the shower because you are so tired and there is absolutely nobody around to be offended your bodily musk except for Cennia, Averic, and possibly Torkal, and you don’t give two shits about what any of them think. Then you remember that you have spent the last fuck knows how long unconscious and at the complete mercy of a bunch of Aggressanalysts. The idea makes you decide that an extra hot, extra thorough shower is definitely in order.

As you remove your shirt—which turns out to be a pain in the ass due to your nigh immobilized right arm—you notice that you are wearing a thin, plastic wristband on your left arm. At first glance you assume it to be an identification bracelet, but you do not see your name or any other identifying features on it. You do notice that it is a bright, candy-red color identical to that of your blood; a fact that pisses you right the fuck off. You try to remove it, but the plastic is too durable to stretch or break. You decide to leave it for later because your ten minutes are ticking away and it would be a bitch to have Averic walk in on you when you are on the load gaper.

After the fastest ten minutes in the history of the universe, Averic is back. The insensitive bastard doesn’t even bother to knock or otherwise announce his presence. Nope; he just barges right in with nary an “Excuse me, but might I inquire as to whether you are ready to present yourself? I would hate to disturb you if you are indecent.” Luckily, you have already finished your ablutions and you are fully clothed.

Averic leads you back to your room with his usual level of charm and grace, which seems to be permanently frozen somewhere between uncouth grubfucker of the year and steaming pile of musclebeast leavings. He leaves with nary a word or a grunt, which is a-OK in your books.

Once you are alone in your room, you notice that somebody has left some food on the desk while you were out—a bowl of soup and two thick slices of grub loaf, to be exact. Your digestive sac takes the opportunity to remind you that hey, asshole, you have not eaten since who knows when and you are fucking starving, so even though the recuperacoon looks even more inviting than it had before, you decide to try to eat enough to make your stomach stop hating you so much.

Gingerly, you pick up a piece of grub loaf, scrutinizing it for any signs of tampering. You do not see anything to raise your suspicions. You bring it up to your nose and sniff, just for good measure (and goddamn it, doing that reminds you of a particularly aggravating and obnoxious blind girl and that lump in your throat is not a sob; you are not a wiggler for fuck’s sake). It appears to be perfectly blameless grub loaf. You take a bite and JESUS FUCK THAT HURTS! Chewing is something that is not going to happen at this point in time.

You drop the grub loaf back on its plate and turn your attention to the soup. After inspecting it the
same way you did the grub loaf, you take a tentative sip. The soup is a chilled, watery concoction that tastes sweet like wiggler food. You drink the rest of it, relishing the feel of the cool liquid against your aching teeth and gums.

The lights dim as you set the empty bowl back on the desk. There is just enough light for you to avoid stubbing your toes on either of the chairs around the desk as you finally make your way to the recuperacoon and climb inside. The slime envelops you and you drop into a deep and dreamless sleep.

> **Sollux:** Wonder what is up with Karkat
twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TA: ok what ii2 your problem kk?
TA: thii2 ii2 liike the tenth tiime iive triied two get iiin touch wiith you and youre 2tiill offliine.
TA: are you avoiidiing me or 2omethiing?
TA: fuck ii probably did 2omethiing two pii22 you off and now you are giiviing me the cold 2houlder liike a liittle grub.
TA: you know what would be ape2hiit banana2 awe2ome kk?
TA: iiif you would ju2t fuckiing TELL ME what your problem ii2.
TA: ii mean iiif you really expect me two apologiize for 2omethiing ii dont even remember doiing then you are going two be waitiiing for a long tiime.
TA: you know what?
TA: fuck you, kk.
TA: iiif you are dead 2et on beiing a pii22y jerka22 for no apparent rea2on far be iiit from me two 2top you.
TA: me22age me when you deciide two 2top actiing liike a giiant douche.
TA: oh and 2orry for whatever ii gue22.

twinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

> Sollux: Wonder what is up with Karkat

> Karkat: Meet some other douchebags
Two days. It has been two days since you woke up with your mouth full of metal. (Actually, to be completely honest you have no fucking idea how long it has been because as far as you can tell clocks are a taboo item in this shithole. Really, would it kill these fuckers to provide their prisoners with a decent timepiece? Whatever. The lights in your makeshift respite block have dimmed long enough to get in a decent amount of sleep two times since Cennia performed her unsolicited dental surgery on you. As far as you are concerned, that qualifies as two days, so that is what you are going with.)

The only troll you have seen in all this time is Averic, and you have decided that he does not count because talking to that nooksucking Ruffiannihilator wannabe is about as stimulating as talking to a wall. (You are seriously beginning to believe that the only phrase he is physically capable of uttering is “Ten minutes.” Everything else that has come out of his mouth has consisted of either unintelligible grunting or equally incomprehensible growling.) He has come by to escort you to the room with the load gaper and the ablution trap a grand total of six times, each lasting a generous ten minutes.

You have spent all of your remaining time alone and locked inside your room with absolutely nothing to do. No wait; that’s a fucking lie. You have actually been swamped with a myriad of stimulating activity. You have eaten six meals consisting entirely of grub loaf and sugary-sweet soup. You have tried to break the door down ten times. You have tried to hack the lock twenty-six times. You have tried to take off that fucking ugly bracelet seventeen times. You have counted the tiles on the ceiling five times. (There are 207. There should be 209 but there are two missing.) You have counted the tiles on the floor twice. (There are 233 of them. Seven of them are cracked.) Last but certainly not least, you have picked and poked at the straightening devices on your teeth so many times you lost count somewhere in the low hundreds. You are, in short, bored as fuck.

This is why, when the door opens and it is Cennia who enters the room, you are almost able to look past all of the shit that she has heaped on you thus far and be truly and completely happy that it is not Averic and that something is actually happening. Almost, but not quite.

“What’s this?” you say. “Do my ocular gaze globes deceive me, or is this somebody who knows what in the actual fuck is going on around here?”

“You appear to be recovering beautifully,” she counters. “How are you feeling?”

“How am I feeling? Is that a joke? My mouth is being perpetually violated by alien torture devices. How do you think I am feeling? I feel like shit!”

“You are experiencing problems with the dental straightening devices? Any excessive bleeding or loose wires?”

You realize then that no; you aren’t actually having any problems with the things on your teeth other than the fact that they are there and you want them off. However, there is not the slightest chance in any of the seven layers of Troll Dante’s hell that you are about to admit this, so instead you say, “My mouth hurts like hell.”

Cennia graces you with yet another of her looks; one which translates to Holy shit you are such a whiny little bitch, I mean come on you sound like a petulant wiggler for fuck’s sake. “Some discomfort is normal. You have been eating all of the food that we provide to you, so I assumed that it was not too severe.”
Her tone suggests a question, and you know that she expects you to say something like “Oh my heavens you’re right. Silly me; I can scarcely feel these metal abominations at all!” You offer up a surly shrug instead.

The corner of her mouth quirks down. (Well fuck me, you think. She actually has emotions.) “Karkat, I understand that you were not recruited into this program voluntarily and I understand that you may harbor some platonic resentment about your circumstances. Personally, I do not care if you choose to behave like an ill-mannered boor. However, my associates have been advised to transfer you over to Torkal’s laboratory if you prove noncompliant. You would do well to remember this whenever you find it difficult to treat them or me with basic civility.”

*Of course that shit with Torkal never stopped being a thing, you think. It’s never going to stop being a thing.* You realize that Torkal will always be the specter that these bulge fondlers trot out any time you set one toe out of line. It makes you furious—you are furious with them and you are furious with yourself because they have you trapped. They know that you will do anything to avoid letting that creeper fuck around with your insides. It’s the reason that you agreed to all of this shit in the first place and it’s the reason that, when Cennia asks you to follow her, you twist your mouth into the most vomit-inducing sugary smile you can manage and follow her out the door like a good little barkbeast.

You continue raging against all past, present, and future incarnations of yourself as you follow her down the hall. You have trouble deciding which version of you is the biggest nookstain. (Past Karkat is clearly an idiot for agreeing to all of this in the first place. However, future Karkat is a monumental coward, as demonstrated by his amazing ability to be reduced to a spineless, bulge-quaking puddle at the mere mention of Torkal’s name. But man, present Karkat sure does present a strong case for the crown by being a digestion sac-turning cocktail of both past and future Karkat.) It’s a tough choice; one that you burn most of the walk to your ablution block pondering.

Cennia has been mercifully quiet all this time, but as she enters the code into the keypad on the door she takes the opportunity to open her gape hole and say, “When you have finished your ablutions, put on the clothing that has been lain out for you. It is the uniform you will wear while you undergo training.”

Sure enough, the moment the door hisses open you see a pile of neatly-folded clothing waiting for you on the floor in front of the ablution trap. You barely manage to hide your epic eye roll until after you hear the door close and lock behind you because really, who cares what you are wearing? Not you, that’s for sure. As far as you are concerned clothes are clothes and—*Wait a second, you think. Something is seriously wrong here.*

You paw through the clothing with growing trepidation. You see a gray pair of pants that are practically a mirror image of the ones you are already wearing, basic undergarments, a pair of black shoes which are nicer and newer than yours, and one long-sleeved black shirt. You do not see your symbol on any of it.

The perma-frown on your face deepens into a scowl. You have never thought of your symbol as something worth bragging about. Hell, you spent so much time worrying about the color (not the gray, but the color you knew it should have been; was meant to be) that you rarely ever thought about the symbol at all. Still, it has been a part of you since before you can remember and the thought of going without it here, in this place, makes you nervous.

You go through each piece of clothing again, just to be sure. Not only is your symbol nowhere to be seen; there does not appear to be any symbol at all. You are not sure what you think about that, but you do not like what it implies—*no identity; nobody; not a troll; they are trying to ERASE ME*—one
bit and then you realize that you do not want to think about it anymore so you dump the blank shirt on the ground and retreat to the relative safety of the ablation trap. You turn on the water full-blast and spend the next several minutes thinking of nothing but the feel of the hot water hammering against your back.

After a stretch of time that feels dangerously close to your ten minute limit, you shut off the water, towel off, and begin to get dressed. The pants and shoes fit so well they could have been custom-made. (You wonder how Cennia came to know your exact measurements, as you have no recollection of her taking any. Then you decide that you are probably happier not knowing because oh son of a bitch they did it while you were unconscious, didn’t they? That is a creepy, creepy, creepy invasion of personal space, fuck you very much.) You hesitate with the plain black shirt in your hands. You are seriously debating tearing it to shreds and shoving it down the load gaper—“What shirt? There was no shirt. Looks like it’s going to have to be my old shirt or nothing, you piss-drinking nubsucker”—when there is a knock on the door and Cennia’s voice says, “I am coming in now, Karkat.”

Quickly, you pull the shirt over your head. It is the same as any other shirt you have worn in your entire godforsaken life, and yet it feels completely different. There is a distinct feeling of absence, like a comforting weight that you had never even been aware of has disappeared. You feel naked.

The airlock hisses, and then Cennia comes in, gives you an appraising look, and says, “It appears as though everything fits properly. Are you comfortable?”

You want to say, “Sweet bulge-grinding mother grub you are the shittiest excuse for an Aggressanalyst I have ever seen in my life. You have the perceptive abilities of a blind flybeast’s festering carcass. NO I AM NOT FUCKING COMFORTABLE! Let me wear my symbol, you giant throbbing pustule.” However, you have the feeling that Cennia will just respond to your usual brand of persuasion with yet another of her stupid looks, so you try for something a bit more diplomatic.

“I want to wear my symbol.”

“I’m sorry, but that is not permitted.”

Oh, I bet my undulating asshole you’re sorry! “Why? What difference does it make?”

“All agents of Her Imperial Condescension’s invasion mission are officially recognized as equal in status,” she replies. “There is no need for Hemocaste distinction when you and your fellow trainees are all at the same level. Personal symbols are inextricably tied to the Hemospectrum. They are therefore an unnecessary distraction. Now if you will follow me, it is time for you to meet your fellow trainees.”

You do not want to follow Cennia. As far as you are concerned, her equality schitck is a crock of steaming crap. (It does not help matters that her symbol is on prominent display—a looping, twisted design in deep green emblazoned across her chest and embroidered into the sleeves of her coat.) No, you do not want to follow Cennia and you do not want to meet any other trolls. You want to wear your symbol. You want to go back to your hive and troll your shit-for-pans friends and forget any of this ever happened.

You begin to weigh the pros and cons of pushing Cennia back out into the hall and holing up in this minuscule ablation block until you either come up with a plan to get your derriere out of here or die of starvation. Cennia seems to notice your reluctance. She grabs you by the wrist (screaming mother of fuck her grip is much stronger than you thought it was going to be. You can feel the bones bending and it hurts) and drags you out into the hall.
She marches you down a series of hallways, each as indiscriminately featureless as the last until you suddenly emerge into a room that reeks of burning grubloaf and frying grease. The room is spacious and open. One wall is completely dominated by a huge window, through which you have a lovely view of Alternia and its moons in all their glory against the stark backdrop of space. (You realize for the first time that holy flying shitballs you are on a starship. You then take a moment to properly berate yourself for not noticing this perfectly obvious little detail sooner because what kind of moron doesn’t notice something like that? Hint: the answer is you. You are that kind of moron.) Long tables with bench seats occupy the majority of the floor space. There are also more trolls than you have ever seen in one place in your entire life.

At a glance you guess that there are at least 200 of them. You see trolls milling around in clusters of four or five, trolls sitting at the tables eating, trolls skirting around the edges of the room looking dazed, trolls talking to each other, trolls fighting (you see a muscular one with serrated horns who seems hellbent on pounding the everloving piss out of some poor dupe off in the far corner)—trolls everywhere. The room is filled with a cacophony of voices echoing off the high ceiling and melding together into one big blur of sound that hurts your auricular sponge clots and makes your think pan ring.

“This is the communal nourishment block,” Cennia says, raising her voice to be heard above the noise. “You may eat if you are hungry. Please remain in this room until you receive further instruction. It is highly recommended that you use this time to acquaint yourself with your fellow trainees.”

You have no desire to do any of those things. The food looks incredibly unappetizing and the prospect of falling ass-backwards into a room full of complete strangers is frankly intimidating as hell. Unfortunately, Cennia has already disappeared back into the labyrinthine series of hallways and you do not know the way back to your respite block without her. Your options are officially: (a) go in and try to avoid making an ass of yourself or (b) continue to stand at the edge of the room like a tool. Reluctantly, you shuffle into the thick of the clusterfuck before you.

You try not to make eye contact with anybody as you search for a suitable place to sit—preferably someplace where you can stew over the abject awfulness of your life and everything in it without some douchemuffin flinging a constant stream word vomit in your face. Nobody seems to notice you as you walk past. You find an unoccupied stretch of table and claim it as your own without incident. You are busy staring into the depths of the platter of something you cannot distinguish as animal, vegetable, mineral, or heaping mass of waste when somebody plops down on the seat beside you. You tear your attention away from the platter of questionable content to see a big, burly guy sitting there, looking at you with a grin that shows off a set of dental straightening devices that match yours and pretty much screams, “WARNING, WARNING: GIANT BAG OF DOUCHE!”

You open your mouth to tell this bulge fondling pissant to shove off, but before you can get a word out he points to your bound arm and says, “You fought, too, huh?”

“What are you talking about and why should I give a fuck?”

He shrugs. “I figured you got that”—he waves at your arm with all the grace of a dying cluckbeast—“when they came around to bring you here.”

This idiot with his stupid grin and his stupid horns (they practically point straight back over the top of his head and it is the dumbest thing you have ever seen) clearly does not understand how to read basic social cues. That is the only explanation you can provide for why he is still sitting here beside you asking stupid questions when you have done less than nothing to encourage him to stay. You are so preoccupied with analyzing the sheer depths of this guy’s stupidity that you do not realize he is
still talking until he says, “So did you?”

“Did I what?” you ask, injecting as much disdain into those three syllables as you can possibly manage.

“Fight back!”

“What do you care?”

“Because I did. They broke my nose.” He proudly gestures to his nose—which, you notice is indeed a crooked mess.

“So what?” you say. “You think getting your ass handed to you by the Threshecutioner squad makes you special? Here’s a newsflash for you, you ignorant crotch stain: getting the shit beat out of you by Threshecutioners is pretty much the official inauguration ceremony to this fucktastic pukefest.”

“No it isn’t,” he says, and his grin finally falters.

And now you are confused. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Everyone else I’ve talked to thinks I was shithive maggots for trying to resist.” His expression goes sour as he adds, “Some of them actually volunteered for this.”

You shake your head. “You have got to be shitting me.”

“Go ahead and ask around. Near as I can tell, we are the only two trolls here who were decent enough to go down fighting.”

If what this doofus is saying is true, then he has managed to establish himself as marginally less awful than the rest of the seedflap stroking imbeciles in this room—an accomplishment which you suppose merits an introduction. You offer him your good hand and say, “Karkat Vantas.”

“Evrind Parmav,” he replies, reciprocating your handshake with a grip like a dead fish. He glances down to your stretch of table, which is still void of a plate, let alone any food and adds, “You should seriously try to eat something while you have the chance. They stop bringing meals to your room once they decide to let you come to the communal nourishment block with everybody else.”

“Where in mothergrub’s sacred quivering sphincter did you hear that?” you demand.

“I didn’t,” he answers. “I’ve been here for a while, though. That’s the way it always goes.”

“How long is ‘a while’?”

“I don’t know; about a perigee, I think,” he says with a shrug. “There were only about ten of us when I first got here.”

You give the platter of food sitting in front of you another look. It still looks about as tasty as dirt, but you decide to do your best to choke some of it down because sitting around later, hungry and branding past you a pan-numbing idiot for not eating when you had the chance would suck major bulge.

Evrind keeps talking while you eat. Despite your previous resolve to avoid speaking to or looking at anybody else in the room, you find that you do not mind his company. In fact, after two days of nobody but Averic and Cennia, you are grateful to be able to talk to somebody who does not have a stick permanently inserted up his waste chute. He tells you about how to find the respite block wing
and how to find the communal ablution blocks (“You don’t get to use the nice private ones anymore. Those are just for newbies.”) He tells you about who is worth talking to and who is an asshole (though you probably could have figured out that the creeper in the corner pulling the wings off of flies qualified for the “asshole” category on your own). You tell each other about fighting the Threshecutioners (and subsequently getting your asses kicked).

You are still talking to Evrind when a shrill, electronic buzzing noise blasts through the room. The sound goes on for only a few seconds, but the room is dead silent by the time it stops. You shoot a questioning glance towards Evrind because seriously what the fuck, but he just makes a chopping gesture with his hands that you take to mean as shut up and listen.

Moments later, there is a hiss of static. Then Cennia’s voice crackles forth from a loudspeaker system in all its amplified glory. “Your allotted nourishment time has ended. Please return to your respite blocks and await further instruction. That is all.”

There is not a moment of hesitation. No milling around to finish conversations or last-minute attempts to shovel in the last few bites of breakfast-lunch-dinner-whatever-the-fuck-meal-this-is-supposed-to-be. You swear you see some girl two tables over drop a spoonful of soup that was halfway to her mouth back into the bowl. By the time Cennia’s voice stops echoing around the room, half of the trolls in the room are gone.

Already on his feet beside you, Evrind cuffs your shoulder just hard enough to hurt. “Come on,” he whispers. “Time to go.”

You take another look around the rapidly emptying room and shake your head. Jesus, you think. It’s like a flock of fucking woolbeasts.

“Karkat, come on,” Evrind repeats, and you notice that his tone has shifted to something bordering desperation. You raise your eyebrows, but the expression on his face is genuinely distressed so you get up and let him drag you towards the exit.

“Sorry,” he says once you have caught up with the crowd. “It’s a bad idea to let yourself get caught hanging around after they tell you to go somewhere. Trolls who do that tend to disappear, if you catch my drift.”

You think for a moment before answering, “If by ‘disappear’ you mean ‘end up dead and possibly dismembered by Torkal’ then yes; I catch your drift.”

“I have no idea who this Torkal guy is, but yeah. That’s the gist of it.”

Well that’s just great, you think. Thank you, Cennia, for being a complete shit stain and not sharing that important little tidbit of information. It’s not like I needed a manual or anything. A simple ‘Hey, Karkat, do not take an additional two seconds to finish chewing your food before following orders’ would have sufficed. Jesus fuck, you would think that if they are going to hand my ass over to Torkal if I fuck up and break any of their rules, they would at least be decent enough to tell me what the rules are, but guess what: you would be wrong.

You continue to seethe until you notice that the crowd in the hallway has begun to thin. A quick glance confirms your suspicions: some of the trolls ahead of you have begun to peel off from the group to disappear through the numbered doors that line the hall. Apparently, you have reached the respite block wing.

You are just beginning to wonder what in the fuck you are going to do because you have no idea which block belongs to you (because past you is a pus-weeping doofus who never bothered to notice
—let alone remember—the number on the door that leads to his respite block) when Cennia materializes from the crowd and says, “Aha. There you are, Karkat. If you will follow me, I will show you the code you will use to gain access to your respite block.”

You don’t even have time offer up a proper goodbye to Evrind before she is herding you away. The best you manage is a lame wave in his general direction before the crowd closes around you and you lose sight of him.

Cennia leads you down the hall, back the way you came until you reach a door with the number “117” neatly stenciled on the front. She enters in a five-digit sequence on the keypad above the handle and then proceeds to drill you on it until you could recite it backwards in your sleep while concussed and heavily intoxicated on sopor slime.

Once she is satisfied that there is no way you will ever forget that completely pedestrian and nondescript combination of numbers, she says, “As of today, this code has been enabled to unlock your door from the inside as well as from the outside. The code will open the door at any time during active hours, but it will not work during the sleep time block because you are not permitted to leave your room during that time. For the moment, we ask that you do not leave your room for reasons other than to use the communal ablution block unless instructed to do so. Do you understand?”

‘Ask’ my ass, you think. You guys probably kill any idiot you see wandering the halls. Out loud, you say, “Yes.”

“Excellent. Please enter your room at this time.”

You type in the code (7-1-7-4-6). There is an automatic whir, the click of a deadbolt drawing, and then—Holy shit, how unexpected!—you open the door and you return once again to the room with the boxy furniture and the 207 ceiling tiles and the 233 floor tiles and you very quickly resume being bored as fuck.

> Eridan: Consult with Karkat
caligulasAquarium [CA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

CA: hey kar where the fuck have you been
CA: i just got my fins on a brand spankin neww doomsday devvice
CA: youd better start gettin your affairs in order an all that other shit you land dwwellers do wwhen you knoww your flyin honkbeast is cooked
CA: damn it kar arent you gonna try an talk me dowwn from destroyin all that you hold dear or ridicule me or anythin
CA: ok you caught me
CA: i dont havve any doomsday devvice
CA: i made it up
CA: that wwasnt wwhat i wwanted to talk to you about anywway
CA: i just wwanted to ask your advvice about somethin
CA: its kinda important but i dont wwanna leavve it sittin in your queue
CA: so
CA: troll me back wwhen you get a second

caligulasAquarium [CA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

> Karkat: How do I English?
The morning (and let’s face it, you use the term “morning” very loosely here because the only means of differentiating time on this freefalling hunk of scrap metal that has the gall to call itself a space station is by the automated dimming of the lights which occurs at the end of every “day.” It would be far more accurate to say “the period of time immediately following your sleep time block”, rather than “morning”, but that is so fucking unwieldy and generally obnoxious to say it makes you want to execute a decorative and highly difficult spinning classical dance move off the levered device so “morning” it is) after you meet Evrind, you wake up with a terrible pressure pounding against the inside of your head. It feels as though all of the blood in your body has crammed itself into your pan and you can feel it throbbing in perfect synch with the rhythm of your blood pusher. It makes you want to retch.

You are convinced that this is unequivocally the worst thing that has ever happened to you or anybody else in the history of the universe and you suddenly feel very sorry for all the times you laughed at Sollux and called him a crying grub for trolling you just to complain about his head hurting. Holy flaming shit, if his headaches are even a sliver of what you are experiencing at this moment then past you is a huge sack of insensitive pail swill. You will never call him “stupid fuckwit” or “pathetic pile of cullbait” or “whiny little wiggler who poops hard in his own diapers” again if it will just make this pain in your head stop.

You are so miserable all you want to do is get back into your recuperacoon and sleep until the flesh-eating earwigs which have apparently replaced your brain decide to quit tormenting you and move on to a new victim. It is all you can do to refrain from tearing off your own auricular sponge clots when Cennia’s voice crackles from the intercom on your ceiling and prompts the creatures in your head to add “delightful tap dance on Karkat’s nerve endings” to their repertoire of how to make your life absolutely unbearable.

“Good morning,” says Cennia’s voice (and damned if she doesn’t sound downright cheerful. You would feel like breaking something if your head wasn’t in the process of making your life horrible beyond all belief.) “All trainees must now report to the communal nourishment block at this time. You may eat breakfast while you await further instruction. That is all.”

The idea of going to the communal nourishment block with its burning grubloaf stench and its greasy food and its LOUD AS FUCK ACOUSTICS is enough to make you feel physically ill. You are tempted to slide back into your nice, refreshing sopor slime and pretend that Cennia’s orders were never a thing that happened. Then you remember the way all of the trolls in the communal nourishment block had jumped to follow orders yesterday evening. You remember the half-raised spoonful of soup and through the awful throbbing, you remember Evrind’s words: “Trolls who get caught hanging around tend to disappear.”

Slowly, you haul your sorry ass across your respite block. Once you are standing outside, you discover a packet of papers clipped to the front of the door.

You glare at the papers as though they are the sole cause of everything that has ever gone wrong with your life. If you had even the slightest, most pathetic reserves of psychic power, the paper would obligingly burst into flame under the intensity of such a glare. Unfortunately, you are not some douchebag with a bifurcation complex and beastly psionic power, so nothing happens.

You spend a few more seconds glaring at the papers, just to show anybody who might care to look that you are in a fucking terrible mood and you are in no condition to be putting up with this reeking pile of mixed and blended excrement. Then you snatch the papers off the door and begin to read:
Dear POTENTIAL COVERT AGENT:

Congratulations on your recent recruitment to take part in our glorious empire’s efforts to vanquish the planet __EARTH__. As demonstration of her infinite magnanimity, Her Imperious Condescension extends a heartfelt thank you in advance for the sacrifice you will inevitably endure in exchange for the expansion and further glorification of the Altermian Empire.

The following pages contain important information regarding your specific training regimen. Please take a moment to familiarize yourself with this information. Keep in mind that unauthorized deviation from this regimen will result in immediate termination, regardless of rank or squad.

Again, congratulations on your forthcoming deployment. Whether you are a member of the Cavalreapers, the Laughsaassins, or any other branch of our vast military, you may rest assured knowing that your sacrifice, along with that of thousands of your peers, will play an instrumental role in our campaign to acquire the planet __EARTH__. May your ruthlessness prove a fruitful asset to the empire!

Regards,

[Signature]
Gen. Razayu Edolst

> What a festering pile of bulgereek. You slowly shake your head. Who in their right mind could possibly be idiotic enough to believe any of this propagandafest? Still shaking your head, you turn the page and continue to read:
What in quaking asspurge is all this, you think. Whatever it is, you are in no mood to deal with it. You flip to the last page and see a map of the station. Well. At least that has some practical appeal to it; although you do find yourself wondering why in the name of fuck you did not receive one of these sooner. Would it have really been that difficult for Cennia to slip one of these to you in all the time you spent locked in your room? The answer is no. No; it would have taken absolutely no effort on her part at all.

You are tempted to continue in this vein of thought, but fuck it. Your head hurts and you have not seen a single, solitary troll since you left your respite block which means that everybody else is probably already at breakfast by now. Headache or not, you are not at all keen on the idea of having your ass handed over to Torkal on the first day you are allowed the tiniest sliver of autonomy. Taking advantage of your newly-acquired navigational tool (because fuck if you remember the way from last night), you make your way to the communal nourishment block, post-haste.

The room is packed when you get there. It is also LOUD AS FUCK, which prompts your head to send a spike of OH MAN OH GOD WHY pain through your being. You glance at the food on the tables. It is different from the swill that you somehow managed to choke down last night, but it looks just as repulsive and the smell of fried grease and god knows what else makes you want to turn skyward and spatter the heavens with your own projectile vomit. In short, everything is just as atrocious as you expected it to be.

You stand there at the edge of the room with the crowd and the food and the OH FUCK MAKE IT STOP NOISE until a girl scuttles past you and disappears into the crowd with all the frantic desperation of a flying squirrel with a string of firecrackers buried deep within its ass. (Well would you look at that, you are not the last one to arrive after all. You take a moment to congratulate yourself for being slightly less incompetent than you imagined.) Then you steel up your nerves and you slouch into the room.
Through the grace of whatever higher deity has decided to fuck around with you today, you manage to find a seat which is isolated enough from the crowd to minimize your chances of having to make inane conversation with any dumb shits who lack the intellect to understand that you are in no mood to deal with their bullshit. You proceed to spend the next several minutes willing the contents of your digestive sac to stay put while you stare into the depths of one of the many platters of unidentifiable “food” on the table before you.

Your headache has just begun to dissipate to a level which borders tolerable when the shrill buzz-and-crackle of the loudspeakers screams through the room and AUGH FETID SHIT-SQUIRTS FROM THE FESTERING HINDQUARTERS OF A DISEASED MUSCLEBEAST SOMEBODY MUST HAVE RAMMED AN ICEPICK THROUGH THE BASE OF YOUR SKULL AND DEEP INTO THE DEPTHS OF YOUR THINK PAN BECAUSE THERE IS NO OTHER EXPLANATION FOR THE ABJECT PAIN YOU ARE EXPERIENCING AT THIS VERY MOMENT.

“Your allotted nourishment time has ended,” says Cennia’s voice. (Well thank Her Imperious Condescension’s anointed butthole for that, you think. Now to go back to my respite block and sleep until this pan-rupturing headache goes away.) “Please proceed to the next location noted on your personal schedule at this time. That is all.”

Well fuck. It figures that the one time you are actually looking forward to returning to your respite block you would be ordered to do something else. You are very tempted to lose your shit at this turn of events. Instead you take a moment to collect your shit, ensuring that it is nestled safe within the confines of a drawn and tied burlap sack which you will wear on a string around your neck where it will dangle above your beating blood pusher for the rest of your life. Then you flip through the packet of papers that you totally had the foresight to bring with you until you come across the schedule that you skimmed over earlier.

*Schoolblock A,* you think. *Spawn of a nook-spawning pus nugget.* You are in no condition to be going to any schoolfeed at this moment. No; the only action you are prepared to undertake at this moment is collapsing face down on the table and staying dead to the world for the next several hours. Sadly, the room is already beginning to empty, leaving you no choice but to whip out your map and be on your way.

When you reach the schoolblock, you take a few seconds to stand there in front of the door, blocking the way for everybody else behind you while you look around the room like a gape-eyed idiot just to get your bearings. Before you is a staircase that leads down to a half-moon sliver of gray-carpeted floor far below. There is a small metal desk piled with a mess of papers and books in the middle of the floor space, and on the wall behind the desk is the biggest projection screen you have ever seen. (Damn you would love to watch a few of your romcoms on that screen. But wait. That’s a fucking stupid thing to think because you don’t have any romcoms anymore and even if you did you would have to be high as a sopor-slurping fucktard to attempt watching them in this room.) Tiers of desks with bench seats radiate out from either side of the staircase, curving out until they reach the walls. The chairs and desks are made out of some kind of cheap-ass plastic that tries to compensate for its subpar quality by coming in shades of navy blue and cream which probably have annoyingly pretentious names like “Twilight Elegance” and “Antique Ivory”. They do not fool anybody, least of all you.

The seating area is already half-full. Most of the trolls are sitting in tight knots of twos and threes, but you see a cluster of about twenty occupying most of the lower middle area, and there is another sizeable clump in one of the far corners of the room. You realize then that you have absolutely no idea where you should sit.
You scan the seating area again and you catch sight of a familiar pair of backwards-raking horns. *Well polish my bulge and display it on top of last twelfth perigee’s behemoth leaving,* you think. *Is that Evrind?* If not for the still very much present throbbing in your think pan, you would be dangerously close to contorting your face into a genuine smile because seriously, what are the odds of stumbling across the only person in this cesspit who you have spoken to without wanting to tear off your own autoerogenous shame globes and shove them up your waste chute just to distract yourself from rage-inducing levels of idiocy and bullshit? You have no idea what those odds are, but you are pretty sure that they are very slim and that you have beaten the fuck out of them.

As soon as you sit down beside him, Evrind turns to you with a dopey grin plastered on his face and says, “Hey, man, did you read that form letter?”

“You mean this phlegm-encrusted conglomeration of unfiltered nook waste?” you reply, holding up the letter attached to the front of the packet of papers.

He nods. “That’s the one.”

“Then yes. I read it.”

“What did you think of it?”

You take a moment to craft a response which adequately conveys the depths of your disgust. Then you say, “I would say that General Douchefist needs to pull his head out of his own waste chute, but since he already has his head buried so far up the Condesce’s waste chute he can probably taste whatever she ate for her last meal, that is a moot point. The whole thing is one giant ass squirt of shit-flavored platitudes.”

You scowl. In hindsight, that response was woefully insufficient. It does not express even a fraction of your disdain. Evrind seems to catch your drift, regardless.

“I know, right?” he laughs. “Oh, and get this: this is the same form letter they’ve been using for the past hundred sweeps at least.”

You shake your head, incredulous. “Are you kidding me?”

“Nope. That Edolst guy has been dead for about a hundred sweeps.”

“Where did you hear that?”

He grins again and you think that you would probably find his face to be amazingly punchable if you were feeling halfway decent. “I’m really into history,” he says. “Razayu Edolst was this small fry general a long time ago. He co-led an invasion campaign one hundred and twenty-four sweeps ago of some planet that nobody even cares about anymore. I guess he somehow managed to find time to write this little gem between ordering platoons of trolls to go get themselves killed.”

He looks as though he wants to keep talking about General Douche Thumper and though your limited exposure to Evrind thus far has shown him to be a perfectly decent specimen of trollkind, you can’t bring yourself to give any measurable increment of a shit. You have absolutely no recollection of ever hearing about a General Razayu Edolst in any of your basic schoolfeeds and you don’t particularly care to hear about him now.

You scan the room for something—anything—you might use to change the topic. Your eyes catch on a troll sitting alone in the first row—a bony-looking girl with long, stringy hair and no horns. You frown and squint your eyes, thinking that you must have just missed seeing them because god knows your own tiny little nubs can be hard to spot if you let your hair get too out of hand. Nope; her hair is
flat against her head and you can’t see anything—nubs or otherwise—that resembles horns.

“Who’s that?” you ask, pointing to the hornless girl.

Evrind’s face contorts into a look of such sour distaste you might as well have been waving a maggot-covered slice of bleat beast genitalia under his nose. “Her?” he says. The single syllable is so heavy with contempt it might as well be dripping with it. You can practically see an acid-green pool of oh my Christ gross forming on the desk in front of you. “That’s Shrega.”

“What’s up with her horns?”

The revulsion on Evrind’s face intensifies even further. It might as well be oozing from his pores now, like fat beads of I am seriously about to barf sweat. “She doesn’t have any,” he says. “And she was born that way. Some kind of mutant freak or something.”

Something twists in your gut at the way he says the words “mutant freak.” It is the embodiment of everything you have spent so much of your life fearing; the reason you so desperately hid your blood color from even your closest friends; the reason you would never, under any circumstances, allow yourself to cry or blush or anything in public. You cannot imagine what her life must have been like—with such a visible mutation.

Evrind seems to notice your distress. “I get what you’re thinking,” he says. “That walking abomination never should have made it out of the brooding caverns. Believe me I am with you on that one.”

You have a sudden urge to punch him right on his broken nose, headache be damned. Then you realize that even though Evrind has seriously misjudged your reasons for being horrified, it appears as though everybody else shares his sentiments: Shrega isn’t just sitting alone. There are plenty of other trolls doing that. No; there is a wide swatch of empty space all around her as though she has issues with offensively loud and rancid flatulence.

If you were a halfway decent person, you would go and sit with her—but as soon as the thought enters your head you know you won’t. Nobody in their right mind would be caught dead associating with the mutant freak. You know damn well that doing so yourself would be tantamount to erecting a giant neon sign over your head that reads “HELLO EVERYBODY. MY NAME IS KARKAT MCDUMBSHIT VANTAS AND THERE IS SOMETHING FUNDAMENTALLY WRONG WITH ME. YOU HAVE MY FORMAL SANCTION TO MAKE MY LIFE AS MISERABLE AS YOU SEE FIT.”

No, you decide that it is definitely wiser to avoid calling any excessive attention to yourself given the circumstances (the circumstances being, of course, that you, too, are a disgusting mutant freak). That is why you keep your ass firmly planted in your chair and you try your damndest to forget that you ever noticed the conspicuously isolated hornless troll at all.

Thankfully, Evrind is just as ready to move on from talking about Shrega as you are. He has already gone back to contentedly babbling away about General Who-Gives-A-Shit Edolst. You don’t mind this at all. In fact, General Edolst is now the most interesting topic in the universe and you will happily devote the rest of your life to researching every last detail of his life, right down to learning his bowel patterns and analyzing them for any sign of abnormalities.

Just when you think that Evrind might be about to broach that very topic, a nasally voice shouts, “All right, all of you shut the hell up and face forward, right now!”

You turn your attention forward and find that a troll has appeared behind the desk on the ground
below you. The first thing you notice about the troll is that he is very short. If you had to guess, you would say that he is scarcely taller than you—a feat which would be remarkable enough for somebody your own age (because let’s face it, compared to some of your friends you are fucking stunted), but in an adult it is truly a wonder to behold. The guy’s shoulders are about as wide as he is tall, his shoulders and arms are thick with muscle and his legs are wide-set and equally huge. His face is an ugly miasma of pockmarks and scars, made all the more foreboding by a scowl so intense it looks as though he has allocated every facial muscle to that very purpose. You do not know what a bulldog is yet, but the second you learn what one is, this guy is the first thing that will pop into your head.

“It is my great displeasure to welcome you sniveling little shits into the only covert agent training program in the entire Alternian Empire,” he says. “My name is Migdal Rakura and I will be your language instructor. Before we get started, let’s get something straight: I am not your lusus. I am not your friend. I do not like nor do I give a shit about any of you. If you want to know my honest opinion, my first impression of you as a group is that you are all whiny, incompetent little grubs. However, because I am obligated to do so, I’m going to share some cold, hard facts about this program with you so you know exactly what you are getting into.”

Despite your reluctance to embrace anything about this royal crapper of a situation, you find yourself listening to Migdal not because you have to, but because holy shit, here is a guy you can actually relate to! He may be ugly as the infected backside of a snortbeast, but this is the first person on the operating side of this pukestain operation who seems to have just as much contempt for everything about it as you do.

“The first thing you need to know,” says Migdal, “is that very few of you are going to Earth.”

A wave of murmuring breaks out over the crowd. You can’t blame them because if you aren’t going to Earth then why in barfnugget fuck are you here? Migdal’s scowl becomes so deep his entire face might as well have turned into a giant canyon of SHUT THE HELL UP. When the whispering tapers down to a manageable hiss, he says, “By the time this program has run its course, only about ten percent of you are going to prove fit for deployment. The remaining ninety percent of you will face termination.”

The whispering that never quite died off explodes into a raging inferno of people losing their collective shit. There are people yelling, people jumping out of their chairs, people LOUDLY discussing this turn of events and GODDAMN IT YOUR HEADACHE IS BACK; AN IMPERIAL DRONE HAS RAMMED A CULLING FORK THROUGH THE CROWN OF YOUR SKULL ARE YOU SATISFIED NOW YOU ASSHOLES?

Migdal’s tinny voice cuts through the pandemonium like the sharp squeal of blades on glass. “Everybody SIT DOWN SHUT YOUR GAPEHOLES AND LISTEN!”

The noise stops abruptly, leaving a hollow echo its place. There is a scuffling sound as people return to their seats and settle in. Migdal stands, a fat ridge of vein throbbing in the center of his forehead as he waits for the room to be silent. Finally, he says, “I am assuming that you would like to know what you need to do in order to avoid kissing your own sorry asses goodbye. If that is the case, I suggest that you listen very carefully to what I am about to tell you. If that is not the case, then by all means, continue to act like a den of rabid howlbeasts. Either way, it’s no skin off my ass.”

He pauses, eyes scanning the crowd as though daring everybody before him to try whispering or coughing or farting—just try it—and see what happens. The room remains silent. With a sharp nod, he says, “All right then. Look to your left.”

The sound of you and two hundred other trolls shifting in their seats ripples through the room.
“Now look to your right.” You turn to look at Evrind (or rather, the back of Evrind’s head as he is also looking right. Son of a mothergrub fucking bitch does this stupid exercise actually have a point?) You can practically hear the creak of thousands of working neck muscles as the trolls around you move to do the same.

“Do you think that you are at least marginally more intelligent than what you see?” he asks.

You almost laugh at that because really? Of course you are smarter than this dumb fuck. If you were even close to approaching such depths of idiocy, you would be too busy cataloguing your nose excretions to function.

“You had better hope to high hell that the answer is ‘yes I am the most intelligent example of trollkind in this schoolblock’ because from now on your life depends on your ability to demonstrate that you are not as woefully stupid as your peers. Your schoolfeeds will have extensive progress assessments every perigee. By the end of your training, you will have faced about one hundred and fifty of these assessments and if you receive the lowest score on even one, you will be terminated, no exceptions.”

Another apprehensive ripple of whispering breaks out across the crowd. Migdal makes a furious chopping motion with his hand and the room quiets down again. He takes a moment to shoot a glare towards a little knot of trolls who take longer to quiet down than the rest of the group. Then he says, “Performing poorly on your assessments is easily the most common reason for termination, but it’s not the only way to get yourself killed. If you fail to cooperate with your cosmetic alteration regimen, you will be terminated, no exceptions. Fail to adhere to your quarterly schedule and you will be terminated, no exceptions. Fail to treat your superiors with proper respect and you will be terminated, no exceptions. In short, fail to exercise common sense and you will find your ass served cold, no exceptions. Are there any questions?”

The room remains silent this time. The silence stretches to a point that is on the border between “uncomfortable” and “FOR THE LOVE OF BULGEROTTING BULL WEEVILS SAY SOMETHING” before Migdal goes on.

“No questions? Well aren’t you just a bunch of the sharpest machetes in the adversary’s bloodpusher. If there are no questions, I will go on to the final point that I am required to tell you before we delve into your real work. If you have a question and you did not ask it for some unfathomably stupid reason, you had damn well better ask it now because I will not be answering any later.”

He looks around the room one more time, beady eyes two smoldering pits of contempt. Nobody moves or speaks. “All right then. From this point on, you are officially forbidden from using Alternian. You may not speak Alternian, you may not write Alternian, you may not type Alternian, and if you happen to be a telepath you may not engage in Alternian telepathically. If you do speak or write or otherwise attempt to communicate using Alternian at any time you will be killed on the spot, no exceptions.”

The room is dead silent for all of two seconds. Then some idiot two rows ahead of you yells, “What the hell?”

Migdal is on that guy with such ferocious intensity you can practically feel his rage searing the air around you, “I SAID NO ALTERNIAN, YOU CRYING LITTLE FUCKER! Consider this your one and only pass. If I hear one more word of Alternian, somebody dies. Have I made myself perfectly clear?”

The object of Migdal’s wrath has shrunk so far down into his seat all you can see of him are the tips of his horns. They bob up and down once, twice, three times; the only answer that poor bastard can
“Good,” grunts Migdal. “I can’t tell you how relieved I am to know that I have managed to penetrate your unusually thick skull. Now that I have your undivided attention, I will continue.

“Your other schoolfeed instructors will conduct their time blocks in Alternian for now. They will transition to using the target language as your skills develop. Regardless of what you hear, your ban against Alternian will still be in effect. If you speak so much as one word of Alternian to them, you will die.”

Migdal pauses again, though you can’t imagine why. You may be surrounded by idiots, but you would be genuinely shocked if anybody in the room was really stupid enough to say anything. Finally, Migdal says, “From this point on, I will be speaking to you almost exclusively in the target language. Consider this your first English lesson.”

He then proceeds to make the most terrible noises you have ever heard in your life. Seriously, what the hell is that shit? It’s all weird, moaning noises punctuated by equally weird percussive noises and…some kind of hissing noise, you guess.

You have no idea what the fuck Migdal is supposedly saying, but you do know that you hate this shitty language and by extension, you also hate humans for ever conceiving of it. If you could go back in time and find the human responsible for this travesty of a communication system, you would cheerfully shove a rocket up his ass and fire it into the nearest available supernova.

Everybody looks to be as profoundly uncomfortable as you are. You see a group of three trolls whispering to each other two rows ahead of you. You are half-tempted to turn to Evrind and say, “Well, that does it for me. I am checking out of this giant hivestem of panfuck.” However, you do not have a death wish, so you just sit there with your gapehole hanging open like a tool.

Eventually someone (and fuck if you know who) figures out that a particular sequence of growl-groan sounds means “Repeat what I am saying dumb shits”. Not long after that everyone is trying to abuse their poor speech boxes into producing sounds that resemble the ones Migdal is making. It is far more difficult than you would like to admit and you have a feeling that you sound like a colossal moron. Your only consolation is that everybody else around you also sounds like colossal morons.

After an unseemly stretch of time in which you have literally no idea what you are meant to be learning outside of English is a fucking horrible language, Migdal says in Alternian (sweet troll Jesus hallelujah, music to your auricular sponge clots): “All right. That’s all for now. You will be free to go shortly. But first, you three—” (he points one sausage-sized finger at three trolls—the ones who you had seen whispering earlier) “—come down here.”

Everybody sitting in the general proximity of those three trolls immediately begins to look at them with awkward little side glances, looking at them while trying not to look as though they are looking at them. Not you, though. You look directly at the poor bastards, so you have no trouble seeing them exchange expressions that are all variants of oh shit.

“I’m sorry; did I stutter?” Migdal asks. His voice is thick with something that makes your bloodpusher thump out a Morse code message against your chest which reads DANGER DANGER RUN AWAY; RUN AWAY YOU DUMB NOOK-CRAWLING FUCK RUN AWAAAAAAY!

You would love to oblige but your legs have suddenly acquired the consistency of diarrhea and all you can do is sit with your ass firmly planted in your chair as Migdal goes on with, “I was under the impression that I was speaking perfectly clear Alternian when I said come down!”
The last word comes out a harsh bark that makes two of the whispering trolls flinch while the third outright cowers like a little bitch. They exchange a final look of pure misery. Then they get up and slowly make their way down to the bottom of the stairs.

Once they are standing beside him, Migdal adopts a confidential tone as he says, “You are probably wondering why I have called you down here.”

None of them say anything. Migdal doesn’t seem to mind. Circling the three of them like a hungry howlbeast, he says, “You are going to help me illustrate a very important point to your fellow trainees.”

Turning to address the rest of his audience, Migdal states, “In every sorry batch of recruits that I see come through here, there are always a few who seem to have trouble understanding that the words ‘No Alternian’ do not mean ‘No Alternian, but only when Migdal isn’t paying attention.’ Well, let me assure you: me and all of my associates are always paying attention.”

The three trolls have gone from nervous to terrified. The one standing in the middle—the one that had cowered—has gone white as your lusus’ ass. To their credit, none of them have cried, screamed, or lost control of their bodily functions yet, which is admirable enough given the circumstances.

The door of the schoolblock explodes open with such force it slams against the wall with a resounding crash. A hulking form comes barreling into the room and starts down the stairs. You do not recognize the massive troll as Averic until he has already passed you by because oh my Christ he is smiling. It is an ugly, cruel thing that is more of a grimace than a proper smile, but it is more emotion than you had thought he was capable of displaying. You promptly decide that you liked him better when he was an emotionless bulge wad.

“Ah. Averic,” says Migdal. “You are right on time.”

He waits for Averic to join him on the floor before he continues. “For those of you who have not met him, this is Averic. He is responsible for general security on our space station. He is also our primary executioner.”

The three trolls standing beside Migdal finally lose it at the word “executioner.” The one in the middle lets out a high-pitched shriek that would have prompted you to feel embarrassed for him if you weren’t so busy being horrified.

The other two trolls are more proactive. The guy on the left focuses on the desk and it is suddenly floating in a cloud of barf-green psionic energy, ready to become a nice, big projectile weapon. The guy on the right raises his hands in two tight fists which spark with arcs of blue-white electricity.

You have only just begun to wonder what might happen if by some miracle they actually manage to kill Averic when the desk crashes to the floor, the electricity fizzles, and both trolls are writhing on the ground. Voice silken smooth, Migdal purrs, “Attacking your schoolfeed instructor is a very poor idea. Especially when your schoolfeed instructor happens to be a leech.”

You shiver. Sollux told you about leeches once—trolls who absorb psychic power. He claimed that he’d caught one of them trying to steal some of his wicked shit computer equipment once and, upon trying to fry the fucker with a well-deserved psionic blast, had experienced “the most heinously disgusting feeling ever” followed by “the most debilitating weakness ever”, all peppered with “pain, pain, and just for variety: more fucking pain.” You are suddenly profoundly grateful that you have no psychic abilities and are therefore in no position to ever have to deal with such shit.

Down on the floor, Migdal pats the psionic troll on the head. “Thanks for the snack, kid. Averic?”
Averic leaps into action, his face a childlike mask of sadistic glee. He goes for the cowering troll first, snatching him up with ease. The poor bastard doesn’t even try to fight back. All he can do is stare, slack-jawed as the grinning psychopath puts one huge hand on either side of his head and squeezes until OH MAN OH GOD OH MAN YOU CLOSE YOUR EYES BUT YOU CAN STILL HEAR IT; HEAR IT POP LIKE A FUCKING GRAPE! You keep your eyes closed, but there is no way to block out the sound—CRUNCH-POP-SQUISH—as Averic dispenses of the other two trolls. Your digestive sac is roiling, you are sweating, and oh son of a bitch you are shaking. You are shaking and you are going to puke, you are going to puke, you are—Migdal is talking again.

“Consider this a warning. One word of Alternian and this will be you.”

You crack an eye open and instantly wish you hadn’t. Rust-red blood and chunky brain matter are everywhere. All over the floor. Splattered all over Averic and Migdal. On the desk. And the bodies—you slam your eyes shut, but the image is already seared into your thinkpan, ready to lurk there like a trauma spider and cause you untold levels of grief every goddamn time you close your eyes ever again.

“You are free to take your lunch; and remember: NO ALTERNIAN!”

You stand up, wanting nothing more than to get the fuck out of this miserable schoolblock and forget about all of the awful things you have been subjected to in it, but the aisle is already clogged with trolls. You have no choice but to wait for them to file past. They do so at a positively glacial pace—a situation made all the more frustrating for the fact that you can’t even yell at any of them for it.

You are forced to watch in silence as a troll after troll inches past. There goes a troll with corkscrew spiral horns and here comes one with serrated, vertical horns, and here comes hornless Shrega with her ocular gaze globes glued to the ground and her stringy hair hanging down into her face. Perhaps it is because she is one of the only trolls you know the name of, or maybe it’s because shit, she’s a mutant, too, but you suddenly notice something is different about her; something more than the obvious lack of horns. You watch her pass by, trying to place what it is that you saw and then you see it again: a brief flash of red around her wrist.

Goddamn, you think because for a while you had forgotten all about that stupid wristband that you woke up wearing three days ago. You begin to scan the wrists of all of the trolls that pass by. Not one of them has a wristband, let alone a bright-as-hell candy red one. You turn around to look at Evrind’s wrists, just to be sure and your suspicions are confirmed: no wristband.

It’s just me and her, you think as you finally get onto the stairs. We’re the only ones wearing these ugly-ass things. The two mutants.

Is that really what it’s for? You wonder. To mark out the freaks? The thought makes you shudder. Quickly, you twitch your long sleeve over the red band of shame. All you can do is hope that nobody else has noticed you wearing the thing. If what you have seen so far is any indication, being a mutant in this place makes you fair game for any manner of douchebaggery. You have no desire to receive said douchebaggery.

Fucking Cennia, you think. Everybody’s equal here my ass.

> Terezi: Begin to suspect
gallowsCalibrator [GC] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

GC: YOU H4V3 B33N GON3 4 LONG T1M3 K4RK4T
GC: YOU 4R3 N3V3R ONL1N3 4NYMOR3
GC: S3R1OUSLY, WH3R3 4R3 YOU?
GC: TH1S S1L3NC3 IS W31RD
GC: USU4LLY 1 C4N N3V3R TO SHUT UP!
GC: H3H3H3H3H3
GC: IF YOU 4SK M3 TH1S B3G1NN1NG TO S3R1OUSLY SUSP1C1OUS
GC: 1 4M B3G1NN1NG TO 4CT 1N SUCH 4 SH4DY M4NN3R 1 W1LL B3 FORC3D TO
DO SOM3 S3R1OUS LEG1SL4C3R4T1NG
GC: DO NOT FOOL YOURS3LF INTO TH1NK1NG 1 W1LL GO 34SY ON YOU
GC: 1 W1LL B3 MY DUTY TO PROS3CUT3 YOU TO TH3 FULL3ST 3XT3NT OF TH3
4LT3RN14N JUD1C14L SYST3M
GC: 1 C4N S33 TH4T YOU 4R3 NOT GO1NG TO STOP B31NG A L4M3 4SS 4NYT1M3
SOON
GC: 1 WOULD 4PPR3C14T3 1T IF YOU WOULD T4K3 S3COND3S OUT OF YOUR
OBV1OUSLY R1D1CULOUSLY BUSY 4ND SUP3R 1MPORT4NT SCH3DUL3 4ND L3T
M3 KNOW YOU 4R3 ST1LL 4L1V3 THOUGH :/

gallowsCalibrator [GC] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

> Karkat: Observe assessment results
Just when you think that your life cannot get any worse, the universe finds new and exciting ways to bite you in the bulge. Case in point, Exhibit A: Yesterday, Cennia and her crew of wonderbutts successfully removed your claws and replaced them with woefully inadequate clear nubs. (Seriously, how can humans live with these things? They aren’t sharp enough to be good for anything, and even if they were they are so brittle they are liable to break the second you try to do anything practical with them, like scratch your enemy’s eyes out or sharpen your sickles or slice open a can of roe paste so you can make roe cubes to appease your cantankerous lusus.) Exhibit B: Your hands are still two useless blobs of bandages and pain. Both of these exhibits lead us inevitably to Exhibit OH MY TREEFUCKING CHRIST ARE YOU SHITTING ME C: At this precise moment you find yourself standing in your respite block stark naked but for a thin film of sopor slime with ABSOLUTELY NO WAY OF PUTTING ON YOUR GODDAMNED CLOTHES. Although you do not believe in any higher power, you are pretty sure that if such divine beings did exist they would all be exchanging friendly bulge-bumps and laughing at you in all of your sopor-soaked, ass-naked glory.

Yes, you have had it with the universe and everything in it. If your rage could become a tangible thing, you would use it to fashion yourself a brand-new set of claws which you would use to tear the universe and any non-existent higher deities a collective new one. Sadly, you have yet to discover the means to perform such a feat and you are left with no choice but to try and find a more pragmatic solution to your current dilemma.

Gingerly, you clasp a towel between your bandaged hands and drag it over yourself as best you can. The slime comes off, but with your hands worse than useless it leaves a sticky residue that you cannot remove. (Ugh, you think. This is going to itch like a weeping crotch blister when it dries.) You grudgingly accept that there is no way in nook-fondling hell that you are ever going to muster up the dexterity to do anything about it and turn your attention to your clothes.

Never in your life has anything so simple been rendered so infuriatingly difficult. Somehow, you manage to thread your legs into your pants and are in the process of manhandling them into place when you realize that—surprise!—they are backwards. You proceed to struggle out of them, your mind devising a fine tapestry of curses and insults until you can properly vent your fury by giving the traitorous clothing item a well-earned kick. The pants sail across the room—and land directly in your recuperacoon. By the time you manage to fish them out of the sopor slime, they are thoroughly saturated with green goo.

You want to swear. You want to swear so badly and you can’t because the “no Alternian” rule is still in full effect and you have not learned any English swear words yet. (Even if you did know any English, you suspect that they would not be nearly as gratifying as any of your Alternian standbys.) The best you can do is slap the sopping mess of fabric onto your table and glare at it until you remember that you need to get to the communal nourishment block and you are no closer to being dressed now than you were five minutes ago.

You retrieve a fresh pair of pants and spend the next several minutes kicking, thrashing, and generally abusing the shit out of them until you finally manage to get them on. You are busy administering similar treatment to your shirt when the intercom begins to crackle.

“Good morning” says Cennia. “This announcement is for all trainees. Your first round of tests have been scored and processed. Results are posted in the communal nourishment block. Trainees wishing to view their scores may do so during the allotted breakfast time. That is all.”
You finish wiggling into your shirt and try to ignore the way your clothes seem to amplify the itchy, wet feel of sopor slime on your arms and legs. Instead you think of the test results hanging in the nourishment block. *Six people are going to die today,* you think. The thought makes you shudder, not because you think that you might be one of the unlucky bastards who did poorly enough to end up dead, but because seriously, *six people are going to die today.*

You want to get to the nourishment block before too much of a crowd gathers, but your abused hands are so awkward you can barely even touch the buttons on the keypad beside the door. It takes twelve—*oh my god TWELVE!*—attempts before you finally manage to punch in the code to unlock your door. (You want to swear so much it *hurts!* Holding back the flood of profanity welling in your chitinous windhole is making you sweat even more profusely than a certain freakishly strong, hemospectrum-worshipping creeper who you weren’t even really friends with—seriously, why are you even thinking about that mouthbreathing musclebeast bulge fetishist?)

By the time you make it to the nourishment block, there is already a large knot of trolls milling around a section of wall on the far side of the room. You allow your silent rage to soak into all of your senses like a fine marinade because wow, your hands and their inability to perform basic, everyday tasks have done the impossible and made your already miserable existence even worse. You wait until you are no longer seeing red (because *fuck* that color for getting you into all of this in the first place. *Fuck it sideways with a rusty culling fork*). Then you begin to weave through the crowd.

It hits you as you skirt through the fray: the sense of too-quiet eeriness you always get whenever you encounter a room full of fellow trainees. With this many congregating bulgebrains, the room should be alive with an unbearable cacophony of talking, yelling, laughing, fighting, screeching, threatening, joking, and all manner of incessant yammering. That it’s *not*—that the only sounds you can hear are scuffling footsteps and a few whispered, monosyllable exchanges that do not even qualify as conversation—is enough to give you an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of your digestive sac.

The press of bodies grows tighter around you as you near the wall. You are soon struggling against trolls moving in all directions—away from the wall, towards the wall, back and forth and in aimless, darting patterns which you assume are designed to aggravate you and everybody else with half a functional pan. You push past a girl with boy-short hair who is just standing still in the middle of everything for no conceivable reason whatsoever, almost knocking her off her feet. She says nothing because—ha—she can’t, but she gives you a look that says something along the lines of “*Fuck you, you throbbing ass pimple if I could talk right now I would call you out on your cloddish bullshit like a screaming harpy; I swear to *fuck* this wordless glare barely conveys a fraction of my contempt for you and everything you stand for.*” (*Christ,* you think. *Is Cennia running a scathing glare schoolfeed? I should look into that shit.*) Then you move one way, the crowd moves another and you’re up against the wall, face to face with six long reams of paper.

Nothing exists outside of those six sheets of black on white as you check the names at the bottom of each list. Annael Sevart. Smedus Menfor. Ellasa Penrik. Finien Caspet. Tarina Inglen. Melron Parnes. You let out a breath you hadn’t realized you were holding. Nobody you know.

It takes you a long time to locate your own name on each of the lists because as if having to sift through over two hundred other names wasn’t aggravating enough, the slurry-gulping dickmuffin that wrote the list decided to do so in English. You are forced to phonetically chew on every single blockish letter on the page until you trip over the sequence of sounds that make up the English approximation of your name. (*It is hard not to wince when you finally do find it. The flat mouth sounds leach all the character out of it and turn it into a fucking travesty. Your lusus would be rotating in his underground interment chamber if he could hear it.*)
The results are better than you expected. You managed to fall somewhere in the upper half of each list, and you are surprised to see that you curb stomped the shit out of almost everybody on the language test. You are not sure whether to be relieved or dismayed. Sure, you are one step farther away from Torkal’s “Let’s cut Karkat into pieces and see how much he screams” funhouse. On the other heavily bandaged grope digit, you are also one step closer to being nook deep in ass-ugly human creatures.

You are still trying to decide how you feel about the results when a large hand claps down onto your shoulder. You narrowly swallow back the urge to shout “Gah! What the fuck!” (because seriously, what the fuck?) as you wheel around to glare at the socially retarded barf nugget who thinks that sneaking up on people and scaring the shit out of them is an acceptable way to say hello. It comes as little surprise when you see Evrind grinning back at you.

“How is…..” He trails off. You can practically hear the rusty spike wheels turning in his pan as he searches for the word he wants to say. He makes a face that indicates he is thinking really hard. (Or maybe he just really needs to use the load gaper. Fuck if you know.) Finally, he grins and says, “Score. Uh…scores. How is scores?”

You shrug. “Good. You?”

“How is scores.” He smiles and proceeds to point out his name on each list. You hate to admit it, but you are glad to see that his name is also in the upper portion of each list. He might be a grinning douchefist, but he is less irritating than pretty much everybody else in this putrid armpit of the universe, and although you can imagine an infinite number of events which would make things even shittier, not having him around ranks pretty high on the list.

“This…this one, two, three, four, five not bad,” he repeats. He points to the language test results and his smile falters. “This one bad.”

You follow his finger and your jaw drops because “bad” does not even penetrate the layer of filth surrounding the outer skin of this ball of stratified fuck you fruit. “Bad” is such a piss-poor representation of what your eyes are feasting on at the moment it is almost laughable. No, what you are seeing is so shitty your brain cannot summon up a word deplorable enough to describe it and you are instead forced to make one up. It is nauseapalling, that’s what it is.

Evrind’s name is not only towards the end of the list; it is a mere five names away from the very bottom. You do not understand how anybody could do so well on all of the hard shit and do so abysmally on the English test when all of the other tests were also written in fucking English. For the barest moment, you consider slapping the stupid bastard senseless because the whole thing just seems so goddamned reprehensible. Then Evrind is tugging at your slapping arm, leaving you with little choice other than to turn away from the list and give him a scowl which you sincerely hope conveys the same level of “what the hell you stupid douche” as your righteous fist of fury.

He bobs his head in the general direction of the tables, which are rapidly becoming islands of clusterfuck to rival the quagmire that you just finished fighting through. “We eats?”

“Not bad.” He smiles and proceeds to point out his name on each list. You hate to admit it, but you are glad to see that his name is also in the upper portion of each list. He might be a grinning douchefist, but he is less irritating than pretty much everybody else in this putrid armpit of the universe, and although you can imagine an infinite number of events which would make things even shittier, not having him around ranks pretty high on the list.

“You eat.”

“What?”

Your scowl deepens because goddamn it you are not letting this dumbass get himself killed over subpar alien verb conjugation. Not on your watch. “Not ‘we eats.’ We eat.”

You are rewarded with his thinking-really-hard-or-imminent-rocket-propelled-bowel-movement
look. Then his face splits into grin which, if not for the dim light of cognition dawning in his eyes, would suggest that his capacity for higher intelligence was on par with a pan-addled assworm. “Understand!” he exclaims. “Thank you. We eat?”

“Yes. We eat.”

The two of you head for the tables. Despite the fact that pretty much every douchethumper and their lusus is already seated, you are fortunate enough to find two seats together. You examine the plethora of foodstuffs laid out on the table in front of you and—hot damn, are those waffles? Fortune has apparently decided to smile on you because fuck yes those are indeed waffles. There are plenty of Earth foods that make you want to vomit up everything which has ever passed through your alimentary canal since the day you hatched, but on a scale of “Congratulations; you have murdered me with this repulsive swill and I hope the chef is contemplating ritual suicide for shame” and “AAUUGHH THIS IS SO DELICIOUS THAT MY SQUAWK GAPER IS IN THE THROES OF ORGASM AND CANNOT BE BOTHERED TO FORM MEANINGFUL WORDS SO HAVE SOME OBSCENE MOANING INSTEAD” waffles rank somewhere around “Pretty alright.”

You are all set to snag a couple of those steaming squares of fried wheat-dough and then you remember your hands. Your goddamned, bandage-encased, worse than useless hands. Even if by some unprecedented stroke of generosity on the part of the universe and everything in it you manage to get the waffles onto your plate rather than dump them in your lap, there is no way in the stub-rotting concentric layers of the brooding caverns that you are going to be able to manage silverware. Your options are officially (a) attack the food face first like a fucking animal or (b) starve. For the barest moment, you consider it. There are no rules against breaking proper table etiquette and you were never renowned for your genteel disposition anyway. Then you shake your head. Fuck that, you think. I am not embarrassing myself for shitty Earth food and past me is a fart-sniffing dunderhead for even entertaining that idea. Besides, the bandages are coming off after breakfast. If I can’t afford to miss one measly little meal then I am a crying wiggler who still poops hard in his diapers.

Evrind appears to notice your predicament. Through a mouthful of charred snout creature flesh (goddamn it you cannot remember the English word for that shit), he says, “You not eat?”

You shrug, exasperated with yourself for not being able to remember the word and exasperated with him for being dumb enough to give a shit and exasperated with yourself again for looking like a pathetic wimp.

He swallows his bite of greasy charred flesh (bacon, you think. It’s bacon.) “Bad…er…bad tooths?”

Son of a fuck, you think. You had been so preoccupied with thinking about your hands and how awful your life was because of them that you had clean forgotten that Cennia had tightened the dental straightening devices before going to town on your claws. The moment you think about it, you are immediately aware of the unrelenting pressure on your teeth and gums and it is godawful. Thank you, Evrind, for reminding me of that. You piece of shit.

You feel like tearing your hair out. Your reserve volume of tolerance for today’s bullshit is already long gone and you are wallowing in a veritable ocean of unvoiced grief. If not for your silly aversion to dismemberment and other forms of general torment by one Torkal Anorst, you could spout an endless fount of vitriol for everything associated with this turd of a situation. Instead, you shake your head and say, “No. Hands.”

He stares at you with a dull gleam of stupid in his eyes. That his mouth is still half-full of bacon does
absolutely nothing to help his case. You sigh and hold up your bandaged hands.

“Oh!” he exclaims. “Hands!” Then his expression morphs into one of horror. In a much more subdued tone, he repeats, “Oh. Hands….”

You steal a quick glance at his hands and sure enough, the lucky asshole’s claws are still in perfect working order. Maybe if your vocabulary wasn’t so stunted and if you weren’t so fed up with today you would try to say something to reassure him that it isn’t as bad as it looks, but oh wait, that would be a fucking lie because it is exactly as bad as it looks. Still, you offer up a shrug which you hope conveys some level of, *Oh my god who cares just eat your food you gaping moron.*

He seems to take the hint and directs his attention back to his plate of bacon and…a half-burned square of bread. *(What is it with humans and burning the shit out of everything they eat? You wonder. *Why is that even a thing?*) You spend the rest of the meal wallowing in a cloud of surly silence.

> Kanaya: Express concerns
> Kanaya: Express concerns

grimAuxiliatrix [GA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

GA: Karkat I Hate To Be A Nuisance And I Am Quite Aware That This May Be None Of My Business But Your Friends Are Starting To Worry About You
GA: As A Brief Side Note Perhaps I Should Clarify That When I Say Your Friends I Am Of Course Including Myself In That Category
GA: Terezi And Sollux Have Both Expressed Their Concerns To Me Directly And I Imagine That Our Other Friends Are Likewise Concerned
GA: It Is Not Like You To Fall Out Of Touch Like This
GA: I Understand You May Not Wish To Talk About It If There Has Been Some Sort Of Falling Out However I Am Asking You To Please Let Me Or Any Of Our Other Friends Know That You Are Alright
GA: Even If You Really Are Upset With All Of Us And No Longer Wish To Be Friends Please At Least Let Us Know That You Are Alive And Well
GA: We Will Not Bother You Again If That Is What You Want
GA: I Hope To Hear From You Soon

grimAuxiliatrix [GA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

> Karkat: Receive more than you bargained for
It is your favorite part of the day: that sacred stretch of time between the final nourishment and sleep cycle time blocks where you do not need to be anywhere or do anything and you are essentially one day closer to getting out of this craptastic place. Under normal circumstances you would be holed up in your respite block to decompress after a long day of dealing with shitty schoolfeeds and even shittier people. Not tonight, though. No, tonight you have decided to subject yourself to one last round of pan-boggling stupidity for reasons you cannot fathom besides the universal constant that past you is a masochistic jackass. (You cannot believe that past you not only conceived of this idea but actually decided to suggest the thing aloud. Past you must have been suffering from a particularly heinous hate crush on present you for doing so.)

Thank fuck the communal nourishment block—no wait, you know this English word: *cafeteria*—is almost empty. This is already going to suck massive amounts of seedflap and you have no desire to be doing this shit in front of two hundred other dipwads.

Across the table, Evrind looks at you with rapt attention. You sigh and say, “OK. Do ‘to read.’”

“He reads. We reads—read. We read. They read.”

“You read book!”

You nod because technically he’s right. Then you shake your head because that was piss-poor conversational grammar and you are not letting him get away with sounding like an ignorant dumbass. You decide to give him another chance. “What do you read?”

He groans and pinch the bridge of your nose because shit, that was even worse and wow this is a lot harder than you had thought it was going to be. Sure, you had been expecting to endure stupefying levels of aggravation and idiocy but you were not prepared for this to devolve into a voyage on the S.S. Failboat quite this quickly. Your efforts with the verb “to read” are clearly going nowhere and you do not have the patience for this hoofbeast shit so you decide to switch tack.

“You read book.”

He frowns. “I have. You have. He…uh…he haves—“

You cut him off with a sharp chop of your wrist. “No.”

“I have. You have. He have—“
“No! Not ‘he have’. He has.”

His frown deepens. “I say he have first time.”

You perform the most epic of facepalms. “Not ‘haves’; has! He has!”

“Is same word.”

Approximately two hours ago, past you had been laughably naïve enough to think that you would make it through this session without flipping your shit. Past you had clearly underestimated the profound depths of Evrind’s doltish nature because at this very moment your shit is soaring through the air, performing barrel rolls and somersaults. “No, stupid!” you snap. “Ugh, stupid dumb! The words are very different—listen! Haves and has. One with ‘v’ and one with no ‘v’.”

Haaaaaavvvvves and haaaaas!”

“Has?”

Ladies and gentletrolls we have finally cracked the thick shell of stupid encasing this dumb shit’s pan and are only now sinking into its soft depths. “YES!”

“Oh! Understand! I have. You have. He has. We have. They have.”

“OK, that is right.” You pick up a fork lying next to your empty plate. “What do I have?”

He looks away from you, staring into the depths of his empty plate as he mutters, “You have…uh…you have spoon? No. You have fork—a fork!” With a grin, he proudly proclaims: “You have a fork!”

It is the first complete sentence you have heard him utter since Migdal announced the ban on Altean. A strange feeling flits through your stomach. For a moment you wonder if you are about to deposit the contents of your stomach in a smelly pile of stomach acid and partially-digested Earth foodstuffs onto the empty plate in front of you. Then you realize that you are proud and it is such a strange sensation you aren’t quite sure what to make of it. (Are you proud of him? You quickly conclude that no; you aren’t particularly proud of him for doing something he should have already been able to do almost a full perigee ago. But if you aren’t proud of him then that means that you are proud of yourself which is just not possible because the last time you were legitimately proud of yourself for anything was fucking never.) Still, this success has almost made you optimistic enough to attempt having him try “to read” again.

You are about to commend Evrind with a heartfelt “Good, that’s right” when a guy wearing a set of pretentious-as-hell pince-nez glasses says, “What you do?”

You open your mouth to tell this guy to piss off and mind his own business but Evrind, apparently emboldened by his recent success, says, “Karkat helps me…uh…English.”

The dude with the glasses raises his eyebrows. “Karkat Vantas?”

You frown and give this guy a closer look. He is tall and reedy with greasy hair and an upturned nose that makes it look as though somebody just shoved a handful of dried shit in his face. His horns are also so big that they would make you feel kind of squirmy and inadequate if you were any less confident in your own trollhood. You are pretty sure that you have never seen or spoken to this loser before in your entire life, all of which begs the question how does he know your name and should that concern you?

Like the socially impaired dimwit he is, Evrind does not allow you to decide whether or not you
want this creeper to know your name. He just beams and shouts “Yes! Karkat Vantas!” You give him a sharp kick under the table for being a douche. He seems completely unfazed.

The new guy stares at you for a couple of seconds, just long enough to border on excruciating before he says, “Can I join?”

You blanch because fuck, the whole point of doing this when you are doing it was so you would be seen by as few people as possible. Bad enough that this tutoring shit could easily be misconstrued as pale smut by any onlookers, but to have somebody else joining in was pretty much the exact opposite of what you had wanted to happen.

“Why do you want my help?” you demand.

“You three or four English test, every time. I twenty or thirty. I need…go up.”

You gape at him. Sure, you had realized that the test rankings were public knowledge, but you had always assumed that everybody dealt with them in the same manner than you did: check the names at the bottom of each list and then quickly sweep the rest of the list to locate where you stood. You had never even considered checking the names ahead of yours. It had never occurred to you that others might be doing so and that placing high on any of the lists might paint a giant, flashing target on your unprotected ass.

The guy is still staring at you, awaiting your answer. Evrind continues to be an obtuse piece of shit and answers for you with a cheerful, “Yes! You join!”

He smiles, then: “My friends also join?”

“No,” you scowl.

“Yes!” Evrind grins. You give him another kick under the table, harder this time. You note with satisfaction that this time he draws in a quick hiss of air through his teeth.

The guy doesn’t even have the courtesy to pretend he is going to take your protests seriously. He just smiles and takes off, presumably to round up a whole troupe of fart-huffers dumb enough to believe they will magically improve their English scores by breathing the same air as you. You turn on Evrind the second Glasses guy is out of earshot.

“Why do you say he can join us?”

Evrind doesn’t answer right away. You can see him mentally straining to process what you said, syllable by painful syllable. You half consider repeating yourself more slowly but you quickly jettison that idea when you remember that he was doing well enough with Glasses guy to think he needed to answer for you so fuck him. Nook fondler can use the practice anyway, you think.

“I not know,” he says. You are about to demand a more satisfactory explanation (or at least more satisfactory grammar, damn it) but he appears to be thinking about what he wants to say next so you let him be. Finally he says, “Many people is…are? Many people is fun.”

You let out a derisive snort. You are itching to give him a proper lambasting, one that would go something like this: Laying aside the fact that every single new person means a fresh assload of shit for me to take care of—and just as an aside, thank you for turning me into the station’s English load gaper; I really appreciate that you giant piece of snot. Laying all that aside, did you really not consider that these are the same people I am trying to help you get ahead of? Every person I help here is another person that is going to stay ahead of you. I never in my life thought I would behold somebody who was an even bigger fuckup than me in every way but now I know that there is a
fuckup of such colossal proportions it has its own gravitational field around which all other fuckups orbit. Congratulations, jackass, you are that fuckup. Yep, that’s definitely how it would go if you only knew the English word for colossal, appreciate, and about one hundred others, give or take a few. Instead you just sigh and huff the word “Stupid” under your breath.

When Glasses guy returns he has not one, not two, but three bulgerots in tow. You proceed to spend the next hour leading them through stilted conversations and verb conjugations, fielding broken questions about prepositions, and trying to get everybody to shut up long enough for Evrind to have a chance to say something. It is, in your opinion, unquestionably the shittiest language lesson in all of paradox space. When the “Turn your shit up to high propulsion and get to your respite blocks for lights out, fuckers” fifteen minute warning bell rings, you are all too happy to excuse yourself with a polite “Good night, shitheads” and abscond out of that clusterfuck before anybody gets it into their pan to follow you. (Of course, you don’t actually say “shitheads” because you have yet to learn how to say that particular word in English. You do your best to convey the sentiment with your tone, nonetheless.)

You are hurrying to the communal ablution block so you can at least clean the metal around your teeth before you slide into the slime—God you hate going to sleep with all manner of mashed up food and shit stuck in the wires. The few times you’ve done it you’ve woken up with breath potent enough to melt a doorknob and it looks fucking disgusting besides—when you hear it: a quiet gasp followed by the sound of stumbling feet and a peal of cruel laughter. The sound is close—just around the next corner. You slow your pace to a conservative creep, wondering if one last piss before crawling into the ’coon is worth getting involved in whatever is going on. You immediately tell yourself that yes it is worth it—what are you planning to do, piss in your own slime? Quit being a crying wiggler and get in there.

Cautiously, you peek around the corner. Two trolls are barring the way to the ablution block. One of them is a girl so tall her horns are inches away from brushing against the ceiling. Her arms and shoulders are rippling with so much muscle you would guess she was at least a teal blood if you didn’t know better. The other is a guy who is almost as tall as the girl, but wiry and twitchy as a nervous nut beast. You can tell he is the one who laughed because his lips are still quirked up in a rancid smile. Standing in front of them is the skinny girl with no horns—Shrega.

You hold your breath as she takes a step forward as though to squeeze between them. Even though you know what is coming, you still flinch when the girl lunges forward and shoves Shrega to the side, ramming her against the wall.

“Where you go?” laughs the big girl. “I say no go in. Stupid.”

Shrega stumbles away from the wall and stands in front of them, staring at the ground with her face hidden in a curtain of her stringy hair. With a voice that crackles like old paper, she says, “Please.”

The guy reaches forward and flicks the top of her head. “Ugly no horns,” he leers. “Make other troll sick. No go in!”

He lets out another cackle and Shrega’s shoulders slump. She nervously fingers the red band around her wrist—the one identical to yours. Your stomach clench. You know you should say something—you are going to say something. This is bullshit, this is wrong; if they want to fuck with a mutant it should be you because sooner or later everybody here going to look like her but they will never ever be as fucked up and gross as you with the cherry cough syrup-colored muck oozing through your veins. You are going to say something, but the big girl notices you first.

“Hello,” she says, all sugar and grubsauce. “You go in?”
Mutely, you step forward. The guy shifts to let you pass. Shrega makes a break for it and the guy lets out a pulse of psionic energy that tosses her back against the wall and makes your hair stand on end. “Not you,” he barks at her. “You no go in!”

“You go in,” the big girl tells you. She waves her hand, motioning for you to pass.

You glance over at Shrega, pinned against the wall. You look at both of her tormentors, one after the other. You want to tell them to leave her alone, to stop acting like stinking wads of nook filth in the underwear of the universe (the kind that leaves stains, even). You duck past them and into the ablation block without saying a fucking word.

> Eridan: Air grievances
> Eridan: Air grievances

caligulasAquarium [CA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

CA: kar are you there
CA: damn it kar i really need to talk to you
CA: i didnt wanna leave my dirty laundry sittin in your inbox like a fuckin idiot but youre not givvin me much choice
CA: im worried about fef
CA: i mean ive noticed shes been talkin to that captor guy a lot evver since he lost his moirail or matesprit or whatever the fuck they were
CA: seriously kar what quadrant were they anywway
CA: anywway ive noticed shes been talkin to him a lot lately and im gettin kinda worried
CA: i mean i know me an her are DESTINED PALEMATES FOR LIFE and all but some of the stuff theyre sayin is startin to sound a little flushed and im gettin kinda
CA: i dunno
CA: kinda jealous i guess
CA: not like im waxin red for her because thats just dumb
CA: whoever heard of a moirallegiance goin red anywway
CA: i mean really does that ever even happen
CA: anywways i was just wonderin what you thought about it
CA: message me when you get a chance kar
CA: seriously where the fuck are you

caligulasAquarium [CA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

> Karkat: Become immune
You had thought when you first woke up in this place with your shoulder dislocated and without the slightest bugfuck clue of what was going on that it was unequivocally and forever the Worst Thing that had ever happened to you™. Unsurprisingly, you had been wrong. Past you had gone on to reassign that title to an incredible variety of traumatic and bile-stirring events, including unsolicited dental surgery, the language barrier from hell, and the one instance in which you stubbed your toe so hard you felt it jangling up your spine. However, past you can go fondle a bag of diseased bulges because none of those experiences can compare to what you are experiencing right this fucking second.

You have been standing in line for nearly two hours now. Everything below your knees feels like it is a giant pile of engorged bruises slowly being consumed in gasoline-fed flames. If you were socially retarded enough to take off your shoes right now, there is no doubt in your mind that you would be left with two candy-red nubs of that weird-as-shit Earth dessert Jell-o. The fourteen other trainees enduring this particular example of cruel and unusual punishment could then rejoice because holy shit, Vantas brought dessert so dig right in and put him out of his abject misery.

The physical torment might be tolerable enough if there was anybody worth talking to. Unfortunately, you do not know a single one of these douchebags and you just do not have the will to abuse your limited English vocabulary into a rousing game of Meaningful Conversations with Strangers: Super Awkward Hallway Edition.

This hoofbeast shit has been going on for so long you are beginning to suspect that somehow you and fourteen other similarly stupid trainees managed to misread your schedules and convene at the same place at the same time for no goddamn reason whatsoever. A quick glance at your (folded, spindled, and mutilated) schedule reassures you that you are not as woefully mentally deficient as you had feared:

Shit, you think. I’m going to be late for the schoolfeed if Cennia doesn’t kick her stuck-up ass into high velocity. Your stomach executes a ten-point graceful honk creature dive at the thought because you are now officially between a culling drone and the sharpest prong of the Condesce’s trident. You do not know exactly when tardiness became a cullable offence, but Averic has recently taken to hiding behind the doors into the schoolblocks and culling the everloving shit out of anybody who happens to straggle in late. It doesn’t take many horrifying scenes of gory death for the message to get your pimple-encrusted asses to class on time to sink in loud and clear. You do not fancy the prospect of becoming random victim number who gives a fuck (mutant edition!) in one of these displays. In fact, the very idea is rapidly dragging you towards a full-on mental breakdown. If this line does not start moving in the next thirty seconds, you are going to take the plunge into full-on shithive maggots mania.

It appears that you are not the only one shitting disproportionate piles of angst over this dilemma. Two trolls—a girl your age and a guy whose huge eyes make him look all of three sweeps—peel off from the front of the line and head in the direction of the schoolblocks. As the line shifts forward, you notice another guy discreetly cut out from the back and follow them. You are seriously considering following suit when the girl standing in front of you turns around and says, “Why so long time?”
“I don’t know,” you reply.

“You thinking so long time for fix vaccine?”

“I don’t know,” you repeat. “I don’t care.”

She bares her teeth and hisses at you. (You make a mental note to avoid doing that yourself because the dental straightening devices just make the gesture look stupid.) Then she says the two most meaningful words anybody has said to you since you set foot on this godforsaken space station: “Fuck you.”

Your heart is soaring because even though you have never heard that first word before in your life, you are pretty sure it is an English swear word. It sounds like a swear ought to sound—short, harsh, angry. You especially appreciate the way it begins with a fizzling “F” and ends with a percussive “K”, like a hissing fuse burning down to ignite a mortar shell of obscenity. It may not be as good as any of your favorite Alternian swears, but this word already feels like an old friend—the kind of friend you might invite over to your hive for a feelings jam because you are just that close, you know each other that well, and—what are you saying? You would never make such a mockery of the pale quadrant! No, this word will be your moirail proper; you moderating and restraining its awesome destructive power and it acting as the conduit through which you expel your hatred and self-loathing.

The girl is already turning around but you need to confirm the meaning of this wonderful, beautiful word. “Wait,” you say. “What is fuck?”

She scowls. “Fuck is fuck. Bad word. Fuck you.”

Her words are bloated with vitriol but you are too excited to care. Your facial muscles are contorting into a position so strange and unnatural it hurts and—oh my fuck you are smiling. “Thank you.”

She looks at you as though aggressive flesh-eating fungus has erupted from your eye sockets. “No, stupid. Bad word! Fuck you!”

You try to summon up an inkling of proper outrage at the rudimentary insult but your head just isn’t in the game because you are still coasting on the fumes of imaginary pale vapors and your stock of piss and vinegar is at an all-time low. It’s going to take something a lot more exciting than a basic “fuck you” to ignite the odious fires of your pestilence center. Still, ignoring a perfectly good insult is almost as douchey as ignoring a compliment, so you pull yourself together and offer up a quick one-fingered salute.

At this point, you assume that the communication is essentially over. You are fully prepared for this onerous bitch to slip you one final well-merited rude gesture before turning around and leaving you alone. You therefore proceed to shit a metric ton of masonry stacking cubes when she lunges at you with all the rancorous fury of a cholerbear intent on eviscerating its prey. She is right up in your face, lips curled back over her teeth, a low growl reverberating in her throat and you hope this isn’t what it appears to be because there are people watching and this is just fucking embarrassing.

She takes another step closer and ooohh fuck, you can no longer delude yourself into thinking that this is just some platonic scuffle because now you can smell the pheromones. The pitch tension pouring off of her is so obvious she might as well have tiny spades flashing in her eyes.

“Whoa!” You take a step back and raise your arms, palms open. You have no idea what to say to this shocking turn of events except WOW THAT ESCALATED QUICKLY. On the one hand, this is your first hard and fast one hundred percent serious blackrom solicitation and you are flattered. On the other hand, you had always assumed your spade would arise from a longstanding, steamy rivalry
with a special somebody who knew exactly how to ignite the blackest of your pitch fury, your belief in hate at first sight notwithstanding. Barring that, you had assumed that it would happen with somebody who at least knew your name for fuck’s sake. (What can you say? You are a romantic at heart.) It goes without saying that an open invitation from some crazy broad you met ten seconds ago in front of a bunch of strangers milling around a depressing hallway has never ranked high on your scale of quadrant fantasy.

You try to conceive of some way to convey all of this to her through the ever-present language barrier (oh, look, you found a new Worst Thing™!) while still maintaining some level of eloquence. However, she is still leering at you like she would like to bite your face off, so you panic and blurt, “No! Uh...thank you, but no.”

Goddamn it, you sound like a certain feckless moron with oversized horns who still spends way too much time playing games for girls. This is so embarrassing you want nothing more than to slink away to the farthest corner of the space station and wet yourself with shame.

She looks as though she is trying to piece together a sufficiently scornful response. You brace yourself for it because there are plenty of socially acceptable ways to turn down a caliginous advance and being a stammering jackass definitely is not one of them. Before the (completely deserved) oral onslaught can begin, Cennia emerges from a door across the hall and says, “Navani Smalas? Navani Smalas, please come forward.”

The girl gives you one last sour look (which, you note, does not hold a burning wax nub to one of Cennia’s looks) before following Cennia into the room.

You let out a breath you hadn’t realized you were holding once she is out of sight. Well, you think, there was nothing about that experience that was not completely terrible and humiliating. Thank you, Navani Smalas, for providing me with my daily dose of public shaming. Glad I can tick that off my to do list for today. Let’s see…there it is, right between “choke on copious amounts of anguish gland secretions” and “drive a barbed spike through the thickest portion of my—

A hand is on your shoulder. You turn around to tell whoever is touching you to fuck off (because hell yes that is totally something you can do now) but the guy behind you looks to be about as resilient as a handicapped hop creature so you tone your distaste down to a withering glare instead. “What?”

He stares at your shoes as though his eyes will melt out of his head if he looks at your face or anywhere else. “Please you not be angry to Navani. She just wanting black romance. Asking all troll. Not only you.”

A fierce heat spreads through your neck, cheeks, and ears at the realization that oh my shitting god she didn’t even think you were particularly hateable or strong rival material, she only wanted you for a one-pail fling. Way to misread the situation spectacularly, Mr. quadrant advice guru. For the first time since you were abducted from your hive you are grateful that you will never speak with your old acquaintances and colleagues again because at the very least you will be spared the supreme embarrassment of having any of them hearing a word about this, ever.

You set your jaw against the heat rising in your face (because fuck Cennia’s stale promises that “Everybody is of equal status here” you know exactly what will happen if any of these piss swigging assholes sees a hint of the schlock flowing through your veins). Embarrassment aside, you suppose you can’t really blame her for being desperate. There has been a rash of hookups ever since you learned just how fucked up and weird human romance is. Even in English, it’s pretty damn difficult to interpret the words “Only one quadrant” as anything other than “guess what, kids, normal, healthy redrom and blackrom and palerom and ashenrom are all going straight down the shitter the second
you set foot on that godawful asscrack of a planet!” As a result, the floodgates of concupiscent and conciliatory emotions have opened and hormones have been flowing fast and thick. You have seen so many people trying to sneak in one last fling, one last grope, one last death rattle of real romance you might as well be living in a nonstop kinkfest of adults-only cinema. (Hell, just this morning you walked in on two dudes in the throes of concupiscent passion in the communal ablation block and goddamn it you will never be able to look at that particular load gaper the same way again. Two days ago you stumbled across a public feelings jam orgy, for fuck’s sake.) It was only a matter of time before it all worked its way around to you. Past you really should have invested some time into considering what to say when that happened so you could have avoided this whole ordeal, the inconsiderate bastard.

The dude behind you is still staring at your shoes. “You not be angry at Navani, OK?”

“Yeah, fine,” you mutter. “OK.”

And then you see the dark flush rising on this guy’s face and oh squealing grub shit he was auspisticizing you unobservant fuck and you are now ass end up in unwanted ashen sentiments. Between your newfound moirallegiance with the English word “fuck” and your thoroughly botched pitch and ashen solicitations you have unintentionally filled almost every goddamn quadrant in the last five minutes. Apparently you bathed in ready-for-sexy-times odor enhancement liquid this evening because there is literally no other explanation for this shitty turn of events.

This situation is rapidly devolving into a conga line of abject mortification; one which you are all too happy to leave behind when Cennia returns and says, “Karkat Vantas? Karkat Vantas, please step forward.”

The room Cennia leads you into reeks of disinfectant. Everything is antiseptic white or steel gray and the light is bright enough to make your eyes sting. It is, in short, everything an Aggressanalyst’s office ought to be. It is also approximately the size of a gnat’s ass. There is room for one small wheeled cart, one ridiculously uncomfortable folding chair, you, Cennia, and that’s it. (Those last two are questionable as far as you are concerned because even though you do manage to close the door after you, you are way closer to Cennia than you ever wanted to be and the sharp edge of the cart is mere millimeters from bashing into your crotch.) You are so unbelievably cramped that it is all you can do to resist laughing in Cennia’s face when she instructs you to “have a seat and make yourself comfortable.” You have to settle with thinking, Wow, are you shitting me? Besides the fact that this purulent ass crevice makes my tiny respite block look like a seadweller’s castle, you must realize that it is going to take some serious acrobatics to maneuver around your ass if I am ever going to plant my gluteal fat deposits on that chair.

Despite your misgivings, you manage to maneuver around Cennia without incident. You sit down on the chair like a champ. (Wow, you think. Look at me go. If chair-sitting ever becomes a competitive sport every trainer in the Empire will be positively shitting themselves to sign me on.)

“How remove your shirt.”

You hesitate for the barest fraction of a second because even here, even now, it is hard to overcome six sweeps of no bare skin ever, you do not let anybody see skin, you are too vulnerable, somebody will cut you and then they will flay you alive if the culling drones don’t beat them to it. Then you shrug off the black shirt and try not to let your teeth chatter as the cool air ghosts over your newly-exposed upper half.

Cennia prods at a patch of blotchy discoloration on your arm. “Have you experienced any pain or inflammation around the injection sites?”
“No.”

You feel her poking at the blotches on your back. “The color appears to be spreading normally. We will wait for the pigment distribution to equalize before giving you another round.”

“How long until the next treatment?”

“That depends on how quickly the pigment spreads. Most trainees receive their second round of melanin about two perigees after the first but some receive it as early as one perigee or as late as three.”

“OK.” You try not to gag as the word leaves your mouth because it’s not OK at all and you have absolutely no way of articulating just how not OK you are with all of this because you are still confined to English. The fact that Cennia insists on babbling on in Alternian only makes the situation all the more supremely unfair.

“Do you have any other questions?”

“No.”

“Excellent. In that case we will begin your vaccination regimen.”

She bustles through the drawers of the cart, withdrawing latex gloves, a handful of ethanol-doused towelettes in paper packets, a vial of clear liquid, a slender syringe. You try not to think about what is in the vial. You try not to think about the way you are about to give a troll you hate in the most platonic sense of the word the freedom to dump fuck knows what (rat poison? Distilled pus from a deep-tissue foot canker? Fuck knows!) inside you. You try not to think about the last group of trainees who came through the vaccination clinic, the poor fuckers who were still in quarantine after getting a cracked batch of this shit and ending up feverish and breaking out in maroon spots. You try really fucking hard not to think about all of that shit. You try and you fail fantastically.

“This first injection will protect you against varicella-zoster virus, the pathogen responsible for chickenpox and shingles disease in humans,” she says as she swabs your arm with cold antiseptic. You derive an inordinate amount of pleasure from hearing her trip over the English disease names because oh my copulating Christ her accent sucks musclebeast genitalia. Cennia does not appear to notice your amusement. She continues her monologue, listing all the gruesome symptoms of the diseases and—ow, damn it, feels like pinching with claws—jabbing you with the syringe without so much as an “OK, Karkat, here I go.” (Well paint my human claw nubs and call me barnacle-infested royalty, you think. Maybe she did notice me autoerogenously asphyxiating myself with unrefined laughter after all.)

You aren’t particularly interested in the finer points of human pathology but you certainly don’t put it past Cennia or whoever the butt-huffing hell writes the examinations to include a section all about human diseases just to fuck over less observant trolls. You therefore file “chickenpox” and “shingles” away as “human flaming molt disease A and B” for easy reference.

The next several minutes are a delightful rhythm of swab, stab, information dump, repeat:

Swab. Stab. Oh, hallelujah, you are now immune to mumps virus, rubella virus, and rubeola virus.

Swab. Stab. Thank the subjugglator’s fake-ass Mirthful Messiahs, you are now immune to poliovirus.

Swab. Stab. Corynebacterium diphtheria, Clostridium tetani, and Bordetella pertussis are now your bitches.
By the time Cennia decides she is done turning you into a pincushion, your arm is sore, your nose is stinging with the burn of ethanol, and your pan is overflowing with ample nightmare fuel for the next several days. (A virus that eats through your central nervous system? Fuck that noise. For a benign and overall harmless planet Earth sure does have a lot of shit that wants to kill you.)

You are putting your shirt back on—in the process of maneuvering your abused arm into its sleeve, in fact—when Cennia says, “I understand that some of the trainees waiting for the vaccination clinic left before receiving treatment.”

You shrug. “Yes. Two or three. A few.”

“Tell me who left early.”

“I can’t. I don’t know their names.” It’s not a lie, but even if you did know the names you sure as greased shit wouldn’t tell her. This place is horrible enough without people going out of their way to make things even shittier for everybody else, you think. You want the names then check your damn roster.

“Did they give any reason for leaving without obtaining proper clearance?”

“No. Maybe they did not want to be late to class.” Which was your entirely your own ass-ripping fault for being late.

She purses her lips and produces a look that says wow those stupid ass wipes are going to rue the day they hatched; yes it truly does suck to be them. Then she removes a green slip of paper from the bottom drawer of the cart. “Be sure and bring this with you to your history schoolfeed.”

You glance down at the paper with a sense of bewilderment as she presses it into your hand. There are no words, no pictures, no symbols or markings of any kind to suggest what purpose it might serve. Instead it emanates a rank, musky odor like dead leaves and liquefied garbage. You wrinkle your nose against the offensive smell. “What is it?”

“A permissive note. The scent will inform Averic that you are to be allowed into class without disciplinary action.

You gape at her because really? There is literally no way that this is not some ill-timed prank designed to make everybody within a six mile radius think you shit your pants. She cannot be serious.

But apparently she is. “You are dismissed,” she says. “Return to your schoolfeed promptly.”

You leave the little room firmly attached to the idea that Averic is going to take one whiff of that stench and murder you on principle. (You would murder you for going out in public with that reek wafting off you. Sure, you may not be terribly concerned with your appearance but there is still something to be said for basic hygiene and social fucking etiquette.) However, when you walk into the schoolblock Averic quietly steps aside and lets you pass.

You reserve one moment to ponder why anybody would ever think smell was the way to go for conveying “Do Not Kill” to the raging psychopath. (Is he really dumb enough he can’t read? What if he catches a cold and murders everyone?) You then proceed to spend the rest of the class learning about some doofus named Napoleon Bonaparte.

>Terezi: Break some bad news
gallowCalibrator [CG] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

GC: SOLLUX 1 D1D 1T
TA: 2hiit.
TA: ii’im a22umiing by it it you mean the thing we both agreed not two do.
GC: Y3P
TA: damn iiit.
GC: Y3P 4G41N
TA: 2o…
TA: diid you fiind anythiing?
GC: …
TA: tz?
GC: SOLLUX C4N YOU H4CK K4RK4TS TROLL14N 4CCOUNT?
TA: you have two a2k?
TA: that 2hiit ii2 grub 2tuff.
GC: OF COURS3 YOU C4N
GC: OK 1M GO1NG TO S3ND YOU SOM3TH1NG
GC: 1 N33D YOU TO S3ND 1T TO 3V3RYBODY ON K4RK4TS CONT4CT L1ST
GC: H3R3

gallowsCalibrator [GC] sent file R3DGL4R3S_1NV3ST1G4T1ON

TA: what the fuck?
GC: JUST S3ND 1T
TA: ok. god.
TA: done.
TA: 2o what diid you fiind?
GC: D1D YOU W4TCH 1T Y3T?
TA: ii’im watchiing it right now.
TA: 2hiit diid ii ju2t 2end everyone ten miinute2 of you role playiing?
GC: K33P W4TCH1NG
TA: oh.
TA: oh FUCK.
GC: Y34H
GC: FUCK

gallowsCalibrator [GC] ceased trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

> Karkat: Wake
TC: WhAt Is Up My InVeRtEbRoThEr?
CG: OH FANTASTIC.
CG: IT’S YOU.
CG: IF I WANTED TO SUFFER I WOULD SWALLOW STICKING VENOM BUGS AND SOB IN ABJECT TERROR AS MY CHITINous WINDHOLE SLOWLY SWELLS SHUT UNDER THE POTENCY OF THEIR STINGS.
CG: AT THE VERY LEAST I WOULD BE PUT OF MY MISERY MORE QUICKLY THAN I WILL TALKING TO YOU.
CG: WHAT IN BARFING FUCK DO YOU WANT?
TC: I jUsT wAnTeD tO sHare WhAt ThIs MoThErFuCkInG dReAm I aLl Up AnD hAd WaS.
CG: DREAM?
CG: AS IN HORRIFYING PICTURES THAT RAPE YOUR MIND WHILE YOU SLEEP?
TC: NaH, bRoThEr.
TC: ThIs MoThErFuCkEr HaS a HaRd TiMe ReMeMbErInG wHaT tHe LaSt TiMe He CrAcKeD oPeN a FrEsH cAn Of MiRaClE sLiMe WaS.
CG: OK THAT RIGHT THERE IS THE SUBTERRANEAN GROWTH POINT OF YOUR PROBLEM.
CG: GODDAMN IT, GAMZEE, I SWEAR ON THE BULGES OF YOUR WORTHLESS MIRTHFUL MESSIAHS THAT WE HAVE BEEN OVER THIS ALREADY.
CG: LISTEN TO THESE WORDS OF COMMON SENSE AND WEEP IN JOY AS YOU BECOME MARGINALLY LESS STUPID: SLIME IS FOR SLEEPING, NOT EATING.
CG: GAMZEE?
CG: HELLO?
CG: WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU?
CG: DID YOU SUDDENLY LOSE CONTROL OF ALL YOUR BODILY FUNCTIONS AND ASPHYXIATE WITH YOUR PANTS FULL OF CRAP?
TC: Shlt, ThAt WaS tHe BitCh NaStLeSt WaL1 Of GrAy I eVeR dId SeE.
TC: I cAn FeEl A bRoThEr Up WiTh GeTtInG hIs FuCkInG aGgRaVaTiOn On.
TC: I jUsT gOt OnE ThIs MoThErFuCkEr HaS a HaRd TiMe ReMeMbErInG wHaT tHe LaSt TiMe He CrAcKeD oPeN a FrEsH cAn Of MiRaClE sLiMe WaS.
CG: BOXES AND CIRCLES?
CG: THOSE ARE LETTERS.
CG: THEY MAKE THESE THINGS CALLED WORDS, YOU SHIT-BREATHING
IGNORAMUS.
CG: HEY!
CG: ALTERNIA TO GAMZEE THE PAN-FUCKED CLOWN MAKARA.
CG: WILL YOU FUCKING SAY SOMETHING ALREADY?
TC: WhOa.
TC: MoRe MoThErFuCkInG gOrGeOuS cIrClE bOx DeSiGnS.
TC: I sTiLl dOn’T kNoW wHaT tHeY aRe AlL uP aNd TrYiNg To Be CoNvEyInG, tHoUgH.
TC: MaYbE yOu CaN hElP a MoThErFuCkEr OuT aNd SaY aLl WhAt YoU aRe WaNtInG tO
sAy MoRe NoRmAl LiKe?
CG: OH, I GET IT.
CG: IT SEEMS YOU HAVE SOMEHOW MANAGED TO ACQUIRE THE MENTAL
CAPACITY TO ATTEMPT A FEEBLE “PRANK.”
CG: ALLOW ME TO DEMONSTRATE MY DERISION WITH A HEARTY ROUND OF
INCREDULOUS LAUGHTER: HAHAHAHA.
CG: NOW QUIT INDULGING IN YOUR MASTURBATORY INANITIES AND ANSWER
ME LIKE A GODDAMN NORMAL FUNCTIONING TROLL.
CG: OH MY GOD. DID I SERIOUSLY JUST USE THE WORDS “NORMAL” AND
“FUNCTIONAL” IN RELATION TO YOU?
CG: UGH, FUCK ME FOR TYPING THOSE WORDS AND FUCK YOU FOR MAKING ME
THINK THEM.
TC: (2LHQ​H Q​D DX5353DDX90 ​²Õ#¬Ý‹Ù wÜ wÜ wÜ wÜ wÜ wÜ wÜ wÜe3​P (,%( I" ×​
Ü¯Ü¯Ü¯Ü¯Ü¯×​ ´‰Ót³p³p×​ ×​ —š…„•Ð„•Ð’—³•¸„•ÐD–p1L‹s0D–w'​‹s0p1LF²„•Ð•¸´…
ÖªTèªTèˆ)ÙmÚmÚmÚmÚmÚmÚmÚmÚmÚmÚmÚmÚmÚmÚˆ)ÙªTèmRQ9
CG: YOU HAVE SUFFICIENTLY DEMONSTRATED THE EXTENT OF YOUR CRANIAL
PROWESS.
CG: CONGRATULATIONS, NOOK CRAWLER. MY AGGRAVATION SPONGE IS NOW
AT FULL CAPACITY.
TC: e3​P •h³p³p×​ ³p•h​M,0 ​F²D–'M& nF²R ÕF²F²D–F²F²D–F²R ÕF²0 ​& n& nD–F²'M "
9""",%6+mRQuk
CG: GAMZEE?
TC: Jn*Jn93 3​M,I" e3Ót/l(P​(P​L​(P​(P​(P​*Jn'/l%n±%n±jtµLTo(2L(P​%n±Im,m'/l%fvGÛ 2Ü 2Ü 2Ü
2Ü 2Ü 2Ü 2Ü 2Ü 2Ü 2Ü 2Ü&RÎ°¸Õ​×°¸Õ​×°¸ÕJk“HQ​LTo""9
CG: OK THAT’S IT, SHIT SPONGE.
CG: IF MY COMPUTER IS EXPOSED TO ANY MORE OF THIS ASININE BULLSHIT IT
WILL BE INFECTED WITH A PERMANENT TAINT OF STUPID SO FUCK YOU, I AM
DONE HERE.
CG: NEXT TIME TRY NOT PUKING INCOMPREHENSIBLE DRIVEL ALL OVER A
PERFECTLY DECENT CONVERSATION.
You sign out of Trollian with a huff, wishing there was some way the program could translate your
furious button mashing into one final rude gesture aimed in the general direction of everything
associated with Gamzee Makara. What in bugwinged hell got into him, you wonder because sure,
you might expect this kind of behavior from Sollux or Terezi but this was Gamzee for fuck’s sake.
Even if somebody were to put a culling fork to your head, you couldn’t recall a single instance of
him intentionally antagonizing you or anybody else. (Unintentional aggravation is, of course, another
story entirely. That’s something that happens every time he opens his reeking misconception hole.)
You had planned to spend the bulk of your evening getting some serious coding done (and by
“serious coding” you actually mean writing shitty, flawed ~ath codes that Sollux will rip to shreds
the second he lays his freaky two-toned eyes on them). You even go so far as to open your ~ath


software. It takes only a few moments of staring at the flashing cursor for you to recognize that Gamzee’s bullfuckery has thoroughly soured your appetite for anything that requires looking at your computer. You decide that a break is in order—one with several episodes of *Thresh Prince* and maybe even a certain romcom also starring troll Will Smith which most of your friends just do not appreciate but they can all just fuck off and die for having no taste in movies whatsoever.

You turn away from your computer and HOLY SHIT CRABDAD IS STANDING RIGHT BEHIND YOU! You get about one millionth of a second to wonder how in the name of everything profane and holy he managed to sneak up on you (because even when he is not screeching or snapping, 400 pounds of crab makes a metric fuckton of noise). Then he is leveling his pincers at you, an angry rattle building in his throat.

“OK,” you say, rolling your eyes. “I’ll get you some damn roe cubes. Cool your rumble spheres.”

To your surprise, the rattle evolves into something closer to a hiss and he snaps one of his pincers at you. You swallow back a gasp but you can’t stop yourself from flinching. You never know just how much of what you say Crabdad understands, but he has never attacked you outside of a strife, and certainly not when you are unarmed and unaware of his presence.

“Hey,” you say. You keep your voice low and even, more silky-smooth calm than you have ever managed in your life. Slowly—I don’t want to fight right now—palms out—look: I don’t have any weapons—you slide out of the chair and stand up. “What’s wrong?”

The movement only seems to heighten his agitation. With a furious screech, he scuttles forward until he is towering over you, trapping you against the wall. Only then do you notice the gash in his belly, deep enough you can see something rubbery and fibrous through the steady gush of too-red blood.

“Crabdad! What the fuck! Who—“ you trail off as you realize something is wrong with you. Your mouth is spitting out bizarre sounds that make your throat hurt. It hits you then that you are speaking English and no wonder Crabdad is upset—here he is bleeding to death and you can’t even be assed to speak the right language.

You try to say, “What happened? Who did this?” but the words come out in English. You realize with a jolt that you can’t say anything in Alternian because you have forgotten how to speak Alternian.

Crabdad screams and you feel the hair on the back of your neck prickle. He has never taken this tone with you before. He is acting as though he doesn’t even know you, like you are an intruder in your own hive which insane because even if you are making weird English noises at him he should still be able to recognize his own troll for god’s sake.

He raises one of his pincers and through the empty space you have an unobstructed view of your window. You catch a glimpse of your reflection in the glass. Your breath catches in your throat. Your horns are gone. You sclera are a sickly white. Your teeth are dull and flat and your skin is a weird pinky-brown color. You are human—fully human—and you barely recognize yourself.

Crabdad’s pincers are flying for your face and you feel it connect, feel it crunch into one of your cheekbones—and then you wake up with a muffled shout.

*Goddamn watered-down sopor slime,* you think as your heart begins to settle back into its natural rhythm. You are relieved to see that the lights in your respite block are on, indicating that sleep cycle is over and you are free to get up because that is the third nightmare in a row—the shit-flavored cherry-topped dessert of a three course meal set—and you truly cannot manage another steaming
helping of this garbage.

Most of the slime sluices off of your body as you drag your sorry ass out of your recuperacoon. The residue it leaves is wet and messy and, unlike regular slime, this shit drips and runs everywhere. It is also cold as a seadweller’s left vestigial heft sac. Your teeth don’t stop chattering until you are dry and fully-clothed, and even then you are nowhere near warm. No, strike that; you are barely even this side of “comfortable enough to function normally.”

The cold keeps you awake as long enough to get you out of your respite block, but the stimulatory effect rapidly wears off as you head for the cafeteria. It is not long before the effect of this dismal sleep cycle combines with a perigee’s worth of equally dismal sleep cycles to leave you feeling about as mentally capable as one of the heinous daywalking undead. Add a properly repulsive odor to your person and you have no doubt that a certain meddlesome fashionista broad would chainsaw the fuck out of you on sight.

You idly wonder how you will feel when the time comes for you to stop using a recuperacoon altogether. It does not take you long to decide that the answer is fucking terrible, that’s how you will feel. Trolls aren’t meant to sleep without sopor slime and fuck anybody—Cennia—who has the gall to claim that “you’ll get used to it”, especially when that person—Cennia—is no doubt enjoying the comforting, dreamless embrace of a proper recuperacoon every sleep cycle.

As you near the cafeteria, you are pleased to note a distinct absence of shuffling, grunting, chewing, slurping, scraping, clinking, or any other sound to suggest that there is a single living soul awake and about besides yourself. Ever since Evrind and all the other snot chewers you coached did so well in the last round of examinations, you have been unable to walk into a room without having a bunch of bulgestains in your face demanding that you explain the proper use of semicolons in intimate detail. Mealtimes have become especially pernicious gauntlets: your perfectly manageable group of Evrind plus three or four has exploded into a sprawling mob of about twenty, all clamoring to talk to you as though you are some sort of wizard who can fix their every language problem just by waggling your bulge at it. It will be a pleasant change of pace to eat a meal without all of those shitrags showering you with unwanted attention.

When you walk into the cafeteria, you are disappointed to see that you are not the first to arrive after all: there is already a troll sitting at the table closest to the entrance. You take a few steps closer, trying to determine whether it is anybody you know and then you come to a dead halt. Long hair, no horns—it’s Shrega.

You know that this might be your only chance to talk to her without anybody else around to see you. Surely it wouldn’t hurt to take a couple of minutes to show her that there is at least somebody who is capable of treating her like a person. Except…except you know that it can hurt because if anybody catches you hanging around with the designated social pariah it is going to raise some really uncomfortable questions, especially if somebody decides to fire up a few extra think panels and make a connection between the bands around your wrists—the bands that mark you both as freaks. You waste a couple of seconds wondering if you should just go back to your room before she sees you, wait until the cafeteria becomes crowded and boisterous and you don’t have to deal with this awkward situation. Then you realize that she is slumped face down on the table, sleeping.

You almost laugh because wow, you cannot believe you were generating that much drama over something as juvenile as where to sit in a near-empty public alimentary commons, especially when the solution to all your puerile woes was so blatantly obvious an unborn grub could figure it out. Any idiot knows better than to fuck around with a sleeping troll. At best you’ll end up with a split lip and mother grub’s leaking waste chute help you if you stumble across somebody with a particularly strong defensive reflex. You decide to do the sensible thing and quietly head for a different table.
You get an uncomfortable sensation in the pit of your stomach as you move to walk past Shrega’s table. Something in the way she is laying there makes your heart climb into your throat. At first you can’t quite put your finger on it, but then it hits you: she is too quiet, too peaceful. Even with the diluted sopor slime acting as a buffer, everybody you know has been suffering mind-bending nightmares every time they close their eyes—but here’s Shrega lying completely still and sleeping away without any slime at all. You frown at that and look again for any of the conventional signs of sleep terrors—even a tiny tremor or half-sighed whimper would do—and you see nothing. Does it have something to do with her mutation? You wonder. Does she just not need sopor slime?

It is not until you are within just a few feet of her table that you realize she is not breathing. It is not until you are standing right next to her that you see the blood (the perfectly normal maroon blood), but once you do see it you don’t know how you missed it because it is everywhere: on her arms, on her clothes, on the floor, smeared on the table around her head, coating the knife in her lap. A yawning hollowness settles into your gut as you realize that she is dead.

You don’t know what to do with this revelation. You’ve seen plenty of public cullings, but this is the first time you have ever seen a dead body up close and personal. Although you aren’t a craven pile of tearsnorts, you do not relish it the way you thought you would back when you used to boast to all your friends that you would be the greatest Threshecutioner the Empire has ever seen. Death is… messier than you expected. The stench of blood and torn entrails is bad enough alone, but with the smells of breakfast wafting through the background—Greasy bacon! Buttery toast! Grilled pancakes!—your olfactory bulb has no idea what the fuck is happening and you just feel kind of sick.

You realize that you should probably tell somebody that there is a dead body in the cafeteria before too many people end up starting their day with the same dose of morbid you just did. You are pretty sure that would be the considerate thing to do. Only problem is you haven’t got the faintest clue where you should go or who you should tell because it’s not as though there is some established protocol for dealing with dead bodies turning up at the breakfast table in this godforsaken place. (You have learned the Earth protocol for dealing with situations such as these and that is call the fucking police and keep your blistered ass the fuck out of it. You take a moment to appreciate the irony in that before you resume feeling confused and mildly nauseous.)

You do not know how long you stand there staring at Shrega’s body like an impotent sack of chickenshit. Your eyes are beginning to glaze over when a beefy hand latches onto your shoulder and a tinny voice says, “Come with me, now.”

Obviously, this is bothering you far more than you thought it was because you just let that hand steer you down the rows of tables, and out of the cafeteria. It never even occurs to you to turn around and see who belongs to that hand even though for all you know it might belong to a culling drone or Her Imperious Condescension, or even the goddamn Speaker of the Vast Glub herself Gl’bgolyb. When your brain finally deigns to return from its trip to the land of NOPE NOTHING TO SEE HERE LALALA I CAN’T HEAR YOU, you are almost relieved to find yourself standing in a dark and empty schoolblock with the relatively innocuous Migdal.

“Let me see your left arm,” he says.

You frown but you don’t hesitate to hold your left arm out for inspection because Migdal is pretty much the only halfway decent and sane adult troll in this shitsack space station and you aren’t in a hurry to fall out of his good graces. He grabs your wrist and pulls on your sleeve, bunching it up around the crook of your elbow. You don’t like the feel of the cold air against your naked forearm. (Arms are easy targets; if anybody attacks you they’ll probably get an arm when you try to block and dark sleeves hide blood color a hell of a lot more effectively than nothing at all.) You like the way it exposes the red band there even less.
You are about to say, “What is it? What are you doing?” but then Migdal procures a pair of wire cutters and snips the band away from your wrist. The band flips to the floor. Migdal curses under his breath—in English! You take the opportunity to add “shit” to your slowly growing arsenal—and lays the wire cutters aside.

“Why was I wearing that red bracelet?” you ask. (And as a side note, yes, you do know it’s not actually a bracelet but you don’t know any other English word that means “circular object worn around the wrist”, so piss off.)

Migdal holds out the pieces of cut band in one hefty hand. “This? It was supposed to be a suicide watch.” His voice drops down to an irritable grumble as he adds, “Lot of good it did with Shrega out there.”

At first you are sure that you misinterpreted Migdal’s words. In a program that is designed to kill off practically everybody involved in it—a program that features *perigee to perigee group culling, for ass-twitching sake*—you can’t imagine why anybody would care a whit about preventing a willing volunteer from joining the growing ranks of dead trainees. Now that you think about it, you don’t quite understand Shrega’s choice in suicide method, either. Self-evisceration seems like a ridiculously unpleasant choice when you could just as easily refuse to take a test or insult the fuck out of one of the adults and get the same result a whole lot quicker with a whole lot less pain. And then, slowly you begin to understand. You have a fucking epiphany and it leaves a putrid taste in your mouth.

“What will happen to Shrega now?” you ask, just to be sure.

Migdal shrugs. “I assume Torkal will want to dissect her body. Even if she is deceased, he still may be able to identify the source of her mutation.”

You stare very hard at the ground, feeling like a dumb wiggler (one that got dropped on its head repeatedly in the brooding caverns and then headbutted its way through every trial on its way to the surface) for not figuring it out sooner. Of course all that manipulative weasel barf with Torkal was just as much a thing for Shrega as it was a thing for you. Of course Torkal wouldn’t want his victims to be mercifully dead before he started in on them. That would take all the shits and giggles out of his incredibly uplifting and life-affirming hobby.

“You should go back to the cafeteria,” says Migdal. “Cennia and Torkal will have cleaned everything up by now and I need to prepare for your language schoolfeed.”

You leave the schoolblock without complaint and head for the cafeteria. You take your sweet time getting there because you still haven’t forgotten the smell of pancakes blended with a side of warm innards and you honestly do not have much in the way of an appetite at the moment. When you finally reach the cafeteria, it is crowded. Predictably, you are mobbed by a pack of ten trolls begging you to explain present perfect tense syntax the second you set foot in the room.

> END OF ACT 1

Chapter End Notes

Chapter summary:
Karkat awakens from a nightmare in which he was fully human and Crabdad could no longer recognize him. Although it is early, he decides to go to the cafeteria early in order to avoid the usual crowds. (Word has gotten out regarding his willingness to help others learn English. As a result he is often confronted with groups of people demanding his help.) When he gets to the cafeteria, he is shocked to find Shrega’s body there. Migdal arrives on the scene and leads Karkat out of the cafeteria. He removes the red band from Karkat’s wrist, explaining that it was supposed to be a suicide prevention flag. Karkat deduces and confirms that Shrega would have been turned over to Torkal if she were to be culled.
terminallyCapricious [TC] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

TC: fUuUcK, KaRbRo.
TC: I dOn’T kNoW wHy I eVeN kEeP oN sAvInG aLL YoUr InFo EvEr SiNcE oUr RiGhTeOuS sIs TeReZi WeNt AnD gOt HeR iNvEsTiGaTiOn On.
TC: cHiCa aLL wEnT aNd ShOwEd Us ThE wlcKeD aSS tRuTh.
TC: NoW wE kNoW yOu ArEn’T eVeR gOiNg To Up AnD aNsWeR tHiS mOtHeRfUcKeR aNyMoRe.
TC: i’M aLL BiTcHtItS sIdEwAyS sTaRiNg At YoUr RuDe NaStY gRaY nAmE hErE, aLL WaItInG fOr iT t0 IlgHt uP IlkE yOu’R e ThErE, mY bRoThEr.
TC: YoU kNoW wHaT tHaT wOuLd Be?
TC: tHaT wOuLd Be A rEaL mOtHeRfUcKiN mIrAcLe.
TC: :o(

terminallyCapricious [TC] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

> Be future Equius
You do not wish to leave the embrace of your recuperacoon when Aurthour rouses you at sunset. You have enjoyed little rest of late, and his unwelcome intrusion awakens a flare of rage in your belly that demands outlet at once. It takes all of your restraint to direct your fury away from your lusus. (He was, after all, simply following your orders; orders which likely contradicted his own judgment. You had seen the quiet disapproval flash across his eyes, even as he bowed to indicate that he would wake you at the hour you desired. Even through your blinding rage, you recognize that it would be unseemly to reward such exceptional service with violence.)

You instead direct all of your anger toward one of the few intact robots that remain in your respite block. The next several moments are a blur of punching, throwing, kicking, and tearing. You do not stop until you have torn all four of its limbs off. Only then do you recover yourself enough to speak.

“Thank you, Aurthour. Your services are singular, as always.”

Aurthour inclines his head to acknowledge your praise as he sets about gathering up the mess of metal, wires, and springs scattered on your floor.

With your rage quelled, you take a seat at your workbench to delve into your current project: thirty-four sets of photo-sensitive devices to be grafted to the eye in such a way as to moderate the amount of light that passes through the pupil—a formal commission from the Alternian Empire. Small-scale projects such as these are not your area of expertise. It is incredibly difficult to employ anything in the way of delicacy with your prodigious strength. Integrating the bioware which will act as an intermediary between the photoreceptive devices and the ocular nerves presents its own difficulties. More often than not, you end up accidentally crushing your work between your fingers or encountering difficulties with the bioware and you must start over from the beginning. You are beginning to worry that you may not finish before your deadline. (The debauchery of such a thought sends a thrill through your body. You cannot hope to tamp down the wave of perspiration that follows, but you do manage to retrieve a towel in time to prevent any of it from ruining the fragile circuitry.)

To make matters more frustrating, your mind is continually wandering from the task at hand. Perhaps you have been driving yourself too hard, perhaps it is a product of too many days of working into the daylight hours, but you often find yourself wondering what purpose these devices will be destined to serve. It is quite obvious that the wearers will be using them under conditions of excessive light, but you cannot settle on any circumstance which would require such permanent adaptive measures. (Sustained diurnal activity? Long-term appointment to regions with especially excessive radiant energy? A military campaign on a particularly sun-baked planet?)

While you can imagine a variety of scenarios to explain the function of the devices you cannot fathom any practical reason behind your instructions to color all of the externally visible portions white. You are certain it cannot enhance the photomodulatory effect of the device: the color creates a glare and it has been fiendishly difficult to program the photoreceptors to compensate without diminishing their sensitivity. You can only conclude that the specification was solely for cosmetic purposes. (But why white, you wonder. Why not natural yellow? Why not any color on the natural hemospectrum?)

You try your best to wave away these inappropriate musings, yet they always tend to slither into your head just when you believe that they have been successfully banished and your pace suffers for it. There are many other distractions: Aurthour delivering meals which you eat as quickly as noble decorum allows. The vengeful screeching of your neighbor’s insatiable lusus. The screams of her
victims. The occasional passing of a fine herd of majestic musclebeasts. Tonight, however, your
neighbor is blessedly quiet and there are no fauna to admire. You work for several hours
uninterrupted. It is therefore all the more aggravating when you discover that you have made a small
error installing the bioware which sets you back farther than you were before you began to work
tonight.

You leap to your feet with a snarl. The rage you felt upon waking is back full force. You sweep your
room for another robot but there are no more intact. Another head-searing bolt of choler slicers
through you as you realize that you have not had time to repair any of your broken robots as a
consequence of your impossibly difficult commission. You drive your fist into the wall. The force
leaves a dent in the stone. You punch the wall again and again and again and again and one more
time until your fist goes through the stone and your knuckles are dripping blue. Then you snatch up
the towel on your workbench and furiously mop away the sweat that is pouring off your face and
neck.

You are still an embarrassing mess when you hear the laughter. You immediately turn to face the
door, though you can easily identify the intruder without looking. Cold, biting, and designed to
wound, it can only belong to your neighbor, Vriska Serket.

She does not wait for you to invite her to come in because you are both acutely aware that you will
never do so. (Noble blood aside, you find her contemptuous and you take quiet solace in the fact that
she lays one full rank below you on the hemospectrum. You treat her as a near-equal only because
she has proven herself to be an unpredictable and dangerous adversary.)

“So this is what creeper Zahhak has been up to,” she cackles, easily gliding into your respite block.
“Nasty ragegasms and lame-ass robots.”

You shoot a quick glance to your lusus, standing at the door where Vriska left him. Even with your
eyes hidden behind your dark glasses, you are certain he can sense your discontent. You had
instructed him of your desire to work undisturbed and you cannot under any circumstance
understand why he would consider it appropriate to show anybody into your abode, least of all Miss
Serket. You have half a mind to punish him for such gross disobedience. Then your eyes fall on the
fresh glass of milk in his hands and you feel your anger recede considerably. You wait for him to
place the offering on your desk and leave with a deeply apologetic bow before you lower yourself to
addressing Serket’s personal barbs.

“What do you want?”

“Psh. As if I would want anything from you.” You are both aware that this is a lie. She rarely
contacts you outside of demanding that you supply her with some form of your robotic expertise. Her
mechanical arm—one of your proudest works—is testament enough to that. You remain silent and
she continues with an easy drawl: “Nobody’s heard a peep out of you for the last perigee. I came by
to make sure you didn’t do something lame like die.”

“Your concern is appreciated, but—“

She cuts you off with a barked laugh. “Concern? Please. I was hoping to score some easy lusus
chow.”

“Well as you can see, I am alive and still strong as a musclebeast.”

“Yeah. I see that all right,” she says. She taps at the web of cracks radiating out from the hole you
put in the wall. “Do us both a favor and talk to Nepeta before you bring down the canyon walls.”
You set your lips into a firm, angry line. You cannot abide casual discussion of your quadrant activities. It is a vulgarity which holds none of the depraved appeal of consorting with insolent lowbloods.

Serket pays little mind to your discomfort. She asks, “When was the last time you talked to her, anyway?”

“I have been extremely busy of late.”

“Doing what?”

Another bubble of ire rises in your stomach, directed at yourself this time. You know the danger of giving Vriska Serket even the smallest of openings. “That is none of your business.”

Something needles at the edges of your consciousness, a voice quietly insisting that you tell her—you can trust her, and what will it hurt? Tell her! You clamp down against the voice and it goes dead as you say, “If you are going to attempt to read my mind then you can leave immediately.”

“Oh!” she laughs. “Acting a little cagey, aren’t we?”

“Aurthour will show you out.” And sure enough, your lusus appears at your door, ready to do so.

Serket rolls her eyes. “Fine. But just remember that I know you’re up to something and I intend to find out what.” She attempts to point one menacing finger at you, but the gesture loses its dramatic flair as she ducks away from Aurthour. “Mark my words, I will find out.”

You watch Aurthour escort her out into the passageway beyond your respite block and wait until you can no longer hear their footsteps before you turn on your computer. Though your deadline still looms, you suppose that you can afford to take a short break after such a vexing encounter. You resolve to return to your work the moment you finish your milk.

Your Trollian icon is one of the first to appear on the screen. You hesitate for only a moment before you close the program. Much as you would like to contact your moirail, you do not have the time to devote to a proper feelings jam, and you have already decided that your next communication will include an especially long and intimate jam to compensate for your regrettable period of neglect. Instead, you bring the mouse to hover over a video file. It is an old file, one you received nearly a full sweep ago. You do not know why you chose to save it. You suspect it had less to do with a desire to archive its contents and more to do with your forgetting it was still there. You remembered it last perigee and you have watched it many times since then. You wish you could forget about it again. You open the file.

The screen fills with the visage of a young female troll—a greenblood by the snub of her nose, but with cheekbones that suggest a drop of blue. Most of the right side of her face is outside the frame and the image is of the crude, jerky quality unique to the most inexperienced of handheld camera operators. Her visible horn is relatively short but conical, and it juts unapologetically away from her skull as it tapers to its sharp point. You cannot see her eyes, but you know that they are red as the tinted glasses that hide them. She stares sightlessly at the camera for a few seconds. Then her mouth splits into a wicked grin that is just a touch too wide for her face.

“Good evening, ladies and gentletrolls of the jury,” she says. “Tonight it is the pleasure of the prosecution to bring to justice the despicable criminal, Nubbyhorns Grouchybutt. The accused stands charged of gross social negligence and just being a stupid douchebag in general. While this scofflaw has long eluded the murderous claws of His Tyranny, you can rest assured that tonight I, Neophyte Redglare, your humble servant of the law shall see to it that he is duly punished for these heinous
There is a jumble of motion as the camera gracelessly changes perspective. You see a brief snatch of teal and red through the confusion—a legislacerator’s uniform, but too bright and too pristine to be anything more than a well-made costume. A hand covers the lens for a moment and then the image settles on a sustained view of the girl’s shoes as she walks along a gravel path.

The camera jerks with the rhythm of her steps. For several seconds your screen is a sickening blur of red, brown, and gray punctuated by the crunch of disturbed gravel. Then there is another moment of indecipherable movement before the camera settles on a cluster of lownrings.

“Ah, the idyllic lownrings,” says the girl’s voice. “So quiet. So safe. So boring. Little do these unsuspecting citizens know, there is a disgusting miscreant hiding in their midst!”

Another round of erratic camerawork follows this short narrative. Whispering gravel becomes the solid, purposeful sound of feet on pavement. A green splash of well-manicured grass occasionally dips into the screen, sometimes accompanied by trimmed shrubs or cheap ornamental rock sculptures.

The camera finally comes to focus on a hive which is remarkably unextraordinary aside from the obscene red awnings that haphazardly erupt from its walls. The camera lingers on the hive. One of its awnings is ripped and the grass is knee high.

The girl stage whispers, “We have arrived at the lair of Lord Grouchybutt. It smells like an even greater musty eyesore than usual. Deputy Pyralspite!—there is an offscreen squeak of some sort of stuffed toy—“Add offensive lack of property maintenance to the list of charges! Grouchybutt sure is racking them up tonight.”

The squeaking sound returns. “What’s that, Deputy Pyralspite? Could it be—yes! It does indeed appear that the culprit is still fast asleep, no doubt hoping to delay facing the shame of his guilt for as long as possible. What say we give this deceitful layabout a wakeup call?”

The tip of a cane raps on the front door. “Karkat! You’ve got company! Time to drag your butt out of the slime, you grouchy butt!”

There is a long pause. Far away, somebody’s lusus is barking. There is no sound from within the hive. The girl hisses something unintelligible under her breath. Then the cane is rapping with greater urgency. “Come on, Karkat, open this door! I swear I am not here to put you on mock trial, ancestor’s honor. Even if I was, I would let you off with a mild cane drubbing. Quit being a wiggler and open up!”

The door swings open a few inches under a particularly forceful blow from the cane. The girl reaches forward and prods it the rest of the way open. There is nobody standing behind the door.

The inside of the hive is dark, but the light of the double moons provides illumination enough for you to see that it has been ransacked. A pile of overturned furniture sits in the corner of what might have been a sitting area. Swatches of carpet have been torn up. Silver jags of broken DVD’s are strewn across the floor. There is no sign of the television screen which might have played them.

The hive seems to swallow up the girl’s voice as she says, “Karkat?”

The silence that follows is deafening.

The girl moves on to the nutrition block. The floor is a sea of broken dishes and scattered flatware. There is a shadow in the corner, huge and unmoving. The girl moves toward it slowly. A short, quiet
gasp indicates that she has recognized what it is seconds before the image resolves enough to reveal the stark white form of an arthropodic lusus—you would guess one of the crustacean variety, but with the uppermost limbs removed and the carapace badly lacerated you cannot know for sure. What you can divine beyond any shadow of a doubt is that it is dead and that it has been in that lamentable condition for quite some time.

The girl clears her throat. When she speaks all of the mirth has left her voice. “I present the corpse of Karkat Vantas’ lusus. Based on this evidence and the fact that this hive has been looted dry, I’m going to go ahead and pronounce the defendant innocent by reason of being dead as a door hinge post. My apologies to the members of the jury.”

The screen goes dark. The glass in your hand shatters, raining broken shards and the last dregs of milk onto your desktop. A few shards dig into your hand. The pain rouses you out of the stupor that the video always seems to cast over you. You pick the glass out of your flesh, furious with yourself for devoting ten minutes to watching the sordid thing again when you cannot afford to waste a single moment. When your hand is free of debris, you toss a towel over the mess on your desktop to sop the milk until Aurthour arrives to clean it away. Then you return to your workbench.

You spend many hours making adjustments to the lenses you started with earlier tonight. You work until your neck and shoulders ache and your eyes sting with the strain of discerning ports and wires so thin they verge on transparent. You rise from your place only once, to draw the curtains against the rising sun.

It is nearly midday when you set aside the completed pair of lenses. You are so exhausted you can scarcely summon the energy to feel any inkling of the pride you know your accomplishment merits. All you want is to climb into your recuperacoon and enjoy a few blessed hours of sleep before sundown.

You start toward the recuperacoon, but halfway there you decide that you will check your commission list first so you might have some idea of what to expect when you return to your work this evening. You quietly pray that the measurements for the next set of lenses will be more accessible than the last. Even the slightest fraction of a nanometer can make all the difference.

You consult the stack of papers which contains your commission information—and then you feel a sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach. You have a myriad of problems to worry about. A crushing deadline. A wandering, sleep-deprived mind. An unstable neighbor who likely suspects you are up to something underhanded. A badly neglected moirail. However, this particular problem may be the most distressing of all: the following name on your commission list is Recruit #008: VANTAS, KARKAT.

> Resume being present Karkat at once
Resume being present Karkat at once

You have officially decided that fuck the consequences, the next time you see Migdal you are ramming your foot so far up his waste chute he will taste the gum you stepped in three days ago. You had thought that Migdal was marginally less terrible than all the other douchebags in charge around here. You had thought that he was the exception to the universal constant that all adult trolls are terrible pieces of shit who enjoy seeing Karkat suffer. Apparently, your judge of character sucks because you now know that Migdal is a sadistic bastard on par with Torkal and Averic but with none of their redeeming qualities.

You have no idea what possessed him at the end of your English schoolfeed to remind you and all of your fellow recruits that your first-ever literary analysis composition was due first thing tomorrow. Those lacking the mental fortitude to avoid chewing their own snot might think he was trying to be helpful. As somebody with the capacity for basic rational thought, you know better. The fact that you have been unwillingly elevated to the position of goddamn Messiah of Syntax and Subject-Verb Agreement is common knowledge. Everybody knows, including all of your schoolfeed instructors and especially including Assbreath. (You have decided that “Assbreath” is Migdal’s new name because you are sure his lusus was a perfectly decent and acceptable guardian and you refuse to besmirch his memory by attaching any of its noble vocalizations to that rancid pile of nook filth.)

There is literally no way that Assbreath could have been unaware of the ramifications of his ever-so-helpful announcement. The son of a bitch had been watching you as he’d said it. It was like he was doing it at you, flinging the words with their shitty consequences directly into your face to leave you with a lap full of word feces that will stain the crotch of your pants for all eternity.

Sure enough, the second Assbreath dismissed the cohort, a mob of no less than thirty trolls descended on your vulnerable bulge in a maelstrom of printed pages and writing utensils. You had tried to fire a poisonous glare towards Assbreath as he sidled past the crowd on his way out the door. He did not seem to catch your sentiment of GO SANDPAPER YOUR BULGE AND COAT IT IN BATTERY ACID, YOU FUCKING FUCK! In fact, the slime chugger was smiling. Fucking smiling!

You do not know how long it has been since the schoolfeed ended, but you do know that you have been sitting in the same chair for so long your ass has gone numb. (You are seriously beginning to wonder if ass-amputation due to lack of bloodflow is a thing. Hell, even if it’s not a thing you are concerned because somebody someday will likely have to be the first ass amputee and the way things are going, it’s going to be you.) You have not had time to leave the schoolblock for nary a piss, let alone dinner. Your back hurts. You are tired. You are so hungry your digestive sac feels like it has inverted and bathed the contents of your abdominal cavity in its nutrient-liquefying acid in a final desperate attempt at gathering some form of sustenance. You are so ready to be done with this shit but there is no end in sight because the line of trolls waiting to see you just keeps getting longer every time you look at it.

With a resigned sigh, you divert your attention away from the black hole that used to be your stomach and direct it toward the pages of tiny print in front of you. The guy who wrote it must have had a typing quirk that involved copious abuse of the Alternian pause curl. That is the only reason you can imagine to explain why the sad fuck has barfed commas all over the page. There are commas after every other word, seven or eight in a row, commas in the place of periods, commas in the goddamn margins…it’s like looking at something crapped out by motherfucking Tavros Nitram. (Fucking hell now you’re thinking about all the asshole friends you used to have for the first time in weeks and no, no, no; you do not have time for this. La la la, that hitch in your throat is just a cough.
Yep, there it goes; a nice big cough. Nothing to see here folks. Move along.

The troll sitting next to you notices your consternation. “Oh,” he says. “It is not good?”

If you hadn’t been at this for hours straight, your response would be something along the lines of “Are you shitting me? It’s like curly punctuation marks erupted from every one of your orifices and descended on this poor, defenseless piece of paper like a swarm of pissed-off bees.” However, you have been at this for hours and you really want nothing more than to get out of this room as quickly as possible because you are legitimately concerned that dinner is going to end before you make it to the cafeteria and that would suck harder than mothergrub’s pulsating egg sphincter. You therefore decide to spare this drool slurper your usual verbal artistry and cut straight to the chase.

“Do you know how to use a period?”

He shakes his head no. *Fuck.*

“Do you know what a period is?”

“Is it…ah…human finish crumbs?”

“Yes.” A flutter of hope begins to stir in the depths of your thoracic cavity; hope that maybe this guy isn’t as fucked as you had initially thought. “Do you know how to use finish crumbs?”

The guy’s face falls. So does your hope. Its wings just go up in flames and it plummets all the way from your chest to the foulest region of your bowels. “Sorry,” he says. “I never used it before.”

*FUCK!* You feel like screaming. Your guts are roiling and you can’t tell if it’s a product of dealing with this bullshit for the past several hours or if it’s because you are still *so damn hungry.* With a heroic effort, you restrain your sudden desire to perform a violent head-to-desk maneuver.

“OK,” you say. “Let’s make this not awful.”

You then proceed to spend an unholy amount of time explaining that *no,* seven commas do not equal “extra-long pause” and *yes,* everybody who speaks English uses periods and *no* you cannot just shit a bunch of commas all over in the margins *what the fuck are you even doing?* By the time you are finished, Comma Guy has learned to reign in his pause curl fetish enough to stop failing so hard at life and write a coherent string of words and *that’s something,* you guess. You, on the other hand, have a sponge full of aggravation fluid, a stomach full of empty, and goddamn it, the line has gotten longer again.

You are on the verge of telling them all to go play a rousing match of hide and go fuck yourself for ten minutes so you can run to the cafeteria and cram down a few mouthfuls of terrible Earth cuisine when you hear the schoolblock doors open. You hear footsteps—lots of footsteps—and you decide that this is it; you are going to erupt into a giant fireball fueled by the intensity of your own ire because there must be at least six more trolls coming in and you are done with this. *Congratulations cruel and ruthless universe,* you think. *You have finally broken Karkat Vantas under the crushing weight of your waste-encrusted hoof. I hope you’re fucking proud of—oh. OH!*

You abruptly pull yourself back from the teetering brink of going apeshit when you notice that the newcomers do not appear to have any intention of joining the line. They are instead heading directly towards you. You decide that you are perfectly OK with this because holy shit on a stick would you look at that, each of them is carrying a platter heaped with a veritable assload of food.

“Hello, Karkat,” says the troll at the front of your personal dinner delivery drone chain. (You immediately recognize him as the pince-nez glasses guy from your first English session with Evrind.
You have since learned that his name is Nulian Yanith because he has continued to ask you inane
English-related questions on an almost daily basis.) You can hear muffled grumbling from the trolls
waiting to talk to you, but screw it, they can wait another thirty seconds. You turn your attention over
to Nulian as he says, “You did not come to dinner. We thought that maybe you are hungry, so we
bring a dinner to you.”

You aren’t sure how to react to this turn of events. Sure, you’re glad that you have been delivered
from the private hell of your innards attempting to digest themselves and you know that you should
properly express your gratitude with a heartfelt “Thank you and piss off.” But you are having a hard
time adhering to social conventions because this is the first time anybody has gone out of their way to
make your life slightly less unbearable since Crabdad and you honestly don’t know what to make of
it. Your response is consequently reduced to a lame, “OK.”

The members of the food-carrying caravan proceed to deposit their platters on the desk in front of
you. You see salad, steamed potatoes and carrots, and an entire meatloaf. (The girl who sets this
chunk of baked bovine flesh in front of you breathlessly says, “Also there was fish and noodle. We
thinking you like this more. Is it OK?” You just nod with your eyes the size of nutrition plateaus
because she is right and you only recall mentioning that once, how the fuck did any of them even
remember that?) There are four kinds of dessert, five glasses of water, two glasses of milk, and a
glass of juice that looks like either apple or white grape. It is more food than you can possibly eat in
one sitting and for once in your life you have absolutely no idea what to say. This turns out to be
ridiculously unfortunate because the trolls that brought you this shitload of food are now staring at
you like they expect you to give some kind of acceptance speech on par with the emotional yet
subtly humorous one given by Troll Will Smith when he won the award for most convincing
portrayal of a midblood in a comedic military-centered television series.


“It’s OK,” says Nulian. “Do you want some more?”

You almost start to laugh because he has to be joking. There is no way he could possibly be serious
—except Nulian is one of the driest shitheads you have ever met in your entire life. You have never
seen him so much as crack a smile, let alone do anything to suggest that he even knows what a joke
is. In fact, now that you have gotten over the absurdity of the question, you notice that Nulian looks
as fidgety as a cat in a room full of rabid dogs riding oscillating chairs. And it’s not just Nulian. All
six of the trolls who came with him look nervous, as though your completely arbitrary assessment of
their ability to carry trays of food without soiling themselves has the power to determine who will
live and who will be asked to insert a spiked barb up the most unspeakable portion of his nether
region.

You aren’t sure if you are comfortable with other trolls treating you like you are some highblood
asshole, but you do have to admit that embarrassing as it is, it’s also kind of nice. You also have to
admit that the staring is starting to cross the line from “annoying” to “creepy as fuck” so you finally
say, “No. This is good. Thanks.”

Nulian nods. “OK, good. See you later then.” He and his merry band of snortblasters file out of the
room looking inordinately pleased with themselves. You are just glad they didn’t do something dumb
like bow.

You scan the line of trolls still waiting to see you and you are relieved to see that it hasn’t gotten any
longer during the delay. (It hasn’t gotten any shorter, but you suspect that would have been asking
too much.) The next person in line is a girl with cheekbones sharp enough to slice open a tin can.
You motion for her to come and sit down as you brutally attack the mountain of potatoes on the
You had assumed from her height—shorter than even your own vertically-challenged self—that she was younger than you. The burgundy flecks dotting her eyes suggest otherwise. At the sight of those blotches of color, you feel an awkward twinge in the pit of your stomach that has nothing to do with your soon to be satiated semi-starvation. The notion that trolls who are older and supposedly wiser than you are actually interested in your advice is a hard fact nugget to swallow. If you were still on Alternia proper, you are pretty sure that these same douchebags would sooner beat the snot out of you than openly seek advice from some punk-ass little shit a sweep or two younger than themselves. Yep, surely that’s the one and only reason you find those blood-colored eyes to be so disconcerting.

You quickly divert your thoughts from all eye color-related topics and their theoretical implications that you are absolutely not thinking about at all. OH LOOK AT THAT, THIS CRAZY BROAD DIDN’T BRING ANY PAPERS FOR YOU TO LOOK AT—LET’S FIXATE ON THAT INSTEAD!

“Where is your composition?” You heavily suspect that she is going to say something infuriating like “Oh, I haven’t started it yet, tee hee!” You hope to fuck you are wrong because it is probably a real bitch to clean up the aftermath of spontaneous frustration combustion.

“I do not want help for that,” she says. You would normally respond to this shocking revelation with an incredulous “OK, please enlighten me as to what the fuck you are doing here”, but you have just taken a massive bite of boiled potato and your ability to enunciate is gone. An aggressive eyebrow raise is the best you can do. She seems to catch your meaning.

“I want to ask a question about history,” she says. “Is that OK?”

Your mouth is still full of potato so you nod and gesture for her to go ahead and get the fuck on with it already.

“OK. So John Booth killed the America president, right?”

You nod, still chewing away. (Shit, why did you take such a ginormous bite?)

“John Booth killed the America president. Then he said, uh…sic semper tyrannis, right?”

You nod again, wondering if she is ever going to get to the damn point. You also wonder if you are ever going to finish chewing this damn potato.

“So what does sic semper tyrannis mean?”

You mouth gops open, gracing everybody in the room with a lovely view of half-masticated boiled potato. You know you should probably close your mouth because that is fucking gross, seriously, nobody wants to see that shit, but at the moment you are too shocked to care. You allow yourself a moment to think, Did she seriously just spend three hours standing in line to ask me that? What the fuck? Then you decide to stop looking like a mannerless imbecile. You finally swallow your mouthful of thoroughly pulped potato before you squawk, “What?”

“What does sic semper tyrannis mean?”

You shake your head. “I don’t know.”

“Ugh, nobody knows!” she exclaims. “I thought that Karkat has to know it. You are best at English!”
“It’s not English.”

“It’s not?”

“Fuck no!”

“Oh.” She is quiet for a few seconds. Then she frowns and says, “If it’s not English then why did he say it?”

You shrug because it beats the hell out of you. It could have been a secret code or a customary human assassination cry or maybe John Wilkes Booth just thought that combination of mouth noises sounded cool. Cheekbones broad lets out a disappointed huff as she gets up to leave. You send a half-platter of food with her because you figure she must be just as hungry as you were and there is no way you are ever going to cram all the food in front of you down your own gullet.

You work through the next several trolls in the line, sharing your hoard of food and playing your designated role of forceful grammar enforcer without incident. The line has dwindled down to a paltry three or four people when the world suddenly decides that you are getting too damn cocky for your own good and reminds you that you are still its sad little bitch. You look up and your guts clench when you see that the next person in line is the tall, muscular girl you saw tormenting Shrega all those perigees ago.

Since assuming your title of English misconception waste receptacle, you have never refused to help anybody who asked. You do not want to help this girl. You want to tell her to go fuck herself because you know what she and her vomit-slurping friend would do if they had even the slightest inkling of what you are. (Or maybe it would be just her—you haven’t seen the psionic guy around lately, so chances are he got himself culled for being too stupid to live. Either way it doesn’t change the fact that she wouldn’t piss on you if you were on fire.)

You know it’s unreasonable. You know that she couldn’t have been the only one to shit all over Shrega’s entire existence. You know that today alone you’ve probably worked with plenty of other people who pulled the exact same bullshit. You don’t give a shit. You hate this feculent scumbag in the most platonic manner possible because she is a fucking terrible person. It takes all of your self-restraint to avoid showering her with a wave of scorn vomit the second she sits down.

You do not look at her face as you scan the pages in front of you. When you have finished reading her printed brain barf, you have no idea what you are going to tell her because technically speaking, she knows her shit. There are nouns and verbs and adjectives, all strung together in a more-or-less acceptable manner. You can’t find any spelling errors. The punctuation is fine (hell, she is one of the only people you have seen all day who not only attempted to use a semicolon but actually managed to execute that feat of pretentious grammatical assholery correctly). The problem is that she apparently had no idea what the assignment was. That is the only reasonable explanation you can imagine for what you are seeing here. It’s either that or she somehow managed to read all 200 pages of English literary classic and missed the entire goddamn point.

“Well,” she presses. “How is it?”

“Well,” she presses. “How is it?”

“Just a minute; I want to read it again.” You think that maybe you missed something the first time around; that maybe your brain has just crapped out on you after these past hours of abuse—but no. You did not miss a single pus-weeping word. It is exactly as bad as you first thought. You are now in the gut-spewing throes of genuine distress because you had honestly planned to give her a few generic advice capsules and send her the fuck away from your general vicinity as quickly as possible, but this is the sort of shit that could get her culled. Much as you dislike her, you can’t ignore the fact that she is a person. A spiteful, sleazy person with a total lake of empathy, but a person nonetheless;
one whose death you don’t want on your conscience.

You are about to tell her that she needs to start over from scratch right the fuck now when the schoolblock door opens again. You glance over your shoulder to see who in nookhopping hell it is this time and you see Migdal advancing toward you.

He doesn’t waste a bulgerotting second on any bullshit social pleasantries. Instead, he just points a beefy finger at you and says, “You. Come with me. Now.”

You try not to cringe because oh nubrotting slither creatures that was his Definitely Not Fucking Around Voice. You’ve heard that voice often enough to know that the metaphorical excrement has just become real and some pathetic loser is about to have his ass handed to him. Usually, this would be of little consequence to you, but this time around you are shitting figurative wall blocks because this time the pathetic loser happens to be you.

You spend one sphincter-pulsing millisecond wondering what you have done to be in this position. Then your eyes fall on the mostly empty platters on the table beside you and you know. Is taking food out of the cafeteria is against the rules? you wonder. Fucking Nulian and his fucking troupe of spazmuffin scab chewers. No wonder they looked so pleased with themselves.

Your head is so full of boiling rage fumes you barely hear the girl exclaim, “What? No; I waited so long time—hours!” You do notice the bulge-shriveling glare Migdal fires at her because unlike any of Cennia’s stupid looks, it is fucking terrifying. The room plunges into silence as she along with a clump of people whispering their grievous malcontent wisely choose to shut the hell up.

Once you and Migdal are both out of the schoolblock, he says, “I realize you were in the middle of what likely qualifies as life-saving maneuvers for the more shamefully ignorant members of your cohort, but this conversation is not for public ears.”

Your sense of unease immediately intensifies into full-blown, innard-liquefying panic because ‘not for public ears’ is rarely a good thing. At best it means insidious intrigue that will get your sorry carcass ripped apart when it inevitably goes globes over bleat orifice sideways. (At worst it means if you start right now you might make it halfway through your pointless prayers for mercy before you are completely dismembered. Not that it matters—either way your shit is wrecked.)

“How do you know why I want to speak with you?” asks Migdal.

Your vocal apparatus is pinched so tight you feel as though you are forcing your response out word by word. “If it’s about the food from the cafeteria, I didn’t know—“

He cuts you off with a wave of his hand. The relief you feel is comparable to spontaneously delivering about six tons of pent-up waste to the nearest load gaper. You are not about to acquire a freshly-torn second asshole over the possibly contraband dinner delivery. You issue a silent apology to Nulian and his friends for ever doubting their intentions. They are all fine examples of trollkind and you are a heinous bastard for ever thinking otherwise.

“At about this point in the training process in every batch of recruits, your instructors meet to discuss how our remaining recruits are progressing. One of the things we do during that time is assess whether any of the recruits show potential for positions of leadership.”

Well. This conversation has taken a giant leap off the rails of the expected and driven straight into the territory of what the fuck village, population you and your properly shocked dimpled ass. You are now shitting wall blocks for an entirely new reason. You want a second to absorb what he is saying and determine if you are in fact interpreting it all correctly, but Migdal barely pauses before going on.
“I noticed it early on and it’s only become more apparent that the other recruits rely on you,” he says. “They seek you out when they don’t know what to do. They look to you as a leader. That is why I intend to nominate you for a position of higher command.”

_Holy bulge-swinging spring weevils you were not misinterpreting._ Are you dreaming? You must be having an uncharacteristically pleasant dream because otherwise this would be the first not awful thing to happen to you since you arrived on this crapsack station, but no—you surreptitiously bite the tip of your tongue and it hurts like fuck-all. You are definitely 100% awake.

Through your haze of surprise-musk, you hear Migdal saying, “You would still be with the ground forces and your training will remain the same. However, you would be in a position of considerable influence as compared to the majority of the ground troops. You would also handle more high-profile missions.”

“What type of missions?” The words leave your mouth before you can stop them. You grind your teeth together until they hurt because _wow, way to immediately fuck up and interrupt your only potential benefactor to ask him a stupid question._ Past you needs to get his shit together and start policing his delinquent squawk blister because this is definitely not the first time it has screwed you over.

To your relief, Migdal does not appear to be unduly perturbed by your inability to observe basic social etiquette rules that rank right up there with ‘don’t fart in public’ and ‘bathe on a semi-regular basis.’ He says, “It would depend on what is needed at the time of your deployment. High-level infiltration is one thing that comes to mind. You might be given command over a regional platoon of troops if and when the invasion turns violent. Of course, all of that assumes you don’t do something incredibly stupid like fail to complete the rest of your training.”


You know you sound like an incompetent jackass but right now you can’t even find it in yourself to be embarrassed because holy flying jizzwaffles upper level covert affairs? Your own fucking platoon? This is the sort of thing you’ve fantasized about since before you were even old enough to be out of diaper nubs.

Migdal is talking again and it is all you can do to push the pause button on your internal power jerk off session and listen. “One last thing,” he says. “Keep in mind that your ass is not the only one on the line here. I don’t give a shit what you do once you leave this facility because at that point you are somebody else’s responsibility. However, if you manage to fuck up and do something cull-worthy while you are still in training then that will fall on me.

“I do not enjoy looking like a fool so rest assured that if you do anything to make me regret my decision, you will be begging Averic to cull you by the time I am through with you. Do you understand?”

You nod, your head bobbling on your neck with all the grace of a marionette on fire.

Migdal scowls. “I repeat, do not fuck this up.”

“I won’t.”

“Good. Now go back to whatever the hell you were doing before we had this little chat.”

You head back toward the schoolblock feeling as though you have imbibed copious amounts of soporifics. (Actually, you have never imbibed any soporifics because Crabdad was a responsible
lusus and the only sort of pan-altering substance he allowed in your hive was sopor slime. Still, you imagine that this is the way you would feel if you had done such a thing.) It had always been your intention to become some bigshot leader. You had assumed that it would happen after sweeps of lethal and vicious service in the Threshecutioner ranks. (Never mind the fact that you probably wouldn’t have made it past the culling drones, let alone made the cut for Threshecutioner.) Now here you are still more than a sweep away from the day the Imperial ships would have come and you are already being offered your own platoon. For the first time since you were manhandled into this program, you begin to think that maybe your life isn’t going to suck.

When you walk into the schoolblock, you are amazed to see that your good fortune has continued: the room is completely vacant. Even the mostly empty food platters are gone. If you can sneak back to your room without encountering anybody on the way, you will be free to spend the remaining time before sleep cycle basking in the juices of your sweet success. You are looking forward to this immensely.

> Future Nepeta: Check in with your moirail
Future Nepeta: Check in with your moirail

aresenicCatnip [AC] began trolling centaursTesticle [CT]

AC: :33 < *ac issues a friendly gr33ting meow to ct*
CT: D --> Hello
AC: :OO < equius! you answered!
AC: :33 < i mean
AC: :33 < *ac circles cts legs and headbutts his ankles a few times*
CT: D --> You must realize that I will not join you in this f00lishness
AC: :33 < *ct purrtends to act annoyed but then he notices how happy the kitty is to s33 him*
AC: :33 < *he decides to role purrlay for just a little while to show the kitty how sorry he is for making her worry about him*
CT: D --> All right
CT: D --> I suppose there is no harm in indulging this juvenile diversion for a few moments
CT: D --> But you will understand that this is not to become a regular occurrence
CT: D --> This is an e%ptionally unusual situation
AC: :33 < yay!
AC: :33 < i mean yay! *says ac*
CT: D --> *I respond to the presence of the clawed female pretending to be a cat with a proper hello*
AC: :33 < *ac headbutts cts ankles one more time to show how much she missed him*
CT: D --> *I respond by doing something to suitably recognize the feline-obsessed female pretending to be a cat*
AC: :33 < *ac whispurrs psssst, try scratching behind the kitty’s soft and furry ears!*
CT: D --> Very well
CT: D --> *I scratch the cat who is clearly not a female wearing a 100dicrous hood behind the ears*
AC: :33 < *ac purrs and says why did you stay away for so long?*
CT: D --> I apologize for my absence, Nepeta
CT: D --> It was not my intention to remain a100f for such an ine%cusably long period of time
CT: D --> Fiddlesti%
CT: D --> *I said all of that*
AC: :33 < *ac leaps onto cts lap and bops him on the nose with one paw*
AC: :33 < *she says thats ok, just dont ever do it again!*
CT: D --> *I acknowledge the presence of the feline who is still not Miss Leijon on my lap and e%plain to her that I have been e%remely busy of late*
AC: :33 < umm, equius?
CT: D --> Yes
CT: D --> Darn it, I mean *I say yes*
AC: :33 < im really happy that you agr33d to role play with me for once
AC: :33 < and i apurrreciate that you are trying your best
AC: :33 < but it looks like you have something impurrrtant to talk about so maybe we should stop role playing now
CT: D --> Yes, I agree
CT: D --> We will cease this nonsense immediately
AC: :33 < so why have you b33n gone for so long???
CT: D --> My current roboti% project is taking a great deal longer to complete than I had originally anticipated
AC: :33 < robotics purroject?
AC: :33 < is it the same one you were talking about last perig33?
CT: D --> It is
AC: :33 < wow it must be a really big job if you are still working on it
AC: :33 < you never did tell me what it was all about, though
CT: D --> I cannot divulge all of the details
CT: D --> However, I suppose there is no harm in revealing that it is a commission from the military
AC: :OO < thats so exciting!
AC: :33 < but it sounds like a lot of hard work
AC: :33 < are you ok?
CT: D --> I assure you that I am handling the pressure in a suitably STRONG manner
AC: :33 < vwiskers said you punched a hole through the wall
CT: D --> Nepeta, have you forgotten that I forbade you from speaking to Miss Serket or need I remind you that her propensity for double%ing makes her e%treally dangerous even among noble b100ded trolls such as myself
CT: D --> I do not e%pect you, as a greenb100d to understand the difference between a%eptable and una%eptable treachery in the b100b100d echelons of society, but you will believe me when I tell you that her conduct falls far outside the realm of allowable perfidy
CT: D --> You will e%cuse my language, but what in the devil-dancing dickens possessed you to speak with her against my orders
AC: :33 < well it wasnt as though i had much of a choice
AC: :33 < you werent answering anybodys messages—not even mine!
AC: :33 < i asked vwiskers to check on you so i would know you were ok
CT: D --> I am touched by your concern
CT: D --> I count myself fortunate to have a moirail with such a STRONG sense of duty
CT: D --> However, from now on you must never disobey my orders
AC: :33 < is that an order?
CT: D --> Yes
CT: D --> I order you to never disobey my orders
AC: :33 < okaaaay, sh33sh
AC: :33 < but did you really punch a hole in the wall?
CT: D --> I cannot deny it
AC: :( < oh no!
AC: :33 < maybe we should get together for a real f33lings jam
CT: D --> Much as I would like to meet with you, I am afraid that I cannot afford to e%tricate myself from my work in order to visit your hive at the moment
AC: :33 < thats ok
AC: :33 < i can come to you!
CT: D --> Neigh
AC: :33 < why not???
CT: D --> The nature of my commission is highly classified
CT: D --> Sharing any information pertaining to it could lead to e%ecution
CT: D --> If you visit my hive there is a small chance that you will inadvertently a%ess that information
CT: D --> I do not wish to place you in undue peril on my account
AC: :33 < well then put your commission away somewhere i wont s33 it!
CT: D --> No, you will not come over
CT: D --> I forbid it
CT: D --> The risk is too great
AC: :33 < come on, equius, thats a crappy excuse!
CT: D --> Language
AC: :33 < ugh, sorry
AC: :33 < but im still coming over
CT: D --> No you are not
AC: :33 < yes i am
CT: D --> No
AC: :33 < yes
CT: D --> No
CT: D --> Our present di%ussion is sufficiently quelling my rage
CT: D --> I have not felt a single urge to break anything since we began
CT: D --> You will remain at your hive and I will remain at mine
AC: :33 < blaaaarrraaruuuughhh
AC: :33 < fine
AC: :33 < but it f33ls really weird doing this without a pile
AC: :33 < you have to puurrrmise me that if we do it this way you wont disapurr again
AC: :33 < and that youll come to my hive as soon as you are done with your purroject so we can
have a real jam and not just some lame chat on trollian
CT: D --> I give you my word and my honor as a b100b100d
AC: :33 < ok
AC: :33 < so why did you punch a hole in the wall?
CT: D --> I was merely frustrated over my poor progress
CT: D --> I was beginning to fear that I would miss my deadline
AC: :33 < oh no!
AC: :33 < oh no!
AC: :33 < that must have b33n really scary!
AC: :33 < *a purrky meowrail offurs worried mr zahhak an especially tender face pap as an
expurrresion of her sympathy*
CT: D --> Mr. Zahhak I mean I appreciate the sentiment
CT: D --> However, I have since developed a STRONG understanding of the fundamentals behind
this particular brand of roboti%
CT: D --> I believe that I will meet the deadline with the proper perseevarance
AC: :33 < i think you can m33t your deadline too
AC: :33 < nobody can beat you when it comes to robots
AC: :33 < you are simply the best there is!
CT: D --> Thank you for acknowledging my aptitude for roboti%
CT: D --> Your unwavering faith in my abilities is commendable and it bolsters my spirit as
STRONGLY as the powerful flanks of an especially vigorous musclebeast
AC: :33 < h33 h33 youre welcome
AC: :33 < is there anything else that is furustrating you?
CT: D --> No
CT: D --> My mane complaints were simple worry over an approaching deadline and a dearth of
proper interaction with my moirail, both of which are resolving as our conversation continues
AC: :33 < thats a furry sw33t thing to say
AC: :33 < but i can tell that there is still something bothering you
AC: :33 < you did that thing you do when you dont want to talk about something
CT: D --> E%cuse me, Nepeta
CT: D --> I haven’t the slightest idea what you mean
CT: D --> You will e100cidate at once
AC: :33 < you do too know what im talking about
AC: :33 < that thing you do where you look at the ground
AC: :33 < you do it almost every time we jam and it is so transparent!
CT: D --> Even if I did “do that thing where I 100k at the ground” as you allege, we are many miles
apart
CT: D --> Just as I cannot lift you onto my e%ceptionally STRONG shoulders from my current
location, you cannot know where I am directing my eyes from your location
CT: D --> Your claim is therefore 100% 100dicrous
AC: :33 < well my nose can smell a liar from so far away you dont even know
AC: :33 < also your webcam is on :PP
AC: :33 < the point is i can tell that there is still something bothering you!
CT: D --> Damn it all
CT: D --> Oh dear
CT: D --> I mean fiddledi%
CT: D --> You will e%use my 100d language, Nepeta, but the topic to which you refer is not meant for casual di%ussion
AC: :33 < not even with your meowrail?
CT: D --> Abso100tely not
AC: :33 < why not?
AC: :33 < does it have something to do with your top secret purroject?
CT: D --> I refuse to pursue this vein of conversation any further
CT: D --> In any respect, it would be improper to devote all of our time to plumbing the depths of my feelings while neglecting to di%uss yours
CT: D --> We shall do so immediately
AC: X(( < hisssss!
AC: :33 < i knew doing this on trollian was a bad idea
AC: :33 < if i was over there right now i would tacklepounce you so hard right now
CT: D --> I command that you e%pound upon any feelings you e%perienced during my absence
AC: :33 < okay fine
AC: :33 < i guess we can talk about my f33lings now if that is really what you would prefur to do
AC: :33 < im not going to furget about this though
CT: D --> Very well
CT: D --> You will begin now
AC: :33 < i mostly just missed you
CT: D --> Did I make you angry
AC: :33 < i was angry at furst
CT: D --> I hope that my failure to perform my duties of moirallegiance did not lead you to do anything untoward
AC: :33 < well
AC: :33 < i did kind of slaughter a musclebeast and leave its carcass where i dropped it
AC: :33 < but i felt really pawful about it after!
AC: :33 < i even went back to try and salvage the meat even though i knew most of it would have gone bad
AC: :33 < i think somebodys lusus got it, though, beclaws i never did find it :((
CT: D --> I must say that I am STRONGLY disheartened to hear that you harmed a majestic and graceful musclebeast
CT: D --> Hoofever, I also recognize that you were under e%traordinary circumstances at the time, a significant portion of which were due to my own lack of decorum
CT: D --> Please continue
AC: :33 < well after a few w33ks i started to get really worried
CT: D --> And this was the point at which you made the rash decision to troll Miss Serket?
AC: :33 < yeah
AC: :33 < but like a said befur, its not like i had much of a choice
AC: :33 < you know what happened the last time one of our furiends disapurred like that!
CT: D --> I assume you are a100ding to Vantas
AC: :33 < it was bad enough losing him
AC: :33 < i was scared i lost you too
CT: D --> Nepeta, I will apologize once again for my ine%cusable behoovior; however, you must not waste another moment mourning Vantas
AC: :33 < how can i not f33l bad?
AC: :33 < i know he was grouchy sometimes but he was my furiend and yours, too
CT: D --> I did not consider him such
AC: :33 < yes you did
CT: D --> No I most certainly did not
AC: :33 < that is such bs
CT: D --> I assure you that it is the hoof
CT: D --> I mean truth
AC: :33 < nope! bs!
CT: D --> While his work ethic may have been admirable, I found him rude, obno%ious lowb100d trash scarcely worthy of our acquaintanceship
CT: D --> His caustic attitude was also a poor influence on you
CT: D --> I am glad that he is gone
CT: D --> We are all better for it
AC: :33 < okay i get it, you didnt like him
AC: :33 < i still f33l sad when i think about what happened to him though
CT: D --> You will not lower yourself to bemoaning his fate for one more second
CT: D --> That is an order
AC: :33 < but he never even did anything to deserve to die!
AC: :33 < even if you didnt like him, you have to admit that is kind of sad
CT: D --> Cease this f001ish talk at once
AC: :33 < no
CT: D --> Yes
AC: :33 < no
CT: D --> Yes
AC: :33 < no!
CT: D --> I cannot fathom what you hope to gain from this ill-guided grief when he is not even deceased
AC: :OO < what?
CT: D --> Oh my
CT: D --> You are not meant to be privy to that information
CT: D --> I demand that you disregard it this instant
AC: :33 < no way
AC: :33 < this is really big mews!
AC: :33 < how long have you known he was alive?
AC: :33 < why were you k33ping it from everyone?
CT: D --> Calm yourself, Nepeta
CT: D --> Now that the horse has left the gate I suppose I have little choice but to e%plain more filly
AC: :33 < filly?
CT: D --> Fully
AC: :33 < oh XDD
CT: D --> Once my deadline has e%pired I will divulge all I know with regards to Vantas’ position
CT: D --> Until then you are not to pester me for more information
CT: D --> I also forbid you from uddering a word of this to any of our mutual acquaintances
CT: D --> Do I make myself perfectly clear?
AC: :33 < but equius this is something all his friends should know!
AC: :33 < cant i at least tell pawllux or terezi?
CT: D --> Abso100tely not
AC: :33 < kanaya?
CT: D --> No
AC: :33 < what about gamz33?
CT: D --> While the very idea of deceiving the highb100d is repulsive, it is at this time a thoroughly
necessary act of impropriety
AC: :33 < uuuuuuuaghhblarugh!
AC: :33 < why are you being such a stupidhead about this?
CT: D --> I am not doing this simply to be a stupidhead
CT: D --> I will not rela% my orders because they are for the sake of your own safety
CT: D --> We will not di%uss this matter again until my deadline has passed
CT: D --> Now you will e%cuse me, I must retrieve a towel and return to work at once

centaursTesticle [CT] ceased trolling arsenicCatnip [AC]

> Present Karkat: Experience a catastrophe
Three minutes. That is the minimum interval of temporal respite you require between waking up and subjecting yourself to your morning ritual of “Karkat Vantas Answers Insipid Questions About English That You Wouldn’t Need to Ask If You Stopped Aspirating Your Own Drool and Attempted To Give Half A Fuck During Your Schoolfeeds, You Shit-Ass Lazy Ignoramus.” You would think that the other trainees could find it in themselves to give you 180 seconds to quietly appreciate the aftertaste of shame that comes with watching your life slide a little farther down the shit-encrusted underground waste conveyance tubule every day. At the very least, you would think that they would be decent enough to leave you time to roll out of your human bed and cover your goddamn shame because you would fucking think that they would rather not be privy to seeing your naked bulge flapping in the wind. You would think all of that and apparently you would be wrong because the morning lights raised literally ten seconds ago and already some boorish asswipe is banging on your door. Slowly, you untangle yourself from the covers and execute a groggy one-fingered salute in the general direction of the door. (Flip off, you think. Flip the bird. Give the finger.)

The knocking grows more insistent as you kick around your room for a clean shirt. You mutter a string of curses under your breath because goddamn it, the English language can go perform a triple flip into the nearest pit of stinking entrails. Seriously whatever the bugfucking hell this douche is going to ask you are absolutely two hundred and eighty-one percent sure it can wait until you actually go to the cafeteria.

When you finally come across a shirt that doesn’t smell and isn’t too wrinkled, you snap, “Fuck off or shut up and wait!” The knocking comes to an obliging stop. You choose to take that as a good sign; that whoever you are about to deal with is at least competent enough to understand rudimentary English slang. (You once tried telling Evrind to “piss off” and ended up spending the following ten minutes defining the word “piss”, how you were not actually telling him to urinate, and explaining that you were telling him to leave you alone for a few seconds. It only got worse when you later stated that he was “pissing you the fuck off.”)

When you are acceptably clothed, you set your face into the deepest show of discontent you can summon, throw open the door, and snarl, “WHAT!”

The girl at your door—a regular at your English sessions—takes a step back and says, “I just want to ask you about” and that’s as far as she gets before she cuts herself off with a gasp and stands there with her jaw gaping open.

You wonder if perhaps your expression is a tad angrier than you had intended. You had meant to convey a healthy unit of annoyance with a side helping of you really couldn’t stand to wait another three minutes?—not I WILL FUCKING EVISCERATE YOU AND FEAST ON YOUR PULSATING INNARDS WITH SUCH RELISH YOUR LUSUS WILL FEEL IT IN HER GRAVE, YOU GIANT DAMN OFFENSE TO SENTIENT LIFE! To that effect, you sigh and, damping the edge off your tone, you repeat, “What?”

She continues staring at you with her mouth flapping open as though she is waiting for Cennia and her crew of ass clowns to insert some new form of dental torture into her gaping maw. You can see her jaw working as though she is attempting to speak. Nothing comes out.

Your scowl melts into an uneasy frown because you cannot fathom why she is looking at you like this and it is beginning to freak you the fuck out. Did you grow a third horn out the middle of your
head while you were sleeping? Are you covered in some hideous rash? Have your ears begun weeping rancid brain fluid, leaving you mere moments away from a globe-smashingly unpleasant but mercifully fast death?

“What is it?” you ask. “What’s wrong?”

She gives you a couple more seconds of glassy staring before she spins on her heel and runs away.

You are not a vain troll. In fact, beyond attending to basic personal hygiene you have never really given half a fuck about your appearance. Even so, her reaction is unnerving and you have a very strong urge to get your ass to the bathroom and see what has rendered her into horrified speechlessness.

Your room is fairly close to the communal toilets. Even walking at a snail’s pace, you can usually cover the distance in less than a minute. This morning proves to be anything but usual because you are pretty sure you walk for an eternity, plus or minus a couple hundred millennia before you finally reach the white-tiled room.

You look in the mirror and your (too-hot) blood runs cold. You haven’t grown an extra horn, but you may as well have. Where your irises once carried the solid gray of pupation, they are now splotched with color and oh fuck no, fuck, FUCK, FUUUUUCK it is a bright, unmistakable candy red.

“No,” you whisper. You run your fingers over the skin below your eye and for half a second you find yourself wildly wondering how badly it would hurt to gauge your eyes out (answer: probably a shit ton because you are pretty sure you would not be able to do it in one clean sweep with these useless piece of shit fingernails), whether there is any plausible way you could pass the rest of your time on the station with your eyes closed (answer: who do you think you are? Terezi I-can-taste-the-colors-of-the-fucking-rainbow Pyrope?), the likelihood that you will miraculously acquire a pair of sunglasses within the next twenty seconds (answer: HAHAHAHA wow you aren’t even trying anymore, are you?) Then, a sick feeling slithers into your belly as you realize there is no hiding, there is no way out. The universe just decided that Karkat Vantas’ life has been too easy and pleasant these past few perigees and has chosen to rectify this awful mistake by forcibly inserting a hefty slice of congealed FUCK YOU pie into the darkest regions of your gullet.

You hear voices. Your nervous system goes into hyperdrive as you realize that the voices are coming closer and somebody is coming, SOMEBODY IS COMING AND THEY ARE GOING TO SEE. There is a terrible second in which all you can do is stand in front of the mirror, paralyzed and gaping. (A small part of you has the urge to break into hysterical laughter because wow this is the same face that girl was making back at your room. You could have one hell of a career as an impressionist if your life wasn’t officially over.) Then the rational part of your brain screams at you to hide, dumbass and the next thing you know you are diving into one of the empty toilet stalls. You lock the door behind you as the bathroom door opens and not one, not two, but three trolls enter.

“I still think you being stupid,” says one of them—a guy whose voice you can’t place right now due to the opaque haze of OH SHIT that has enshrouded your mind.

“Not stupid,” says a girl’s voice. “Uh…not smart either. Ugh, what word do I wanting to say?”

“Realistic?” a second girl's voice supplies.

“Yes! I being realistic!”

The guy scoffs. “How you being re-al-is-tic?”
They reach the row of sinks just across from your hiding place. You feel a vague sense of gratitude when one of them turns on the tap—the rush of water provides just enough white noise to hide the sound of you hyperventilating like a stupid dickweed.

“There are no kismesis on Earth,” says girl number one. “I do not want getting so um…attach…then go to Earth and break kismesis. I think break kismesis now is better.”

“That is stupid!” the guy repeats. “I think being happy here is better.”

There is a sound of somebody spitting a mouthful of dental cleansing paste into a sink. Then girl number two says, “You won’t feel like that when you go to Earth and you have to break up your moirallegiance. You will cry and say ‘it hurts, it hurts! I wish I listened to Pylori!!!’”

“But maybe I not going to Earth,” says the guy and you suddenly realize that you know this guy, that he’s been to your English sessions on and off over the past several weeks. (You’ve told him the same thing practically every time: that he would be fine if he would quit forgetting his goddamn auxiliary verbs. Now here he is, forgetting his goddamn auxiliary verbs with all the consistently of a well-practiced typing quirk. You would probably yell at him about that if you weren’t in such dire straits at this very moment. As it is, you latch on to the grammatical error. Its familiarity grounds you—a precarious tether linking you and your imminently-lost shit.)

“No,” says girl number two. “You will go to Earth and cry and cry because you are being dumb.”

“Maybe I not leave here,” the guy retorts. *(I will not leave, you think.*) “Maybe I fail the tests. Then I be happy until I die and you two look like dumb.” *(I will fail the tests. I will be happy.*)

Girl number one snorts. “OK. You think so if you want think so.”

The tap shuts off and you hold your breath as the voices head toward the bathroom door. You hear the guy say, “Yeah, I think so because I right!” and then the door closes behind them and you are once again thankfully, blessedly alone.

You notice as you sit in the stall waiting for the voices outside the door to fade that you are shaking, actually shaking and you feel like you are about to be sick. You also notice with some level of disgust that you have broken out in a nasty cold sweat that reeks of rotting onions and rat piss. You know that you should probably do something about that, but with your stomach still performing all manner of backflips, flip-flops, and somersaults, you are legitimately concerned that the only thing you will accomplish if you expose yourself to a hot, steamy shower is that you will actually be sick. You don’t think you have it in you to deal with that shit today because you are far too busy attempting to deal with the hulking tower of shit the universe has deposited on your lap. *(Besides, you think, one look at my eyes and nobody is going to waste a pants-pissing second being offended over a little common fear-stink.)*

It’s not as though you had expected a hemanonymous troll tag and a hyperdiligent avoidance of careless cuts and scrapes to keep you safe forever. It’s just…you honestly had not expected to live long enough to see your eyes change and past Karkat in all his nook-twiddling glory had failed to plan for such a contingency. Consequently, you have absolutely no idea what in the name of grub-fisting shitballs you are going to do.

The flow of people coming and going begins to pick up. There is a steady gurgle of running water and flushing toilets. Conversations from different groups of trolls meld together into an unintelligible drone of noise. Picking out any single snippet of speech is about as easy as identifying the individual foodstuffs contained in a pukestain on the wall, but from what you can ascertain it all seems to stay within the bounds of quadrant banter, schoolfeeds, and other mundane chatter you would expect.
There is nothing to suggest that the girl you had spoken with earlier has passed on what she had seen. (You do hear your name once and it makes your bowels clench harder than an ice water enema. You only relax when you realize that the person who uttered your name was merely advising one of her friends to see you about some ongoing English problem.)

Nobody seems to notice that your toilet stall has been occupied for an inordinate stretch of time. You try to use this small haven of privacy to formulate some course of action that does not suck harder than a turbo-charged dirt-eating appliance. This proves to be a failtastic exercise in failure because rather than churn out anything resembling a functional plan, your traitorous brain chooses instead to fixate on a bone-thin girl (…never should have made it out of the brooding caverns) with stringy hair (ugly…make other troll sick) and no horns (some kind of mutant freak…). You eventually abandon any illusion of plan-making in favor of silently yet ardentely haranguing past Karkat for the integral role he played in delivering you into this clusterfuck of a situation. Seriously, if you could get your hands on that stupid ass you would force-feed him a brimming mug full of WAKE UP AND SMELL THE THORN-ENCRUSTED PLANT GENITALIA in the hopes that he would realize that the cosmos and every cotton-assed entity in them would never miss this prime opportunity to fuck with you.

The crowd dwindles down to just a few stragglers. The sense of panic that has been lurking at the edges of your consciousness lunges back into sharp relief with all the shit-stirring impact of a sinister denizen rising up out of the ruthless Alternian Sea. You know that soon the bathroom will be empty and you will have to leave because even now, after more than a sweep, trolls who get caught hanging around still tend to disappear.

The onions and rat piss panic sweat settles over you again. You catch yourself silently —shamefully—begging the five-four-three trolls left to stay just a little longer, to give you just a few more minutes because you are not ready for this oh god you are not ready for this! Three-two-holy fuck only one left. The door opens, squeaking on its hinge. You hear a set of hurried footsteps fading away—and then nothing.

You are dangerously close to another round of healthy hyperventilation. You close your eyes and see two trolls shoving a smaller troll against a wall, both of them leering with a jagged desire to hurt. Even though you know that the smaller troll shouldn’t have any horns—you saw this happening; you were there—you see your own nubs there, hear your own voice crackle with pain and fear as you whisper, “Please.” You bury your face in your hands because you can’t do it. You can’t become the new Shrega.

The bathroom door opens. An authoritative adult voice—one you don’t recognize—says, “Malingering is not tolerated. Leave immediately or face the consequences.”

You take a shaky breath and say, “I’m sorry” and then you cringe because your voice comes out hoarse and weak. It makes you sound pathetic and if there is anything you want to project right now it sure as puckering shit isn’t pathetic. You clear your throat and try again: “I’m sorry. I am feeling sick.”

“What do you need to be escorted to the medical wing?”

You take a moment to weigh the benefit of delaying your inevitable coronation as the station flogging post against the distinct possibility of being poked and prodded by Cennia on a day which had not been meant to include any such douchebaggery. On the one hand, you might manage to carve out another hour or two for ineffectual planning and anxiety. On the other hand, you have a sneaking suspicion that Cennia would contact Torkal and mother grub’s perverse slurry receptacle knows what he would want to do to you.
The adult’s voice cuts through your thoughts like a finely-whetted sickle: “Recruit, do you need to be escorted to the medical wing?”

“No,” you sigh. “Just…just give me a minute.”

You must sound much worse than you think you do because the adult is quiet for a moment before she says, “I can give you thirty seconds. Any longer and I will turn you over to Averic for disciplinary action. Is that understood?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Thirty seconds.”

You hear a set of footsteps walking across the room, hear the bathroom door open. You wait for it to close before you unlock the door to your stall and walk over to the row of sinks. Once there, you turn on the cold tap full bore and stick your head under the stream of icy water. The shock is enough to make you gasp, but it clears away the too-hot feeling of hysteria and calms your revolting stomach down to a more manageable grumble of malcontent. You count to ten, letting the water trickle into your ears and down the back of your neck. Then you turn off the water and stand up.

Somebody was charitable (or maybe stupid) enough to leave their towel next to your sink. Under normal circumstances, the thought of using somebody else’s skeevy towel would disgust you because there is no way to know where that towel has been and what horrors it has seen. Today you have more important things to occupy your anguish sponge than the remote possibility that the towel may have grazed another troll’s bulge. You grab the (damp, obviously used, fucking gross) towel and proceed to attack your dripping hair with such reckless abandon that your hands bash up against the base of one of your horns and you end up skinning one of your knuckles raw.

When you are finished, you look to the mirror one last time because maybe you are getting ahead of yourself here. Maybe your eyes were just a little bloodshot after another night of terrible sleep. Maybe it was some trick of the eye-searing fluorescent lighting that Cennia or Torkal or whoever the farting hell else was in charge of electrical management on this piece of crap station insisted on using in all the bathrooms. Maybe, just maybe your bloodthirsty and overall ornery as hell personality has garnered enough favor with the hideous deities of troll fortune for them to decide that just this once Karkat Vantas deserves a break. Then you remember that the hideous deities of troll fortune do not exist outside of pan-addled wiggler stories and even if they did there is no way they would grant you the steam off their nonexistent piss, let alone anything of actual value because sure enough, your eyes are still blotched with that repulsive color.

Your gut sinks as you realize that if anything your situation is even worse than you had initially thought. The splotches in your eyes are nothing like the little flecks that Evrind had bragged about for weeks before you or anybody else could see anything. These are big and bright and impossible to miss and the backs of your eyes are stinging and you suck in a deep breath that hitches in your throat because you are not going to cry, goddamn it, you ARE NOT GOING TO CRY.

You hear footsteps outside the door. The adult is returning. You toy with the idea of being a defiant little shit just to see if she really will take you to Averic because sure, death by Ruffianhilator reject would hurt but it would only consist of one or two seconds of awfulness and then it would be over. No need to endure sweeps of Shrega treatment. No need for anybody to ever know your ugly little secret at all. (Except Cennia and Torkal, of course. And fuck, why not add Averic to the list because even though his brain is the size of a peanut you are pretty sure he would notice that wow, the head pulp and chunky bits leaking out of this fine example of trollkind are the wrong goddamn color.)

You know it would be an easy way out and for half a second you consider it. Then you remember
Torkal and you realize that there is no easy way out, that there will never be an easy way out because the universe hates you and wants you to suffer. You also realize that even now, with all the metaphorical excrement in the world smashing against the whirling device, you can’t bring yourself to throw your life away. When you hear the door open, you turn away from the mirror, duck your head, and hurry past the adult before she can say a word.

You have to pass by your room on the way to the cafeteria. It occurs to you as you approach the door that you might be able to hole up there for another hour or two before Averic comes by for a truancy sweep. If you are lucky, you might manage to hack the electronic lock and fuck with its programming enough to jam it, buy yourself just a little more time—but no. You pass the door without missing a step because no amount of planning or preparation is going to change the color of the splotches in your eyes.

You realize that you are running. You know that you should slow down and savor the final few seconds you have left before the festering mass of nook waste known as your life comes to an end. Instead you decide to run even faster because fuck it, at this point you might as well get this over with as quickly as possible, just like ripping an extra-sticky bandage off the darkest and most sensitive regions of your crotch.

The cafeteria is so packed that nobody notices you when you get there, even though you come barreling into the room so fast any sane troll would assume that you were being pursued by a particularly rabid and pissed-off cholerbear. By an obscene stroke of fortune, you spot an unoccupied stretch of table in a sparsely-populated area of the room near one of the walls. Keeping your head down, you start in that direction.

You are sure that somebody will stop you because eye color aside, you can barely breathe without some assmunch demanding that you explain commas and semicolons and all the differences between them in excruciating detail. You are consequently shocked when you manage to plant your ass on the bench with nary a “hey, Karkat, how can the word ‘fuck’ be a noun and a verb and an adjective?”

A full three minutes pass. You are just beginning to think that maybe if you keep your head down and concentrate all of your energy into being inconspicuous you might actually be OK when you hear a voice—Nulian’s—say, “Hey, Karkat, I found you!”

Your mouth goes dry. Keeping your eyes fixed on your untouched plate of food, you say, “What do you want?”

A second voice says, “Can you help us with English now?”

“No,” you rasp. “I am busy. I can do it later.”

“Just one question?” another voice asks. (Goddamn son of a fuck how many of them are gathered around you right now?)

“Ask me later,” you repeat.

“But there is test next,” whines yet another voice. “We need help now.”

You are pretty sure you feel your insides shrivel. You know now that these assholes are not going to leave until you’ve answered all of their questions because that’s the way things work on test days. Your chest feels tight. You try to swallow around the lump that has settled in your throat but your mouth is too dry and you can’t breathe.
Nulian’s voice says, “Hey, you OK?”

A laugh flits up into the back of your throat and dies there because WOW YOU ARE SO FAR FROM OK THAT ANY ATTEMPT TO MOVE FARTHER AWAY FROM THAT NEBULOUS STATE OF GENERAL WELLBEING WOULD RESULT IN YOUR CIRCLING RIGHT BACK TOWARDS IT AGAIN. You hear another voice say, “He is, uh, what word? Uh, he is shake. Shaking.”

A hand brushes your shoulder and the contact is so unexpected that you jump, raising your eyes to the group of six-seven-eight trolls gathered around you. It’s only a momentary slipup, but it’s more than enough.

There is an uncomfortable five seconds of silence. Then it begins:

“What—WHAT?”

“Did his eyes…?”

“Oh my God!”

You can hear voices whispering, groping for the English word.

Nulian is the first to find it: “Mutant,” he hisses. If you were capable of producing any meaningful words at the moment, you would commend him because WOW, HE WON! HE FOUND THE WORD FIRST! GOOD FOR HIM!

There is a light trip of footsteps, a confused jumble of voices:

“What? Why you bringing me here?”

“Huh? What is it?”

“Look—look!”

“His eyes!”

“Wait, really?”

You feel as though you are collapsing in on yourself. You can feel yourself hunching into a defensive posture—shoulders down, arms tucked up against your body—and you try to stop because you can’t afford to look weak now. You need to look threatening, strong, and fierce; you need to convince these shithads that you will rip their heads off and jam them up their own waste chutes if they fuck with you…but you can’t bring yourself to look away from your plate.

“Mutant,” repeats Nulian. “Freak!” (Well look at that, he’s a regular synonym repository. A real vocabulary whiz, this one.)

There are more voices now, bleeding together into a ball of nonsense: “I can’t see—eyes are—what are you--move, I want to—freak—wait, is he really—fucking bright red….”

A hand grabs the collar of your shirt. You jerk away with a yelp and oh shit you looked away from the table and there are at least fifteen fucking trolls crowded around you. You immediately slam your eyes shut—but you are too late. A collective gasp goes up from the crowd and then there is an explosion of sound—people shouting at each other, people shouting at you, pounding footsteps as the crowd grows larger, laughing—some fucker is laughing at you.
You want to get away. You would gladly run your ass straight to Torkal’s lab if you could just get out of this clusterfuck but you can’t because the wall is behind you and the table is in front of you and you are surrounded by a ring of people three deep. Something ricochets off your left shoulder. It leaves behind a starburst splatter of warm gooiness—mush. Somebody threw a bowl of mush at you.

A wave of raucous laughter surges up around you. You cover your ears because you can’t take this, you never wanted this, you just want it to stop—and then a voice is screaming, “STOP IT! STOP!”

It takes you a moment to realize that you are not the one doing the screaming. You crack one of your eyelids to see Evrind standing on the table in front of you, his body crouched into an aggressive stance and screaming, “STOP! DO NOT HURT! STOP!”

A troll towards the front of the group lurches forward towards you. You don’t know what he is trying to do, whether he intends to hurt you or whether he’s just some bumbling dunderhead who can’t avoid tripping over his unusually large and odiferous feet. Either way, Evrind pile drives one of his big fists straight into the poor fucker’s face.

There is a wet crunch that cuts through the confused tangle of sound and stops it dead. The guy reels back, clutching at his nose and moaning. A trickle of maroon blood is already dripping through his fingers.

On the table in front of you, Evrind is breathing hard, shoulders rising and falling with each breath. His hands are still clenched into fists.

Somebody in the crowd yells, “What the fuck, Parmav!?”

“Tsay stop,” Evrind replies. “So if hurt Karkat then I knock down.”

“What,” sneers a girl from somewhere off to your left. “Are you moirails now or something?”

“You hurt Karkat then I knock down,” Evrind repeats.

An uncomfortable murmur rolls through the crowd. Then, by twos and threes, the knot of trolls surrounding you disperses. Evrind stays up on the table, glaring after them until it’s just the two of you in your own freak bubble of seclusion.

“You OK?” he says as he clambers back down to the ground.

A hot spike twists through your gut. You want to scream at him that no, you are not ‘OK’ and it is going to be a long time before you are ever anything even remotely resembling ‘OK’, you shit-eating ignoramus! You want to kick his simpering ass and tell the son of a bitch to go and fuck himself and the hoofbeast he rode in on because you aren’t moirails and it’s not his place to be doing this shit for you. You have never felt more humiliated in your entire life.

Somehow, through the fog of shame and resentment fuzzing out your senses, you manage to grate, “Why did you do that?”

He shrugs. “You is—are. You are friend.”

You are about to tell him that fuck that, that was the most embarrassingly public example of a pale advance you have ever seen in your life and thank you so much for pissing a hot and steaming spray of mortification fluid into the noxious well of suck your life has become—and then it hits you. Human friendship. He’s trying to be human friends. You frown. The fact that Evrind’s actions fit with the weird, pseudo-pale elements of human friendship does little to quell your embarrassment. Still, you try to tell yourself that it might not be such a bad thing if Evrind has decided to buy into the
whole human friendship idea. At the very least, you would have one person not going out of his way to make you miserable and hell, that would be one more than Shrega ever had.

“Hey, uh, Karkat?”

You keep your response clipped and irritable because even though you are not as pissed with him as you have every right to be, he is still not off the hook for embarrassing the shit out of you. “What?”

“Are you really a mu…uh…a-a mu….”

You know what he is trying to ask. Normally you’d give him the word, but fuck that. You have no desire to hear it again and if he’s already forgotten it then so much the better. Hoping he’ll get the hint and shut his gape hole, you send him a scathing glare to rival even one of Cennia’s most potent looks.

Evrind reels back as though he has been burned. You understand a half second too late that language-challenged or not, you’ve just answered Evrind’s question loud and clear. He offers up a shaky smile, an embarrassed laugh…but you can’t help but wonder if you hear something moldering under the easy laughter like a pile of dead carcasses under a thin layer of flowers.

> Future Nepeta: Spill the beans
arsenicCatnip [AC] began trolling gallowsCalibrator [GC]

AC: :33 < *ac scales a tr33 and stealthily apurroaches your window*
AC: :33 < *ac scratches at the glass as gently as pawsible so her razor sharp claws dont leave any marks*
GC: *GC STR3TCH3S H3R POW3RFUL TH41L 1N 4 SHOW OF D1SCONT3NT 4T B31NG WOK3N 4T SUCH 4N UNHOLY HOUR*
GC: *GC CONSID3RS SN4RL1NG 4 F3W F1R3-T1NG3D O4TH3S 1N YOUR G3N3R4L D1R3CT1ON 4S 4 G3NTL3 R3M1ND3R TH4T NOT 3V3RYBODY W4K3S UP 4S 34RLY 4S YOU DO*
GC: *HOW3V3R TH3 GR34T DR4GONS CUR10S1TY H4S B33K3D*  
GC: SO WH4TS UP *S4YS GC*
AC: :33 < its…oh wait  
AC: :33 < ugh, i cant tell you  
GC: WH4T?
AC: :33 < like a clue?
AC: :33 < well its about somebody we know and you will never guess who it is in a bazillion trillion years!
GC: 4L1V3 OR D34D?
AC: :33 < i kind of purromised equius i wouldnt tell  
AC: :33 < but he never said anything against helping you guess!
GC: OH3! 3XPLO1T1NG 4 LOOPHOL3 WH1L3 CONT1NU1NG TO 4DH3R3 TO TH3 L3TT3R OF TH3 L4W
AC: :33 < h33 h33  
GC: OK4Y 1S TH3R3 4NY 1NFORM4TION YOU C4N T3LL M3 OUTR1GHT?
AC: :33 < i know!
AC: :33 < keep going!
GC: K4N4Y4 M4RY4M 1S 4CTU4LLY 4 R41NBOW DR1NK3R 4ND SH3 1S ON 4 W1LD
BLOODLUST R4MP4G3 4S W3 SP34K
AC: :33 < no!
AC: :33 < good guess though h33 h33 h33
AC: :33 < its someone who nobody has talked to in a really long time
GC: W3LL TH4T N4RROWS 1T DOWN CONS1D3R4BLY
GC: L3TS S33…4R4D14 M3G1DO H4S R1S3N FROM TH3 GR4V3 4S 4 V3NG3FUL
SP3C1M3N OF TH3 UND34D 4ND 1S 1N F4CT H34D OF TH3
THR3SH3CUT1ON3RS 34RN1NG 4CCOL4D3S L3FT 4ND R1GHT 4ND TH3 ONLY
R34SON NOBODY H4S H34RD FROM H1M 1N 4LL TH1S T1M3 1S S1MPLY TOO BUSY CRUSH1NG R3S1ST4NC3 1N R3MOT3 SYST3MS TO G1V3
4NY OF US TH3 T1M3 OF D4Y
AC: :33 < yes!
GC: W41T R34LLY?
AC: :33 < the first bit about karkat being alive is true anyway
AC: :33 < equius wouldnt tell me much so i dont know about the rest
AC: :33 < it might be pawsible though!
GC: SO K4RK4T 1S 4L1V3 4ND 3QU1US Z4HH4K KN3W 4BOUT 1T
GC: TH4T 1S V3RY 1NT3R3ST1NG R3SMOT3 ST4R SYST3MS TO G1V3
4NY OF US TH3 T1M3 OF D4Y
AC: :33 < what
GC: D1D 3QU1US T3LL YOU 4NYTH1NG 3LS3 4BOUT WH4T K4RK4T 1S DO1NG NOW
OR HOW H3 FOUND OUT 4BOUT K4RK4T 1N TH3 F1RST PL4C3?
AC: :33 < no
AC: :33 < he didnt really mean to tell me about karkat at all and he s33med pawfully flustered when i found out
GC: HMMPMM
AC: :33 < why do you k33p saying hmmmm?
AC: :33 < its starting to look kind of worrisome
AC: :33 < like maybe you are thinking about something but you dont really want to say it out loud
AC: :33 < i hope it is not that kind of a hmmmmmm because that is the worst kind of hmmmm there is
GC: C4N B3L13V3 K4RK4T 1S 4L1V3 4ND 1M NOT SOLD ON TH3 1D34 TH4T H3 1S OK4Y
GC: NOT BY 4 LON3 SH0T
AC: :33 < oh
AC: :33 < it was that kind of hmmmm :( 
AC: :33 < so you think karkat might be in trouble?
GC: L3TS LOOK 4T TH3 3V1D3NC3 H3R3
GC: F1RST OFF 1F YOU ST1LL H4V3 1NT3R3ST1NG 4BOUT W41T W41T TH3 1D34 TH4T H3 1S
W41T W41T
arsenicCatnip [AC] is an idle troll!

AC: :33 < okay im back
GC: D1D YOU W4TCH 1T?
AC: :33 < yeah
GC: TH3N YOU S4W HOW H1S LUSUS W4S SL4UGHT3R3D
GC: 3V3N 1F K4RK4T H4D SOM3 R34SON TO K1LL H1S LUSUS (4ND TH4T 1S 4 V3RY B1G 1F BY TH3 W4Y) YOU 4ND 1 4ND PR3TTY MUCH 3V3R3BODY 3LS3 KNOWS H3 1S 4 BL3 WUSS
GC: H3 WOULD N3V3R H4V3 B33N 4BL3 TO DO 1T SO BRUT4LLY
AC: :33 < i guess i can s33 your point there
AC: :33 < but what if karkat put down his lusus and those marks came from looters who went through his hive after he left?
GC: YOU R34LLY TH1NK TH4T H4PP3N3D?
AC: :33 < no, not really
AC: :33 < but i can play the malevolent pitchfork-carrying entities advocate cant i?
AC: :33 < also maybe i just really want him to be okay
GC: F1N3
GC: FOR TH3 S443 OF B31NG M3T1CULOUS 1 W1LL 4SSUM3 TH4T H1S LUSUS 1S F4ULTY 3V1D3NC3
GC: BUT HOW 4BOUT THOS3 BROK3N DVDS?
GC: K4RK4T WOULD NOT TR34T H1S CR4PPY ROMCOMS L1K3 TH4T
GC: H3 WOULD NOT L34V3R T3M3M B3H1ND 4FT 4LL 1F H3 H4D 4 S4Y 1N TH3 M4TT3R TH4T H3 WOULD ST1LL B3 TH3R3 G4BB1NG 4BOUT 1T NOW
GC: THOS3 SH1NY B1TS OF YUCKY-T4ST1NG PL4ST1C A4R3 4 PR3TTY CL34R 1ND1C4T1ON TH4T SOM3TH1NG 1S 4M1SS
AC: :33 < maybe they werent his?
GC: SO YOU 4R3 S4Y1NG TH4T SOM3BODY BROK3 4 BUNCH OF DVDS W3NT TO K4RK4TS 4B4NDON3D H1V3 4ND SC4TT3R3D TH3 R3MN4NTS OF TH31R MOV13 COLL3CT1ON TH3R3?
AC: :33 < i guess it kind of is dumb when you put it that way
AC: :33 < but what if he did decide to leave them behind and somebody else came through and clawed them all to shreds?
GC: 1 SUPPOS3 TH4T 1S 4 F34S1BL3 3XP3CT1ON 2 TH3S3 3N4LDS TO TH3M 1N PL4Y
GC: 1 D1D 4 LOT OF POK11NG 4ROUND 4FT3R 1 SHUT OFF TH3 C4M3R4 4ND TH3 WHOL3 PL4C3 R33K3D OF FOUL PL4Y
GC: 4ND L3TS NOT 4CTU4LLY TH3 F4CT TH4T H3 H4S NOT CONT4CT3D 3NYBODY 1N 1D L1V3 1D L3TS NOT TH3N K3 H3 D1S4PP3R3D O3V3R 4 SW33P 4GO
GC: 1 WOULD S4Y TH4T 1S TH3 MOST D4MN1NG P13C3 OF 3V1D3NC3 4LLL
AC: :33 < okay i guess there isnt really much of an explanation for that one
AC: :33 < so what then?
AC: :33 < do you think he was katnapped or something?
GC: 1 DONT KNOW 4BOUT K1DN4PP3D BUT 1F K4RK4T 4CTU4LLY 1S 4L1V3 1 DO NOT TH1NK H3 L3FT H1S 1V3 VOLUNT4R1LY
GC: H1S UNCH4R4CT3R1ST1C L4CK 0F COMMUN1C4TION 4LLS0 L34DS M3 TO B3L3TH3M S4T4W H3 3S 3S 3S NOT TH3R3 W1LL1NGLY
AC: :33 < that is so sad :'(
AC: :33 < there must be something we can do to help him
GC: M4Y3B3
GC: BUT W3 N33D MOR3 1NF0RM4T1ON F1RST
GC: DO YOU THINK YOU CAN GET QU1US TO TELL YOU ANYTHING ELSE?
AC: :33 < he said he would tell me everything he knew about karkat after he finished his robotics project
AC: :33 < i can try to get more out of him earlier though
GC: OK4Y TH4T 1S 4 GOOD ST4RT
GC: YOU WORK YOUR MO1R41L CH4RMS 4ND 1 W1LL BR1NG TH3 R3ST OF OUR FR13NDS UP TO SP33D ON TH3 S1TU4T1ON
AC: :33 < wait!
AC: :33 < just to start out can you maybe pass this along to only a few people and tell them not to mention it to equius?
AC: :33 < i dont want him to know that i let the adorable kitty out of the paper or sometimes plastic purchasayed goods toting device
AC: :33 < at least not until ive had a chance to warm him up to the idea
AC: :33 < he was really against it before
GC: YOU GOT IT
GC: 1 W1LL T3LL SOLLUX 4ND M4YB3 G4MZ33 1F H3 1S LUC1D 3NOUGH TO K33P UP 4 D3C3NT CONV3RS4T1ON 4ND 1 W1LL SW34R BOTH OF TH3M TO S3CR3CY ON P41N OF D34TH
GC: OR M4YB3 JUST 4 V3RY S3V3R3 C4N3 DRUBB1NG GC: >:
AC: :33 < thanks terezi
AC: :33 < i will troll you as soon as equius decides to stop being a big dummy about all this

arsenicCatnip [AC] ceased trolling gallowsCalibrator [GC]

> Present Karkat: Downward spiral
With the unquantifiable heap of irritating shit that you have dealt with in your life, you would think that it would be difficult to choose that one magical incident that qualifies as “Karkat’s most irritating experience to date.” However, if you were to look deep within your body of annoying experiences, you would find one special nugget of waste traveling within its putrid digestive coils that represents the culmination of all previous and future annoyances you have encountered or ever will encounter in your lifetime. As luck would have it, tonight is the night that the universe has decided to shit out that steaming turd of a situation for you to appreciate in all its nub-twiddling, bulge-diddling glory. What you are experiencing right now, at this very moment is therefore, without the slimmest shadow of a doubt, the most irritating thing you have ever experienced in your entire life.

You have been sitting in the same schoolfeed—the final schoolfeed of the day—for the past three hours. This would be enough to tweak your aggravation sponge even under normal circumstances because the schoolfeed lasts right up until dinner so you are always fucking starving by the end of it. (It does nothing to help matters that the subject—Earth economic systems—is one that you find to be brain-numbingly boring.) Even so, it’s not as though you are some snot-nosed little crying wiggler about it. You can handle a few hours of being hungry and bored just as well as any other minimally functioning troll. What you can’t handle is some blistered asshole sitting behind you and kicking the back of your seat nonstop for two hours and fifty-five minutes of the past three hours.

It had started out as a gentle, rhythmic tapping that you could have almost excused as accidental; some socially inept idiot getting squirmy and jiggling his foot without realizing he was hitting the back of your chair. The possibly innocent tapping soon evolved into focused jabbing that continued until about midway through the schoolfeed, at which point the son of a bitch sitting behind you decided to abandon all pretense of subtlety and just started straight up kicking the shit out of your chair hard enough to buck you forward in your seat.

If the experience wasn’t so goddamn obnoxious, you would have to commend the asswipe for his endurance. He has not let up once throughout the entire schoolfeed and unless he is wearing some heavy-duty steel toe boots (which you know for a fact he isn’t because where in the name of piss-toggling fuck would he have gotten them) his feet are probably sore as hell. As the situation stands, your aggravation sponge is filled beyond capacity and you are practically drowning in the resultant overflow of exasperation fluid. The only thing keeping you from immediately spilling an economy sized jug of retaliatory fuck you all over the region of his booger-encrusted face is the knowledge that disturbing schoolfeeds is a surefire insta-cull.

Your only option for dealing with this is to face forward and focus all your energy into channeling your ever-expanding frustration rage into hanging on the instructor’s every word. It is an exercise in patience which proves that contrary to what any nooksucker on the street might say, you possess greater reserves of self-discipline than even the most devoted auxiliatrices in the brooding caverns.

“Do not forget,” says the female instructor (kick, kick-kick-kick goes the crotch pimple behind you).

“Your next round of assessments will be coming up next week—“

Kick-kick, kick-kick-kick-kick....

“—so be ready. Questions?” A smattering of people raise their hands. You scowl and narrowly restrain your desire to flip each and every one of them their own special version of the double bird because mother of squealing fuck you just want to get the hell out of this miserable schoolblock.
Kick, kick, kick-kick….

“Before you ask—“

Kick, kick, kick….

“—if anybody asks anything even remotely resembling ‘what is going to be on the assessment’—“

Kick, kick, kick, kick….

“—I will personally snap their horns off and create a trophy wall for them in my respite block.”

Kick, kick….

“So are there any questions?”

The forest of hands slowly withers like a sea of dying fungus.

Kick, kick, kickkickkickkickkickkickkickkickickkickkickkickkickkickkick.

“No questions? Good. Dismissed.”

You jump out of your chair fully intending to whip around and give the oozing bag of shit behind you a piece of your mind (and quite possibly your fist for good measure), but he is already beating a fast retreat down his row and toward the center aisle. You consider going after him, but your row is already clogged with people lollygagging around for no conceivable reason whatsoever. (Seriously, you think. Do you people lack the mental capacity to talk about whatever the barfing fuck you think is so important AND walk at the same time? Would that really be such a hard thing to do?) The only way you are getting anywhere near the stupid shitstain would be to vault over your row and try to chase him down before he melts into the crowd.

You are still immersed in devising a strategy for making the leap to the row behind you without doing something stupid like bunging your shins on your chair when you feel a hand on your shoulder and Evrind is saying, “Hey. You OK?”

You twist away from the hand because goddamn it, you have told him not to do that. You don’t care if it’s something that human friends do; it’s too close to papping for your tastes and it feels fucking weird. You growl, “Yeah. I’m fine.”

“I felt…uh…kick? Kicking?”

“It’s fine,” you repeat and you are surprised to find that the majority of your boiling rage has dissipated to a more bearable simmer of mild choler. It may not be “fine” (in fact, you’re pretty sure that this qualifies as the exact opposite of “fine”), but aside from that first awful morning, your life has been remarkably not shitty since your eyes decided to out you to every bulge-doodling idiot on the station and you would prefer to keep it that way. Is it really worth harassing the sleeping culling drone over something as pathetic as chair kicking? The answer is abso-fucking-lutely not and past you is a remarkably stupid example of trollkind for even considering it.

“Come on,” you say. “Let’s go.”

You are pleased to see that the people who had been milling around in your row have removed their malingering asses from the vicinity during your exchange with Evrind and your path to the center aisle is clear. You are less pleased—though not at all surprised—to see that the aisle is still a clusterfuck. Of course nobody bothers to be a decent person and let you or Evrind out of your row
because that would require them to endure mild inconvenience for the benefit of you and your
fucking terrible mutant blood. Predictably, you and Evrind are the last two trolls out of the
schoolblock and you end up trapped behind a band of inconsiderate fuckers walking so slowly you
can only assume that they are trying to hide contraband game grubs in the deep recesses of their
puckered assholes and walking any faster would cause the goods to erupt through the seat of their
pants like a spring-loaded ass worm.

You want to shout, “You’re going to have to speed up or get the fuck out of the way because I am
done dealing with bullshit today. My stock of bullshit has been selling like wildfire and I have no
more to deal with so take a fucking rain check and come back never, you assholes.” The words are
there ready to come out at a moment’s notice. You swallow them back with effort (because sleeping
culling drones), but you can still feel them in the back of your throat just waiting for you to let your
guard down.

Evrind tugs on your sleeve and says, “Are we practice English tonight?”

You make a show of rolling your eyes at the question because of course you are practicing English
tonight because that is something you do every night, Evrind, you empty-headed moron. Secretly, in
the darkest crannies of your being which you will never, ever expose to the light of day, you are
relieved for the distraction. “Yes, we are practicing English tonight.”

He furrows his brow. “Practicing?”

“Yes. Practicing.”

“OK.” Under his breath, he repeats, “We are practicing. Are practicing.”

You wait for him to stop mumbling before you say, “Do you want to practice for any other tests?”

He chews his lip and looks up at the ceiling, clearly engaged in deep and meaningful inner reflection
(or maybe he thinks the answer to your question is lurking around somewhere on the ceiling).
Finally, he answers, “Um, eco-nom-ic?”

“Economic systems?”

“Yeah. I can’t…too many English vocabulary. They talk so fast. I don’t understand it.”

You frown. He’s been saying that more and more ever since your instructors made the leap to
teaching in English full time. You don’t mind rehashing the schoolfeeds for him (hell, it saves you
the trouble of having to fuck around with all that shit later), but you don’t like to think about what it
probably means.

Other people are struggling too, you remind yourself. And they’re too fucking stupid to admit they
need help. Aloud you say, “OK. We’ll do economics, too.”

The people in front of you continue to be piles of thoughtless nook waste and maintain a pace
somewhere between creeping toilet mold and sentient tuber vegetable. When you finally reach the
cafeteria, it is packed. A couple of perigees ago, you would have worried about finding a place to sit.
Now you can look around the room and—oh look, there it is! Your own isolated little corner, way
the fuck away from everybody else because apparently these dumb shits think that having the wrong
blood color is as contagious as pan-rotting spore infection. (You are pretty sure that the intent behind
this is to upset you, but after enduring perigees of constant badgering by everybody and their lusus
about ‘English this’ and ‘English that’ you are more inclined to see it as a perk; the one good thing to
come out of this shitty state of affairs.)
You get an uneasy feeling in the pit of your stomach as you and Evrind skirt around the edges of the room on your way to your designated corner of banishment. You have become accustomed to the occasional half-whispered jeer (scum-freak-trash-MUTANT) or the odd bout of muffled tittering whenever you pass by a group of trolls. With the cafeteria as packed as it is, you were expecting the walk to your table to be particularly sucky—except tonight there is nothing. No derogatory remarks, no poorly-executed attempts to hinder you, annoy you, or otherwise jab at your anguish gland—nothing. In fact, you have the distinct feeling that everybody is actively trying to avoid looking at you.

When you reach your table, you understand. You have a fucking epiphany that ignites the pestilence centers of your brain and whips your simmering rage back up into full-on erupting fires of odious wrath. Past you really should have realized that something was up way back in the schoolblock, but past you is literally the stupidest version of you that exists so of course he didn’t notice a thing. The way the crowd had always managed to shift just right to keep you from leaving, the ridiculously slow pace of the ass whiffers walking in front of you—it had all been a means to delay your arrival long enough to orchestrate this exercise in nookbiting bullfuckery.

There are two full human formal place settings waiting for you. You see soup spoons and salad forks and dinner forks and dessert spoons and butter knives and three types of glasses, and even cloth fucking napkins folded into dainty floral designs—but all of the food that should have been on the table has been removed and some colossal pile of putrid bulge filth has taken the liberty of filling the plates for you. On one plate there is a large pile of something that looks as though it might have been chicken and mashed potatoes before it was thoroughly masticated and spat back onto the plate. The other plate holds a single half-eaten dinner roll.

Beside you, Evrind goes, “Oh….” Because wow, what the fuck else is there to say? He slowly approaches the table and examines the plate with the chewed-up something on it as though he is seriously considering sampling the nasty thing. Then he makes a face and just stands there looking like a wounded puppy.

You want to scream at somebody. You want to curse and yell and break something and goddamn it you wish you knew the flying nub biter who was responsible for this so you could kick his feckless little ass. You can put up with more than your fair share of shit. Dealing with Crabdad’s cantankerous nature and your old friends’ liquefied word feces every day from the day you pupated prepared you to deal with veritable oceans of rage-inducing inanities and crap in general, but this shit? This is going too fucking far and the fact that these pail sluggers decided that you weren’t enough, that they had to go and fuck with your friend makes it all the worse.

You may not be able to do anything to piss swiggers responsible for this, but you can at least do something to try and set that last bit straight because Evrind does not deserve to be punished for the giant cosmic joke that is your genetic irregularity. Taking a deep breath to smooth the quivering fury that is welling in your chitinous windhole, you turn to him and say, “You don’t have to stay.”

Evrind jerks as though you slapped him. “But I...I want to,” he stammers.

“Don’t be fucking stupid.”

“I’m not stupid.”

You roll your eyes. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

He just shrugs in response.

“Go sit with the other trolls. They’ll let you sit with them.”
“No,” he says, but even though he shakes his head you see his eyes settle on a knot of trolls and the appetizing, definitely not pre-chewed dinner which they are messily devouring like a pack of goddamn wild hyenas.

“I’ll be fine,” you press. “Go eat.”

He hesitates, eyes lingering on the trolls with the food and for one second you think holy fuck, he’s going to do it. He’s actually going to do it. Then he looks back to you and says, “No. It’s OK. I need…uh…I need to do English practice.”

“Fine,” you sigh because fuck it, you can lead the carnivorous ground worm to the rotting hoof creature carcass but it won’t do you a lick of good if he’s hell bent on being a recalcitrant shit. “Sit down.”

He smiles that stupid grin that makes you want to punch his face and takes a seat. You pointedly move the two plates and their disgusting contents out of the way before sitting down across from him. “OK,” you say. “Economic systems. Where do you want to start?”

You have been trying to detail the major differences between Earth socialism and Earth capitalism (and by “trying” you actually mean failing miserably because Jesus h. g. fucking Christ you had not realized just how far behind Evrind has gotten with his English vocabulary) for several minutes when you hear a set of footsteps come to a stop behind you. To your immeasurable credit, you manage to keep your focus on Evrind until he finishes his clumsy attempt to parrot back the meaning of embargo. Then you decide that you are sick of feeling the skin on the back of your neck curdle under the rancid breath of the socially impaired idiot standing behind you. You steel yourself because whelp, this is it; the excrement has finally struck the tines of the whirling device and say, “What do you want?”

“How is your dinner?” says the guy behind you and wow, what do you know, you recognize that snotty voice because it belongs to pompous bastard extraordinaire Nulian Yanith.

You scowl. Whether or not he is here to take ownership for the festering pukefest of an evening you have been forced to endure, you feel like turning around and beating his ass. It wouldn’t be hard to do: massive horns aside, the dude is wiry as a twig and you seriously doubt his lusus ever pushed him into anything resembling a proper strife. One good jab to the solar plexus and he’d be out for the count. You’d be a lying shitmouth if you said you weren’t tempted. Then again, you know how Nulian operates. You wouldn’t put it past the slimy little dirt crawler to have another troll or two posted nearby, ready to swoop in and save his scrawny waste chute the second things turn ugly. To that effect, you do not turn around when you growl, “Piss off.”

Nulian snorts. “Piss off?”

You don’t dignify his sad attempt to rattle you with a response. Instead you say, “OK, Evrind. Tell me about laissez faire again. Make me believe you know what it means this time.”

Evrind does not appear to have heard you. He isn’t even looking at you. His eyes are fixed on the troll standing behind you and the expression on his face suggests that he is contemplating disemboweling Nulian with his bare hands.

You kick him under the table hard enough to make him gasp (because fuck that shit, you do not need or want him fighting your battles) and say, “Evrind! Laissez faire.”

“Oh…uh…it’s when, when—“
A bony finger jabs into your shoulder. You grit your teeth so hard you can hear the grinding deep within your skull.

“—it’s when people can do a business thing.”

Another jab, harder this time. Your focus on Evrind reaches an intensity that any onlooker would classify as “really fucking creepy.”

“They do a business thing but um—“

A third jab in the same spot, hard enough to hurt. You ball your hands into fists, the levees restrain your unbridled grief and fury beginning to crack under the unrelenting stream of douchebaggery flowing into them.

“—um…they….”

Evrind goes quiet as you feel another jab. Nulian doesn’t let up this time, digging his finger deep into the meat of your shoulder. You realize that **wow, great; this shitstorm isn’t going to resolve itself quietly because apparently somebody toggled the difficulty setting of your life up to “grub shit insane super hard hard mode”**.

You begin to turn around in order to tell Nulian to his face to fuck right the hell off and your vision explodes into vicious snaps of white light when a fist crashes into the right side of your face. You reel back with a choked yell because **fuck that hurt**. A ribbon of blood dribbles from your nose and even though you know it’s stupid, you know everybody knows what to expect, your hands still fly up to cover the damage. The blood oozes over your fingers and down over your lips, hot and sticky.

Somebody—not Nulian—is laughing. You realize for the first time that Nulian is not alone and you damn past you to the hottest portion of troll Satan’s asshole for not noticing this important fact earlier.

You hear Nulian say, “Ugh, look at it. You should wash your hand.” And then Evrind jumps over the table and all hell breaks loose.

You are pretty sure that Evrind was aiming for the guy who hit you, but the momentum from his leap fucks up his aim and he hits Nulian on the shoulder instead. Nulian lets out an indignant shriek and makes as though to hit Evrind while he’s recovering his balance but you decide that nope, that shit is not going to fly. You have designated this area to be a no fly zone and nonexistent mirthful messiahs and other nonexistent semi-omnipotent deities help you, you are grounding this shit right here and now. You put both of your hands on Nulian’s gut and give him an open-palmed shove that sends him stumbling back into the table behind him. He wobbles on his feet and you charge after him, throwing all your weight behind your shoulder as you plow into him. He claws at you as he goes down, pulling you with him. There is a confused moment of scuffling limbs when you hit the ground, an impression of Nulian trying to scratch you with his useless clear fingernail nubs and then you have him pinned.

He squirms, trying to buck you off but you have at least twenty pounds of muscle on him and neither of you go anywhere. Somewhere close by, you hear the grunting, slapping, cursing sounds of Nulian’s accomplice and Evrind pounding the everloving piss out of each other. A crowd has gathered: you hear yelling (you think you hear somebody shouting “Yeah! Kill him!” and you have no idea who in fuckbuggering hell they are encouraging and who they want to see pounded to macerated pâté), feet shuffling, people crowding each other for a better look—but nothing to suggest that any of these lazy-ass voyeurs plan on joining the fray to help you. (You hear nothing to suggest that they are going to help Nulian, either, which you count as a small ass squirt of a blessing from the pantheon of shitty miracles.)
Nulian’s breathing morphs into high-pitched gasping as he realizes that you have him and nobody is coming to rescue his sorry self. Part of you—the vindictive, ornery part that just does not have any fucks left to give—wants to pound his face into mush. You want to see him humiliate himself and beg for mercy, send the message loud and clear to all the bastards watching that you do not screw with Karkat motherfucking Vantas. But then his panicked gasping turns into panicked keening and son of a screaming fuck, you look down into his fear-glazed eyes and you know that you can’t do it.

His glasses are sitting at an odd angle on his face, one of the lenses cracked. He growls at you as you reach for them and whips his head back and forth as though he intends to brain you with one of his massive horns. You put your hand on his forehead and shove his head against the ground with maybe just a smidge more force than strictly necessary.

“Don’t,” you snarl. He obligingly goes still and this time when you reach for his glasses he lets you take them. You examine the cracked glass. It’s deep, one step away from snapping the lens down the middle but the glasses look cheap as shit and you are pretty sure that they are the stupid, non-prescription kind that pretentious idiots wear to make themselves look more pretentious. You should probably break them on principle of him being an asshole, but you don’t. Instead, you put them back on his face at the correct angle.

Evrind is still slogging it out with Nulian’s friend. You can hear them yelling at each other, still hear the thud of fists on flesh. The crowd that had gathered around you and Nulian is beginning to drift away to watch them, drawn to the mayhem like the attention-challenged cretins they are. Nulian swings an arm up but it’s a weak attempt at a punch and you knock it away with ease. You lean in, getting right up in his face as you say, “You’re embarrassing yourself. Tell your friend to stop.”

The platonic hate boiling in the air around Nulian is so intense it’s like a cloud of smelly flatulence. He glares at you with a look that would cut through iron if the poor fuck had any sort of psychic ability whatsoever. (You are quietly thankful that the only power he seems to possess is the power of being a magnificent douche because you enjoy the simple things in life like having a head that is completely intact and attached to your body.) Then he spits in your face.

The gob of stringy saliva hits just below your eye. You jerk back, forgetting yourself for only a moment because augh, fucking nookwhiff piss weasel that was disgusting but it’s long enough for Nulian to roll free. He pulls himself into a crouch and immediately launches himself at you like a jet-propelled kangaroo hopped up on crazy pills. You end up in a tangle of limbs and it becomes apparent that wow, this idiot isn’t going to give up unless you knock him the fuck out, is he?

Nulian’s limited success seems to have stoked his drive to not get his ass handed to him because he is flailing so much it’s like trying to pin down a live eel in a vat of lightning greased lard. You grapple with him but you can’t pin him and you can’t get away and ow, FUCK one of his wild punches lands right on your nose and now it’s bleeding again. The blood is running down onto your chin, staining your shirt and it hurts, hurts, hurts, HURTS so much you can barely even see through the ball of fire that has erupted in the center of your face.

Your fist sinks into something soft. Nulian gags and rolls away from you with his arms hugged around his abdomen. He lies there sucking air and even though you know he’s incapacitated, you know that you can get away, you throw yourself after him because your face is still throbbing with an insistent harpy-bitch pain that screams at you to do whatever it takes to keep him down. You wind up to deliver a finishing blow that will keep Nulian from even thinking about fucking with you or Evrind ever again—and then there are arms around you, jerking you back.

You try to get away from those arms but they are wrapped tight around your torso. Nulian staggers to his feet, and slowly advances toward you. You suddenly understand that oh shit, this fucker is
going to hold you down, keep you helpless until Nulian is done beating you to a pulp and then he’s probably going to beat your bloody, pulped remains into fine liquid form. You intensify your thrashing, all the while screaming at yourself for being a stupid idiot and not finishing Nulian off when you had the chance because you knew he would never do the same for you, that given the opportunity he would cheerfully rip your lungs out through your ass then piss on your grave, that—the arms around your torso slip. With all the knowledge that this is it; this is your one and only chance to get away and you cannot afford to fuck this up, you jackknife around and drive your fist as hard as you can into the guy’s face.

The room suddenly goes very quiet: all of the shouting, cheering, and general fuckery associated with large crowds of unruly trolls high on vicarious violence and aggression just stops. At first you have absolutely no idea what to think about this. Then you see who you just punched and OH MAN, OH GOD it’s an adult troll who stands barely taller than you but twice as wide with a face that could reduce weaker trolls to vomit-spewing trauma monkeys under the best of circumstances: Migdal. Holy deep-fried bulge-hopping FUCK you just punched Migdal in the face.

You take a step backwards and oh, look: you’re right next to a table. This turns out to be incredibly serendipitous because your legs then decide that fuck this shit we are ollie outie and the table is the only thing standing between you and a face plant to the ground. Your lips are working but no sound is coming out. This is probably for the best, as there is literally nothing you could possibly say to make this situation not completely terrible. It is all you can do to avoid cowering and evacuating your bowels right there in front of everybody as Migdal glowers at first you, then Nulian, then Evrind and Nulian’s friend in turn.

Migdal gestures toward Nulian and his friend and barks, “YOU TWO go to the bathroom and clean yourselves up.”

Bent double with his arms still wrapped around his belly, Nulian hobbles toward the exit. A few seconds later his friend follows, keeping his head bowed as though he is trying to hide his fantastically swollen black eye.

Migdal waits until they are out of the cafeteria before he yells, “YOU—” (he jabs a finger in your face) “—and YOU—” (he jabs a finger at Evrind) “—come with me.”

You almost laugh because this is really all too much. You know your legs are going to crap out on you the second you let go of the table so you are not going to be following anybody anywhere, thanks. Except wow, look at that, you are already halfway across the cafeteria when did that happen? Your legs continue to demonstrate their amazing ability to do their job by falling into step alongside Evrind as Migdal leads you out of the cafeteria, down the hall, and into one of the empty schoolblocks.

Once you are inside, he turns to Evrind and says, “Did they knock out any of your teeth?” (You turn your attention to Evrind and notice for the first time that holy flying shitballs blood is gushing from his mouth. You are the worst friend in the entire history of the world for not noticing that sooner. It is you.)

“No; it’s OK” says Evrind. A glop of blood splashes over his lips, runs down his chin, and drips onto the front of his shirt.

Migdal frowns. “Go to the modification block and have Cennia take a look at you. She’ll want to check the straightening devices. God help you if they’re damaged.”

Evrind gives you a vaguely apologetic look before he ducks out the door. (You can’t imagine why he thinks he needs to apologize to you for anything. Maybe he is trying to apologize for pulling more
of that confusing pseudo-pale human friendship crap, you think. Admittedly, you had been planning to kick him in the shin for getting involved, but you figure that being reduced to spewing his bodily fluids all over the place like a goddamn pressurized sprinkler device is punishment enough.)

Once Evrind is gone, Migdal rounds on you with his face arranged into the most pants wettingly intimidating scowl you have ever witnessed in your life. With a furious stabbing motion, he gestures to the livid bruise forming on his cheek and snarls, “I could have you culled for this.”

Your mouth goes dry because of course he’s right. You’ve seen trolls culled just for bumping into an instructor in a crowded hallway. Accidental or not, you are pretty sure that decking a teacher in the face is grounds for something truly special—and by special you actually mean too unspeakably terrible to imagine.

“I should have you sent directly to Torkal,” he continues, his voice building to a roar. His lips are drawn back, his teeth are bared, eyes flashing…he is in short, pissed. “If it were any other authority figure on this space station, you would already be on Torkal’s operating table. Am I making myself perfectly clear?”

You feel sick. You haven’t actively thought about Torkal for a long time now, but your subconscious was apparently busy at work imagining plenty of pan-scarring scenarios because you are immediately flooded with images of Torkal cutting you open, Torkal’s hands coated with your blood, Torkal gleefully juggling all of your internal organs around like a demented Subjugglator…. Your voice comes out as a shaking dry rasp: “Yes. I didn’t—I’m sorry. Please.”

He continues glowering at you just long enough for you to begin imagining even more Torkal-related horribleness (cold surgical tools, the smell of antiseptic, “our personal lab rat”…..) Then he huffs out a sigh and his expression becomes a couple of degrees less terrifying.

“I’m not going to report you,” he says. You let out a breath that you didn’t even realize you had been holding. You are so relieved you are dizzy with it and you barely hear him grumble, “I should, but I’m not going to.”

Your mouth is still dry as a cracked piece of preserved hoofbeast genitalia submerged in desert sand. With a tremendous effort, you croak, “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I went to the cafeteria to speak with you and I very strongly doubt that you are going to like what you are about to hear. The fleet rejected my nomination.”

“What?” With everything you have been through in the last month, you had almost forgotten about Migdal’s promise. (Actually, that’s a bald-faced fucking lie. Migdal’s promise had been the last thing you’d thought about every night before you fell asleep and the first thing you’d thought about every morning when you woke up because it was the ray of light piercing through the turbid muck in which your life was firmly mired. You hope that you are hearing this wrong. You really fucking hope that you are hearing this wrong because tonight has been beyond shitty and you are not prepared to consume another helping of awfulness at the moment.)

Migdal curls one of his hands into a tight fist. The ropey tendons in his wrist pop into high relief and his hand shakes against the force. “Your blood color disqualifies you from consideration for leadership positions.”

“Oh.” You stare down at the ground. Of course you weren’t hearing things wrong. You aren’t sure whether you should feel angry or ashamed, but either way your face feels hot.

“I want you to know that I fought for you. Told them they were wasting a lot of potential, but they
wouldn’t hear of it.” He mumbles something that sounds a lot like “Fucking bunch of short-sighted cretins” and punches the wall with a thud that reverberates through the schoolblock like a war drum.

You wait for the sound to die out. Then, keeping your gaze locked on the ground, you say, “So now what do I do?”

He shrugs. “Complete your training. Go to Earth with the other ground forces. Realistically speaking, very little has changed in that department. As for right now, go have Cennia make sure your nose isn’t broken.”

Between fearing for your life and eating a healthy dose of globe-shriveling disappointment, you had forgotten about your nose. You realize now that it still hurts like a bugwinged motherfucker even though the blood around it is turning crusty and cold.

“Yeah, OK,” you say. “I’ll do that.”

You are about to leave the schoolblock when Migdal claps a hand onto your shoulder, stopping you in your tracks. “Listen, Karkat. None of my nominees have ever been turned down before because my instincts are very rarely wrong on these matters. I made my recommendation because I believe you have the potential to do something outstanding with this operation. My thoughts on the matter haven’t changed.”

You aren’t sure who he is trying to convince with his ‘nothing has changed’ act, but you know that he’s lying through his teeth and from the contorted crater of pissed off frustration marring his ugly face, you’d say that he is even less convinced than you are. If your spirit wasn’t currently shattered into a million pieces under the cloven hoof of the disgustingly bloated entity known as “fate”, you would probably laugh at the futility of it all. Instead you offer up a stilted smile, a stale “thank you”, and then you are on your way to the dubious joys of Cennia and her merry crew of shitheads—a shitty ending to a shitty day. You hope to fuck that she is merciful enough to give you some real, edible food.

> Future Terezi: Tell Gamzee the good news
Future Terezi: Tell Gamzee the good news

gallowCalibrator [GC] began trolling terminallyCapricious [TC]

GC: H3Y G4MZ33
GC: 1 HOP3 YOu R3 4W4K3 4ND 1N TH3 V1C1N1TY OF YOuR COMPUT3R B3C4US3
1 H4V3 S0M3TH1NG TO S4Y 4ND 1 4M NOT G01NG TO L34V3 1T 1N YOuR 1NBOX
WH3R3 YOu W1LL N3V3R R3M3MB3R TO L00K 4T 1T
GC: 1 4M G1V1NG YOu T33N S3CONDS TO SP34K UP B3C4US3 1 ASSUM3 YOu R3 4R3 TOO
BUSY ST4R1NG 4T 4LL TH3 COLORS OF TH3 CLOUDS TO HOLD 4 COH3R3NT
CONV3R3S4T10N 4ND MOV33 4N
GC: 10
GC: 9
GC: 8
GC: 7
TC: hEy ThErE mY jUsTiCe SlAmMiNg ChIcA.
TC: WhAt Is AlL uP wItH yOuR mOtHeRfUcKiNg SeLf?
TC: hOnK :o)
GC: N3P3T4 JUST F1N1SH3D T3LL1NG M3 SOM3 R4TH3R S41D
GC: 1 4M H3R3 TO 4CT 4S 1NS1DUOUS M3SS3NG3R DR0N3 4ND D3L1V3R S41D
N3WS TO YOu
TC: KiTtEn S1s iS aLi On SeRvInG uP sOmE b1tCh Sh1tTiNg InTrIgUe WoRds?
TC: i’m uP aNd LoOkInG oUt WhErE tHe WaVeS aR3 A cOmPl3t3 Sh1t LiKe A
mOtHeRfUcKiNg MiRaCle.
TC: WiCkEd AsS f0aM bUbB1es AlL wHiTe AnD dIsApPeArInG lIkE tHe bItChEs Sh1t TiTs.
GC: TH4TS N1C3 BUT C4N YOu TURN 4ROUND F0R 4 S3CONDS?
GC: TH1S 1S S0M3 S3R1OUSLY HUSh-HUsh M4T3R14L FOR YOuR 3Y3S ONLY
GC: 1 N33D YOu FOCUS3D H3R3 R3L4Y SP34K1NG
TC: dAmN s1sTeR tHiS iS s0UnDInG lIkE sOmE nAsTy HeAvY tAlk wHA t yOu HaVe To SaY
GC: 1 4SSURE3 YOu 1T 1S
GC: YOu TURN3D 4ROUND Y3T?
GC: TH4TS 1S NOT MUC1H OF 4N 1MPROV3M3NT BUT 1 GU3SS 1T W1LL H4V3 4N
TO
TC: L3Y tHe EnLgMa T4Lk t0 ThIs M0ThErFuCkEr.
TC: DiSPl1N G0SH ThE EnLgMa T4Lk t0 ThIs M0ThErFuCkEr.
GC: B3C4US3 1 DO TH4T 1 N33D YOu TO T33L M3 3X4CTLY WH3R3 YOu 4R3 4ND
WH4T YOu 4R3 D01NG
TC: i’M jUsT gEtTiNg My M0ThErFuCkEr On OuT bY tHe WaTeR.
TC: Th3nKiNg Th3 oLd GoAt MiGhT bE cOmKnG aLi SiDeW4Ys AReSoNd H3Re SoOn.
TC: i’M uP aNd LoOkInG oUt WhErE tHe WaVeS aRe AIl aT mAkInG f0aM aNd Sh1t LiKe A
mOtHeRfUcKiNg MiRaCle.
TC: WiCkEd AsS f0aM bUbB1es AlL wHiTe AnD dIsApPeArInG lIkE tHe bItChEs Sh1t TiTs.
GC: TH4TS N1C3 BUT C4N YOu TURN 4ROUND F0R 4 S3CONDS?
GC: TH1S 1S S0M3 S3R1OUSLY HUSh-HUsh M4T3R14L FOR YOuR 3Y3S ONLY
GC: 1 N33D YOu FOCUS3D H3R3 R3L4Y SP34K1NG
TC: dAmN s1sTeR tHiS iS s0UnDInG lIkE sOmE nAsTy HeAvY tAlk wHA t yOu HaVe To SaY
GC: 1 4SSURE3 YOu 1T 1S
GC: YOu TURN3D 4ROUND Y3T?
GC: TH4TS 1S NOT MUC1H OF 4N 1MPROV3M3NT BUT 1 GU3SS 1T W1LL H4V3 4N
TO
TC: L3Y tHe EnLgMa tHeEnLgMa T4Lk t0 ThIs M0ThErFuCkEr.
TC: DiSPl1N G0SH ThE EnLgMa T4Lk t0 ThIs M0ThErFuCkEr.
GC: B3C4US3 1 DO TH4T 1 N33D YOu TO T33L M3 3X4CTLY WH3R3 YOu 4R3 4ND
WH4T YOu 4R3 D01NG
TC: i’M jUsT gEtTiNg My M0ThErFuCkEr On OuT bY tHe WaTeR.
TC: Th3nKiNg Th3 oLd GoAt MiGhT bE cOmKnG aLi SiDeW4Ys AReSoNd H3Re SoOn.
TC: i’M uP aNd LoOkInG oUt WhErE tHe WaVeS aRe AIl aT mAkInG f0aM aNd Sh1t LiKe A
mOtHeRfUcKiNg MiRaCle.
TC: WiCkEd AsS f0aM bUbB1es AlL wHiTe AnD dIsApPeArInG lIkE tHe bItChEs Sh1t TiTs.
GC: TH4TS N1C3 BUT C4N YOu TURN 4ROUND F0R 4 S3CONDS?
GC: TH1S 1S S0M3 S3R1OUSLY HUSh-HUsh M4T3R14L FOR YOuR 3Y3S ONLY
GC: 1 N33D YOu FOCUS3D H3R3 R3L4Y SP34K1NG
TC: dAmN s1sTeR tHiS iS s0UnDInG lIkE sOmE nAsTy HeAvY tAlk wHA t yOu HaVe To SaY
GC: 1 4SSURE3 YOu 1T 1S
GC: YOu TURN3D 4ROUND Y3T?
TC: i Was jUsT tHiNkInG wHaT tHaNkS tO tHe MiRtHfUl MeSsIaHs ThAt KaRbRo Is StIlL aLL aLiVe BeCaUsE tHiS iS oNe SiCk TwIsTeD gIaNt MiRaClE.
GC: DONT GO TH4NK1NG YOUR W31RD M4G1C D31T13S FOR 4NYTH1NG JUST Y3T
TC: AwWw, SiS wHy ThE mOtHeRfUcK nOt?
TC: i’M aLl FiSt FuLlS Of SpEcIaL StArDuSt ReAdY.
GC: 1 H4V3 NOT TOLD YOU 3V3RYTH1NG Y3T
GC: YOU C4N 4CTU4LLY 4FT3R 1 H4V3 S41D
3V3RYTH1NG 1 H4V3 TO S4Y
TC: bUt DaMn, iF kArKaT bEiNg AlIv3 aFtEr WhAt We All sEeN iSn’T a MiRaClE I dOn’T kNoW wHaT tHe FuCc Is.
GC: K4RK4T 1S 4L1V3 BUT 1 TH1NK H3 M1GHT B3 1N SOM3 K1ND OF TROUBL3
GC: 1N F4CT 1F TH3R3 1S NOT SOM3TH1NG UNS4VORY 4FOOT 1 W1LL COMSUM3 MY H34D SW4DDL1NG G4RM3NT
TC: WhOa.
TC: i'M nOt EvEr HeArInG oF nObOdY eAtInG nO hEaD sWaDdLeRs BeFoRe.
TC: YoU ShOuLD CrAcK a FuCkInG fAyGo In ThAt FuCkEr.
TC: ThAt WoU1D bE sOmE wIlCh ShIt.
GC: YOU 4R3 SO W31RD SOM3T1M3S >:)
GC: 4NYW4YS YOU 4R3 S41D Th3 P01NT H3 R3SCU3 M4N3UV3RS
GC: DO YOU FOLLOW?
TC: aW sHiT, wHy DiDn’T yOu SaY s0E aR3LiEr?
TC: I gOt To Be GeTtInG mY C0MMuNiCaTiOn On.
TC: gEt Us SoMe FuCkInG rEsErVeS aNd WhAt.
GC: W41T!
GC: G4MZ33 YOU C4NNOT BR34TH3 4 WORD OF TH1S TO 4NYBODY
GC: TH1S 1S DOUBL3 S3CR3T B44D MOJO OR WH4T3V3R YOU C4LL SOM3TH1NG SUP3R CL4SS1F13D 1N Y0UR B1Z4RR3 CLOWN-B4S3D R3L1G1ON
GC: G4MZ33????

terminallyCapricious [TC] ceased trolling gallowsCalibrator [GC]

GC: W3LL SH1T >:[
Sometimes you really wish you could just shut your damn mouth. The more you think about it, the more you realize that you spend an absurd amount of time either actively saying something stupid or suffering the effects of the garbage that past you chose to vomit out of his misconception hole. Shit like: “OK, Sollux, I granted you remote access, now what?” and “I guess I can answer a few English questions right now” or “I’d like to see you take that sopor pie and shove it right up your ass”…you could have avoided so much misery if you had just kept your gibbering seedflap shut. (Though to be perfectly fair, you’d had no idea that Gamzee was high—or stupid—enough to actually attempt that last one.) There are altogether too many examples of Karkat royally fucks himself over by his incredible inability to keep his babbling seedflap shut. You even find yourself wishing you could shut your mouth right now, though for entirely different reasons.

You are lying on a weird electrical reclining chair that would probably be comfortable if your arms and legs weren’t strapped down. (As a side note, fuck the putrid behemoth leaving who decided to attack an Agressanalyst last perigee. You are almost envious that the stupid shit got culled because at least then you would never have to endure this indignity. You fervently hope he spends the entirety of his afterlife tied down to a bed of nails crafted from the rankest shit available.) Above you, a light shines directly into your face, so bright your eyes are watering. A plastic wedge in your mouth forces your jaws open as wide as they will go. (On another side note, the nook-burrowing idiot who bit Cennia almost a sweep ago can go take a flying leap into a pile of festering bulges.)

Cennia’s face hovers into view, her eyes enlarged to grotesque proportions behind a set of magnifying glasses. She stares intently into the darkest reaches of your open mouth and purses her lips at what she sees there. (Or maybe she purses her lips at the smell. You purposefully avoided brushing your teeth this morning—the one act of passive-aggressive rebellion that nobody will ever bother punishing you for.)

“We are almost finished,” she says. “Keep your mouth open wide.”

You almost offer up a heartfelt laugh from the bottom of your derision nodule because wow, is she seriously going to pretend that you have any choice in the matter whatsoever? Unfortunately, your jaw has begun to ache with such a vindictive urgency that you have serious reservations as to its ability to withstand even the gentlest of scornful guffaws. You therefore silently pray that she will finish whatever the piss-hopping fuck she is trying to do before the bottom half of your face falls off.

She brandishes a thin strip of metal and ugh, that is really fucking unpleasant. This isn’t the first time she’s filed your teeth and it’s probably not going to be the last, but you are never going to get used to it. It’s not that it hurts—you know she’s only getting the outer bits, the stuff that isn’t made to feel pain, but the pressure is uncomfortable and the scrape of metal on enamel rattles in your head in a way that makes your whole vertebral column shudder.

“The dental straightening devices should be ready to come off after a few more minor adjustments,” Cennia says as she files away. This is the first good news you have gotten in a long time, so of course she immediately ruins it by adding, “When that happens, we will need to fit you with a maintenance device.”

You try to frown at this unwelcome bit of news. With your mouth already stretched as wide as it can go, the gesture only intensifies the ache that is consuming the lower half of your face. What you would really like to do is politely ask Cennia, ‘What the fuck is a maintenance device and how the fuck does it work,’ but that stupid plastic wedge has blown your ability to enunciate straight to shit. (You suppose you could ask her after she is done fucking around with the contents of your oral
cavity, but that would require you to subject yourself to thirty more seconds of Cennia than strictly necessary, so screw that.)

Your inability to produce anything resembling intelligent speech turns out to be a non-issue because Cennia leaves no space for even the stealthiest interjection before she continues to ply you with her own special brand of verbal diarrhea.

“We will also complete your dental reshaping regimen at that time,” she yammers. *(Scrape, scrape, scrape* goes the file.) “That means that your teeth will be equivalent to human proportions in only a few more perigees.)

_Joy of fucking joys, you think. One more way I’ll be less troll and more ass-ugly alien thing. My excitement has swelled to such obscene dimensions that it is completely immobilized by its massive girth and is forced to roost in an ever-growing swamp of its own filth. You can’t produce a proper scowl at the moment, but you do manage an eye roll of truly epic proportions._

Cennia does not seem to notice your disdain. She begins humming some tune you don’t recognize as she scrapes your teeth. You have no idea what has put her into such a good mood but if things continue in this direction it will mark the first time she has ever failed to give you one of her stupid looks. At one point, you might have counted that a feeble pinprick of a victory in this depressing hellhole. Now you are too jaded to give half a farting fuck.

Your jaw is screaming bloody gut-spewing murder by the time Cennia finally pulls that shitty piece of plastic out of your mouth. All of the muscles in and around your jaw are quivering with fatigue; you can feel the ligaments stretching like overloaded cables and it feels so good to finally close your mouth that it actually hurts. You run your tongue along your poor, abused teeth and try not to cringe. They are definitely flatter. At this rate it won’t be long before the only defensive tools at your disposal are your horns, which is barely one step above PAINT A NEON TARGET OVER YOUR BULGE AND LIE DOWN ON THE GROUND COVERED IN MIND HONEY. (Not to say you’re embarrassed by your tiny nubs. Most of the time you consider them a blessing, like when you are walking through doorways or under low-hanging ceilings or putting on your clothes without tearing them to shreds like pretty much everybody else you have ever spoken to in your entire life. But even you, in all your nubby-ass tiny horn pride have to admit that as far as weapons go they are about as effective as a set of blunt spoons.)

Cennia’s voice cuts through your self-pity globe stimulation party: “Are you feeling any undue discomfort?”

“No. It’s fine.” Actually, it’s not ‘fine’; your jaw still hurts like a screaming banshee but fuck if you are about to tell her that and have her give you a *look* that means *holy fucking shit you are such a whiny little pissant that I am embarrassed for you; seriously just shut the fuck up already._

“Remember to stick to soft foods for the rest of the day,” she says as she works at the straps holding you down to her recliner from hell. Your arms come free, giving you the opportunity to massage your throbbing jaw. “Mashed potatoes. Soups. Pudding. The nutrient preparation staff has been advised that today is an adjustment day so there should be plenty of appropriate selections available.”

The straps holding your feet come free. You sit up and swing your legs off the edge of the weird reclining chair-bed thing. It is such a relief to be free of the restraints and the skeezy feeling of vulnerability that comes with them you barely hear Cennia say, “Your schoolfeed will have already started by now, so let me get you a permissive note.”

You try and fail not to make a face when she presses the stinking thing into your hands. Even after all this time, you still can’t ignore just how much these things smell like rotten sphincter seepage.
This is the point at which Cennia would usually dismiss you. You are already on your feet in anticipation of that sweet, sweet moment because you are on the verge of suffocating on the stinking cloud of clinical condescension that always hangs around her general vicinity. Much to your crotch-puckering chagrin, Cennia appears to have other ideas.

“Karkat, I need to ask you a question before I allow you to go.”

You barely manage to hold back a sigh because you were so close to deliverance from this awful room and all of the awful things in it that you could practically taste it and now the only taste in your mouth is the taste of shitty disappointment. “What is it?”

“You are friends with Evrind Parmav, are you not?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Have you happened to see him today?”

“No.” You frown, a concerned thrum beginning to build in your belly. “What’s going on? Is he in trouble?”

“Not necessarily,” she replies, tugging at the fingers of her green surgical gloves. “I was merely curious as to whether you might be able to explain why he failed to appear at his appointed modification time.”

The thrum in your gut becomes an icy hand gripped around your chest. You shake your head. “I don’t know. Sorry.”

She gets an expression on her face that might count as a precursor to one of her looks, but then she apparently decides that she doesn’t want to ruin your flawless record and says, “Very well. You are dismissed.”

You hurry out into the hallway, but the Cennia-free air still stinks in a way that has nothing to do with the reeking permissive note clutched in your hand. You cannot invent a single plausible reason to explain why Evrind would skip a modification appointment. Sure, he may be dumb as a bag of dried mucous deposits in some respects, but he’s not stupid enough to intentionally do something that will get him culled and last you checked he could read and follow a schedule. God damn it Evrind, you think. What the hell are you doing?

You know that you should go directly to the schoolblock but some mystical force has turned your feet into rebellious little bastards and you are instead heading toward the dormitory wing. You forgot to bring a writing implement with you for the schoolfeed. Since your chances of finding anybody who will loan you one are about as high as having a flock of sparkling pixies fly from your ass, you decided to get one from your room. That will be your story in the unlikely event that you run into anybody. If Evrind’s room just happens to be on the way (spoiler alert: it totally is)…well, then you suppose there’s no harm in taking five seconds to check in as you pass by.

You hesitate to knock on Evrind’s door once you are standing outside his room. Part of you really hopes that he is in there, that there is some benign reason behind his missed appointment. For all you know, he might have done something dumb like trip over his sheets and crack his skull open or eat the orange-scented soap that has inexplicably begun to appear in all the common bathrooms. You wouldn’t put it past him and more importantly, you doubt that he would be culled if he was too injured or sick to move. You knock on the door.

There is no answer. You press your ear against the door, listening for any telltale sounds of
breathing, moaning, or—fuck it, why not?—globe fondling and you hear nothing. A wave of crotch-wetting embarrassment sweeps over you. *Who the chafing fuck do I think I am, his lusus?* you think. Of course he’s not in there. *He’s probably at the schoolfeed along with everybody else in possession of a halfway functioning pan.*

You make your way to the schoolfeed, fully expecting to see Evrind’s stupid grinning face and feel like a colossal moron for wasting even one stale iota of your concern on him. When you reach the schoolblock, the seed of worry that has been planted in your bowels blossoms into a vile tree of blistered fuck you fruit. No matter how many times you scan the room, there is no sign of Evrind anywhere.

You take a seat near the back of the schoolblock and proceed to spend less time listening to the schoolfeed than you do inventing fake-ass reasons that Evrind could not have gotten his ass culled. *They would have announced it, you think. They always announce it when anybody gets culled because they got a wild long-eared hop creature up their ass and did something stupid. Besides that, Cennia wouldn’t have asked me if I knew where he was; she would have known.* (You try not to consider the possibility that the awful fuckheads in charge of this operation couldn’t be assed to page Cennia that *oh by the way that Parmav kid won’t be coming around today because he’s a pile of eviscerated entrails and gore now.* You also try not to consider the possibility that Cennia knew Evrind was dead and she was just fucking with you like a spiteful bitch.

Towards the end of the schoolfeed it occurs to you that you have not checked the medical block yet. The idea ignites a tiny glimmer of hope in your blood pusher and you latch onto it as desperately as a certain seadwelling asshole with a genocide complex latches onto a potential significant other. You spend the final ten minutes of the schoolfeed sincerely hoping that Evrind is lying in the medical block covered in oozing blisters or with his eyes swollen shut—*anything* as long as he is alive because he is the only friend you have left in this stinkhole and you don’t know if you can take losing him on top of all the other steaming bullshit you have been put through.

You are the first person out the door when your instructor dismisses the schoolfeed. Not that that matters—everybody behind you will be turning left, toward the cafeteria to enjoy a lunch of tepid soup, pudding, and the exceedingly weird Earth food known as “green Jell-o.” The medical block, on the other grope member, is to the right. You are consequently free to proceed toward your destination at a pace just a tick below *EVERYBODY OUT OF THE GODDAMN WAY MY INNARDS ARE GOING TO SPEW ALL OVER THIS GODFORSAKEN CORRIDOR AND EVERYONE IN IT IF I DON’T MAKE IT TO A LOAD GAPER WITHIN THE NEXT THREE SECONDS.*

When you come barreling into the medical wing reception area, the troll sitting behind the desk—a brownblood guy you’ve never seen before—gives you a snooty look that he can cram up his nook and says, “Hello. What is your medical emergency?”

“Oh. Nothing,” you pant. (Holy flaming bulgerot, were you actually running fast enough to get winded? That’s embarrassing.) “I’m fine.”

The receptionist guy looks as though he wants to tell you to piss off and quit wasting his time because sitting behind a desk and scratching your ass all day is apparently serious fucking business. To his credit, he demonstrates that he is not completely socially stunted by saying, “Is there something you need at the moment?”

“Yeah. Is Evrind Parmav in here?”

Receptionist dude scrutinizes you as though he is cataloguing every pore on your face and filing the information away to be used for his own sick pleasure the second you leave him to the privacy of his
pointless desk job. “Who are you and what is your relationship to Evrind Parmav?”

“So he’s here?”

“I can’t disclose that information until you tell me your name and the nature of your relationship. Do you have an established quadrant relationship with Evrind?”

Even though you’ve learned to stop wasting the fucks you have to give on worrying about how the other recruits are interpreting the human friendship thing you and Evrind have going on, the bluntness of the question catches you off guard. You end up spluttering, “What? No! My name is Karkat Vantas and I’m just a friend. A concerned friend.”

Receptionist guy looks at you as though he is thinking about how you and Evrind are totally sharing a quadrant and doing unspeakably graphic, not-for-wigglers shit. You look at him as though you are thinking about how awesome it would be to punch his face. Finally, he types a long string of data into his computer and says, “Evrind Parmav was admitted several hours ago. You are welcome to visit him, but we ask that you avoid waking him if he is resting and that you limit your visit to no more than ten minutes. Just to perfectly clear, by ‘ask’ I mean that somebody will be around to drag your ass back out here if you exceed your allotted ten minutes. Do you understand?”

“Yeah. Which room is he in?”

Receptionist enters another string of text into his computer. “Room 24. Go through that door, take a right and it’s the fourth room on your left and don’t go wandering into the quarantine area or you’ll have to go through detox. I can tell you right now that you do not want to go through detox.”

You hurry through the door, throwing a hasty “thanks” to Receptionist guy over your shoulder as you go. You are careful to follow his directions to the letter because you have seen the poor trolls who were subjected to the horror known as “detox” and you have no desire to have all of your body hair burned off today, thanks. When you reach room 24, you find the door is closed. You knock, but you make sure to exercise some restraint because you do not want to be a piece of shit and wake Evrind up if he is asleep.

A voice from inside the room says, “Come in.”

You frown. The voice is definitely Evrind’s, but the words are garbled as though he is speaking through a mouthful of mush. You push the door open and barely suppress a knee-jerk reflex to recoil at what you see.

Evrind looks as though he has been professionally beaten. His lips are swollen like over-inflated bicycle tires. There is a lump the size of a small grapefruit forcing his left eye shut and his nose is even more of a fucked up mess than it was when you first met him. His right wrist is in a splint and oh Christ, his left horn is just GONE; snapped clean off less than an inch above the base.

You do an absolute shit job of hiding your shock as you exclaim, “Evrind! What the hell happened to you?”

Evrind appears to be just as shocked to see you as you are by his appearance. His good eye goes wide and in a voice that barely qualifies as ‘strained warble’, he says, “Karkat? No…no, no, no. I can’t…I—I can’t talk to you.”

“What are you talking about?” You take a step toward him and he shudders as though you slapped him. “Evrind, who did this to you?”

“They said…said they will take the other horn if…I t-talk to you.”
“Who’s ‘they’? What the fuck happened?”

Evrind seems to melt into the bed, his large frame reduced to something small and frail as a matchstick. “Waiting for Cennia and they—they made a—a trap and Karkat, I can’t talk to you.”

A hot tongue of rage curls through your guts. Evrind’s rudimentary English aside, it’s not hard to deduce what happened. Fucking piss-crawling cowards, you think. Too afraid to take him one-on-one like a real goddamn troll. In your life, you have only wanted to kill somebody in earnest a handful of times—far, far less than the average troll—but you honestly think that you could snap the necks of every one of the trolls responsible for this without losing a single night of mal-adjusted sleep. “Tell me who did this. Was it Nulian?”

“Karkat—“

“His crotch-fondling friends?”

“Karkat—“

“Just tell me who it was and I swear to fuck I will make them pay.”

“No-o-o,” he wails and oh god his chest is hitching and he is crying, actually fucking crying. “I can’t say it. I can’t—I can’t talk to you!”

The fire building in your bowels begins to dissipate. You had wanted to find out who had done this to your friend and make sure that it never happened again. It was never your intent to get him all worked up and scared shitless. Wow, I am the crappiest friend in the entire universe and all the realms beyond, you think. If the mother grub ate all the ingredients that comprise terrible friendship then shat them all out into one single egg, then that would have been my egg. In a more subdued tone, you say, “Evrind, hey—“

“No! No; I can’t talk to you, I CAN’T TALK TO YOU!”

“Evrind, I didn’t—“

“Just…just g-go awa-a-a-y,” he sobs. “I can’t talk to you; go away.”

“But I—“

“Go away! Please. Just go away!”

“OK fine!” you shout. “Fuck you too, then.”

You leave the medical block with Evrind’s frantic mantra of “go away, go away, I can’t talk to you, go away” echoing after you and the knowledge that you are now truly on your own.

> Future Vriska: Get the lowdown from Tavros
arachnidsGrip [AG] began trolling adiosToreador [AT]

AG: Taaaaaaaavros!
AG: Don’t pretend you don’t know I am here.
AG: I know you are online. Your Trollian tag is lit up like the flaming torch on top of last Twelfth Perigee’s 8ehemoth leaving.
AG: Come on Toreadoofus, answer me!
AT: hi VRISKA,
AG: That’s more like it.
AG: What the hell were you doing, anyway?
AT: nOTHING REALLY, jUST PLAYING A GAME THAT YOU WOULD PROBABLY
SAY IS FOR POOPING WIGGLERS AS WELL AS OTHER THINGS TO GENERALLY
HURT MY SELF ESTEEM, pROBABLY,
AG: Oh my god you were playing Fiduspawn, weren’t you?
AG: That game is even more lame ass than you. You have to admit that is pretty lame!
AG: I mean really? Who the fuck even plays that crappy game anymore?????????
AT: uH, i DO,,
AG: I rest my case. Laaaaaaaaame!
AG: Anyways, you should know 8etter than to keep me w8ting like that. I mean, if I am taking time out of my life to talk to you then you’d 8etter 8elieve it’s important! I don’t have time for you to 8e pulling this 8ullshit.
AT: sORRY, i GUESS,
AG: I guess I can let it slide this time. 8ut next time I won’t 8e so forgiving. Can’t have every8ody thinking I’m going soft, can I?
AT: uH, NO,
AT: i GUESS NOT,
AG: The correct answer is no, fuck nooooooo!
AG: So the next time you see that I am trying to contact you, you’d 8etter get those useless, floppy legs of yours under you and fucking hop to. Otherwise I’ll have no choice 8ut to make an example of you. Got it?
AT: yEAH, i GET IT,
AT: iF VAGUE AND SCARY THREATS ARE A TANGIBLE THING THAT YOU CAN
HOLD IN YOUR HAND, tHAT IS,
AG: Wow, Tavros. That was either the dum8est thing I’ve ever heard or the most pathetic, weak-slime attempt at a 8um I have ever seen in my life!
AG: Either way, you should 8e em8arrassed. Hell, I’m em8arrassed FOR you!
AT: oKAY, vRISKA, wHAT DO YOU WANT,
AT: bESIDES JUST TO ANTAGONIZE ME, wHICH IS A THING THAT GENERALLY
HAPPENS,
AT: wHEN YOU TALK TO ME, mOST OF THE TIME,
AG: Antagonize you? Tavros, you haven’t even SEEN antagonizing yet! 8elieve me, if I was trying to antagonize you, you would know it!
AG: 8esides, you act as though I need a reason to talk to my good 8uddy Torea8ore. Like it has to 8e some 8ig, fucking special occasion for me to contact you.
AT: bUT YOU JUST SAID, tHAT,
AT: yOU CONTACTING ME TONIGHT IS AN IMPORTANT THING,
AT: tHAT USUALLY MEANS THAT YOU WANT SOMETHING, aMONG OTHER
THINGS,
AG: It wasn't important for you, dummy! Not for me!
AG: But now that you mention it, there is something you are going to do for me.
AT: I don't know if that is a thing that is going to happen,
AT: At least, not until I know what it is, anyway,
AG: Of course you'll do it. You'll do it just to prove that you are slightly less useless than everybody thinks you are.
AT: :(
AT: I don't think everybody thinks I am useless,
AT: At least, not completely,
AG: See? Everybodly totally thinks you are useless! Useless, worthless garbage, that's what you are, Nitram.
AG: But I am here to do you a favor. I am giving you a chance to redeem yourself, and it is soooooo easy.
AG: All you have to do is answer one little question.
AT: That's it,
AT: That's all you want,
AG: Yep. That's it.
AT: Okay, well I might be able to do that, possibly
AT: What is the question,
AG: There is some information going around; some rumor or some shit. I don't know what it is, but I do know that it is something big.
AG: Kanaya Fussyfangs apparently doesn't know anything about it yet, Terezi is being a huge bitch and refusing to tell me anything even though she totally does know, and nobody else will even talk to me long enough to let me ask about it!
AG: I am starting to feel really out of the loop and I hate being out of the loop ::::(
AT: I don't know if I want to tell you,,
AG: So you do know!
AT: If Terezi doesn't want you to know,
AT: Then there is probably, uh, some reason, that she didn't tell you,
AT: I don't know, if I can tell you anything,
AT: Given the, uh, circumstances,
AG: What? Of course you can tell me!
AG: Terezi is just being a cagey bitch so she can lord it over me that she knows something I don't.
AG: Besides, just because Terezi is doing something doesn't mean you have to do it, too.
AG: The point is you should tell me what you know right now so we are all on the same page here.
AT: No,
AT: I don't think I want to,
AG: Oh come on!
AG: Tell me!
AT: No,,
AG: Tell me, Pupa!!!!!!!!!
AG: Teeeeeewell meeeeee!
AT: HHSHISROWIWIIIAAATTTTMMMMMYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY
AT: jUST STOP MIND CONTROLLING ME,
AG: That’s more like it.
AG: All right; I kept my end of the deal. Now you keep yours.
AT: oK, bUT COULD YOU MAYBE, nOT TALK ABOUT IT WITH ANYBODY,
AT: oR LET tEREZI KNOW i TOLD YOU, fOR THAT MATTER,
AG: Yeah, yeah. I solemnly swear not to utter a word of this to another living soul on pain of death and 8lah 8lah 8lah.
AG: Come on, get on with it!
AT: wELL, gAMZEE TOLD ME ABOUT THIS,
AT: bUT HE SAID, hE HEARD IT FROM tEREZI,
AT: wHO HEARD IT FROM nEPETA,
AT: wHO HEARD IT FROM eQUIUS, tHAT,,
AG: That wh8t?! Stop pausing for dramatic effect or whatever the fuck you are doing and T8LL M8!
AT: kARKAT IS ALIVE,
AG: That’s it? That’s the 8ig secret?
AG: What a fucking letdown!
AG: I mean yeah, okay it’s nice to know that some whiny, shouty asshole we all thought was dead a sweep ago is alive all of a sudden. That’s cool I guess.
AG: 8ut holy shit, I thought this was going to 8e some ground-shaking news here. What the fuck is every8ody’s pro8lem?
AT: tEREZI THINKS HE IS IN TROUBLE, pROBABLY,
AT: aND gAMZEE SAID A RESCUE MISSION, iS A THING THAT MIGHT HAPPEN, iN THE FUTURE,
AG: Okay, I guess that’s a little more interesting. 8ut I still don’t see why every8ody’s getting their undies in a twist a8out keeping it secret.
AG: W8……..
AG: Oh my god. You said this whole thing started with Equius, right?
AT: uH, yEAH,,
AG: Oh my god! Hahahahahahahaha!
AG: Pupa, I have to hand it to you. You really have no idea how helpful you have 8een.
AG: Aaaaaahahahahahahahaha!

arachnidsGrip[AG] ceased trolling adiosToreador [AT]
Once, several sweeps ago, you got into a pissing contest with Sollux over who was a more capable adversary. He’d led off by blowing out all of the windows in his hive with his still-developing psionics and then entreated you to “match that.” Being young, truculent, and eager to piss on his parade, you had contorted your face into an expression that suggested you were in dire need of a load gaper, and strained to make something—anything—happen with your mind. When, after five minutes, you had yet to do something as lame-ass low-level as make your hair stand on end, your three sweeps self had come to the painful realization that your friend could do something you could not. You had immediately tried to hide your embarrassment by assuring him that “Your dumb psionics wouldn’t be able to do anything against me because I’d cut your head off first.” You had then proceeded to piss away the rest of that night and many hours over the following sweep trying to awaken the psychic abilities that were surely lying latent in the deepest crannies of your pan. That there was nothing there to awaken really shouldn’t have come as much of a surprise. The tyrannical entities of fate and genetics had barely seen fit to fart you into existence, so why in grief-weeping Alternia fuck should you have expected them to have endowed you with something awesome like badass flashing eye lasers or the ability to predict the future?

Lack of premonitory ability notwithstanding, you have known since the moment that Migdal entered the schoolblock that something is up. You are no field expert on the life and habits of Migdal Rakura because even though he is the only authority figure involved in this festering boil of an operation who doesn’t make you want to puke on sight, you have less than zero desire to follow him around and document all of the gruesome details of being his ugly self including (but certainly not limited to) how often, on average, he tends to take a shit. Even so, it’s not that difficult to know when he has something important to say. It’s something in the way he carries himself—a subtle but definitely noticeable shift from pissed-off and stompy toward pissed-off and purposeful.

You are not the only one who is feeling shit-roiling apprehension. There is a charged atmosphere in the room that is making everybody fidgety as hell. If you had even the most pathetic lick of psychic power—which, as we have established, you most certainly have not—you would suspect that there was some kind of low-grade telekill pulse in effect. Clearly, the other recruits have caught Migdal’s change in demeanor and are reacting accordingly. Or maybe they are reacting to the massive stack of papers that Migdal had been carrying when he entered the schoolblock; the stack of papers now sitting on his desk like a towering mound of white bird poop as he guides you and your cohorts through another awkward session of advanced English idioms. Migdal may be trying to fool all of you into a false sense of security with his talk of how easy it is to fall off of logs and make pie, but you see through his flimsy attempt at maintaining normalcy to the bowel-melting truth that some serious shit is about to go down.

After the most uncomfortable two hours of schoolfeed in the history of paradox space, Migdal finally says, “All right. That’s enough English for today but you are not dismissed so keep your asses in your seats for a few more minutes because I have an announcement to make.”

He glares around the room, daring you all to do something dumb like stand up and see what happens. (You wonder why he even bothers with the intimidation song and dance anymore because everybody who has made it this far knows better than to trifle with the hardass adult troll.) When he is completely satisfied that nobody is going to do much as scratch their own ass without his permission, he says, “I am going to take a moment to cater to those of you lacking the mental capacity for long-term memory and remind them that your final comprehensive examination will be taking place in only five short days. I’m sure that you all have burning questions about how the test will work and what will be on it, and luckily for you, I have been cleared to share that information
with you. I also happen to be in a charitable mood.”

A forest of hands shoots into the air from the smattering of trolls sitting in the schoolblock. Migdal scowls at them. “I am not feeling charitable enough to take questions, so stop waving your limbs in the air like a bunch of halfwits. The way this is going to work is simple: I am going to talk, you are going to listen, and if I see another arm flapping in the air I will dismiss the schoolfeed and you will not receive any more information about the exam. Is that clear?”

The sea of waving arms immediately disappears. “Now then, those of you with more than one functioning brain cell will remember that you recently took a practice version of the final exam. All of the topics that were on the practice version will have their own sections on the final exam. The final may or may or may not include additional sections covering different material and no, I am not going to tell you what any of the extra content might be so absolutely do not bother to ask.

“Scoring for this exam will be different from your previous assessments. Of course, if you receive the lowest score on any section of the exam you will be culled, as per usual. However, your scores from each section will also be summed into a cumulative score. If your cumulative score places your performance in the bottom twenty percent as compared to your peers, you will be culled.”

Nobody says anything (you’ve all been conditioned by now to avoid saying anything when an instructor is speaking and the few trolls who never got the hang of that have long since been weeded out by Averic) but you see a lot of people shifting in their seats and exchanging anxious looks. Honestly, you can’t blame them (hell, you would probably be doing it yourself if people would quit treating you like a festering bulge blister and let you sit near them.) Shit, you think. That’s ten people, at least.

Migdal ignores the wave of quiet restlessness rippling through his audience. “I have your practice examinations here. They have been scored. You will notice that we have also graciously included your rank for each section as well as your overall cumulative ranking. Before I hand them back to you, I have one final information nugget for all of your feckless brains to consider.

“We intentionally issued this practice test without warning you that it was coming. Our goal was to determine which of you, if any, could perform at an acceptable level without prior preparation. Most of you performed as abysmally as expected. However, a select few recruits received scores that automatically qualify them for deployment. Therefore, the recruits with the top five cumulative rankings on the practice test will be excused from taking the final exam.”

The uneasy quiet dissolves into a roiling hiss of whispering which is the closest any of your schoolfeeds will ever get to globes-to-the-wall pandemonium. Migdal waits for the most pathetic example of anarchy in the entire universe comes to an embarrassingly polite end before he goes on. “I am going to call each of you down one by one to pick up your practice exams. Once you have received your practice exam, you are free to leave. Zylist! Come pick up your exam.”

You watch the troll with the last name Zylist—a girl with absolutely no defining facial features who you have probably met several times over yet you have absolutely no memory of having done so—hurry down to the lecture floor and retrieve her exam. She rifles through the pages as she climbs the stairs on the way to the door. You watch her face to see if you can gage where she placed, but she remains impassive and makes it out of the schoolblock without revealing jack shit.

It goes pretty much the same with recruits Yanith (f*cking Nulian, you think), Wynalt, and Wulami, although you notice Nulian take a seat towards the back of the room, presumably to wait for his crotch-sniffing buddies. Then it’s your turn. You head down the stairs at a pace that is neither too fast (because you are not going to give any bulge thumper sitting in an aisle seat to “accidentally” stretch out their leg and send you tumbling down the damn stairs) nor too slow (because you do not want to
Despite your general inability to formulate a single solid shit to give about this program or anything even remotely pertaining to your so-called life in it, you cannot help worrying about your scores because the thought of becoming Torkal’s personal chew toy is still as revolting as ever. You try to get a read on Migdal’s expression as you approach, looking for any cues that might tell you what to expect, but he barely graces you with a cursory glance. His beady gaze globes flick in your direction for a half second—just long enough to ascertain that you are indeed you and not some assmunch with a burning desire to know way more about your personal business than could possibly be considered healthy. By the time you reach his side, he is already barking out the next name on his list.

You try to play it cool and avoid looking at the sheaf of papers in your hand until you are safely out of the schoolblock. It really shouldn’t be that difficult a task to accomplish—it’s not like you have anybody to wait for and the idea of hanging around the schoolblock just to watch fifty other stressed-out recruits pick up their tests sounds about as desirable as drilling a hole through your own pan. You last about three seconds before your mutinous eyes decide that fuck you, asshole; we will look at whatever we damn well please and right now that paper is the most fascinating thing in the entire world so let’s have at it!

There is a red number three inked on the upper right corner of the page. It takes a moment for the significance of that particular number to register, but when it does you come to a dead stop in the middle of the stairs like a boorish idiot. (Wow, way to block the way for everybody else who was harboring hopes of ever leaving the schoolblock. All we can say here is that is sucks to be them because they are now subject to the whims of your capricious legs and their innate inability to move in response to significant stimulation of your surprise palate.) No way, you think. That cannot be what I think it is. You look again, fully expecting to see that your mind is playing shitty tricks on you—but no. There it is at the top of the page, as clear and insistent as an imperial drone presenting you with a filial pail: Cumulative rank: 3.

Your stomach performs a soaring acrobatic flip as you realize that you will never need to worry about Torkal getting his nasty-ass hands on you ever again. For one second you are drunk on your own elation, dizzy with it because it’s over, you made it, and Torkal can suck it. Then your throat clogs with mute horror as a second thought jolts through your pan: This is it; I’m really going to spend the rest of my sad and pathetic life on some wretched alien planet surrounded by hideous human-creatures.

Left to your own devices, you would happily continue standing in the middle of the aisle and sucking down your rotten cocktail of conflicting emotions like a complete tool for a ridiculously long time. You are saved from this embarrassing fate by a third realization: the fact that almost everybody left in the schoolblock is staring at you. You have yet another realization (Christ on an unleavened slab of grubloaf, at this rate you are about one more realization away from divine enlightenment) that you had better propel your ass into high velocity because the looks you are getting are heavy with the promise of blood—specifically, yours—if you continue to block the only way out of the schoolblock.

Once you are safely outside the schoolblock, you stop to thumb through the rest of your scores. (It’s not so much that you have to. You know that regardless the scores you received, you are never going to have to sit through another high-stakes kick-the-shit-out-of-everybody-else-OR-ELSE exam. In fact, you have a distinct desire to set the ream of paper in your hand on fire and shove it down the nearest available load gaper in celebration of your shit-tastic achievement. Still, this is one of the few things in your life that you have managed to not fuck up completely and you can’t help feeling the
You are nearing the end of the practice test when you hear a cruel peal of laughter. You look away from the sheet of paper to see Nulian leaving the schoolblock with three other trolls. At first you think that he is going to try to fight you again, this time with a couple of his lackeys to hold you down—on each side to make a shitty “let’s beat the snot out of Karkat sandwich.” Then you realize that he isn’t even looking in your direction. You are about to relax because you sure as greased heaving fuck are not going to push the issue if he isn’t, but then he turns to one of his friends and says something that makes your too-warm blood run cold: “I think we should all thank Evrind for being so stupid. He is going to save many, many lives when he scores lowest on every section.”

You don’t know if Nulian had intended for you to hear the load of nook discharge that he just hawked from his gape hole. You don’t know if he is even aware that you are standing within earshot. It doesn’t make much difference either way because you are too lost in your collective sentiment of oh fuck to focus on anything else.

The steady trickle of trolls passing you by has begun to dwindle considerably. You try to remember if you saw Evrind leave the schoolblock. The answer is no, you have no recollection of seeing a large, doofy-looking guy with only one horn but that’s really not saying much since you have been way too busy fondling your ego’s massively swollen shame globes to notice much of anything that has happened around you in the last ten minutes.

For an excruciating three minutes, you stand outside the schoolblock, watching as final dregs of your cohort pass you by. You see no sign of Evrind among them. When you are certain that the schoolblock is empty, you open the doors and peer inside.

You had hoped that you would not see Evrind there. You had hoped that he would have left with his new friends. You had hoped that Nulian was just being a stupid bastard who hasn’t got the faintest clue what the cloud of misconception and dumbassery spawning from his shout hole even means… but lo and behold there is one troll left in the schoolblock. He is sitting with his head down on the desk and even with one horn missing (especially with one horn missing) you’d recognize that stupid backward-raking style anywhere.

“Hey, Evrind.” He doesn’t look up or do anything to acknowledge your presence. You step into the schoolblock with a sigh and walk down the aisle and down the row until you are standing next to him before you repeat, “Evrind. Hey.”

He still doesn’t look at you but this time he shudders at the sound of your voice. (Fuck, you think. Is he crying?) After a long moment, he says, “What do you want?”

You frown because his voice is so tired and lifeless and not Evrind that you don’t know what to think. There is a stack of paper lying on the desk beside his head. Even with the front page half-obscured by one of the arms he has hugged up over his head, you can still see the words in the upper right corner: cumulative rank: 52.

“Let me help you.”

He sits up and oh fuck, his face is a blotchy mess of clear snot and maroon tears. He snorts up a truly impressive measure of nose mucus and scrubs at some of the more incriminating areas of his face with his sleeve. “No; I can’t talk to you.”
Your frown deepens into something so intense it hurts. Your facial muscles are straining with the effort of maintaining an expression that accurately conveys your level of utmost frustration. “OK, you know what? This whole ‘I can’t talk to you thing’ you’ve got going on here? This is bullshit.”

“You don’t understand. They won’t let me talk to you.”

“Well fuck ‘they’! I don’t care who they are or what they told you; they are a bunch of brainless ass wipes!”

He says nothing in response to your outburst, opting instead to sit there looking stricken and teetering on the edge of bursting into tears. Softening your tone (because goddamn it, you do not want him to start crying again), you say, “I know you don’t want other people to see me with you. Fine. Well, actually it’s not fine. It’s shit. But for now, we are going to be practical and pretend that it’s fine.”

Evrind doesn’t say anything but he doesn’t go back to crying, either. You take that as a good sign and plunge forward with, “Nobody has to see me helping you. You can come to my room or I can go to your room. Nobody would ever need to know.”

He sniffs back another noseful of snot and swallows down what must be a loogie of epic proportions. Then he darts his eyes around the schoolblock and, apparently satisfied that the two of you are truly alone, he croaks, “Can you make me pass the final exam?”

If you are being completely honest with yourself, you have no idea whether there is anything you can do over the next five days to ensure that he makes it. If you had just a little longer, if you weren’t starting so late in the game, if he wasn’t so far behind…there are so many fucking ‘ifs’ swarming around this rotting carcass of a situation that you could cut a solid slice of them out of the air with your sickle. Even so, you do not hesitate to say, “Yes.”

He looks at you with something that almost qualifies as hope. “I can help you, Evrind,” you press. “You’re my friend and I want to help.”

Evrind is quiet for a long time. You reign in your urge to make him answer, telling yourself that he may not be saying yes just yet but he also hasn’t said no, that this is the longest he has gone without screaming at you to ‘go away’ since the day you saw him in the medical block, and all of that has to count for something, right? Finally, he takes a deep breath, opens his mouth—and then the doors to the schoolblock swing open and two trolls come sauntering in.

The effect on Evrind is immediate. His eyes, so open and hopeful just a second ago, glaze over into two chips of hard ice and he jumps to his feet. Even in his normal easy slouch, he has several inches on you but now he is standing ramrod straight and towering over you by more than half a foot. With his face contorted into a hostile scowl, he snarls, “No! Go away; leave me alone!”

You try to say “Oh my god, don’t let these fuck heads intimidate you” but you only make it through the first two words before Evrind shouts, “Shut up, you…you mutant freak!”

You jaw clenches at the words ‘mutant freak’ because even though you know he doesn’t mean it, even though you know he’s just putting on a show for the shit eaters standing in the back of the room the words still sting. With a great effort, you tamp down your growing desire to plant your foot up his ass and instead hold your hands out with your palms up. In the most placating tone you can manage, you say, “Evrind—“

“No!” he snaps. Before you can react his hands are up and shoving against your chest with enough force to send you staggering back into the chair behind you. You tumble down into an awkward sit
with your ass only halfway on the seat, whanging the hell out of your back on the desk as you go. Evrind forces his way past you, waiting until he reaches the aisle to turn around and tack on two more parting words: “Fuck you!”

You watch him hurry up the aisle and out of the schoolblock, the two onlookers following close behind. Slowly, you untangle yourself from the chair and stand up. Shaking your head, you whisper, “God damn it, Evrind.”

Six days later it does not come as much of a surprise when you check the exam rankings and see the name PARMAV, EVRIND at the bottom of more than half the exam sections. What does come as a shock are the words printed underneath the results which succinctly announce:

All remaining recruits are to relocate to the medical block immediately following the next sleep cycle for horn removal procedures

> Future Eridan: Share some shocking gossip with your moirail
> Future Eridan: Share some shocking gossip with your moirail

caligulasAquarium [CA] began trolling cuttlefishCuller [CC]

CA: hey fef
CA: i hope you're there cause you are not gonna believe wwhat kan just told me
CC: )i –Eridan!
CC: It )as been so long since we last glubbed. I was starting to get WORRI-ED!
CC: )ow are you doing?
CA: okay i guess
CA: been havving a hard time gettin my fins on a decent doomsday devvice evver since vvris quit
giving them to me
CC: W)(ale t)(at's probubbly for t)(e betta, don’t you t)(ink?
CA: wwhat
CA: howw is that a good thing
CC: I M---EAN t)(at we’ve glubbed about w)(y you reely s)(ouldn’t be trying to krill all t)(e land
dwellers a bazillion times already.
CC: Beac)(ies t)(at, none of t)(ose devices ever worked!
CC: You would get so worked up and -EXCIT-ED every time s)(e gave you one and end up so
upset w)(en it failed. Sometimes you even got )(urt!
CA: okay fine i get it
CA: apparently me bein bored all the fuckin time is the best solution to evverything
CA: can wwe please movve on to discussin something else noww
CC: S)(ore! You said Kanaya told you somet)(ing?
CC: O)( my glub! Did s)(e offer to auspisticize for you and S)(oallux? 38O
CA: wwhat the
CA: eww
CA: no
CA: as if i wwould evver wwant to share a quadrant wwith that ugly dirt scraper
CA: thats gross fef
CA: wwait no
CA: its fuckin insulting
CC: It was just a joke, -Eridan. G-E-EZ!
CA: wwell it wwas in vvery poor taste
CA: besides wwhat kan told me is far more interestin than plain old quadrant buzz
CC: Oo)! I know )ow muc)( you love quadrant gossip.
CC: It must be somet)(ing reely ---EXCITING!
CA: yeah an you are nevver gonna guess wwhat it is
CC: W)(at is it?
CC: Did Kanaya )(ave to exterminate anot)(er )oard of t)(e undead again?
CC: Oo)(, oo)(! Did s)(e decide to give everyone free MAK----EOV------ERS?
CA: no
CA: no free makeovers and
CA: wwait wwhat the fuck wwas that first thing
CC: Did s)(e decide to move )er )ive underwater?
CC: No wait, t)(at’s stupid. 38/
CC: -Er…did s)(e let Gamsea talk )(er into trying one of )(is pies?
CA: NO
CA: damn it fef
CA: i said you wwould nevver guess so quit guessin and let me tell you
CC: )(-E-E )(-E-E sorry.
CC: I was just )aving a little fun!
CA: wwell stop cause wwhat im about to tell you is fuckin serious
CC: S)(-E-ES)(! Okay mister crabby pants.
CC: I am conc)(pletely searious now. Sea? 38l
CC: So w)(at is t)(is big news?
CA: you remember howw kar disappeared last swweep and wwe all thought he wwas dead
CA: wwell it turns out hes alivve
CC: O)(, I already )eard about t)(at! Isn’t it ----EXCITING?
CA: yeah its pretty fuckin exciting all right an
CA: wwait a second
CA: howw did you already knoww
CC: Sollux told me about it )(OURS ago!
CA: oh of course
CA: HIM
CC: Glub?
CC: W)(at’s wrong?
CA: oh nothin
CA: just gettin kinda tired of bein showwn up by some lowwblooded asshole wwith a fuckin mental
disorder
CC: W)(at are you glubbing about?
CC: So ...(e knew about Karcrab before you. W)(o CAR-ES?
CC: It’s not like it’s some big conc)(pefis)(ion or anyfin.
CA: yeah it is
CA: fuckin gutterblood is alwways findin neww and invventivve wways to stick in my craww
CA: i swwear its like hes doin it on purpose fef
CC: Are you S)(OR-E you two don’t need an auspistice? 38/
CA: wwhat
CA: fuck no
CA: i already told you i wwouldnt havve that air sucking mess in one a my quadrants
CA: not evven if he an i wwere the only trolls left on all of alternia an the future of our entire race
hinged on us gettin together
CA: id commit ritualized suicide and spare myself the shame
CC: I don’t know….
CC: )e’s kind of c)(armin once you get to know )im. I bet you two could be fronds if you weren’t
so focused on being irritated wit)(im all t)(e time.
CA: hes a fuckin pissblood fef
CC: 38O
CC: O)( my glub, -Eridan. RUD-E!
CA: its the truth
CA: hes a foul tempered uncouth disrespectful pissblood wwho has no business breathin the same air
as us
CA: i cant understand howw you can stand spendin so much time talkin to someone so awwful and
so little time talkin wwith your owwn moirail
CC: Wait. Is T)(AT w)(at t)(is is about?
CC: You t)(ink I’m neglecting you to )(ang out wit)( Sollux?
CA: no fef
CA: thats not wwhat i am tryin to convvey here at all
CA: wwhat im tryin to say is that as your moirail i think you should stop spendin so much time
wwith him because hes a bad influence
CA: not to mention a fuckin liability
CA: remember howw he wwent insane and bleww up his matesprits hivve
CA: they nevver evven found the body because there wwas nothin left to find
CA: he fuckin vvaporized her
CC: If you’re talking about w)(at )(appened wit)( Aradia, you and I BOT)( know t)(at wasn’t )(is fault.
CC: Do you know w)(at I t)(ink?
CC: I t)(ink t)(at maybe you are a little s)(ellous of )(im.
CA: me
CA: jealous a him
CA: thats a fuckin laugh
CC: I’m searious, -Eridan.
CA: wwhy the fuck wwould i be jealous a him
CC: I don’t know. But if you AR-E…
CC: I just want you to know t)(at even t)(oug)( Sollux is a very important frond to me and I DO enjoy glubbing wit)( im a lot, at t)(e end of t)(e nig)(t t)(e troll in my pale quadrant is still YOU, - Eridan!
CA: yeah
CA: i got that
CA: thanks fef
CC: Any time! 38D
CC: <>
CA: <>

caligulasAquarium [CA] ceased trolling cuttlefishCuller [CC]

> Present Karkat: Reach the end
You had known that losing your horns was going to suck. Hell, you still remember Torkal gleefully telling you all about the recovery time for the procedure like a sadistic, snot-gulping bastard because wow, casual banter about permanent dismemberment is not something that you tend to forget easily. Even without Torkal’s assurances to bolster your confidence in the actual degree of suckery that you were going to endure, you know just as well as any troll with a single functioning brain cell that breaking a horn hurts like a wailing grub-stomping motherfucker and you assumed that cutting them off couldn’t be much better. You had, in short, been prepared for the entire experience to suck harder than a blood-drinking swamp worm latched onto the most succulent region of your bulge. And yet, the moment you emerge from the chemical haze of anesthetic, you realize that you had not been prepared enough.

The room is spinning so fast that even the idea of moving or—fucking god forbid—sitting up makes you want to retch. It feels as though the bed is tilting at an impossible angle, like it’s decided to dump your ass on the floor because it is done dealing with your disgusting husk of a body. The only thing you can do is fist your hands in the sheets, close your eyes, and hang on and oh shit, oh SHIT CLOSING YOUR EYES MAKES EVERYTHING SO MUCH WORSE ABORT, ABORT, ABORT!

Cennia’s face looms into view over you, the only thing that has the decency to stay stationary as the room continues to rotate around you. Her lips are moving, but between the aftereffects of the anesthesia and the godawful spinning you barely even realize that she is speaking to you. It takes you a ridiculous amount of time to piece the patchwork quilt of word salad she is puking at you into comprehensible speech.

Finally, you understand that she is asking you if you can hear her. With a concerted effort, you manage to nod your head. This turns out to be a terrible idea because the movement immediately kicks the spinning into high-gear. You tighten your grip on the sheets, suck in a deep breath, and focus your entire being on not throwing up.

Cennia’s squawk hole is moving again. “Are you experiencing any pain?”

You try to assess what the fuck is actually happening with your body but the spinning and the tilting is so distracting you honestly can’t focus on anything else. You think that maybe you aren’t in any pain, but that does not make a single lick of goddamn sense considering what Cennia and her crew of shit rags have done to you and…and fuck, you wish that the spinning would go away long enough for you to figure this shit out.

Cennia repeats her question, more insistent this time. You think you hear an edge of concern there, which is funny because she has never given you the impression that she gives a single flying fart about your comfort before so why the fuck should she start now? Somehow, you manage to choke back your rapidly growing urge to vomit so you can croak, “D…dizzy….”

“Vertigo is an expected side effect of the surgery,” says Cennia. “The symptoms should begin to improve in a few days.”

She starts rambling on about all the secondary vestibular sensory systems that used to be in your horns but aren’t there anymore and nerves and all manner of hyper-detailed anatomical bullshit that you just do not have the energy to deal with at the moment. You would try to go back to sleep just so you could get away from her ceaseless cascade of verbal diarrhea if closing your eyes did not suddenly make everything about a billion times worse and ugh, why is she putting her arms behind your back, what the actual fuck is happening?
You try to twitch away from her because you don’t particularly relish having her skeevy hands on you under the best of circumstances, let alone when you are completely incapacitated. The movement spurs the spinning back up into high speed. You sink back into her arms with a cold sweat beginning to settle onto your face. Her arms begin to move and you realize with a sense of dread that she is trying to get you to sit up.

“No,” you moan. “No; don’t. Please….”

She sighs and very slowly says, “Karkat, we have removed your secondary vestibular sensory organs. You need to allow your vestibular system to acclimate to the change.”

You know that she is no doubt trying to explain why you are being subjected to this special brand of torture, but your brain is having none of it because right now you are diverting all of your think power towards not chucking up the contents of your stomach. From far away, you feel her arms come away from your shoulders, feel your back sink against a mountain of pillows propping you up into a half-sitting posture. The room continues to whirl around you, now with a delightful sensation of freefalling into an endless pit. You last a whole four seconds before your stomach finally rebels and you throw up all over the front of Cennia’s white lab coat. (You would probably find this hilarious if the gesture had granted you even the tiniest shittconstruct of relief, but the room does not stop spinning and your stomach keeps trying to heave until your eyes tear up because it fucking hurts, make it stop.)

Through your continued retching, you feel Cennia’s hands guiding you to lie back against the pillows. You hear her voice say, “Try to relax, Karkat. I have administered an anti-emetic and it should take effect shortly.”

The words float around inside your head like confused insects. By the time the meaning registers, your gut is already beginning to quiet down to a more manageable grumble of malcontent. You suddenly notice that your entire body is soaked with sweat and you are shivering. A cloth mops across your face—Cennia cleaning away the sweat on your face and the puke on your chin. You want to tell her to stop because with you helpless as a grub the action feels too close to pale territory for comfort, but whatever she gave you is making you tired and it feels good to get all that crap off your face so screw it, you let her.

The drowsiness tugs at you like an insidious current beckoning you out into a vast ocean of colorless nothing. Soon you are too tired to care about Cennia violating your quadrant sensibilities. You are too tired to care that the room is still spinning and the bed is still tilting. You are too tired to care about anything at all. You close your eyes and you sleep.

This shit-tastic pattern of wake up, puke, fall asleep continues uninterrupted for several days until finally, you open your eyes and the room is not spinning. You have never been more grateful for anything in the entire sum of your sad and pathetic excuse of a life. (That’s not to say that you are some ungrateful bulgewipe. Your life may be 99.9% inane bullshit with an extra-large side helping of actual shit, but you’ve always taken time to appreciate the small things in life—things like how lucky the Empire is to have been graced with the presence of Troll Will Smith or how it’s been a whole five perigees since the last time somebody actively tried to cause you bodily harm just to see your disgusting blood color. But wow, holy flying Jesus on a skateboard made of flaming shit, there is nothing like three days of intense, nonstop vertigo to really put things into perspective. Now that you know that a room which has the courtesy to remain stationary is something worth being thankful for, your gratitude knows no bounds.)

You lie there, relishing the way the walls just sit there not moving. You offer up a silent note of appreciation to the ceiling for its exceedingly kind choice to also stay the fuck still. The bed also
deserves special recognition for its incredible ability to not pitch around and try to throw you onto the floor.

After a few minutes of quietly enjoying the beautiful stillness of every inanimate object in the room, you decide to attempt sitting up. For the first several seconds, you are convinced that you have made the biggest mistake you have ever made in your life, that you pushed your luck and now you are summarily having your ass handed to you because everything instantly devolves into the now-familiar spinning sensation. Then the whirling slows to a gradual halt and hell fucking yes you just sat up without puking all over, look at you go, this is seriously better than winning a walk-on cameo role on an episode of Thresh Prince, well OK nothing is better than that because that would be the fucking pinnacle of awesome but goddamned if this doesn’t come close.

You are still celebrating your globe-smashing victory when Cennia enters the room. She takes in your upright posture with an expression of pleased approval (as she should because—guess what—you did it all by your own damn self).

“I expected that your vertigo would begin to resolve today,” she says. She brandishes a tray with a small bowl and a glass of water before adding, “I have brought you some basic nourishment. If you feel able, you should try to eat.”

Now that she has mentioned food, you realize that the only time you have spent not puking up everything inside your alimentary canal over the past three days was when you were drugged and sleeping. You are consequently so insanely hungry it feels as though somebody is boring a hole straight through your abdomen.

When she sets the tray in front of you, you are disappointed to see that the bowl contains only watery soup. Then you decide that fuck it, you’re too hungry to bitch about Cennia’s shitty culinary choices. You drink the soup down without bothering to come up for air and then immediately finish off the glass of water in three big gulps. The tiny meal barely makes a chink in the iron-thick armor of your newfound appetite.

Cennia appears to notice your disappointment. “I need to see how you handle that much before you eat any more,” she explains.

You decide that this is reasonable enough because despite your digestive sac’s insistent demand for more, more, MORE, your back and abdomen are still aching from all the abuse they have endured and the thought of going through any more is about as appealing as chewing on a piece of diseased cholerbear genitalia. Besides that, you are still coasting on the fumes of your happy discovery that the room has decided to stop playing the “Let’s see how much spinning Karkat can take before he yaks up his guts” game. You are just not in the correct frame of mind to be a cantankerous little shit for no good reason. Cennia predictably gives you the perfect excuse by adding, “If there are no problems, you can have some more later, after you are finished with Torkal.”

“Torkal?” you repeat. “You’re handing me over to Torkal?”

Cennia looks taken aback. “Karkat, I—“

“No! I did everything you assholes told me to do. I jumped through all of your stupid circular performance objects. I did everything right! You can’t do this!”

“Karkat! You are entirely misunderstanding my intentions. I am not planning to hand you over to Torkal for experimentation, though I may need to reconsider that line of thinking if you continue to scream at me.”
“Well then would you kindly explain to me what the fuck is going on? Because I thought the deal was that I would never have to see that creepy asshole again as long as I played by your shitty rules.”

Cennia purses her lips and you realize just a tick too late that shit, you just insulted her moirail, didn’t you? She treats you to a look that says wow, look who’s talking about being an asshole you insensitive sack of shit before saying, “Torkal performed your horn removal surgery. You need to see him so he can ensure that you are healing properly.”

You feel like you’ve just swallowed a gallon of ice water. You have devoted so much time and energy into ensuring that Torkal would never lay a single nasty grope digit on you that you cannot even process the idea that just three short days ago he was looming over your unconscious, unprotected self with a handful of pointy shit and free reign to do as he wished. The thought makes you feel ill and oh look, the walls are starting to spin again. You take a deep breath, waiting for the walls to stop moving (they do) and willing your meager meal to stay down (it does).

“Is that all he did?”

Cennia gives you a blank look. “Pardon?”

“He just did my horns? He didn’t go fucking around with anything else?”

“He most certainly did not,” Cennia exclaims. “Torkal’s application to perform additional exploratory surgeries was denied and I can assure you that he did no such thing because I was assisting him in the operating room.”

It occurs to you that this is the most flustered you have ever seen her. You suppose that it would upset you, too if some petulant little shit was calling your moirail’s character into question, but you can’t help it because Torkal is a scary bastard with a let’s cut Karkat into lots of little pieces fetish. You know that you should probably stop prodding the venomous sticking bug’s nest but you are far too worked up to comply with simple reason. You demand, “If you were there then why didn’t you do the surgery?”

“Because Torkal invented and perfected the technique and it is not my area of expertise. Now if you are quite finished asking questions, we should be going. Torkal is waiting for us.”

You aren’t finished asking questions. Hell, you could sit here asking questions forever if it would delay your meeting with sketchy-as-fuck Torkal that much longer, but her tone had left no room for argument and even though you are pretty sure she wouldn’t actually turn you over to her moirail this late in the game, you don’t particularly want to test your luck on that matter, either.

Slowly, you maneuver your legs over the edge of the bed. Cennia none-too-gently helps you to stand. There is a brief flash of the now-familiar spinning sensation and then whoa, shit what is this, why is everything tilting to the right? You sway on your feet and make a valiant effort to stay in an upright position but let’s be completely honest with ourselves here, the only thing that prevents you from executing a truly epic faceplant is Cennia’s hands on your shoulders.

You stand there, waiting for the floor to return to the nice, normal horizontal position it goddamn well knows it is supposed to be. It doesn’t. You try to take a step forward, but the weird tilt of the floor is disorienting enough when you are standing and walking only make it about ten bajillion times worse. Cennia is decent enough to catch you before you fall.

“What’s going on?” you gasp, trying to at least dredge up the coordination to stand on your own and failing. “Why is the floor—“
“This is the first time you have tried walking since the surgery,” Cennia interrupts, her tone clipped and utterly devoid of any hint of sympathy whatsoever. You are beginning to think that pissing her off was not your cleverest idea. “Your vestibular system will accommodate in time. Now come with me.”

You have no idea how she expects you to walk anywhere in this condition. You feel as though your feet are scrabbling with every step, like you are constantly on the verge of keeling over and everything you try to do to compensate the imbalance only makes it worse. Somehow, she manages to herd your unstable ass out of the room and out into the hall, where you promptly crash into the wall. You are pretty sure she let that happen on purpose, but you quickly discover that the tilting doesn’t seem quite so bad if you can keep a hand on the wall to steady yourself so—haha—the joke’s on her. By the time she drops you off at the examination room, you are hobbling along like a pro.

You try to avoid looking at Torkal as you stagger across the room and flop down onto the nearest chair. You are quietly grateful that you managed the maneuver without any mishaps because looking like a helpless jackass in front of Torkal is not high on your human bucket list (and on a side note, you are perfectly aware that humans use buckets as cleaning tools but the very idea of having something called a ‘bucket list’ is so ridiculously vulgar that even you are reluctant to use it for anything other than the vilest shit you can imagine).

Torkal’s weird hissing voice is still just as unsettling as ever as he says, “Already walking? Most recruits come to me in a four wheel device. Guess that confirms my theory. Smaller horns do correlate with faster recovery times.”

His expression suggests that he is being serious, but the leering psychic imprint he jabs you with makes you suspect that he is actually making a really rude remark about your horn size. You scowl and try your best to shut him out of your head. His presence dissipates to the edges of your consciousness to play silent spectator to your every thought and emotion like some sort of invasive mind worm.

You notice that there is a mirror on the wall directly across from where you are sitting. You try not to look because you aren’t terribly keen on seeing the sum of all the fucked up shit that they’ve done to you, but you have not seen a mirror since before the operation and you can’t hold back your morbid curiosity.

It is a relief to see that the top of your head is swaddled in bandages that conceal the damage from view. The bandages are wrapped so thick you can almost pretend that your nubs are still there and hidden under all the layers of cotton. It’s a comforting notion and even though you know that it is impossible, you let yourself cling to it until Torkal says, “Well, let’s see what we’ve got here.”

He leans toward you and you have to fight back the urge to flinch away from him like a scared little bitch. That obnoxious psychic haze of flatulence clouding your head crackles with something that you think is supposed to represent laughter. You pour all of your concentration into thinking the words FUCK YOU as hard as you can and you are pleased to note that the crackling laughter stops.

Torkal stands in front of you as he works at the helmet of white clinging to your head. You cannot see even the tiniest sliver of the mirror around his ugly ass, so it comes as a shock when he steps away from you with his hands full of cotton and you see what the bandages had been hiding.

You are surprised to see that your head has been shaved. (You immediately feel stupid for being surprised because wow, of course it’s shaved. You wouldn’t want a stray hair getting stuck in your think pan, would you?) With no hair to soften the impact, the alterations are like a physical affront. Your horns are gone. In their place are two shallow indentations, lined with a thin layer of metal.
You note that the edges of the indentations are threaded as though something is meant to be screwed in and you cannot for the love of gibbering fuck conceive what that something might be. (Fake horns? you think and nearly laugh because the idea is just that goddamn perverse.) The lining extends beyond the border of the holes, leaving a thin rim of metal no more than a millimeter in width before it seamlessly blends into your skin. Son of a bitch, you think. They didn’t just cut them off…they fucking mutilated me.

Torkal moves to stand in front of you again, getting way too much up in your business for comfort. He is so close you can smell the residue of whatever carrion he last consumed sitting heavy on his breath. You brace yourself to feel pain as he begins to poke around the surgical sites, but the entire area is numb and the only thing you feel is a vague impression of the pressure of his fingertips ghosting over your scalp. You can’t help frowning at that because you know it should hurt and the lack of pain feels like a copout; your body’s way of utterly failing to acknowledge that you have lost a major part of your identity.

“These are healing fine,” says Torkal. “You’re definitely ready for the plugs.”

Your frown deepens. “Plugs?”

Torkal doesn’t have the decency to explain what in the raw fuck he is talking about. He just walks off to retrieve the plugs, whatever those are. You bitterly think that Cennia would have been more than happy to tell you what was going on even if she does have a stick permanently inserted up her waste chute and you berate yourself for antagonizing her earlier. You decide that from now on you will be nothing short of a perfect gentletroll while you are in her presence. You will say “please” and “thank you” and “yes, good madam” if it will ensure that you never have to deal with her nookwhiff of a moirail ever again.

When Torkal returns, he is carrying two thin buttons of metal topped with rubbery bioflesh. The edges of the metal are threaded and oh, you get it, you see where this is going. You are lucky that your observational abilities are so keen because Torkal does not bother to utter a single word to explain what he is planning to do. Nope, the insensitive swill gulper just goes right ahead and screws the first of the plugs into one of the indentations on your head without so much as a “By the way, I’m going to be fucking around with the shit we stuck in your head. I sure hope you are ready for that.” Masked behind the weird curtain of numbness that has decided to shroud the top of your scalp, the sensation isn’t terribly unpleasant. The sound of the threads grinding together as the mechanism screws home is an entirely different matter: it seems to reverberate in your head, a scratching vibration that sends an uncomfortable shudder all the way down your vertebral column until the threads lock into place with a dull click.

“This bioflesh is engineered to sprout hair at the same rate as your natural hair growth,” Torkal says as he goes to work with the second plug. (Scratch, scratch, click goes the plug.) “Once your hair grows back you’ll need to keep it at least two inches long to hide the rims. Got that?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

Torkal continues to fondle the top of your head like a creeper, presumably checking the fit of the plugs. His psychic presence continues to stomp all over the inside of your head, drinking in your abject misery like a fine cocktail of shaken anguish fluid and despair. Finally, he says, “OK, we’re done. Stand up and I’ll take you back to your room.”

You get up out of the chair and damn it the floor is still tilting about fifty degrees to the right. Torkal catches you before you fall. You almost end up falling anyway because really, you do not want Torkal’s gross hands on you. Ugh, you think. Why the fuck can’t Cennia be the one doing this?
“Cennia is busy preparing the next recruit for my evaluation so you’re stuck with me,” says Torkal and wow, did you seriously forget that he can read your thoughts? Yes, you most definitely did. Good job pissing off the psychopath, moron. You are just full of great ideas that are wonderfully conducive to your long-term survival. Go you.

Torkal manhandles you out the door and back to your room with a lot more force and a lot less patience than Cennia. There is nothing about the experience that is not simultaneously awful and humiliating and nothing can adequately describe the measure of relief you feel when he finally dumps you off in your room and leaves you alone.

You sit on the bed for a few minutes after he leaves, getting your bearings. Then you carefully stand up and shamble over to the tiny ablution block attached to your room. There is a load gaper in there, an ablution trap the size of a human postage stamp, and a sink that is barely fit to piss in. You are not interested in any of those things. Gripping the edge of the sink for support, you direct your attention to the mirror above the sink.

Your skin is that weird human color. Your horns are gone. You bare your teeth and they are flat and straight behind the braces. The only part of you that still looks at all troll-ish are your eyes—and even that looks fucked up and weird now that your irises have changed to that disgusting candy red. You are definitely more ugly human alien than you are troll now and you are every bit as hideous as you had imagined you would be.

*I’ll never be able to go back to Alternia or join the fleet like this,* you think. *Earth is the only place I can go now.* And even though you have known that your life as a troll was over the second the Threshecutioners appeared on your doorstep, even though you have known exactly what was going to be in store for you if you managed to evade Torkal’s operation funhouse, the thought *hurts.* You are grateful that you are alone right now because the emotional shitstorm that has been swelling inside you ever since the Threshecutioners kidnapped you finally breaks, pounding at you in painful waves. You promise yourself that this is the only time you will ever let yourself give in like this. Then you lower yourself down to the floor, bury your face in your hands and you cry.

> PRESENT Vriska: Bring Equius up to speed
arachnidsGrip [AG] began trolling centaursTesticle [CT]

AG: Equiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiuuuuuuuuuuuuus.
CT: D --> What
AG: Oh, nothing. Just wondering what you’ve 8een up to lately. That’s all.
CT: D --> That is uncharacteristically civil of you
AG: Make any nasty lakes of sweat recently?
CT: D --> E%cuse me
AG: Fuck around with any lame-ass ro8otics?
CT: D --> Is this a joke
AG: Cry over any spilt milk?
CT: D --> If you are going to insist upon perpetuating this f00lishness then I will be forced to end this conversation at once
CT: D --> I have neither the time nor the patience to waste on your juvenile anti%
AG: Geeeeeeeeeeeez! Aren’t we a little finicky today?
CT: D --> Goodbye Serket
AG: Hey, w8! Don’t sign off yet. At least let me tell you what I came here to say!
CT: D --> Very well
CT: D --> What did you wish to disclose
AG: Oh, nothing much.
AG: Just that I heard you’ve 8een keeping secrets.
CT: D --> I haven’t the slightest idea what you are referring to
AG: Really? 8ecause I heard that Karkat Vantas is alive and Nepeta’s 8een a very 8ad moirail. ::::P
CT: D --> WHAT
AG: Hahahahahahahaha!

arachnidsGrip [AG] ceased trolling centaursTesticle [CT]

> Everybody: Join memo dii2cu22ion2 for iidiiot2
> Everybody: Join memo dii2cu22iion2 for iidiiot2

twinArmageddons [TA] opened PRIVATE memo dii2cu22iion2 for iidiiot2
twinArmageddons [TA] invited gallowsCalibrator [GC] to memo

TA: come on TZ.
TA: please do not leave me iiitiing here talkiiing two my2elf liike 2ome 2elf-ab2orbed douchebag.
TA: that 2hiit wa2 only ever funny when KK diid it.

gallowsCalibrator [GC] joined memo

GC: H3LLO MR 4PPL3B3RRY
TA: hey TZ.
TA: do you want two help me moderate thii2 iicoming 2hiit2torm?
GC: >:?
TA: >:??
TA: what ii2 >:? 2uppo2ed two mean?
GC: 1T M34NS TH4T 1 4M NOT S4Y1NG NO BUT 1 4M H4V1NG 4 H4RD T1M3
1M4G1N1NG WHY YOU TH1NK YOU W1LL N33D MY H3LP
GC: SO I W1LL R3P34T
GC: >:??
TA: there are going two be ten people in here and about half of them are a22hole2.
TA: keeping everybody on topic ii2 going two be a bitch.
TA: al2o ii am probably going two be runniing a few hackiing iinterfance2 at 2ome point twonight.
GC: PL34S3 T3LL M3 YOU 4R3 NOT PL4NN1NG TO H4CK 3QU1US WH1L3 W3 4R3
1NT34T1NG H1M
GC: TH4T WOULD N3V3R FLY 1N 4 C1V1L1Z3D COURTBLOCK
GC: DO 1T 4FT3R 1NST34D
TA: actually ii kiind of already diid.
GC: >:O
GC: SOLLUX C4PTOR 1 THOUGHT SOM3TH1NG SM3LL3D OFF 4BOUT YOU TH1S
F1N3 3V3N1NG
GC: NOW 1 KNOW TH4T B3N34TH TH4T YUCKY MUST4RD T3XT MY NOS3 W4S
D3T3CT1NG TH3 D3SP1C4BL3 ST3NCH OF 4 SN34KY L1TTL3 BUTT
GC: 1 DONT KNOW WH3TH3R TO B3 D1S4PP01NT3D OR PROUD
GC: 4CTU4LLY L3TS GO W1TH PROUD
GC: PROUD IS GOOD
GC: 1 T4K3 1T YOU D1D NOT F1ND 4NYTHING H3LPFUL
TA: no. hiit2 hard drive wa2 full of robotiic2 engineering bluepriiint2 and mu2clebea2t porn.
TA: 2o much mu2clebea2t porn.
TA: whatever he know2 about KK, it2 not on hiit2 computer.
TA: ii wa2 thiinkiing that twonight the hackiing would happen after EQ gave u2 a lead 2o ii would
have 2ome iidea of where two 2tart.
TA: the point ii2 ii cant concentrate on what ii2 going on in here and break a 2ouped up firewaller at
2he 2ame tiime.
TA: well actually ii probably can but the re2ult would be pretty 2hiitty on both end2.
GC: OK 1 G3T 1T
GC: L3TS B3 TH3 CO-MODS
TA: ok ju2t a 2ec.

gallowsCalibrator [GC] has been granted moderator privileges
TA: bam. done.
GC: OH TH3 TINY 4LMOST 1NS1GN1F1C4NT POW3R
GC: IT 1S 1NTOX1C4T1NG
GC: TH3 M3MO 1S MY COURTBLOCK 4ND TH3 B4N H4MM3R 1S MY M1GHTY G4V3L
GC: H1S TYR4NNY MUST B3 QU4K1NG W1TH J34LOUSY
GC: H3H3
GC: SO NOW WH4T
TA: diid NP ever get back two you?
GC: NO
GC: M1GHT 4S W3LL CH3CK 1N W1TH H3R NOW
gallowsCalibrator [GC] invited arsenicCatnip [AC] to memo
arsenicCatnip [AC] joined memo

AC: :33 < hi sollux
AC: :33 < hi purrezi
AC: :33 < where is efurryone else?
GC: W3 H4V3 NOT 1NV1T3D TH3M 1N Y3T
GC: W3 W4NT3D TO S33 1F YOU H4D 4NY LUCK W1TH 3QU1US F1RST
AC: :33 < *sigh* no
AC: :33 < he wouldnt tell me anything
AC: :33 < in fact he was furry upset that I spilled the legumes
TA: do you think he will 2tiill 2how up twoniight?
AC: :33 < oh i know he will!
AC: :33 < i dont know how much he will tell you though
AC: :33 < he is in a really terrible mewd
GC: DO NOT WORRY
GC: BY TH3 T1M3 W3 4R3 DON3 H3R3 H3 W1LL B3 S1NG1NG L1K3 4 B34UT1FUL Y3LL0 W0NGB1RD
GC: JUST L1K3 3V3RY M1SCR34NT 4ND M4LCONT3NT WHO TR13S TO T4K3 4 ST4ND 4G41NST TH3 1N3XOR4BL3 M1GHT OF TH3 L34GU3 OF L3G1SL4C3R4T3RS
TA: oh my god
TA: TZ ii hope youre not planniing two turn thii2 iintwo a courtblock drama rp.
TA: becau2e ii diid not 2iign up for that 2hiit.
GC: NO W0RR13S
GC: 1 W4S JUST 1LLUSTR4T1NG MY PO1NT W1TH 4 D3L1C1OUSLY COLORFUL S1M1L3 TH4T H4PP3N3D TO R3F3R3NC3 TH3 4LT3RN14N JUST1C3 SYST3M
GC: 1 C4N 4SSUR3 YOU 1T W1LL NOT H4PP3N 4G41N
GC: NOW L3TS 1NV1T3 3V3RYBODY 1N B3C4US3 COURT 1S NOW 1N S3SS1ON!
TA: god damn iit TZ.
GC: OK TH4T W4S TH3 L4ST T1M3
GC: BUT S3R1OUSLY W3 SHOULD PROB4BLY G3T TH1S GO1NG
AC: :33 < wait!
GC: >:?;
TA: what.
AC: :33 < befur we start i just want to say dont go too hard on equius if you can help it
AC: :33 < i dont think he would k33p something like this from me unless he thought he was purrtecting me from something
AC: :33 < even if he is being a big jerk about it
GC: DULY NOT3D
GC: L3T TH3 R3C0RD SHOW TH4T MR BLU3B3RRY 1S TO B3 H4NDL3D W1TH TH3 M4X1M1MUM M34SUR3 OF L3N14NCY 4LL0W3D BY TH3 L3TT3R OF TH3 L4W
TA: ok now ii know you are ju2t tryiing two pii22 me off.
GC: >:P
GC: H3H3
TA: whatever. let2 ju2t get thii2 2tarted whiile the niight ii2 2tiill young.
twinArmageddons [TA] invited adiosToreador [AT] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited grimAuxiliatrix [GA] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited arachnidsGrip [AG] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited centaursTesticle [CT] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited terminallyCapricious [TC] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited caligulasAquarium [CA] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited cuttlefishCuller [CC] to memo
grimAuxiliatrix [GA] joined memo
cuttlefishCuller [CC] joined memo
GA: Good Evening
GA: Or To Be More Accurate Good Evening To You And Good Morning For Me
adiosToreador [AT] joined memo
CC: )i everyone!
TA: hii FF.
TA: and KN.
AT: hi,
arachnidsGrip [AG] joined memo
caligulasAquarium [CA] joined memo
TA: 2hiit. and TV.
TA: hii TV.
AG: Whaaaaaaaat? No hello for me?
AG: Don’t tell me you are in one of your 8itchy moods again, Captor.
AG: 8ecause if that’s the case I’m getting out 8efore this whole memo turns into a giant drama shitfest.
GC: H3R3, L3T M3 H3LP YOU W1TH TH4T
gallowsCalibrator [GC] banned arachnidsGrip [AG] from responding to memo
TA: what the hell TZ.
GC: WH4T SH3 W4S B31NG RUD3
GC: 1 4M JUST S3ND1NG 4 M3SS4G3
GA: And What Exactly Is The Message You Are Attempting To Convey
GC: TH4T TH1S IS 4 S4F3 PL4C3 4ND 4NT4GON1Z1NG P3OPL3 FOR NO GOOD R34SON 1S NOT GO1NG TO FLY
CA: oh come off it
CA: wwe all knoww her antagonizin nature is her finest quality
TA: well ii gue22 you would be the one two know that.
TA: beiing her ex-kii2me2ii2 and all.
GC: SOLLUX! S4F3 PL4C3!
CA: you shut your stinkin air hole sol
CA: at least i didn’t fuckin KILL my ex
CC: 38O
CC: ----ERIDAN! W)(at t)(e GLUB!
TA: fuck you, fii2h diick.
CA: fuck no
CA: this may come as a surprise to you but even i havve standards
GC: GUYS NO
GC: STOP
TA: oh my god that wa2 not a 2oliicitatiion you creepy fuck.
CA: i kneww that
CA: i was makin a witty rejoinder
CA: i should havve knowwn you wwould be too obtuse to get it
GC: GUYS 1 4M S3R1OUS H3R3
TA: well maybe it would be ea2ier two tell when you are being a pretend a22hole if you diidn’t act liike an actual a22hole all the tiime.
CA: oh look wwhos talkin about bein an asshole asshole
GC: OK TH4T 1S 1T

gallowsCalibrator [GC] banned twinArmageddons [TA] from responding to memo
gallowsCalibrator [GC] banned caligulasAquarium [CA] from responding to memo

GC: SORRY YOU H4D TO S33 TH4T, FOLKS
GC: 1F TH1S W4S 4 R34L COURTBLOCK SC3N4R1O 1 WOULD HOLD TH3M IN CONT3MP
GC: BUT S1NC3 1T ISN'T 1 4M JUST GO1NG TO S4Y WOW TH4T W4S OBNOX1OUS
GC: 4ND 4LSO K1ND OF 3MB4RR4SS1NG TO W4TCH
GC: F3F3R1 PL34S3 T3LL M3 TH3M Y4R3 NOT L1K3 TH1S 4LL TH3 T1M3
CC: Ac3)(elly, t)(ey kind of are.
GC: UGH
GC: HOW DO YOU 3V3N D34L W1TH 4LL TH3 SCR34M1NG?
AC: :33 < maybe they just n33d a good auspistice!
AC: :33 < kanaya what if you
GA: No
CC: No
GA: Laying Aside My Own Doubts As To The Effectiveness Of Such An Arrangement It Appears That Their Mutual Quadrant Mate Has Her Own Objections
GA: You Cannot See It But That Remark Was Followed By A Question Noodle Meant To Convey Mild Curiosity Towards The Mutual Quadrant Mate I Just Mentioned
CC: Wait. Me?
GA: Unless You Are Aware Of Any Other Target Of Both Eridans And Solluxs Affections Then Yes You
CC: O)(. I wasn’t trying to make a comment about your abilities as an ausfis)(tice, Kanaya.
CC: I was just going to say t(at I don’t t)(ink t)(ey are angling toward ROMANTIC )(ate.
CC: I’m pretty s)(ore t)(at t)(ey ACS)(ELLY want to krill eac)( ot)(er.
AT: uh, i UNDERSTAND THAT TALKING ABOUT QUADRANTS IS AN INTERESTING THING, fOR SOME PEOPLE,
AT: bUT, i THOUGHT THE POINT OF THIS WAS TO TALK ABOUT kARKAT, aND WHAT WE ARE GOING TO DO TO HELP HIM, aMONG OTHER THINGS,
GC: 1T 1S!
GC: BUT TH3R3 1S NOT MUCH TO DISCUSS UNT1L 3QU1US G3TS H3R3
GC: N3P3T4, YOU 4R3 SUR3 H3 1S COM1NG?
AC: :33 < yes! he purromised he would be here and he always k33ps his purromises
AC: :33 < he will be here soon, youll s33
GA: In That Case I Would Like To Suggest That We Unblock Vriska While We Are Waiting
GA: Eridan And Solluxs Behavior Was Distracting And Clearly Deserved Censure But Your
Treatment Of Vriska Seems A Touch Heavy Handed Doesn't It

AT: NOT REALLY, NO

GC: BUT SH3 IS TH3 ON3 WHO THOUGHT IT WOULD B3 FUNNY TO CONT4CT 3QU1US 4ND T3LL H1M TH4T 3V3RYON3 W4S W1S3 TO H1S S3CR3T B3FOR3 H4D 4 CH4NC3 TO T4LK W1TH H1M 4BD4 T0 TH4S M4K1NG T0N1GHT 4BD4T 4 B1LL1ON T1M3S MOR3 4WKW4RD TH4N IT 3V3RYN3 4DD3D TO B3

AC: :33 < yeah
AC: :33 < he ended up contacting me and throwing a big hissy fit
AC: :33 < it took me hours to calm him down :(

centaursTesticle [CT] joined memo

GC: SP34K OF TH3 M4L1C1OUS P1TCHFORK C4RR1NG 3NT1TY
CT: D --> I will have each and every one of you know that I will abso100tely not be sharing any information with respect to Vantas tonight
CT: D --> My reasons for attending this shameful display are to inform you of this fact and to ensure that Nepeta is not compromised by this f00lishness
CT: D --> This situation has already surpassed the bounds of acceptable impropriety
CT: D --> None of you shall question me any further on the matter
AC: :33 < hi equius!
CT: D --> Nepeta, I forbid you from participating in these disgraceful anti%
CT: D --> You will leave this memo at once
AC: :33 < no way! this is too impurrtant to miss
AC: :33 < im not going anywhere
CT: D --> Yes you are
AC: :33 < no im not
CT: D --> Yes
AC: :33 < no, no, no!
AC: :33 < you cant furce me to go anywhere so im staying
CT: D --> Very well
CT: D --> You may remain
CT: D --> However you will cease responding this instant
AC: :33 < raaaaaaawwwwr! XPP
GC: OK 1 GU3SS 1T IS T1M3 TO UNBLOCK 4LL TH3 R4BBL3ROUS3RS NOW TH4T OUR GU3ST OF HONOR H4S 4RR1V3D
gallowsCalibrator [GC] unbanned twinArmageddons [TA] from responding to memo
gallowsCalibrator [GC] unbanned arachnidsGrip [AG] from responding to memo
gallowsCalibrator [GC] unbanned caligulasAquarium [CA] from responding to memo

GC: W3LCOM3 B4CK K1DS
GC: 1 HOP3 YOU 4R3 R34DY TO PL4Y N1C3 BEC4US3 MY B4N H4MM3R 1S ST4RT1NG TO G3T1CHY
AG: Oh my god who thought it would 8e a good idea to let Pyrope moder8 this clusterfuck?
TA: god damn it tzi did not give you mod privilige2 2o you could ban me from my own memo.
AG: Oh. Well that explains that.
GC: SORRY BUT YOU W3R3 K1ND OF M4K1NG 4 SC3N3
GC: YOU KNOW, TH3 ON3 YOU TOLD M3 TO DO
TA: ok, ok. ii wa2 being a diick.
TA: poiint taken.
CA: wwell i havve to say its alwways refreshin to see somebody wwise enough to knoww their
owwn shortcomings
CA: especially when that person is a dense fuck in all other respects
GC: 1 H4V3 THR33 WORDS FOR YOU 3R1D4N
GC: 1TCHY
GC: B4N
GC: H4MM3R
CA: ok fine
CA: wwhatevver
CA: just tell the dirtscraper to lay off a my quadrants because i aint interested in his skeevvy ass
TA: yeah. 2ure. whatever you say, ed.
TA: let2 ju2t get thi2 2hiity memo on track now that everybody ii2 fiinally here.
AT: uH, aCTUALLY WE ARE STILL MISSING SOMEBODY,
AT: gAMZEE ISN’T HERE YET,
AG: He’s had plenty of time to get his stupid clown 8utt here.
AG: I say we start without him.
TA: 2econded.
CT: D --> No
CT: D --> Nothing shall commence without the highb100d
AT: bUT, wHAT IF HE FORGOT,
AT: hE MIGHT NOT EVER SHOW UP,
AT: HAT IS A THING THAT IS VERY POSSIBLE AND ACTUALLY EVEN LIKELY TO HAPPEN,
GC: Y34H, 1 4M GO1NG TO GO 4H34D 4ND S4Y 1TS T1M3 TO ST4RT NOW
GC: W3 C4N 4LW4YS G1V3 G4MZ33 TH3 LOWDOWN ON WH4T H3 M1SS3D 1F H3 SHOWS UP L4T3R
CT: D --> Neigh
CT: D --> The highb100d will arrive when he sees fit
CT: D --> Until then we must wait out of deference to the respect that his position demands
AG: Wooooooow.
AG: If I didn’t know any better I’d say somebody is STALLING!
CT: D --> Your failure to acknowledge the natural order of the hemospectrum is udderly reprehensible
CT: D --> I refuse to subject myself to such gross impropriety
CT: D --> If you continue to trample the bounds of societal decorum by galloping forward with the current proceedings, then I will have no choice other than to remove myself from the conversation immediately
AG: Oh my gooooooood are you even serious right now?
AG: I went out of my way to make a shitty horse pun and I h8 horse puns!
AG: Don’t you think the least you can do is take the stick out of your ass for a few minutes???????
AG: Hellooooooo! Alternia to creeper muscle8east fetishist Zahhak!
AG: Come on you asshole. Answer me!
AT: uHH, hE’S NOT ANSWERING,
AG: I c8n see th8t, you b8g dummy!
GC: TH3 B4N H4MM3R
GC: 1T 1TCH3S
AG: OK fine. I’ll shut up.
AG: You tyrant.
GC: >:]
GC: >8]
AC: :33 < equius? are you still here?

centaursTesticle [CT] is an idle troll!
TA: 2hiit.
GA: Oh Dear
CC: 38(
CA: wwoww vvris
CA: wway to royally fuck THAT up
AG: Hey, how the fuck was I supposed to know he would go running off like a sissy the second someone decided to call him on his bullsh0t?
AG: If you want to 8lame anyone for this then 8lame Gamzee.
AT: bUT gAMZEE ISN’T EVEN HERE,
AG: Exactly! None of this would have happened if that 8raindead moron had just shown up when he was supposed to.

terminallyCapricious [TC] joined memo

TC: WhOa. LoOkS lIkE tHiS mOtHeRfUcKeR gOt HeRe AlL bAcKwArDs FuCkInG lATe.
TC: wAs I aLl Up AnD mIsSiNg AnY oF tHe MoThErFuCkInG cOnspIrE tAlK?
GA: Allow Me To Assure You That You Have Missed Nothing Of Any Significance
GA: In Fact It Is Beginning To Appear As Though There Will Be No Quote Conspire Talk Unquote Tonight After All
CA: yeah and no thanks to you gam
CA: wwhere the fuck havve you been
TC: I wAs ReLaYiNg SoMe HeAvy pRaIsE tO tHe MiRtHfUl MeSsIaHs.
TC: yOu KnOw HoW tImE gEtS aLl BiTcHtItS cRaZy WhEn ThE wIcKeD sPiRiT cOmEs Up OuT oF nOwHeRe AnD fIlLs A fUcKeR wItH a PoWerfuL UrGe To LaY dOwN tHe NaStY vErSeS.
TA: no. iim pretty 2ure nobody here ha2 any idea what you are talkiing about riight now.
AT: aCTUALLY, i DO,
TA: waiit, really?
AT: i THINK SO,
AG: What, so now you think you’re some hotshot clown whisperer?
AG: Tavros, I have to hand it to you. Here I was thinking you couldn't possi8ly invent a made up fantasy even lamer than sad Pupa Pan wanna8e 8ut somehow you managed to come through.
GA: Personal Barbs Aside I Must Admit That I Share Vriskas Sentiment Of Mild Surprise And Disbelief
CA: yeah
CA: nobody can make sense of gams mystical clowwn mumbo jumbo
CA: not evven gam
AT: wELL OK, i DON'T UNDERSTAND THE CLOWN THINGS MOST OF THE TIME, oR EVER FOR THAT MATTER,
AT: bUT i DO KNOW THAT SOMETHING, wHEN CONFRONTED WITH THE BEATS THAT ARE BOTH STRICT, aS WELL AS MEDICALLY COMPOROMISED,
AT: i CAN’T HELP BUT DROP SOME SICK FIRES,
TC: Aw YeAh.
TC: yOu PrEaCh It, BrOtHeR.
TC: ThE bEaTs ThEy FuCkInG fAlL InG
TC: aLl ThE mOtHeRfUcKeRs CrAwLiNg
TC: JuSt To CaTcH a GlImPsE oF It ThEy Be BaLiInG
AT: yES WE ARE SLAMMING
AT: sOME MIGHT EVEN SAY JAMMING
AT: hARDER THAN TWO DIAMONDS AFTER A PALE FAMINE
YOU TALK ABOUT CLOWNS THAT I DON’T KNOW,
BUT THAT’S OK, I TAKE THAT TIME TO WATCH MY FIDUS SPAWN GROW,
AND THEN I COME BACK BECAUSE I CAN’T BREAK THE FLOW,
OF NASTY VERSES ON FIRE,
HATERS BETTER STEP OFF, I EST THEY, UH, EXPIRE,

did this memo just turn into a thirty lam poetry edition?

I DONT 3V3N KNOW 4NYMORE :/!

SAY YOU LACK THE UNDERSTANDING
OF THE WICKED RELIGION WHAT’S ALL UP IN MY HEAD CRAMMED IN

TO TOP.

SO LET ME TOSs A CLOUD OF SPECIAL STARDUST WHAT YOU CAN GAZE IN
GET YOURSELF A MOTHERFUCKING EDUCATION

DO NOT DROP ANY MORE TACK BEAT2.

DO NOT NURSE ANY MORE DROPPED RHYME2.

DO NOT PERFORM ANY OTHER 2E2ELE22 METAPHORICAL ACTION2 THAT DE2CRIIBE 2AYE22IVE LINE2 OF VER2E.

MAKING THE GREATEST MIRACLE WHAT EVER WAS AROUND
BRINGING YOU UP SO YOU’RE DOWN WITH THE CLOWN.

I GAVE YOU FAIR WARNING GZ.
NOW I AM GOING TO HAVE YOU.

WAIT SOLLOC)!

WY can’t you let (im stay?

HE I2 HIJACKING THE MEMO, FF.

BE2IDE2 THAT NOBODY WANT2 TO BE ENDLESS WALL2 OF BAD 2LAM POETRY.

IT2 JU2T INHUMANE.

WYALE I WAS SORT OF -ENJOYING IT!

…YOU WERE?

Y-----ES YOU SEALLY CRABBY BUTT!

FiSH SiS ET TiNg HeR aPPReCiAtIoN oN TO The RiGHTeOuS vErSeS iS mAkIn g ME aLL PrOpEr ThaNSKfUl.

hONK hONK :o)

38D

WHAT WAS EVEN THE POINT OF THISI2 MEMO?

2OMEBODY PLEA2E rea22ure me that we did start thii2 thing wiith an actual purpo2e iin miind.

OH JUST L3T H1M ST4Y FOR NOW

ITS NOT L1K3 W3 C4N DO 4NYTH1NG PRODUCT1V3 UNT1L 3QU1US D3C1D3S TO COM3 B4CK

MIGHT 4S W3LL TO HAVE FUN WITH 3QU1US D3C1D3S TO COM3 B4CK

WHAT W2 EVEN THE POINT OF THISI2 MEMO?

2OMEBODY PLEA2E rea22ure me that we did start thii2 thing wiith an actual purpo2e iin miind.

OH JUST L3T H1M ST4Y FOR NOW

ITS NOT L1K3 W3 C4N DO 4NYTH1NG PRODUCT1V3 UNT1L 3QU1US D3C1D3S TO COM3 B4CK

AG: 8LUH 8LUH I’m Thollucht Captor and I can’t go more than two thecondth without whining a8out how every8ody around me thuckth.

AG: Honestly, your stitching is waaaaaaaay more o8noxious than their 8ad rapping.

AC: :33 < ch33r up pawllux

AC: :33 < THE POETRY MIGHT BE KIND OF BAD BUT YOU HAVE TO ADMIT THAT THEY ARE PAWFULLY CUTE TOGETHER

AC: :33 < I WILL HAVE TO REMEMBER TO UPDATE THE SHIPPING WALL LATER!

AT: uHH, i’M SORRY, BUT i DON’T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT, EXACTLY.

CT: D --> Welcome highb100d

CT: D --> Please excuse my tardiness
CT: D --> I stepped away from my computer for a moment in order to retrieve a fresh stack of towels
CT: D --> Forgive me my insolence
TC: NaH, bRo. It’s cOoL.
CT: D --> No
CT: D --> My behavior is disgraceful
CT: D --> Your failure to correct me is likewise una%eptable
CT: D --> I command you to discipline me at once
CT: D --> Please
TC: uUuUuUhHh…
TC: :o(
CA: ok no
CA: i just endured a giant block a fuckin terrible slam poetry
CA: if this devvolves into one a zahhaks dom sub fantasies I am gonna perform an acrobatic fuckin
piroiuette off the handle
CA: eq wwe get it
CA: youre scum gam is a disgrace and you get off on gettin ordered around
CA: noww lets skip all a that shit and get to the point of this fuckin memo already
CT: D --> Your commands are undiginified and po100ted with foul language
CT: D --> Furthermore tradition mandates that I ignore all orders from you thus preserving the noble
feud between sea and land dwellers
CT: D --> Therefore
AC: X(( < grrrrrrr!
AC: :33 < equius stop trying to purrvent us from talking about karkat
CT: D --> I
CT: D --> Very well
CT: D --> Though I would STRONGLY prefer a reprimand from the highb100d I will settle for
Ampora’s vastly inferior rebu%
CT: D --> You may proceed with the discussion if you feel you must
AG: Well there you have it, folks. This conversation is officially approved for all you muscle8east
porn enthusiasts out there.
AG: Now let’s get this pu8lic entertainment exhi8ition on the road 8efore his royal sweatiness
changes his mind.
AT: uH, cAN i MAKE A REQUEST
CA: no
GC: Y3S
TC: SuRe ThInG, tAvBrO
AG: Fuck no!
AT: uH, wHICH ONE IS IT,
GC: GO AH34D T4VROS
TA: ju2t try two make iit quick.
AT: i WAS JUST THINKING THAT MAYBE, sOMEONE SHOULD GIVE A SUMMARY,
or OTHER SHORT OVERVIEW OF WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR,
AT: tHAT WAY WE COULD ALL KNOW THE SAME INFORMATION, wHICH WOULD
BE A GOOD THING i AM SURE,
AG: What’s there to summarize?
AG: Karkat’s alive, he got himself into trou8le and now we have to pull his shouty 8utt out of
whatever hole he went falling into.
AG: 8am. There’s your crappy summary.
GA: Do We Know For Certain That Karkat Is In Actual Danger
GC: NO
GC: 1 W1LL 4DM1T TH4T TH3 3V1D3NC3 1S PUR3LY C1RCUMST4NT4NT14L 4T TH1S PO1NT
GC: BUT IF H3 IS NOT 1N 4 S1TU4T1ON TH4T QU4L1F13S 4S A M3T4PH1C4L B4D ND, WHY H4V3N T4NY OF US H34RD FROM H1M 1N MOR3 TH4N 4 SW33P?
GC: WHY WOULD H3 4B4NDON H1S H1V3?
GC: WHY WOULD H3 K1LL H1S LUSUS?
AG: Gee, too 8ad no8ody here can answer any of those questions.
AG: Oh, w8…
CT: D --> I have already e%pressed my position on this matter
CT: D --> I will not disclose any intelligence pertaining to Vantas nor do I have any desire to do so
AC: :33 < then why are you still here?
CT: D --> Pardon
AC: :33 < if you really dont want to talk about karkat with us then why are you staying on the memo?
CT: D --> I must remane in order to rein in any talk that might place you at risk
CT: D --> Furthermore, even if I did have the inclination to discuss Vantas, which I do not, I would take great pains to prevent that desire from whinnying out because I am not at livery to saddle anybody with that informanetion
GA: Dot Dot Dot
AT: wOW,
AT: tHAT, wAS A LOT OF HORSE PUNS,
AC: :33 < equius are you pawsitive you dont want to talk about karkat?
CT: D --> Neigh
CT: D --> I mean yes
CT: D --> I mean
CT: D --> I require a towel
GC: EQU1US W41T
CT: D --> What
GC: YOU S41D TH4T YOU 4R3 NOT 4T L1B3RTY TO T3LL US WH4T YOU KNOW 4BOUT K4RK4T
GC: D1D SOM3BODY ORD3R3 YOU TO K33P 1T S3CR3T?
CT: D --> The information was specified as classified, so yes
GC: TH3 P3OPL3 WHO ORD3R3 YOU TO K33P 1T CL4SS1F13D
GC: DO YOU KNOW TH31R BLOOD COLOR?
CT: D --> How could I
GC: 1 W1LL 4SK TH3 QU3ST1ONS H3R3
GC: NOW 4NSW3R TH3 QU3ST1IONS Y3S OR NO
CT: D --> No I do not know their b100d color
GC: TH3N 4LL0W M3 TO R3M1ND YOu TH4T TH3R3 1S 4 H1GH BLOOD3D TROLL W1TH US T0N1GHT WHO WOULD GL4DLY ORD3R3 YOU TO D15R3G4RD YOUR ORD3RS B1ND1NG YOU TO S3CR3T
GC: 1SNT TH4T R1GHT, G4MZ33?
TC: hUh?
TC: Uh, SuRe. WhAtEvEr YoU sAy, ChIcA.
CT: D --> Oh
CT: D --> Oh my
GC: 4ND IF YOu W1LL 4LL0W M3 TO CONT1NU3 1N TH4T V31N, YOu SHOULD 4L5O R3M3B3R TH4T ON3 M3M3B3R OF TH1S PROS3CUT1ON JUST SO H4PP3NS TO B3 TH3 H1GHLY 3ST33M3D T3YR14N BLOOD H31R3SS H3RS3LF, M15S F33R1 P31X3S
GC: S3R3LY 4 D1R3CT ORD3R FROM OUR FUTUR3 3MPR3SS, ON3 OF ONLY TWO TROLLS 1N TH3 3NT1R3S WHO S1TS 4TOP TH3 H1GH3ST T13R OF TH3 3M0S3P3CTRUM WOULD OV3RR1D3 4NY PR3V1OUS DR3S YOu M4Y H4V3 R3C31V3D, WOULD IT NOT?
CT: D --> I
CT: D --> Oh dear
CT: D --> I fear that you may be correct
GC: W3LL OK TH3N
GC: F3F3R1, WOULD YOU B3 SO K1ND?
CC: O)( S)(OR-E!
CC: A)(em. --------------EQUIUS! I order you to s)(ell out everyt)(ing you know about Karkat RIG)
(T T)(IS S--------EACOND!
CC: )ow was t)(at?
TA: that wa2 perfect, FF.
CC: 38D
CA: wwell eq
CA: you heard the future empress
CA: spill it
AC: :33 < equius are you okay?
CT: D --> Twenty-two point si% millimeters
TA: what the hell ii2 that?
AG: Oh my god it’s a 8ulge size joke.
CT: D --> The very idea that I would lower myself to telling 100d jo% is positively revolting
CT: D --> I would find your implication thoroughly insulting if I was not already well aware of your
routinely uncouth behavior
CT: D --> As it is, I will assure you that the measurement has abso100tely nothing to do with
Vantas’ unmentionable regions
AG: Whew! That’s a relief.
AG: For a second there I was afraid Zahhak was developing a sense of humor.
AG: Guess the world isn’t ending after all.
CT: D --> Twenty-two point si% millimeters is the diameter of the ocular modifying devices the
military commissioned me to fabricate, presumably to be worn by Vantas for martial purposes
AC: :33 < does that mean he was recruited?
AT: hOW IS THAT EVEN ABLE TO HAPPEN,
AT: nONE OF US WERE OLD ENOUGH TO JOIN THE MILITARY A SWEEP AGO, oR
RIGHT NOW FOR THAT MATTER,
AT: uNLESS, kARKAT IS ACTUALLY OLDER THAN WE THOUGHT,
CC: W)(ale…I know t)(at sometimes if somebubbly is a R-E-ELY good fig)(ter t)(e military will
invite t)(em to join early.
CC: Maybe t)(at’s w)(at )apppened!
TA: what would they want wiith hiim?
TA: didi they need 2omeone two flaiil a 2iickle around liike a tool?
GA: I Am Afraid That I Must Also Express My Doubts That Karkat Would Have Been Recruited
By Virtue Of Possessing Superior Combat Abilities
GA: While I Do Believe He Was Quite Capable Of Defending Himself Should The Need Arise I
Never Experienced The Impression That Karkats Fighting Skills Were Unusually Exceptional
GC: 3QU1US 1S TH3R3 4NYTH1NG 3LS3 YOU C4N G1V3 US?
CT: D --> The devices are designed to moderate the amount of light entering the eye, primarily to
avoid damage in the event of overe%posure
CT: D --> I have been commissioned to produce thirty-four sets
TA: who comii2iioned you?
TA: iif you giive me a name ii can trace ii.
CT: D --> There are several names on the order form
CT: D --> Wait one moment
CT: D --> I will scan it for you
TA: that work2. ii will be back in two miinute2.

twinArmageddons [TA] is an idle troll!

CA: guys im startin to think that kar is in real trouble here
TC: i Th OuGhT wE wErE aLrEaDy PoSSeSiNg Of ThAt KnoWLeDgE kErNaL.
CA: no i mean REAL trouble
CA: the kind wwe cant fix
CC: Water you talking about, -Eridan?
CA: wwell the military is really fuckin strict but evven loww levvel grunts get communication
privileges
CA: if they arent lettin him contact anyone they might havve him doin somethin really fuckin terrible
AT: uH, wHAT DO YOU MEAN, bY TERRIBLE,
CA: i mean like medical experimentation or
CA: pail slavvery or
AT: oK CAN YOU STOP,
AT: i'M SORRY i ASKED,
CT: D --> I do not believe the military would commission these devices for those purposes
CT: D --> It would be most ostentatious
AG: Oh please. You just don’t like the idea that your precious ro8otics project might 8e going to a
8unch of slaves and whores.
TA: ok ii’m back.
GC: D1D YOU F1ND 4NYTH1NG?
TA: mo2t of the name2 were dead end2 but there wa2 one that look2 liike iit miight be a lead.
TA: 2ome aggre22analy2t chiick named cenniia ettiino.
CA: agressanalyst
CA: fuck i wwas right
CA: fuckin medical experimentation
TA: no ed. ii dont think that ii2 what ii2 going on here.
TA: or at lea2t, not exactly.
CA: wwhat do you mean not exactly
CA: either it is or it isn’t and it obvviously is
CA: youre just pissed i stole your thunder
TA: 2omebody 2hut hiim up or iim hiittiing the perma-ban button.
CA: hey fuck you sol
CC: -Eridan, S)(OOS)(!
CA: oh come on fef
CA: its not like im makin some big embarrassin scene here
CC: I know but can you AT L-EST wait until Sollux is finfs)(ed before you go glubbing your
opinion?
CA: but fef
CC: PL------EAS------E, -Eridan?
CA: ok FINE
CA: i wwill stop
CA: in fact I wwon’t say anything else for the rest a this memo because clearly none a you cretins
vvalues my input
CC: -Er…t)(at wasn’t w)(at I meant, but if t)(at’s w)(at you eely t)(ink t)(en okay.
CC: Go a)(ead, Sollux. It s)(ould be smoot)( sailing now.
TA: 2o iit look2 liike cenniia ii2 pretty iinvolved wiith 2ome kiind of trainiing faciiliity.
TA: 2omething two do with invadiing a planet called oh my chrii2t are you 2hiitiing me?
TC: WhOa. ThAt’S thE LoNgEsT nAmE fOr A pLaNeT i’Ve EvEr BeEn HeArInG oF.
GA: I Am Assuming That The Name Of The Planet Is Not Actually The Thing You Just Stated
GA: Please Reassure Me That This Assumption Is Correct
TA: 2hiit. 2orry guy2.
TA: ii2 ju2t thi2 planet name ii2 really fucking 2tupiid.
GC: WH4T 1S IT?
TA: earth.
AT: aRE YOU SURE THAT IS REALLY, WWHAT THE NAME OF THE PLANET ACTUALLY IS,
AT: aND NOT JUST SOME GENERIC CODE WORD INSTEAD,
TA: no, ii am completely 2eriou2.
TA: the planet ii2 actually called earth.
AG: Pfiffiffiwahahahahahahahaha!
AG: Who was the genius that dreamed up THAT flaming turd of a name?
AG: I mean they might as well have just named it DIRT and 8een done with it.
GA: Yes Or Perhaps Mixture Of Rock Clay Organic Matter And Sand
AT: tHAT IS A VERY LONG NAME FOR A PLANET
TA: They Could Call It MORCOMS For Short
TC: wAiT hOw MaNy MoThErFuCkInG pLaNeTs ArE wE dIsCuSInG rIgHt NoW?
TC: CaN oNe Of YoU hElP a MoThErFuCkEr OuT aNd ShAre ThE kNoWiNg Of WhIcH oNeS wE aRe EvEn TaLkInG aBoUt?
GC: JUST 34RTH R1GHT NOW, G4MZ33
GC: 4ND ON TH4T NOT3, SOLLUX C4N YOu F1ND OUT 4NY MOR3 4BOUT TH3 TR41N1NG F4C1L1TY?
TA: way ahead of you TZ. hackiing their databa2e a2 we 2peak.
TA: aaaand we are in.
CC: 38O
CC: T)(at was so fast!
TA: the firewail wa2 weak a2 2hiit and they dont even have any of their data encrypted.
TA: ii look2 liike they ju2t a22umed they were two far under the radar for anyone two bother fuckiing with them.
AC: :33 < is there any information about karkat?
TA: iiim looking.
TA: huh. judging by the ro2ter2 ii look2 liike they are only takiing people wiith burgundy blood.
CT: D --&gt; Are you affirming that Vantas is a rust b100d
TA: why doe2 that even matter?
AG: Well that’s disappointing.
AG: After all that hemanonymous drama I was expecting him to 8e some kind of 8utthurt royal shit.
AG: Or may8e a mutant. That would have at least 8een kind of 8adass.
GC: OH MY GOD VR1SK4 W1LL YOU C4N 1T
GC: W3 4R3 NOT TURN1NG TH1S 1NT0 4N 3XPOS1TORY S3SS1ON ON K4RK4TS BLOOD COLOR
GC: SOLLUX H4V3 YOU FOUND 4NYTH1NG 3LS3 Y3T?
TA: yeah. wow. FUCK.
GA: Please Feel Free To Share With The Rest Of The Schoolfeed At Any Time
TA: ok 2o apparently the program ha2 been going for a while. theyve 2ent a few round2 of recruit2 two earth already.
TA: none of them have come back.
AT: nOT TO BE A JERK, oR UPSETTING TO ANYBODY IN GENERAL,
AT: bUT ISN’T THAT KIND OF WHAT IS THE USUAL THING THAT HAPPENS, iN MOST MILITARY CAMPAIGNS,
TA: yeah. that wa2nt the thing that had me crappiing buiiliing 2quare2 though.
TA: the group they are training right now 2tarted out wiit 257 people.
TA: now they are down two only 34.
AC: :33 < oh no!
AC: :33 < how could that happen?
TA: it look2 liike they have been culliing batch2 of recruiits every periigee.
CT: D --> That seems rather wasteful
GC: UND3RST4T3M3NT OF TH3 SW33P
CC: W)(y would t)(ey do t)(at?
TA: ii dont know. it ju2t 2ay2 TERMIINATED.
TA: it2 not liike they went go2h maybe we 2hould inculde an explanatiion ju2t iin ca2e all the
hacker2 out there get curiiou2.
TA: oh hey. ii found KK2 iinfo.
AG: Finally!!!!!!!!
CC: OO)(, OO)(! Tell us w)(at it says!
AC: :OO < what does it say?
GC: F1ND 4NYTH1NG US3FUL 1N TH3R3 Y3T?
TC: lAy On ThE mOtHeRfUcKiNg WoRdS wHaT hAvE tO dO wItH oUr bEsT
iNvErTeBrOtHeR.
TA: ok cool your rumble 2phere2 guy2. geez.
TA: ii look2 liike he wa2 involuntariily recruiited but we kiind of already knew that.
TA: holy 2hiit that ii2 a lot of mediical procedure2.
GC: >:?
GC: WH4T DO YOU M34N BY M3D1C4L PROC3DUR3S?
TA: ii mean there are about a hundred entriie2 iin here that 2ay MEDIICAL PROCEDURE. none of
them have any inforination about what they were doiing but they are chronologiically dated and oh,
get thi2 the per2on who diid mo2t of the procedure2?
TA: cenniia ettiino.
AC: :33 < the aggressanalyst?
TA: yeah.
TA: ii hate two 2ay ii but thii2 really look2 liike 2ome kiind of mediical experimientatiion 2hiit.
CA: ahem
TA: what.
CA: medical experimentation huh
CA: funny seems like wwevve heard that somewhere before
TA: ok fiine.
TA: you were riight, ed. Whoop-de-fuckiing doo.
CA: just so wwe are clear
TA: uh-huh. whatever you 2ay.
TA: 2uppo2edly he wa2 flagged a2 a 2uiiciide rii2k for the fiir2t couple of periigee2.
CC: O)( my cod!
CC: Are you searious?
TA: yeah. oh. waitit a 2econd.
TA: they flagged hiim againi four day2 ago.
TA: 2ame date a2 the la2t mediical procedure.
GA: I Cannot Imagine Karkat Wishing To End His Own Life
GA: If Nothing Else He Is Too Stubborn To Do So
GA: He Must Be Truly Miserable If He Is Actually Considering It
TC: :o(
CT: D --> You stated that the day he was flagged coincides with the day of his most recent mediical
procedure
CT: D --> This would suggest that the two are connected
CT: D --> The question now becomes which precipitates the other
AG: Does it really matter?
AC: :33 < we n33d to get him out of there!
GC: Y34H 1 TH1NK 1 H4V3 H34RD 3NOUGH TO CONV1NC3 M3
TA: if we are going two do 2omething we had better do it quick.
TA: he2 2et two deploy at the end of thi2 periigee.
GC: F1RST TH1NGS F1RST
GC: WH3R3 1S H3?
TA: the trainiing facility ii2nt two far from here. it ii2 ju2t out2iide alterniia2 orbit.
TA: we could get there in a few hour2…
TA: if we had a 2tar2hip.
TC: So ALL w/e aRe NeEdInG iS fOr SoMe MoTh3rFuCkEr 2o Be AlL uP aNd SuPpLyInG uS wItH sOmE wIcKeD aSs StArShIp?
AT: i DON’T THINK THAT IS SOMETHING MOST PEOPLE WOULD HAVE,
AG: No shit, Pupa.
CC: We cod use MY s)(ip!
CA: wwhat
AC: :33 < i didnt know you had a starship befurry
CC: It’s not very big and I barely -EV-ER use it.
CC: Acs)(elly sometimes I kind of forget I even (ave it!
CC: But I am S)(OR-----E it will work just fin for t)(is.
CA: no fef
CA: wwe cant use your ship
CC: Glub? W)(y not?
CA: because it’s a fuckin terrible idea
CC: )ow is it a teribubble idea?
CA: it just is
CA: listen to me guys
CA: wwe are gonna havve to find another ship because wwe cannot use fefs
CA: do you all got that
GA: Eridan If We Are Going To Rescue Karkat We Will Need A Ship And Feferi Is The Only Person Here Who Happens To Own One
GA: I See No Reason Not To Use It
GA: Unless You Were Planning To Explain Your Objections
GA: If That Is The Case Then By All Means Please Do
CA: ok i wwill
CA: fef howw many armies havve you raised so far
CC: W)(at?
CA: here let me answwer that for you
CA: none
CA: howw many followwwers havve you amassed
CC: I don’t sea w)(at t)(as to do wit)( ANYT)(ING we are glubbing about.
CA: wwhts that
CA: none again
CA: wwwell then you must havve some immensely powwerful secret wweapon lying around somewhere right
CC: -----Eridan w)(at the S)(ELL has gotten into you?
CA: oh wwait no you don’t
CA: wwhich means that if our current empress decided to fly her ruthless fuckin ass here and fork you dead there is nothin that could stop her from doin it
CC: 38O
CC: W)(y would you say somefin like t)(at?
CC: W)(y would you t)(ink it was okay to do t)(at )(ere?
CC: Or ANYW)(------ER------E for t)(at manatee?
CA: because its the truth fef
TA: hey ed?
TA: 2 hut up.
CA: no sol
CA: you shut up
CA: im makin a point here
TA: what point ii2 that 2uppo2ed two be exactly?
TA: that you are a ma22ive douche?
CA: you can ban me wwhen i am finished but you guys havve gotta hear me out here
CA: look i wwill evven say please if you wwant me to
CA: just let me stay for like twwo more minutes
CA: please
GC: OK 3R1D4N
GC: IF YOU 4CTU4LLY DO H4V3 SOM3TH1NG CONSTRUCT1V3 TO S4Y TH33N GO 4H34D
GC: BUT K33P 1N M1ND TH4T W3 W1LL B4N YOU 1F TH1S TURNS OUT TO B3 4 COMPL3T3LY OFF TOP1C DR4M4 R4NT
CA: ok seriously can i say somethin wwithout eveveryone jumpin downw my throat and screamin that they are gonna ban me
AG: Did you seriously not hear what Redglare the court8lock dict8or just said?
AG: If you have something to say then spit it out already and if you don’t then do us all a favor and shut the hell up.
CA: wwoww fuck you too vvris
CA: anywways the point i wwas tryin to make here fef is that you havve nothin to protect you from the empress if she decides to come after you an the only reason she hasnt done it yet is cause you havven done anything to rock the political boat
CA: if wwe go disruptin a military training facility and they trace the ship back to you its gonna look like you are issiuin a challenge against the condescse
CC: O)(. I guess I never t)(oug)(t about t)(at.
CA: there you see
CA: thats wwhyy wwe cant use your ship
CC: Reely? Because I t)(ink it’s exactly w)(y we S)(OALD use my s)(ip!
CA: wwhat
CC: You said I )(aven’t done anyt)(ing to rock t)(e political boat. Maybe it's time I started making waves!
CA: fef you are completely missin my point
CA: if the condescse thinks youre turnin into a threat there wwont be any time to pull together a proper army to fight back
CC: I appreciate your conc)(cern, -Eridan, but I can’t spend my w)(ole life )(iding like a scared little guppy.
CC: Besides, )o( can I build an army to fig)(t for me if I never put mys)(elf out t)(ere?
CC: And w)(at better way to do T)(AT t)(an by kelping our good frond?
AT: uH, aRE YOU SURE THAT THIS IS THE BEST THING TO DO,
AT: iT SOUNDS LIKE IT MIGHT BE KIND OF A BIG DEAL,
AT: aND ALSO VERY RISKY,
AG: Helloooooooo, we are talking a8out fucking around with the military here.
AG: It’s going to 8e risky no matter how you cut it.
TA: are you 2ure you want two do thii2 FF?
CA: no
CC: Y---------ES!
CC: We will use my s)(ip and everyt)(ing will go SWIMMINGLY, you’ll see!
AC: :33 < yay!
TC: i Am AlL gEtTiNg My GrAtlUdE oN fOr ThE mOtHeRfUcKiNg WiCkEd BiTcH tItS
mIrAcLe WhAt I aM wItNeSsInG hErE.
GA: Yes Thanks Are Indeed In Order

caligulasAquarium [CA] left memo

CC: )()(? ---Eridan?
AG: What a surprise.
AT: sHOULD SOMEBODY MAYBE, tRY TO CONTACT HIM,
AT: aND SEE IF HE WILL COME BACK,
GA: No
GC: NO
TA: fuck no
AG: Sure, Tavros. Go right ahead.
AT: mE,
AT: wHY ME,
AG: I think the REAL question here is why NOT you?
AT: wELL i DON’T THINK HE LIKES ME, oR CARES ABOUT ME AT ALL ACTUALLY
AT: sO I DON’’T THINK HE WOULD LISTEN,
AT: sOMEBODY LIKE FEFERI OR KANAYA WAS WHO i WAS THINKING OF,
AT: oR MAYBE YOU,
AG: Hahahahahahahaha! ME?
AG: If you think I have any desire to put up with his o8noxious 8ullshit then you are even dum8er than I thought.
AG: 8esides, that’s crossing over into moirail territory and he’s already got himself one of those.
Riiiiiiiight, Feferi?
CC: I t)(ink it would be best if we just leave )(im alone for now.
CC: )(e can always come back if )(e eels like it.
GC: OK TH3N MOV1NG ON
GC: W3 H4V3S 4 SH1P 4ND W3 H4V3S 4 D3ST1N4T1ON
GC: L3TS WORK ON H4SH1NG TH1S PL4N OUT SO 1T C4N M4TUR3 L1K3 4 F1N3
P13C3 OF FRU1T TH4T 1S R1P3 FOR TH3 P1CK1NG
GC: 4 FRU1T TH4T SM3LLS D3L1C1OUS L1K3 P1N34PPL3
GC: OR M4YB3 OR4NG3S
CT: D --> I have a suggestion
CT: D --> You will listen and implement it accordingly
GC: W3 W1LL S33 4BOUT TH4T
GC: L3TS H34R WH4T 1T 1S F1RST!
CT: D --> The lenses I was commissioned to make are nearly complete and the deadline for their completion 100ms a mere si% days from today
CT: D --> At that time the training facility will undoubtedly e%pect them to be delivered without delay
CT: D --> I propose that we send one or two of our present party to the facility under the premise of delivering the completed lenses
CT: D --> This would provide an e%cellent e%cuse for visiting the facility and allow an optimal opportunity to secret Vantas onto Pei%es ship with minimal risk of confrontation
TA: holy 2hiit.
TA: that ii2 actually a 2oliid iidea, EQ.
GC: Y34H
GC: Y34H
GC: Y34H
GC: 1 C4NNOT 1M4G1N3 4NY OTH3R SC3N4R1O TH4T WOULD G3T US 1NT0 TH4T
F4C1L1TY W1THOUT R41S1NG 4 LOT OF SUSP1C1ONS
GC: DO3S 4NYON3 OBJ3CT TO M4K1NG TH1S OUR OFF1C14L WORK1NG PL4N?
GC: SP34K NOW OR FOR3V3R W4LLOW 1N YOUR 4GON1Z1NG R3GR3T!
CC: I t)(ink it sounds GR---------EAT!
AC: :33 < me too
GA: I Do Not Have Any Particular Resignations
TC: I aM sO mOtHeRfUcKiNg DoWn WiTh It.
TC: hOnK hOnK.
AG: Hell why not? Let's do it!
AT: iT SOUNDS GOOD, tO ME,
GC: W3LL HOW 4BOUT TH4T
GC: LOOKS L1K3 YOUR PL4N W1NS, 3QU1US
CT: D --> I was not aware that there was a competition at hand
AG: If that was supposed to be a joke it was really lame.
CT: D --> It was not
AG: You are so 8oring it 8low2s my mind.
AG: All of the eye rolls. All of them.
AT: uH, wHO IS GOING TO GO,
AT: t0 THE FACILITY, i MEAN,
TC: I'IL d0 iT.
TC: fLoAt Al1 All aRoUnD iN tHe StArS wHeRe ThE mIrThFuL mEsSiAhS bE uNtll I'm FiNdInG oUr NuB hOrN bRoThEr.
TA: no offen2e GZ, but fuck no.
TC: Aw, WhY tHe MoThErFuCk NoT?
GC: W3 N33D SOM3ON3 W3 C4N COUNT ON TO B3 SH4RP
GC: Th4T SL1M3 4DD1CT1ON OF YOURS DO3S PR3TTY MUC2H TH3 3X4CT OPPOS1T3
CT: D --> Your highb100d status would also present certain problems
CT: D --> It would be nigh impossible for anybody to believe that one of your position would be employed for such a menial task.
CT: D --> In fact this would be true for any member of the nobility.
CT: D --> Anybody possessing b100d in a hue of b100 or higher shall be e%c100ded from consideration.
TA: wow eq. there are about 200 way2 you could have 2aid that wiithout 2oundiing liike a giiant bulge and yet you 2tiill elected two 2ound liike a giant bulge.
GC: BUT 1T 1S 4 V4L1D PO1NT
GC: YORKS L1K3 YOU GUYS G3T TO S1T TH1S ON3 OUT
GC: 1 WOULD 4DD MR GR4P3Y POPS1CL3 4MOP4 TO TH4T L1ST BUT H3 1S NOT H3R3 SO 3H
AC: :33 < ooh!
AC: :33 < ac will go!
CT: D --> No
AC: :33 < but it will be so much fun
AC: :33 < like a big live action role purrlaying game
AC: :33 < and you know how good i am at role playing!
CT: D --> I will abs0100tely not allow it
AC: :33 < why not???
CT: D --> The risk is much too great
CT: D --> I would never forgive myself if something were to happen to you while you were in the facility and beyond the reach of my prodigious STRONGNESS.
AC: :33 < but nothing will happen
GA: Actually Nepeta It May Be Better If You Remain Here
AC: :33 < oh no kanaya
AC: :33 < not you too
GA: Equius Has Already Compromised His Own Safety By Sharing Classified Intelligence
GA: As The Person Who Crafted The Devices He Is Likely One Of The Only People Outside Of the Facility Who Is Aware Of Karkat's Whereabouts
GA: When Karkat Disappears It Is Very Likely Equius Will Be Held Suspect
GA: If They Discover That His Moirail Played A Role In The Ruse It could Put Both Of You At Serious Risk
GA: In Fact It Might Be Prudent If The Two Of You Were To Abscond To A Safe Hiding Place Until The Commotion That Is Sure To Surround Karkat's Escape Quiets Somewhat
CT: D --> Yes
CT: D --> Such precautions are most reasonable
CT: D --> Nepeta you shall join me in executing these safety measures
GC: W3LL 1T L00KS L1K3 Y0U 4R3 ST4Y1NG PL4N3T-S1D3 NEPET4
AC: X(() < grrrrrrr! :(()
GC: BUT 4T L34ST Y0U G3T TO GO ON A N1C3 R0M4NT1C R3TR34T W1TH Y0UR LOV1NG MO1R41L
TA: and meanwhile our volunteer pool continue2 two 2hriink.
GC: TRU3
GC: GU3SS TH4T M34NS 1D B3TT3R PL4C3 MY C43G4RS WH3R3 MY MOUTH 1S 4ND VOLUNT33R MYS3LF!
GC: H3H3
GC: SO
GC: 4NYBODY GO1NG TO JO1N M3 ON OP3R4T1ON CR4BBY BUTT?
GC: OR 4R3 W3 D3CL4R1NG TH1S 4 SOLO M1SS1ON?
AT: wELL i WOULD,
AT: eXCEPT IT SOUNDS LIKE WE WILL NEED LOTS OF STEALTH, aS WELL AS OTHER SNEAKY MANEUVERS,
AT: aND A FOUR WHEEL DEVICE IS NOT EXACTLY AN INCONSPICUOUS THING,
TA: 2crew iit. ii will go.
GC: YOU SUR3?
TA: we are down two eithet KN or me and if we are a22umiing they wouldnt buy a blue blood delivery guy then they 2ure a2 fuck arent going two 2wallow a jade blood working out2iide of the brooding cavern2.
TA: ii ha2 two be me.
AG: Well there you have it.
AG: Six days from now we are firing a 8lind chick and a 8ipolar asshole into space on a starship from the possi8le future empress so they can attempt to rescue some shouty 8astard we all thought was dead until a8out two days ago.
AG: Oh and in the meantime some gross sweaty jerk is going to go running off into the wilderness with a girl who thinks she is a cat 88% of the time.
AG: Did I miss anything?
AT: iT SOUNDS KIND OF LIKE AN ACTION MOVIE TITLE, wHEN YOU SAY IT LIKE THAT,
CC: I know! It's so ---------------EXCITING!
TA: diid we actually do the thing we 2tarted thii2 memo for?
TA: we actually accomplii2hed 2omething?
TA: ii don’t believe itt. iit2 a fucking miracle.
TC: YeAh DoGg.
TC: mOtHeRfUcKiNg MiRaClEs AlL uP iN hErE.
GC: 1 TH1NK W3 4R3 DON3 H3R3
GC: SOLLUX, 3QU1US, 4ND F3F3R1
GC: L3TS T4LK L4T3R 4BOUT LOG1ST1CS
CC: S)(OR-----E!
CT: D --> Very well
TA: ok.
TA: now everybody out of the memo 2o ii can lock it.
CC: BY-------E ---EV-----ERYBODY!

CuttlefishCuller [CC] left memo

AT: aDIOS,
AT: jUST LIK3 MY NAME, hEH,
GA: Goodbye And Best Of Luck

AdiosToreador [AT] left memo
GrimAuxiliatrix [GA] left memo

CT: D --> Good evening
CT: D --> We shall be in touch

CentaursTesticle [CT] left memo

AC: :33 < bye efurryone
AC: :33 < good luck pawllux and purrezi
AG: Try not to do something dum8 like get caught or die.
AG: ::::P

ArsenicCatnip [AC] left memo
ArachnidsGrip [AG] left memo

TC: WhOa. WhErE tHe MoThErFuCk DiD eVeRBoDy Go?
GC: G4MZ33 TH3 M3MO 1S OV3R
GC: JUST L34V3
TC: oH. hAhA.
TC: PeAcE oUt AnD hAvE yOuRsElF a MoThErFuCkInG nIgHt ThEn, SiS.

TerminallyCapricious [TC] left memo

GC: LOOKS L1K3 TH4T 1S 3V3RYB0DY
GC: 1 GU3SS TH4T M34NS 1 SHOULD GO TOO
TA: waiiT TZ.
GC: >:?
TA: ii ju2t wanted two 2ay that out of everybody ii could be going up there wiith
TA: iim glad iit2 going two be you.
GC: AWWW >:]
GC: L1K3W1S3 MR 4PPL3B3RRY
GC: T4LK TO YOU L4T3R
GC: <>
TA: <>

GallowsCalibrator [GC] left memo

twinArmageddons [TA] locked PRIVATE memo dii2cu22iion2 for iidiiiot2
Eridan: Be in cahoots with Vriska
caligulasAquarium [CA] began trolling arachnidsGrip [AG]

CA: vvris
CA: are you there
CA: come on
CA: you know i wwouldnt contact you unless i was desperate
CA: come on vvris
CA: please
AG: Oh my god, Eridan. What the fuck do you want?
AG: And 8efore you say anything, if this is going to turn into another lame 8itchfest a8out doomsday
devices then I am ending this convers8ion 8efore it 8egins and putting your trollian handle right 8ack
onto my 8lock list.
CA: its not
CA: i swwear
AG: OK. Fine.
AG: In that case I guess I can spare a few minutes to listen to your malarkey.
AG: 8ut let’s keep this short.
AG: I have got too many irons in the fire to waste my time on your melodramatic crap.
CA: i need a ship
AG: THAT’S your 8ig emergency? You fucked up a FLARP campaign and lost your prissy-ass
galleon?
AG: Well 8oo fucking hoo I’m sooooooo sorry you no longer have your amazing fake pir8 ship
which wasn’t really all that impressive to 8egin with.
AG: Why can’t you just 8uy another one? Or steal one from some8ody who is slightly less sucky
than you?
CA: im not talkin about flarp vvris
CA: i mean i need a real fuckin ship
CA: a starship
CA: and i need it fast
AG: Oh, well in that case let me just drop everything and get right on that for you.
CA: really
AG: Fuck no!
AG: What makes you think I just happen to have a starship lying around? While we’re at it, what
makes you think I’d hand it over to you if I did?
CA: vvris please
CA: i havvent bothered you for anything for a really fuckin long time
CA: i knoww you could get a ship if you really wwanted one
CA: you havve connections
AG: Huh. Care to enlighten me a8out who these “connections” are supposed to 8e? 8ecause I have
no idea what the hell you are talking a8out.
CA: dont play coy wwith me vvris
CA: evveryone knowws youre in good wwith some gamblignant fleet or some shit
CA: its wwhy you quit playin flarp last swweep
CA: wwhy keep doin the pretend pirate thing wwhen you can be the real thing instead right
AG: Wow, Eridan. And here I thought you were only deluded when you were thinking a8out your
quadrant prospects.
AG: I’m flattered you think I’m hardcore enough to have a 8unch of 8adass space pir8s wrapped
around my finger 8ut the fact is I have a8out as much influence over the gam8lignant rings as you do
over the imperial fleet. In a word: ZERO.
AG: I quit FLARPing because we are going to 8e going off planet soon and I have hotter irons in the fire than storing up a 8unch of fakey fake treasure and made-up achievements. Not to mention the fact that I was sick of you trying to crash my campaigns all the time.
CA: i did NOT try to crash your campaigns
AG: :::::
CA: well ok
CA: maybe i did try to horn in on a couple a your campaigns once or twwice
CA: but thats not important right noww
CA: the important thing here is that i need a ship in the next fivve days or sooner an i thought you might be able to get one but obvviously you cant so screww it
AG: Hey! I never said I couldn’t do it.
CA: so you wwill do it then
AG: Why do you need a starship all of a sudden anyway?
CA: i just do ok
AG: W8.
AG: You said you needed it in the next five days?
CA: yeah
CA: so
AG: Oh my god. Eridan, you are sooooooo o8viouuuuuuuus.
CA: wwhat
CA: i havvent got the slightest idea wwhat you are tryin to imply here
CA: i am the most subtle and refined troll you or anyone else wwill evver havve the privvilege a associating wwith
AG: God, it would almost 8e cute if it wasn’t so pathetic!
AG: Hahahahahahahaha!
CA: come on vvris
CA: at least tell me wwhether or not youre gonna do this for me
AG: Aaaaaaahahahahahahaha!
CA: vvris
CA: are you still there

arachnidsGrip [AG] ceased trolling caligulasAquarium [CA]

Two days later a small starship touches down onto the narrow spit of land beside your hive. The craft is completely empty, running on autopilot with nothing to indicate that it had ever been manned at all save for a small card in the pilot’s chair:

You're welcome

> END OF ACT 2 (part 1/2)
> Tavros: Check in with Gamzee

adiosToreador [AT] began trolling terminallyCapricious [TC]

AT: hI, gAMZEE,
AT: uH, aRE YOU THERE,
AT: yOU SAID THAT YOU WANTED TO TALK, wHEN sOLLUX AND tEREZI WERE GOING TO GET kARKAT,
AT: bUT YOUR TROLL HANDLE SAYS THAT YOU ARE NOT ONLINE,
AT: sO i GUESS THAT MEANS YOU FORGOT, wHICH IS OK AND NOT VERY SURPRISING, rEALLY,
AT: i'LL BE ONLINE WAITING TO HEAR HOW THE SICK RESCUE MANEUVERS WENT AND LIKELY MOST OF THE REST OF THE NIGHT AFTER THAT, iF YOU REMEMBER LATER,
AT: oR IF YOU DON’T REMEMBER BUT DECIDE TO TROLL ME BECAUSE YOU FEEL LIKE TALKING,
AT: tHAT IS OK TOO,
TC: hi my main peanut butter blood brother.
AT: oH, hI gAMZEE,
AT: i THOUGHT THAT MAYBE YOU FORGOT THAT US TALKING WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A THING THAT HAPPENED TONIGHT,
AT: bUT i GUESS i WAS WRONG,
TC: MOTHERFUCK RIGHT YOU WAS WRONG.
AT: uH, aRE YOU OK,
AT: yOU ARE TYPING REALLY WEIRD
TC: i'm fuckin fine, bro.
TC: NEVER WAS FEELING MOTHERFUCKING BETTER.
TC: honk honk honk :o)
AT: oK, iF YOU SAY SO, i GUESS,
TC: FUCKIN PAN IS ALL TWISTED UP INTO THE MOST SPIRITUAL KNOTS THAT EVER WAS EXISTING.
TC: and all the motherfucking green stuff is dripping on out all over the floor.
AT: uH, i DON’T UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT,
AT: yOU ARE ACTING REALLY WEIRD,
AT: aND BY WEIRD i ACTUALLY MEAN WEIRDER THAN NORMAL, bECAUSE BEING KIND OF WEIRD IS THE NORMAL THING FOR YOU TO DO,
AT: dID SOMETHING HAPPEN,
TC: NOTHING MOTHERFUCKING HAPPENED.
TC: ignorant motherfuckers saying the wicked shit about this motherfucker.
TC: SAYING THIS MOTHERFUCKER AIN’T FIT FOR SAVING OUR MOTHERFUCKING KARBRO.
TC: saying this motherfucker ain’t sharp.
TC: SAYING THIS MOTHERFUCKER AIN’T HAVING THE THINK POWER FOR PERFORMING SUCH RIGHTEOUS ACTS.
TC: motherfucking laughing at this motherfucker.
TC: ALL ON ACCOUNT OF THE MIRACLE SLIME Do:
TC: they was getting their mirth on.
TC: IN THEIR MOTHERFUCKING MINDS, BROTHER.
TC: but now the motherfucking joke is on those laughing motherfuckers.
TC: AND THE ONLY MIRTHFUL MOTHERFUCKER UP IN HERE IS THIS Fucker.
AT: WHAT DO YOU MEAN,
TC: :)]
TC: Do:
AT: gAMZEE, yOU ARE STARTING TO WORRY ME,
AT: aND YOU ARE ALSO KIND OF FREAKING ME OUT AT THE MOMENT,
AT: dID YOU DO SOMETHING,
TC: honk :)]
AT: wHAT DID YOU DO,
TC: NOTHinG MuCH.
TC: just kicked the wicked miracle slime.
TC: TOSSeD THAT MOTHERFUCKIN POISON SHIT RIGHT OUT INTO THE sea.
TC: and watched it float away like a cloud of special stardust.
AT: yOU STOPPED EATING SLiME,,
TC: MOTHERFUCKINg TRUTH.
TC: ain’t been putting none of it into my thirsty squawk blister.
TC: AND NOw IT'S TIME TO SHOW IT TO ALL THEM HIGH TALKING MOTHERFUCKERS.
TC: show them how this motherfucker ain’t holding on to the heavy ignorance.
TC: GIVE THEM THE KNOWING THAT THIS MOTHERFUCKER IS THE ONLY ONE WHAT’S FIT FOR FLYING UP TO THE STARS.
TC: up to our motherfucking nub horned brother.
TC: AND THEN THE ONLY MOTHERFUCKER WITH A THiNKpAN FULL OF THE RUDE LAUGHTER WILL BE THIS MOTHERFUCKER.
TC: i’ll be talking the wicked rescue talk with you soon, brother.
TC: HONK.
TC: honk.
AT: wAIT gAMZEE,
AT: wHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO,
AT: gAMZEE,

terminallyCapricious [TC] ceased trolling adiosToreador [AT]

AT: ;(}

> Feferi: Discuss matters with your loving matesprit and moirail

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling cuttlefishCuller [CC]

TA: hey ff.
CC: :)i, Sollux!
CC: Are you and Terezi getting ready to leave your )(ive now?
TA: we actually left a while ago.
CC: O)( my glub I can’t bereef t)(at t)(e big nig)t is fin-ally )(ere!
TA: oh yeah. we are doing thiii2.
TA: we are makiing iit happen.
CC: T)(is is SO ------------EXCITING!
CC: 38DDDD
CC: Terezi remembered to pick up the lenses from ----Equifis)(, RIG)(T?
TA: ii told you liike two day2 ago that 2he diid.
TA: waitt diid ii tell you that?
TA: ii thought ii diid but if you are a2kiing about it then ii probably forgot.
TA: 2hiit, ii am the wor2t mate2priit. ii2 me.
CC: O)( PL------EAS-------E! I am S)(OR-E t)(at t)(ere are PL-ENTY of worse matesprits t)(an you
and i would bet anyfin t)(at none of t)(em are as cute as you.
CC: ACS)(elley, I bet you are TWIC--------E as cute as any of t)(em!)
TA: ii am glad two know that you are willing two put up wiith having 2uch a failita2tiic mate2priit.
CC: WA)(ale I think you are conc)(pletly pitiable just thee way you are.
CC: AND W)(IL-----E W-----E'R----E AT IT
CC: O)( (oot.
TA: huh? what2 up?
CC: -Eridan is messaging me.
TA: dont an2wer.
CC: Sorry to krill the romantic mood, Sollux, but i reely s)(oaldn’t leave )(im glubbing.
CC: I AM )is moray-eel, after all!
TA: tz and ii are going two hiit an out of 2erviice regiion iin a couple more miinute2.
TA: let2 keep talkiing until then.
CC: Well I guess )e can wait if it’s just a few minutes.
TA: ehehehe you are 2o naughty ff.
CC: Yes and it’s ALL YOUR FAULT YOU KNOTTY MOT)(------ERGLUBB------ER!
TA: ehehehehehe.
CC: So )ow muc)( longer until you and Terezi get to t)(e launc)( site?
TA: a couple of hour2.
TA: do you have the cooordinants programmed into your autopilot app yet?
CC: Y-ES! I was so -EXCIT-ED aboat tonig)(t t)(at I put t)(em in DAYS ago!
CC: The autopilot glubbed t)(at it s)(ould only take twenty minnows to get to w)(ere you will be.
TA: in that ca2e ii can me22age you again 2o you can 2end the 2hiip when we are getting clo2e.
TA: that way it will get there right around the 2ame tiime we do and there won’t be a lot of tiime
for people two notice an unmanned 2hiip chilling out iin the launch hangar.
CC: That sounds reasonabubble to me.
CC: Sollux? Did you drift into t)(e no service zone?

You shake your head as you minimize the chat window. Sollux is always so much fun to talk to,
even if he is a little grouchy sometimes. Actually, you think his on-again off-again grouchiness is part
of his charm. The way he gets all frustrated and mad at himself is so pitiable it makes you feel all
filled with gooey flushed sentiments.

Speaking of grouchy mother glubbers…Eridan is still waiting for you. You kind of hate to say it, but
his brand of grumpiness is not nearly as endearing as Sollux’s. In fact, you don’t think it’s
particularly endearing at all. It’s tiring, demanding, mean-spirited, and…ugh, why are you letting
your thoughts float down this path again? He’s your moirail and if there is one thing you know about
moiraillegiance, it’s that it involves a lot of hard work! It’s just…sometimes you can’t help
wondering how it would feel to have a moirail that wasn’t quite so high maintenance.

Your computer chimes to let you know that Eridan has written you another message. You know you
shouldn’t keep him waiting any longer. (In fact, traditional pale quadrant etiquette dictates that you
should have answered him right away. You don’t particularly give a glub about stuffy old quadrant
covenventions, but you know that Eridan is gaga for them and he is probably going to be even crabbier
than usual on account of your ignoring them so blatantly.)

Swallowing back a sigh (he’s your moirail and this is your job, after all), you bring up Eridan’s chat window.

caligulasAquarium [CA] began trolling cuttlefishCuller [CC]

CA: fef
CA: hey
CA: wwhere are you fef
CA: fef i knoww you are online
CA: your troll tag says you are
CA: answer me fef
CC: )(i, -Eridan.
CC: W)(at’s up?
CA: nothin much
CA: just wwonderin howw you are doin
CC: O)(. I’m fin, I guess.
CA: are you sure
CC: I t)(ink so.
CC: Unless you know somet)(ing I don’t?!!
CA: wwhy wwould you evven think that
CA: i wwas just thinkin you might be feelin kinda nervous about tonight
CC: Not reely! I’m too -------EXCIT---ED to be nervous!
CA: youre not nervvous
CA: like not at all
CA: not evven a little bit
CC: No. S)(ould I be?
CA: i wwas thinkin you wwould be kinda nervvous wwhat wwith this bein your first real challenge to the condesc an all
CC: T)(at’s w)(y it’s so -------EXCITING!
CC: T)(is is t)(e first step towards setting all of my plans for t)(e t)(rone into mocean.
CA: arent you evven wworried about your boyfriend
CA: i mean he is goin on a dangerous mission
CA: wwhat if he doesnt come back
CC: Water you glubbing about? Of COURS-E Sollux is coming back!
CC: Alt)(oug) (now t)(at you mention it, maybe I am just a little conc)(erned.
CC: BUT ONLY A LIITTL-E BIT because I know t)(at everyt)(ing is going to go swimmingly and Sollux and Terezi will be t)(ere and back in no time.
CA: oh
CA: wwwell if youre SO SURE evverythin is gonna go smoothly maybe i shouldn’t bother to make my offer after all
CC: Offer? W)(at do you mean “offer”?
CA: i wwas just gonna see if you might wwant me to come to your hivve and be wwith you wwhile they are goin after kar
CA: you knoww
CA: for moral support
CA: or in this case i guess it wwould be moirail support
CC: 38O
CC: -Eridan, t)(at is so sweet!
CC: Y-----ES, I would like you to come to my )ive!
CA: you wwould
CC: OF COURSE I would, you seally blubber butt!
CA: ok
CA: i will be there as soon as i can
CC: I'll be waiting 38)
CA: oh fef can i ask you one more thing before i go
CC: S)ore.
CA: did you send your ship to the launch hangar yet
CC: No. I was going to raise the anc)or in anot)er )our or so.
CA: good
CA: thats perfect
CC: (u/? What do you mean?
CA: oh
CA: i just wanted to make sure i could be with you when you did
CA: it is a landmark event after all
CC: And w)at better way to sailebrate t)an by doing it wit) my moray-eel by my side?
CC: I'll see you soon, -Eridan!
CC: <>
CA: <>

caligulasAquarium [CA] ceased trolling cuttlefishCuller [CC]

Well that was way more pleasant than you were anticipating. You can’t remember the last time Eridan did something this thoughtful. Actually, you can’t remember him doing anything like this at all! It’s a nice change of pace and it couldn’t have happened at a better time.

There is no question about it: with your moirail at your side, your matesprit being all brave and heroic, and your imperial plans finally starting to get some wind in their sails, tonight is going to be a night you will never forget!

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> Kanaya: Touch base with the fugitives

grimAuxiliatrix [GA] began trolling arsenicCatnip [AC]

GA: Hello Nepeta
GA: And Equius Assuming He Has Arrived At Your Hive
AC: :33 < hi kanaya
AC: :33 < equius just got here a few minutes ago
AC: :33 < he says to tell you hello and also
GA: And Also
GA: Question Noodle
AC: :33 < okay i kind of dont want to type this but equihiiss wont stop bugging me until i do
GA: What Is It
AC: :33 < *sigh* equius says hello and also thank you for opening your hive to us as a sanctuary
GA: I Do Not See Why You Find That To Be Such An Objectionable Statement
AC: :33 < i wasn’t finished yet
AC: :33 < thank you for opening your hive to us as a sanctuary, a helpful gesture which is strongly appropriate and fitting for a jade blood such as yourself
GA: Oh
GA: You Are Quite Welcome Although It Might Be Best To Keep In Mind That You Have Not Arrived Yet And You Will Not Do So For Several Days
GA: Have You Selected The Route You Will Take To Reach The First Outpost Yet
AC: :33 < yep! it is going to be a furry long walk but equius thinks we will make it there just befor sunrise
AC: :33 < we are going to leave in just a couple minutes
GA: In That Case Perhaps I Should Let You Go So You Can Attend To Any Last Minute Preparations You Might Need To Carry Out
AC: :33 < that is purrobably a good idea
AC: :33 < equius is starting to get all twitchy
AC: :33 < kind of like a big muscular kitty that got into a patch of catnip h33 h33
GA: Please Contact Me When You Reach The Outpost And To Inform Me That You Both Arrived Safely
AC: :33 < we will! s33 you in thr33 nights, kanaya!

arsenicCatnip [AC] ceased trolling grimAuxiliatrix [GA]

You close the chat window and hesitate, your cursor hovering over another name on your chumproll. You have no desire to come across as intrusive, but a seed of apprehension has begun to take root in the bottom of your pump biscuit and copious amounts of sewing and topiary sculpting no longer presents distraction enough for you to ignore it. You bite your lip and click on the name.

grimAuxiliatrix [GA] began trolling arachnidsGrip [AG]

GA: Vriska I Understand That You Find My Concerns To Be Meddlesome At Times But It Has Been Four Days And You Have Not Answered Any Of My Messages
GA: This Silence Is Becoming Worrisome
GA: The Last Time You Acted This Way One Of Our Mutual Acquaintances Died Another Was Blinded And A Third Was Left Without Function Of His Lower Body Not To Mention The Injuries That You Sustained Yourself
GA: I Am Beginning To Believe That You Are Planning To Do Something You May Regret Later
GA: I Would Greatly Appreciate It If You Would Contact Me If Only To Disavow Me Of This Notion
GA: Please Do Not Do Anything Too Rash

grimAuxiliatrix [GA] ceased trolling arachnidsGrip [AG]

> Eridan: Execute plan

You forgot how much you hate being underwater. You hate the feel of it pressing in at you, so much heavier and more insistent than air. You hate the dizzying sensation of hovering over what might as well be a bottomless pit of oblivion what with the ocean floor being miles away and impossible to see. (Coincidentally, you don’t hate the fact that there is a creature living down there that could kill every troll in the universe in an instant if it ever experienced so much as a tummy ache because that is kind of fucking badass.) But the real reason you tend to avoid being underwater isn’t the claustrophobic pressure or the endless pits of doom or even Fef’s monstrous lusus. No, the real reason you prefer to stay out of the water is that it completely fucks your sense of style.

Some uncultured swine—probably landdwellers—might think that is a frivolous reason to avoid the environment that your body was designed to live in. Those cretins just do not understand the dramatic effect of a carefully groomed pompadour or a voluminous cape billowing in the wind. You can’t wear your cape underwater because it’s heavy and has the annoying habit of snaring around your legs and you can kiss your pompadour goodbye the second your head goes under the surface.
and really, when was the last time anybody ever managed to look imposing with their clothes trying
to murder them and their hair floating around their head like a goddamned heavenly nimbus?
 Fucking never, that’s when. And all of that is just the shit you have to contend with when you are in
the water. We are not even going to get into the way your clothes cling up against your skinny ass
and turn you into a shivering drowned weasel when you come out of the water because that is just
embarrassing. And yet here you are swimming for Fef’s hive, sans cape and sans pompadour, all
because she is in dire need of her moirail.

You cannot fathom how she ever got the notion that she was ready to challenge the Empress. You
also cannot fathom why nobody else was willing to take any of your perfectly valid concerns
seriously. Clearly, the only solution here is to take matters into your own hands. Maybe once you are
finished saving Fef from herself, she will notice what a great moirail you are and then she’ll finally
realize that you are the only one who deserves to be the target of her flushed desires. The thought is
enough to take your mind off the wretchedness of your appearance and send you swimming ever
onward and ever deeper.

You spend much of the swim to Fef’s hive pondering exactly how you are going to make your move
once the dust from all of tonight’s excitement begins to settle. (Should you just dive right in and
announce your intentions to move this relationship to a more meaningful level? Or would it be better
to remind her of just how much effort you put into making tonight happen first? You think the latter
is the safer bet because it can’t hurt to have her thinking about some of the favors you’ve done for
her, but you cannot deny that the former has a romantic boldness to it that cannot be ignored. It’s a
tough decision but you are certain that you’ll make the right choice once you are in the heat of the
moment.)

Fef greets you at the main entrance to her hive with a hug that would snap the ribcage of any
landdweller like a bundle of dry twigs. Lucky for both of you, your seadweller body is far more
resilient. The gesture still leaves you breathless but it doesn’t elicit a single bruise. Or at least, you’re
pretty sure it doesn’t leave any bruises. You had forgotten just how goddamn strong Fef is.

“ I am so glad you’re here, Eridan!” she exclaims. Releasing you from her death grip, she treats you
to one of her exuberant smiles; the kind that makes you unsure whether to melt or whether to be
annooyed by the relentless bubbliness radiating out of her. Then she says, “Come on; come inside!”

You ease through the door and follow her through the winding corridors of her hive. You are glad
that she doesn’t seem to expect you to answer her as she chatters on about how tonight is going to be
“so exciting” and “a first step towards changing the political tide” and how she will “always
remember it forever.” Now that you are actually here, you are suddenly nervous as hell. You are
legitimately concerned that your voice might come out all strained and crackly and give you away
before you have even done anything. For the first time in your life, you are grateful that you are
underwater. You are positive that you would be sweating bullets if you were above the surface at the
moment.

The two of you emerge into a room you assume must be her respiteblock. The floor is a rich purple
color, patterned with ivory inlays carved to resemble Gl’bgoly’b, the walls are a shade of purple two
clicks brighter than the tyrian color pumping through her collapsing and expanding bladder based
aquatic vascular system, and there are ornamented cages containing cuttlefish scattered everywhere.
Yep, definitely a respiteblock. It occurs to you that you have never been in her respiteblock before
now. Most of the few in-person jams you have had took place at your hive and Fef had never invited
you into her respiteblock on any of the handful of times you had gone to her. Under any other
circumstances, you would be fucking ecstatic, but right now you know you have bigger fish to fry.
(Besides, there will be plenty of time for ecstatic reveling a couple of hours from now, when Fef
realizes exactly who should be in her red quadrant.)
There is a desk in the corner. Most of the space is crammed with caged cuttlefish. The only space not covered with captive aquatic flora is occupied by a thin computing device that looks as though it is so costly it is outside even your incredibly generous price range. As though it is alive and perfectly aware that it has an audience, the ridiculously expensive piece of technological brilliance lets out a musical chime the second you lay eyes on it.

Fef trails off mid-monologue and hurries over to her desk. She fiddles with the touch screen mechanism on her tiny computer, skims whatever it is that has appeared on the screen, and then that broad smile flashes across her face again. She looks away from the screen and you swear her whole body is quivering as she says, “That was Sollux. He and Terezi are almost to the launch site and you know what that means!”

Shit. You had hoped that you would make it to Fef’s hive with plenty of time to refine your clumsy working plan into a sophisticated plot worthy of bamboozling any member of the aristocracy. But now here you are, less than five minutes after arriving and already Fef is motioning for you to come closer as she fires up the autopilot app on her computer so you can be right there by her side when she pushes the big green icon labeled “LAUNCH.” The only thing you can do is to fly by the seat of your pants and hope to hell you can pull this off.

You dart your eyes around her respiteblock, looking for something—anything—that might help you stall her; something that you can use to buy yourself just a couple more minutes to come up with a plan that does not suck. You see nothing.

Fef is growing impatient. She gestures for you to join her again, exaggerating the movement as though she is playing a game of charades with a particularly pan-fucked idiot. “Come on, Eridan. Let’s do this!”

You are about two steps away from reaching full on panic mode when inspiration hits. “Hey, Fef? Where’s Ψdon’s Entente?”

“What?”

“Your double culling fork. Where is it?”

“Who cares? Come on; time to raise anchor and get this glubbing party started!”

“No, Fef!” You barely manage to tamp down the impulse to stamp your foot. The excited sparkle in her eyes hardens into a veneer of cool irritation. Hastily, you amend, “What we’re doing right now is a big deal. We’re making fucking history here! Don’t you think you should have your legendary trident on hand? You know, to make things all official?”

The edges of her mouth pull down into a frown. “I don’t think it’s that important, Eridan. I mean, you’re the only person who is here to see me do it.”

“Well yeah…but what if we took a picture for all the history texts? You’d have to have your culling fork for that. Otherwise how the fuck would anybody know you weren’t just…I don’t know, watching cat videos on TrollTube?”

She stares at you, scrutinizing your face as though searching for some form of deception. If you were the flighty type you might break under that stare—but you’ve had years of hardcore FLARP role play to hone your acting skills. You meet her stare without so much as a blink.

For a few seconds you are sure that she is going to just go ahead and push the button, ceremony be damned. Then she rolls her eyes and sighs, “Okray. Fin. I’ll get the glubbing trident if you’re so set
Setting aside her razor-thin computer, she crosses the room and throws open the doors to a large wardrobe closet standing against the wall opposite the desk. You can hear her grumbling under her breath as she leans so far inside that her head and most of her torso disappear. An idea occurs to you as you stand there watching her dig deeper and deeper into the depths of the wardrobe. It’s a sloppy idea, with none of the finesse you had expected to demonstrate here tonight, but right now you don’t have time for sophistication or finesse.

As quietly as you can, you begin to cross the room. Fef’s body stiffens as you approach, and for one wild half-second you think that she has somehow sensed your intentions. Then she begins to withdraw from the wardrobe and you realize that she must have found the trident, that she still has no idea that you have left your post at the door. By the time she is fully out of the wardrobe you are standing directly behind her, and when she turns around your faces are so close her nose almost brushes against your chin.

She lets out a sharp gasp, takes an uncertain step back. You immediately push her back as hard as you can. The momentum isn’t as strong as it would be on land, but it’s still enough to knock her off balance. She drops the trident and windmills her arms, using the water resistance to slow her backward tumble. Her face is a myriad of emotions—confusion, surprise, and then anger rapidly building to a scorching fury as she realizes exactly what you plan to do. She rights herself as you reach for the wardrobe doors. With a wordless yell, she launches herself towards the opening. At the same instant, you slam the doors shut and bear down against them with all your weight as she smashes into them from the inside.

The doors shudder and your arms strain to hold them but they remain closed. You know that you will not be able to hold the doors shut forever. In fact, you know that the second Fef gives it all she’s got, you might as well just throw open the doors and get out of the way. You frantically look around the respiteblock for something you can use to bar the door. Your eyes fall on the golden trident lying on the ground at your feet. Without a second thought, you scoop it up and slide it through the large pull handles on the wardrobe doors.

A millisecond later, the doors tremble as Fef rams against them again. The trident makes one hell of a racket as the doors judder up against it, and the whole wardrobe seems to shake—but the doors hold. There is a furious screech from inside the wardrobe as Fef throws herself against the doors again and again, and each time the doors tremble, the trident clatters, and the wardrobe stays closed. Fef screams, “Eridan, what the glub are you doing? Let me out of here!”

Voice as smooth as the best romance movie leading man, you say, “Sorry, Fef, but this is for your own good.”

“What? What are you talking about? Let me out!”

The doors shake as she slams herself against them again. You shake your head and pat the side of the wardrobe. Fef is yelling at you again, calling you a shitload of nasty names, demanding that you open the doors and let her out, screaming threats…you don’t listen to any of it because you know that you are doing the right thing and you are sure that she will understand once this is all over. Instead, you hurry over to her desk and scoop up her computer.

The autopilot app is running. You notice that the launch hangar coordinates are already programmed in and the launch button is a green, pulsating blot that is just begging to be pressed. You hit the smaller red icon at the bottom of the screen; the one labeled “CANCEL.” The launch button goes gray. *Crisis averted,* you think.
You nearly drop the computer when it lets out another chiming noise and then you curse under your breath. You’d forgotten that Fef had been talking to Captor just a moment ago. Quickly, you minimize the autopilot app to reveal the active chat window. You skim the chat log as quickly as you can. The computer chimes twice more as you read. Clearly, Captor isn’t going to have the courtesy to leave you the fuck alone. Looks like you’ll have to test your acting chops a little.

TA: in that case i can message you again so you can end the ship when we are getting close. TA: that way it will get there right around the same time we do and there won’t be a lot of time for people to notice an unmanned ship chilling out in the launch hangar.

CC: That sounds reasonabubble to me.

CC: Sollux? Did you drift into the no service zone?

twinArmageddons [TA] is an idle troll!

TA: hey ff, tz and ii are almost two the launch hangar.

TA: it’s probably okay two end the ship now.

TA: ff?

TA: are you there?

CC: Yes! I’m here.

CC: But I can’t send my ship to you.

TA: why not?

TA: what happened?

CC: Of course (e does!

CC: Of course (e is my moray-eel so (e’s come to my (ive lots of tides.

TA: hey are you okay?

TA: that a22hole didn’t try two hurt you or some hit did he?

CC: WHAT? NO!

CC: Oh my cod, Sollux. (e might act like a jerk sometimes but (e would N-EV-ER (urt (es own morail. G-E-EZ!

CC: Where would you even t(ink somefin like t(at?

TA: because (e ii2 a fucking bulge and ii wouldn’t put ii past ii2m.

CC: (e said (e’s sorry and (e is only trying to kelp.

TA: tell him ii2 idea of being helpful ii2s fucking jacked.

CC: I don’t know, Sollux.

CC: Remember how UPS-ET (e was in the memo about using my ship?

CC: Maybe (e really DO-ES t(ink (e is protecting me.

TA: whatever. ii2 till 2ay he ii2 an a22.

CC: Oo! Sollux, -Eridan just sent me another message.

CC: (e says (e as a ship we can use 380
TA: really?
TA: how did he suddenly get his hand on a ship?
CC: Vriska got it for him!
TA: that crazy spider bitch?
CC: (-E-E) (-E-E). Yeah.
CC: Was do you think? Should we use this ship?
TA: I don't know, ff.
TA: I really don't like the idea of him and her being in cahoots with each other behind everybody else's back.
TA: it smells weird to me.
CC: But this could be our only chance to save Crabsnack! And –Equius will be in serious trouble if we don't deliver those lenses.
CC: Are you sure you don't want to go?
TA: I don't know.
CC: What does Terezi think about it?
TA: She's not crazy about it either but she said she will if I am.
TA: What do you think, ff?
CC: M-E?
TA: ed ii your moirail. I don't really think I'm okay then just this one time, he is okay.
TA: So what do you think?
CC: I think we should give him a chance!
TA: all right. Tell him two end his ship then.
CC: OKAY! Just a minnow.
CC: He says it will be there soon 38
TA: thank you.
TA: tz and I are going to go over our plan again now.
TA: do you want me to message you again before we leave?
CC: No. I want to know that this is over and that you and Terezi and Karkat are all safe (e next time we go.
TA: okay. Talk to you thii morning then.
CC: Be careful, Sollux!
TA: I will.
TA:<3
CC:<3

TwinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling CuttlefishCuller [CC]

You smirk as you close the chat window because that was an award-winning performance if you've ever seen one (even if the heart at the end did kind of make you throw up in your mouth a little.) Troll Will Smith has got nothing on you! You can't wait to tell Kar all about this later—but first things first: you have to get your ship over to where it needs to be, PDQ.

You pull up Fef's autopilot app and hurry through a new setup. Most of the data fields auto complete with the correct information. The only ones you change are the departure location (your hive's coordinates) and the craft PIN (your bootleg ship's). Minutes later you are pressing the LAUNCH icon.

A volley of resounding thuds pulls your attention back to the wardrobe. Fef is still screaming at you. You note with a frown that the names she is spitting at you now are more obscene, the threats more detailed and violent. You had intended to let her out of the wardrobe once you had your ship heading for the launch hangar in the place of hers. Now it looks as though you have no choice but to leave her in there a little longer.
With her tiny computer tucked under your arm, you leave her respiteblock, closing the door behind you to blot out the shouting. I’ll let her out as soon as she is calm enough to listen, you think. Then she’ll see that this was the only way things could have been.

>Terezi: Board starship

You would love to board the starship, but the starship hasn’t arrived at the hangar yet! As such, you and Sollux “Mr. Appleberry Blast” Captor are chilling at the edge of the massive airstrip in front of the hangar, playing the quintessential waiting game. Not that you are terribly averse to a little one-on-one alone time with your moirail. Why, if the task at hand weren’t so serious, the two of you would almost certainly be suffering a serious case of the pale vapors.

Pffft. Yeah, right. Neither of you are sappy-dappy romantics like the shouty doofus you are going to be rescuing in a couple of hours. Even so, you are grateful for the break. The walk to the hangar had been much longer than either Sollux or you had anticipated and the two of you stupidly took the whole distance all in one go. For the moment, you are perfectly content to lay sprawled on your back in the velvety grass growing along the edges of the tarmac and give your abused feet a breather. You suspect that Sollux is equally grateful for the break. Despite a bout of obligatory grousing, it wasn’t long before he was slipping off his shoes and sitting down beside you.

You inhale a deep breath that is redolent with the frozen salt-and-pepper scent of open night sky. You detect no glazed sugar-scented clouds or black licorice flying squeakbeasts. You also detect no sign of any approaching fish scales in burning oil starships.

Keeping your attention on the night sky (because you would rather smell frozen salt-and-pepper than Sollux’s stinky feet), you say, “So Eridan didn’t say when his ship would be getting here?”

“No. He just said ‘soon.’” He lets out an irritable huff before adding, “I hope his definition of ‘soon’ is more accurate than his definition of ‘helpful’ or we’ll be out here until next fucking sweep.”

You laugh because making fun of the person who is being a giant ass and screwing with your plans is clearly the best solution for everything.

Sollux rolls his eyes so hard you can practically hear them scraping against the boundaries of his ocular holes. “It’s not funny, TZ.”

You roll your eyes right back and say, “That last thing you said was funny.”

“I was being serious.”

You laugh two exaggerated “HA HA”’s just to piss him off. Then you stick your tongue out at him to let him know that you were just messing with him. He seems to get the gist of what you are trying to convey because he shifts positions so he is lying on his back beside you. The two of you lapse into a comfortable silence, staring up at the night sky in search of any sign of the ship that should be here any second if Eridan’s idea of ‘soon’ is anywhere in the general vicinity of correct.

You are taking a moment to appreciate the cotton candy pink of Alternia’s lesser moon when Sollux says, “Hey TZ? Did we make the right call here?”

“What? About Karkat?”

The grass whispers in protest as he shakes his head. “No. I mean about using ED’s ship.”
You stay quiet for several seconds, pondering. You are pretty convinced that Eridan isn’t trying to sabotage the rescue. In fact, you think he honestly believes all of the malarkey he was spouting about trying to keep Feferi out of harm’s way. Even if his methods are shit, his motives appear to be relatively benign. As for Vriska…you don’t trust her as far as you can throw her but you cannot think of anything she would stand to gain by making things difficult except nine brand new enemies. You are reasonably sure that she would prefer to keep at least one or two friends, if only to have somebody to listen to her dramatic posturing from time to time. Then again, you know that “pretty convinced” and “reasonably sure” wouldn’t be enough to prove innocence in any respectable courtblock.

A minute whiff of aggravation fluid is enough to tell you that Sollux is becoming restless for your response. You purposefully wait another twenty seconds because he can afford to hold his stampeding musclebeasts. Then you say, “I think we made the only choice we could. And now that we’ve made it, we have to see it through.”

“Yeah,” he sighs. “I guess you’re right.”

You think he might be about to say something more, but he doesn’t so you return your attention to the delicious cotton candy moon. A few minutes later, you are about to shift your focus over to the equally delectable citrus lime moon when you detect the faintest impression of burning oil fish scales from far, far away.

“I think I found the ship,” you announce.

“Where is it?”

You gesture in the general direction that you think the smell must be coming from. The smell of aggravation fluid is thicker than before as he says, “You’re literally pointing at like half the sky right now.”

“Keep looking; you’ll find it.”

You hear him grumbling about how he doesn’t have smell-o-vision, how the hell is he even supposed to see anything against a night sky that’s as dark as a dirt noodle’s asshole. Then he says, “Oh. OK, I see it now. Looks like you’re right, TZ. It’s definitely a ship and it’s definitely coming this way.”

You direct your attention back to the smell of fish scale silver and burning oil, following it as it grows stronger and stronger and…and…something weird is happening. Your head feels strange, your thoughts separated from your consciousness through a thick veil of fog in your pan. The ship is here, it has landed…but when did it do that?

You try to remember; you try to recall the roar of landing thrusters, the smell of burning fuel, the feel of the hot blowback whipping against your face and you can’t because the last ten minutes are wrapped in an incomprehensible cotton fluff fog. They are just gone and it makes no sense because people don’t just not notice a starship landing less than 500 feet away.

Your body is shaking. Your teeth are chattering and you are bathed in a cold sweat. A tendril of nausea is curling through your gut and you cannot understand why; when did you get sick, why can’t you move?

Sollux is limp on the ground beside you, a keening moan rising from his throat. He is just as heavily drenched with sweat as you are and there are waves of fear rolling off him, so thick the smell is almost enough to make you gag. You realize with a biting jolt that he is not just scared, but terrified.
Your mouth feels gummy as you say, “Sollux, what happened?”

Sollux does not reply—but a low voice rasps, “Hey there, legal chica.”

It takes you a moment to match the voice to the person it belongs to because you have only spoken in person a handful of times and the voice you are hearing now has none of the easy drawl that you are used to hearing there. When recognition finally dawns, you are shocked. “Gamzee?”

The volume of his voice ricochets back and forth between a manic scream and that first low, almost inaudible rasping: “WELL WHAT DO YOU MOTHERFUCKING KNOW? You got it in motherfucking one, sis.”

Your heart kicks into a rhythm that is three or four clicks faster. Beyond the bizarre volume fluctuations, there is a harshness to the tone of his voice that sets your teeth on edge. You swallow past a throat that feels dry as the Alternian desert sand to say, “What are you doing here?”

“What type of maneuvers are you thinking I’m executing here? I’m all up and going to rescue our shouting brother. Flying up into the motherfucking stars to paint a wicked mural with the blood of them what took him from us.”

You can hear him approaching the spot where you are lying. It occurs to you then that you have not moved since you woke up. You attempt to make a fist, hoping that whatever has been done to you has not left you unable to defend yourself and are relieved when your fingers obligingly curl into a tight fist. Your body may still feel shaky, but you can fight if the need arises.

You quickly assess Sollux as best you can without moving from your position on the ground. He is still not moving, but his moaning has given way to shallow, rapid gasping. You are momentarily unsure whether to classify this as a good sign or a bad one, but the stench of fear pouring off of him has diminished considerably so you decide that it qualifies as a good sign. Still, he is in no condition for fighting. Whatever happened—and you are beginning to have your suspicions as to what that may be—it is taking him longer to recover from it than it took you.

Keeping your tone as neutral as possible, you say, “I thought that we decided it would be best if Sollux and I did that.” You wisely tamp down the desire to add you know, without the slaughtering people part.

“Ain’t looking that way to me, chica. What my look holes are seeing is two motherfucking jokers lying on the ground like they’re all about to take a motherfucking slumber break.” Gamzee’s footsteps come to a stop beside Sollux. He prods Sollux’s side with the tip of his shoe. “This piss blooded motherfucker ain’t even looking like he’s even fucking awake.”

You bite back the knee jerk reaction to snarl at him to get the fuck away from your moirail. You may have recovered enough to mount a surprise attack, get past Gamzee, and make a break for the idle starship, but you have definitely not recovered enough to do all of those things and also drag Sollux along with you. Your only hope is to keep Gamzee talking long enough for Sollux to recover enough to move.

You ask, “Are you responsible for that?”

“Heh heh. Maybe I motherfucking am. And maybe I motherfucking ain’t.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing much. Just laid down some of the wicked chucklevoodos on you motherfuckers.”
Damn, you think. Despite your fervent hopes that they would turn out to be wrong, your suspicions had been correct. The Gamzee you know would never purposefully set his chucklevoodoos onto one of his friends. Hell, as far as you could tell the Gamzee you know didn’t even know how to use chucklevoodooos at all. You and most of your mutual friends had been of the belief that good-natured as he was, he was too dumb to ever figure it out at all—and that was assuming he even had the ability to begin with. You do not know what could have happened to transform that Gamzee into the focused chucklevoodoo machine standing here now but you intend to find out.

“When did you learn to do that?”

He laughs, a sound like pebbles rattling in his throat. “AIN’T NO NEED TO BE LEARNING WHAT’S BEEN ALL UP INSIDE A BROTHER ALL THE MOTHERFUCKING LONG.”

“Of course not,” you say. You risk momentarily taking your attention off of Gamzee for another quick assessment of Sollux and are relieved to discover that he is breathing somewhat normally now. There is still a mild tang of fear in the air around him, but it is a good, stress fluid-filled fear that is nothing like the debilitating terror you had smelled a minute ago. You return to focusing on the suddenly psychotic clown looming over you to say, “When did you start using chucklevoodoos?”

“Well I’m thinking it must have been the same time that I kicked the wicked miracle slime. THREW IT ALL THE MOTHERFUCK AWAY so I could be motherfucking sharp. AND NOW, this motherfucker is SHARP AS A NASTY SPIKE off the club of the ruthless mirthful messiahs and MORE FIT TO BE FLYING UP TO THE STARS THAN ANY OF YOU MOTHERFUCKERS.”

Sollux’s voice is hoarse but steady as he says, “Yeah, sure. Sorry to break it to you, GZ, but that’s not happening.”

“And why the motherfuck not?”

You try to think of a response that is not going to whip Gamzee’s insanity into an even greater fervor. Some small part of you is still holding out hope that you might be able to resolve this without resorting to bloodshed if you can just keep him talking. But even as you search for the words you know that there is nothing you can say that is going to allow this to end peacefully. Sollux seems to recognize this as acutely as you do as he says, “Because before you were just an idiot. Now you’re still an idiot but you’re shithive maggots to boot. I mean, maybe if we wanted everybody up there to get killed sure, but—”

“You SHUT YOUR MOTHERFUCKING SQUAWK HOLE!” Gamzee roars. “Fucking piss blood motherfucker needs to learn his motherfucking place. PLUGGED IN TO A MOTHERFUCKING SHIP! You’re nothing but a talking engine. A MOTHERFUCKING SPARKPLUG WITH LEGS.”

You wince because you know that of all the things that Gamzee could have latched onto, that was one of the few that could really hurt Sollux. With the Imperial ships arriving in only a few perigees, many of your more recent jams have been dominated with discussing his fears that his programming abilities will not be enough to save him from being relegated to a helmsblock. You have done your best to reassure him that nobody can do what he does with computers, that he is the most apeshit bananas awesome computer whiz you have ever heard of, and—above everything else—that he is not just a mindless piece of equipment to be stuck into a machine and then thrown away.

You want to kick Gamzee’s face in for potentially undoing at least three jams’ worth of progress on the matter, but Sollux is lying between you and him and Gamzee is too far away for you to get in a good shot. You and Sollux seem to be operating on the same wavelength tonight because his
response is to snarl “fuck you, GZ” and kick Gamzee, striking him square on the kneecap with the ball of his foot.

Even though Sollux relies almost exclusively on his psionics for fighting just like the skinny-assed computer geek he is, you know that the kick was solid. It should have hurt enough to at least knock Gamzee off balance if not leave him rolling on the ground in agony. Gamzee barely seems phased. There is a grunt that might indicate a fleeting moment of mild discomfort—and then nothing. No yelling. No stumbling to the ground. Not even the slightest flinch.

You don’t see the juggling club (mainly because you being blind isn’t a thing you can just turn on and off at will) but you hear the drag of it against the air as Gamzee brings it down—hard. Sollux dodges, throwing himself so far to the side he ends up sprawled over the top of you with his bony elbow driving into your shoulder. An instant later the club hits the ground beside you, leaving a bowling ball-sized crater where Sollux’s head would have been if he’d dodged just a little slower.

Sollux is struggling to get up but the effects of the chucklevoodoo must not have fully worn off yet because his movements are so clumsy he might as well have about two or ten or maybe twenty too many distilled soporifics sloshing around in his system. You try to help him but you realize with mounting dismay that your own movements still feel more sluggish than where you would like them to be. The two of you end up ineffectually writhing on the ground in a tangle of limbs.

You can hear Gamzee laughing that sandpaper-and-pebbles chortle as he advances on you. The sound sends a shiver down your vertebral stack. Sollux swears under his breath and then he’s up and you’re up and you are about to run, but Sollux is swaying on his feet with Gamzee right behind him, club at the ready. You know that there will be no dodging this time. Sollux looks about two seconds away from falling on the ground and you are almost positive that Gamzee had been toying with you with his first swing, trying to scare the living hell out of the both of you for his own amusement before murdering the two of you in earnest. You throw yourself forward as the club whistles through the air.

If you had tried to push Sollux out of the way, you would have taken the hit intended for him full in the face, leaving you dead and him no less incapacitated than before. Luckily for you both, your lunge was not aimed for Sollux. Instead, you crash into Gamzee with everything you have in you. Gamzee’s entire body jerks with the impact and the swing goes wild, missing Sollux and only just grazing your shoulder rather than taking your head off. The blow sends a zing of numbing pain down the entire length of your arm. You are sure you’ll have a wicked bruise to show for it, but you are pretty sure nothing is broken and you’ll take a couple of bruises over a bashed-in pan any time.

Gamzee shoves you away from him then lunges after you as you are stumbling backwards. You can smell him coming like a grape Faygo nightmare of whirling juggling clubs, teeth, and claws. There is nothing you can do to get out of the way. Your cane is in your hand but you don’t even have time to bring it up to swing it at him, let alone draw the blade because you can already feel the wind off his clubs as he brings them down towards your face—and then a snap of appleberry-scented psionics sends him flipping away through the air.

His roar of rage is a continuous wall of (thankfully diminishing) sound until he crashes the ground fifty feet away. Then everything goes quiet.

You do not even entertain the possibility that the rough landing might have knocked him out. Instead you rush forward, grab Sollux by the crook of his arm, and run for the starship as fast as your legs will carry you.

You are only about a third of the way to your goal when you hear Gamzee chasing after you, honking as he comes. His voice is still fluctuating between low whispering and shouting, but you
have no trouble determining that he is gaining. You will yourself to pour on just a little more speed. You are running so fast you are practically dragging Sollux behind you until he gets smart and propels himself forward in a fizzing cloud of psionics. (Though if he was really smart he’d quit worrying about hanging back with you and use his psionics to get his ass onto the ship about ten times faster.)

When you reach the ship, Gamzee is so close behind you that you don’t even have time to seal him out before he charges through the hatch after you. You can hear him winding back to throw one of his clubs, but this time you are ready for him. You wheel around and crack your cane across his face hard enough to hear the bridge of his nose snap. He drops one of his clubs to clap a hand over the damage as he reels back. You plant a kick to his abdomen that sends him tumbling back through the hatch to land square on his ass on the unforgiving tarmac outside. You pause only to kick his club after him before mashing the CLOSE HATCH button.

Gamzee launches himself at the closing hatch, but the barrier slams into place and he ends up hitting the reinforced steel with a dull thud. He immediately begins hammering against the barrier with his clubs but the door is strong and the only thing that happens is one hell of a racket.

“Holy shit, TZ!” Sollux yells above the continuous clang of clubs against steel. “Your arm!”

“It’s fine!” you shout back. “Just get us the fuck out of here!” He hesitates, standing in front of you as though he wants to say something else but you snap “GO!” and he hurries off for the control room.

You follow after him more slowly. Now that your stress fluid is receding, your arm is really beginning to hurt. Gingerly, you bring up the hand on your good arm to examine the wound. You are surprised to find your shirt torn, a thin trickle of blood staining the sleeve. The bruising is already welling up and making more thorough examination uncomfortable but you are relieved to find that the blood appears to be coming from nothing more serious than a thin scrape. Cautiously, you attempt to rotate the shoulder in a circular motion. You make it about a quarter of the way through the motion before another flash of pain zings down your arm. Although you are still reasonably sure that nothing is broken, it’s pretty clear that arm is going to be more of a hindrance than a help for some time. You thank your lucky stars that it’s not your dominant arm.

You feel the ship beginning to lift off as you reach the control room. Sollux is still working at the instrument panel and as soon as you enter the room, he says, “Hey, TZ, come here for a second.”

When you get to his side, he shoots a nervous look at your arm and says, “Are you sure you’re OK?”

“It’s fine,” you reply. You frown because you have never known Sollux to dote on minor flesh wounds. “Is something wrong?”

“I think we should have a failsafe. You know, in case this whole thing goes tits-up.”

Your frown intensifies. “Why do you think it’s going to go tits-up? Do you know something I don’t?”

“I’m not hearing either of our voices screaming with the imminently deceased if that’s what you mean.”

“OK. Good. So what’s the problem then?”

He slowly shakes his head. “It’s just between Eridan and Vriska pulling their shit and now this thing
with Gamzee I’m just kind of…I don’t know…spooked, I guess.”

“Hey,” you say. You put a hand on his shoulder—not quite a pap, but a gesture of physical reassurance nonetheless. “If you don’t want to do this we won’t do this.”

He shakes your hand off then makes a face that suggests that he feels like a bit of a douche for doing it even though he knows that you really do not care. “It’s not like that. I’d just feel better if we had some contingency plans, just in case.”

“OK, what did you have in mind?”

He gestures to a screen on the instrument panel in front of him. “I’m working on programming in our return trip. The program can handle a shitload of alternate destinations. I’ve already done this for myself, but I want you to enter in a set of coordinates—not your hive—that would be a safe place for you to go. Don’t tell me where they are. Just enter them in.”

Your frown is back, deeper than ever. “You’re talking like you think only one of us is coming back.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I swear I’m really not hearing either of us with the imminently deceased and even if I was it’s not like we could do much to change that. Just humor me, OK?”

“OK, fine.” You pap his face and this time he doesn’t duck away as you say, “But I want you to know that it’s all or nothing here. Either we both come back together or neither of us do. Got it?”

He gives you a quick pap back before replying, “Yeah. I got it. Now enter in those coordinates already.”

You nod and turn toward the screen. After a moment of consideration you type in a set of coordinates for the edge of the forest, far enough away from your hive to be outside any Investigarroter squad sweep but within reasonable walking distance of a small city.

When you inform Sollux that you are finished, he smiles for the first time since you left his hive and says, “Thanks, TZ. Operation recover shouty asshole is now officially under way.”

“Hell yeah!” You grin back and the two of you share the most epic fist bump in the history of paradox space.

> END OF ACT 2 (part 2/2)
> Karkat: Receive some unexpected visitors

You used to think that nothing could be shittier than your tiny asscrack of a private respiteblock with its shit-tastic desk and its shit-tastic chair and its extra super shit-tastic human bed but ten days in the medical block has thoroughly schooled you on the true meaning of shittiness. (Having a bunch of Agressanalysts wanting to take your temperature and blood pressure every fucking hour and waking you up multiple times every sleep cycle just to ensure they didn’t miss filling in a single box on their inane charts? Very shitty. Eating only Cennia-approved portions of ridiculously bland human food on a Cennia-approved schedule? Shit-tacular. Having to discuss in intricate detail exactly when and how frequently you used the load gaper on a daily basis? Hurry, hurry, hurry, ladies and gentletrolls, the shit carnival has arrived to expunge its putrid waste all over the flaming shambles of Karkat’s life!) Consequently, you are exceedingly happy to be back in your own respiteblock, having been cleared to leave the medical wing a mere two hours ago.

You know that you are not completely free of Cennia and her crew just yet. In fact, they will likely be visiting you later tonight to watch you walk in a straight line with your eyes closed and frog-march you around the station a couple of times. They claim that this treatment qualifies as “vestibular reeducation.” You think what they are really interested in is preventing you and all of the other recruits from doing something stupid like killing each other or conducting a weaponized raid on the cafeteria since there are no more schoolfeeds to keep you occupied. They really have no need to worry about you pulling any of that shit, though because right now you are perfectly content to stay holed up inside your block, appreciating the definite not-shittiness of all of its lovely features.

Goddamn, you love your desk. You love your chair. You love your human bed. You especially love the clothes nestled inside the drawers on the human bed because they are actual clothes and not bullshit paper medical robes. And those walls! Those blank and utterly featureless walls! They may look exactly like the ones in medical block but they are your blank walls enclosing your block with all of your shit inside. Clearly, it would be a privilege to spend the rest of your life in a room as fine as this. You decide that fuck Cennia and her nameless crew of Agressanalysts you are never, ever leaving this room again except to eat or piss.

A sharp rap on the door cuts through your reverie. You groan because wow, you just got through pledging the rest of your life to loving all 233 floor tiles in your room (you would love them all, especially the seven cracked ones) and now some insensitive fuck is going to tear you away from the object(s) of your devotion just like the antagonist in every rom-com ever. Seriously, what piece of swill has decided to insert their smelly bulge into your business now?

A voice outside your door says, “KK? Fuck, please tell me you are in there and not doing something stupid like stroking your bulge in the ablution block.”

Your heart stops. You know that voice. It’s a bit deeper than you remember it, but you would recognize that stupid lisp anywhere.

You say, “Schollucth?” Then you wince because the retaining devices Cennia gave you when she removed the braces make you lisp even worse than Sollux “how the fuck do I sibilant” Captor.

“Wow,” he intones. “Fuck you too, KK.”

Quickly—before he gets the idea that you are actually socially stunted enough to pitch shit on somebody you have not talked to in over a sweep—you spit out the odious metal and plastic
contraptions and repeat, “Sollux?”

“What a relief to know you didn’t get any smarter over the last sweep and a half. Yes, it’s me.”

“And me!” another voice sings out. “You remember me; don’t you Mr. Gunpowder gray text?”

Of course you remember this voice. The way it always sounds like the troll it belongs to is about five million miles ahead of you and laughing at all of your comparatively woeful mental inadequacies. The way it always used to worm inside your listen ducts and take up residence in all the secret crannies of your pan, staying there for you to over-analyze every little tiny thing its owner said. Around the lump that has appeared in your windhole, you say, “Terezi?”

“You got it!” she exclaims with that same harpy cackle that has always been grating as fuck.

You lick your lips, wanting to ask them what they are doing here; how they are here—but you are pretty sure that the no Alternian rule didn’t stop being a thing just because a couple of old friends suddenly materialized out of nowhere. You can’t risk getting yourself passed over to Torkal, not when you are so close to getting out of here and—and what the hell are you thinking? Fuck the rules, that is Sollux Captor and Terezi Pyrope out there, do you really think they are going to appreciate your squawk blister vomiting out a cascade of surprise noises in motherfucking ENGLISH? No, if you are going to be plying them with a wall of surprise noise vomit the least you can do is make sure that it’s in a language they can actually fucking understand. So, for the first time in over a sweep, you speak in motherfucking beautiful Alternian to say, “What the hell are you doing here?”

Sollux says, “We’re busting you out, dumbass. Now shut up so I can finish hacking this lock.”

You feel a flutter in your chest. Your blood pusher is so light it feels as though it could just fly right up out of your thoracic cavity, erupt from your mouth, and float on up to the ceiling, dragging your sad and worthless body along behind as it goes because they came for you, after more than a sweep they actually fucking came for you! And then your joy turns to bowel-shriveling horror when you realize that oh shit they haven’t seen you in more than a sweep and they have NO FUCKING IDEA WHAT THEY ARE GOING TO SEE WHEN THEY GET THAT DOOR OPEN! You open your mouth to shout “No, wait” at the exact same moment that the deadbolt slides free and the door flies open.

Sollux is the first one through the door. He says, “The lock was open access inside and outside why the fuck didn’t you” and then he stops dead, the words dissolving into a startled hiss. You shrink back, stricken because he is baring his fangs at you. Your best friend is baring his fucking fangs at you.

Terezi bumps into Sollux from behind, hard enough for him to stumble a couple of steps forward. He stops hissing but his posture is so tense he looks as though he’s about one mild fear jolt away from either pissing himself or frying the shit out of you with his psionics or—fuck it—doing both. There are a few seconds of supremely uncomfortable silence in which you would gladly puncture your shame globes with a rusty spike hammer if it would just get you the fuck out of this awful situation. Then Terezi says, “Karkat, why do you smell like chemical coffee over peaches?”

“Because he’s fucking pink-brown…..” Sollux seems to deflate a bit, a quizzical expression edging in around the totally justified revulsion. “What the fuck even is that color?”

You feel so wretched you wish you could shrivel up and break into a million tiny unidentifiable pieces like a dried-up molted nook worm exoskeleton that somebody stepped on. Fighting to keep your voice even (because it would fondle major bulge to embarrass yourself even more by doing
something completely dumb like collapsing into a giant puddle of tears and snot), you say, “I don’t know.”

“What happened to your claws?” Sollux says. “Fuck, what happened to your horns?”

“OK, I get it; I’m fucking hideous!” you snap. “I’m still me, you rancid piece of trash.”

“Yeah,” he says. “Shit. I’m sorry. I just wasn’t expecting….” He makes a vague gesture towards you as though what he means to say is I just wasn’t expecting you to look like a fucking monster. You make a gesture of your own right back, one that says fuck you loud and clear.

“Well this is a truly heartwarming reunion,” says Terezi. “Makes me feel all warm and gooey right here.” She pats her chest over her bloodpusher and pretends to wipe away a single tear before going on with: “But let’s get real here for a second. We have about fifteen minutes to get out of here and a lot of station to cover. I’m going to say that it’s time to go now, kids.”

“Yeah.” You nod vigorously to show your wholehearted approval for this very reasonable course of action before adding, “You guys need to get out of here before anybody sees you.”

“We didn’t fly all the way out here just to say hello,” Sollux retorts. “You’re coming with us, idiot.”

“I can’t.”

“What the fuck do you mean you can’t?”

“I mean I can’t! Where will I even go?”

Terezi shrugs. “You’ll stay with one of us until we figure something out.”

“Oh, right. Because nobody’s going to notice some nasty-looking freak skulking around your hive.”

“Oh my god,” she moans. “Karkat, you look fine. If you’re really that concerned about it we’ll pick up some makeup and horn prosthetics. Now can we please just go?”

You look back and forth, from Terezi to Sollux and you realize suddenly that they came here for you even though you haven’t seen each other in over a sweep, and even though you are ugly as a canker-encrusted foot, they still want you to go with them. It occurs to you then that life on Alternia now wouldn’t be much different from what it had been before the Threshecutioners kidnapped you. Your secret had always deterred you from needlessly leaving the safety of your own hive before. (In fact, you had so rarely ventured outside that you barely even knew what your neighbors looked like, let alone knew their names.) Sure, you wouldn’t have Crabad or your own hive and your secret would be a fuckton more visible, but you would be with your friends until the Imperial ships came, at which point you would have the same two options you’d always had: go rogue or die. You would never have to rot away on some awful alien planet. You would never have to speak English or worry about ancient Greece or think about the roaring twenties again. You would be free—really fucking free to live as a troll rather than spending the rest of your life pretending to be something you are not.

“OK,” you say. “Let’s go.”

You follow Sollux and Terezi out of your respiteblock and even though you know where they are going, you let them lead you down the hall, past the communal ablation block, heading for the elevator on the far side of station that will take you down to the receiving hangar. You notice as you walk that Terezi’s left sleeve is torn and stained with teal blood. Through the hole you see that her skin is a kaleidoscope of teal bruises and scabbed-over scratches, as though some inept fuck tried to maul her with a melee move but was too dumb to aim for anything vital. The halls are deserted, but
you keep your voice low and hovering just above a whisper as you ask, “What happened to your arm?”

She stiffens. Sweeping her hand over the area, says, “What, this? It’s nothing.”

You shake your head. “No it’s not ‘nothing.’ It looks like somebody tried to take your fucking arm off.”

“OK, fine. If you must know, I ran into a door.”

You and Sollux both say, “What?”

“A door,” she repeats, biting off the two syllables with extra-crisp enunciation like she thinks you are both hearing impaired dirt tunnelers with half a brain between you.

You frown. “I’ve never heard of a door doing that.”

From the front of your three-person dinglehopper parade, Sollux says, “She ran into a door. Drop it, KK.”

“Oh my shitting Christ,” you gasp. “You did that, didn’t you? You guys are fucking black for each other.”

Terezi and Sollux exchange a look that very clearly says holy fucking shame globe sacks that is the funniest laugh pellet we have ever heard is he really THAT stupid before straight up bursting into full-on laughter. Through their continued guffaws, Sollux manages to gasp, “Holy shit, KK. Try a totally different quadrant, you moron.”

“Diamonds,” Terezi clarifies.

Your jaw drops so quickly your chin could chop a solid metal plate clean in half. “No shit?”

“Yes,” Sollux replies. “Now do you think you can manage to stop speculating on my love life long enough for us to concentrate on—“

“Somebody’s coming,” says Terezi.

Sollux trails off his rant and sure enough, now that he’s shut his wobbling seedflap you do hear voices echoing down the hallway behind you. “Shit,” whispers Sollux. “KK, is there a good hiding place anywhere around here?”

You chew your lip, considering your options. You are standing directly between the schoolblock wing and the storage wing. You immediately jettison the idea of using the schoolblocks because they are nothing but big, open space. Even if the three of you hunkered down under the desks, anybody could see you the second they walked in the door. (Besides that, you are pretty sure that they are all locked now that your schoolfeeds are officially over and those locks are good old-fashioned key and tumbler deals, totally impervious to computer hacks. The chances of making it into any of those rooms before getting caught are approximately less than fucking zero.) You rarely ever venture into the storage wing, but you have been there enough times to know that it is a miniature labyrinth of tiny rooms, some empty and some so full that all the random shit inside is precariously perched and waiting for some lame schmuck to open the door so that they end up buried under an avalanche of broken chairs, canned foods, and other crap.

“Come on,” you say, leading them toward the storage wing.
The voices are drawing closer—close enough for you to distinguish that there are definitely more than two or three of them. In fact, it sounds as though it is a small crowd around fifteen or twenty strong. You cut a sharp right to enter the maze of storage units and keep walking with Sollux and Terezi hot on your heels until the three of you round a bend, putting you out of sight of the main hall.

You don’t know which rooms are empty enough to accommodate the three of you and which are so loaded to the fucking gills that all the shit inside will come tumbling out and alert every single damn person on the station that DANGER, DANGER SOMETHING IS GOING DOWN IN THE STORAGE WING BETTER GET YOUR ASS OVER THERE AND SEE WHAT'S UP. You are about to pick a door at random and hope to fuck that the Storage Room Roulette gods are smiling on you tonight when you notice that the trolls you are attempting to hide from have entered the storage wing and are coming your way. You can’t see them yet but you can hear them well enough to pick out two snips of talk noises that set your digestive sac into churn and puree overdrive: “Vantas” and “missing.”

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that they are looking for you. (You manage to puzzle it out in less than a second and you are sure that Terezi cottons on to it even quicker than you do. Hell, Sollux could probably figure it out even if his mutated double brain decided to pull a complete short circuit shit fit.) The three of you exchange looks that are all varying degrees of oh SHIT. Then you hurry deeper into the warren of storage units because choosing a hiding place that is literally two doors away from the people looking for you would be about as intelligent as dousing yourself in cholerbear pheromones and tying yourself naked to a tree in the middle of the goddamn wilderness.

You take turns at random—left, left, right, left, right—until you can no longer hear any sign of the group of trolls behind you. Only then do you stop, take a deep breath, and throw open a door. Apparently you are a fucking master of Storage Room Roulette because the room contains only a couple of empty recuperacoons stacked in the far corner. You motion for Sollux and Terezi to go in before following them inside.

The motion-activated lights click on before you are even finished closing the door. One of the fluorescents sputters and burns out. The other seems permanently stuck at half power and it flickers like a goddamn strobe light. The effect is like something out of the climax of a super-low budget horror film with terrible acting and even more laughably bad special effects.

For a few seconds, the three of you stand there basking in the jackhammer rhythm of the flickering light and the smell of stale sopor. Then Sollux half-whispers, “So now what?”

“The hallway that we came in by is the only way in or out of here,” you whisper back. “Shit guys, I’m sorry. I didn’t think they would come in here after us.”

“God, Karkat, they haven’t caught us yet,” Terezi hisses. “That hallway might be the only way out but there’s like a bajillion ways to get to it from here. All we have to do is give them a little time to clear the hallway we need and then avoid them when we head back that way. We’ll be fine.”

“They’re looking for me. If they think I’m in here they’ll keep somebody in that hallway to make sure I don’t do exactly fucking that.”

Sollux shrugs. “Then we’ll fight our way past them and run like hell. They only think you’re in here. They don’t know that TZ and I are with you, too.”

“Hey, fuck you,” you scowl. “I could fight my way out solo and you damn well know it would be a fucking wonder to behold. They would enter it into the record books as ‘the day Karkat Vantas epically vanquished every fucker standing in his way with nothing but feet, fists, and pure fucking grit.’ People would read it and shit themselves in terror.”
Sollux looks as though he wants to share his completely inaccurate and worthless assessment of your fighting abilities but the distant sound of a door slamming prompts him to mutter “Fuck. We have to move.”

Terezi is already reaching for the door. You move to stand in front of her and say “Wait” because something terrible has begun to dawn on you like an invasive fungus unfurling deep within your gut.

“Karkat, we need to move now,” she says. Frowning, she makes another grab for the door and you block her again. From far away, another door slams.

“How did you find me?” you ask.

Sollux and Terezi look at each other as though they are both thinking the same thing—namely, what the hell is wrong with him who the fuck even cares? Finally, Sollux says, “EQ.”

“Equius Zahhak?”

Terezi nods. “Yeah. He got a commission to make some sort of ocular lenses for this program and saw your name on the list. Once Sollux knew where to look it didn’t take him long to hack in and find you.”

“Fuck,” you groan. Pinching the bridge of your nose, you say, “Guys, I can’t go with you.”

“What?” Sollux shouts. Another door slams, still some distance away but closer than the first two. Terezi punches his arm and he drops down to a furious whisper as he adds, “Why the fuck not?”

“These shitstains are going to go after that sweaty bastard the second we get out of here,” you reply. “They’ll go after him and then they’ll go after everybody he ever even fucking sneezed at.”

“Yeah, we know,” says Terezi. “We already made contingency plans for that. He’s absconding with Nepeta as we speak to someplace where they’ll both be safe.”

“No. You guys don’t get it. Wherever he’s going, it’s not going to do shit. These people are flying squeakbeast bugfuck shithive maggots insane. If I leave they will literally never stop going after him and everybody he knows until they find me and even then they’ll still cull the shit out of you and all our friends if any of you so much as pass wind anywhere within a ten million mile radius of them. None of you will ever be able to register your quadrant mates or join the fleet or do anything ever again.”

Terezi shrugs, all easy nonchalance and maybe if you hadn’t spent a good chunk of the first six sweeps of your life analyzing everything she did because she was Terezi fucking Pyrope and you were a stupid romantic piece of shit you could believe it. But even after being away from each other for so long, you notice the instant of hesitation and the tiny line that appears between her eyebrows as she says, “So we’ll go rogue then.”

You almost laugh because the idea is so bad and so stupid so completely unworthy of even momentarily gracing Terezi’s pan that it is fucking ludicrous. “No you won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m not worth it, goddamn it,” you hiss.

There is a long, uncomfortable silence, breached only by the ever-nearing sound of slamming of doors. An image flits into your pan and sticks there like a scene from a movie stuck in freeze-frame: Sollux with his lips curled back and fangs on full display, hissing at you like you are the most
horrifying thing he has ever seen in his life. The way he’d looked at you then—like you were less than a troll, like he really believed that all of the alterations Cennia has inflicted on your outside have leached through to irreparably change the inside, too—should have been enough to hammer home the cold, ruthless reality that guess what dumb shit nobody, not even your own friends will be able to look at you and see a troll ever again. Hell, even if you were to trapse around wearing some shitty disguise, how long would it be before you fucked up and somebody saw what you really looked like underneath the fake horns and caked-on makeup? (Answer: not very fucking long because if there is one thing you have learned living in this craphole it’s that the forces of the universe will always align their streams of piss in such a way as to ensure that Karkat Vantas lives a life of abject misery and suck.)

You don’t know who you were kidding thinking you could go back and expect your life to be anything like what it was before. The excitement of seeing your old friends must have been too intoxicating for Past Karkat’s tiny brain to handle because it’s all so clear to you now. You allow your next run of words to spill out of your squawk hole like flood waters of putrescent reason and common sense bursting through a dam of stupid:

“OK. Let’s pretend for just a second that your lives wouldn’t be over even though we all know that they totally, abso-fucking-lutely would be so we can take a charming look at what my life would be like. Would I be able to go outside without shitty fake horns and a fucking gallon of makeup? No. Would I be able to re-join the fleet? I’m going to go out on an extending tree member here and say that the answer is fuck no because the military doesn’t take kindly to fucking deserters.”

You pause just long enough to take a breath. Sollux says, “KK—” and that’s as far as you let him get before you continue your wild shitstream of a rant, whipping whatever the shit-scraping hell Sollux was about to say into submission.

“While we’re still discussing the topic of things that will be a major fucking concern in Future Karkat’s sad excuse for a life, let’s take a second to think about quadrants, folks. Do you guys really think anybody is going to want to share a pile with me when I look like this? No wait, better yet, how about you guys name off people who might actually consider pailing me and I’ll perform a beautiful interpretive dance to show you how violently they will puke up their guts every time they fuck up and look at my face. Who wants to go first? Oh, looks like it’s Sollux. Go ahead, Captor, start the fucking list!”

“Wow,” he says, raising his eyebrows so high they creep up above his glasses like two fuzzy caterpillars fleeing from the death beams he has the gall to call eyes. “Are you done with all that bullshit now, KK? Because all you did there was whine about how shitty your life will be on Alternia without giving me or TZ any reason to think that your life will be any less shitty on…what was the name of that alien planet again? Dirt?”

“Earth,” Terezi supplies.

“Yeah,” he says. “Thanks, TZ. So are you going to explain exactly why you think that whatever you have to look forward to on Earth is so much better than coming with us?”

“Don’t try to change the subject, you piece of shit,” you hiss. “Go ahead: name somebody—anybody who would let me auspisticize for them. Or how about somebody who would pap me without wanting to cut off their own globe-fondling hand and throwing it into a pit of fire.”

“Oh my god,” he groans. “Will you shut the fuck up already?”

You know that you should stop. You know you’ve gone far beyond the boundary of clarifying your point and rocketed straight into the territory of being a petulant douchebag—but the onerous fires of
your despair palate have been stoked and you are on a fucking roll so you might as well continue to ride the train all the way to super douchebag central. You hiss, “No, you shut the fuck up. Actually, no. Tell me something first: would you want to pap this ugly husk of a face?”

He gapes at you, no doubt rendered mute by the mere idea of such a horrifying experience. Just as you are about to crows that you were right, so fuck you he says, “OK, you know what? No. I wouldn’t want to pap you—but not because of your stupid fucking face. In case you’ve forgotten, I already have a moirail, shithead.”

You are still piecing together a response to show your utter contempt for that weak-ass copout of an answer (because goddamn it, you want to win this fucking argument, never mind why) when bony fingers rake through the fuzz of hair that has appeared on your scalp since the operation. You go tense at the touch because goddamn it, you hadn’t even noticed Terezi sneaking up on you. You are about to whip around and ask her exactly what the fuck she thinks she is trying to pull here, but then she leans in from behind you and whispers into your ear: “I don’t get why you are so hung up on this, Karkat. If you want my honest opinion, I think it makes you look kind of pitiable.”

Of all the things she could have said to you at that moment that was literally the last thing you were expecting to hear. (Quite honestly, you could not have been any more shocked if she’d told you that she was actually a giant troll-eating dragon with six eyes and Subjugglator polka dots stuffed inside a Terezi suit and waiting for the most opportune moment to char the fuck out of everybody on the space station and eat them for dinner.) You are pretty sure that she is only saying this shit to shut you up. Even so, you can’t stop yourself from stupidly saying, “What? Really?”

“Yes, you dummy.” You feel her fingers tracking along your scalp until they pass into the numb area around the surgical site. Then all you can feel is a far-off impression of something ghosting along the top of your head, stopping to trace the metal rim that surrounds the space your right horn used to occupy. She asks, “Did it hurt?”

You shudder because you want to tell her that it was terrible, that it made you so fucking sick you couldn’t even stand up for days. Instead, you say, “It’s fine now.”

Shaking her head, she mutters, “Those fuckers.”

Her fingers are still exploring your scalp, gliding along with an on-again off-again pressure that actually feels kind of fucking amazing. You would be perfectly happy to stand there and let her continue massaging your scalp like this because this is the first time in a long time that anybody has touched you without intending to poke, prod, jab, cut, or otherwise medically alter you in some way—but another slamming door reminds you that wow, bulge breath, you still need to get your friends out of here before anybody sees them. You duck away from Terezi’s hands and say, “I still can’t go with you.”

“Why not?”

Without a moment’s hesitation you blurt, “They nominated me to lead a platoon.” For about half a second you feel just about as surprised as Sollux and Terezi look because wow, way to class it up by manipulating the truth to your friends, you mendacious piece of trash. Then you realize that this is the sickle that will pierce straight through the heart of any argument that they might use to get you to go with them and kill it dead in its tracks. Picking up your enthusiasm (because the only way you are going to get them to believe you here is if you sell this shit hard), you say, “That’s right; they nominated me for a position in higher command. What do you think about that?”

“No way,” Sollux breathes. “You’re shitting me.”
“Oh, I assure you I do not shit.” You can feel Terezi scrutinizing you, looking for any tells that you are lying but you know she won’t find any because—ha—you aren’t lying. Every last one of the things you are claiming happened actually did happen, never mind the fact that the whole thing ended up sinking ass-deep into a mire of shit and anguish fluid later. “I’m the third-ranked recruit in this program. They even said that the other recruits look to me as a leader.”

“Why didn’t you tell us about this earlier?” Terezi demands.

“Because past me is a stupid nookwhiff who was too busy choking on surprise juice over the fact that two people he wasn’t expecting to see ever again were suddenly barging into his respiteblock like a couple of cloddish assholes.”

“Well shit,” says Sollux. “We thought we were rescuing you. Apparently, this whole trip was fucking pointless.”

Terezi purses her lips and says, “Are you sure you don’t want to come with us, Karkat?”

You hesitate because you want to go with your friends so much it hurts. You want to go back so you can bitch at Gamzee with all his stupid clown shit and talk through high-minded shit with Kanaya and argue with Sollux over which of you is the better programmer (him) and which of you is the better fighter (you, of course). You want to shoot the shit with Terezi and exchange inane quadrant banter with Eridan. You’d be glad to role play with Nepeta or see if Tavros ever managed to grow a proper set of shame globes. Hell, you wouldn’t even mind dealing with Vriska’s bullshit or Feferi’s ridiculous bubbliness or having sweaty creeper Zahhak order you to order him around. But...you know that it wouldn’t be long before not just you but everybody would have to disappear into the woodwork of the Alternian wilderness and you already know that you would never be able to live with yourself if you were to do that to all of them. (Hell, some of them would barely even last a day out there. You wouldn’t put it past Gamzee to immediately eat something poisonous and die within the first hour or two after leaving his hive.)

Finally, you say, “The only good thing that would come out of me leaving with you would be the dramatic imaginary fanfare that would play to signal the end of my life and your lives and the lives of literally everybody we know and even that would be completely shitty because I would be the only one hearing it. I can’t do it. I’m sorry.”

“All right then,” Terezi briskly replies. “I guess that means we’re done here.”

You are about to explain that you really are sorry, that you know they must have taken a huge risk in getting up here and that you hope they don’t feel as though you’re just turning around and shitting all over them for their troubles—but then another door slams, close enough to make all three of you jump and you know you don’t have time for empty pseudo thank you’s.

“I’m going to go out there now and let them find me,” you say. “They’ll leave once they have me and then you guys should be free to go. Do you guys remember the way out?”

“What do you take us for?” Sollux scoffs. “A couple of brain dead morons?”

Terezi rolls her eyes and says, “We’ll manage.”

“OK,” you breathe. Keeping your eyes on the floor, you say, “I guess this is goodbye then.”

You are so intent on not looking at either of them as you reach for the door that it comes as a total shock when Terezi grabs you by the wrist and says, “Wait.” You are so surprised that you forget that you are supposed to be staring at the ground so nobody can tell how miserable you are. Instead, you
whip around to face her—and then her mouth is on your mouth and oh...OH WOW, she’s kissing you. It’s pretty much the least sexy kiss in the history of the world because she is trying to shove her tongue into your mouth and you’re just kind of standing there like an idiot trying to process the fact that Terezi fucking Pyrope is kissing you how the FUCK did that happen? By the time you realize that Jesus fucking Christ on a one wheel device maybe you should be doing something a little more proactive here like wrapping your arms around her or shoving your tongue into her mouth she is already pulling away from you. Troll Casanova must be shaking his head and contemplating suicide in response to that pathetic showing.

Terezi doesn’t seem to be terribly put out by your complete failure to effectively swap saliva with her. She gives you this wide grin that is just this side of grubfucked insane and says, “For what it’s worth, I think you taste nice. Like delicious cherry candies.”

You look over at Sollux, trying to convey enough what the fuck just happened, seriously how did she do that without gagging sentiment that he might offer up some explanation for his supposed moirail’s bizarre actions. Instead he just gives you an irritable look and says, “Fuck that. You do not get sloppy makeouts from me for being a self-sacrificing piece of shit.”

“OK,” you say (because wait, what? Why the hell is he talking about sloppy makeouts now? Did the quadrant fairy somehow sneak her sparkly ass into this storage room and endow you with the gift of irresistible concupiscent attraction?) “I’m going now.”

“Take care of yourself, Karkat,” Terezi whispers.

“Yeah; don’t fuck anything up,” Sollux adds.

You tell them that you will and that you won’t (in that order, fuck you very much) and then you open the door and slip out into the hallway. None of the searchers are in your hallway. (You count this as a small miracle because you really had no clue how the hell you were going to explain why you were just chilling in a storage unit other than that you wanted to experience the thrill of fondling your genitals in a semi-public area while farting out noxious clouds of stink that could choke a healthy musclebeast to death.) You wander around, following the sound of slamming doors until you run into a short female troll working her way down the hall opening each door she passes and them slamming them shut, looking for all the world like an overgrown pupa throwing a temper tantrum against her lusus.

When she sees you, she says, “There you are. Why did you leave your respiteblock without authorization?”

After your brief English respite, you almost fuck up and answer her in Alternian. You catch yourself just in time and, in perfect fucking English, you reply, “I didn’t realize I needed authorization.” She gives you a doubtful look so you quickly add, “Cennia mentioned I should try to walk. For vestibular rehab.”

This time she seems to buy your dirty, dirty lie because she thumbs on the small communicating device attached to the collar of her shirt and says, “This is Judila. I found Vantas. Everything is fine. Returning him to his respiteblock as we speak.” Then she grabs you by the elbow and says, “Come on; let’s go.”

To her credit, she doesn’t frog-march you all the way back to your respiteblock the way Cennia’s medical staff does whenever they get their grubby hands on you for your actual rehabilitation sessions. (You swear to that those fuckers’ sole mission in life is to make you trip over your feet and fall on the floor like an inept shitwit.) Instead, she very nicely leads you back through the station and deposits you in your respiteblock with a mild “If you wish to make any other excursions beyond the
ablution block or the nutrition block, please be sure to obtain the proper authorization first.” She is so goddamn pleasant it almost rots your perfectly straight teeth out (and now that you think of it you should probably put those obnoxious retaining devices back into your mouth before Cennia stops by or she will have your head on a pike and your bulge filleted and served on ice).

You proceed to whittle away the next several hours over-analyzing everything that you did or said around your old friends and mentally arguing with yourself over whether or not you made the right call even though you know in your heart of rotten, crusted-over hearts that you were absolutely, 100% right.

> Nepeta: Enjoy some quality time with your loving moirail

You can handle that! Between working on his commission and making plans to rescue Karkat, Equius has been so busy that the two of you have barely even had time to chat on Trollian, let alone see each other in person. In fact, you can’t even remember the last time you saw each other face-to-face. (Actually, yes you can! It was almost three perigees ago. You went to his hive for a surprise visit, even though the weather was really crappy that day. He spent at least ten minutes moaning about how you had come all that way in the rain and insisting that you change into one of the fresh sets of clothes that you keep at his place for just such a situation. Then the two of you settled into a nice pile of broken robot parts and had one of the best jams you have ever had!) You were so excited to see him tonight that the first thing you did when he walked into your hive earlier this evening was knock him onto his butt with an especially ferocious tacklepounce.

You would normally follow the tacklepounce with a nice long conversation about feelings or random stuff like his robotics projects or your most recent wall art masterpiece—but not tonight! Tonight you and he are absconding to the first of three outpost rest stops on your way to Kanaya’s hive and your goal is so far away that there hadn’t been a moment to lose if you were going to get there by sunrise.

The two of you and your lusii have already been walking for hours and as far as either of you can tell, you are going to have to keep walking for a long time. It’s a good thing he is so STRONG and you have such great stamina. Otherwise you might end up stuck sleeping out in the open wilderness with no sopor slime and no shelter to keep the local fauna from bothering you. (Not that you couldn’t defend yourselves from most animal threats. You could! It’s just that getting woken up in the middle of the day by a bunch of hungry great beasts would be really annoying because the two of you need your rest if you are going to make the other legs of your trip on time.)

You know that you should be keeping a sharp eye out for any roaming animals (because cholerbears and wolf beasts don’t only come out during the day) or traveling trolls (because it would completely defeat the purpose of absconding in secret if a bunch of people saw where you were going). Even so, you often catch yourself glancing up to the stars every once in a while. Tonight is the night that some of your good friends will be going up there to rescue another good friend and you can’t help feeling just a little nervous for them. Equius seems to be just as concerned as you are; you have noticed him looking up at the starry night sky with that broody expression he gets when he has something on his mind. (Really, with the two of you walking around with your heads in the clouds, it’s a good thing you have Aurthour and Pounce de Leon to pay attention for you.)

Neither of you have mentioned Karkat or Sollux or Terezi all night. It’s almost like you afraid that you will jinx the whole rescue operation if you say their names out loud, which is kind of dumb now that you think about it. The next time you see him looking up at the night sky, you decide that it is finally time to discuss the figurative prehensile trunk creature in the room.
“Where do you think Sollux and Terezi are right now?” you ask.

He is quiet for a long time; so long you start to wonder if he even heard you. Finally, he says, “I would imagine that they have reached the station by now.”

“I still kind of wish I could have gone with them,” you sigh. “Then I would at least know what was happening instead of having to be a curious kitty all night.”

“Yes, but you know very well why I forbade you to go.”

“I know, I know. It’s too dangerous.”

“That is correct. Your safety will always be of the utmost importance to me. Furthermore, although I am an exceptionally strong specimen of troll, even I am not immune to loneliness. I am glad to share your company on this long journey. Are you not glad to share mine?”

“Oh, I wasn’t saying I didn’t want to be with you, Equius!” you exclaim. “I just thought it would have been a fun opportunity for some real-life role play, that’s all!”

He goes quiet again. You dart another look up to the night sky, wondering if any of those shiny stars might actually be the station that Karkat has been living on for the last sweep. That inevitably makes you wonder what they have been doing to him that is so bad he would need to be flagged as a suicide risk and oh great, now you’re starting to make yourself kind of sad.

Before you can get too depressed, Equius’ voice breaks through your train of thought: “The extremely muscular male commands Miss Leijon who is clearly not a cat at the moment to stop fretting over not being a part of the rescue mission. He assures her that Captor and Pyrope are most likely performing adequately as we speak.”

You perk up, the familiar syntax bringing an excited flutter to your blood pusher. “Equius, are you trying to role play with me?”

“The extraordinarily strong nobleman demands that the agile feline-obsessed female before him properly reciprocate his valiant attempt at this childish game, lest he recognize the silliness of these antics and desists with this hoofbrained attempt to lift his moirails flagging spirits.”

Equius has never started a role playing scenario for you before! Trying to convince him to participate at all is usually harder than herding cats. Grinning, you reply, “The limber moirail would give the hulking muscle man a hug to show her appreciation…if she wasn’t busy being a furocious feline huntress right now!”

“What, exactly, does the huntress expect to hunt? There does not appear to be anything in the immediate vicinity worth hunting and she will remember that she is not allowed to stray from the path.” He pauses for a beat before quickly adding, “Er…said the man pretending to speak to a huntress who is no longer Nepeta Leijon.”

“What, exactly, does the huntress expect to hunt? There does not appear to be anything in the immediate vicinity worth hunting and she will remember that she is not allowed to stray from the path.” He pauses for a beat before quickly adding, “Er…said the man pretending to speak to a huntress who is no longer Nepeta Leijon.”

“The huntress laughs and says ‘what are you, blind? There’s a huge rabid bear just up ahead!’” Equius looks as though he is on the verge of pointing out that there is not actually a bear anywhere in the area, but that’s no fun! You decide to give him just a little extra material to nudge him in the right direction. “Oh no! It looks like the nasty bear is menacing some helpless baby musclebeasts. The huntress runs ahead as fast as she can go, but it looks like she isn’t going to make it. The only way she can get there in time is if her great archer furiend slows the bully bear down by firing a couple of arrows into its thick hide!”

Equius looks abashed. For a moment you think that maybe you overreached just a little bit with
threatening the helpless baby musclebeasts (even if they are only pretend helpless baby musclebeasts), but dann it, you want to see Equius let go and enjoy role playing for once and if there is anything that will get his attention it’s a majestic musclebeast in peril! Then, to your delight, he clears his throat and says, “Very well. If the bear is rabid then I understand—I mean the archer understands—that it must be relieved of its suffering. The archer notches an arrow to the bow and, assuming that the bow is resilient enough to remain in one piece under the strain of the archer’s ludicrous strength, lets the arrow fly.”

“The arrow only grazes the beast,” you announce. “Now it is even angrier! The huntress hopes that the archer will try again because those musclebeasts are on the verge of becoming a meal!”

“The archer notches another arrow. He aims more carefully and hopes that the arrow does not harm the bear more than necessary.”

“The aim is true! The arrow stops the bear in its tracks. The huntress leaps on the bear and quickly slays it before it even realizes that it has been injured. Then she calls out to tell her archer friend ‘thank you for helping me stop the rabid bear! Now we should probably bury it so no other animals get sick.’”

“Did the baby musclebeasts survive?”

“Of course!” you exclaim. “The baby musclebeasts run up to the brave archer. One of them even nuzzles his hand to show how thankful it is to be saved!”

He smiles (which makes you smile because you have never seen him do that when you make him role play with you) and says, “The archer supplies the baby musclebeasts with a large pile of high-quality hay so that they will grow to be majestic and STRONG.”

“The baby musclebeasts eat up all the hay and run off. It looks like they have already grown stronger. Meanwhile, the huntress is busy digging a hole for the rabid bear. She says ‘gosh it’s hard work digging this hole. I wish that there was a strong person nearby who could help!’”

“The archer replies—oh my. Stop at once.”


He shakes his head. “No, you misunderstand. The charade must cease at once. There is real danger afoot.”

“There is?” You sneak a quick look over to Pounce de Leon and sure enough, your lusus is standing stock still with his nose to the air and his tail lashing back and forth in choppy stabs. A glance towards Aurthour tells you that the butler lusus is similarly agitated: he is standing even more erect than usual and his head is tilted to one side as though he is listening for something. A moment later, you hear it: an almost imperceptible crunch of plant matter and earth that can only be footsteps of someone or something walking just out of sight on the path ahead of you.

Equius whispers, “Nepeta, you will climb a tree and hide at once. The lusii will remain here with you while I investigate this threat.”

“What?” you whisper back. “Equius, that’s stupid! It’s probably just a wandering antler creature or something and even if it’s not I’m not letting you go alone.”

“Antler creature or not, my orders are non-negotiable. You’ll do as I say immediately.”

“OK fine,” you sigh. “But you had better come back, you dumb sweatyface.”
He brushes your arm with the tips of his fingers—the closest thing to a real pap his insane strength will safely allow—and says, “I assure you I will be fine. Now up you go.”

With your trusty claw gloves, it doesn’t take long to shimmy up the trunk of the nearest tree. You are soon comfortably nestled in a notch between the principal trunk and one of the larger limbs. The surrounding foliage provides excellent camouflage—you are positive that nobody on the ground will be able to see you unless they know exactly where to look. Unfortunately, it also blocks your view of the ground and you can barely see Equius creeping forward as stealthily as he is able—which, you notice with mounting dismay, is not terribly stealthy at all. Even when he is completely out of your line of sight, his footsteps are so loud anybody with ears would hear him coming from a mile away.

_I should have gone_, you think, wincing as he crunches though a patch of particularly noisy dry leaves. _I have way more scouting experience than he does_. Ugh, _why didn’t I think to say that before he went off on his own?_

You have no sooner had this thought when Equius’ footsteps come to an abrupt stop. You frown and strain your ears for any noise to indicate that he is still making progress and hear nothing. The forest is so still it might as well be a petrified wasteland: there is not even a breath of wind to stir the foliage or the usual buzz of insects to break the silence.

Your apprehension increases as you continue to sit there waiting for Equius to return and give the all-clear. _He should have been back by now_, you think and the longer you wait the surer you become that something is very, very wrong.

You decide that orders or no orders, you need to go and make sure that Equius is alright. _He’s always so worried about protecting me_, you think as you quietly crawl along the length of the branch. _But moirails are supposed to watch out for each other!_ When you reach the end of the branch, you leap for a nearby branch a neighboring tree. _It’s a two-way street._ You land on the target branch without a sound and quickly prime yourself to jump for another branch farther ahead. _I hope he is OK._

You continue to make your way forward with more sneaky stealth than even the quietest kitty that ever did sneak. With every leap, you tell yourself that _Equius will be fine, any second now I’ll see him crouching behind a tree or hiding in some brush_ even though you are rapidly becoming more and more certain that this will not be the case at all.

_Leap. Equius is going to be so annoyed if he notices that I followed him. WHERE IS HE?_

_Leap. He’ll scold me until he is blue in the face! I SHOULD HAVE SEEN HIM BY NOW._

_Leap. But that’s OK. WHY HAVEN’T I FOUND HIM YET?_

_Leap. I’ll just have to scold him right back for scaring me like this! COME ON, EQUIUS, WHERE ARE—OH, NO. NO, NO, NO…._

Your final leap has put you at the edge of a small clearing. The path is much wider here, and covered with soft grass that looks like it would be delightful to roll in. Little yellow flowers dot the ground at random and a small fairy ring of toadstools stands off to one side of the clearing. With no overhanging tree limbs, the light of the double moons pours into the open area and gives everything a surreal luminescence. The whole thing would be kind of pretty—if not for the fact that there are four tall, robed figures at the far end of the clearing carrying a very muscular and very unconscious troll with very arrow-shaped horns (one of which is very broken) away from you at an alarming pace.

You do not hesitate. You do not even think. You just launch yourself out of that tree and hit the
ground running because there is no time to think, they hurt Equius and you can’t let them take him from you. YOU CAN’T LET THEM TAKE HIM AWAY! Stress fluid is fizzing through your veins, giving you the strength to run faster than you have ever run before. You cross the clearing so fast everything around you seems to be a wild blur and then you are a screaming nightmare of claws and teeth as you leap towards the nearest of the robed figures, ready to tear the bastard’s innards out and wear them as a trophy crown because nobody messes with your moirail, nobody is allowed to take him away from you!

A set of arms catches you from behind and maybe, if you weren’t so desperate to get to Equius, get Equius away from these people, SAVE EQUIUS it would occur to you to jackknife in your captor’s arms and slash his throat. But your rage makes you sloppy—all force and no restraint—and you throw yourself against the arms over and over, screaming at them to “Let me go, let me go! Equius, no! NO, NO, NO; LET ME GO!”

Something stings the back of your neck, an insect bite, a pinprick of sudden pain that vanishes just as suddenly. You try to struggle against the arms that have you but you are suddenly tired. Your body feels sluggish and your eyelids feel heavy and you just want to sleep, want to—Drugs, you realize. They drugged me.

The realization sends a cold bolt of fear through your belly—but you are so tired that you can barely even remember what you are supposed to do about it. With the last of your strength, you extend your arm, reaching out for Equius, reaching out…reaching…..re….ach……ing……

Your last conscious thought is Equius…please be OK….

> Sollux: Be the hero, save the girl

What girl? The only girl around you right now is TZ and if the shit hits the whirling device you and she both know that she would most likely be the one saving you. If there is one thing that TZ is not it’s a pathetic, weeping damsel in distress. Now if it were KK we were talking about that would be different. You’ve seen him distressed and weeping more times in one day than you have seen TZ in either of those states in her entire life. Although last you checked KK was still a dude so try again, dumbass.

> Sollux: Abscond to safety

Now that is something you can do.

After KK skips out on you like a stupid piece of shit, you and TZ hang back in the storage closet for a few minutes to give the search crew a chance to clear out. You spend most of that time being completely pissed off. You are pissed at KK for pretending to be some kind of martyr, saying he was pulling this shit for the good of everybody else. Even though he was probably right, it doesn’t change the fact that he chose this place over you. He chose the people who kidnapped him and cut off his horns and ruined his teeth over you and although you would never admit it to a single living soul because you would never, ever hear the end of it, you are a little hurt. You two were friends for sweeps and although his constant drama and immature arguments were kind of annoying, you had assumed that he valued your friendship at least as much as you valued his which in this case would have meant choosing the people who actually gave a shit about him over the people who spent a sweep turning him into a fucking monster. (You try to ignore the niggling idea that by choosing them
he was also choosing to keep you safe which meant that he was still indirectly choosing you. You also try to ignore the persistent thought that you would have done the same thing for him or TZ or FF or AA or any of your other friends in a second, you hypocritical ass.)

When you get tired of being pissed at KK, you decide that the person you should really be pissed at is yourself. After all, **you** had been the one looking at all the information about this awful place. All of the information that had convinced everybody that KK had needed rescuing had come from **you**. Maybe if you had taken just a couple more minutes to poke around, you would have found the real story: that underneath all of the worrisome musclebeast shit you were seeing, KK was living out his dream of becoming some hot shit military commander. Had you even **looked** for more information about what this program was actually doing on Earth? **No.** Had it even occurred to you to look at the recruit rankings? **No.** Instead you were content to go “**hur durrrr, guys KK’s being experimented on! He’s going to kill himself! Oh noes what do?**” like some stupid fucking tabloid reporterterrorist. God damn it, why can’t you ever do anything right?

TZ doesn’t seem to be pissed at anybody. She just seems kind of sad, which is even worse because this whole situation is your fault which means that it is also you fault that she is sad. God, you are the shittiest morail. It is you.

When you finally decide it’s safe to leave the storage room, you think that TZ is going to suggest going back and **making** KK come with you. Dragging his cherry-scented ass (that was how TZ had described it, wasn’t it? Cherries?) to the ship and tying him down inside, preferably with a nice big piece of tape over his mouth so he can’t spout any more bullshit until you have him planet-side. You want her to say it and if she doesn’t say it then you will. You tell yourself you are going to say it the whole time you walk through the mazelike storage wing. You tell yourself you are going to say it as you emerge into the empty main hallway. You keep telling yourself you are going to say it as you get on the elevator that will bring you down to the lower levels of the station and you continue to keep telling yourself you are going to say it right up until the doors close and the elevator car begins to descend because after all that planning and all that effort you cannot believe that you are just leaving KK **here**—but you don’t say it and neither does TZ.

The two of you don’t say a word to each other as the elevator takes you down to the ground floor. You are sure she must be thinking what you are thinking, something along the lines of **what the fuck just happened and how do we break it to everybody that we failed HARD** because in a couple more minutes, you and she will be back on Ampora’s ship and on your way back to Alternia. That’s OK, though. In fact, you are glad to be heading home because you are just done with this. You want to get off of this shitty space station, go back to your crappy little hive, feed your dumb lusus his mind honey and then climb into your recuperacoon and sleep until everybody forgets about this whole situation and your failboat handling of it. God you suck.

You are in the docking area and heading for the airlock that leads to your ship when something weird happens. It starts out as a weird tingling sensation, like all of your thoughts have turned into psionic energy and they are zapping the surfaces of your double-brain with wonky static electricity. You have only just noticed the tingling when it suddenly intensifies, jabbing at you from the inside and then pulling at something; **pulling** until part of you is suddenly outside of you. Your legs give out from under you and you gasp, not because falling on the ground like a ragdoll hurts but because you know this feeling. You have only felt it once before but you know this feeling.

TZ is kneeling beside you. You hear her say, “**Sollux? Hey, what’s wrong?**”

You want to warn her to **run, get out of here NOW** but all of your muscles seize up the second you open your mouth. Your body spasms and all you can say is “**HAAAAUUGHHH**” as your diaphragm goes haywire and forces all of the air out of your lungs.
TZ has her arms around you and is making one hell of an effort to pick you up, but another spasm hits you, followed by another and another until you are full on writhing and it won’t stop, *fuck it* **HURTS MAKE IT STOP!** The pain is so distracting that you barely even notice her standing back up, can barely even process the meaning of the words as she says, “Whoever you are, I know you’re there. Come out and face us instead of hiding like a stinking coward.”

The leech emerges from behind a wall of packing crates and takes his time as he saunters across the docking bay floor until he is standing between you and your airlock. He is a short troll, but wide and built with enough muscle to rival EQ in a sweaty body competition. His face is such a mess of scars it could only mean one of two things: either he’s had his ass handed to him a few times because he has no clue how to handle himself in a fight or he’s badass enough to have been in a shitload of nasty fights and survived. Judging by the way he carries himself and—oh, yeah—the fucking ginormous muscles, you’re going to guess it’s the latter.

With a nasally voice that sounds like it’s coming to you through a tin can, he says, “I was beginning to wonder when you would get back down here. Are you enjoying your stay on our humble little station?”

TZ doesn’t bother to play his little game. Instead she points to you and demands, “What are you doing to him?”

“What, this?” The pulling sensation momentarily spikes into a *tearing* sensation. You bravely curl into a tiny, tiny ball and moan as the spasms ripping through you increase in intensity. Then, just as quickly, the pain recedes back to a level that is just this side of bearable. You go limp and lay on the floor, gasping like a beached fish. The leech says, “I’m just restraining him so we can have a nice, civil conversation.”

“Cut the shit,” snarls TZ. “What do you want from us?”

“Your ship’s PIN was reported as stolen a few days ago. You’re going to have to come with me so you can answer some questions for the relevant authorities.”

You have got to give TZ credit. Even with the whole plan rapidly going tits-up, she doesn’t miss a beat. Without the slightest hesitation, she says, “The ship belongs to our employer. If it’s stolen then you should take it up with her because it’s not our problem.”

“If that’s the case we are not at liberty to release you or your ship until we have spoken with your employer. Regardless, right now you are coming with me.” TZ doesn’t budge. Neither do you, though your defiance has less to do with your outstanding personal mettle and a whole lot more to do with the fact that the leech is still sucking away at your psionic powers and it’s making you feel floppy.

The leech sighs. “You have two options here. We can do this the easy way—“ (he eases up on draining you enough you could probably stand if you really, really wanted to) “—or we can do this the hard way.” (You feel a rough pull and then your psionics are ripping out of you even faster than before. Your entire body rebels against the feeling, muscles firing at random. You try to bite back the hoarse scream rising in your throat and you fail miserably.)

“Stop that!” shouts TZ. You hear something—a whisper of metal against metal—and realize that she’s separated her cane to reveal the blades concealed within. “Let him go, now!”

The pain begins to intensify. It crashes through you in relentless waves and *fuck you can’t take this your guts feel like they are melting*. You try to roll onto your side because you know you are going to puke but your body is too busy twitching on the floor to listen and ugh, *fuck* you just yakked up a
mouthful of bile and drool all over yourself. Gross.

You don’t notice TZ charging the guy but you definitely notice when he diverts his attention away from you to deal with her because the pain just shuts off. It happens so abruptly you are dizzy with the relief and for a moment all you can do is lie there on the ground trying to regain your bearings. Ten feet away, TZ is a blur of whirling, jabbing, sweeping blades as she bears down on her opponent with a cold, murderous rage that is outright scary as hell. The leech doesn’t seem to find her nearly as intimidating as you do. He doesn’t seem to have much trouble dodging the deadly blows and he knocks away the weaker strikes like they are about as threatening as a pack of flies buzzing around his head. You reach out for your psionics and—ow, fuck—you slam into a psychic wall that makes you see stars. The leech may not be draining you at the moment but he’s still focused enough on you to keep you from accessing your psychic power.

Without your psionics and with your body weak and aching from the residual effects of the draining, there isn’t much you can do to help TZ at the moment. In fact, you would probably just get in her way and slow her down. But just because you can’t fight doesn’t mean that you intend to lie on the ground like a useless sack of shit. With TZ attacking him, the leech can’t divert enough of his focus toward you to keep you completely incapacitated. You figure if TZ keeps him busy you can make it over to the airlock and open it and if you can open the airlock you and TZ might still be able to make a break for it.

You are still lying supine on the floor. Rolling over onto your belly takes a monumental effort and—oh yuck—you end up rolling right into the tiny amount of puke that didn’t end up all over you before, but you manage it. You quickly discover that your arms and legs are still too weak to allow you to stand up but you decide fuck standing up, crawling is a shit ton less conspicuous anyway. Slowly, you begin to move your abused carcass towards the airlock.

It takes you a long time to drag yourself across the docking bay floor. Your arms keep crashing out on you and making you fall face first on the floor like a tool. By the time you finally make it to your goal you are shocked that TZ and the leech are still fighting (though you do note with trepidation that TZ is starting to look tired while the leech doesn’t have a scratch on him). With the last of your strength, you haul yourself up to slouch against the wall so you can reach the keypad. Your fingers are shaking, but you still manage to type in the passcode on your first try and the airlock opens with a loud hiisiissssssssssss.

You do not know if the leech had known what you were up to, but even if he hadn’t figured it out yet the airlock makes such a goddamn racket that it could raise the dead. He looks in your direction just long enough to create a wide enough opening for TZ to get a wicked hit on one of his big biceps. A gout of cerulean blood sprays from the wound. For one second you think that TZ might manage to duck around him on his wounded side and run for the airlock. Then the leech apparently decides that playtime is over because he lunges forward and, engulfing one of her forearms in his hand, turns around and hurls her across the room. She hits the wall hard and you hear something—probably her already wounded shoulder—go snap.

The leech turns his attention back to you and—fuck not this shit again ow, ow, OW!—your body immediately begins to judder against the strain as he sucks away at your psionics. You sincerely regret sitting yourself up against the wall because now that you are a convulsing mess you keep bashing your head up against it. Your mouth opens, trying to scream at him to “AUUGH STOP, FUCK, YOU’RE HURTING ME, STOP!” but the only thing that comes out is a long, toneless groan (which is probably just as well when you stop and think about it. It’s not as though he would have a single fuck to give about hurting you. Hell, for all you know the fucker gets off on that sort of shit.)
From far away, you hear TZ screaming at him to “Stop it! Stay away from him!” and only then do you realize that the leech is coming toward you. TZ’s shouts don’t stop him from advancing on you, but he does dial down the intensity of his psychic assault enough to let you lie on the ground without twitching. You think you might even be able to manage coherent words.

He grabs you by the ankles and begins to drag you away from the open airlock with about as much effort as hauling a bag full of feathers. Through your raw throat, you croak, “F-f-fuuuuuck youuu.” You try to struggle but he’s still draining you and it’s about as effective as a dirt tunneler trying to wiggle out of a hungry bird’s beak. You have to settle with repeating, “F-fuuuuuck youuu, fffuck youuu.”

You hear running feet—TZ is running toward you. She is limping and her left arm is hanging useless at her side but she is still holding a blade with her right hand and when she launches herself towards the leech you know that this time he won’t be able to turn around and block her; this time the blade is going right into him to pierce his heart from behind; this time—something huge crashes into TZ before she can land the hit. She goes flying through the air, landing ten feet away and skids another five before she finally stops.

It takes you a moment to recognize that the thing that hit her is another troll because the guy is fucking huge. If the leech’s muscles would have made EQ proud, this guy would have him drowning in a pool of his own sweat. Goddamn his wrists are about as big around as your thighs. Your perspective is all kinds of fucked up from your position on the ground, but as near as you can tell this new guy stands at least two and a half times taller than the leech and you’d be willing to bet it’s closer to three.

The leech stops dragging you along the floor long enough to turn to the mountain of troll standing over you and say, “Thank you Averic. You may continue to neutralize the threat.”

Your despair gland releases all of its anguish fluid at once as you realize that not only is Averic ridiculously strong, he is also much faster than he has any business being. He bounds across the room towards TZ, reaching her just as she begins to stagger to her feet.

“No,” you whisper because sure, TZ is a fucking amazing fighter—but the monster coming for her now is bigger, stronger, faster, and way more experienced than both you and her combined. You know that she would be lucky to come out alive if she was facing him at her best. But now, injured and barely able to stand up, she doesn’t even look as though she could take down Tavros’ lusus, let alone go horn to horn with this terrifying fucker.

The fight barely even lasts ten seconds. TZ makes a desperate swing with her blade. Averic catches it mid-swing with his bare hand and jerks it out of her hand before snapping it in half and tossing the broken pieces across the room. TZ hits him with her fists but you suspect that it hurts her more than it hurts him because he doesn’t even bother to try and dodge. Instead he lifts her off the ground by the back of her shirt and then hugs her up against his chest with his massive tree-trunk arms. TZ screams and struggles against him but nothing she does seems to faze him. After a few seconds of bluster all of the fight just seems to drain out of her and she goes limp against his arms.

“Threat neutralized,” Averic grunts. “Awaiting further orders.”

The leech looks down at you, then over to TZ and Averic, and then back to you again. Then he says, “We only need one for interrogation. You may kill the spare.”

> Sollux: Be the hero, save the girl
How the fuck are you supposed to do that? You can barely move and as long as this son of a bitch keeps draining you, your psionics are useless. There is nothing you can do! Oh god why is he putting his hands on TZ’s head like that? What the fuck is he going to do to her?

>Sollux: Be the hero, save the girl

You can’t save her! You can’t even save yourself. You can’t do anything!

Holy SHIT is he going to crush her head in? Oh god, no, no, no, NO, NO!

>Sollux: Be the hero, save the girl

You can’t! FUCK YOU!

>Sollux: Be the hero, save the girl

There is one thing you can try. Just one. But you know it’s not going to work.

A long time ago, back when AA was still alive, some punk-ass leech broke into your hive and stole some of your computer shit. Soon after the incident, AA had shown up at your place with a box of throwing stars, insisting that you learn to use a non-psychic weapon so you would have something you could rely on in case your psionics were ever compromised. You’d bitched and moaned but she knew how to whip your ass into shape and eventually you learned to throw the stars with enough precision to be reasonably dangerous should the need arise.

You used to keep them in the box they had come in but ever since you fucked up and AA died you have taken to carrying a handful of them with you in a little leather pouch that is small enough to fit in your pocket. In fact, the pouch is nestled in your left front pocket right now…. 

>Sollux: Be the hero, save the girl

Very discreetly, you reach into your pocket and find the familiar leather pouch. You flick it open and soundlessly withdraw three of the stars inside. You take a second to line up your shot because you know you are only going to get one and you had damn well better make it count. Trying to land the shot you want is going to be a bitch because the leech is turned away from you, looking over to the spot where Averic has TZ. (The fact that your hands are shaking worse than a flighty junkie hopped up on crazy pills and your arms feel about as substantial as cooked noodles does nothing to improve your odds.)

Averic starts squeezing. You hear TZ gasp, see her scratching at the huge hands. Then you throw.

The stars zing through the air and even though it’s a hard shot the aim is true. (Yes.) Two of them dig into the leech’s cheek (hell yes) and one nails him right in the eye (HELL FUCKING YES). Roaring with pain, the leech lets go of you. Apparently the damage is enough to make him forget all about you because you feel a heady surge of power as your psionics snap back to life.

Quickly, before the leech realizes his mistake, you hit Averic with a blast that knocks him on his
muscle-bound ass. He drops TZ but your psionics catch her before she hits the floor. You know you only have another moment or two before the leech recovers and starts sapping you again so you make your decision—be the hero, save the girl—and throw TZ across the room, through the open airlock and into Ampora’s ship. You hear her hit the ground harder than you’d intended and then she is screaming at you because she isn’t stupid and she knows exactly what you are planning to do.

She is struggling to get up, trying to get to the airlock, all the while screaming, “Don’t you do this to me, you piece of shit! You fucking hypocrite; don’t you do this!” The leech is looking at you now and you know that any second you’ll feel that tearing sensation and then there will be nothing to prevent TZ from hobbling back out here and getting herself killed for you.

You charge up—“Don’t you dare!”—and you hit the airlock with a blast that curls the metal in on itself, sealing off the only way in or out of the ship.

You listen for the sound of the engine charging, listen for any sign that she is doing the smart thing and flying that ship right the fuck out of here. The only thing you hear is her continued screams, made incomprehensible through the thick barrier of melted metal and plastic. Goddamn it TZ, you think. GO!

You don’t know why the leech isn’t trying to drain you yet but if he’s going to fuck around and dawdle then you are not going to let the opportunity go to waste. Scraping together as much psionic power as you can, you pour it out through the walls and then you stretch it, dumping it along the surface of Ampora’s ship, over all the metal paneling and super-reinforced plastic windows. You stretch it until the whole damn ship is sitting in a bubble of psychic energy and then you throw it away from the station as hard as you can.

From one of the docking bay windows, you catch a glimpse of the ship hurtling away from the station and you smile because you know that TZ is going to be OK now; she is going to make it. Then there is a sharp pull from inside your head and a cramping pain in your body as all of your muscles begin to spasm. You open your mouth but you find that you cannot even scream because this time he isn’t holding anything back. Your back is arching at an almost impossible angle as the muscles there clench and hold but at the same time everything in your abdominal region is contracting and trying to pull you in the opposite direction and it feels like you are being torn apart.

From far away, you hear the leech saying, “Very impressive. You are going to make one hell of a ship once we finish interrogating you.” And then everything goes black.
adiosToreador [AT] joined memo
cuttlefishCuller [CC] joined memo

GC: H3Y GUYS
GA: Hello Terezi
AT: hi,
CC: )(i Terezi!
CC: )(ow did t)(e rescue fis)(ion go?
GC: …
GA: That Does Not Sound Terribly Encouraging
GA: Are You Alright
GC: HON3STLY? NO 1 4M NOT 4LR1GHT
AT: :(>
AT: oH NO,
AT: wHAT HAPPENED,
AT: wHERE ARE KARKAT AND SOLLUX,
GC: 1 4LR34DY S41D I W1LL T3LL YOU ONC3 3V3RYBODY 1S H3R3
GC: C4N W3 PL34S3 JUST T4LK 4BOUT SOM3TH1NG 3LS3 UNT1L TH3N?
AT: uH, jUST SO YOU KNOW,
AT: i DON’T THINK, tHAT gAMZ3E IS GOING TO BE HERE,
AT: hE WAS ACTING REALLY WEIRD EARLIER,
AT: iT W4S, kIND OF FREAKY, aCTUALLY,
GC: W41T, YOU T4LK3D W1TH H1M 34RL13R T0N1GHT?
GC: WH4T D1D H3 S4Y?
AT: uH, hE TALK3D ABOUT HOW HE THOUGHT THAT EVERYBODY LAUGHING AT
HIM W4S A THING THAT HAPPENED, mOSTLY
AT: hE ALSO SAID THAT, uH, hE W4S GOING TO SHOW EVERYBODY HOW HE
WASN’T STUPID ANYMORE,
AT: bUT HIS TYPING QUIRK WAS REALLY WEIRD, aND ALSO HE SAID THAT HE
STOPPED EATING SLIME,
AT: iS THERE, aNY REASON YOU ARE ASKING, iN PARTICULAR,
GC: Y34H
GC: H3 SHOW3D UP 4T TH3 L4UNCH S1T3 4ND TR13D TO K1LL M3 4ND SOLLUX
W1TH H1S JUGGL1NG CLUBS
CC: W)(AT D1D H3 S4Y?
GA: Are You Certain It Was Gamzee
GA: I Have Never Known Him To Be Needlessly Violent
GC: OH 1T W4S H1M, 4LL R1GHT
GC: 1 WOULD KNOW TH4T GR4P3 SOD4 ST3NCH 4NYWH3R3
AT: hE DIDN’T, uH,
AT: hURT EITHER OF YOU,
AT: dID HE,
GC: NO
GC: 4T L34ST, NOT TOO B4DLY
CC: Wait a seacound.
CC: T)(at dumb clownfish)( acs)(elly managed to )(URT you?
GC: JUST A F3W BRU1S3S
GC: BUT 1T COULD H4V3 B33N A LOT WORS3
GC: 4PP4R3NTLY H3 KN0WS HOW TO US3 CHUCKL3VODD00S NOW?
GC: SO Y34H
GC: NO G4MZ33 T0N1GHT 4ND 1 4M GO1NG TO GO 4H34D 4ND S4Y TH4T 1 4M ON3 HUND3R3D P3RC3NT OK4Y W1TH TH4T
GA: I Am Afraid That Nepeta And Equius May Also Be Absent
GA: Nepeta Promised That She Would Contact Me When They Had Reached Their Designated Rest Area
GA: I Have Yet To Hear From Her
AT: i THOUGHT THEY LEFT, a LONG TIME AGO,
AT: sHOULDN’T THEY BE TO THE PLACE THEY WERE GOING BY NOW,
GA: Yes
GA: However Nepeta Did Mention That It Was A Particularly Long Distance
GA: They May Still Be Traveling If The Journey Proved More Taxing Than Expected Especially If They Happened Across Any Unexpected Delays
GC: OK
GC: SO NO N3P3T4 OR 3QU1US FOR TH3 MOM3NT
GC: 4ND 1 4M GO1NG TO S4Y TH4T W3 4R3 PROB4BLY NOT GO1NG TO S33 VR1SK4 OR 3R1D4N 31TH3R
GC: 1T WOULD T4K3 4N 4WFUL LOT OF N3RV3 FOR 31TH3R OF TH3M TO SHOW TH31R D3SC31TFUL MUGS 4NYWH3R3 N34R TH1S M3MO 4FT3R TH3Y H4V3 DON3
CC: W)(at? W)(y?
CC: W)(at did t)(ey do?
GC: IF 1T W4SNT FOR TH3M 4ND TH31R P1LF3R3D SH1P TH3N SOLLUX
GC: NO
GC: 1M SORRY
GC: 1 4M G3TT1NG 4H34D OF MYS3LF
GC: SINCE TH1S 1S APP4R3NTLY 3V3RYBODY TH4T 1S GO1NG TO SHOW UP 1 M1GHT 4S W3LL G3T TH1S OV3R W1TH

terminallyCapricious [TC] joined memo

TC: honk
AT: oH, gAMZEE YOU’RE HERE,
TC: OF COURSE I MOTHERFUCKING AM.
TC: legal sister wouldn’t let this motherfucker in on the rescuing of our best karbro.
TC: AND NOW SHE’S ALL ABOUT TO GET HER TELL ON ABOUT HER WICKED STARSHIP ESCAPADES.
TC: i wouldn’t miss it for the motherfucking world.
GC: G4MZ33 B3FOR3 1 T3LL YOU 4NYTH1NG YOU 4R3 GO1NG TO SHOW UP 1 M1GHT 4S W3LL G3T TH1S OV3R W1TH
TC: WHY THE MOTHERFUCK SHOULD I BE HAVING TO DO THAT?
GC: B3C4US3 1F YOU DONT 1 W1LL H4V3 4ND B4N YOU FROM TH1S M3MO 4S 4 M4TT3R OF PUBL1C S4F3TY
TC: i’m not understanding the meaning you’re up and conveying with such wicked slander words chica.
TC: BUT IF THAT’S THE WAY YOU’RE THINKING IT HAS TO BE THEN GO THE MOTHERFUCK AHEAD.
TC: lay on the motherfucking question talk.
GC: 4R3 YOU OR 4R3 YOU NOT S1LL ON YOUR MURD3R CLOWN R4MP4G3? TC: NAH CHICA.
TC: i got the sick nasty violence all on up and out of my head.
TC: WENT TO SOME RUDE FUCKER’S HIVE AND PAINTED MYSELF A WICKED PICTURE WITH HIS LOW MOTHERFUCKING BLOOD.
CC: O)( my god. I mean cod.
CC: O)( my cod.
GC: DID YOU 4CTU4LLY K1LL SOM3BODY?
TC: only a mild motherfucking bit.
AT: hOW DO YOU ONLY A LITTLE KILL SOMEBODY,
AT: i DON’T THINK, tHAT IS A THING THAT IS LIKELY TO HAPPEN,
GA: I Hesitate To Ask But Was It Anybody We Know
TC: NAH SISTER.
TC: it was just some brother with a loud ass cluckbeast lusus.
TC: THEY MADE SOME WILD SOUNDS WITH THEIR SCREECH HOLES.
TC: when i snapped their motherfucking bones.
TC: HONK.
CC: S)(oaly glubbing s)(it.
CC: You u)(, you don’t eel like krilling anybody else at the moment do you?
CC: Like if somebody ) (appened to do somefin to glub up the rescue?
TC: what?
TC: WHY ARE YOU SPEAKING THE UNFAITHFUL SABOTAGE TALK, FISH CHICA?
CC: I’m just being )YPOT)(ETICAL )ere.
CC: But if somebody )(YPOT)(ETICALLY did somefin t)(at mig)(t )ave glubbed up t)(e rescue, w)(at would you do?
CC: )(YPOT)(ETICALLY speaking?
TC: i don’t know.
TC: I GUESS IT WOULD HYPOTHETICALLY DEPEND ON WHAT THE MOTHERFUCK THEY WERE ALL UP AND DOING.
TC: but at the moment i ain’t got it in my pan to be laying down the chucklevoodooos on nobody.
GC: OK F1N3
GC: IF TH4TS TH3 C4S3 TH3N YOU C4N ST4Y
GC: BUT 1F YOU THR34N 4NYBODY 1 W1LL NOT 3V3N BOTH3R TO G1V3 YOU 4 W4RN1NG B3FOR3 1 B4N YOU ON TH3 SPOT
GC: GOT IT?
TC: YEAH.
TC: i’m comprehending the words what i see on my screen.
TC: NOW PAINT A MOTHERFUCKING PICTURE WITH THE RECOUNTING WORDS.
TC: this motherfucker is ready to get his listen on.
GC: TH3R3 1S NOT MUCH TO T3LL
GC: F3F3R1, D1D YOU T3LL TH3 OTH3RS 4BOUT 3R1D4N T4K1NG YOUR SH1P?
CC: No. I mean, )e )ad anot)(er s)(ip for you to use and )e didn’t R-E-ELY mean to make t)(ings )ar for you and Sollux so )e didn’t t)(ink )e needed to say anyt)(ing and get everybody all worked up.
AT: wAIT,
AT: eRIDAN TOOK YOUR SHIP,
AT: wHY WOULD HE THINK THAT WAS A THING HE NEEDED TO DO,
CC: ))E W4S JUST TR3YING TO B-E A GOOD MORAY -EL AND K-E-EP M-E SAF-E!
GA: Perhaps That Is What He Believed He Was Doing But I Have To Say That From My Point Of View It Comes Across As Needlessly Coercive
GA: Are You Certain You Are Alright With Him Acting This Way
CC: OF COURS-E I AM!
CC: )e was protecting me because t)(at is w)(at MOIRAILS do!
CC: Bea)(sides, )is s)(ip got you up t)(ere just fin, didn’t it?
GC: OH Y34H
GC: ONC3 W3 TOOK OFF W3 G0T UP TH3R3 W1TH0UT 4 H1TCH
CC: T(en w)(at’s the big seal?
GC: …
CC: Terezi, stop glubbing around (ere.
CC: Tell me t)(at Karcrab and Sollux are wit)( you rig)(t now.
CC: Please?
GC: K4RK4T WOULDN’T COM3 W1TH US
CC: W)(AT?
TC: WHY THE MOTHERFUCK NOT?
GA: What Happened
GC: W3 COMPL3T3LY M1SR34D TH3 S1TU4T1ON GUYS
GC: H3 1S P4RT OF 4N 1NV4S1ON FORC3
GC: 1N F4CT H3 1S 3V3N L34D1NG H1S OWN PL4TOON
GC: OR 4T L34ST TH4T 1S WH4T H3 TOLD US
AT: wHAT ABOUT ALL OF THE, uH, mEDICAL PROCEDURES,
GC: 1 SUSP3CT TH3Y W3R3 MOD1F1C4T1ONS TO H3LP H1M SURV1V3 ON 34RTH
GC: SOLLUX 4ND 1 D1DNT 4SK H1M
GC: 1T S33M3D L1K3 1T W4S 4 TOUCHY SUBJ3CT
TC: so you’re saying you left our best shouty brother up there?
TC: NONE OF US AIN’T EVER GOING TO SEE HIS NUBBY HORN SELF AGAIN?
GC: Y34H H3 1S ST1LL UP TH3R3
GC: 4LTHOUGH YOU WOULDN’T S33 H1S NUBBY HORNS 3V3N 1F H3 H4D COM3
W1TH US
GC: TH3Y CUT TH3M OFF
CC: 38O
GA: That Is Terrible
AT: tHAT SOUNDS LIKE A REALLY UNNECESSARY THING TO DO, aND ALSO KIND
OF CRUEL,
AT: wHY WOULD THEY WANT TO DO THAT,
GC: 1 D0N’T KNOW
GC: TH4T W4SNT TH3 ON1LY TH1NG TH3Y CH4NG3D 4BOUT H1M
GC: H3 LOOK3D 4 LOT D1FF3R3NT!
CC: So water you trying to say?
CC: T)(at t)(ey turned )(im into some kind of ugly FR-EAK?
GC: NO!
GC: 1 4M JUST S4Y1NG TH4T H3 LOOK3D D1FF3R3NT!
GC: 4CTU4LLY 1 THOUGHT 1T W4S K1ND OF CUT3
GC: OK WH4T 1S UP W1TH YOU?
CC: Me?
GC: Y3S YOU
CC: W)(at do you mean?
CC: Am I acting weird? Because I don’t)(ink I am acting weird.
GC: YOU 4R3 4CT1NG R34LLY J1TT3RY
GC: 1N F4CT TH3 ON1LY T1M3 YOU 4R3 N0T B31NG J1TT3RY 1S WH3N YOU 4R3
B31NG N4STY
CC: I’m being NASTY?
GA: Calling Karkat An Ugly Freak Was A Bit Insensitive
CC: O).( W)(ale I’m sorry if I am being a mean snapperfis)(.
CC: I guess I am just WORRI-ED about Sollux. You still )aven’t told us w)(at )appened to )im.
CC: Is )e okray?
GC: …
CC: Terezi, is Sollux okay?
GC: YOU M1GHT W4NT TO S1T DOWN B3FOR3 1 T3LL YOU 4BOUT TH1S
GC: 4CTU4LLY YOU 4LL M1GHT W4NT TO S1T DOWN
GA: For Goodness Sake Terezi Will You Please Just Tell Us What Happened
GC: TH3Y GOT H1M
CC: W)(AT?
GC: TH3Y C4UGHT US 4S W3 W3R3 L34V1NG
GC: 1 GOT 4W4Y BUT H3
GC: H3 D1DN’T MAK3 1T
CC: O)( my god t)(is cannot be )(appening. )(ow could you )(ave gotten yours)(ellves caug)(t?
CC: )(ow could you )(ave done somefin so glubbing STUPID?
GC: 1T W4S 3R1D4NS SH1P
CC: )(OW IS T)(AT POSSIBBUBBL-E?
GC: TH3Y KN33W 1T W4S ST0L3N 4ND TR13D TO D3T41N US FOR QU3ST1ON1NG
CC: No…no, no, no!
CC: You’re lying! You )(AV-E to be LYING!
GC: 1 W1SH 1 W4S
GC: 1 4M SORRY F3F3R1
CC: NO! FUCK YOU )(OW COULD YOU L-ET T)(IS )(APP-EN?
GC: 1 D1D 3V3RYTH1NG I COULD TO S4V3 H1M
CC: W)(AL-E YOU OBVIOUSLY DIDN’T DO ----ENOUG)(!
GA: Feferi I Understand That Sollux Was Your Matesprit But You Cannot Blame Terezi For This
AT: yEAH,
AT: iT SOUNDS LIKE THIS IS ACTUALLY ERIDAN’S FAULT,
AT: oR AT LEAST, tHAT IS WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE TO ME,
CC: )(ow is it –Eridan’s fault?
AT: wELL IT WAS HIS STOLEN SHIP, wASN’T IT,
CC: No! It was Vris! S)(e was t)(e one w)(o stole it for ))(im!
GC: >:?
GC: VR1S?
TC: so what i am understanding here is that our rude devious spider sister is the one what’s behind
every motherfucking thing that went wrong?
GC: 3R1D4N 1S TH4T YOU?
CC: Y-------ES! I M-EAN NO!
AT: uH, wHICH ONE DO YOU MEAN,
CC: Y-ES it wwas Vris and NO I’m not me! Shit I mean him.
CC: I’m not ))(im!
GC: OH MY GOD 3R1D4N
GC: IT IS SO OBVIOUS IT’S YOU >:/
TC: IF WHAT MY LOOK HOLES ARE SEEING IS TRUE I’D BETTER BE GETTING MY
ABSCOND ON.
TC: it’s going to be a long motherfucking walk what i got ahead.
CC: I’m not –Eridan! I SW-EAR IT’S M-E!
GA: Eridan It Is Alright You Do Not Need To Continue This Charade
GA: We All Know It Is You And It Is Frankly Embarrassing To Watch
AT: gAMZEE WHERE ARE YOU GOING,
TC: I’M UP ON A RIGHTEOUS DESIRE FOR THE SUBJUGGLATION.
TC: going to pay the spider bitch a fucking visit.
TC: I’LL PAINT THE WALLS WITH HER BLOOD.
TC: and then i’ll feel the crack of her bones as i grind them into my special stardust.
GC: 3R1D4N?
GC: 4R3 YOU ST1LL TH3R3?
TC: HONK.
TC: honk.
TC: HONK.
AT: gAMZEE, wAIT,
CC: shut up all of you just SHUT UP

terminallyCapricious [TC] left memo

GC: WH3R3 IS F3F3R1?
CC: FUCK fefs gonna fuckin kill me
CC: fuck fuck fuck fuck FUCK
GA: Eridan Where Is Feferi
CC: fuck off
CC: all of you just leavve me alone
cuttlefishCuller [CC] is an idle troll!

GC: D4MN 1T
GA: Do You Believe That Was Eridan The Whole Time
GC: 1 DONT KNOW
GC: PROB4BLY
GC: GOD FOR 4LL 1 KNOW W3 W3R3 T4L4K1NG TO H1M 4LL N1GHT
GC: W41T 4 S3COND
GC: WH3R3 D1D G4MZ33 GO?
AT: hE, uH, sAID THAT HE THOUGHT KARKAT AND SOLLUX NOT BEING HERE
   WAS VRISKA’S FAULT,
AT: aND THEN HE SAID HE WAS GOING TO KILL HER,
AT: aND THEN HE LEFT,
GC: OK
GC: SO 4NYBODY W4NT TO W4RN VR1SK4 4BOUT TH3 PSYCHO MURD3R CLOWN
   COM1NG H3R W4Y?
AT: i ALREADY TRIED,
AT: sHE ISN’T ONLINE,
GA: I Know
GA: She Has Not Been Online In Days
AT: oH,
AT: tHEN MAYBE, iT WOULD BE A GOOD THING IF SOMEBODY WENT TO HER, aND
   ALSO TRIED TO CALM DOWN gAMZEE,
AT: wHEN HE GETS THERE, i MEAN,
GC: T4VROS NO
GC: YOU D1D NOT S33 WH4T G4MZ33 W4S L1K3 WH3N H3 W4S ON H1S MURD3R
   R4MP4G3 34RL13R
GC: TH3R3 IS NO C4LM1NG H1M DOWN
AT: mAYBE THERE’S NOT,
AT: bUT HE’S MY FRIEND,
AT: i HAVE TO AT LEAST TRY,
GC: T4VROS PL34S3 L1ST3N TO M3
GC: IF YOU GO 4FT3R H1M H3 W1LL K1LL YOU
GC: T4VROS?

adiosToreador [AT] left memo

GC: BLUH, T4VROS YOU 1D1OT
GC: IF YOU GO G3TT1NG YOURS3LF BR41N3D TO D34TH 1 4M GO1NG TO PUT YOU
   ON TR14L 4ND H4V3 YOU H4NG3D
> Eridan: Freak the fuck out

No need to tell you to do that. Between the vaguely ill feeling in your gut and the hyperventilating, you are doing a pretty good job of that already.

Oh GOD you had only been trying to keep Fef safe and maybe get her to consider going red with you and now you’ve gone and killed her matesprit and you are pretty sure all of your friends hate you. How could Ter have fucked everything up so horribly? No, how could Vris have done this to you? Getting you a ship that would be flagged the second she laid her hands on it...you know she must have done it on purpose just to burn you. How could everything have turned out so fucking wrong? You never wanted this to happen!

Well OK, maybe you would have cheerfully wrung Captor's neck with your own two hands given the opportunity—but you weren’t stupid. You knew full well that hurting that scrawny little computer shit would sink any chance you had with Fef faster than a leaking rowboat made of lead. You had therefore devoted all of your energy into hoping that he would politely go curl up and die somewhere or—better yet—Fef would come to her senses and break up with him so her flushed quadrant would be open and easy pickings.

And speaking of Fef...how in the fuck are you going to tell her about this? You may have spent all night crafting speeches designed to win back her love and affection—but all of your grandiose rhetoric had kind of hinged on pointing out how nobody got hurt and everything had worked out for the best. (It would have gone something along the lines of “I know I locked you in a closet all night but look! Sol and Ter still got Kar back and now you have a little more time to build up a proper army before you challenge the Empress and by the way did I mention that Sol and Ter and Kar are all just fine?”)

For a minute you consider not telling her. Maybe you can just open up the wardrobe and go with your original speech. If you were really convincing, she might buy it and maybe you would still have a shot at not losing everything you have worked so hard for...but no. Even if she did believe you (which you are pretty sure she wouldn’t because you literally kept her locked in a wardrobe all night) there is no way you could prevent the others from contacting her and telling her the truth. And now that you are thinking straight, you realize that would only make things worse because you are pretty sure that they will go out of their way to make you look like a horrible monster. No, it is definitely better that she hear it from you first so you at least have a chance to paint yourself in a rosier light.

Steeling yourself, you quietly open the door to Fef’s lavish respiteblock and step inside. The room is deathly still. There is not a single peep from the wardrobe, not even when you gently knock on the doors and say, “Fef? You OK?”

For a moment you think that she might have somehow gotten out—but no. The trident is still in place
and you are certain that if she had gotten out her first move would have been to come after you. You swallow an especially big gulp of water before you say, “I’m going to let you out now, OK?”

She does not answer. You sigh. “Will you at least say something?”

No answer. *God,* you think. *She must be even more pissed that I was anticipating she would be....*

“OK,” you say. ‘I’m opening the doors now.’

Carefully, you slide the trident through the pull handle loops and set it aside. You have only just begun to pull on the doors when they burst open and Fef comes barreling out, hitting you in the chest like an Heiress-sized bullet. The force is so great that it sends you tumbling and you end up executing a lazy flip in the water before you can recover. By the time you right yourself she is hovering in front of you and even though you are a good six inches taller than she is, she seems to tower over you.

Her voice low and dangerous, she says, “What did you do?”

“I’m sorry Fef,” you say. “I swear I just wanted to keep you safe. You have to understand that I was doing it for you.”

She snatches her computing device out of your hand—*huh, you were so worked up that you had completely forgotten that you were even carrying it with you*—swims across the room with and settles down to sit at her desk. She glares at you as though daring you to even think about taking one step closer to her before she begins to scroll through the open memo.

“Oh my glub, Eridan,” she groans. “Were you imperchfinating me all night? What is the matter with you?”

You notice her eyes tracking on the screen. Quickly, you exclaim, “Fef, wait! Don’t read that yet!”

“Why not? What did you do?”

“God, Fef, I swear I didn’t mean for this to happen. I just....” You trail off as you notice that she isn’t even listening to you as she continues to read. You hurry over to where she is sitting and make a grab for the device but she sees you coming a mile away and elbows you in the gut hard enough to make you choke. Still, you don’t give up because if you are going to have even the tiniest chance of redeeming yourself here you cannot let her find out what a fiasco this night turned out to be by reading that awful fucking memo. Wheezing through the pain in your gut, you say, “God damn it, Fef, you have to give me a chance to explain before you read any more!”

This time she doesn’t even bother to look at you as she shoves you away—hard. The force of it sends you flying until you smack into the wardrobe all the way across the room. You let yourself sink down to the ground with your face buried in your hands because she isn’t even going to give you a chance, is she? In a way it seems strangely fitting: she’s given you less than you wanted all your life so why should it be any different now, when your life is about to be over?

From across the room, you hear a gasp. “No,” she whispers. “Oh cod. No, no, no. Sollux....” She lets out a quiet little sob and when you dare to look over at her she is hunched over with her hair hiding her face from view.

“Fef,” you say. “I’m sorry.”

Approaching her cautiously, you say, “I was trying to protect you.”
You kneel down on the floor beside her and carefully put one of your hands on her cheek in one of the finest, gentlest paps you have ever given in your life. “I was just trying to be a good moirail.”

She shudders. “Don’t touch me.”

Your blood pusher clenches because surely you have misunderstood. Sure, she is upset with you, but there is no way she has just said what you thought she said. “What?”

“I said don’t touch me!”

You shrink back because she has never taken this tone with you before. In fact, you are pretty sure she has never taken this tone with anybody before. You try to sound calm and reasonable but your voice comes out as a pathetic whine as you reply, “But I’m your moirail.”

She barks out a choked-off laugh. “You really think that we can just go back to being moirails after this?”

“Can’t we?”

“Moirails are supposed to be able to trust each other, Eridan. How can I trust you after what you’ve done tonight?”

“But I did it for you!” you shout. “I did it to protect you! How can you not understand—”

“My matesprit is dead!”

The phrase seems to hang in the water between you, charging the room with an electrical atmosphere of accusation as the words ring through your pan: my matesprit is dead, my matesprit is dead, my matesprit is dead….

Very carefully you say, “Well maybe that’s for the best.”

“What?”

“I mean, he was so much lower than you on the hemospectrum…how long do you think it would have been before he croaked and broke your heart? Not very fucking long at all.” The look she gives you suggests that she is either about to burst into tears or about to slap you. Quickly, you decide to change tack to something a bit less morbid: “Do you even realize that there is somebody else out there who pities you so much it hurts—somebody who deserves to be red with you so much more than he ever did.”

She gapes at you and some stupid, optimistic part of your pan thinks, yes she is finally getting it! Then she says, “Oh my cod. I knew you were shellous of him but I never thought you would do something like this. Eridan, how could you?”

“Wait, you think I did this on purpose?”

“Of course you did it on porpoise!” she retorts. “I’m not stupid, Eridan. You come here pretending to comfort me like a good moirail and then once my matesprit is dead because he used your ship you just happen to be here to take his place. That’s what you were planning, wasn’t it?”

You shake your head, aghast because oh god you cannot let her think that you planned for things to go this way; god damn it she will never fucking forgive you for this if she thinks that you planned this! You might as well be begging as you say, “No, Fef…I never meant for it to turn out like this. I swear!”
“You locked me in a closet all night.” The finality with which she says those words stops you cold. You try to think of an adequate response but everything you could possibly say to explain yourself — “I was protecting you” “I just wanted you to be safe” “I wanted to show you that I could be a good moirail” or rather, “I wanted to show you that I could be a good moirail so you would see how much I deserved to be your matesprit”—has already been said. You are still desperately searching for the words which will get you out of this mess when she quietly says, “Get out.”

Your jaw drops because this cannot be happening, she cannot be doing this to you. You try to say something smooth, something that will make realize how absolutely ridiculous and fucking unfair she is being. You say, “What?”

“I said that I want you to leave. Now.”

You don’t move. You can’t move because this is not happening. She’s bluffing, you think. God damn it, she has to be bluffing. Fef’s face contorts into a mask of rage and she screams, “Get out of my hive!”

“You can’t do this to me,” you hiss. “I did everything right and don’t you fucking dare try to say different. I fucked around in your pale quadrant for sweeps just waiting for you to figure out that I deserved better than that stupid bullshit quadrant from you, your majesty. Even tonight I was still playing by diamond rules like a stupid chump and hoping that you would finally wise up. I cannot fucking believe that after all I did for you, you still—“

Her trident flashes across the room so fast you don’t even have time to duck. You don’t know whether she is too worked up to aim well or whether she was intending the throw to be a warning shot, but either way you are lucky: two of the prongs graze across your forehead just below your hairline and the third glances harmlessly off your horn. The water around you begins to swirl with tendrils of violet blood—your blood. You instinctively clap a hand over the wound as the salt water surrounding you finds the damaged flesh and amplifies the sting.

“GET OUT!” she shrieks and this time you finally move because she is armed and in her element and possibly trying to actually fucking kill you. Her voice follows you as you go, “I never want to see you ever again! I will krill you myshellf if you ever come near my hive again!”

As you exit her hive and start the long swim back to your own home, you feel a surge of rage toward Sol for getting his stupid ass caught and toward Ter for letting him get his stupid ass caught and toward Vris for fucking you all over with a rigged ship and toward Eq for telling all of you about Kar and toward Kar for getting his stupid ass kidnapped in the first place. God, you are so fucking angry with all of them for making Fef hate you and above all you are absolutely fucking furious with Fef for having the gall hate you when you were being nothing short of a perfect example of moirallegiance in every fucking way.

You decide right then and there that you are done with all of your so-called friends. If they are all too stupid to appreciate you then you sure as fuck aren’t going to give them the time of night ever again. In a few more perigees the Imperial ships will come and then you’ll make new friends—better friends who give you the respect that your royal blood fucking deserves. Your old friends were a bunch of pathetic nobodies. But you? You’re Eridan fucking Ampora and you are going to be something great.

> Straw Soldiers: Part 2
Straw Soldiers: Part 2

Chapter Notes

Helpful hint: Hover your mouse over the image for super high-tech Alternian-to-English translation technologies!

Transmission released fleetwide on the 12th bilunar perigee of the 6th dark season's equinox:

> Months in the past, but not many...
Your name is Karl Vantross. It is the first day of your senior year of high school and you and your parents just moved here from Los Angeles because your dad’s job decided to transfer him to their Seattle branch for no good reason whatsoever. Most people would think that moving away from your school and all of your friends right before your senior year would suck, but you’re OK with it because all of your old friends were assholes and your old school was equally terrible. Your interests include watching ridiculously terrible movies and pointing out their flaws and MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS, ASSHOLE. You have no idea what you will do when you graduate, but somebody once told you that it would be something outstanding, so you guess there’s that. If anybody asks, this is your story and you are sticking to it whether you like it or not.

Actually, you don’t like it. You don’t like a single shit-spewing word of it because it’s all a load of bullshit. If you were being totally honest, it should really go something like this:

Your name is (not) Karl Vantross. It is the first day of your senior year of high school and you and your “parents” just moved here from a hell of a lot farther away than Los Angeles because this is where the Empire decided you should be. Most people think that moving away from your school and all of your friends right before your senior year would suck, but you’re OK with it because they fucking killed people at the drop of a hat at your old school and you really didn’t have any friends there, anyway. Your interests include watching ridiculously terrible human movies and pointing out their flaws and doing your part to contribute to the total subjugation and domination of this worthless planet. You have no idea what you will do when you graduate. Probably whatever your “parents” tell you to do because they’re the ones getting all the orders from the Imperial fleet.

And speaking of parents…it is really fucking weird to be living in the same hive (house) as not just one but TWO adult trolls. Sure, you know all about basic human social constructs. You have seen enough awful human TV shows featuring awful human families as they go about their incredibly inane and awful human lives to know that human children have to live with at least one adult human caretaker and more often than not, two. The only problem is that past you, being the shining beacon of intelligence and common sense that he is, never considered that this would mean you would have to be subjected to the same situation until an Imperial commander was introducing you to these two random adult trolls and informing the three of you that they were now your “parents” and you were now their “child” and that as their “child” you had to live with them and follow their rules and as your “parents” they had to function as your pseudo-lusus and make sure you didn’t do something stupid like try to swallow a bottle of bleach or some shit. (Actually, until that incredibly awkward moment you’d had absolutely no idea that there were other facilities training other groups of trolls for this piece of shit operation—which is totally obvious now that you think about it. Wow, did past you seriously think that deploying tiny batches of twenty or thirty trolls every other sweep was any way to run a massive covert invasion? Apparently he did because this development was just as surprising and uncomfortable as a sudden bout of explosive diarrhea. It is a wonder that you didn’t just soil yourself right there in your surprise. Your only consolation was that the two adults seemed to be equally floored to see you as you were to see them. All you can think is thank fuck neither of them were on your station because having to call any of the shitheads who tormented you for half a sweep “mom” or “dad” would be all manner of nook-humped awkward.)

Your “dad” is a guy with a baby face that makes him look like he is barely old enough to be your older “brother” let alone mature enough to have contributed to your genetic slurry in any way, shape, or form. He spends most of the day in Seattle, working at some software company that you can’t be bothered to care about and he pisses away most of his time at home on the computer. Maybe if either of you had the tiniest inkling of a desire to pretend that you are actual human father-and-son pals you
would ask him to show you a few things about coding because he seems to know his shit but—alas!—the two of you combined cannot summon up a single fuck to give about fostering bizarre alien familial affection ties. The two of you tend to avoid each other, him seeking you out only to inform you of the latest news from the fleet and you seeking him only to inform him that there is not a single roll of toilet paper to be had in the entire house and will you please get some more before we are all running around with bright red ass cheeks like a bunch of fucking apes. You are completely OK with this arrangement because from the few vocal exchanges you have had he seems like kind of a douche. You have no idea what his real name is (in fact none of you know each other’s real names because you were all forbidden from using them the second you left your training facilities). His human name is “Otto.”

“Nora”—your “mom”—looks as though she would have pulled off the rugged badass look before they took away her horns and fangs. You don’t know what the hell she did for fun and entertainment before she ended up getting recruited but you suspect it involved overdosing on shitloads of adrenaline because holy fucking shit as if strapping your ass into a combustion-propelled vehicle isn’t terrifying enough (and on a side note, what is wrong with humans; who the fuck thought it was a good idea to base their main mode of transportation on engines that fucking explode?) she drives as though she thinks she is in a constant drag race with Her Imperious Condescension’s flagship and turning a corner on more than two wheels is an automatic point reduction. She somehow managed to snag a post as a nighttime security guard which means she barely even needed to try and adapt to maintaining a diurnal schedule, the lucky broad. You rarely speak to each other because she is usually going to bed as you are getting up and she is usually getting up when you are going to bed. You are completely OK with this arrangement because unlike your “dad”, she will occasionally try to go through the motions of doing human mother things like asking you how your day was or even fixing you meals, which you guess would be kind of nice if she didn’t do it with a constant undertone of I don’t give a single squirting shit about you I am only doing this for show you horrible little leech. Consequently, you are not nearly as stoked as most human kids probably would be when you wake up to the smell of sizzling bacon and frying eggs.

You take your time selecting a pair of worn jeans and a plain tee shirt from your closet because it is 6:30 am, the bus isn’t coming for another hour, and maybe if you wait for the food to get cold you will not have to endure any of Nora’s resentful pretend human mom bullshit. You proceed to the bathroom and you wash your face, rake a comb through your hair and brush your teeth with all the speed and agility of an impaired turtle. Then you go back to your respiteblock (Bedroom, you remind yourself because you will never get away with calling it a respiteblock anymore and if you are never going to say it again then you might as well train yourself to stop thinking it, too). You pick up your brand-new backpack, open it up, rifle through everything in there a couple of times, to buy yourself a couple more minutes. (Pencils, pens, paper, ruler, three-ring binder, erasers, colored pencils…it’s like an office supply store vomited into your poor, defenseless Jansport.)

By the time you finally head downstairs you are sure that Nora will have decided fuck the ungrateful little shit I’m tired and going to bed because it is already ten past seven and you have barely ever seen her make it past six. You are so confident that you are going to go downstairs to an empty kitchen that you just about piss yourself when you walk into the room and find Nora sitting at the table and staring at you with a smile that has no business being on a living person’s face. (Seriously, you are half-tempted to tell her to give it back to the creepy porcelain doll she lifted it from because now there is some freaky toy running around out there without a mouth and when the fuck was the last time you ever heard of a doll scaring the shit out of some unsuspecting kid without a proper fucking mouth for shit’s sake.)

“Good morning, Karl,” she says.

“Why are you still up?”
Her creeper smile edges just a little wider and goddamn it, the fakiness of it makes her eyes look like they are glazed-over doll eyes. “It’s the first day of your senior year. I made you breakfast.”

You have to tamp down the instinct to wince. Her voice is sickly-sweet and airy but there is something else in it—something you cannot quite put your clawless digits on—that is nasty and unsettling, like a loogie of clear snot hiding in a can of whipped frosting. “What do you want?”

“Is it so hard for you to believe that I just want you to have a good start for your first day of human school?”

You want to say “Yes. Yes it is because I know you don’t give an actual shit about me.” Instead you just shrug and stand there with the knowledge that any casual observer would probably think you were being a massive bulge.

“Sit,” she says, indicating the empty chair directly across from the one in which she is currently seated. You slump your shoulders but do as she says and ugh, why the fuck is she still giving you that creepy doll face stare; you swear that it is at least ten billion times creepier up close than it was from across the room and something about it makes you feel like you are fucking naked for human Jesus’ ass-purging sake. Once you are seated, she motions to the covered plate sitting in front of you and says, “Eat.”

You remove the cover and are greeted with a plate full of scrambled egg, bacon, and two slices of toast with purple jam. Kept warm under the cover, the food is still steaming and it smells good. You immediately wonder if it is poisoned. Then you decide that no, you are pretty sure that even though there weren’t any explicit orders against “parents” killing their “children” or vice versa, it would probably get the humans riled all the fuck up and attract shitloads of attention that would blow the snot out of the “covert” part of your big covert mission and Nora has to be at least marginally smarter than that if she’s made it this far. You take a cautious bite of bacon and it’s good—better than the way they made it back on the station, where it was always either floppy and undercooked or burned black. (You never could figure out why the cooking staff seemed to have such a hard time mastering the charring of porcine belly flesh when they could do just fine with pretty much everything else.)

Even though the food is good, you really wish Nora would quit staring at you while you eat it because the longer you sit there with her giving you that weird doll stare, the more you start to get the feeling that maybe you were wrong about her not poisoning you. Hell, for all you know maybe she is just sitting there waiting for the flesh-eating maggots that she sprinkled into the eggs to come bursting through your abdominal wall and perfume the entire kitchen with the lovely smell of perforated entrails. (There is also the disconcerting fact that your flat teeth make a shitton more noise than your fangs ever did while they mash up your food. You aren’t exactly the most genteel troll in the universe—not by a longshot—but in the dead silence of the kitchen it sounds like you are a fucking cow and that is kind of really fucking embarrassing.)

You have almost cleaned the whole plate when Nora says, “You have some orders from the fleet.”

You gasp and damn near choke to death on a mouthful of grape jam and toast. Nora doesn’t bother to do anything decent like help you as you hork up a big old mouthful of half-chewed bread. Nope, she just sits there watching you with that creepy fucking stare as you slug down a mouthful of apple juice and try to keep your eyes from watering because damn it you do not even want to think about how Nora and Otto will react to the idea that their “son” is a fucking mutant. You dealt with that shit back on the station and you’ll be fucked upside-down and sideways before you have to deal with it again.

Finally, when you can actually manage to breathe without feeling like your throat is in the midst of a freak-out spasm, you wheeze, “What?”
Nora doesn’t even bother to say anything along the lines of “Gee that looked really fucking unpleasant; are you OK?” Her face remains an undisturbed mask of smiling porcelain doll creepiness as she states, “The fleet has sent your first formal orders.”

“Oh,” you breathe. You take a moment to ensure that you can actually enunciate like a person without devolving into another fit of asphyxiating yourself. Then you say, “So what are they?”

“I’ll tell you on the way to school.”

You frown. “I thought I was supposed to take the bus.”

A flicker of life finally graces Nora’s creepy dead-eye stare. “I’ll drive you.”

Your frown deepens because you really do not relish starting your day with a rousing round of OH FUCK OH GOD NO OH GOD WE’RE GOING TO FUCKING CRASH WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU EVEN DOING FUUUUUUUCK! Of course, you do realize that riding a human bus has its own perils. Why, if every human sitcom that features school-aged children is to be believed then riding on those big-ass yellow vehicles is actual, serious fucking business. Still, you are pretty sure that those perils would be a lot heavier on the bullshit human drama and lot lighter on the impotent screaming for your insignificant life, so decide to keep angling for the bus.

“Just tell me now, before I leave.”

“You might miss the bus and then I’d have to drive you anyway.” Then, as though it explains absolutely everything, she shrugs and adds, “Otto was supposed to tell you when you got up but you waited so long to come downstairs that his carpool came and he had to leave for work.”

“OK fine,” you groan because you have just had an epiphany that—guess what, nookhopper—it doesn’t matter what you say; she just wants an excuse to take the car and play a lively game of “Let’s see how much globes-to-the-wall insane driving Karkat Karl can take before he has a nervous fucking breakdown and evacuates his bowels all over your custom leather car seat covers.” You pick up your backpack with a huff and channel all of your energy into aggressively scuffing your toes on the floor as you follow Nora to the garage because if she’s not going to listen to your completely civil and reasonable words—seriously, you didn’t even swear at her once: nary a “fuck” or a “damn” or even a lowly “hell” to be heard—then maybe your surly-as-fuck body language will convey the message loud and clear that you are just not in the mood for this bullfuckery.

Nora seems perfectly content to ignore your passive-aggressive recalcitrance. In fact, she is so distracted by the prospect of putting you into mortal peril that she even forgets to do the stupid fake human mom thing and yell at you for putting marks into the shitty linoleum. She looks as though she might actually start skipping as she approaches the car. It hits you as you climb into the passenger seat that this is the only time you ever see her doll mask smile evolve into something approaching real pleasure. It also hits you that you have no way of knowing whether it’s the driving itself or whether it’s the putting you into a state of pants-pissing terror that gets her so goddamn frisky. You try really fucking hard to ignore the idea that it is almost certainly the latter.

You know exactly what is coming when she turns the key in the ignition. Even so, it comes as a shock when the car goes from zero to fifty in two seconds flat, flying out of the garage like the final remnants of a rancid meal shooting from the darkest regions of some poor fucker’s bowels. You grab the armrests and hold on for dear life as Nora cuts a hard left onto the road, whipping the entire back end of the car into a tire-squealing fishtail. The car lags as though it’s about to die but Nora stomps on the gas and—gah holy fuck—it lurches forward like a fucking animal. You choke back the urge to yelp like a pathetic little bitch as the force of it throws you back in your seat (because holy grubsawing fuck it’s not like you’re some pooping wiggler that will squeal if anybody so much as
farts in their direction) and then, with a fucking awful roar from the engine, the car screams off down the road.

You look over at Nora once the car settles into a steady speed of GET THE FUCK OUT OF THE WAY OR SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES. She is completely focused on the road and smiling with the same type of glee you’ve seen on wiggler’s faces as they pull all the legs off some of the crawly creatures back on Alternia. You see nothing to suggest that she remembers that she is going to tell you about your orders or that she remembers you have orders or that she even knows what the fuck an order even is anymore. You are kind of reluctant to do anything that will take her attention away from the road but the only reason you agreed to subject yourself to this ass-puckering romp through the land of OH GOD NO was so you could hear your orders from the fleet and you are damned if you are leaving this chugging vehicle without some fucking orders.

“So,” you say. “The fleet.”

“Mmm,” she mumbles. She takes a right turn that makes you white knuckle your grip on the armrests —fuuuuck you seriously come this close to rolling right off the damn road and into a ditch—before she adds, “They want you to make friends.”

For one moment you completely forget the fact that you are in a combustion-propelled motor vehicle that is most likely about to rocket off the road and leave you tragically dead in the middle of asscrack nowhere, USA so you can boldly exclaim, “They want me to what?”

“Make friends,” she repeats. And then, as if you are completely fucking stupid, she decides to clarify the glaringly obvious by stating, “Human friends.”

You shake your head because sure, you’ve spent the last sweep (oh, whoops, make that two and a half years) preparing to live on Earth and sure, you expected that to involve interacting with these human aliens on at least a semi-regular basis…but nowhere in the job description did it ever say that you were going to be doing something as utterly ridiculous as making friends with them. Did they forget that none of us are actually human, you wonder. Jesus fucking Christ on a hallucinogenic cactus next thing you know they’re going to expect me to fucking human marry one of them, too.

You absolutely cannot fathom the reasoning behind such a weird order but you are damn well going to get to the bottom of it right fucking now.

“Why the fuck would they want me to do that?” you demand.

“I don’t know,” she replies. She glances away from the road for a split-second and in that moment all of the manic glee that had painted her face is gone, replaced with something dead cold and serious. When she speaks again, it’s with an intensity you haven’t heard from her before: “Your orders were specifically to make friends with humans. Try to seek out less popular specimens if possible.”

“Less popular specimens?” you repeat. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

She shrugs. “Less involved in the community, less familial connections…that sort of thing.”

You groan because wow, not only do you have to make friends with some weird and ugly human alien; you have to make friends with an unpopular weird and ugly human alien. From what you know about them, regular humans are already completely fucked up and backwards. You don’t even want to consider what one of them could possibly do that is bad enough to become unpopular when they are literally surrounded by unfiltered awfulness at all times.

Nora slams on the brakes as the car roars into the school parking lot. The car screeches to a stop, leaving a trail of skid marks longer than the ones that would appear in a giant’s underwear after a
meal of nothing but prunes and laxative diet shakes. A few kids milling around outside the building turn and look at your car. You honestly can’t blame them because you would probably stare, too if you thought some psycho was about to run your ass right the fuck down.

You don’t do any of the stupid melodramatic bullshit that most movies featuring human adolescents seem to think the new kid in town needs to do to show that they are the new kid in town. You don’t sit there staring at the building in silent trepidation because you were here literally two days ago to pick up your schedule and you are in proud possession of at least one functioning brain cell so you can read the map they were decent enough to give you just fine. You don’t monologue to your ‘loving’ (haha, loving, that’s a fucking laugh) parent about how you are so sad that you had to move and how you’ll never ever make any new friends in this squalid dump. Instead, you pick up your backpack, open the car door, and get out like a normal fucking person.

Apparently, fixing you breakfast and providing you with a heart attack-inducing ride to school has maxed out all of Nora’s tolerance for maintaining the fake-ass loving mother façade because she doesn’t bother to say anything like “Have a nice day” or “I love you, sweetie” or even a gentle reminder to “Don’t fuck up too badly.” Instead, she shouts after you, “Remember: make some friends” before peeling out of the parking lot and leaving behind a cloud of smoke and the acrid stench of burning tires. Another group of kids turn around and stare at you like you’re the fucking psycho who thinks that you’re doing it wrong if you’re not going at least twenty over the speed limit at all times. You scowl at them and they quickly go back to discussing whatever the fuck they were so absorbed in before Nora decided to scare the shit out of everybody. Then you remember that you are supposed to be making friends and mentally kick yourself because wow, way to make an approachable and friendly first impression there, dipshit. You quickly walk into the building, the better to dispel any lingering connection that those jerks will make between you and the driver from Satan’s asshole.

The main hall is packed with human adolescents. There are tall ones and short ones and males and females and some wearing bright colors and some wearing all black and some wearing so goddamn much makeup that they would put Gamzee to fucking shame and every last one of them is ugly as fuck. (Of course, you are also pretty fucking hideous, so you fit right in. Go you!) Most of them are gathered together in little groups, jabbering at each other about meaningless shit like hyperactive screech birds. Some of them are attempting to navigate through the crowd to disappear into smaller hallways or through doors that presumably lead to classrooms. You decide to join the latter category because you are pretty sure that none of the people in those weird little tribes chilling in the hall are unpopular enough to satisfy your orders.

You weave through the crush of bodies—a feat made exponentially more difficult due to the fact that there is a group of about ten males are gathered in a circle and kicking around a colorful little ball right in the goddamn middle of the fucking hall and blocking the way for literally everybody like a bunch of stupid jackasses. Eventually, you manage to arrive at room C – 1, the site of your first momentous foray into the world of American human education. The room is mostly empty, though a few people have already claimed their seats, mostly in the very front or the very back of the room. You select a seat somewhere in the middle because you really don’t give a fuck and wait for the room to fill.

More humans trickle in at the minutes tick by. A few of them give you a brief glance as though to say wait, who the fuck are you? but most of them don’t give you a second look and none of them bother to say anything to you. You are completely fine with this because it gives you a chance to scope shit out and see which of them—if any—might be potential “unpopular human friend” material. You immediately rule out the ones that go out of their way to sit near each other. Then you begin to eliminate the ones that don’t seem to have trouble keeping a conversation going with the people sitting near them. (This proves to be a hell of a lot more difficult than it sounds and there is the
added risk of somebody looking your way and thinking you are a creeper...which, admittedly, yeah. You kind of are being a creeper at the moment.)

By the time the human teacher walks into the room and the first bell rings, you have narrowed your list of “possibles” down to three: a dude near the front who is too engrossed in the thick book he is reading to look up and acknowledge that there are actually living people nearby, a surly-looking guy who looks like he wants to punch everybody in the face, and a girl who is clearly high on some kind of human soporific. Then the teacher calls the class to order (you are surprised to see that it takes her a couple of tries to get everybody to shut the hell up, though you suppose there isn’t nearly as much incentive to follow the rules when you aren’t at risk of being killed just for scratching your own ass out of turn) and you are nook-deep in the wonders of English literature.

By the end of the class, you have dumped all three of your “possibles” off your list. The book guy is clearly one of the teacher’s favorites and the way he always acts like he knows everything reminds you of Nulian. You sincerely suspect that the surly guy is an asshole because he spent most of the class period kicking the seat in front of him and gigging about it and orders or no orders, you would prefer it if your friends were not complete shithed. The girl might be worth pursing...but you have already spent enough of your life babysitting morons who spend most of their time soaring high as a fucking kite and you really don’t think you can bear being around another Gamzee. You therefore leave the classroom with a huge-ass purple book entitled *The Language of Literature* and not a single prospect.

The second and third class periods pass in almost exactly the same way: go to classroom, make a shortlist of likely targets, leave with gigantic fucking book and not a single one of your “possibles” remaining on your shortlist. You elect to make a quick stop at your locker before you head for your fourth period class because your backpack is more packed full than an Alternian slither creature on a feeding binge and you swear to sacred fuck that the thing weighs almost as much as you do. You have no idea as you enter in the combination and gleefully deposit *Language of Literature, Holt’s Pre-calculus*, and *Landmarks in Humanities* that the consequences of your totally mundane and logical decision will change your life forever.

Most of the seats have already been taken by the time you arrive at your fourth period classroom. You end up sitting next to some dopey-looking kid with spiky dark hair and square glasses. You fully expect him to ignore you like all of the other bulge wipes you have encountered today, but the goofy kid shocks the shit out you by cracking into a huge grin and saying, “Hey, new guy! I’m John. Who’re you?”

You take a moment to allow your surprise gland secretions to thin to a reasonable level (because whoa, shit this is the first human you have ever spoken with who seems like he wants to carry on an actual conversation) before you reply, “Kark—uh, Karl. I’m Karl Vantross.”

“Vantross?” he repeats. “Sounds kind of like Van Helsing!”

“No it doesn’t,” you scowl because wow, just your luck: you aren’t sitting next to just your average, run-of-the-mill idiot. Oh, no. You have managed to find the king of idiots in all his fecal-throwing, shit-eating grinning glory. “That is literally the stupidest thing I have ever heard in my life.”

“Well, *duh* it doesn’t,” John laughs. “I’m just messing with you.”

You give him a withering glare, the kind that would make anybody with the slightest ounce of social competence shrink up into a dried-up husk of SHUT THE HELL UP. He doesn’t seem to get the hint because he just keeps flinging his incomprehensible word vomit at you.

“You do know who Van Helsing is, don’t you?” he asks.
“Yes,” you huff because—guess what—you are not even half as stupid as he is so the fact that you already know everything he knows and then some is a universal given. Of course you know this morsel of brainless human pop culture trivia. “He’s that doctor from the book about vampires. Dracula.”

His face takes on a solemn expression that is so heavily put-on it might as well scream I’m about to say something really fucking douchey right now so take cover before the storm commences. “Van Helsing is Wolverine.”

“What?”

“You know, Hugh Jackman? Wolverine? He was Van Helsing.”

You sincerely hope that your dark scowl is enough to hide your sudden feelings of OH SHIT because you have absolutely no fucking idea what this asshole is talking about. You think you might have heard the name Hugh Jackman but your knowledge of human celebrities is obviously nowhere near where it should be because you can’t remember if he’s a singer or an actor or if he’s just one of those famous people who are famous for no fucking reason whatsoever. You guess that he is probably some actor and you also guess that he must have played Van Helsing in some Earth movie at some point…but then what the fuck does he have to do with some Earth woodland creature that is the rough equivalent of a miniature Alternian cholerbear? And what in mother grub’s oozing heft sphincter does the miniature cholerbear have to do with the doctor from the Dracula story? God fucking damn it, you cannot be fucking up this egregiously on your first ever proper conversation with a human, what the fuck is wrong with you?

Somebody sitting in front of you, a guy who looks like a douche-tastic flesh-and-blood version of the human Ken doll turns around and says, “Hey, Egderp. Leave the new guy alone.”

The goofy smile melts off John’s face like a bead of sweat disappearing into the dark regions of a plumber’s ass crack. ‘Hey, I was just—“

“Whatever you were just doing, he doesn’t want to deal with your shit. What’re you planning to do, blow him the fuck up or some shit?”

John’s reaction takes you utterly by surprise. He doesn’t tell the douche face to go fuck himself with a rusty fine-toothed comb. He doesn’t say anything at all. Instead, he just kind of seems to deflate a bit and stares down at his desk like he thinks that maybe if he looks at it hard enough, it’ll tell him what he should do and say. You realize with quiet astonishment that he is just giving up.

Ken-doll douche face turns around a bit more so he is facing you fully. “Sorry you had to see that, man, but Egderp is a dick. I was doing you a favor,” he says. He gives you what you are sure would pass for a winning smile if he didn’t look like such a fucking tool before he offers up his hand and adding, “Cory Manson.”

You look down at the hand in front of you. Look at John who, you realize with a sudden jolt of awkward, is still just sitting there staring into the boundless depths of his empty desk. Look at Cory’s too-perfect Ken doll face. And then you make your decision. Narrowing your eyes to poisonous slits of smoldering hostility, you say, “Listen here, Cory I-don’t-give-a-shit: John and I were having a nice, civil conversation until you turned around and crapped all over it so you can just fuck right off back to whatever vile stink pit you crawled out of this morning.”

Face aghast, Cory quickly withdraws his hand. “What?”

You execute an epic eye roll because he’s acting like you were speaking a completely different
language even though you know for a fact that you were speaking very clear and precise English like the most considerate example of an invading alien species the universe has ever known. You wish this shithead could understand Alternian so you could give him a proper lambasting. Instead, you decide to keep things nice, crisp and concise: “I said fuck you.”

Cory obviously has never had to deal with anything in the way of trading real verbal barbs because he is so woefully unprepared that the best he can do is a stammered, “Yeah? Well…fuck you, too.” You flip him off as he turns back around, not because you are particularly angry with him but because repeating the same thing that your opponent just said in an insult-off is pretty much the weakest shit ever and you find his lack of imagination to be depressing as hell.

Once Cory-the-douche face is out of your business, you return your attention back to John and say, “So. What the fuck were you trying to say about Van Helsing?”

“Oh!” he exclaims. The smile is back, just as big and dumb as before but you think his eyes might be a little wet. You can’t be sure if what you are seeing are actual tears or if his eyes are just naturally watery because human tears are clear for some weird-ass reason. If they are tears he does a damn good job of covering them as he says, “I was talking about the movie. Have you seen it?”

“No.”

“Oh. You should.”

“Why? Is it any good?” You are not sure whether you want him to say that it is a work of unparalleled cinematic brilliance or whether you want him to say that it’s a steaming pile of absolute shit. Either way, you suspect that watching it and ripping it to shreds will provide a good, solid two hours worth of entertainment.

John laughs. “No. It’s pretty terrible, actually. But I think you’d like it!”

“And why in the name of colorful flying fuck do you think that?”

John is about to answer but the bell rings before he can divulge whatever bizarre chain of human logic nuggets led him to conclude that you seemed like the type of person who would appreciate unsolicited shitty movie recommendations. The teacher doesn’t piss around long enough for him to offer up much of a response, either. The best he can do is grin and repeat, “Seriously, you should watch it!”

You proceed to spend the next hour listening to the female teacher talk about all the shit you can look forward to learning this semester, watching her walk the class through a painfully slow review of the human scientific method, and receiving a fucking enormous book named Prentice-Hall Biology. The classroom becomes increasingly restless as the hour progresses. You suspect that this is because the lunch period is next and your human classmates are preparing themselves to descend on the cafeteria like a flock of ravenous jitterbats. Their total inability to sit still disgusts you—though not as much as it should because you realize that you would probably be right there with them if not for Nora’s huge breakfast.

The classroom begins to clear out fast once the bell rings. You have yet to master the art of combining the actions of throwing all of your shit into your backpack and running out the door into a single fluid motion, so you are one of the last ones to leave the room. When you finally do manage to drag your sorry ass out of the room, you are surprised to see that John has waited for you.

“Hey, Karl,” he says. “Did you want to eat lunch together?”
You look at him and for just one second his dopey grin and laughing eyes remind you of someone—a burly troll with an infectious grin and a crippling inability to string together more than two words of English at a time. Then you remember that you are just looking at a kind of dorky human. You quickly remind yourself this guy will never be another Evrind for you. He’ll never be a Sollux or a Terezi or even an Eridan because he’s only human, after all. Even so, the guy hasn’t gone out of his way to make you particularly miserable, so you shrug and say, “Sure.”

He smiles and says, “Cool! I’ll meet you there—I have to get my lunch from my locker first.”

He disappears into the crowd with all the speed and subtlety of a silent fart puffing from somebody’s ass. You proceed to the cafeteria because you had not had the time or patience to bullshit around with packing yourself edible food this morning and you have a feeling the line to buy yourself a lunch is going to be absolutely fucking outrageous.

As it turns out, you were completely and totally correct in assuming that the line would be ridiculous. The lunch period is already half over by the time you finally manage to get through the line and acquire a basic soup-and-sandwich lunch. You make a mental note to never dawdle on your way to the cafeteria ever again as you pay for your meal and emerge into the dining area with your food.

At first you think you will have a hard time finding John because the cafeteria is really fucking crowded. You briefly wonder if maybe you should have just listened to Cody-the-douche’s warning that “Egderp is an ass” because for all you know John just wanted to make you look like a stupid fucking oaf just standing there in the middle of the room playing the world’s shittiest game of human Where’s Waldo. Then you spot him waving you over to a stretch of table in the far corner of the room.

You notice as you approach that something seems to be a bit off. A moment later it hits you: most of the other kids are sitting in little knots of five or ten, but John is sitting completely alone. Well cut off my globes and nail them up for Twelfth Perigee’s Eve, you think. Looks like the pernicious deities of troll fortune have decided to crack a heinous smile over the completely miserable excuse of an existence known as my life.

As you sit down, you decide that you had better confirm your suspicions before you go thanking any nonexistent beings for anything. You try to sound light and casual as you say, “Hey, John. Isn’t anybody else going to sit with us?”

He gets that crestfallen look on his face again, the one that had appeared there when Cory harassed him in the biology classroom. When he speaks, his voice has adopted a strangely flat quality: “No, Karl. It’s just me.”

“Is it always like that?” You immediately feel like a festering pile of bulge reek for asking, but you need to be sure and if there is any delicate way of asking somebody if they are loathed by their peers you have yet to hear of it.

He stares into the depths of his chocolate pudding cup for a long time. Then he says, “Yeah. It kind of is.”

You look at him, trying to figure out exactly why everybody in his entire cohort seems to dislike him enough to exile him to his own little corner of the room. Sure, he’s kind of doofy-looking and he apparently has fucking awful taste in movies, but he doesn’t smell and he seems surprisingly not horrible as far as humans go. You are at a loss.

John seems to take your silence as a sign that you have come to the conclusion that you are deeply offended by his very existence because he sighs and says, “Look, if you want to sit somewhere else
“Why in the leaking sack of human waste to the crotch would I want to do that?” you say. “This is perfect.”

He frowns. “It is?”

Fuck. “It’s fine.” He keeps looking at you like he thinks you are about to do something really fucking stupid like dump your milk over his head or whatever the hell it is that human bullies do when they have their prey at their mercy so you add, “Now give me some more fucking terrible movie suggestions.”

He brightens considerably at this request. As he begins to ply you with awful movie titles (Ghostbusters 2! Con Air! Deep Impact!), you take a moment to congratulate yourself because you are only about four hours in and Operation: Befriend the Unpopular Human Kid is on track to becoming a rip-roaring example of success.

> John: Answer chum
John: Answer chum

turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB]

TG: hey
TG: you havent messaged me in a seriously long ass time
TG: are you still alive
EB: hi dave. yeah, i’m fine.
EB: i’ve just been kind of busy! it’s our senior year, remember?
TG: yeah i got that
TG: im sure you are up to your ass in drugs sex and shitty pop music just like every other good american teen
TG: id better watch myself lest you lay down some high school musical shit and go busting out into some crappy auto toned song and dance about the joys of sex ed
TG: but seriously are you actually ok
EB: yeah. i think so.
EB: everybody’s still kind of pissed at me, though
EB: also i’m banned from going to any official school functions for the entire year, including prom.
EB: actually make that ESPECIALLY prom.
TG: that blows but everyone knows official school functions are overrated
TG: watching high school sports is pretty much just watching a bunch of sweaty douche bags knock each other around and congratulate each other for being sweaty douche bags and dont even get me started on school dances
TG: school dances are the most awkward pieces of glitter encrusted crap to come out of the bowels of american adolescence
EB: yeah. i know.
TG: so
TG: any of your old friends come crawling back yet
EB: no :( 
EB: i made a new friend though! some new guy who didn’t know any better.
EB: (hahaha)
TG: oh snap
TG: trolling the hell out of the new kid
TG: nice work man
TG: your pranksters gambit must be shooting through the roof and up into the clouds to goose some unsuspecting angel right on his feathery ass
EB: yeah…i think i might have to retire the prankster’s gambit for a while.
EB: it’s kind of the reason i got into this mess in the first place.
TG: what
TG: dude no
TG: thats like your trademark dorky thing
TG: everybody needs to have at least one trademark dorky thing
TG: its what keeps us from becoming assholes
EB: haha, got you good there.
EB: i could never retire the prankster’s gambit!
TG: jesus man dont even joke about shit like that
TG: i was legit concerned for you for a second there
TG: sitting here thinking you were turning into some kind of asshole before my very eyes
TG: promise me you wont ever become some copout conformist douche bag who is too concerned about stepping on everybody elses fragile little egos to appreciate a good joke
EB: pfff who do you think you are talking to here?
EB: i am still the pranking MASTER and that’s something that will never change!
TG: good
TG: oh speaking of pranking
TG: its almost halloween up in here
TG: got any major plans in the works yet
EB: not really.
EB: the house arrest only ended a month ago. i’m pretty sure dad will flip if i do anything too major, even if he does secretly think most of my pranks are pretty funny.
EB: i might go to a party, though.
EB: i may be banned from school-sanctioned social events but they never said anything about good old fashioned house parties!
TG: that sounds pretty sweet
TG: everybody knows house parties are where its at
EB: what are you going to do?
TG: totally going trick or treating
EB: really?
EB: isn’t that kind of embarrassing?
TG: hell no
TG: free candy is never embarrassing
TG: i will be rolling in the reeses and snickers
TG: wallowing in their sweet goodness like a cheap and dirty sugar whore
TG: besides im doing it ironically
EB: whatever you say.
EB: oh crap.
TG: what
EB: it’s eleven. i have to get off the computer now.
TG: oh
TG: that sucks
EB: wait isn’t it like one in houston right now?
EB: why the hell are YOU online? won’t your bro beat your ass?
TG: nah
TG: we are way too cool for curfews
TG: its like we have this sign like the ones in front of roller coasters that say you must be at least this tall to ride except for us its you must be at least this cool to fly in casa strider
TG: and curfews are like negative cool so they get booted out of the line and end up standing around with all the midgets and kids who still pee their pants
TG: also bro has a gig tonight
EB: oh.
EB: crap. i can hear my dad coming.
EB: gotta go!
TG: ok
TG: see you

ectoBiologist [EB] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

> Tavros: What are you doing?
You have no idea what you are doing right now. Actually, that’s not quite right. You know exactly what you are doing, and that would be making your way towards the hive of the girl who, on top of tormenting you for as long as you can remember, paralyzed you from the waist down back when you used to FLARP. You have been up all day following the labyrinthine tunnels that run through the seaside cliffs near your home further inland and hoping that you reach your destination before your mutual friend who has apparently decided to go on a murder clown rampage gets there first. (You think you have a pretty good shot. He might be able to move faster than you, but you don’t think he knows about the tunnels and there isn’t any other way to get there during the day without the sun killing you.)

The problem is therefore not so much the what you are doing, but the why you are doing it that has you all kinds of confused. As previously mentioned, this girl has been nothing but horrible to you since the day you met her—and come to think of it, she was never content to limit herself to tormenting just you. She has been completely awful to almost everybody you know, and probably to a lot of people you don’t know, too. You really don’t have any reason to save her (and in fact, you might even have more reasons to want her dead.) And yet you know that you cannot just sit back and let Gamzee kill her.

You spend most of your long journey wondering what this says about you as a person. You like to think that it means you are better than she is, but you aren’t so sure that is right because she is strong and confident and you’re…well, not. Actually, a lot of people would probably say what you are doing is yet another sign of just how weak you are: too merciful to let another troll die. Or maybe they would just say you are being really stupid, going out of your way to save not just any troll, but the one you have wanted off your back for sweeps. Call it mercy or call it stupidity, either way it is still something the Imperial fleet would frown on under even the best of circumstances. (That’s OK, though. You had kind of planned on pulling a Pupa Pan and going rogue when the time came for the fleet to take your cohort away because you are pretty sure they would cull you the second they saw you roll up in your four wheel device. You therefore don’t really give much of a shit when people—mainly Vriska—try to tell you what the fleet will think about you and your woeful lack of potential.)

When you reach the end of the tunnel system, you emerge into a landscape that is so different from the seaside plains that surround your hive it may as well belong to an entirely different world. It’s all red rock and canyons without much in the way of vegetation except the occasional patch of scrub that is so dry it looks half-dead. Even the air feels different: you are so far inland that there is not even a hint of the briny ocean breeze to which you have become accustomed. Instead the air is dry with a musty smell to it that reminds you of old dirt.

The tunnel system has deposited you atop the summit of one of the many craggy rock formations scattered throughout this arid wasteland. You do not immediately notice Vriska’s hive from your vantage point and for a moment you worry that you might have taken a wrong turn at one of the many forks that you had come across on your way here. (Realistically speaking, that is a very possible and even probable thing that may have happened. You have never visited Vriska’s hive before and your sense of direction is passable but by no means extraordinary.) Then you see it at the far end of your rock formation: a hive that you are sure is huge and imposing when you see it close-up but looks to be about the size of a pebble from where you are right now.

You groan under your breath because you had really been hoping that the tunnel would be nice enough to end somewhere more convenient, like right next to her front door or maybe even inside her respiteblock. This is the farthest you have ever traveled on your four wheel device in one go.
Your arms and shoulders are already knotted up and painful and you don’t think it will be much farther before you can’t go any more. Worse yet, although the tunnels had been somewhat maintained and generally manageable in your four wheel device, the terrain standing between you and your goal is much rougher. In the light of the rising moons, you can see plenty of treacherous dips and rocks that you will need to avoid, and the downhill slope is steep enough you are legitimately concerned you might fall out of your device which would be a major pain in the ass and probably painful to many other bodily regions as well. Under normal circumstances you would probably just turn back…but these are pretty far from normal circumstances and the thought of turning back now, after you have come so far and are so close just feels like a terrible letdown. With a sigh, you start forward.

Compared to your brisk pace in the tunnels, your progress down the hill is painfully slow. It takes much longer to navigate around all of the obstacles in your path than you had anticipated. Your shoulders are crying out for a rest by the time you are halfway down the slope. You would do anything to oblige, but you don’t think your brakes will hold on a slope this steep and losing control is pretty much the last thing you want to happen right now. You are beginning to think that coming down here was a really bad idea.

To keep your mind off of how uncomfortable you are at the moment, you decide to think about Rufio for a while. It has been a long time since you have thought about him. You worry that he might be upset with you for neglecting him, but of course he isn’t because he is your imaginary best friend and he understands you better than anybody else in the world! You pretend that he is here with you now and saying lots of encouraging things like “Don’t worry; you are doing a totally bangarang job!” or “You are being so brave…keep going!” Of course none of this actually makes your arms hurt any less, but it’s a nice distraction.

Your arms feel so wobbly by the time you reach the bottom of the hill that you barely have it in you to roll the final ten feet between you and Vriska’s front door. Now that you are finally here, you are surprised to see that all of the windows in her hive are dark. It almost looks as though she is not at home…but if she isn’t here you can’t imagine where else she would be. You knock on the door, tentatively at first and then you imagine how Rufio would do it and you hit it with a satisfying bang, bang, bang! There is no answer.

You clear your throat and say, “Vriska? Are you…uh, are you there?”

You listen for anything to indicate that Vriska might be coming to let you in and you hear nothing. You are pretty sure that she would make some noise even if she had no intention of letting you in just so she could taunt you about not letting you in, so you listen for anything to indicate that Vriska is actually home at all and you also hear nothing. You try the door. It’s unlocked. Hoping she hasn’t rigged her entryway with some kind of nasty booby trap, you open the door and roll inside.

You can’t go up the stairs to where her respiteblock must be but you don’t need to see her respiteblock to know that she isn’t here because the hive is a mess. Piles of broken eight balls and old FLARP dice everywhere. Shredded posters. A couch that looks like somebody used it for fencing practice. An ominous smell of food beginning to go rancid, like somebody left the thermal hull open. You aren’t sure how long she has been gone but that smell is enough to tell you that it has been at least a few days—long enough for more aggressive looters to have already made their move which would explain the mess. The idea makes you frown because looting is generally a thing that happens only when somebody isn’t coming back.

_Did she get culled?_ you wonder. Your frown deepens into a borderline scowl because even though Vriska is one of the shadiest, meanest, and all-around most awful people you know, she is also one of the sneakiest people you know. She is way too savvy to get caught doing anything that would get
her culled and you suspect that even if she did end up on the cull list she would find some way to slither out of it. Getting culled just doesn’t fit and you are pretty sure that is not what has happened here—which leads you to wonder if she didn’t get culled then where is she?

A crash of shattering glass pulls you out of your silent musings. It sounds like somebody has thrown something through one of the ground floor windows on the opposite side of the hive. You hold your breath, hoping that it’s not a looting party because you don’t have your lance with you and none of the piles of junk on the floor around you happen to be comprised of deadly weapons. You really hope that it’s just a random act of vandalism, that the culprit will be satisfied enough to move on. Tonight just does not seem to be your night: you hear a whisper of tinkling glass—somebody clearing the pane—followed by the scratchy crunch of it breaking underfoot as the intruder climbs through.

You scan the room for something you might be able to use to defend yourself and you see nothing. *(Maybe I could toss one of those broken eight balls at their head,* you think. Then you bury your face in your hands because the only thing that would accomplish would be to annoy them and that is a completely stupid idea and *oh god why didn’t you bring your lance with you, you dummy?*) You are on the verge of a full-on panic attack when you hear it: a low, gravelly voice whispering, “Spider sis, heeey spider sis….” *Gamzee.*

You are about to call out to him but then his voice evolves into a manic howl that is so angry and so heavy with bloodlust and so not Gamzee that it makes you recoil as he screams, “COME OUT AND MOTHERFUCKING PLAY, SPIDER SIS!” For the first time since you left your hive, you begin to think that maybe Terezi had been right; that maybe there really is no way to calm Gamzee down because you have never heard him talking like this before. You have never heard anybody talking like this before and you have no idea what you are going to do.

Everything had seemed so simple to you back at your hive. You would go to Vriska, warn her about Gamzee, she would leave, and then you would talk to Gamzee and maybe lay down a little slam poetry with him until he forgot about wanting to hurt Vriska and went back to his hive. Now here you are with Vriska already gone—*where?* You have no idea—and Gamzee here much sooner than you had expected and *oh god* is he actually going to kill you if he sees you here what in the hell were you even *thinking?*

You know that you need to move, you need to hide, you need to get the hell out of here…but there is a pressure building in your head, wrapping around the bases of your horns and settling into your body and you can’t *move.* Your body is shaking, oily sweat beginning to pop out on your face and you are *scared* with a fear that reaches into you and turns you inside-out and numb. Your pan hits the word to describe the fear—*chucklevoodoo*—but it does nothing to lessen the impact because *oh god he is coming and you can’t move,* why can’t you *MOVE?*

Something is pricking at your eyes. A distant part of you realizes that they are tears. You wish they would stop because you don’t want to cry, not here and not in front of Gamzee but you can’t hold back a throat-wrenching sob when he enters the room because you are so damn *scared* and he looks absolutely *terrifying.*

Gamzee has always been tall but without his easy slouch he towers over you, so huge the tips of his horns brush the high ceiling above you. His makeup is a mess, completely flaked off in some areas and running into ugly swirls of smudge in others. He has a juggling club in each hand, both of them spattered with maroon blood. There is more blood on his clothes and there is something in his hair that you are pretty sure is a fragment of bone. His whole body seems to be twitching, like all of his nerves have been replaced with live wires and *god,* the smile on his face is like somebody took his normal gentle grin and *twisted* it into a cruel leer.
He takes one step toward you, two. Then he stops, a new expression edging in around the blood frenzy: surprise. Twirling one of his clubs with an easy grace to rival the most practiced Subjugglator, he says, “Hey, Tavbro. WHAT THE MOTHERFUCK ARE YOU DOING HERE?”

The weight of the chucklevoodoo lifts and the relief is as immediate and sweet as breaking the surface after being on the verge of drowning. You gulp air as you gasp, “N-nothing. Nothing. I was just…just leaving.”

You wheel yourself backwards, moving towards the door as though to emphasize this last point. He takes another step toward you. His grin takes on a mischievous edge without losing an ounce of its cruelty. “I’m all up and looking to find me some wicked spider bitch. YOU BEEN SEEING ANYTHING WHAT’S LIKE THAT, BROTHER?”

You move another few feet closer to the door and he follows. “She isn’t here, Gamzee.”

This time he moves first, closing the distance between you by half before he says, “And why the motherfuck not? YOU BEEN PLACING THAT BITCH ABOVE ME, BROTHER? Putting her above our dearly departed Karbro. WARNING HER OF THE RIGHTEOUS RETRIBUTION WHAT SHE DESERVES.”

You shake your head. You are out of the hive now, Gamzee still following as you continue to back away from him. If things continue this way much longer, you’ll reach the cliff’s edge and when that happens you don’t know what you are going to do. “She was gone when I got here.”

“You’re lying.”

“What?”

“I SAID YOU’RE SPEAKING THE MOTHERFUCKING NASTY FALSEHOODS, MOTHERFUCKER.”

“No; Gamzee, I swear—“

“Don’t you be saying no more of the wild untruths. DON’T YOU BE SAYING NO MORE FALSE WORDS WHAT ARE DIRTIER THAN YOUR MOTHERFUCKING SHIT BLOOD.”

You wince because even though you are pretty sure he doesn’t mean it, the derogatory term still stings coming from him. You are about to assure him that you are not lying, that you are only telling him the truth, but he doesn’t let you say anything before he crashes on with, “I’m going to give you one motherfucking chance here, bro. ONE MOTHERFUCKING CHANCE BECAUSE I LIKE YOU. Where’s that spider bitch at right now?”

You stop moving because you have reached the cliff and there is nowhere else for you to go. Your options are now (a) roll of the edge to your death, or (b) stay where you are and get killed by somebody you thought was your friend. You cannot choose one or the other because they both sound equally terrible to you. Burying your face in your hands, you mumble, “I don’t know.”

“What was that? Motherfucker better speak up. I CAN’T HEAR YOU.”

“Gamzee, please, I don’t….” You trail off with a gasp because you just looked up and saw something huge rounding the corner of Vriska’s hive. It’s big and white and scuttling along on eight legs, each of which are as big around as the trunk of a small fruit tree. You have never seen Vriska’s lusus before but you have heard enough horror stories to know beyond any shadow of a doubt that this must be it. You also know beyond any shadow of a doubt that it is heading toward Gamzee at an alarming pace. “Oh my god; Gamzee look out!”
You have no way of knowing whether it is something in your voice piercing through the fog of murder clown rage boiling in his pan or whether it is just an instinctive response, but whatever the reason Gamzee turns around. He turns around—but too slow. The giant spider is already adjusting her fangs for the killing bite, already crouched and ready to leap. It doesn’t matter that Gamzee is fast and it doesn’t matter that Gamzee is strong because the spider has him trapped—has you both trapped, really—and there is nowhere either of you can go that will put you out of reach of those fangs.

The only thing you can do is close your eyes and think no, not like this; please! You almost leap out of your skin when you get an answer. It is a rough answer that comes to you in a mental barrage, wave after wave of crashing instinct, response, and emotion: hunger, confusion, hunger, hunger, where is the girl? Hunger, fear, hunger, hunger, hunger, HUNGER.... If you were standing up the force of it would knock you off your feet. Lucky for you, you can’t stand up. The only thing that happens to you is a headache that begins in the back of your head and throbs all the way around to your temples.

Another mental assault hits you and this time you get the feeling that she is examining you and Gamzee more closely—sizing you up and sizing Gamzee up and trying to decide what to make of the both of you. The general impression you are left with is hunger, I’ve had better, hunger, hunger, hunger, EAT THEM NOW, hunger, hunger, hunger.... Quickly, you think no; you can’t eat us. Please don’t.

You peek open one eye to see that the lusus has neither retreated nor advanced. Instead it is standing stock still with all eight of its milk-white eyes fixed on you. You realize suddenly that wow, this is the biggest creature you have ever communed with and it is actually listening to you. Then Gamzee is saying, “Whoa, what the motherfuck is up with you, my main peanut butter motherfucker?”

“It’s fine,” you gasp because oh crap it’s hard to keep your connection with her and talk at the same time. “I have her. It’s fine.”

Gamzee is quiet long enough for you to re-establish your connection with the spider. You are beginning to contemplate asking her to please let you and your friend go when Gamzee says, “YOU FUCKING STRAIGHT AND PROPER MIRACLE WORKER MOTHERFUCKER. You all up and stopped that bitch. MOTHERFUCKING SAVED ME LIKE A WICKED APPARITION FROM THE MIRTHFUL MESSIAHS. Now I’m not having much of a fucking choice what to think about. NOW THIS MOTHERFUCKER HAS GOT TO DO WHATEVER BITCH TITS NASTY SHIT IS BEING NECESSARY TO PRESERVE THE FUCKING MIRACLE.”

You are so focused on maintaining your link with Vriska’s lusus that it takes you a moment to register the words. It isn’t until Gamzee is advancing on the spider, clubs at the ready that the meaning begins to sink in. Aghast, you shout, “Gamzee, no!”

Your link slips momentarily. The spider lunges and you desperately think, no, please don’t! The spider stops. Gamzee doesn’t. His club comes down hard on one of the spider’s eyes, popping it like a grape. A gout of cerulean blood spurts from the wound and you see something clear and gelatinous oozing from the hole as the spider lets out a terrible sound—and remains standing perfectly still.

Gamzee is already going in for another hit. You scream at him, “No! Gamzee, stop! Please stop!” but the hit connects to the spider’s right mandible this time. There is a firecracker sound of chitin snapping and then a piece of her jaw is dangling, hanging on by only a few ragged strands of exoskeleton. The spider makes a noise so heavy with hurt you feel it in your own chest and still it does not move.

With the spider’s blood flowing fast and thick, Gamzee is an unstoppable nightmare of whirling
clubs, horns, and flashsteps. You want to let the spider go because it's not fair; it was only hungry and protecting its troll's hive like she was made to do and it's not fair—but you can't. You can't because the second you let her go she will go after Gamzee with her venom and her fangs and she will kill him and very possibly kill you, too.

You desperately want to close your eyes. You do not want to watch Gamzee killing this creature, but you know that you owe her at least that tiny ounce of respect because you are the one preventing her from defending herself and that makes you every bit as much to blame for her death as Gamzee. And so you watch and cry as Gamzee pulverizes the poor creature’s head with strike after strike after strike after strike. You watch as the spider’s body collapses and Gamzee lops off its twitching legs. You watch and try not to throw up as he smashes a hole through its vulnerable belly and the blood and entrails spill out onto the ground. You watch as he collapses into the mess, shoulders shaking and at first you think he is laughing but then it hits you that he is sobbing. He lays there, covered in the spider’s cerulean blood and crying as he tears at his own skin. You don’t notice it right away because it’s almost impossible to decipher anything of Gamzee through the mess of cerulean but then you see the purple welling up on his arms and you realize that he is hurting himself.

Something wells up in your chest when you see him lying there. You are still angry with him and angry with yourself and sad for the spider and you still feel kind of sick, but this new emotion swallows everything else up until the only thing left is a looming pity. You pity him even if he is kind of gross and weird and even if he is a crazy murder clown. Actually, you pity him exactly because he is a weird, gross, crazy murder clown.

You roll forward, toward the place where Gamzee is thrashing on the ground. The ground is so saturated with the spider’s blood that your wheels keep sinking into the mess and it ends up taking you a long time to reach him. By the time you make it to his side, his arms are covered in purple and he has started in on his legs.

“Gamzee,” you whisper. “Hey, come on, Gamzee, stop.”

The only thing he does to acknowledge your presence is to start attacking himself even more. You shudder as one of his claws snaps under the abuse, but he doesn’t even seem to notice. He just keeps dragging his claws along his legs, dipping his fingers into the blood, smearing it onto his face and —ugh, you really did not need to see that—licking it off.

You know what you need to do and you are kind of nervous because you have never done it before and it is starting to look as though he might kill you or kill himself or kill both of you if you screw this up. You had always assumed that your first shooshing would involve a lot more pile talk and a lot less blood, but you tell yourself that this is fine. You tell yourself that everybody’s first shooshing is different and that Rufio would be all over this like a pro so you should be, too. Then you carefully reach out and lay a hand on Gamzee’s bloodstained face.

“Shoosh,” you whisper. He goes stiff but he stops clawing at himself so you take that as a good sign. With a little more confidence, you repeat, “Shooossh.”

He moves as though he wants to jerk away from your hand but you don’t let him, not even when he begins to growl from deep down in his throat. You pap him again and you shoosh until the growl dissipates down into a whine. He tries to swat your hand away but it’s a half-hearted attempt and if the way his eyes are beginning to drift into a lidded sense of contentment is anything to go by, you don’t think he really means anything by it.

You keep shooshing and papping him until his whole body just seems to let go all at once and relax. He leans into your hand before taking it in both of his and cradling it against his cheek. You let him keep your hand for as long as he needs it. He is still crying and at one point you think you hear him
mumble something about missing Karkat and you think that is probably something you should talk about in a pile once he calms down a little.

Eventually, he stops crying and begins to stand up. You have just enough time to note that all of the manic energy that had been snapping through him back in Vriska’s hive is gone and without it he just looks tired. Then he is hugging you, which would probably be a lot nicer and more romantic if he wasn’t still covered in blood and smearing it all over you. (You don’t mind too much, though. You are too busy coasting on a serious case of the pale vapors to worry about your clothes getting ruined.)

“Are you OK now?” you whisper into his ear.

His voice is a torn-up wreck as he whispers back, “Yeah…I think everything is going to be all up and motherfucking alright now.”

“Good,” you breathe. “In that case we should probably get out of here. You can come with me to my hive if you want.”

He says that he would like that better than a bottle of the wicked elixir straight from the Mirthful Messiahs themselves. Then the two of you are leaving Vriska’s empty hive and dead lusus behind you, him pushing you up the steep slope all the way to the tunnels while you set to work composing some of the best-worst slam poetry for your new diamond to enjoy during the long trip home.

> Karkat: Survive Halloween
Karkat: Survive Halloween

You are going to murder John. You did not make this decision lightly. In fact, in the month that you have known him, you have been lenient enough to forgive a veritable shitload of murder-worthy offenses by one, John Egbert. (The stupid laugh and really fucking awful taste in movies had been easy enough to overlook but it had taken every single molecule of your pent-up reserve of magnanimity and all-around goodwill not to punch his face after the stunt where he SUPERGLUED YOUR GODDAMN Hand TO YOUR WATER BOTTLE.) But this is the dirt tuber pod that broke the harvesting drone’s back and left him wallowing in a puddle of his own bodily wastes.

You had assumed that John’s intentions were open and one hundred percent pure of any sort of stupid bullfuckery when he had approached you one week ago and invited you to go to a Halloween party with him. “It’ll be fun,” he’d said. “Staying home on Halloween is for losers and old people,” he’d said. “Come on, Karl, you’re not an old person so don’t be a loser,” he’d said. Past you, being a nook-diddling sissy who can’t withstand the irritation of a few moments of mild flatulence let alone somebody badgering at him nonstop for days on end, had finally caved like the weak-ass piece of shit he is and agreed to go just to get John to shut the fuck up. Now here you are, perched in front of your bathroom mirror with a plastic tray of shitty face paint, a few capsules of fake blood, and a rapidly overflowing aggravation sponge because your desire to put any of this gross crap on your face is so small it could fit inside the assholes of the microscopic critters crawling around on the dust motes swirling in the air around you.

Cursing John with every living part of your being—you really are going to tear him a new asshole to ensure that he has sufficient means of evacuating all of the shitty ideas festering inside him rather than puking them out as words and getting you involved in situations like this one—you dip your applicator sponge into one of the wells of waxy face paint. The disgusting glob of shit that you come away with doesn’t look like it has any business being anywhere near anybody’s face at any time under any circumstances, ever. It looks like it should be sealing a crack in somebody’s toilet bowl, keeping the water in their porcelain pisshole from settling in and spawning a flesh-eating spore mold infestation. (Of course, you wouldn’t recommend anybody use this crap for such an important purpose. You are pretty sure that you’d be better off flushing it straight down the crapper and taking your chances with the spore mold.)

You sit there staring at the crap on the applicator sponge. Fucking paint, you think. (And then, just for good measure: Fucking Halloween. Fucking party. Fucking John with his goddamn stupid horse shit about “Oh, just be a zombie, Karl; that’ll be EASY!” Fuck this whole fucking evening in every one of its heinous leaking orifices and kick it down to flounder in the stink of its own shame feces.) Then you set to work spreading the sticky crap all over your face.

The paint feels cold and greasy on your face and goddamn it, how the hell does Gamzee wear this shit every day? It doesn’t spread very evenly because it is literally the cheapest crap you could buy, but you still get a funny twinge in your gut when you finish your base coat and end up with a gray-skinned reflection staring back at you from the mirror. Not by any stretch of the imagination does it look like real, honest-to-fuck troll skin. The shade is too pale and the unevenness gives it an almost cartoonish quality—but it is still a hell of a lot more appealing than the gross human color you have grown used to seeing every time you make the mistake of looking into a mirror.

Shit, you think. Maybe I should have just constructed some terrible fake horns and gone as myself. Then you shed a single tear of grief for all of the brain cells that must have died to allow such a stupid idea to enter your head because what in the fuck would you tell everybody you are supposed to be dressed as? Costume party or not, you are pretty fucking sure that the fleet would have your ass
in a second for putting yourself into a situation with the possibility—however remote—that you might at one point end up saying, “Why, yes I am a member of the alien race that is secretly invading your planet; how did you guess, you sly bastard?”

Quickly, before you have time to come up with any other epically bad ideas, you tear your gaze away from the mirror and attack your face with the rest of the color palette. You smear on half-assed cream-colored highlights, add some green and brown smudges, dab on some black around your eyes to ensure that you exude the proper degree of deadness. (Because god fucking forbid you end up looking like some shitty half-dead zombie that doesn’t even know how to be dead properly.) The first capsule of fake blood disintegrates in your hand when you try to open it and gets fucking everywhere—on the sink, on the counter, on the mirror, on the floor—and the whole bathroom ends up looking like a goddamn murder scene. (More specifically, it looks like a “Nora and Otto decided to team up with Torkal to murder Karkat, dump his gross blood all over the floor and roll in it like a bunch of fucking heathens scene.”)

You know it’s only fake blood—fake human blood at that—but the color still kind of sets your teeth on edge. You set aside a moment to wonder why in the piss-loving fuck past you ever thought that dressing up like a dead and bloody thing was actually a good idea. (Answer: he didn’t—this shit was John’s idea which is why you are going to kill him later.) Then you decide to stop being a crying little wiggler and mop up with mess with your shirt.

You open the second blood capsule a little more carefully than the first and successfully smear some of it around your mouth and on your arms. The end result may not be the finest example of cosmetic wizardry ever, but it’s definitely not bad for two minutes of half-assed effort, either. You don’t exactly look scary, but you do look passably unsettling and you are reasonably confident that nobody will need to ask you what the hell you are supposed to be. If nothing else, you have certainly met the minimal requirements for inclusion into Egbert’s Halloween costume party shitfest.

You see no sign of Nora or Otto when you come out of the bathroom. If they are sticking to their normal routine, Nora is probably just waking up and Otto is already glued to his computer screen, fully immersed in the artificial utopia of whatever the fuck he finds so enthralling about the human Internet. You don’t bother telling them where you are going when you leave the house because you are still perfectly content to avoid them whenever possible and it is highly likely that neither of them would give a single farting fuck anyway.

Under normal circumstances, John’s house is a ten minute walk from yours. Tonight the sidewalk is packed with parents walking their kids around to engage in the absolutely fucking insane act that humans refer to as “trick-or-treating.” (This practice has always baffled the shit out of you because what guardian in their right mind would trot their charge around, encourage them to accept food from total fucking strangers and then let them eat it? You get that humans aren’t as naturally inclined toward violence as trolls are, but goddamn, even Sollux’s dumb-as-globes lusus would know better.) It takes you an additional five minutes to weave through all of the superheroes, princesses, animals, fire fighters, wizards, mermaids, devils, and shit that you can’t even begin to describe before you finally arrive at John’s door.

John is standing there handing out fun-size Three Musketeers and Milky Ways to a flock of children dressed as…a bunch of yellow jellybeans wearing overalls and goggles what the fuck? He grins when he sees you coming, offers you a wave and goddamn it, did he seriously dress up as Nick Cage from Con Air? Torn-up wife beater, bloodstained bandage on his left arm, shit-tastic shoulder-length wig…fucking Christ, he totally did. You knew he was kind of a nerd but holy bulge-crawling snot beetles what a fucking nerd.

John quickly finishes distributing the candy to the yellow jellybean children. He turns around as they
dissipate to shout “Dad, I’m going now” into the bowels of the house before hurrying over to you and saying, “Hey, man. Cool paint job!”

“Oh, it’s a fucking masterpiece all right,” you sniff. “And by masterpiece I mean something I shat out in like thirty seconds. But hey, thanks for having the decency to pretend that it is anything other than craptastic. And speaking of craptastic, nice costume.”

He rolls his eyes at you and says, “OK you’re doing that thing where I literally can’t tell if you’re trying to be funny or if you’re just being dick so I’m going to pretend your compliment was totally heartfelt and genuine and say ‘awww thanks, buddy!’”

“Nobody is going to know who you are supposed to be, dumbass!” (A middle-aged woman herding three kids in sheep costumes gives you a dirty look, presumably in response to your fucking unacceptable use of profanity. You consider expanding on your last remark because if the worst those kids have heard in their lives is a simple ‘dumbass’ then they are going to be miles behind their peers by the time they are adolescents. Then you decide fuck it, you don’t feel like getting into a passive aggressive bullshit competition with total strangers tonight and let it go.)

“Do you know who it’s supposed to be?”

“Well of course I know who it is and…” You trail off when you see the smirk creeping onto his face because you already know what he is going to say next and you just walked right into it like a stupid chump.

“Well then I guess somebody knows who it is then,” he says. “And don’t try and claim that you’re nobody because that’s just dumb.”

“OK, you know what? Fine. Enjoy having people asking who the hell you are all night.”

His face is just one big shit-eating grin as he says, “Oh, I will! Now come on; let’s go.”

The party is less than ten blocks away from John’s house but the crowd of trick-or-treaters has grown even thicker in the couple of minutes the two of you pissed away standing around talking about John’s stupid costume and it ends up taking you the better part of an hour to get there. (It does nothing to speed your pace when John insists on stopping at one of the bigger houses on the way there and waiting until a group of high school-aged trick-or-treaters comes to the door. At first you think he is completely batshit insane and tell him so, but you understand why he wanted to stop when a suitable group finally arrives: when one of the poor fucks rings the doorbell, the “scarecrow” sitting in the chair beside the door suddenly comes to life, howling like a deranged animal and scaring the everloving piss out of them and you. Of course John finds this absolutely fucking hilarious and—though you wouldn’t admit it under threat of extreme torture, death, or surgical shame globe removal—you do, too.)

You had thought that it might be hard to pick out which house was going to be your destination, but the second you see it you know that yep, that’s the one because despite being the biggest house on the block, there are no trick-or-treaters going to the door. After a moment of observation, you ascertain that the loud thrum of bass and low synth shaking all of the windows in their panes appears to be acting as a highly effective human child repellant. (You file this useful bit of information away for use in the unlikely event that you find yourself attacked by humans under the age of twelve.) There are a bunch of young adults milling around the open door. Most of them look to be older than you by a few Earth years, though you do see a few people closer to your age and—oh goddamn it, one of them happens to be Cory “the Ken doll” Manson.

John seems to notice Cory at roughly the same moment you do. He tenses up beside you but you
have to give him a single sliver of grudging credit because other than that not terribly noticeable lapse, he keeps his shit together and continues toward the house without even breaking step. In fact, he very noticeably picks up the pace. (You end up having to break into a really un-zombie-like trot that makes you look as ridiculous as a moron trying to dance ballet in clown shoes to keep up but you can’t say that you really blame him.) He doesn’t exactly look at the ground as you approach the door, but you notice that he is very actively looking practically everywhere except in the general direction of Cory as though he is actually dumb enough to believe that if he can’t see Cory then Cory won’t be able to see him, either. You, however, do not take your eyes off the smarmy sack of shit. Consequently, you see him moving to block the door just in time to grab John by the back of his tank top and yank him to a stop before he goes crashing into the gross sack of human flesh that is standing in your way.

“Hey Egderp,” Cory smirks. “What the hell do you think you’re doing here?”

“Damn it, Cory,” John sighs. “Can we not do this tonight? Just let us through.”

Cory’s smirk gains about two more shades of amazing punchability but his voice is almost amiable as he replies, “No can do, man! This party is twenty-one and over only.”

“You’re only seventeen, douchebag.”

“Yeah, but I’m on the list.”

John’s eyes narrow to poisonous slits. For a second you think he might actually punch Cory’s stupid Ken doll face, which you would be totally, one hundred percent down with. Then he takes the easy way out and says, “What list?”

“Oh, you know. The ‘not a psycho who blows shit up’ list.” He shrugs and pulls his dumb pretty boy face into the most painfully insincere expression of sympathy you have ever witnessed in your life. (Holy nook spewing bulge rot, you think. If this were a stage production on Alternia the crowd would storm the stage and dismember him on the spot. They would place his head on a pike so all future generations of aspiring actors can look upon it and weep in shame.) Then he says, “I’m sorry, man, but you’re going to have to fuck off.”

John looks at the ground like he is actually considering doing as Cory said. You decide that fuck that; two can play at being an affable asshole and if Cory is hell-bent on going down that road with you then he is about to find himself sadly outclassed. In a voice so sweet it is practically dripping blobs of congealed sugar all over on the ground around you, you say, “Hey, Manson. If you’re already so bored of fondling your tiny genitals that you need to act like a huge asshole, remember that nobody will mind if you go play a nice game of hide and go fuck yourself.”

“Hey, screw you, Vantross!”

“Hmmm…no thanks. Sorry to break it to you, but insufferable pricks really aren’t my type.”

A furious flush of color rushes into Cory’s cheeks. His eyes snap with something dangerous, something that says that he is seriously contemplating separating your head from your shoulders and using it for a soccer ball. Completely unnecessarily (because you’re not stupid; you get it), he snarls, “I’ll kick your ass, you little shit.”

He takes a step toward you, balling one of his hands into a fist. You immediately adapt a relaxed fighting stance because you grew up strifing against a 400 pound crab of course you can take this pile of crap if he tries anything. Then a girl is saying, “Oh my god, Cory, just let them in.”
Cory continues to glare at you for another couple of seconds just to let you know that he would have totally kicked your ass even though you both know that is a dirty fucking lie. Then he lets out an annoyed huff and gets out of the way.

John smiles at the girl. “Thanks Judy!”

She doesn’t answer as the two of you go inside. She doesn’t even look in his general direction or offer any indication that she heard him at all. It’s hard to hear over the thump of the bass but you think you hear her saying something like “Jesus Cory, why can’t you just leave him alone?” Then John is dragging you out of earshot over to a table laden with a punch bowl, canned beverages, scoop chips, a shitload of dip, and about twenty fucking huge bowls of wrapped candy. (There is also one bowl of something that looks startlingly like a bunch of severed grub horns which you recall is a real, honest-to-fuck Earth candy just in time to avoid having a mild freak out and embarrassing the shit out of yourself and everybody around you.)

John selects a can of soda off the table, scoops up a handful of candy, and shouts, “Want to see if they have any sweet Halloween-type games?”

You shrug. He seems to take this noncommittal gesture as a sign of thunderous agreement because he grabs you by the arm and starts dragging you all over the damn house. He herds you through a kitchen where people are milling around drinking beer and eating pizza, cookies, and hot wings; past a big room where a bunch of people are pretending that their kind of gross-looking gyrating qualifies as dancing to the child-repelling music being put out by an almost comically huge sound system; past a little room helpfully marked “BATHROOM! PISS HERE; NOT THERE!”; through another big room packed with people playing the famous Earth college sport “beer pong”; and then finally to yet another big room with a couch, chairs, and a TV. (A few of your classmates are huddled around the TV and engaged in some shooting game like it is really fucking serious business). The place may still be smaller than even the shabbiest, laziest hives on Alternia but it is fucking huge by human standards and packed wall-to-wall with tacky Halloween decorations and people in costume. If you didn’t find everything about humans to be completely contemptuous in every way, you might be just a wee bit intimidated.

“Hey, check it out!” John exclaims. “They have bobbing for apples. Want to give it a try?”

You follow the direction in which he is pointing with an unsettled flutter in your digestive sac because you have never heard of “bobbing for apples” and you really hope it isn’t going to turn out to be some kind of weird-ass human sexual euphemism. You are therefore relieved to see that it appears to be nothing more offensive than a bunch of idiots attempting to drown themselves in a tub full of apples floating in water (though now that you think on it, that doesn’t necessarily rule out ‘weird human sexual act.’ Still, you notice that they appear to be trying to bite the apples so you are going to assume that is the object of the game and commemorate this as the moment you discovered the absolute nadir of this species’ sorry excuse for entertainment.) You decide that aside from having zero desire to look like a globe-tickling ignoramus, the water looks really fucking unsanitary and you have no need to expose yourself to all of the bacteria, mucus, dead skin cells, parasites, and other nasty shit must be floating around in there after fuck knows how many other people have molested it with their dirty gape holes. You therefore shake your head and say, “I’d rather pleasure myself with live jumper cables but don’t let me stop you.”

John shrugs and says “Your loss” before joining the line to publicly shame himself. The line for public shaming is surprisingly long, so you take a seat in one of the chairs to look around the room and see what other, presumably less brain dead people are doing.

You haven’t been looking long when the girl from outside—Judy—sits down beside you and says,
“Sorry Cory was being such a jerk back there. He can be kind of insensitive sometimes.”

You want to tell her that whatever Cory is, “insensitive” barely begins to penetrate the excrement-mired surface but then she is already saying, “You must be new this year because I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t recognize you even without all that zombie makeup. What’s your name?”

You take a moment to debate whether it is worth getting to know this human girl because she doesn’t seem to fit the “unpopular” specification in your orders. Then you realize that you are being a bulge because even if she is an ugly human creature, she’s still a person who is just trying to be friendly and here you are thinking about order specifications and being a giant asshole. You decide that you had better amend that before she catches on to the fact that you are a complete bastard with the social skills of a puddle of pail swill so you reply, “I’m Karl Vantross.”

She smiles and says, “Nice to meet you, Karl Vantross. I’m Judy Cooper. Did you just move here?”

“Yeah. In August. From Los Angeles.”

She gasps and squeals, “LA? Oh, I have family down there! Maybe you’ve met them.”

A nervous twist jolts through your gut because damn it, you hadn’t counted on talking to somebody who knows anything about your fake area of origin. “Uh…no, I don’t think I have. It’s a really big city.”

“Yeah; you’re probably right,” she says. You congratulate yourself on diverting that potential crisis with some of the finest finesse ever witnessed in the history of Alternian covert invasion. Then she says, “So you’re friends with John, then?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“That’s nice of you.”

You frown because that was a really fucking weird response but the zombie makeup must be screwing with your scowling game because she doesn’t seem to catch your sentiment of what the hell? You kindly help her out by saying, “What in the name of god’s oozing ass pustule is that supposed to mean?”

“Oh crap, that was a really bitchy thing to say, wasn’t it?” You don’t say anything even though you are aching to say yes; yes it was because you are pretty sure that she doesn’t actually expect an answer. Your suspicions prove correct when she sighs and goes on to say, “I just feel sorry for him sometimes, you know?”

“No, I don’t know. Care to enlighten me instead of fucking around with all this cagey horse shit?”

She looks at you like she is trying to decide whether she should offended by your perfect frankness. Then a switch seems to throw and she laughs instead. “You say some really weird crap sometimes. It’s funny!”

“Oh, right. I’m a regular damn comedy act,” you grumble. “Look, are you going to tell me what the hell you meant when you said you felt sorry for John or not?”

“Well he used to have lots of friends and now hardly anybody will even talk to him.”

“Wow,” you scoff because you see right through her fake-ass sympathy act and you don’t believe it for a second. “You know, if you’re really that worried about it you are totally free to do something proactive like, oh, I don’t know, sit with him in the cafeteria or fucking talk to him yourself.”
“I know,” she sighs. “I guess it’s just that nobody really seems to know how to approach him after what happened.”

“Why? What happened?”

She gapes at you. “He hasn’t told you what he did?”

You feel a bit of a thrill as you realize that this is it; you are finally going to solve the shitty mystery behind why everybody avoids John like he’s carrying the fucking black plague when the only real social crime you have ever seen him commit is the perfectly forgivable offense of being a slightly annoying nerd. You are about to say the magic words “no, what did he do?” and reap the spoils of the teenage gossip dump, but then a cell phone chimes and Judy’s too-wide brown eyes decide to defy the laws of physics and biology go about twice as wide as normal. Before you can say a word, she withdraws a cell phone from the depths of her purse, looks at the screen and groans, “Oh, crap!”

The next thing you know, she is standing up and saying, “Sorry Karl; I’ve got to go. It was nice meeting you.”

“Wait!” you exclaim because damn it, you thought that you and she had reached an understanding and agreed to cut the cagey horse shit. “What the hell did John do?”

Already beginning to walk away, she says, “It’s complicated. Just ask him!” Then she is disappearing into the crowd, leaving you to wallow in a frothing pit of curiosity and frustration.

Seconds later you see John coming your way. His head is a soggy mess, the wig sitting askew and looking more like a drowned muskrat than something anybody would ever want to allow anywhere near their head. He is grinning and brandishing a half-eaten apple like it’s a trophy but the smile becomes slightly less annoyingly sunny when he sees you.

“Hey, are you OK?” he asks.

You half consider demanding that he tell you right fucking now what the hell he did that was so terrible it turned him into a goddamn full-blown pariah. Then you realize that this is literally the happiest you have ever seen him and you don’t feel like being a diseased slab of drone genitalia and pissing all over it. “I’m fine,” you say. “Just thirsty. Where the fuck were the drinks?”

“Come on; I’ll show you.” He starts off toward the hall that will take you back toward the front door and you follow him back through the beer pong room (the crowd has gotten bigger and rowdier since you first passed through), past the bathroom (you can’t be sure but you are pretty sure you hear somebody puking in there), past the big dance room (something goes crash as you go by—you don’t know what it was but it sounds like it was something that was fragile and possibly valuable which has now been destroyed beyond salvage), through the kitchen (now the center of a shouting match between two dudes that seems to be going along the lines of “Fuck you, man”/“No, fuck you”/“Dude, you first”/“No, you”) and back to the room with the food and drinks.

You examine the spread, noticing that almost all of the beer cans are gone while the soda cans are virtually untouched. There is an orange drink in the punch bowl that looks like it is probably fucking awful, but the bowl is almost empty so maybe it’s actually really delicious and you are letting your natural prejudice against everything human get in the way of experiencing true culinary bliss. You decide to stop being a species-ist assbutt and give the orange drink a try.

When he sees you reaching for the ladle, John bats your hand away and exclaims, “Whoa, don’t drink the punch!”
You jerk your hand back as though human skin exudes toxic acid and his momentary contact has left a horribly disfiguring scar on both your flesh and your psyche. “Holy fuck, John, I’m just trying to embrace the spirit of this stupid holiday by partaking of a seasonal beverage. Don’t have a fucking shit fit.”

He fidgets in a way that suggests his bowels are in full revolt and he is in dire need of a toilet right this fucking second before he says, “Yeah I know, but I heard somebody spiked it with pumpkin vodka.”

“Pumpkin what?”

“Pumpkin vodka. You know; the liquor? Someone dumped like, two thirds of a bottle in there. So don’t drink the punch.” He pauses a beat before adding, “I mean, unless you want to get drunk.”

“Ugh, fuck no,” you say. You shudder because the fleet made it pretty fucking clear that until the invasion becomes violent you are to be nothing short of a perfectly upstanding—but not outstanding—American citizen and by “pretty fucking clear” you mean that they will very likely swoop down out of the sky and decapitate you if you get caught breaking any human laws. You are pretty sure that gaining a reputation for underage drunken shenanigans would qualify as “less than upstanding” by human standards (and therefore, “imminently cull-worthy” by the fleet’s standards), so you quickly select a can of soda off of the table instead.

As you pop open the can, you get the unsettling feeling that somebody is watching you. (And just to be clear, you are perfectly aware of the fact that there are about fifty other people in the room and some of them probably are giving you the odd passing look because you are standing right in front of the food and of course they are going to look your way when their stomachs start making the rumbles for picked-over party edibles. You are also perfectly aware of the fact that John is looking at you because the two of you are having a conversation. The sensation that you are experiencing at the moment is nothing akin to the awkward whoops I fucked up and looked at you from across the room now watch me redirect my gaze globes at something less offensive like that pile of musclebeast leavings. No; this is the uncomfortable feeling of somebody boring a hole through the back of your head while very possibly undressing you with their eyes.) You do a discreet scan of the room to see if there really is some asshole standing around staring at you like a creeper and—well would you look at that—some girl in a bumblebee costume is looking right at you. She tries to look away when she notices that you’ve caught her but whoops; too fucking bad, you have already decided that she is a creeper and no amount of innocent ocular redirection is going to change your opinion of her now.

You fire a glare in her direction that you are sure still manages to say Wow, next time try not making everybody ridiculously uncomfortable, you crazy broad despite the six inch layer of cracking paint on your face before you turn to John and say, “Who in fuckbuggering hell is that?”

“Oh, that’s Aria Mendell.” His face cracks into a particularly stupid-looking smile as he adds, “She was totally checking you out, man.”

“What?”

“You should go ask her to dance—I think she likes you!”

Your throat goes so tight that your voice comes out about an octave higher than normal as you very cleverly repeat, “WHAT?” Then, for variety’s sake you say, “No!”

You know that you should really try to express yourself in something more meaningful than monosyllables but John’s assertion is so horrifying that you have been momentarily slapped in the globes with a temporary case of stupid. Past you had never developed a contingency plan for
avoiding possible inter-species sloppy makeouts because it had never occurred to you that a human might at some point find you attractive. Now here you are, horribly underprepared and unable to handle the situation without flipping your shit. You silently curse past you and everything he stands for for putting you into this seedflap stroking situation.

“What do you mean ‘no’?” John huffs. “Come on, Karl, you’ve got to capitalize on this. She hardly ever even talks to anybody which works out great because you hate practically everybody, too. It’s like a match made in heaven! Er…unless you’re gay…? If you are, can we pretend that I didn’t say everything I just said?”

You chew your lip because how in the hell are you supposed to explain that your concern has nothing to do with his planet’s weird gender-based romantic practices and everything to do with the fact that you and she are totally different species and by the way your species happens to want to enslave hers? You don’t even know what stupid Earth label would fit for troll romantic orientations because you literally do not give a single dried-up pebble of a shit. Still, he is looking at you like he is legitimately concerned that he just took a giant shit all over your romantic values so you roll your eyes and say, “Not that this is any of your goddamn business, but no, John, I am not a homosexual. You can weep in joy now that you know that you have not offended any of my deeply fragile romantic sensitivities, dumbass.”

“Oh. OK. Are you sure you don’t want to at least go talk to her? You guys might really hit it off!”

You glance over towards Aria to see that she is looking at you again. You guess that she isn’t too bad-looking by human standards, but even if you were attracted to her—which, guess what, you aren’t—the fact remains that she is still human. (You will admit that the bee costume is sort of cute, but you aren’t half as apeshit about it as a certain asshat with a bifurcation complex would be.) You shake your head and say, “She isn’t really my type.”

John looks as though he is about to say something more in the vein of weird human romance but then all of the color drains out of his face and he breathes, “Oh shit.”

Frowning, you say, “What?”

“Oh my god, Karl, the cops are here.”

You turn around to look out the front window and sure enough, a patrol car is parked outside with its lights flashing and two guys in uniform are heading for the front door. A twist of apprehension winds through your abdominal cavity like a parasitic worm burrowing within the deepest regions of your ass because even though you doubt that the fleet is going to hand you your ass for getting caught at a party that was busted by the police, you sincerely doubt that it will put you in very good standing. Beside you, John continues to be a completely useless piece of garbage, gibbering, “Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god….”

His face is starting to turn a funny greenish color and you are beginning to worry that he is about to puke or faint or puke then faint and fall in his puke.

Apparently you are not the only ones to notice that the human law enforcement brigade has decided to pay a surprise visit and scare the piss out of everybody on the premises like the shittiest Halloween prank ever because the thumping music abruptly shuts off, leaving a comparatively quiet buzz of confused murmuring and exclamations of drunken disappointment. Two seconds later, the doorbell rings. A guy who looks like he might be in his mid-twenties hurries to the door, pauses there as though psyching himself up for some really serious fucking shit, then steps outside, closing the door behind him.

Each and every one of next one hundred and eighty seconds seems to stagger by like crippled bunny stuck in a quagmire of filth. The confused murmuring evolves into an anxious hum that seems to
grow more oppressive with every slow and tortured second. After a minute or two, John discontinues his “oh god, oh god” mantra and graduates to staring straight ahead with a dazed look on his face as though he has allocated all of his higher mental functions towards not crapping his pants. You strain your ears trying to hear anything of what is happening outside between the police and Mr. Twenty-Something Jackhole but you cannot hear anything through the closed door—which, when you really stop to think about it, is probably a good sign because the only sounds that would carry through that barrier are screaming, gunshots, and possibly a particularly long and gruesome death rattle. It is, in short, the longest three minutes you have ever experienced in your life.

You are certain that the police will storm inside and start rounding up everybody in sight for forcible interrogation and incarceration the second Mr. Twenty-Something Jackhole opens the door. The universe decides to deal you an uncharacteristically pleasant surprise because when the door opens, he comes inside alone and announces, “Party is still on, folks!” A cheer ripples through the room before he adds: “At least, it’s still on if you’re twenty-one or older. Anybody under twenty-one needs to clear out right the hell now. Adios, kiddos, this is not a drill.”

A wave of discontented grumbling sweeps through the room and somebody—presumably a fellow member of the not-yet twenty-one club—squawks in protest. You can hear a few other people raising similar objection in other areas of the house as the news spreads. From the too-loud quality of some of the more vocal examples of whiny-as-shit malcontents, it sounds as though some people are already drunk enough to try to pick a fight over the unwelcome news. (One particularly asinine example of humankind is actually yelling, “Go ahead, try and throw me out! My mom’s a lawyer; if you touch me she’ll fucking sue your ass!”) You do not particularly feel like sticking around to watch the whole place devolve into a drunken brawl and from the way he is already edging toward the door, you guess that John has even less of a desire to continue hanging around in this dump than you do. The two of you beat a retreat to the door in the same way somebody would attempt to escape an angry and possibly rabid wolverine: quickly and with a giant assload helping of caution.

Once you are outside, John lets out a shaky sigh and says, “Sorry I freaked out back there, Karl. It would have really sucked if the police caught us, though. My dad would have killed me!”

“That’s understandable enough, I guess.” You decide not to mention the fact that whatever his parental unit would have done to him, it would very likely be a gentle caress to the shame globes compared to what would have happened to you.

“Hey, it’s not very late yet. What say we watch Ghostbusters 2 and gorge on leftover Halloween candy?”

You shrug and say “OK” because even though he has already forced you to watch that movie and it is pretty awful, it still beats the hell out of going back and sitting around at your own house with nobody to keep you company except Nora and Otto. As you weave through the thinning crowds of trick-or-treaters, you decide that despite all of the annoying shit you have endured, tonight has not been nearly as awful as you had been expecting.

> John: Pester Rose
ectoBiologist [EB] began pestering tentacleTherapist [TT]

EB: Hey Rose!
EB: We haven’t talked in forever.
EB: How are you doing?
TT: Hello, John.
TT: I am quite sound in both body and mind.
TT: I assure you that my failure to maintain correspondence of late is not due to a lack of desire to keep in touch.
TT: My mother has taken it upon herself to enroll me into flight classes and my free time has consequently become very scarce.
EB: Whoa, flight classes?
EB: So you can fly planes now?
TT: Not at this precise moment, but if all goes as planned I will receive my pilot’s license before the year is up.
EB: Wow; that is so cool!
TT: To be perfectly frank, I would not have agreed with those sentiments at the outset because I was preoccupied with the substantial loss of my already limited spare time that these classes would require.
TT: However, I will admit that I find the experience to be quite…exhilarating.
EB: Dang, I wish I could fly.
EB: It sounds like fun!
TT: Maybe we could attempt the traditional post-high school “road trip” once I acquire my license, though with the notable modification of flight in the place of traversing the American interstate highway system.
EB: Yeah.
EB: We could bring Dave and Jade!
EB: Oh, and maybe Karl could come with us if we had room for him and it was cool with you guys.
TT: Karl?
TT: Who is this “Karl?”
EB: He’s a buddy of mine from school.
EB: Actually, he’s kind of my only buddy at the moment.
EB: Nobody else seems to want to talk to me since that whole fiasco last year.
TT: I am sorry to hear that, John.
TT: It must be difficult to experience such unmerited social stigma day in and day out.
EB: Well it does kind of suck, but I’m fine.
EB: Karl is a good friend. Maybe even better than the friends I had before because none of them would ever watch any of my movies with me but he doesn’t seem to mind.
EB: We’ve already watched Con Air and Ghostbusters 2 a couple of times each.
TT: Well that is certainly a demonstration of companionship in the highest degree.
TT: I am glad that you have found such an accommodating friend.
EB: Oh, since we are on the topic of Karl, I wanted to ask your advice about something.
EB: It’s kind of an awkward situation but I would really appreciate your insight.
TT: An awkward situation? Do tell.
EB: So there’s this girl….
TT: I see. Tell me more about this girl.
EB: Well, I don’t really know her all that well so I don’t know what to tell you, exactly.
TT: Try starting with a name.
EB: ok. her name is aria.
EB: she moved to town a couple of years ago and she hardly talks to anybody.
EB: she seems nice but she is kind of creepy. kind of like perky goth but without the whole goth style thing.
TT: Ah. Do you find her attractive?
EB: i guess she would be kind of cute if she wasn’t so spooky.
EB: but that’s not the point. the point is that she’s been following karl around since halloween even though he doesn’t seem all that interested in her and the whole situation is starting to get really freaking uncomfortable.
TT: And how does this make you feel?
EB: i already told you that it’s really freaking uncomfortable!
EB: wait, are you implying that you think i have a crush on aria?
TT: I said no such thing. However, if your mind naturally takes our conversation in that direction what else am I to conclude?
EB: dang it rose, i asked for insight not a psychoanalysis workup!
EB: i just wanted you to tell me what you think about why she is following karl around all the time.
TT: I would think that the most obvious explanation is also the most likely: she has fallen victim to the tragic yet highly common affliction known in colloquial terms as “unrequited crush.”
EB: that’s what i thought at first, too.
EB: but the thing is she has never actually spoken to him, not even to say have a nice day or hey, you have a string of toilet paper on your shoe.
EB: all she does is sit there and stare at him. it’s really creepy!
TT: You did say that she rarely speaks to any of her peers. She may be too shy to approach him.
EB: maybe…but i don’t get a shy vibe from her.
EB: i mean she went to a halloween party in a sexy bee costume!
TT: Because clearly shy people can never have the desire to play sexy dress-up now and again, correct?
EB: ok, maybe that was kind of a dickish thing to say.
EB: but the way she looks at him doesn’t feel right for the whole mooning lover thing.
EB: (hehe. mooning.)
EB: it feels more like she’s just…watching him.
EB: like she’s some kind of wildlife biologist and he’s a new butterfly species or whatever the crap a wildlife biologist would want to observe.
TT: Perhaps she just finds him intriguing.
TT: After all, it is certainly not written that simple interest must always be of the romantic nature.
EG: i guess that’s possible…
EG: karl does say some pretty funny things sometimes.
TT: For clarity’s sake, when you say “funny”, are you referring to funny as in humorous or funny as in strange?
EG: it’s a little bit of both, to be honest.
EG: maybe she just likes listening to him come up with silly insults.
EG: wow, that sounds really dumb now that i typed it out.
EG: does that sound like something that could actually happen in the real world?
EG: somebody stalking another person just to hear them making up a bunch of insults?
TT: There are plenty of stalkers who have done much more for far less.
EG: i guess i won’t say anything to karl about aria then.
EG: i mean, it’s not like she’s hurting anything just by being kind of weird.
TT: Yet.
EG: what?
TT: Does she exhibit violent or psychotic tendencies?
EG: what???
TT: Cruelty to small animals?
EG: no!
EG: rose, you are kind of starting to freak me out.
TT: Apologies, John.
TT: I was joking.
TT: I seriously doubt that this girl is a potential serial killer.
EG: oh well that’s a relief.
EG: good to know that the chick who sits two rows across from me in calc isn’t on the verge of
going batshit crazy.
TT: I aim to be a perfect bastion of reassurance and self-confidence, but right now I am afraid that I
have to go.
TT: My flight class starts in half an hour.
EG: oh, ok.
EG: have fun up there. do a barrel roll for me!
TT: Of course.
TT: Goodbye, John.
EG: bye, rose.
EG: keep in touch!

ectoBiologist [EB] ceased pestering tentacleTherapist [TT]

>Kanaya: Where are you?
Your head feels strange. There is a heaviness there as though your skull has been pumped full of wet cement, and a dreadful throbbing that seems to be emanating from behind your eyes and into the very center of your pan. Your mouth and throat are both terribly dry. You cannot recall any instance in which you felt so parched, not even the time you strayed too far from your hive when you were too young to know better and spent two days wandering the desert before your lusus found you. You had been feverish then and you are experiencing that same paradoxical phenomena of feeling both too warm and too cold right now. Groggily, you wonder, *Have I lost myself in the desert again?*

Even in your current state, the thought strikes you as unlikely. You have devised many strategies for navigating the desert without getting lost since then and they have never failed you. Your pan quickly abandons the notion, reaching instead for a more reasonable idea: *Have I fallen ill?*

The headache, fever, and general feeling of malaise certainly seem to lend credence to this thought. You realize that you are lying supine on something soft and comfortable with a thin sheet covering your body—all evidence that your lusus is caring for you. But that can’t be, you think. *My lusus is dead.*

This last thought brings with it a twist of alarm because you do not know where it could have possibly come from. You have no immediate recollection of your lusus’s passing—yet somehow you know that she is gone. In fact, now that you have begun to recover from the shock of waking in such a state you are beginning to realize that your surroundings feel nothing like your hive. Your hive is open, airy, and smells of all your sweet and fresh flora. This place feels close, heavy, and the smell is a foreign mixture of earth, wood, and rot. More distressing still, you have the distinct impression that *somebody* is quite nearby and from the steady whisper of their breathing, it seems that they are watching you.

You are suddenly glad that you have not yet opened your eyes. Whoever it is who is in the room with you seems content to let you alone as long as you appear to be sleeping and you are not yet sure that you wish to confront this mystery person while you feel so awful. You decide to keep your eyes closed and focus on maintaining deep, even breaths as you attempt to piece together the events that have led to your current situation.

Through the inscrutable fog enshrouding your pan, your memories of the past few days are choppy segments of disconnected nonsense: *The Imperial fleet was coming...I left my hive...and now I am somehow here...?* You wait for anything else to emerge from the writhing mists currently clouding your memory, but nothing further presents itself so you turn to decoding the significance of these three solid facts.

*The Imperial fleet was coming. That must be why I left my hive. Was I going to see my friends off?* You briefly entertain the notion, but the longer it sits in your mind the less likely it seems. Feferi was planning to remain planet-side under the protection of her lusus and last you had heard, Gamzee and Tavros had plans to go rogue together. (You hope that these arrangements work well for them, but you cannot help worrying that something will go wrong. Gamzee and Tavros are hardly cut out for survival in the hard Alternian wilderness and lusus or not, the time will soon come when the Empress will challenge Feferi.) In fact, only two of your acquaintances had plans to ascend with the fleet and you had no plans to meet with either of them. Terezi was ascending under a pseudonym and the two of you had agreed that a blind girl commiserating with one of the supposedly deceased Terezi
Pyrope’s former acquaintances might raise some very uncomfortable questions. As for Eridan…after his deplorable behavior you have no desire to see or speak with him ever again. All of your other friends are either deceased or missing, which at this point is as good as dead. You decide that no; I was not going to see my friends off. I must have been on my way to the brooding caverns.

It is as though a spear of sunlight has lanced through the fog in your mind in response to this last thought. You clearly recall leaving your hive, the body of your lusus curled on the ground outside your door. She passed peacefully in her sleep, you think. She looked so beautiful. You recall starting off for the brooding caverns with the matriorb. A moment later, you recall retrieving the matriorb from within your lusus’s belly: digging elbow-deep into the incision, locating the spiny orb by touch alone, the sticky feeling of her already cool blood drying on your arms once you pulled it out. You recall walking for days, scarcely daring to stop and rest until you were out of the desert lest you be taken unawares by a brood of the undead. You recall your legs aching and your eyes growing heavy as you finally reached the forest beyond the desert…and then you recall a pinprick on the back of your neck—a sting, or perhaps a bite—followed by a profound exhaustion, and then…nothing but a wall of impenetrable black.

*Have I been abducted?* you think. Then you feel silly for even bothering to put the thought forward in question form because everything about your current situation suggests that this is almost certainly what has happened. You rack your pan for anything to help you identify who has taken you—even a momentary glimpse of a caste symbol or horn would do!—but you can recall nothing beyond the darkness.

You are beginning to think that it might be best to open your eyes and see precisely who you are dealing with, but you cannot immediately bring yourself to do so because you still feel terrible and you doubt that this mystery person was foolish enough to leave you in possession of your weaponized lipstick. The person in the room with you lets out a quiet sigh. You know that you could continue to pretend that you are asleep for quite some time, but something in that sigh says that this person has been here for some time and he or she is prepared to remain for as long as it takes to see you awaken.

You realize that it makes little difference whether you confront this person now or if you do so later because your circumstances are unlikely to change while you lie here pretending to sleep. *I may as well do it now and get it over with*, you think. And so, all at once, you open your eyes.

You find yourself lying on a thin mat on the floor of a very small, nearly featureless one-room hive. The walls and roof appear to be made of some strange mixture of mud, sticks, and leaves and the floor is nothing more than packed earth. There is just enough moonlight filtering in through the slit of a window for you to see a matching chair and desk in one corner, a single shelf devoid of any books or knick-knacks on the far wall, and a tiny chest tucked away in another corner.

Looking back at you is a slight girl one might mistake for fragile until they noticed the ropey muscles layered on to her diminutive form. Her wide eyes and sweet expression suggest that she is younger than you are, but there is a tempered fierceness lurking just beneath the surface that adds a hardened edge and matures her considerably. She is wearing a blue kitty cat cap over her messy, short hair and though you cannot see it, you know that she is wearing a matching blue tail because this girl happens to be somebody that you know.

“Nepeta?” you gasp.

She smiles broadly. “Hi, Kanaya!”

You begin to sit up, but the motion sends a flare of pain through your pan. You sink back down into a fully supine position and massage your temples before saying, “I was certain that you were dead.”
“Nope! Definitely not dead!” Then, apparently noticing your distress, her smile loses a bit of its shine and she says, “Oh, is your head bothering you?”

“You see Nepeta wince. “Ooh, that sounds really pawful.”

Burying your face in your hands, you groan, “I assure you it is.”

“Hang on; I’ll get you something to help. Don’t go anywhere, OK?”

You are tempted to mention that you seriously doubt that you are in any condition to be going anywhere, but the throbbing in your pan seems to worsen every time you speak and it has already built to an intensity that is verging on unbearable. You therefore continue to lie on the bed with your hands over your face, hoping that whatever it is that Nepeta is bringing will work quickly.

A few minutes later, you hear Nepeta’s light footsteps and then she is pressing a small cup into your hand and saying, “Here, drink this. It won’t fix everything right away, but it’ll make you feel a little better.”

Careful to avoid spilling the cup, you gingerly raise yourself into a half-sitting position. The movement sets another bolt of pain flashing through your head so you do not hesitate to swallow down the contents of the cup you are holding. The liquid is cool, slightly viscous. It leaves a mild bitter aftertaste, but your parched mouth and throat rejoice at the moisture and the pain in your head quickly dulls to a relatively tolerable level of mild discomfort.

Setting the empty cup aside, you say, “Thank you, Nepeta.”

“You’re welcome.” She picks up the empty cup and turns it over in her hands before adding, “I figured you might have a purretty nasty pan ache when you woke up. Their knock out juice packs a real pawch!”

You furrow your brow, the oddity of her statement igniting a sudden twitch of apprehension in your blood pusher. “‘Their’ knock out juice? Who is this ‘they’?”

“Oh…” She worries her lower lip between her teeth, a furrow appearing between her brows before she answers, “Have you ever heard of The Collective?”

Your unease begins to grow because there is a levity in the way she says those last two words that suggests that they must be capitalized—not merely “the collective” but “The Collective.” Swallowing back your rising nerves, you reply, “I have not. Are they the ones who have detained us here?”

“You know how you arrived here, but I was rendered unconscious and brought here without expressing my permission. I believe that very much satisfies the qualifications for kidnapping ‘or something.’”

“You don’t know if ‘detained’ is the right way to put it….?” She puckers her lips into a little frown. “That kind of makes it sound like they kidnapped us or something.”

“I do not know how you arrived here, but I was rendered unconscious and brought here without expressing my permission. I believe that very much satisfies the qualifications for kidnapping ‘or something.’”

“Well, OK, yeah. That’s how Equius and I got here, too.” You are about to reiterate your contention that such actions are the very definition of kidnapping, but she leaves no space for interjection before she quickly adds, “But it’s not like we can’t leave if we want to!”

You nod and say, “I see” even though you really do not see at all. Then you say, “How long have
you and Equius been here, exactly? Wherever here might be."

“This place is a commune where a lot of Collective members live. Er...well not this place—“ (she
sweeps a hand around as though to indicate the small room the two of you are in at the moment) “—
this is just one of the hives in the commune. It purrobably wouldn’t be very comfortable if all of them
lived in just this one tiny hive!” She begins to laugh but quickly trails off when she sees that you do
not seem to be sharing in her mirth. In a more subdued tone, she says, “Equius and I have been here
for a while now. Ever since we left my hive for your place, actually!”

“And in all that time you have never chosen to contact any of your friends and inform us that you
were both alive?”

Her face falls a bit at this last statement. “Well, I wanted to but the Collective didn’t really want us
talking to anybody outside the commune for a while and Equius furbid me from doing it. I never
even got to hear how the rescue mission went!”

“If you must know, it went very poorly,” you retort. You realize that it would be kinder to soften the
details or perhaps even omit them entirely, but the idea that Nepeta and her moirail have been
perfectly capable of alerting you or Terezi or any of your mutual acquaintances of the fact that they
have been alive all along while you were worrying yourself sick on their behalf ignites something
ugly inside you. All of the lurid details end up pouring out of you in an angry rush: “First of all,
Gamzee absolutely lost his mind and tried to murder Terezi and Sollux and quite possibly would
have harmed himself or several others if Tavros had not managed to pacify him. Next, Karkat
refused to return with Sollux and Terezi despite evidence that he has been put through multiple
cosmetic alterations, not the least of which includes having his horns completely removed. Finally,
Eridan and Vriska undermined the entire mission by abducting Feferi and forcing Sollux and Terezi
to use a stolen ship that ultimately resulted in Sollux losing his life and Terezi nearly losing hers.
Terezi was devastated because Sollux apparently sacrificed himself for her sake and of course Feferi
was beyond inconsolable because she lost not only her matesprit but she also ended her
moiraillegiance with Eridan under the most dreadful terms possible. On top of everything else, we all
believed that you and Equius had come to a terrible end. Quite frankly I am shocked that the two of
you thought that it was alright to allow us to continue to believe that you were dead for several
perigees when in fact you have been alive and quite comfortable all the while.”

Nepeta gapes at you as you race through your furious monologue, her eyes growing wider by the
second. By the time you are finished, you are out of breath, your eyes are stinging with tears and
your head is beginning to throb again against the sudden onslaught of emotion. For a moment the
room is silent. Then Nepeta gasps, “Oh, Kanaya, I am so sorry! I had no idea efurrything went so
badly! Now I feel pawful for letting everybody worry about us when there was already so much
going wrong!”

“Would you mind explaining exactly why you thought doing so would be a good idea in the first
place?”

“It was The Collective’s idea.” She must see the ire rising in your eyes because she quickly amends,
“Please don’t be too angry with them! They were only trying to purrtect us. When we told them
about what was happening with Karkat they insisted that we stay here so they could hide us and
keep us safe.”

Another flare of anger curls through you. Your voice is cold as a glimmering steel sword and twice
as sharp as you say, “And why in heavens would you think it was a good idea to tell them anything
about our plans to rescue Karkat?”

“OK, this is going to sound kind of crazy but I swear that I am telling the truth.” She takes a deep
breath, slowly releases it, and then she says: “They sort of think Karkat is some kind of a god.”

The words are so ridiculous that you are scarcely able to choke back your incredulous laughter.

“They think what?”

She holds up her hands as though your words of disbelief are a physical force that she can bat out of the air. “I know, I know. I didn’t believe it at first either. But Kanaya, they are all wearing these little necklaces with his symbol on them and they keep saying that it’s the ‘Mark of the Sufferer’ and there’s this cave with all these old drawings of a person who looks just like him but older and…well…I don’t really know what to think about all of it, but even Equius admits that there is no way it can all be a coincidence.”

“The ‘Mark of the Sufferer’,” you repeat. You are quiet for some time, trying to make sense of everything you have just heard. Finally, you shake your head and say, “I’ve never heard of anybody known as the Sufferer, but I never particularly cared for history myself. If the pictures that these people have are meant to depict this ‘Sufferer’ and if he resembles Karkat, then perhaps he was Karkat’s ancestor.”

Nepeta nods and says, “Yeah…that’s what Equius thought, too—but even he didn’t know anything about someone called the Sufferer. Oh, and if that’s not weird enough, wait until you hear this: there are a lot of drawings in that cave of people who look like our friends—especially you and me and Sollux. There’s even one that looks like Equius shooting an arrow at the one who looks like Karkat, which I guess probably explains why some of them didn’t seem to like Equius all that much at first.”

You try and fail to keep a mild bite of skepticism out of your voice as you reply, “And I suppose that I am to believe that they think we are likewise holy entities?”

“Well…sort of. I mean, they keep calling me the ‘Young Disciple’ and acting like they are my servants. At first it was amusing but now it’s sort of embarrassing.” A greenish flush begins to rise in her cheeks and she looks down at the ground before she goes on. “Anyways, apparently you’re the ‘New Dolorosa’ and…and I’m not explaining all of this very well, am I? Hang on; I’ll get someone who can do a better job.”

You want to tell her that she is doing a fine job, that you cannot imagine any easier way of explaining such implausible subject matter—but she is already hurrying out of your small hive. Now that she is no longer in the room with you and your pan is not subjecting you to the painful throbbing, you find yourself wondering who this hive belongs to. The empty shelf and clear desk suggest that it is abandoned, but primitive though it is, its pristine condition clearly indicates that it has been meticulously maintained. The only thing in the place that might lead you to believe that somebody lives there at all is the mat you are lying on, and even this lacks any type of personal decoration or mark.

You are just beginning to wonder whether the basic trunk might hold any personal belongings or if it is as empty as the shelf and desk when Nepeta returns, an unfamiliar female troll in tow behind her. The unknown troll is so aged she is bent almost double and her skin appears to be as thin and fragile as tissue paper. Much of her hair is gone and what little remains covers her scalp in transparent wisps as thin as spider silk. Her horns are dull and the ends appear brittle and chipped and you cannot even begin to guess her blood color or caste because she wears a featureless gray robe and the only symbol you can see is the one hanging from the silver chain around her neck—a symbol which, as Nepeta earlier ascertained, is identical to the one that Karkat used to wear.

The older troll steps forward and says, “Hello, child, and welcome to our commune. You may call me Nilosa.”
You are perfectly aware that the polite thing to do at this point would be to introduce yourself, but you are fairly sure that Nepeta or Equius have already shared your name with this woman. Under normal circumstances, you might attempt to alleviate the awkward situation by offering up a customary pleasantries such as “I am pleased to meet you”, but in this particular instance you are not at all sure that you are even remotely pleased to be meeting this person, so you remain silent.

Nilosa does not appear to take offense at your willful disregard for customary social conventions. Instead, she states, “I understand that the Second Signless, that is, the one you call ‘Karkat’ remains in the hands of the adversary.”

You shoot Nepeta a look of mild exasperation because you had neither expected nor wished her to immediately relay that information to your kidnappers. Then you return your attention to Nilosa and say, “If by ‘adversary’ you mean the Alternian military, then yes.”

“That’s a shame,” sighs Nilosa. She closes her eyes and lowers her head. “Such a shame. The members of the Collective who remained on Alternia had so hoped to lay eyes on the Second Signless—on Karkat again before the end of times.”

Nilosa’s use of the phrase “end of times” does not escape you. You are curious as to whether she had intended the words to be taken literally or figuratively, but you have a feeling that asking for clarification on that front will lead to more questions than answers at this point. You therefore decide to focus your attention for the time being on something more concrete yet still every bit as perplexing: “Lay eyes on Karkat again? I find it difficult to believe that you have met him. In all the sweeps I knew him he never mentioned anything to suggest that he was aware of the existence of a cult who believes that he is a god.”

“I would not expect him to remember meeting us,” she replies with a dry laugh. “He was a newly-pupated wiggler when his lusus passed through our commune.”

“I mean no offense when I say this, but I cannot imagine why any lusus would choose to bring their grub here.” You pause a moment before amending, “Actually, I do mean some offense, but only a small amount.”

There is a stretch of silence in which you hear Nepeta giggling from behind Nilosa. Then Nilosa says, “Allow me to give you a more comprehensive explanation. Do you feel up to walking a bit?”

You shrug. “I suppose I do.”

“Then please, follow me.”

You stand up and although the motion makes your head feel heavy it is nothing like the throbbing you had experienced earlier. Nilosa starts toward the door of the hive at a rapid pace that is so incongruous with her fragile appearance that it is nearly alarming. You quickly move to follow. It is only as you are stepping through the door that you realize that Nepeta is not following you outside. A glance over your shoulder reveals that she is neatly folding the mat atop which you had been lying. You see her look up, offer you a smile and a quick wave, and then you are outside.

It does not surprise you to see that you are still in the forest in which you collapsed, though from the extraordinary size of the trees and the thickness of the canopy high above, you conclude that you must be far deeper into the wild growth than most trolls would dare to venture. The forest floor is thick with small debris and gnarled tree roots, but it has been cleared of the impassible overgrowth that might have sprung up in such a remote location. There are many small hives scattered throughout the cleared area, all of them identical to the one you have just left. At first you estimate the number to be in the low hundreds, but as Nilosa begins to lead you away from “your” hive you
begin to notice other hives built into the trunks of some of the larger trees and into the sides of hills and you realize that the actual number of hives in the area must be verging on an even thousand.

Nilosa leads you along a narrow path that seems to wind directly through the thick of the commune. You see trolls of all ages bustling about the commune: adults traveling from here to there or stopping to talk or laugh with one another, young children running in herds, older children going about menial chores or occasionally entertaining the younger ones, and a good number of elderly trolls interacting with trolls at every age, but none appear to be quite as old as Nilosa. It is difficult to discern blood colors with everybody clothed in featureless gray robes, but among the adults you see mostly burgundy, bronze, yellow, or olive irises—though you also see an occasional teal or cerulean, and at one point you even see an older male with seadweller fins. The impression you get is one of a great many trolls living together peacefully in a state of almost euphoric happiness.

You are not certain whether you find this incredibly unconventional way of life pleasant or mildly creepy; however you are certain that you find the way everybody seems to stop what they are doing to stare at you as you pass by to be decidedly unsettling. You feel a flush of surprise when you realize that some of them appear to be bowing to you. You consider asking Nilosa to do something to put a stop to this absolutely undeserved reverence, but the path seems to be lined with a continuous flood of people and there is no way to make your request with any degree of privacy.

After some time, Nilosa veers onto a larger path. The hives along this path are larger than the ones you have already passed and they look less like individual dwellings than places of gathering. There are even more people packed along this path and it seems as though they have all gathered here specifically to see you. Most of them are whispering among themselves as you pass. You hear many excited variations of “It’s her” and over and over, the words “New Dolorosa.” The number of trolls bowing to you steadily increases as you continue to walk. By the time Nilosa reaches the mouth of a small cave, they have begun to abandon mere bowing for full prostration and you are beginning to feel embarrassed in response to all the excessive attention.

You hesitate when Nilosa disappears into the cave. Your skepticism may be rapidly waning (for if this is all nothing more than a ploy to persuade you to let down your guard, it is the most elaborate and excessive ruse you have ever seen), but you are still not entirely comfortable entering a small space with a complete stranger without a weapon on you, even if that stranger appears to be much less able-bodied than you. The eyes of the crowd on your back persuade you to continue, if only to escape the gawking.

The inside of the cave is more open than you had expected with enough space for at least twenty trolls to comfortably fit inside. Despite its roominess, you are thankful to find that it is only you and Nilosa because you are certain that this is where Nilosa has been leading you and you are not yet accustomed to the constant staring for it not to be a distraction. Torches light the room in a soft, orangey glow and a quick glance around is enough to tell you that the walls are covered in old paintings. Even in the unsteady torchlight, you can tell that the paintings are skillfully rendered with an almost loving attention to detail that has not been lost to the ages.

The rock walls render Nilosa’s voice into a bone-dry echo as she states, “This is a sacred place. Although anybody is free to come here, it is the duty of The Collective to preserve its sanctity. Therefore, I must ask you to refrain from touching any of the images that you see here.”

“Of course.” Under regular circumstances you might feel the need to further ascertain that you will do no such thing, but it is difficult to force even those two words of assurance from your mouth because as you look at the walls more closely you realize that everything Nepeta has told you thus far appears to be entirely true. You see drawings of trolls who bear an uncanny resemblance to Nepeta, Sollux, and even to yourself in both appearance and in caste symbol. There are drawings of
trolls who resemble your other friends as well—you see a few who look like Terezi, a few of Vriska, a few of Equius—but above all, there are hundreds and hundreds of drawings of a troll who you cannot deny looks very much like Karkat Vantas.

Nilosa does not seem to notice your near-speechless shock. “I have not brought you here to proselytize. I assure you, my intentions are merely to explain why you have been brought here and why we have detained your friends. However, in order to make my reasoning clear, I must share some details about the beliefs of The Collective. Whether you choose to adopt these beliefs as your own or whether you choose to adhere to only the historical evidence is entirely your decision.”

You nod, still too preoccupied by the incredible collage of drawings on the walls to manage vocal words.

Nilosa leads you to an image of a grub. The tiny nub horns suggest that it is meant to be yet another drawing of the Karkat troll, but in the place of the burgundy color you were expecting to see, the grub’s carapace is an impossible shade of red. You wonder if the color has been altered by the passage of time or if it was perhaps a mistake on the part of the artist, but then Nilosa says, “The story of the Signless begins many sweeps ago when a grub with mutated blood color appeared in the brooding caverns.”

If this is Karkat’s ancestor and Karkat’s ancestor was a mutant, then does that mean that Karkat himself is also a mutant?

You frown at the thought, not because it repulses you but because you suddenly feel a painful swell of platonic pity for your old friend. No wonder he was always so reticent about his blood color….

Nilosa continues, oblivious to your quiet musings. “Due to his mutation, this grub was bound for a life of hardship if not immediate death. Even if he were to successfully complete his trials, the fact remained that no lusus would select a troll with such an unconventional blood color to call their own.

“However, a young Auxiliatrix happened to discover the young grub. Legend states that she was immediately drawn to the child and recognized his importance through an act of divinity. Whatever the reason, she chose to flee the brooding caverns with the child and raise him herself.”

As if to emphasize her point, Nilosa indicates an image of your double cradling the Karkat grub in her arms. “History has remembered this Auxiliatrix as the Dolorosa, and under her care the Signless grew into a healthy child and, in time, a healthy adult.”

So it appears as though my ancestor raised Karkat’s ancestor. For a moment, you are unsure whether you find this information to be shocking, heartwarming, or embarrassing. Then you decide that it is a combination of all three, comprised of a much larger proportion of the first two.

“The Signless was a visionary in his day. He preached many controversial ideas, upholding ideals such as mercy, kindness, and above all, equality among all blood colors. In time, his movement gained many followers.”

She leads you past a series of drawings depicting the Karkat troll speaking before crowds of followers, past images that you decide must represent the contents of the sermons that occurred at each gathering, and then she stops in front of a very large drawing of the Karkat troll with the Nepeta troll, the Sollux troll, and your double. “These were his most trusted followers: the Disciple, the Ψiioniic, and of course, the Dolorosa. They passed many happy sweeps in each other’s company.”

Nilosa lingers in front of the painting for some time, as though she is reluctant to go on. You are finally reaching the point at which you are no longer shocked speechless by shocking revelations regarding you and your friends’ ancestors, so you clear your throat and say, “I assume that something
happened to challenge their happiness.”

When Nilosa speaks again her voice sounds flat and even older than her considerable years. “You are correct. The teachings of the Signless were the spark of a rebellion that bloomed into a brutal war. The Signless was executed for heresy and his followers were scattered. The Disciple fled into the Alternian wilderness and devoted the rest of her life to memorializing the teachings of the Signless. She created the drawings that you see in this cave.”

She hustles you past another series of drawings. You do not have time to examine all of them closely, but you do notice that the images here are less detailed and messier than the ones that had come before. You still manage to see images of a troll who could be Equius’s hatchmate aiming an arrow at the Karkat troll, the Sollux troll in biowires, your double crying with her hands bound in chains…. You are not one to shy away from unpleasantness but something in the way the images have been so sloppily rendered suggests that the very act of creating them was a terrible trial and the pain of the artist is so palpable that it makes your own heart ache. It is a relief when Nilosa stops before an enormous drawing of Karkat’s symbol.

“Even in the face of his own death, the Signless preached that a troll of similar blood hue and attributes would appear—a Second Signless who would bring his teachings to fruition. His followers set about creating a new breed of lusus—one specifically designed to care for the Second Signless when he should appear. When Karkat completed his trials, our lusus recognized him for who he was and brought him to the commune so all of the faithful might know that our messiah had returned. At that time, we formally assigned him his sign, as until that point he had none. Then we released the child with his lusus so that he might enjoy a normal upbringing.

“Not all of the members of the commune agreed with this course of action. There were many who said that the child should have remained here, under the protection of his followers. I was one of the most vocal proponents for allowing him to leave. I had hoped that his experiences in the outside world would ground him for his mission more effectively than a life of luxury and reverence. I had thought that his lusus would sufficiently protect him from any threat he might encounter. I was wrong.”

She sighs before going on. “Karkat’s disappearance created shock waves throughout the commune. Although I was prepared to accept full blame for my poor decision, it was not enough to prevent many perigees of bitter infighting. We were on the verge of a major schism when a group of younger followers spotted your friend Nepeta traveling through the forest with her moirail. You must understand that many of our followers see her—and you—as the living reincarnations of our sacred figures. When they returned here with the Young Disciple, the rejoicing that occurred prevented the death of our commune.”

“Ah,” you say. “So you chose to detain her here to prevent the collapse of your cult.”

“I admit that the time of her arrival was indeed opportune. However, we have not held her or her moirail here against their wills. When they shared word of their involvement in the rescue of the Second Signless, the commune recognized that they were in danger. We offered them our protection and they accepted. Their sequestration has been entirely voluntary.”

You press your lips together into a thin line. That is what Nepeta said earlier, you think. Their stories are certainly matching up so far…. “If their sequestration has been entirely voluntary as you so elegantly put it, then why did you feel the need to prevent her from contacting me or any of our mutual acquaintances to inform us of her situation?”

“We never forcibly prevented her from doing so. We merely suggested that she and her moirail avoid contact with the outside world for the time being for the sake of their own safety.” She must note
your skeptical expression because she quickly adds, “I understand that they were en route to your hive when our followers took them. Is this not precisely what you were planning to do once they arrived?”

You remain silent for some time. Although you are not normally inclined to take a kidnapper at their word—one who has kidnapped you, no less—you do believe that these people sincerely revere Karkat’s ancestor and, by extension, Karkat himself. You are convinced that they would not do anything to willfully harm Nepeta, Equius, or any of Karkat’s other friends, yourself included. Finally you say, “Very well. I understand why you took my friends and why they have chosen to stay here but unlike them, I am not in any need of protection at the moment. If you will excuse me, I would like to see my friends one more time before I take my leave.”

You move as though to start toward the cave exit and Nilosa quickly shifts to block your way. “I would prefer it if you were to stay.”

“Why?”

“Because I have a job for you, if you would be kind enough to accept it.”

You had been devoting most of your attention toward staring longingly at the exit and planning another attempt to skirt past Nilosa but her words are so surprising that your focus immediately jerks back to her. Flabbergasted, you repeat, “A job?”

“The Collective wishes to offer the current heiress its full support when the time comes that she must make a campaign against the current Empress. In order to do so, we will need somebody to act as an intermediary between us and her. I would like to offer that position to you.”

You are taken aback. Your first reaction is to be happy for Feferi because the last time you had spoken with her she was still too distraught over the events of your failed rescue mission to put much energy into planning for her impending challenge. However, you cannot help wondering whether this remote cult is capable of providing a resistive force of any significance and, if able, what motivation it would have for involving itself in Feferi’s political conflict. Then you realize that it does not matter because you already have a job to do.

“I apologize, but I cannot accept that position. I must deliver the matriorb from my lusus to the brooding caverns and no offense, but this commune does not strike me as having any real military clout.” You pause for a beat before adding, “For clarity’s sake, this time I truly do not mean any offense.”

Nilosa smiles. “Child, this commune is only a small part of The Collective. Our numbers may not be what they once were and we may be scattered, but I assure you that we are still a force to be reckoned with should the occasion arise. As for the matriorb, have no worries. Our commune has connections with a good number of Auxiliatrices in the caverns. They will gladly accept it from one of our followers.”

“Why are you interested in Feferi?” The question leaves your mouth before you can stop it and it comes from as much pure curiosity as it does mild suspicion.

“It is written that the arrival of the Second Signless will signal the end of our world. I understand that Karkat is acquainted with the heiress and that she had a hand in your regrettably failed rescue attempt. Surely there is no harm in throwing our lot in with a fellow supporter of the Second Signless in the times of the apocalypse.”

Nilosa seems to hesitate for a moment, but you do not believe she has said all that is on her mind.
You are proven right when several seconds later she adds, “If the apocalypse happens to take its time getting here…well, it would not hurt to have a comfortable relationship with the new crown Empress.”

You frown as you consider the older woman’s words. Nilosa may be devout, but she appears to have a bit of a scheming streak. If their forces truly are ‘a force to be reckoned with’ then might they not attempt a second coup d’etat the moment Feferi is installed into power? The possibility is worrisome but you quickly dismiss it. The followers hold such reverence toward Nepeta that her mere presence prevented the commune’s collapse and they appear to be equally obsequious towards myself. Nilosa may hold some sway over the Collective, but I doubt that even she could rally the followers to act against our explicit wishes. Finally, you say, “Very well. I will act as your liaison.”

Nilosa’s smile returns. “I am very glad to hear that. I shall send an envoy to the brooding caverns with the matriorb at once. In the meantime, you are welcome to stay here as long as you wish. I assure you that you will not regret this decision.”

Nilosa moves to allow you access to the exit. A lightness comes over you as you make your way to the mouth of the cave. You had not realized until now how little you had wished to spend the rest of your life underground, away from the open sky, the moon, and—above all—the sun that you have come to love so much. You still have reservations about trusting Nilosa completely, but you have a strong feeling that whatever the outcome, you will not regret the choice you have made tonight.

> Karkat: Disobey

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is HEAVILY influenced by Cultstuck! by elanor_pam. I have read that work so many times that by this point I honestly have trouble separating it from canon and I highly recommend it to anybody who has not yet read it because it is amazing.
Now that you have been living with Otto and Nora for a good four months, you have finally settled into a comfortable schedule of avoiding the shit out of them which has made living together in the same house almost tolerable. After weeks of observing their daily patterns, you have determined that there is a period from 6:15 to 6:30 every morning between the time Otto leaves for his job in Seattle and the time that Nora returns from her work on the night shift in which it is you and only you present in your house. If you can manage to drag your sorry ass out of bed and out the door in that fifteen minute sweet spot, you get to enjoy a nice morning free of the dynamic douchebags. When you get home from school, Otto is always still at work and Nora is always asleep and the only thing you need to do to ensure that you do not have a close encounter of the asshole kind is stay holed up in your room until Nora leaves for her work and Otto retires to his room to fill a filial pail or whatever the fuck he does with his beloved computer all night. Once you reach that magical time, the house is yours until you decide to go to bed and start the whole crappy cycle of shitstained crap over again.

By careful adherence to this schedule, you manage to successfully avoid any and all contact with both Nora and Otto for almost four full weeks before Nora barges into your room late one Saturday afternoon and announces that she has the night off and the three of you are going out together for a “family dinner” so have your ass downstairs and in marginally presentable condition in the next twenty minutes or suffer the consequences. You sit there with your mouth gopping open in abject horror just long enough for her to step out of your room and into the hall. Only then do your poor squawk strings allow you to shout, “Why in the hell are we doing that?” Nora pokes her head back into the room to say, “Because we are a happy American family, and we wouldn’t want the neighbors to think any different, would we?” She punctuates the remark with one of her mildly creepy doll smiles before adding, “Leave in twenty minutes—and put on some decent clothes before we go.”

You wait until she leaves and the door is fully closed behind her before you roll your eyes and flick her a quick one-fingered salute to convey your utmost willingness to comply with these stupid shenanigans. Then you decide that maybe she is right about the clothes thing because even though you do not give a single gently caressing fuck about how you look you know that most humans would probably shit a brick if you walked into some fancy-ass restaurant in—
god fucking forbid
—clothing that is actually comfortable. To that end, you take a moment to swap out your beat-up T-shirt and sweats for a button-down shirt and a pair of stiff-as-bulges slacks before you head downstairs.

You had thought that maybe this dumb eating together in public bullshit was the result of some sort of order from the fleet: Yes, we noticed that the three of you have not exchanged a single word in over three weeks and this is really fucking unusual for most Earth families so the three of you need to get your asses out to a crowded public place and affirm your undying love and familial affections for one another before the whole damn neighborhood starts to figure out that HOLY SHIT GUYS THESE FUCKERS ARE ALIENS. You quickly realize that you are totally fucking wrong on this front once you get downstairs and see Otto sitting on the couch with an expression on his baby face that is equal parts surprise and bewilderment because on top of being a complete piece of shit who hogs the house computer all the goddamn time, Otto is the only one allowed to touch the PDA that sends and receives transmissions from the fleet. There is literally no way an order from the fleet could come in without him seeing it. The whimsical goblin of shitty ideas must have decided to break into your house and unload his entire stock of bullshit into Nora’s barely functioning pan because as near as you can tell, this idea is hers and hers alone.
You and Otto exchange a wordless glance of pure misery. He almost looks as though he wants to say something to you, but then—thank fuck—your cell phone buzzes. You use this godsend of an opportunity to whip that shitty piece of plastic out of your pocket, plant your ass on the far side of the couch and pretend that he does not exist.

ectoBiologist [EB] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG]

EB: hey, karl.
CG: WELL VIOLATE ME SIX WAYS WITH A SLIMY SPIKED COOKING IMPLEMENT I WAS NOT EXPECTING TO HEAR FROM YOU TONIGHT.
CG: WHAT THE HELL DO YOU WANT, JOHN?
EB: just checking to see if we are still on for getting together and working on that biology project tonight.
EB: i thought you were going to be here fifteen minutes ago.
CG: GODDAMN IT.
CG: APPARENTLY I HAVE BEEN GARGLING LIQUID STUPID ALL DAY BECAUSE I COMPLETELY FORGOT THAT WAS A THING.
EB: well thanks a lot for standing me up, asshole!
CG: SHIT.
CG: JOHN, I’M SORRY.
CG: GOD I AM SUCH A SHITTY FRIEND SOMETIMES.
EB: karl, i was just kidding.
EB: it’s no big deal. just come over now!
CG: BELIEVE ME, NOTHING WOULD MAKE ME MORE INCLINED TO EXPEND COPIOUS AMOUNTS OF SMILE SERUM THAN TO DRAG ASS OVER TO YOUR HOUSE RIGHT FUCKING NOW BUT MY *FANTASTIC* PARENTAL UNITS HAVE JUST DECIDED TO SLAP ME IN THE CROTCH WITH TWENTY POUNDS OF BULLSHIT IN A BURLAP SACK LABELED “FAMILY BONDING TIME.”
CG: WE ARE LEAVING FOR THE RESTAURANT IN FIVE MINUTES.
EB: oh.
EB: well that sounds nice.
EB: a little traumatic maybe with all the ball-slapping, but nice.
CG: NO.
CG: IT’S NOT “NICE.”
CG: IT’S SHIT.
CG: WATERY, SPURTING, ASS SQUIRTS OF AWFUL, FIERY SHIT FROM THE DEEPEST BOWELS OF TRULY AWFUL EXPERIENCES.
EB: ew.
EB: so is this going to be an all night deal, then?
CG: FUCK NO.
CG: IF THIS TAKES ANY LONGER THAN TWO HOURS I WILL SCOOP MY EYEBALLS OUT WITH A SPOON AND SHOVE THEM RIGHT UP MY ASS.
CG: WOULD IT BE TOO LATE IF I COME OVER AFTER THIS WHOLE DINNER THING IS OVER?
EB: nah! my dad can drive you home if we get done really late.
EB: see you in a couple of hours!

You are about to type a response that goes something along the lines of “SEE YOU LATER, ASSHOLE” when Nora snatches the phone right out of your hand and holds it up over her head.

You would consider jumping to your feet and snatching it right back, but she is tall as a fucking giraffe and you are…not, and you have no desire to complete this shitty version of classic schoolyard bully imagery with a series of embarrassingly futile attempts to reclaim something as trivial as a
goddamn *cell phone*. Instead, you remain seated and one hundred percent dignified as you squawk, “Hey! What the fuck!”

“No cell phones during family time,” she replies. “You can have it back after dinner. Now come on; time to go.”

You look to Otto with a final desperate hope that maybe he will get his feckless bulge in gear and tell Nora that this is a terrible idea and she should feel terrible for conceiving it because she sure as shit isn’t going to listen to a single word of it from you. Otto does nothing to improve your general opinion of him by failing to say a single fucking word. (The douche wad doesn’t even have the decency to glance in your general direction.) The only viable option you have left is to resign yourself to enduring an evening of whatever the dry crusty fuck Nora thinks qualifies as “family time.”

One ass-clenching, knuckle-whitening car drive from hell later, the three of you are sitting in the middle of an Applebee’s restaurant that is packed to the rafters with people. (Seriously, you are pretty sure that there are more people here than the entire population of Maple Valley. Where in the hell did these people even *come from*?) There are shitloads of families with kids and about half of the kids are throwing temper tantrums at any given second. The bar is packed to standing room only and every few minutes the crowd in there lets out a collective cheer or a collective groan of disgust, peppered with shouts of “CRAP CALL, REF” and “COME ON, DAWGS, KNOCK ‘EM DOWN!” It is the loudest example of a human restaurant you have ever seen in your entire life (which is, admittedly, not saying much because this is literally the first human restaurant you have ever set foot inside. Still, all of the schoolfeeds on the station had led you to expect something a hell of a lot quieter and formal than this. Hell, this barely qualifies as this side of *civil*.)

You order the most expensive thing on the menu just to spite Nora because—ha—you don’t have to worry your hornless head over earning and managing weird Earth paper money and she and Otto can both suck it if they have a problem because none of this was *your* idea. Nora orders some kind of pasta dish and trips over the pronunciation like an idiot, much to your glee. (The fact that she practically has to shout to be heard over the noise from the bar and the kids and all the other sentient beings gibbering at each other around you is just the sweetened grub sauce on the leavened confectionary.) Otto orders a salad. You are pretty sure he picked the first thing he saw on the menu because he just could not be assed to look at it for more than five seconds.

Once the waiter leaves with your orders, Nora turns to you and says, “So Karl, how is your mission going so far?”

You gape at her because *wow, holy shit* there were so many ways she could have asked that same exact question without sounding like a creeper invading alien from a hostile Empire hellbent on subjugating this planet’s population, *what the hell is wrong with her?* “Can we not do this right now? I mean, it’s not like this is a *really fucking public place* or anything.”

“You think anybody is going to hear us in here?” Otto replies. A particularly loud shout of “C’MON REF GET OFF YOUR KNEES AND STOP BLOWING THE GAME” comes from the bar as if to accentuate his point. “Just answer the question.”

You shrug. “It’s fine. I made a friend. Everybody seems to hate him for some reason and because you are literally the dumbest people I have ever met in my life let me qualify that by saying that it’s that weird platonic human hate and not some kind of hot-as-balls caliginous passion or anything else your shallow brains might be imagining.”

“That sounds promising,” says Nora. “You should invite him over sometime.”
“Wow, I thought you had a one bad idea per night limit but paint my ass and call it a goddamn Subjugglator I guess I was wrong on that front. Why the hell would I want to do that?”

“Because I need to send a progress report to the fleet and tell them how our missions are going,” Otto replies. “How do you expect me to verify that you are following orders if I never see this friend of yours?”

“Oh my god I just told you—“

“I would feel better if I met him in person.”

You want to protest because fucking Christ, why in the nook-toggling fuck isn’t your word enough? Does he seriously think that you are stupid enough to lie about mission related shit and if so, here’s a newswflash: Karkat “the Pied Piper of unpopular assholes and other societal rejects” Vantas knows how to handle his shit on that front so sit down, shut up, and cram your face with gross salad you faithless piece of festering trash. You are sorely tempted to give him a healthy serving of fuck you but somehow you manage to hold back the flood of bullshit that is welling in your mouth because there is something in his voice, a steely quality underneath the usual veneer of douchebaggery that paints his every action which gives you pause.

Otto and Nora are both staring at you—he with a focused intensity that you have never seen from him before and she with that glassy-eyed doll face that always makes you feel all squirmy and uncomfortable. You don’t know why they seem to have their skid marked panties in a bunch over whether or not you will let them meet John of all people, but you do know that you are in no mood to put up with them staring at you as if you have just announced that you are the second coming of troll Jesus or some other equally fantastical bullshit. To that end, you sigh and say, “OK, fine. I’m going over to his place after dinner tonight. I’ll invite him to come over to our house next time we hang out since you’re both so set on it.”

“Good!” says Nora, all unicorn farts and creepy-as-shit smiles.

Otto nods. “See that you do.”

“Yeah, OK dad.” you grumble. “So now that we know all about my mission, how about yours? How about mom’s?” You pause for a moment, a frown settling onto your face as realization dawns: “Wait, what are your missions?”

Nora and Otto exchange an interesting look—one that you are inclined to interpret as aw, shit! Then Otto says, “We have a joint mission and it’s proceeding adequately. That’s all you need to know for the moment.”

His tone says the subject is fucking closed but his expression suggests that when he says “proceeding adequately” he actually means “failing spectacularly” and oh, now you get it. He can’t tell the fleet that we are all dragging ass down here, you think. I guess he figures that the fleet won’t kick their asses from here to next Sunday and back if at least one of us manages to come across as functional on a basic level. No wonder they’re more up in my business than a hyperactive nook worm.

Your food arrives soon after you reach this epiphany, cutting any further conversation short, thank fucking Christ. You grace the nice waitress with an extra-sincere “thank you” as she unloads your humongous plate of honey barbeque baby back ribs but there is absolutely no way you can pump the true depths of your gratitude into those two paltry little syllables.

Nora and Otto must have been more rattled by your unintentional reminder of their own incompetence than they let on because the three of you barely exchange a word as you eat. You do
not mind this at all. In fact, you are 100% content to devour your delicious ribs and pretend that Nora and Otto are not here because this is the most delicious thing you have put into your meal tunnel in over a sweep and it’s a shame that Nora and Otto have to fuck up your appreciation for it by existing.

By the time the three of you are finally walking out the door, you are pretty sure that Operation: Fake Family Dinner was a resounding failure because there is no way that anybody in that Applebee’s could have possibly misconstrued the three of you as anything even remotely resembling a “happy American family.” (In fact, if the sidelong glances from the people in the booth across from you are anything to go by, half the population of Maple Valley has silently dubbed you “that dysfunctional family of assholes who talk like they are covert agents or some shit, god they are fucking weird.”) Conversely, Operation: Ensure Nora Never Suggests Another Fake Family Dinner Ever Again was a globe-smashing success and hell, at least you got some decent food out of the deal. Awkwardness aside, you are going to count this as one of the few ticks in the win column on your nonexistent life scorecard.

The drive back to your neighborhood is exponentially less sucky than the drive to the restaurant because—find a devout subjugglator and snort all his special stardust it’s a motherfucking miracle—Otto drives. Nora spends most of the ride haranguing him about how he is going too slow and oh my god why are we even stopping here? You spend most of the ride appreciating the way that you are not being thrown into pants-wetting mortal terror every half second. He may be a giant bag of douche, but goddamn Otto can stop at a stop sign like nobody’s fucking business.

As Otto pulls into John’s driveway, you are almost prepared to admit that perhaps you were a little hasty in your initial assessment of Otto’s character; maybe his ability to obey human traffic laws like a champ is indication that he is not, in fact, one hundred percent douche one hundred percent of the time. Of course the second this thought enters your head, Otto proceeds to fart all over it by saying, “Do not forget what you are here for tonight.”

“Yeah, yeah; I get it. Invite the human social reject over for tea or whatever,” you reply. Climbing out of the car, you add, “See you whenever.”

The car hovers in the driveway as you make your way to the front door. Any normal onlooker might think it was nothing more threatening than two loving and conscientious parents watching to ensure that their precious little darling doesn’t get ambushed by rabid frothing badgers on the way to his friend’s doorstep—but you are not a normal onlooker. You also happen to know that neither Nora nor Otto gives a single blustering shit about you so whole gesture comes across as really fucking creepy because fucking Christ they are waiting to see what John looks like, aren’t they?

Trying to ignore just how insanely uncomfortable you are with the glare of the headlights searing into your back like the eyes of a ravenous dragon lusus, you ring the doorbell. A second later, you hear a rush of footsteps and then John is opening the door.

“Hi Karl,” he says. “How was dinner?”

“It was fine,” you grumble. Without thought, you find yourself shifting to shield John from the glare of the headlights and block him from view.

“Oh, are those your parents?” John proceeds to kick your attempts to keep him out of Nora and Otto’s sight directly in the bulge by cupping his hands over his mouth, leaning halfway out the door, and shouting, “HI, KARL’S MOM AND DAD!”

You are so annoyed you could hatch a giant leviathan of fuck you, dumbass all over the city of stupid that makes up the vast majority of his brain. What the fuck is the matter with him? You think. Here I am trying to keep his stupid, shit-spewing ass safe and.... You frown as Otto responds to John’s
shout with a quick beep on the car horn before driving off. What am I trying to keep him safe from? Your frown deepens further as another, far more disturbing question ricochets through your progressively stunned thinkpan: Why do I care about keeping his ass safe?

John’s voice cuts through the fog of what the hell is happening cloaking your mind: “Helloooo! Earth to Karl, are you still with me here?”

You come to the embarrassing realization that you have just been standing there staring off into space for you don’t even know how long. Feeling dazed and mildly dizzy, like coming up from a heavy dose of anesthesia, you say, “Yeah. I’m here. What were you saying?”

“I was saying that you should come in now because it’s cold as balls out here.”

You say “Sure, OK” but you don’t move at all.

John furrows his brow, a concerned look beginning to creep into his eyes. “Hey, are you OK? You’re acting kind of weird. I’m pretty sure this is the longest you’ve ever gone without insulting somebody.”

“I’m fine.” You arrange your face into your trademarked I’m a cantankerous shit so do not fuck with me right now scowl before adding, “Family dinners are just a giant, steaming pile of horse shit. Now let me in; I’m freezing my ass cheeks off.”

John seems to accept this as evidence that you are indeed OK because he moves out of the way to let you in. You, on the other hand, cannot help thinking, What in the name of holy nook-dripping spore mold is the matter with me? You take a moment to remind yourself that John is human, humans are not in any way remotely deserving of your friendship let alone your protection and therefore John is also not worthy of real friendship/protection/etc. and will you just get your head back in the goddamn game already? Then you follow him inside.

John’s house always smells like baked goods. Besides the Halloween party house, John’s is the only human home you have ever been inside so you aren’t entirely sure whether this is a human thing or whether it is specific to just John, but either way it’s a hell of a lot nicer than what your house smells like. Tonight you detect a scent of cinnamon and mildly burnt gourd that you immediately recognize as pumpkin pie because Nora went on one of her fake mom kicks and bought one of those a couple of weeks ago so you could have pretend human Thanksgiving. That pie had been cold and so sweet it had hurt your teeth but if this shit tastes half as good as it smells you might have to seriously re-asses your opinion of human pumpkin pie.

“Hang on a sec; I have to run upstairs and grab our notes from last time,” says John. He’s already halfway up the stairs when he adds, “Dad’s making hot chocolate in the kitchen if you want some.”

A bubble of masticated honey barbeque baby back ribs-flavored apprehension rises in your gut as John disappears upstairs. You really wish he hadn’t mentioned his parental unit because now you are going to look like an unmannered little shit rag if you don’t say hello and doing that is about as appealing as a rusty ice pick to the root of your bulge. The problem isn’t that Troy Egbert is an asshole. No; the problem is that despite the universal constant that all adults are entities of unfiltered awful who want Karkat to suffer, Troy Egbert is very definitely not an asshole. In the few times you have spoken with him, he has asked you how school is going and actually cared about the answer, made surprisingly amicable small talk about living in Maple Valley, and even offered to prepare an extra portion of dinner on the one occasion you stayed into the supper hour. Worse yet, from the inane shit that John complains about (“Ugh, Dad made cookies again. Want one?”; “Whoa, you don’t have a curfew? I have to be home by eleven—my Dad is so lame!”) you are pretty sure that Troy Egbert is exactly the type of parent who would stay parked in the driveway to ensure that his
son made it safely to his friend’s front door because he actually gives a shit.

When you enter the kitchen, John’s dad is at the stove beating the shit out of the contents of a saucepan with a wire whisk. He looks up when you come in and the crow’s feet at the edges of his eyes deepen as he gives you a smile that is worth at least fifty of Nora’s fakey doll faces. “Hello, Karl. Are you hankering for some hot chocolate? There’s plenty to go around.”

“Yeah. I mean yes, please.” Fuck, you do not understand why it is so goddamned hard to act like a normal, functioning person whenever you are around this stupid adult human. It’s like your brain suddenly begins to suffer a monstrous case of constipation every time you open your mouth because you are trying to phrase shit as non-offensively as possible while simultaneously wondering why in the hell you are even worried about offending him in the first place. You know his opinion of you as a person counts for nothing—strike that, it counts for less than nothing. It has negative value and you should actually be trying to offend the fuck out of him to get yourself back onto the positive side of zero—but for some godforsaken reason the idea of losing his unspoken approval makes you feel unbelievably shitty.

John’s dad removes the saucepan from the stove and pours its contents into three large mugs, each bearing a truly hideous image of a harlequin. “You must be looking forward to your winter break. Will your family be doing anything for the holidays?”

You shrug because you have no fucking clue what horrors Nora and Otto are planning to inflict upon you when you are stuck at home for an uninterrupted two weeks. Then a burst of inspiration strikes and you say, “No…most of my family is still in LA.”

“Well if your folks are fans of good baking, feel free to invite them over to casa Egbert for some of the best red velvet cake in the state.”

You try and fail to keep your mouth from gopping open because that is a fucking terrible idea. The mere thought of Nora and Otto coming here and fucking everything up with their collective assholishness makes you want to vomit. You are pretty sure you can feel the baby back ribs roiling in your gullet as they consider making an encore appearance all over casa Egbert’s nice, clean table.

Quickly—too quickly, you exclaim, “No!” Then, in response to the startled look that appears on Mr. Egbert’s face, you amend, “They wouldn’t want to bother your family on a holiday.”

“It wouldn’t be a bother at all.” He places one of the harlequin mugs on the table in front of you before adding, “Any friend of John’s is as good as family here.”

You don’t know how to respond to this bizarre declaration so you elect to stare into the depths of your marshmallow-topped hot chocolate and silently freak the fuck out because no, no, no; this human is not calling you family, he cannot possibly mean that the way you think it sounds, this is some weird and manipulative bullshit and you are not going to fall for it, no siree Karkat Vantas is not some snot-chewing fool rolling in a mountain of his own feces and he is not falling for this shit. John’s dad sits there, patiently awaiting your response and utterly oblivious to your inner turmoil. Thankfully, John chooses that moment to insert his blemished ass back into the picture.

“Young about that Karl,” he says as he comes bustling into the kitchen with an armful of loose leaf notes, textbooks, and spiral-bound notebook. “I forgot I moved all of our project crap to my desk. Oh, the hot chocolate is done? Cool.”

He dumps the research material into a messy pile on the table in front of you, grabs one of the two mugs of hot chocolate remaining on the counter, and takes deep enough swig that he comes away with a marshmallow mustache which makes it look as though he has just attempted to snort a handful
of powdered sugar up his cartilage nub and failed epically. His dad seems to take this as a signal to leave the two of you the fuck alone because he scoops up the final mug and leaves the room with a supplication to the two of you to “Have fun and work hard.”

John waits for his dad to leave before he says, “Bluh, sorry to inflict my dad on you like that. I hope he didn’t do anything too weird.”

Inwardly you are screaming that yes, yes he did do something weird; he implied that I am part of your human family and I don’t even care if that is a normal human thing to say he is totally ass-backward on that point because I am pretty fucking sure that human families generally do not have members who are on the wrong side of a full-blown covert intergalactic war. Aloud, you say, “He invited my parents over for Christmas.”

“Oh my God,” John moans. “Do me a favor and just ignore him when he says embarrassing stuff like that. I think he’s just too excited about me having friends again to know how to act.”

You aren’t entirely sure that you want to ignore it (what the fuck are you talking about, of course you do). It has been so long since Crabdad that you have almost forgotten how nice it feels to have a lusus to care about you (newsflash asshole: John’s dad is not a lusus and even if he was he’s not yours) and after seeing the way a human parent is supposed to act you have caught yourself more than once wondering what it would be like if Nora and Otto acted more like they were your real human parents (but they aren’t so quit being a fucking idiot, Jesus Christ what is the matter with you?) Of course you would never admit any of this to anybody anywhere. To distract yourself from this confusing bullshit, you direct all of your attention to the latter half of John’s statement and recognize it for what it is: a perfect chance for gathering some intel and doing your actual job.

John is already reaching for the stack of notes in front of you. Before he gets lost in the wonderful world of human cellular biology, you clear your throat and say, “Hey, John. Can I ask you a serious question here before we go all ass-deep into shit about endocytosis or whatever the fuck we’re doing tonight?”

“Yeah, sure. What is it?”

You take a moment to ineffectively try to imagine some way of asking what you are about to ask without sounding like a complete nook-biting bag of douche. Then you realize that there is literally no way of putting what you want to say in a diplomatic light so you suck it up and say, “What the fuck happened to make you lose all your friends?”

“Oh…” John frowns and diverts his gaze to the unopened textbook in front of him. You have a sudden realization that wow, even if there isn’t a diplomatic way of pointing out that somebody doesn’t have any friends you managed to hit on the absolute shitiest way of doing it. Good job, you insensitive ass sphincter.

You are about to apologize to John for being such a socially stunted piece of trash, but John surprises you because he suddenly looks back to you and solemnly states, “I kind of blew up prom last year.”

“You ‘kind of blew up prom?’ Forgive me if I am being a completely obtuse dick with a single, barely-functioning brain cell, but how in the flowery basket of steaming cow shit do you ‘kind of’ blow up prom?”

He lets out a chopped laugh before ever-so-kindly clarifying: “I mean I might have sort of set the venue on fire?”

You shake your head because what? “Well that’s about as clear as a pail full of jizz. Care to explain
how you managed that?”

He laughs again, a humorless, tired sound. “It was supposed to be a prank. See, I had all this Silly String that I was saving for a special occasion and I happened to be on the prom committee last year so I thought hey, perfect opportunity, right? So I rigged the stage to shoot Silly String when they announced prom king and queen. Except the aim was off and…well, I didn’t realize that Silly String was that flammable.”

You look at him, incredulous. “So let me get this straight. You burned down your prom with Silly String.”

“No! Well, not exactly. I mean yeah, the Silly String caught on fire but that wasn’t the thing that fucked everything up. It was what happened after that really got everybody upset.”

He looks at you like he expects you to make some witty interjection but fuck that, you want to hear where he is going with this so you just gesture for him to keep talking, goddamn it.

He seems to get the drift because he says, “The sprinkler system came on.”

“You are shitting me?” you say. “That’s what everybody has their nuts in a twist over?”

He nods. “Yeah. Pretty much.”

“But that’s actually really fucking hilarious!”

“Well, I kind of thought so at first…” He trails off before sheepishly adding, “But the country club didn’t agree. And, uh…neither did the cops.”

“The cops,” you repeat. “You got arrested for a stupid prank?”

“Uh…yeah. Kind of.” He pauses for a moment, then noticing the look of holy fuck are you serious on your face he quickly adds, “I mean I didn’t go to jail or anything! I didn’t even go to juvie. They just made me help clean up the water damage and put me under house arrest for the summer. Oh, and I got suspended for the rest of the school year but that wasn’t so bad because I think everybody was really pissed with me right after it all happened. I had to change my Pesterchum handle because I got a couple of death threats.”

“Oh my fucking god,” you mutter. “Who in bull-squatting fuck makes a death threat over a dumb prank?”

“I don’t know. But yeah, long story short I blew up prom and everybody is still pissed at me.” He pauses and then, looking supremely uncomfortable, he says, “I don’t know why you decided to put up with letting everybody crap all over you just for hanging around with me, but—“

You cut him off right there because there is something in his tone—a tired note of resignation (“You don’t have to stay”; “But I… I want to…”) that reminds you of that fucking awful night on the station (“Don’t be fucking stupid”; “I’m not stupid…”) and even though you know that the circumstances are completely different, (“Go sit with the other trolls. They’ll let you sit with them”; “No…” ) you feel something painful in your thoracic cavity because it feels exactly the same. “Let’s not get into this bullshit now, John. You are less of an asshole than everybody else at school and we are hereon and henceforth officially bros so shut the fuck up and stop worrying about it.”

“Oh…” He is quiet for a moment. Then he assumes a look of exaggerated shock to say: “Oh my god, Karl, are you saying I’m an asshole?”

“Don’t be a dumbass, John. Even if it does suit you, it’s really fucking unbecoming.”
He laughs and this time it’s the relaxed, mirthful sound you are used to hearing. “Aw, thanks for that, you giant asshole. Now remind me what the heck a Golgi apparatus is supposed to do.”

You sigh because fuck if you know; they never made you learn how human cells work on the station so this is all just as ass-spanking new to you as it is to him. The two of you proceed to scour the pages of your awful hand-written notes and your slightly less awful biology textbook for information about human Golgi apparatuses and mitochondria and endoplasmic reticulums (rough and smooth!) and ribosomes and all other manner of deeply involved microscopic shit.

Several hours and two empty cups of hot chocolate later, the two of you decide to call it quits on the wonderful and complicated-as-fuck-all world of human cellular biology because you are both on the edge of falling asleep in your own private lakes of drool.

John lets out a yawn of skull-cracking proportions and says, “Hang on; I’ll tell my dad you’re ready for him to drive you home.” He takes off his glasses and rubs at his eyes before adding, “Do you want to do your place next time?”

Otto’s words echo through your pan so clearly he might as well be whispering them directly into your ear and spraying his putrid breath into your olfactory bulb: _Do not forget what you are here for tonight_. You know exactly what you are supposed to say—what you _should_ say…but your response erupts out of your mouth before you can even think about biting it back: “No!”

John looks taken aback by your vehemence (and actually, if we are being completely honest with ourselves here, so are you). Replacing his glasses, he splutters, “Wow. OK, we can meet here. Geez.”

“Sorry. We can’t do my house because…” you trail off, groping desperately for a plausible excuse. The best (and by “best” you actually mean “infinitesimally less stupid than all the other shit you could say”) you can come up with is “because my mom and dad work really weird hours.”

“That’s fine. I’ll uh…I’ll just go get my dad now.”

You nod, somehow managing to play it cool despite the fact that your insides have become a roiling mass of liquefied nails and acid because you _just disobeyed a direct order if not from the fleet then from Otto, which—let’s face it—is basically the same thing and you have no reason, no excuse, nothing to explain it away_. You wish you could say you didn’t know what is happening…but you do. You know _exactly_ what is happening and it’s a terrible mistake, it’s a fucking joke, it’s absolutely stupid and sick and _wrong_…but you think you might have accidentally fallen in real human friendship with John.

> John: Answer chum
John: Answer chum

gardenGnostic [GG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB]

GG: hi john!!!!
GG: how was your christmas??
EB: hi jade!
EB: christmas was nice but it was cold this year.
EB: we had a lot of snow.
EB: also i wanted to tell you thank you for the pda computer thingy.
EB: i’m using it right now and it is really awesome!
EB: but it must have been super expensive!
GG: oh i didnt buy it…
GG: i made it!
EB: holy crap, you made this thing?
EB: that is so cool!
GG: i always say that people should have at least five computers on them at all times and most of the time you never even have one!
EB: hey my cell phone worked for mobile chats.
GG: bluh, that crappy old thing does not count as a computer!
GG: it doesnt even have internet on it and it hardly EVER picked up any of my messages
EB: well yeah…
EB: i don’t think your teeny island out in the middle of the pacific ocean is included in our service plan.
GG: that is why you needed a REAL portable computing device!
GG: now you dont have an excuse to not answer my messages right away, mister :p
EB: haha yeah i guess you are right.
EB: did my package get over to you on time this year?
EB: i hope it did…
EB: i sent it way back around halloween this time.
GG: yep!
GG: i got it just a couple of days before my birthday
EB: good.
EB: sorry it wasn’t something as cool as a brand new computer.
GG: what are you talking about???
GG: i totally needed new bass strings!
GG: also all my pumpkins died last year so i was thinking about ordering some new seeds but now i dont have to :D
EB: well ok then.
EB: but i still don’t think bass strings and pumpkin seeds are half as good as a new computer.
GG: well if you feel that guilty about it you could always make it up to me by visiting me next christmas!!
EB: hey, yeah!
EB: rose is going to get her pilot’s license soon…maybe she could fly us to your island.
EB: that would be pretty cool!
GG: oh, it wouldn’t be cool…
EB: …it wouldn’t?
GG: nope!
GG: not cool at all!!!
EB: ok then….
GG: URRRGH
GG: john you are supposed to say why wouldn't it be cool so i can make a joke here!
GG: sheeeesh >_<
EB: oh. well excuse me :p
GG: :p yourself!
EB: :p :p
GG: :p!!!!!
EB: ok fine. why wouldn’t it be cool for rose to fly us over to you next christmas?
GG: because i am in the southern hemisphere silly!
GG: it would be the middle of summer…
GG: that means it wouldn't be cool…
GG: it would be hot!
GG: hahahaha :)
EB: (GROAN)
EB: oh my god, jade that was terrible.
GG: more like your face is terrible :P
GG: but seriously it would be really great to see you guys next christmas—or any other time of the year for that matter!
EB: i guess we’ll have to talk to rose and dave and see if we can work something out.
GG: yeah!! i am already looking forward to it :D
EB: me too.
EB: whoops i should probably go. my dad just called for dinner.
GG: ok! talk to you later john <3
EB: bye, jade.

gardenGnostic [GG] ceased pestering ectoBiologist [EB]

> Eridan: Why are you so (un)happy?
> Eridan: Why are you so (un)happy?

You had never realized just how awful your life was on-planet. Living in a drafty old wrecked ship. Consorting with land dwellers and—worse yet—treating them like equals. And your quadrants…fucking hell, the memory of all the stupid shit you were willing to put up with would probably be enough to make you furious if it wasn’t so goddamned embarrassing.

It wasn’t a matter of willful self-denial. In fact, not a day went by in which you did not know that you deserved more. The problem was that you never realized just how much more you, as a member of the violet-blood ruling class, higher than everybody except the goddamn Empress herself, truly deserved.

You were one of only nine violet bloods to ascend this sweep but the ship that came to collect the nine of you was just as massive as the ships that came to collect all of the lower blood castes. Where those ships were clunky things barely fit to hop a fucking puddle, yours was a graceful, smooth-gliding craft and so new you could practically still smell the fresh paint. From the second you set foot inside, you were treated to cool, climate-controlled air with a hint of ocean brine. The corridors are wide with gorgeous viewing decks to increase the feeling of openness, the common rooms are spacious and lushly furnished, and best of all, each and every one of you got your own private suite.

Your suite is easily three times as big as your crummy old hive. The upper level consists of a huge ablation block, a sitting area with a large viewing port, and a private dining block for those times in which you just cannot be bothered to dine with your fellow sea dwellers. There is also a recreation block with all the latest state-of-the-art recreational technology and a library packed to the fucking gills with volume upon volume detailing every notable accomplishment of the Alternian military back to ancient times. It is, to put it concisely, fucking excellent in every way.

The lower level is entirely underwater. Although the water temperature is maintained at a constant temperature and salinity for optimal comfort, you have only ventured down there once because goddamn it you still hate being underwater. From your brief exploration, you aren’t missing much. Sure there is a respiteblock fit for a fucking king with a shitload of expensive-looking art pieces rendered in precious metals and a second (smaller) recreational area, but beyond that it’s all open space peppered with some of the more benign examples of aquatic Alternian flora and fauna. (You had of course been put out that the only recuperacoon in the suite was located in the underwater respiteblock but one firmly-worded complaint was all it took to get a second one installed on the upper level. You opted to have it placed in the sitting area so that the first thing you saw when you woke up would be the absolutely breathtaking view of the stars.)

In addition to enjoying the lavishness of your private suite, you have been waited on hand and foot from the moment you boarded the ship. All you need do is ask and anything you could possibly want is yours: exotic food prepared on demand, entertainment (music and recitations seem to be the more common requests, but one of your fellow sea dwellers has taken a shine to ordering pairs of servants to beat the shit out of each other which, you have to admit, is actually pretty fucking hilarious), and even rare first edition prints of romantic classics like In Which a Young Midblood Female Troll, Under Pressure from Both Lusus and Moirail to Find a Suitable Concupiscent Quadrant Mate, Encounters a Male Troll of Noble Blood and Subsequently Seeks to Enter Caliginous Relations While the Object of Her Pitch Sentiments Secretly Harbors Emotions of a Decidedly Flushed Variety, etc. Not one to let such an opportunity go to waste, you have enjoyed a manicure complete with fine claw shaping, multiple full-body massages, and had your gills flushed. You have never had to bother with your own hair because you have had it professionally styled every evening and your horns are as smooth and sharp as the day you pupated after treatment with all the best oils and
sanding techniques.

Of course, you are careful not to do or say anything to betray that you think this is the coolest thing you have ever experienced in your life. After all, this is just some crappy little transport shuttle. You have no doubt that all of this will look like outright squalor once you are in command of your own fleet. (What can you say? It’s all about keeping things in perspective and from your perspective this is just the beginning with respect to getting all the fame and glory that you always deserved.) And speaking of your own fleet, tonight is the night that you will be receiving the craft which will become your personal flagship once you put your superior knowledge of military strategy and tactics into action and acquire said fleet.

You have only just crawled out of your recuperacoon when a servant knocks on the door to your suite. You take your time selecting a gently pre-warmed towel from the dehumidifying storage unit built into the side of the recuperacoon. Slowly and with deliberate care, you clean away the slime from every inch of your body. Then you drape a silk robe over yourself (can’t have some land dweller trash losing his sight due to the radiance of your highly desirable self), stride over to the door and open it. With all the regal indignation you can muster, you say, “You’re early.”

The servant—a brown blood who barely looks a single sweep older than you—bows his head and replies, “Forgive me, sir. I was informed that you desired to be escorted to the docking bay at this hour.”

You barely manage to hide the smirk that tries to crawl onto your face. Of course you requested that your escort arrive at this time. You did so knowing full well that you would not be ready to leave until at least a full half hour later because showing the stupid fucking land dwellers how little they matter is standard protocol around here and what better way to accomplish that than by reminding them that your time is infinitely more valuable and important than theirs? (Not to mention the fact that it’s fucking hilarious listening to them apologize for no reason whatsoever.) Narrowing your eyes, you repeat, “You’re early.”

Head still bowed, the brown blood says, “Yes, sir. Of course. Please forgive my mistake. Shall I return later?”

With a prodigious effort, you swallow back the gleeful leer building at the corners of your mouth. “No; wait right there. I’ll only be a few minutes.”

The brown blood says “Yes, sir” but you and he both know that you are going to be one hell of a lot longer than that. To your credit, you maintain your façade of indignation until you close the door in his face. Only then do you allow yourself to crack a smile because this is it; this is how things are meant to be and it is fucking awesome.

You take a leisurely fifty minutes to complete your horn and claw care regimen, style your own hair (you miss your personal stylist already), select the clothes you will wear, get dressed, and eat a light breakfast. You take an additional ten minutes to peruse one of the hundreds of military annals in the library because you’ve kept him waiting this long so why not make it a perfectly round hour while you’re at it? When you finally open the door, you are decked in the most theatrical garb you own, your belly is full of delicious food, and your mind is still digesting all the minutiae of the final stand of General Razayu Edolst.

The brown blood is standing right where you left him. Careful to inject as much irritable haughtiness as possible into your words (because he is the one who fucked up, after all; not you), you say, “All right. I’m ready now, although I have half a mind to file a complaint for your fucking disgraceful service.”
You think you see him wince a bit. (Not that you can blame him. One of your cohorts has made it a habit to complain about every single servant who has so much as looked at her and you’ve seen the aftermath of some of the beatings those poor fucks had gotten as a consequence. You don’t actually have any intention of needlessly inflicting that on anybody, but this dumb sap doesn’t have to know that.) “I apologize for the inconvenience, sir.”

You scrutinize him for a few seconds, just long enough to see him squirm. Then you let out a big, gusty sigh and say, “I guess I’ll accept your apology this time. Just be glad you caught me in a charitable mood.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

“Yeah, whatever. Just take me to the docking bay. I’ve got a ship to claim.”

The brown blood bows and leads you away from your suite. You follow him along several corridors decked with tasteful artwork, past a viewing deck with truly spectacular view of a distant super nova, and down a long set of corrugated metal stairs to finally arrive at the docking bay. It is a truly massive space, filled with neat stacks of crated cargo, herds of tech and mechanic crews, and—most importantly—dozens of beautiful new ships.

The second you step off the stairs, you are greeted by an adult violet blood who is hovering dangerously close to the end of his prime. “Ah, Ampora!” he exclaims in a tone that could only be described as downright jovial and pretty much the absolute antithesis of everything a fearsome, strong member of the ruling class out to be. “You are right on time. The mechanics crew just finished its final inspection of your ship. Come with me and we’ll get you sorted out.”

You wordlessly step forward, leaving the brown blood standing at the foot of the stairs. The violet blood (you never did bother to learn his name because clearly he’s a nobody if he’s working on a boring old shuttle even if he is technically a royal blood like you) continues to talk as you cross the docking bay:

“You will be excited to know that we have assigned you to the best ship available. Your preliminary assessments showed that you have an impressive knowledge of military history and you outscored all of your peers with regards to theoretical martial practices. Quite naturally, to the most promising recruit goes the most promising ship.” (You smirk at this because of course you outscored all of your peers. Your sweeps-long hobby of becoming the Empire’s greatest repository for military history has served you well.)

The violet blood leads you down a row of particularly impressive ships, each more imposing than the last. Your sense of anticipation grows to almost unbearable proportions because you can’t help wondering which will turn out to be yours. Will it be the one with the snappy vanity paint job? The one decked with enough weaponry to make even the wiliest Gamblignant wet themselves at the mere sight of it? What about the one with engines so big it might as well scream “speed demon” or the one that looks like it could single-handedly mow down a whole squadron of enemy ships? Then you catch a glimpse of the ship at the end of the line and your collapsing and expanding aquatic-based blood pusher skips a beat because you know beyond any shadow of a doubt that that’s the one.

The ship is big—almost twice as big as some of the rattly old tin cans you passed on your way here—but the lines are so fucking sleek it looks as though it could turn on a half caegar. Although it is clearly built for speed, you can see a healthy peppering of weaponry along the hull: two fully maneuverable main cannon turrets on each side along with scatterings of half-concealed smaller turrets to take care of any land dweller dumb enough to come too close. It is a clean steel gray, but with beautiful violet accents to further hammer home the point that this is a royal ship so stay the fuck out of the way. It’s dramatic yet tasteful, intimidating yet beautiful and above all else, it is absolutely
“I think you will be very pleased with this ship,” says the violet-blooded old fart. “It is one of the most ambitious models we offer to new recruits and it has been outfitted with all the latest military-grade equipment.” He then proceeds to prattle on about advanced landing gear and plasma shields and all manner of technical crap that you only half-listen to because you really just want to get inside and try everything for yourself already for fuck’s sake.

You are so sick of hearing him drone on that you are on the verge of breaking something (preferably his scranny old gobblebeast neck) when his voice suddenly adopts a conspiratorial tone. You immediately perk up because you are always up for a little intrigue and if his breathless half-whisper is any gauge this promises to be something especially juicy.

“It’s not every sweep we get a unit that scores beyond the limits of the psionic ratings index,” he says. “This sweep we ended up with five that did just that and yours scored so high that it is leaps and bounds ahead of the rest. In fact, there were a few inquiries from some very established military personnel.”

“Wait a second,” you say before he can go back to talking about the ship’s top-of-the-line humidifying systems or something equally boring and pointless. “Are you saying some big shot generals were vying for my helmsman?”

“Shocking, isn’t it? I don’t believe I have ever seen so much clamor over a fresh helmsman and you can believe me when I say that I have been around for a good, long while.” You are pretty sure that he has been around for ‘a good, long while’ and probably then some. Still, you pay close attention as he leans a bit closer to you and drops his voice down to a half-whisper to add, “If you want my professional opinion, I think that this ship has the potential to become one of the fastest and most feared in the entire fleet.”

You don’t have anything to say to that, mostly because you are too busy congratulating yourself over already being well on your way to being envied, respected, feared, and every bit as fucking great as you always knew you would be. The old violet blood seems to pick up on your developing fantasies of crushing everybody who dares to stand in your way because he quickly adds, “Of course none of that will come without the right leadership—and speaking of leadership, the fleet is expecting you to report for your formal initiation posthaste. I suppose that means I had better quit gassing on and let you board your ship so you can be heading out.”

_Fucking finally_, you think. Of course you don’t say _that_ out loud because even though this old windbag is starting to go a little doughy around the middle, you are pretty sure he could kick your ass if he really wanted to and that would be really fucking embarrassing. You therefore say, “Yes, I suppose you’re right. Thanks a million. I’m sure we’ll be in touch.”

“Oh, one last thing,” he says as you start toward the boarding ramp.

You come to a jolting stop but you do not turn around. (This is probably for the best because it ensures that he does not see you rolling your eyes.) Through clenched teeth you grate, “Yes?”

“You reported that you have no experience flying a craft with a helmsblock modification. Is that right?”

“Yeah…. Is that a problem?”

“Oh, it’s no problem at all,” he replies. “The fleet will train you in all the tricks of the trade once you arrive. In the meantime, we have programmed your destination coordinates into the autopilot. Once
you have engaged the ignition, the ship will automatically take you to where you need to go so don’t
go getting adventurous and start mucking around with the controls. The last thing you want is to end
up stranded somewhere and hope that somebody is feeling charitable enough to respond to your
distress signal, right?”

He follows this statement with a deep belly laugh that does little to quell the mildly sick feeling that
you get in response to such a mortifying scenario. Somehow, you manage to summon up a weak
laugh of your own as you say, “Yeah. That’s right.”

“In that case, off you go and—” he clears his throat like a self-important asshole “—‘May your
ruthlessness and bloodthirsty nature prove an asset to the Empire until no star in the universe shines
outside the merciless influence of Her Imperious Condescension.’”

You hurry up the boarding ramp the moment he is finished reciting the (hell fucking yes goddamned
full formal) military slogan, lest he find yet another reason to needlessly detain you. The ramp
ascends once you are safely inside and the exterior door and airlocks seal with a satisfying hydraulic
hisssss. The sound is almost enough to spark you into performing a happy little jig because now there
is absolutely no way he can launch into another sermon about the precise chemical composition of
titanium alloy. Of course you don’t actually do this because you are way too grown-up and
sophisticated to do something like jump around and wave your arms in the air like a stupid, wiggler.
What you actually do is purposefully walk to the control room like the world’s best picture of a
refined yet moderately genocidal gentletroll.

You will admit that you let out an undignified squeak when you actually get to the control room
because it is your fucking control room and it is literally perfect in every way. It is nothing like the
hellish little cramped pits you see in all the movies. No; this is a control room with some serious leg
room. The viewing port is just the right size—not too small but not so big that some sniper fuck
could see you well enough to get a lucky shot and pick you off. The control panel is made of
beautiful lacquered wood and the controls are shiny and new. Best of all, the captain’s chair is a
huge, intimidating thing that just seems to ooze waves of power. You are certain that anybody
would squeak if they were to lay eyes on such a picture of perfect magnificence, so you can hardly be
blamed for momentarily losing your shit.

You could stay in your control room for sweeps and never, ever get tired of it—but you still have the
whole rest of the ship to see. To that end, you quickly run the ignition sequence and watch all the
screens and buttons light up. (The “Estimated time to arrival” blinks to life displaying a time of 72
hours, which is significantly longer than you had expected, but then you remember that that will be
72 uninterrupted hours to acquaint yourself with all of the ins and outs of your ship and it doesn’t
seem nearly long enough.) Then you leave the control room and start exploring.

You take your time as you make your way down the corridors of your ship, stopping every now and
then to run your hand along the wall (your wall) or appreciate the view of the shuttle fading into the
distance as your ship carries you along with all the gentle ease of one of your massive FLARP
galleons gliding along on a calm sea. You examine the living quarters—a warren of rooms with
enough space for a crew of at least fifty. The captain’s quarters are not nearly as large as your room
on the shuttle had been, but the room is still much bigger than your puny little respiteblock back on
Alternia. You note that the furnishings are tastefully accented with the same lacquered wood motif as
the control panel. You also note that every stick of furniture in the room looks as though it cost more
than the average rust or brown would make in their entire lifetime. It is a room befitting of royalty
and, more importantly, befitting of you.

You linger in the captain’s quarters for some time, taking the time to drink it all in and try to imagine
all the time you will spend here celebrating all of your forthcoming victories, both military and
romantic because if there is one thing that sparks the fires of caliginous and flushed affection, it’s a successful and powerful warlord who just so happens to be dashingiy good-looking even if he does have two rather prominent scars across his forehead. (Actually, no. Make that especially because he has two prominent scars across his forehead. You had originally hoped that the wounds Fef left when she chucked her trident at you would heal without a trace but now you are glad that they didn’t because they add a nice touch of danger to your overall persona.)

You leave the captain’s quarters and let your feet carry you along to a mess hall and kitchen already stocked with several perigees’ worth of food. There are even some high-quality pre-made meals in the refrigerator, presumably to tide you over until you reach the fleet and they assign you a crew with an actual cook. The meals all appear to come with dessert so you take the opportunity to snag a slice of leavened confectionary to munch on as you explore the rest of the ship because you’re the captain and you’ll eat your dessert whenever the fuck you want it.

You continue on to three large meeting rooms, each outfitted with a bank of the latest computers available on the market and all the best presentation technology. You even wander through the sparkling-clean latrines and down into the dark and mostly-empty storage hulls until there is only one room left.

So, you think once you are standing outside the door. This is where the prodigy helmsman that everybody wanted is. You take a moment to ponder what you are going to see. (It’ll be a green, you think. A green or maybe a pissblood because browns and rusts burn out too fast for anybody to get this worked up over.) Then you open the door and step inside.

It is the first helmsblock you have ever seen in real life but it is not all that different from the ones you have seen in all your favorite military films. The room is dim, lit only by the whitish glow of monitor screens and the erratic crackle of psionics. The biowire is so thick it makes the room look like the pinkish maw of some horrifying creature from the depths of the Alternian sea. Your eyes follow the layers and layers of biowire as they snake and curl and wind along the walls, ceiling, and floor until they converge to plug into your prodigy, your helmsman, your—oh…oh, fuck.

There is no way—absolutely no fucking way that this is possible. You try to tell yourself that you are mistaken; that it’s a trick of the unsteady light or maybe somebody spiked that leavened confectionary with a hefty dose of sopor slime and this is all just the product of some drug-induced hallucination because you certainly wouldn’t put it past any of the simpering lowblooded fucks who loaded your ship to do something that unconscionable…but there is no mistaking those stupid double horns or those stupid huge teeth or that fucking stupid red-and-blue psionics motif.

Slowly, you pick your way over to the base of the helmsman’s column. You take a deep breath and then you let it out without saying anything because it’s really fucking unsettling to see the biowires just going straight into him like he’s a fucking outlet plug and you had no idea that arms could twist like that. You try again and this time the name leaves your mouth in a tentative little mewl that has no business coming from a fearsome military commander such as yourself: “Sol?”

A tiny, almost imperceptible shiver runs through him and for just a second you think that maybe he is going to call you fish dick or rub your quadrant failures in your face and just fall into his old pattern of being an obnoxious shit. Then, in a flat voice, he intones, ERROR:UNRECOGNIZED APPELLATION. PLEASE INPUT NEW COMMAND.

You don’t know what you were expecting. After all, you know that this thing isn’t Sol; you know that it’s just a piece of equipment that happens to look like him. What you don’t know is whether you should feel relieved (because god, it would be embarrassing to have a helmsman whose entire mission in life is to make you look like a fucking idiot) or whether you should be sorely disappointed
(because this is the first time you have ever really, honestly felt as though you were completely ahead of Captor on anything so of course he’s too fucking brain dead to care). Then you decide that it doesn’t matter how you feel because equipment can be programmed and since this is your ship and your helmsman, you might as well treat yourself to a little harmless fun.

“Helmsman,” you say.

A pause. Then: WELCOME, CAPTAIN. PLEASE INPUT COMMAND.

“Uh…..” You pause, trying to remember how this sort of thing worked in the few military films you saw that actually showed a captain commanding his helmsman manually. “Uh…change recognized appellation from ‘Helmsman’ to ‘Sol.’”

COMMAND RECOGNIZED. APPELLATION SUCCESSFULLY CHANGED.

You take a moment to consider your next move and then inspiration strikes. “Sol, change form of address from ‘Captain’ to ‘Master.’”

COMMAND RECOGNIZED. FORM OF ADDRESS SUCCESSFULLY CHANGED.

A broad grin creeps onto your face as you say, “Sol, do you know who I am?”

There is a long pause, long enough for you to wonder if the question didn’t register. You are just beginning to consider changing the wording up a bit and trying again when he tonelessly says, YOU ARE MASTER. MAY ALL ENEMY CRAFTS FALL BEFORE YOU. IT IS AN HONOR TO SERVE.

Well. That was a bit more than you were expecting. You would have been perfectly happy with a flat “Yes, Master” but the military slogans are a nice touch. You have to admit that it feels nice to finally get the respect you always knew you deserved from this land-crawling asshole. You decide that since the ship is just coasting along and you have nothing better to do and there is nobody around to see, there is no harm in continuing this silly little charade a bit longer.

“Sol, repeat dictation: ‘Eridan Ampora is better than me in every way.’”

There is a pause in which you can practically see the spike wheels turning behind his empty two-toned eyes. Then he repeats, ERIDAN AMPORA IS BETTER THAN ME IN EVERY WAY.

You grin because hearing this troll with this obnoxious voice say that is pretty fucking hilarious.

“Sol, repeat dictation: ‘Eridan Ampora is stronger, smarter, and way better-looking than I am.’”

This time there is no hesitation before he does as you ask. You take him through a few more choice phrases (BEES SUCK; I FUCKING HATE COMPUTERS; KAR-NO WAIT, KK WAS A BETTER PROGRAMMER THAN I WAS) and you tell yourself that this is perfect, this is great, this is everything you ever wanted to hear and you try really hard to ignore—

I AM NOTHING COMPARED TO YOU.

—the niggling feeling that—

I AM LESS THAN NOTHING.

—something absolutely vital—

MY QUADRANTS WERE A FUCKING MESS.
You are so busy telling yourself that you are happy you don’t even notice—

I WAS NEVER GOOD ENOUGH FOR FF.

—that you are on the verge of becoming really fucking desperate—

ERIDAN DESERVED FF MORE THAN I EVER DID.

—until you decide to go for broke:

“Sol, repeat dictation: ‘I killed AA on purpose.’”

You bite your lip the second the words are out of your mouth because you know that is a low blow that even he doesn’t deserve. Still, if anything you could say would wake this piece of shit up enough to let you gloat properly, you are pretty sure that would be it.

You watch his face for something—anything; even the tiniest twitch of a frown would do—to indicate that the words have registered. His expression remains utterly blank as he dutifully repeats, I KILLED AA ON PURPOSE.

“Goddamn it, Sol,” you groan. “Will you fucking fight back already?”

There is a long moment of silence. Then: ERROR: COMMAND UNRECOGNIZED. PLEASE TRY AGAIN.

And that is it. The final straw holding you together snaps and you proceed to lose your collective shit. You kick the base of the helmsman’s column hard enough to send a zing of pain through your whole foot and when that doesn’t elicit a response you tear at some of the bioware trailing down from the ceiling. The wires are soft and fleshy in your hands, but they are too durable to break and all you manage to do is rip a bunch of messy gashes into your palms. You quickly drop the wires and, snarling deep in your throat, you hit Sol on the jaw as hard as you can.

He jerks against the force of the hit but his expression does not change. You are all wound up and ready to hit him again—right in the same place as before, on the yellow bruise that is already starting to form—when you notice the blood.

A gush of nasty snot-yellow blood is pouring down his neck.

All the fire seems to go out of you at the sight of the blood. You hadn’t meant to actually hurt him. (Well, OK maybe you had—but damn it, you’d only been trying to get him to answer you. It’s not like you came here intending to kick the shit out of him. Seriously, what kind of idiot captain beats the hell out of his own helmsman? Apparently, you are that idiot captain. It is you.) Quickly, you follow the yellow trickle of blood up along his neck until you find the source.

He looks against the force of the hit but his expression does not change. You are all wound up and ready to hit him again—right in the same place as before, on the yellow bruise that is already starting to form—when you notice the blood. A gush of nasty snot-yellow blood is pouring down his neck.

At first you think that maybe you nicked him with one of your rings, but then you realize that this is nowhere near the place you hit him and the character of the wound is nothing like the scrape you would expect from a punch. No; this is a narrow puncture wound just underneath the angle of his jaw, small but deep. It almost looks as though somebody stuck him with an ice pick but you know that’s not possible because you and Sol are the only people on the ship right now and you know that you didn’t do it and you know Sol didn’t do it because he barely even counts as a person at this point. Then it hits you that it’s not so much that something has been stabbed in so much as taken out and that is when you finally notice the cluster of blood-tipped biowires dangling free beside him.
“Shit,” you groan because it’s been less than five hours since you walked onto your ship and you’ve already managed to break your damn helmsman. You reach forward and grab the loose biowires. Then you proceed to stand there doing nothing while you continue to hold the soft, warm things (ugh, why do have to be warm that is fucking disgusting) in your hands because you realize then that the idea of plugging those things into him kind of makes you want to puke. I don’t know what the fuck I’m supposed to do about this shit, you think. For all I know I’d just fuck him up even worse.

You look down at the mess of wires in your hands—now dripping a murky shade of brown with the smear of your blood with his—and fling them away with a grunt of disgust. Then you pinch the bridge of your nose and sigh, “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck…”

You take a few more minutes to hover on the knife’s edge between falling into bald-faced panic like a pathetic little wiggler and handling this shit in a calm and collected manner like a mature adult. Then you say, “OK, Ampora. Sol is still breathing. The ship is still moving. You’re fine. Everything is fine.”

Your stomach unknots a bit in the face of this impregnable reason. You glance back to the wound on Sol’s neck and are relieved to see that the flow of blood has already slowed to an oozing trickle. I’ll get him repaired once I get to fleet, you think. (God, you hope that bruise goes away before anybody sees it. The last thing you need is for anybody to find out that this was your fault.) Everything will be fine until then.

You leave the helmsblock thoroughly convinced that those wires did not serve any sort of critical function because everything is OK. You are OK, Sol is OK, the ship is OK…clearly, you were making a mountain out of the dirt tunneling fur creature’s hill. You take the scenic route back to the captain’s quarters—through the storage bay, through the latrines, past the meeting rooms, through the kitchen (you pause to grab one of the pre-made meals to take with you on your way through), through the mess hall, all the while telling yourself that you are totally happy with this, this is everything you deserve and everything. Is. Fine.

When you reach your regal private quarters, you flop onto one of the lush divans and devour the meal from the kitchen with such gusto anybody watching would think you hadn’t seen a single morsel of food in the past sweep. You leave a mess of crumbs on the cushions but you are suddenly too tired to care. You shoot a glance over to your recuperacoon and think that maybe a nice, refreshing nap would be in order…but you really don’t feel like going to all the trouble of changing out of your dress clothes and the divan is so comfortable and surely it wouldn’t hurt to lie here for a while; surely it would be OK if you just closed your eyes for just a few seconds; surely….

Fef is crying again. She’s always crying when you see her but this time she must have been going at it for a while because the water around her is already fuchsia-tinted with her tears. You know that you should go to her because you’re her moirail (NO YOU’RE NOT) even though you want (DESERVE) so much more, so much better…but you can’t. There is an ominous feeling in the pit of your stomach that’s bringing a sour taste into your mouth and you can’t move.

“You why would you do this?” she says and you shiver because it’s her voice but not her voice; a warped mess of her usual airy cheer with something bitter and ugly beneath it that makes the hairs on the back of your neck prickle. There is something perverse in the tone, something that screams at you to GET AWAY—but you can’t. You can’t even bring yourself to cover your ears as she repeats over and over and over: “Why would you do this, why would you do this, why would you do this….”

You don’t want to answer because you know what is coming next, what always comes next. Your mouth moves to say, “Fef, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it, I never meant—“

“Sorry,” she repeats and now that awful caricature of the best and worst of her takes on a mocking
“Sorry? Sorry isn’t going to be enough.”

“Fef, please—“

She’s moving now and you try to close your eyes because you don’t want to see but your eyes are fixed on her and you can’t look away. You scream at yourself to WAKE UP, COME ON WAKE UP but of course you don’t because you never do.

She is standing with her back to you, her long hair shrouding her from view like a dark cloud from the waist up but now she’s turning around, turning with her arms hugged up against her chest. You want to tell her to stop; fucking STOP. Your lips move but there is a choking lump in your throat and nothing comes out.

She is facing you with her arms still hugged up against her chest. Her eyes are narrowed to poisonous slits, her mouth drawn into a hard line, and the fury radiating off of her is almost enough to distract from the curls of blood dripping from the corners of her mouth. Her face contorts as she hisses, “Look what you’ve done to me.”

Her arms fall away from her chest and there is a hole there, big as your fist and spewing gouts of fuschia blood into the water around her. You can see jagged ribs, torn flesh, bits of torn-up lung and shredded muscle…and a mess of blood and ragged tissue where her heart should have been. You open your mouth to say—what? You’re sorry? You only meant to help? You didn’t mean it? You’ve already said it all and it’s all fucking worthless.

“LOOK WHAT YOU’VE DONE TO ME!” she roars and oh god, when did she grab her trident? Where did it even come from?

Even though you know it is futile, you try to move out of the way. The water around you feels as though it weighs a million pounds. You can’t even twitch a finger as she hurls her weapon.

You suck in a breath as it hits you. You feel the tines sink into your torso, feel them pierce deep, feel them tear through the flesh in your back and the water turns an opaque violet around you. The pain hits you as you sink to your knees. It is a cold spike that sends lightning through you, choking you even as you scream, long and deep and heavy with the agony of it, you—

—wake up in a cold sweat screaming. Your hands instinctively fly up to your chest—your intact, perfectly whole chest—and you let them rest there as you lay gasping on the divan. As you emerge from the hazy aftermath of the nightmare, you berate yourself for being stupid enough to fall asleep outside of your pod. It isn’t as though you didn’t know what would happen. You’ve had this dream every time you’ve so much as closed your eyes without a healthy buffering of sopor slime to tamp it down and every time you have it you wake up screaming, screaming; holy SHIT somebody is actually fucking screaming.

In your dream-dazed state, it takes you a second to understand exactly where the screaming is coming from (who the screaming is coming from). When you do all your insides seem to go numb because oh Christ, oh fucking CHRIST you are fucked if this means what you think it does.

There is another scream; a ragged, terrifying, fucking awful sound. Then the entire ship groans with a creak of metal straining under a tremendous force and you realize that yes, this does mean what you think it does and yes, you are going to be completely fucked if you don’t do something about it right now.

The ship lurches sideways at exactly the same moment you attempt to roll off the divan. You hit the ground hard and even though it hurts like hell you don’t waste any time wallowing there in an
awkward tangle of limbs. Instead, you stagger to your feet and sprint from the room as fast as your legs will carry you. The ship makes a few more awkward lurches as you run but you keep your feet under you and the worrisome creak of metal spurs you to pick up speed as you go.

When you finally reach the helmsblock, the entire room is flashing with red and blue psionic energy. Even with the biowire sucking up what must be a fucking ridiculous amount of power, you can still feel the tingling overflow of it ghosting across your skin and setting your hair on end. Across the room, Sol is writhing against the biowires, throwing himself against them hard enough to make the whole helmsman’s column shudder. For about half a second you think that he might actually manage to tear himself free. Then you see him go limp and you remember that this shit was designed specifically to prevent that from happening and of course he isn’t going to get out of it because it’s fucking growing into him.

You hear him panting and you can’t tell whether it’s from panic or pain or effort or some combination of the three. Then he mumbles something under his breath and the whole column sparks up like a nightmare fireworks display of red and blue. A few seconds later you hear an ominous screech of metal on metal and the ship begins to shake.

“Sol,” you say. It comes out as a pathetic little croak so of course he doesn’t even look in your general direction. You clear your throat and try again: “Sol! Sol, stop!”

This time you seem to get through to him. The laser light show from hell abruptly stops and he sags against the biowires. Then he croaks, ampora? i2 that you?

You take a moment to compose yourself because you had always expected that coming out ahead of Captor would feel good and this…this isn’t satisfying at all. In fact, if you are being completely honest with yourself, this is fucking awful. Then you step forward and say, “Yeah, Sol. It’s me.”

oh my god, he groans. get me the fuck out of here.

You shake your head. “I can’t do that.”

what the fuck do you mean you cant? ju2t pull thi2 2hiit out of me.

“I mean I can’t!” you snap. “You’ll fucking die.”

ii dont care! he replies, drawing out the last word into an agonized wail. He jerks his arms against the wires but they hold fast. thi2 2hiit hurt2 liike fuck!

You are about to tell him that maybe it wouldn’t hurt so much if he would stop twisting around like a fucking idiot but then his eyes roll back and he starts babbling a bunch of shit that makes absolutely no sense until you really listen to it—shit like no, no ii dont know, ii fucking 2wear, ii fucking 2wear ii dont know and aAAUGghhf222top, 2top; ii dont know ple2e 2top! You stand there for a long time, waiting for him to stop screaming at nothing and begging to people who aren’t there and it just keeps going on and on and on. Damn it, Sol, you think. What in the fuck did they do to you?

When he finally quiets down, you take a step closer and say, “Sol? Are you…here now?”

He snaps his head up to look at you—but his eyes are looking right through you, like you aren’t even there at all. Then he proceeds to fire another monstrous surge of psionic energy into the biowires. The ship immediately begins to pitch back and forth, forcing you onto your hands and knees. Above the crackle of psionics and the creaking of the ship, you shout, “Goddamn it, Sol, stop!”

This time he does not seem to register your voice at all so you drag yourself toward him, all the while screaming, “I’m the goddamned Captain! You have to listen to what I say and I’m telling you to
fucking STOP!" By the time you reach the helmsman’s column, the ship is making the worst noise you have ever heard in your entire life and the floor is shaking so badly you have to use the biowires for support just to stand up.

You are about to yell at him some more, but now that you are right here next to him you can see the thin trickles of blood beginning to ooze from his nose and the corners of both his eyes. It occurs to you then that no matter what you say, he is not going to stop until he either burns himself out or tears the whole fucking ship apart and if the horrible sounds that your ship is making are anything to go by, you are pretty sure you know which is going to happen first.

There is only one thing you can do to save yourself and it is going to be the most humiliating thing you have ever done in your life. You would never lower yourself to even thinking of doing it if the situation were anything less than desperate. Still, you pray to fuck that you can pull it off because you are seriously out of practice and there is no doubt in your mind that you will die horribly if you fuck this up. Then, keeping yourself steady on the biowires with your left hand, you reach out and lay your right hand on his face. Very quietly, you whisper, “Shoosh.”

The psionics abruptly stop. You take that as a good sign, so you pap him again—an exceptionally gentle and calming pap if you do say so yourself; especially since the thought of touching his nasty body makes you want to hurl. He seems to relax a bit. You think that this is it; it’s working and all you need to do is seal the deal with another gentle shoosh—and then he jolts away from your hand as though it was a hot branding iron.

ugh, get off me, he grunts. youre not my moiirail.

You quickly pull your hand away because god, this is embarrassing and gross and of course you don’t actually feel that way about him; he’s a fucking dirt-scraping land dwelling piece of shit but what other choice did you even have when he was literally on the verge of killing himself and—more importantly—you along with him? You open your mouth to explain all of this to him (because god forbid he starts getting any ideas) but before you can say a word a burst of psionics hits you in the gut and sends you flying halfway across the room toward the door. You lie there on the ground, winded and sucking air as he screams at you about youre not my moiirail; youre not her and you 2tay the fuck off of me!

“Goddamn it,” you wheeze once you are able to speak again. “Sol, I was just—“

He zaps you again before you can finish. This time you end up flipping through the air to land in an undignified heap in front of the door.

“Sol, stop—“

get out! he snarls.

This time you see the flashing pulse of energy arcing toward you. You manage to dodge just in time by diving out of the helmsblock. The door slams behind you with a crunch of warping metal which is enough to tell you that it won’t be opening again unless Sol decides to let you in. Even though you know it’s useless, you give the door a solid kick with the toe of your boot. The gesture raises a muffled shout of go away! fuck you! followed by something that sounds like quiet sobbing.

You spend a long time in your private quarters, waiting for Sol to start screaming again or tear the ship apart and kill the both of you. Several hours of uneventful silence later, you begin to understand that you are not actually about to die. You are just beginning to consider climbing into your recuperacoon—because now you are exhausted in earnest and you just do not have it in you to deal with another fucking terrible dream right now—when the ship begins to move again, slow at first,
then faster until you are moving along at a smooth, fast clip. When you go to your control room, you are not surprised to see that your destination has been changed. You are surprised to see what it has been changed to:

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Shaking your head, you whisper, “Where the fuck are you taking us, Sol?”

> Karkat: Happy bloody Valentine’s Day
From the second you hear your alarm clock, you are acutely aware that something is horribly, horribly wrong. You never sleep late enough for your alarm to go off because you hate starting your day with an inanimate object screeching at you like some kind of insistent harpy-bitch hell-bent on dragging your sorry ass into the land of wakefulness and shitty reality. In fact, though careful conditioning you have trained yourself to snap awake, fully alert and ready to strife at a moment’s notice exactly 30 seconds before that obnoxious assembly of cogs, bells, and phosphorescent numbers lets loose with its headache-splitting wailing.

Speaking of said head-splitting wailing…your alarm has been screeching away for a long time now. It occurs to you that you should probably do something about that, but goddamn you are tired in a way that is nothing like the fatigue you might feel after a night of poor sleep or even after a good strife with Crabdad back when Crabdad was still alive and clacking. No; this is an exhaustion that is so intense you can actually feel every fiber in your body collectively “noping” against the very idea of extending your arm far enough to cover the two feet lying between your bed and your alarm clock.

As the alarm continues to screech away and the parasitic sleep spiders kindly begin to clear their cobwebs from the finer regions of your brain, it dawns on you exactly what it is that is so wrong: you hurt all over. Your whole body—joints, muscles, bones—is throbbing with a dull ache. It feels like you swallowed an entire swarm of sticking bugs and they are currently in the process of sanding the shit out of the general region of your throat in preparation to lay the groundwork for a brand-new colony. And your head. Fucking shit, there is something jammed into all of your sinuses and it has transformed your ears and your eyes and your nose and even your goddamn teeth into areas of throbbing awfulness. You can’t hear properly and you can’t breathe properly and you are pretty sure that you would be flipping your shit over all of this if you weren’t so fucking tired.

After a couple of minutes the alarm finally gives up on your worthless excuse of an existence and shuts the hell up. You lie there, relishing the silence and telling yourself that you’re going to get up; you’re going to get up any minute; yep any minute now…but first you’ll close your eyes for just a second.

You’ll close your eyes just to rest them for a couple of seconds and then you’ll…

You’ll….

Somebody is shaking you and yelling at you to wake up. You spend a couple of moments contemplating the fucked-up weirdness of this development because wait just a single goddamned second when in the name of bilge-spewing bulge worms did you fall asleep? Then you realize that whoever-it-is who has graciously decided to start your morning off with a hefty helping of invasion of personal space is still shaking the shit out of you.

You groan, “Ugh, stop.” It is nothing short of an act of providence that the person abusing the shit out of your shoulder listens to you because even though you were trying to sound fearsome you still feel absolutely wretched and the words had barely held enough bite to intimidate a handicapped pigeon, let alone somebody hell-bent on causing you actual physical harm.

Nora’s voice says, “Come on Karl; you have to get up right now.”

Get up? Why would you want to do that? Surely you have misunderstood the sounds that she has just farted out her squawk blister because you are in a truly horrible state of affairs and you would really appreciate it if she would just fuck off and let you sleep until whatever has happened to make
your body hate you so much goes away. You consider explaining all of this to her in a calm and rational manner. Then you decide that fuck that, you are too tired to be assed so why bother with all that bullshit when pulling your covers over your head and grumbling, “Nope, go ‘way” will suffice?

Apparently, Nora is too dense to understand the substance of your incredibly eloquent protestations because she immediately whips the covers back and says, “You are going to miss the bus.”

Through the layer of broken glass that has settled into the sensitive tissues of your protein chute, you croak: “I don’t care. I’m dying.” (And wow, whatever it is that is packed into your sinuses has utterly obliterated your ability to speak like an actual functioning person. You literally just gargled out something that sounded like “I dobe gare, I’b die-ig.”)

She lets out an annoyed huff and then gross, her hand is on your face why is she papping you what the fuck is she even doing, did she miss the schoolfeed on basic social etiquette that explained that papping people who platonically hate you with their entire being while they are in their death throes is really fucking uncouth? You are on the verge of conveying all of this to her, preferably with a virulent round of the good old one-fingered salute when it occurs to you that her hand is just kind of hanging out on your forehead you suspect that she is attempting to do the fake mom thing again.

Your suspicions are confirmed when she rolls her eyes and says, “You are not dying. You do not even have a fever. You have a human head cold. Get up.”

OK, maybe your assertion that you were about 99% of the way to becoming a disease-ridden corpse was a little melodramatic. Even so, you still feel like warmed-over shit and not at all in the mood to deal with another day of playing human and lamenting every idiotic choice past you has made to bring you to this particular point in the unusually long and rancid turd which symbolizes the extent of your life. You therefore attempt to burrow your way back under the covers. Nora immediately tosses them into a sad little lump that you can’t reach way down at the foot of the bed.

“Goddamn it,” you rasp. “You don’t know how this feels.”

“You’re right. I don’t. But I do know that Otto was able to adhere to the human tradition of ‘being a hero’ and show up at work when he had his head cold last week. Now stop acting like a repugnant human baby and go be a hero.”

You have a powerful urge to tell her to go eat a wet bag of boiled globes because you both know that the human idiom is actually “don’t be a hero.” You are halfway to opening your mouth and doing just that when you realize that it’s not going to make one single iota of a difference what the stupid idiom is because either way she’s still going to force you to drag your snot-dripping ass to school. You also realize that holy mucus-filled snot muffins you are going to miss the bus if you aren’t out the door within the next ten minutes. You do not have it in you to deal with Nora’s globes-fucked insane driving, so you squeeze out a couple of drops of ornery tenacity fluid and pour yourself off the bed. Nora gives you a little nod as though to say “Yep; that’s the idea, sport” before finally leaving you to your own devices.

You note with relief that the pressure in your sinuses isn’t half as bad once you are standing up. Your relief turns out to be more misplaced than a slice of fire-spiced pepper flake pie shoved into the most cavernous regions of your ass crack because your nose suddenly decides to become a gushing faucet of snot just as you are pulling a tee-shirt over your head and oh ass crackers, you are pretty sure that some of it got onto your shirt. Yep, you can definitely feel a cooling trail of slimy mucus on the fabric as it settles against your chest. You would probably do something about that if you weren’t three minutes away from missing the bus and condemning yourself to a rollicking round of OH GOD OH FUCK YOU ARE GOING TO KILL US PLEASE SLOW THIS CAR DOWN RIGHT FUCKING NOW. As it is, you do your best to ignore that hefty portion of oh fuck that is
"gross and run your ass to the bathroom.

Once you arrive, you take a moment to appreciate that—joy of nook-skipping joys—you look every bit as terrible as you feel. You are pretty sure that the bags under your eyes are deep enough to conceal a full set of military-grade double sickles and still have room left over, and Jesus cactus-fucking Christ the color and consistency of the stuff coming out of your nose would be enough to convince anybody back on Alternia that you are a full-blown yellowblood suffering a severe nosebleed.

It takes you exactly 30 seconds to brush your teeth and splash your face with a couple of handfuls of water which turns out to be so cold it might as well have been pissed out of the faucet by a goddamned yeti. When you are finished you still look like death warmed over, but at least you are beginning to feel almost human. Of course, by “almost human” you actually mean “barely scraping the scummy bottom rung of the ladder representing basic sentient life.” Still, you have managed to gather enough of your cognitive shit together to snag a banana on your way out the door so you won’t be completely starved by the time you make it to lunch.

Sadly, you have not amassed enough think power to remember that you really fucking hate bananas until you are half a block away from the bus stop. (It’s not so much the taste that bothers you. You think they taste just fine. No, it’s the weird, mushy texture that is vaguely reminiscent of something on its way to rot that has always rustled your metaphorical jimmies like none other.) You are on the verge of launching into a mental tirade against past you for being such a cement-brained ignoramus when you notice that OH GREAT the bus is already at the bus stop and OH SHIT it’s leaving without you.

You break into a sprint and manage to catch up to the bus before it picks up too much speed but your voice craps out on you when you try to yell at the driver to “PLEASE STOP, GODDAMN IT” and the bus continues to accelerate. You are about three seconds away from having your wheezing, snot-blasted ass left in the dust when you realize that maybe past you wasn’t such a brain dead idiot after all. Whispering a silent apology to past you—because clearly, his reasons for selecting such a repugnant piece of alimentary sustenance had nothing to do with your gustatory preferences and everything to do with preparing your ass for this very moment—you wind up and chuck the banana at the bus as hard as you can. The fruit hits the door with a satisfying squish and holy shit it’s a fucking miracle the bus stops.

The driver gives you a nasty look as you board the bus; one that says “Wow, guess who has to clean that up later, thanks a lot you little shit.” If you were feeling a little more faint of heart and a lot less shitty, you might consider apologizing. Sadly, perigees of Cennia’s looks have more than prepared you to deal with even the most scathing of human glares and you are way too caught up in trying not to choke on the big old wad of phlegm that you just horked up to give half a puttering fart over what this adult human thinks of you. You drag your disease-ridden carcass past him and his weak-sauce attempt at a scornful glare and you plop down into the nearest unoccupied seat without saying a word.

You spend the entirety of the bus ride to school hunched forward with your face pressed against the backrest of the seat in front of you. Nobody attempts to sit with you and nobody attempts to speak to you and you are absolutely fine with that because all you want to do right now is go to sleep until your body decides to stop doing all of this terrible shit to you. As luck would have it, the backrest turns out to make a really horrible pillow. Every time the bus runs over so much as a pebble, it jerks all over the place and your head bashes against the seat hard enough to rattle your useless blunted teeth in their sockets. By the time you finally reach school, your brain feels as though it is swirling around like the dandruff-looking morsels inside a shaken snow globe.
You notice that something is off the second you step off the bus. At first you think that maybe it’s the residual effect of having your head jolted around so many times you are in serious danger of reverting to Gamzee levels of utter stupidity. Then you see a girl walk by with a bunch of heart-shaped balloons and you remember that today is human Valentine’s Day.

You groan because now that you are cognizant of that little fact nugget, you know that there is no way you are getting through today without witnessing at least one really awkward public sloppy makeout session. (Of course, your chances of witnessing awkward public sloppy makeouts are fairly high on any given day because human high school seems to be a constantly boiling cesspit of adolescent hormones. Between everything you have seen since the start of the school year and everything you saw in human media back on the station, you have for the most part become desensitized to most of the stuff you are likely to see in public on a regular basis.)

Under normal circumstances, you would head to the cafeteria to bullshit with John until the first bell ushers in another craptastic day of educational browbeating—but the circumstances that you are witnessing today are far from normal. No; today the ever-present cloud of hormones swirling in the air is thick enough to choke a fucking horse. You are just not in the mood to put up with any of that shit right now so you decide that the safest course of action is to make a quick stop at your locker and then go directly to your first period classroom and pretend to sleep until class starts. Who knows, maybe you’ll get lucky and actually fall asleep until this whole day is over so you can go curl up in your bed and try not to let this stupid human virus kill you.

The main hall is as packed as ever when you walk inside, but today the crowd is peppered here and there with various tokens of today’s holiday: people carting around flowers, boxes of candy packaged with a red/pink/white color motif that would make a certain fashionista troll you used to know want to drive her own darning needles through her eyes…you even see one girl wearing a bizarre sort of head gear that looks like a set of springy antennae topped with fuzzy pink hearts. You steel yourself to deal with the daily onslaught of way too many people way too close. Then you dive in.

You are almost to your first stop when you see something that makes your mucus-coated mouth go completely dry: Aria Mendell is standing right in front of your locker. You stop in your tracks and issue a nonverbal prayer to any and every divine being in existence (and even the ones in nonexistence) that she won’t see you. Since you are the butt of every cosmic joke ever, she immediately looks directly at you with a gaze that is about as comfortable as a set of high-beam lasers to the nook and—oh fuck—starts towards you in a manner that can be described as nothing short of really fucking purposeful.

For about half a millisecond, you consider sticking around and having it out with her like a mature and responsible soon-to-be adult because you have been skirting the issue since Halloween and this is the first time she has caught you without John in tow. Then you realize that you have been skirting the issue since Halloween and you still have no idea how to address it, what the fuck are you even thinking, get the fuck out of there! Quickly, before she makes it into hearing range, you duck around a guy carrying a stuffed bear that is easily twice as big as you and abscond to the one place you know beyond any shadow of a doubt is safe: the bathroom.

You stay there for a long time, wallowing in the knowledge that yes, you are being a complete asshole right now and no, you are not going to do anything to change that today. At one point you attempt to tell yourself that maybe you would be more up to handling this shitty state of affairs if you didn’t feel so awful. Then you berate yourself for being a lying sack of shit because you know that you would still be huddled in here like a waste-spewing coward even if you were at your best.

The first bell rings. You continue to hide in the bathroom, communing with all the shit that has
passed through this place because you too are a complete piece of shit and they are your brethren. The second warning bell rings. You wait another minute before you finally bolster up the globes to poke your head out of the door and peek out into the hall like the world’s saddest and most feckless turtle ever. Sure enough, the hall is completely empty so you make a mad, snot-heaving dash for your first period classroom and slide into your seat just as the final bell rings.

You sincerely try to devote a reasonable trickle of give-a-fuck to the teacher as she gushes on about Heathcliff and Catherine and all their scandalous capers because as far as human teachers go, this one is pretty sharp and you don’t want to be called out for sleeping in class like a festering pile of bulge waste. You also happen to find this particular example of English literary classic to be not mind-numbingly awful, even if you would sooner endure flagellation with a rusty, glass-encrusted piano wire than admit it. (Sure, the quadrant flipping that seems to happen every other chapter is about as subtle as a bar of solid lead to the face, but it’s no worse than a few of your favorite romance novels back on Alternia.) Of course, the herd of human adolescents sitting around you lacks the context you have for understanding the blatant yet enticingly contrasting blackrom/redrom themes in Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* and you are almost invariably disappointed by the really fucking obtuse directions that the discussion seems to go. Today is no different. You last a whole fifteen minutes before your brain finally decides that *nope, fuck this shit* and you spend the rest of the class period wallowing in your own mucus-munching, phlegm-dripping, snot-spewing misery.

The following two classes are no better. You spend more of humanities fervently trying to prevent any of the nasty shit oozing out of your nose from dripping onto your desk than you do listening to the teacher and you devote the entirety of pre-calculus to thinking about how glorious it would be if all the sewer mains to the school would be nice enough to explode and coat the building in a layer of raw sewage so you can go home.

By the time you reach biology your nose is a running faucet of disgusting, your head is throbbing worse than a boil on the infected backside of a wild snort beast and you are officially 500% done with today. You roll into the classroom as early as you can, fully intending to go the fuck to sleep (preferably through the whole class period and maybe through lunch, too but fuck it, you’ll take even a three-minute half-dose if it will do anything to alleviate the tired ache dogging you). The room is empty save for a guy and girl who have moved beyond “sloppy makeout” territory and entered the realm of “actively attempting to eat each other’s faces off.” Under normal circumstances you would probably turn around and leave to give them a little privacy like a decent person. Sadly, your patience for complete and utter bullshit is at an all-time, swill-mired low so you plop your ass into your chair and stare at them like a cantankerous piece of shit until the girl mutters something to the guy and they get up and leave. The guy flips you off as they walk past. You return the sentiment (because seriously, how hard is it to do that shit somewhere a little more private like underneath the bleachers in the gym like any other self-respecting human adolescent couple), but you are so exhausted that the gesture lacks any of the fire that you would usually inject into it. The moment they are out the door, you abandon any pretense of pretending to be a sentient life form and lay your head down on your desk.

You are so off your game by this point that you completely forget that this is the class you have with John until he is right next to you (when the fuck did that happen, holy fuck, did you ACTUALLY go to sleep?). “Oh hey, you’re here,” he says, yammering into your ear like a goddamned mosquito hopped up on happy pills. “I thought maybe you stayed home sick or something.”

You groan and, without bothering to sit up, you roll your head ninety degrees to the right in order to look at him. Apparently, you have progressed from merely looking like death warmed over to looking like a slab of half-rotted, maggot-encrusted diseased flesh warmed over because he flinches away from the sight of you as though somebody shoved a red-hot poker up his ass. “Oh wow; you are sick,” he says.
The most articulate response you can manage at the moment is a lovely, wet snort as you make the horrible mistake of trying to breathe through your nose. He frowns at the sound before stating the utterly obvious: “Well, that’s gross.”

You offer up nothing in response because you are just too damn tired to bother. John’s frown deepens, an edge of concern beginning to crawl into his expression as though he seems to think that your snot-bubbling silence is a sign that you are actively dying before his very eyes. “You seriously look like crap. Are you OK?”

“Yeah,” you rasp. “Just fucking peachy.”

He gives you a look which suggests that he does not buy your incredibly persuasive and totally believable response. Then he shrugs and says, “Whatever you say. Just try not to puke on me during lab today.”

“It’s a head cold not a stomach bug, John, you stupid fucktard.” You pause for a beat before adding, “Wait, what are we doing in lab today?”

“Didn’t you read the lab manual?”

You screw your eyes shut because of course past you was a lazy butt whiffer who didn’t read the lab manual. “No. Apparently I was too busy huffing farts and killing off precious brain cells. I completely forgot.”

“Oh. It’s—” It is a precisely this moment that the bell rings and the ever-punctual-to-the-goddamn-millisecond teacher begins to speak. John’s only option is to lamely finish with a whispered, “You’ll see”, leaving you with absolutely no useful information on the matter whatsoever.

Since this is the first class of the day in which you are actually going to be expected to do something, you make an effort to pay attention to what the teacher is saying. Something about antigens manages to penetrate the groggy haze that is unfurling in the corners of your head like the white-fogged clouds of halitosis that curl from your lips on a cold day. Antigens and…heredity…? You think you know where this is going; you would probably be able to piece it together quickly enough if you weren’t so…so….

You close your eyes and the next thing you know John is poking your shoulder and hissing, “Karl, wake up. Lab time.”

“’M’awake,” you grunt, even though you were very obviously sleeping like a useless sack of crap. You reluctantly stagger to your feet and let John lead across the room to your shared lab station without complaint.

John seems to take this as a sign that you are hovering on the very brink of death because that weird, concerned look comes across his face again. He says, “Are you sure you’re OK?”

“Yeah,” you croak back. “Yep. Just fine. Fuck off. And by fuck off, I actually mean tell me what we are supposed to—“ You trail off, a sense of utter horror unfurling in your bowels on you as you see the equipment which has been laid out for you today. Two rectangular trays, each with three small, indented wells about the size of your thumb. Three tiny bottles of fluid. A handful of individually-wrapped band-aids. Two tubes of plastic about as long and wide as your little finger that look perfectly innocent but you know better because fuck, fuck, FUCK you DID skim ahead in the lab manual weeks ago and you knew this was coming why the FUCK didn’t you do something proactive about it like induce violent projectile vomiting or feign a goddamned coma this morning?
You must be covering your roiling sense of **HOLY FUCKING SHIT** like a seasoned, Troll Will Smith-level A-list actor (or maybe you just look shitty enough that a little panicked hyperventilation does not make you look any worse) because John seems to be oblivious to your distress. Ever the cheerful fart tumbler, he says, “Here; I’ll show you how to do it.”

He picks up one of the plastic tubes, arranges the end of it over the tip of his index finger, and presses down. There is a snap of a spring releasing fast and hard. Then he removes the plastic tube and **Jesus CHRIST,** there are a couple of beads of his gross (too-red, just like yours) human blood welling there. He yammers on about how “This is actually a really easy lab” and “We’ll probably be done in like, five more minutes” as he squeezes a couple of drops of his blood into the wells of the tray he has claimed as his own. You continue to stand there, mute with horror as he picks up the bottles and starts adding drops of fluid to the wells because no, no, NO there is another full set of this garbage laid out special for you and you want no part in this, not now or fucking EVER.

You have decided that this is it; this is your limit. The fleet can make you learn English and file down your teeth and cut off your horns and even make you be (real) friends with a gross and obnoxious human, but there is no way that they or anybody else is going to make you do this. Of course the moment that you come to this conclusion, John chooses that exact fucking second to set his tray of fresh fucking disgusting out of the way and say, “OK, Karl. Your turn.”

You know that you need to say something very clever if you are going to talk your way out of this. Your incredibly witty response is to hug your hands up against your chest like a scared little bitch and yelp, “No!”

“Whoa, I didn’t realize you have a thing about needles.”

You arrange your face into scowl but your voice comes out as a whiny croak that sounds nothing short of downright defensive as you reply, “I don’t have a ‘thing’ about needles!” He gives you a knowing look that makes you want to punch him in the knowing face so you quickly add, “I didn’t realize you have a thing about being really fucking blasé about spewing your bodily fluids all over the place.”

“Wow, I know! It’s like three whole drops of blood!” He rolls his eyes before adding, “If you want, I can—”

You see him reaching for the clean tube of plastic (lancet, you think because you remember that page in the lab manual now, fuck you very much) and even though your diseased brain is running about twenty times slower than usual you still have the think power to see where he is going with this and you are not even going to let him finish the thought. You therefore interrupt him with a very firm and persuasive, “No!”

“Karl, it’s really not that bad. Just let me—“

You see him reaching for one of your hands but your senses are on GRADE A RED ALERT here, does he seriously think for a single butt-itching second that he is going to catch you unawares? You twitch out of reach before he lays a single grope digit on your person and snarl, “I said no.”

He rolls his eyes and mumbles something under his breath that you are pretty sure is something along the lines of “Oh my god, you are being a whiny little baby who still poops hard in his own diapers.” (Actually, if we are being completely accurate here, you only hear him say the first half of that, but you are so certain he is thinking the second half you can practically hear it yourself.) “The longer you sit there thinking about it, the worse it’s going to seem. You should just get it over with,” he insists, making another grab for your hand.
You take another giant step away from him and his spring-loaded finger pricking machine of evil and horror. “You touch me with that thing and my foot will be going so far up your ass it will get stuck there and I will end up having to walk around with your ass permanently affixed to my foot like a life-size douchebag-shaped sneaker.”

“Sure you will,” he laughs. “Look, it’ll only hurt for a second. Mine’s already stopped bleeding. See?”

He pulls the band-aid off his finger and holds up his hand to illustrate his point. You make the mistake of letting your attention drift to his definitely not-bleeding hand for about half a second. Of course your lack of vigilance comes around to bite your square in the crotch: John easily lunges forward and grabs your right hand. The next few seconds are a confused blur of shouting and ineffectual struggling:

“Let go!”

“Here, just let me—“

“Fuck off, Egbert! Don’t—“

“Dude, stop curling your fingers I can’t—“

“Rrraugh! Get off of me, you—“

“Ow, quit stomping on my foot!”

“I’ll stomp on your foot all I want to so fuck—“

Snap. Something sticks the tip of your middle finger. You immediately shut the fuck up and stop struggling because fuck, that was NOT what you thought it was, there is no way he managed to get that shitty piece of plastic anywhere near your unprotected flesh, you were paying attention and there was no fucking WAY…..

“There,” he says. He releases your hand and steps back before adding, “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

You want to scream at him that Yes it was ‘so bad’; it was ‘so bad’ you think you are going to shit five gallons of pure, unfiltered rage and make him drown in it but then you notice that the whole class has gone dead silent and everybody is staring at you. You therefore direct your gaze to the hideous tiled floor and say nothing because John got you both into this awkward predicament and he can damn well get you the fuck out.

John rises to the occasion magnificently by letting out a nervous laugh and saying, “Sorry, folks. Karl has a thing about needles. Er…carry on.”

You wait until everybody has stopped looking at you and the annoying hum of classroom activity returns before you turn to him and hiss, “I do not have a thing about needles!”

“You could’ve fooled me.” He frowns before adding, “Hey, you should make sure you get some of that into the tray before you stop bleeding. Unless you want me to stick you again?”

You decide that that suggestion is so fucking awful and stupid that you are not going to even bother to dignify it with a verbal response. The only thing it deserves is a virulent double bird, which you execute straightaway. The maneuver starts off strong but it quickly loses its impact when you notice the trickle of blood running down your left digit. Even though you know that you are no different from anybody else in the room in that respect (and even if you’d been harboring any doubts on the
matter, you just saw John’s blood color for Christ’s sake), you can’t quite tamp down the reflexive instinct to jerk your hand out of sight before anybody sees the (fucking gross, wrong, mutant) color.

Luckily, John seems to interpret your bizarre behavior as further evidence of your totally fictional aversion to all things sharp and pointy rather than evidence that you are actually part of an alien species that is way too hung up on the color of the crap oozing through your vascular system. With a sigh, he nudges the tray toward you. When you continue to stand there like a brainless moron, he grabs your hand again and guides your hand over to the tray.

“Geez, Karl, I’m sorry,” he mutters as you proceed to bleed all over the tray. “I didn’t realize this would bother you so much. OK, we’re done. You can put on the band-aid now.”

You keep a wary eye on John as you clean the blood off your finger, watching as he adds a few drops of fluid from each of the bottles to the blood in the tray. You half expect your fucked up blood to find yet another way to royally screw you over. (Who knows? Maybe adding that chemical shit to it will make it potent enough to eat a hole through the counter! Maybe it will randomly decide to burst into flames! Maybe it will release a noxious cloud of neurotoxin, killing everybody in the general vicinity!) John quietly mixes away without giving you any sign to lead you to believe that he has found anything too out of the ordinary. You are just about to breathe a sigh of relief (because oh hip hip hoo-fucking-ray your blood is similar enough to regular human blood to pass the “not an alien” test) when John breathes, “Oh, cool! Check this out, Karl!”

Your blood pusher immediately kicks into high gear because fuck, you were wrong, your blood is doing something weird and it’s going to get you nook-deep into a mire of shit, what were you even thinking agreeing to go along with this shit? (Answer: You didn’t go along with this shit; this shit just fucking happened before you even had a chance to think.) Steeling yourself for the worst, you look at the tray in front of John. Then you furrow your brow because as far as you can tell your blood is behaving itself beautifully and doing absolutely nothing out of the ordinary at all.

Apparently you have missed something really fucking obvious because John gives you a disappointed look and says, “Don’t you see it?”

“No.” You look back and forth between the tray holding John’s blood and the tray holding yours once, twice, looking for what it is that John thinks is such a big fucking deal. “It looks exactly like yours.”

“I know!” John exclaims. “We have the same blood type! O negative. Universal donor. Pretty cool, huh?”

“Yeah,” you grunt and goddamn it, that is not a lump in your throat. You are not about to start crying like a stupid little grub even if this is the first time in your life you have ever known anybody with blood that looked and acted just like yours. Being tired and sick is clearly fucking with your emotions because that shit has (always) never mattered to you before so why the fuck should it matter now? You manage to croak out the word “Cool.” Then you plop down onto your lab chair because WHOOPS, THE ROOM IS GETTING WOBBLY AND YOU REALLY NEED TO SIT DOWN NOW.

Your head clears a bit once you are sitting down. You aren’t sure when the teacher dismissed class—must have been while you were busy making an ass of yourself, hovering on the brink of uncontrollable sobbing over John’s bodily fluids—but that is what must have happened because now that you are not dangerously close to losing your shit you notice that all of your classmates are cleaning up their lab stations and walking out the door. John is decent enough to clean your station for you while you continue to sit there like a totally useless pile of dried-up fecal matter.
Once he is finally finished rinsing out the blood trays and disposing of the used lancets and re- 
shelving the bottles, he turns to you and says, “Karl, can I make a suggestion?”

You shrug because now that your adrenaline-filled meeting with emotional bullshit version 69.1 is 
over you feel even more tired and shitty than you did before class started.

John sits down in the chair beside you. “Promise me you won’t get all pissy over it, OK?”

You shrug again, but this time you summon the gumption to grumble, “You do realize that by telling 
me not to get pissy that you are pretty much setting me up to be a pissy asshole from the outset, but 
fine.”

“Hang on. I have a visual aid.” He digs around in his backpack until he comes up with a half-empty 
box decorated in the eye-searing red-white-pink Valentine’s motif that has been assaulting your poor 
gander globes all morning. He then proceeds to dump its contents into his hand and rifle through 
them, all the while mumbling to himself about, “Come on, where is it” and “Shit, I hope I didn’t eat it 
already.” Eventually, he selects something from the mess in your hands and gives it to you, a 
triumphant expression on his face.

You stare at the thing he has given you, confused beyond all belief. It appears to be a small, yellow 
heart made out of a chalky substance. You frown because the second you think about chalk you 
begin to think about a certain obnoxious girl who you know would go ape shit over candy that tastes 
like disgusting chalk. “What the fuck is this?”

“Sweethearts? They were handing them out in the cafeteria before school.” Your bewilderment must 
be leaking out of your pores to form a choking haze of what in maggot-infested horse dicks are you 
talking about because he quickly adds, “You’re looking at the wrong side, numb nuts.”

You make a mental note to come up with a proper comeback for the “numb nuts” quip later, when 
you don’t feel like the ground and masticated contents of a reconstituted shit sandwich. Then you flip 
the heart over. You find that there are two words printed in red on this side of the heart: GO HOME

“What the hell?”

He shrugs. “That’s my suggestion.”

“Go home? Fuck that.” You close your fist around the heart, half-intending to chuck it across the 
room. Then you remember that you promised you were going to try and not be a pissy little shit 
about John’s advice, no matter how stupid it turned out to be so you sit there with the candy clenched 
in your fist instead.

“You look like crap and you look like you feel crappy, too.”

“I’m fine,” you insist. You proceed to punctuate this statement with a loud draw of snot crackling in 
your sinuses which pretty much confirms that you are the exact opposite of “fine.”

“Do I have to escort your butt to the nurse’s office here? Are you really going to make me drag you 
there? Because if that’s the way you’re going to be about it I’ll make sure to take you right through 
the main hall so everybody sees you make a dick out of yourself. Is that what you want?” You stare 
at the ground because no, of course you don’t want him to pull that shit. You want him to shut the 
fuck up and give you a second to think about what you are going to say to make him shut the fuck 
up so that you can think about what you are going to say to get him to leave you the fuck alone and 
Jesus Christ, you aren’t even thinking straight here what the fuck even was all THAT?

John seems to take your silence as an open invitation to keep talking. “Go home,” he says. “Get
some rest. Get better.”

You sigh and run your fingers through your hair, stopping to massage the area around the metal rims. You are well on your way to developing a massive headache around the area your horns used to be and you don’t know whether it’s because your head still feels like it is packed full of snot or whether it’s because you know that John is probably right and you are too damn tired to continue being an argumentative shitrag. Then you sigh and groan, “If I agree to go home will you shut the fuck up?”

“Absolutely!”

“OK, fine. I'll go. Now leave me alone.”

He eyes you as though he is seriously considering acting on his threat to personally convey your ass to the nurse’s office himself. Then he shrugs and says, “OK. But if I find out you did something dumb like go to your next class I’ll hunt you down and kick your ass.”

“Jesus dicks, John, will you get the fuck out of my face before you catch my death cold? Go eat lunch.”

“All right then. Keep in mind I was serious about the ass kicking, though.” He slings his backpack over his shoulders, gives you a wave, and says, “Feel better, buddy” before leaving you to yourself.

For about half a minute after he leaves the room, you consider fucking off to your fifth period classroom just to piss him off. Then you decide that you are, in fact, feeling Very Shitty Indeed so you scoop up your backpack and make your way to the nurse’s office.

The lady who greets you when you walk in has young eyes but her face is so wrinkled it looks like a rainbow drinker (vampire, you think. Get your act together, dumb shit) got hold of her and sucked out every last drop of moisture in her body. She takes one look at you and says, “You must have come from biology class, young man.”

You raise your eyebrows. “How did you know?”

She smiles and massages her temples as though to say I’m psychic, duh even though you know for a fact that all humans have even less psychic ability than you do. Then she laughs and says, “We get a lot of people coming through here on blood typing day. There are always a couple of fainters every year; nothing to be ashamed of.”

The frown on your face deepens into a scowl. “I didn’t faint. I’m sick.”

“Yes, yes; I can see that. Come on back.”

She leads you into a small room which is an almost perfect replica of one of Cennia’s modification blocks, right down to the heavy stench of antiseptic that would probably be burning off all the hairs in your cartilage nub if you could smell properly. There is only one thing that sets this room apart from the ones on the station and delivers you from all manner of magical mutilation funtimes with Cennia memories and that is the fact that while all of the rooms on the station had only one bed this one happens to have two. It’s a minor difference; one you probably wouldn’t have noticed in your disease-addled state if not for the girl lying supine on one of the beds: curly hair, snub nose…for the second time today the spoor-encrusted wheel of fait has brought you into the general proximity of Aria Motherfucking Mendell.

She seems just as surprised to see you as you are to see her but –ha—she can’t harass you while the nurse is busy taking your temperature and asking you really fucking difficult questions like “Do you feel bad enough to go home?” and “Do you have somebody you can call to pick you up?” You tell
her that yes, you do feel bad enough to go home (why the hell would you come here if you didn’t?)
and yes you have somebody to call (even though you know Nora is probably going to be a huge
bitch about it). Aria stares at you like a creeper throughout the entire process, making you supremely
uncomfortable but—thank fuck—the nurse doesn’t leave you alone with her for a single fucking
second. (You suspect that this weird hypervigilance has something to do with the bizarre yet
seemingly universal idea that leaving two human adolescents of opposite gender together
unsupervised will result in immediate X-rated shenanigans. Most of the time you think this notion is
pretty fucking dumb, but right now you are temporarily grateful for its existence and you commend
the moron who conceived of it with an imaginary but not unfriendly bulge bump.)

Nora is all doll smiles and sugar syrup when she arrives to pick you up from the nurse’s office but
it’s pretty easy for you to tell that she is actually Very Fucking Annoyed underneath her sickly-sweet
veneer. The second you are outside the building, she predictably begins to complain about how you
woke her up and how you were over halfway done with the school day anyway, did you really have
to do this? All the shit that you went through in biology must have you way more riled than you had
thought because your stomach suddenly cramps with the pain of a thousand rusty sickles and you
violently puke up a mouthful of phlegm and stomach acid all over her shoes. That turns out to be just
the ticket for getting her to believe that—guess what—your “son” actually is miserably sick.

She drives you home in stony silence. Once you arrive she helps you drag your aching carcass
upstairs to your room and leaves you with a bottle of water, a thermos of lukewarm chicken stock, a
box of tissues, and a half-muttered admonishment to “Wake me up if you’re dying, I guess.” Then
she ever-so-considerately fucks off so you can get some rest.

You crawl onto your bed without bothering to change into your pajamas or even pull the covers over
yourself. As you sink into the depths of the most welcoming sleep ever, you quietly reflect that
human Valentine’s Day wasn’t nearly as horrifying as it could have been and that’s something, you
guess.

> John: Pester Rose
ectoBiologist [EB] began pestering tentacleTherapist [TT]

EB: rose!
EB: holy crap, rose.
EB: dave just told me you got into like, every ivy league school in the country.
EB: is that actually a thing that happened or is he being a dick and pulling my leg?
TT: Why on earth would you doubt any of the pearls of truth that drop from the lips of our ever-virtuous companion David B. Strider?
EB: because he was doing that obnoxious thing where he says something then takes it back and pretends it’s not true even though it probably is just to be a dick and screw with me.
TT: Ah. In that case I will resist the nearly overwhelming urge to dissect the overtly Freudian overtones of that last statement and answer you directly.
TT: Yes, John. It is true.
EB: wow, that is freaking awesome!
EB: congrats and thank you for not going all freud-y on me.
EB: so where all did you get in?
EB: dang. any idea where you’re going to go?
TT: I haven’t given it much thought. To be perfectly honest, I’d rather hear about your plans than talk about mine at the moment.
EB: pfff i’m probably just going to hang around in community college for a couple of years. booooring!
EB: your plans are way cooler than mine. you must be super excited!
TT: I suppose so.
EB: wait, aren’t you?
TT: At the risk of sounding like an over-privileged brat, no. Not terribly.
EB: oh. well why not?
EB: i mean, i thought ivy league was your thing since forever.
TT: I suspect that therein lies the problem.
TT: Somewhere along the line my goal turned into an expectation—or rather, my mother’s expectation, my teachers’ expectations, and my tutors’ expectations…
TT: I am beginning to wonder whether I might be happier if I had taken myself in a direction that was a bit less…predictable, I guess.
EB: so are you still going to go?
TT: Of course.
TT: After all, it’s what is expected.
EB: that is kind of depressing :(.
TT: Apologies, John.
TT: My ennui is likely nothing more than a result of simple post-success letdown. I will be “right as rain” soon enough, I am sure.
EB: well ok then.
EB: but if you’re still itching to be all unpredictable, just remember that our summer road trip—
EB: (wait, can you really call it a road trip if we’re flying? maybe it’s a summer fly trip. no, that sounds dumb!)
TT: (Perhaps we could call it our avian adventure?)
EB: (no way, that sounds super dorky!)
TT: (Our winged migration?)
EB: (isn’t the name of a documentary?)
TT: (Our stratospheric scud running?)
EB: bluh, whatever we call it our trip is going to be all kinds of wild. plenty of unpredictable shenanigans to make up for being a predictable but super-smart ivy league kid.
TT: Thank you, John. I will be certain to hold you to that standard.
EB: you got it. i will plan the most epically unexpected capers you can imagine.
TT: Best of luck with that.
EB: oh, believe me you will not be disappointed because
TT: Because…?
EB: shit, rose i have to go.
EB: i just realized i was supposed to meet karl at the library almost half an hour ago!
TT: In that case I suppose I can allow you to leave. Goodbye, John.
EB: bye rose! talk to you later!

ectoBiologist [EB] ceased pestering tentacleTherapist [TT]

> Terezi: Who are you?
Terezi Pyrope? You have no idea who this Terezi Pyrope brood is but whoever she is, she is clearly not you because your name is Filani Trunak! As is customary for trolls of your age, you recently underwent ascension, leaving your home planet behind forever in order to join the fleet and devote the rest of your life to forwarding the ever-growing might and glory of the Empire. You are already a few perigees into the training which will dictate precisely how you will be serving the Empire. Fortunately your myriad of interests happens to coincide with the profession which has been selected for you. Your passion for justice and the Alternian legal system will serve you well as you perform your duties as a Legislacerator under the merciless eye of His Honorable Tyranny.

Of course, all of that is still quite a ways down the line for you. After all, the fleet can’t just go throwing a bunch of untrained schmucks into the courtblock and expect the outcome to be anything resembling the well-oiled prosecuting machine you learned about in all your schoolfeeds! You’ll need to prove your mettle as a Neophyte before you are awarded the full title of “Legislacerator” and before you can do that you’ll need to prove your competence by serving as a clerk under an experienced Legislacerator. In turn, the Legislacerator will act as a mentor, gradually increasing your responsibilities until you are deemed capable enough to advance to the more autonomous role of Neophyte. (Your mentoring Legislacerator is an old guy who goes by the name of “Goldhorn”, presumably in reference to the honey-smelling gold-plated horn prosthetic that fills out the upper half of his left horn.)

Lucky for you, Goldhorn possesses all the observational prowess one would expect of a representative of the greatest and most efficient legal system in the universe. Recognizing your potential early in the recruitment process, he handpicked you along with three other high-performing recruits for accelerated training. Consequently, your days of mindless transcription and filing are largely behind you. In fact, today happens to be the first day you will have a chance to gain some firsthand fieldwork experience. Within the next few hours, you along with the other recruits under the tutelage of Goldhorn will be making a visit to a nearby colony planet in order to interview the locals and gather clues to track down the band of marauders behind a rash of devastating raids that have swept the area. You are of course looking forward to all of the interrogation and investigation procedures that are bound to occur once you arrive. In the meantime, you are filling the time until your departure by being a good Legislacerator-in-training and reviewing all of the images of the area you will be responsible for covering on your private, fleet-issued traveling computing device.

The scenes on the screen are full of cement roads that taste like yucky burnt ash and equally unappetizing cement buildings redolent of the taste of cigarette butts, all with an occasional hint of rancid cream off-white storefronts. The sky is colorless but your superior nose detects a grayish haze there that carries with it hint of baked farts. There is the occasional billboard to add a splash of cranberry red or minty green here and there, but taken together it all tastes like a big old blob of nondescript urban sprawl.

You are thinking about zooming in on one of the more colorful billboards to see if you can make out what it says (as well as sample its appealing green apple color a little more closely) when something weird happens. It begins as a flicker of salt-and-pepper static that ghosts across the screen. Then the image application freezes, utterly refusing to close let alone enlarge the green apple billboard for you. You are on the verge of flicking the power off and restarting the machine when your Trollian app pings. Before you can tap the button to bring up the app, a chat window pops up and words begin to appear in rapid succession:

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling g??????C?????????? [GC]
TA: TZ.
TA: TZ are you there?
TA: 2hiit, thi2 had better be the riight iip or ii am going two fliip a biitch.

For a moment your bloodpusher clenches because you had never expected to taste that exact shade of mustard-yellow text ever again. You nearly forget yourself in your surprise—but in the next instant realization begins to dawn and with it, a cold anger.

GC: WHO 1S TH1S?
TA: what do you mean “who ii2 thii2?”
TA: you know who thii2 ii2.
GC: R34LLY
GC: YOU M4Y TYP3 L1K3 H1M BUT UND3RN34TH TH4T D34DDE L3MON SC3NT3D T3XT 1 SM3LL TH3 ST1NK OF 4N 1MPOST3R
TA: no wait.
TA: ii can explaiin.
GC: GOODBY3 F4K3Y MCF4K3RSON

g??????C????????? [GC] ceased trolling twinArmageddons [TA]
twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling g??????C????????? [GC]

TA: TZ ii 2wear iit2 me.
GC: YOU TH1NK YOU 4R3 B31NG CUT3 4ND FUNNY BUT YOUR3 R34LLY NOT

g??????C????????? [GC] ceased trolling twinArmageddons [TA]
g??????C????????? [GC] blocked twinArmageddons [TA]
twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling g??????C????????? [GC]

TA: damn iit TZ.
TA: will you 2top that already?
GC: W41T 1 JUST BLOCK3D YOU
GC: HOW D1D YOU DO TH4T?
TA: you know ii know how two hack around trolliiian blockiiing 2oftware.
TA: that 2hiit ii2 liike grub 2auce for me.
GC: W3LL BULLY FOR YOU
GC: NOW L34V3 M3 TH3 H3LL 4LON3
TA: TZ wait. ii have 2omethiing ii need two tell you and ii2 URGENT.
GC: WH4T 4 CO1NC1D4 2OM3T3D TH4NG FOR YOU TOO

g??????C????????? [GC] sent file bloofer.exe

GC: H4V3 FUN W1TH TH4T, 4SSHOL3

g??????C????????? [GC] ceased trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

You sign out of your Trollian account and close the program, convinced that you have successfully deterred Mr. Imposter McPhonybutt from contacting you again. (If nothing else, you know for a fact that it is mighty difficult to use Trollian when your computer is mired in the throes of a self-executing virus loop created by one of the best computer whizzes you ever knew.) You take a few deep breaths in and out, focusing on the stuffy, book paste and dusty paper smell of your teeny little office in an effort to settle the cold tongues of anger snapping through you. You are well aware that a true
Legislacerator is a master of her emotions, never losing herself to grief or anger in front of a suspect (or at least, never doing so without a calculated goal in mind). Even so, you wish that you were tech-savvy enough to trace that jerk and drag him kicking and screaming back to the courtblock yourself because you can still hear the awful sounds your moirail made that night on the station. He is screaming and you are powerless to help him because you are too busy getting your worthless ass beat; your moirail is dying because you are fucking useless and—

Your Trollian application pings again, another chat window popping up before your pan fully process the meaning of the sound:

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling g??????C?????????? [GC]

TA: u2iing one of my own viiru2 code2 agaiin2t me?
TA: that 2tiing2, TZ.
TA: can you not do that again? ii forgot what a giiant fuckiing bulge ii wa2 when ii de2iigned tho2e thiing2.
TA: TZ? you 2tiill there?
GC: SOLLUX?
GC: 1S TH1S R34LLY YOU?
TA: do you really thiink there ii2 anybody out there who could break out of that viiru2 loop that fa2t?
GC: 1 THOUGHT YOU W3R3 D34D
TA: ii would rather not talk about iit riight now.
TA: at lea2t not untiil after ii tell you what ii came here two tell you becau2e ii dont know how long ii can keep thii2 connectiion 2ecure.
GC: W41T 4 S3COND
GC: HOW 4R3 YOU TYP1NG SO F4ST?
TA: ii have alway2 been a fa2t typer.
GC: NOT L1K3 TH1S
TA: 2o ii got a little fa2ter. biig deal.
GC: NO
GC: NOBODY TYP3S TH1S F4ST
GC: NOT 3V3N YOU
TA: what are you even talkiing about right now TZ?
GC: SOLLUX
GC: D1D TH3Y TURN YOU 1NT0 4 SH1P?
GC: SOLLUX?
GC: 4R3 YOU ST1LL TH3R3?
You feel something jagged twisting deep inside your thorax as you watch the numbers flood your screen. Of all the things that could have befallen your moirail after he gave himself up to save you, this is the worst outcome you could have possibly imagined. You want to scream because this is worse than interrogation, worse than torture, worse than death; this is everything he spent his life running from and it’s not fair, he doesn't deserve this, they should have taken you.

You barely have it in you to make an attempt to decode what he is trying to tell you through the endless strings of numbers. Your half-hearted attempts turn out to be totally fruitless because you don’t speak starship and even if you did the lines of numbers are scrolling by too quickly for you to follow. It is almost a relief when Trollian crashes and your computer defaults into an emergency restart.

You will your heart to slow its manic thrumming enough to let you breathe as you wait for the reboot to complete. When your home screen finishes loading, you open your imaging application and thumb through a few of the baked farts and cigarette butt-stinky images of the area you will be traveling to. You run a few of your other applications—data analysis, music player, your private image file (filled with images of only the most delicious colors like cherry red and clean, fresh mint)—and to your relief everything appears to be working normally. Then you take a deep breath and open Trollian.

On the eve of ascension you had scrubbed your entire contact list. Some of the names you had been sorry to see go while others had been inactive for some time. With a select few, you had even felt a vicious sense of pleasure as you jabbed the delete button. Regardless of your feelings towards the troll handles and the people behind them, you had ascended with a blank contact list on your Trollian account. Consequently, your current contact list is significantly different from the one you used to keep when you were planet-side and it takes you longer to spot the change than it would have a few perigees ago. Your mouth goes dry when you find it, even though it does not come as a surprise: sure enough, the twinArmageddons handle has reclaimed its place on your contact list.

The handle is a darker hue than normal, a delectable honey-flavored color signifying that the owner is offline. You hover over the name, not sure whether you want to send along a private message (saying what, exactly? Condolences on being turned into a battery? Sorry I let them plug wires into your pan?) or whether it would be better to delete the name, block the user, and pretend that the last fifteen minutes or so never happened (and what would that even accomplish? It’s already evident that he can contact your account any time he feels like it.)

You are still debating with yourself over how you are going to handle this situation when there is a sharp rap on the door to your office. Quickly, you close Trollian and call out, “Come in!”

The door opens to reveal a troll who you recognize immediately by the distinctive smell of raspberries dipped in talcum powder: a recruit around your age by the name of Dukasa Meldin. (You are pretty sure the raspberries correspond to his blood color—teal with maybe a drop or two more blue than you. The talcum powder smell comes less from his appearance and more from the fact that he seems to bathe in the stuff for reasons you and all the other recruits can only guess at.) He doesn’t actually come into your office. (In fact, you are pretty sure you detect a subtle aroma of derision fluid underneath the sharp smell of powder. You suspect that this stems from the perpetual state of
apparent disarray you keep your office. Little does he know that you know precisely where 
everything in your office is located down to the discarded staple on the floor under your left shoe 
because you specifically arranged its contents by smell the day you moved in. Of course, you aren’t 
about to waste your time explaining any of that to him because he’s a jerk who jumps to fallacious 
conclusions way too quickly to ever have a dream of becoming a high-level Legislacerator and it’s 
not your job to mentor his incompetent ass.)

“Trunak,” he says.

You bob your head as though to say, “Yes, that’s me. Filani Trunak and certainly nobody else.” 
Aloud, you say, “Meldin.”

“Goldhorn says it’s time to head out.”

You stare in his general direction without speaking for a few seconds because you know that he 
finds your scorched eyes to be creepy as fuck even when you are wearing your glasses. You wait 
until you hear a slight shuffling noise as he uncomfortably shifts his weight from foot to foot. Then 
you break into your best smile—nothing to fear from the sweet blind girl, don’t you feel silly now? 
—and reply, “Great! I was beginning to wonder if we would ever get this traveling entertainment 
exhibition on the road.”

You and Dukasa start toward the docking bay. You notice right away that there is something 
different in the silence between you today; something that has nothing to do with the usual 
undercurrent of mutual dislike. You take a discreet whiff to be sure and yep, he is emanating a mild 
tang of stress fluid that definitely was not there when he arrived at your office. You suppose you 
could be kind and ignore it, leaving the two of you to make the considerable walk from your office to 
the docking bay in peace but where’s the fun in that? Now that you think about it, a little round of 
“Let’s fuck with Dukasshole” is just the thing to ground you after the emotional roller coaster you’ve 
just been on.

“I take it you’ve read the debriefing,” you say. You keep your tone light and conversational but little 
does he know you are just hanging the noose. Let’s see how long it takes him to hang himself....

“Yes. It looks like it’s going to be pretty boring as far as fieldwork goes.”

“Really? I thought I heard we’d be doing some interrogation.”

He shrugs. “Maybe. If you call listening to stories from a bunch of yokels interrogation.”

“It’s better than sitting around filing all day, right?”

“You haven’t heard the way civilians can gab,” he grumbles.

“Ah. And you have?”

He lets out a huff that you are pretty sure indicates he is puffing his skinny chest out like a self-
important doofus before he says, “Actually I have. Goldhorn took me along on one of his 
investigation runs just the other night.”

“Well aren’t you lucky?” You sense his posture going stiff in the way his footsteps beside you 
become just a little choppier and you realize just a fraction of a second too late that you allowed just a 
little more sarcasm to bleed into that last remark than you had intended. Quickly, you amend with, 
“How was it?”

His pause is just a little longer than usual before he replies, “It was alright. But we got this one
Enforceassassinator who just would not shut her squawk blister.”

“Did she tell you anything useful?”

“If you call giving us a detailed inventory of every canned good in the region useful, then yes.” He shudders before adding, “God it was boring.”

“At least it was fieldwork.”

He lets out another huff, this one rife with the stench of scorn. “Fieldwork is supposed to be exciting. Sitting around listening to some old geezer talk about how this one can of grub sauce got dented once is not exciting.”

You grin (internally, of course! Externally your face remains a perfect mask of cordial disinterest). *You’ve found your rope.* “Well, it won’t be much longer before we are all out where the action is. Chasing down criminals. Hauling in bad guys….”

You trail off and for a minute you think that he’s not going to take the bait. Then, voice lightened with the distant edge of a smile, he says, “Apprehending delinquents.”

Injecting a little more enthusiasm into your voice, you exclaim, “Enforcing justice!” *Tightening the noose*….

“Prosecuting villainous curs!”

“Capturing wild rogues!” *Tighter*….

“Scrubbing out the Scourge of the Empire!”

_Gotcha._ You drop the jovial act to fall back into your regular attitude of guarded dislike in order to say, “What was that?”

“Scum of the Empire,” he replies. “Scrubbing out the Scum of the Empire.”

“That’s not what you said a second ago.”

He frowns. “It’s not?”

You turn to look directly at him because you do not need to look where you are going in order to avoid falling on your face like a moron and you want him to squirm a little. You wait until you smell the sweat begin to ooze from his pores. Then you stretch your face into a wide grin and break into a peal of easy laughter.

“Oh of course it is,” you cackle. “Jesus, learn to recognize when somebody is fucking with you.”

He clenches his jaw so hard you can hear his poor fangs grinding in protest as the raspberry aroma intensifies all around his cheekbones. He doesn’t say anything to you for the remainder of your walk to the docking bay. You aren’t psychic but the platonic hate swirling around him tastes just like musty soot and it’s not hard to imagine some of the choice things he is thinking at you. You really can’t be bothered to care about what he thinks of you but the silence is uncomfortable enough that you are glad to reach the docking bay and join Goldhorn and the other two recruits waiting for you there.

Dukasa predictably makes a beeline for Goldhorn and apologizes like a simpering little sycophant for being late even though you and everybody else knows that you are still at least five minutes early.
Goldhorn accepts the apology with an open, smiley sort of tone that any Legislacerator-in-training
would quickly recognize as carrying a distinct undercurrent of irritation. Dukasa eats it up like
soaked grub loaf. (You wonder to yourself as you fall in line to board the shuttle why, exactly,
Goldhorn selected him as a “high-potential recruit” because as near as you can tell the guy has none
of the potential of any of the other recruits he has chosen to take under his metaphorical claw-tipped
leathery dragon wing. You seriously suspect that the choice had less to do with Dukasa’s abilities in
the courtblock and more to do with his ability to be a huge suck-up. If he wasn’t such an asshole you
would feel sorry for him. The kid is going to have one hell of a rude awakening when it comes time
to prove his mettle in the courtblock.)

You all claim your seats on the shuttle—a maneuver that takes all of three seconds because even
though none of you particularly like each other you are all mature enough to handle sitting in close
proximity for a fifteen-minute shuttle ride. Once the shuttle has lifted off and fallen into a steady
cruising speed, Goldhorn stands up. (He is tall, even for an adult troll in his prime. Even though he
must be stooping double, you hear the tips of his horns scrape the ceiling above you—a scuff of
keratin against plastic on his right and a decisive scratch of metal from his left.)

“By now I am sure that you have all studied the debriefing in detail,” he says, “You have all likely
developed an idea of what is expected of you and how you will go about doing it. However, as it
turns out there seems to be a bit of a hitch in the plans.”

He pauses for a moment. You get the impression that he is scrutinizing the four of you, gauging your
reactions and weighing them to determine whether they are Acceptable or Unacceptable. The four of
you sit in rapt silence, a decidedly “Acceptable”—albeit boring—response, so he goes on:

“When you received those debriefings it was believed that this would be strictly an intel-gathering
excursion. As it turns out, there is a possibility that some of the marauders may still be in the area.
That means that for all intents and purposes, this little outing has just turned into a fugitive recovery
operation.”

You hear Dukasa shifting around to sit a little straighter in his seat behind you. For a second you
seriously think he is going to yell “aw YEAH” and pump his fist in the air but he surprises you by
showing a little restraint and being quiet. You have a hard time sitting still yourself, though for an
entirely different reason: the sudden explosion of stress fluid pouring off of him is enough to make
you want to gag. The two other recruits—a guy with cracked horns and a girl who wears too much
perfume—exchange a look that would be unreadable even if there wasn’t an overwhelming cocktail
of talcum powder, raspberry, stress fluid, and cloying perfume assaulting your poor, defenseless
nose.

“I know that some of you—“ and here Goldhorn ever so slightly (yet with the crinkle of his stiff
Legislacerator uniform, ever so distinctly) inclines his head in Dukasa’s direction “—are very eager
to dive in to the more hands-on components of our profession. While that is all well and good, your
main responsibility for tonight has not changed: you will still interview all of the local
Enforceassassins in your assigned zone. However, there is also the possibility—however remote
—that your information gathering will lead you to one of our marks. For that reason we will be
supplying each of you with one of these.”

He sweeps up a satchel that smells like dead animal flesh cured to a lovely chocolate color and
proceeds to dole out handheld devices that give off a scent of ice-glazed steel to each of you. Since
you happen to be sitting in the seat nearest to where he is standing, you get yours first. You proceed
to turn it over in your hands, trying to determine what it does and coming up empty. Around you the
other recruits appear to be doing the same until Dukasa finally says, “Forgive my question, sir, but
what is this?”
"Those are signaling devices. If you should happen to come across one of our marks, do not attempt to apprehend the target single-handedly. Instead, push the red button and the device will ping me your precise location. It will continue to do so every five seconds until I deactivate it personally so from that point on your job will be to keep the target within sight without engaging him or her."

Again, there is a very slight crackle of stiff fabric as he inclines his head in Dukasa’s general direction before adding, “This matter is non-negotiable because at this point none of you are prepared to apprehend a dangerous fugitive. While it certainly is no skin off of my gluteal fat pads if you get yourselves maimed or killed, that sort of thing tends to leave a poor impression on my record. Therefore, if I hear of any of you attempting to do anything outside of the letter of my orders I will personally see to it that you spend the rest of your careers in the fleet scrubbing floors and spit-shining latrines. Have I made myself perfectly clear?”

All of you—even Dukasa—respond with quiet nodding. Goldhorn dips his head in acknowledgement of yet another “Acceptable” response from the four of you. “Good,” he says. “Are there any other questions?”

There is a moment of silence. You imagine that Goldhorn must be on the verge of calling your little powwow to a close when something about the signaling device in your hands catches your attention. You clear your throat and say, “Excuse me, but it appears as though there are two other buttons on this device. You told us what the sweet cherry-red one does, but might I ask what the sour apple-green and licorice-black ones are for?”

“The black one is the power switch and the green one is a stun feature. Point the tapered end of the device toward your target and it will deliver a non-lethal dose of pulsed energy which will temporarily stun anybody standing in the way.” Goldhorn may not be able to smell the wave of excited stress fluid sloughing off of Dukasa but Dukasa must look like a grub on Twelfth Perigee’s Eve because he quickly amends, “Of course none of you will be using that feature tonight because you are not authorized to engage a target in any way. If any of you find yourself in a position that necessitates using the stun feature then I hope you enjoy cleaning load gapers for a living because no Legislacerator worth their salt would pick up a recruit too stupid to follow orders.”

Behind you, Dukasa slumps in his seat like the unprofessional slouch he is. Of the other two recruits the guy remains as inscrutable as ever, but you get the impression that the girl seems to think this whole “find the fugitive” story is a big, patronizing ruse. The rest of the shuttle ride passes uneventfully (for you, anyway. Dukasa jumps out of his seat to look out the window as you make your final descent and the other guy seems to have a rough time with the transition from artificial gravity to the natural stuff.) Once the shuttle lands, Goldhorn detains you all just long enough to confirm that there really are no other questions to be had. Then the four of you are free to do as you will.

The city in which the shuttle has deposited you is exactly as your debriefing images had suggested it would be: tangles of uninteresting roads lined with equally uninteresting dome-shaped alien hives, all of it reeking of ash-gray cement. The only difference between the images and the real deal is that much to your dismay, the baked farts odor of the smog haze is much stronger in person. You take a moment to allow yourself to adapt to all of the really unpleasant smells. Then, using your traveling computing device, you locate the area you are responsible for covering tonight.

Your first stop is the Fourth District administrative office. The polite, impersonal voice of the navigational system on your traveling computing device takes you through a maze of twisting roads which lead you so deep into the urban sprawl you can no longer smell either of the planet’s lemony yellow moons. You pass by the occasional alien on your way—tall creatures with spindly limbs and scales that scrape together every time they move who are most certainly examples of this planet’s original reptilian inhabitants. The Empire must have invaded their planet generations ago because
none of them pay you the least bit of attention aside from moving to clear the path as you approach.

Eventually, you reach your destination: a building with a sign bearing the sweet, candy-red Imperial symbol. You go inside and are met with an adult troll drumming her claws against her desk and emitting an attitude which suggests that she is bored as hell. (You can’t say that you don’t sympathize with her. On a planet that is as clearly subjugated as this one the responsibilities of an Enforceassassinator must be about as stimulating as grubsitting a bunch of pan-damaged maggots in a jar.) Once she notices that you are there, she stops her drumming to let out a low yawn before saying, “You the Legislacerator?”

“Yes I am. You can call me Filani Trunak.”

“Selessa Synsis,” she replies (and wow, you don’t have to be Troll Sherlock to deduce that this lady’s lusus was of the serpentine persuasion). “Let’s get to it then.”

You proceed to spend the next hour listening to your witness talk about every last bit of damage to property/person/etc. that occurred as a result of the most recent raid in excruciating detail. From her account, the raid was brief yet violent with little rhyme or reason as to which areas were spared and which were blasted to smithereens. The assault was over so quickly that the criminals did not even seem to have time to gather up the spoils of the destruction they left in their wake: the only reported loss of property corresponded to that which was destroyed. She finishes her account with, “Frankly I hope you catch and hang the whole lot of those worthless Gamblignants.”

At this you frown and think, *Purposeless violence, disregard for material gain...as near as I can tell this attack had all of the trappings of an unaffiliated band of delinquents and none of the sophistication I’d expect from an organized crime ring.* Aloud you say, “Why do you say that they were Gamblignants?”

She shrugs. “I saw one of them running around out there during the attack.”

“How did you know it was a Gamblignant and not just a fellow Enforceassassinator running for cover?”

“Well for one, I know all the Enforceassassinators in the area and trust me, she was no Enforceassassinator.” She pauses for a moment and you get the impression that she is choosing her words carefully before she adds, “Also, she was dressed...strangely.”

“Strangely dressed?” you repeat, raising your eyebrows as though to say *do tell.*

Her face colors in with a bitter coffee blush. “I mean she was dressed like a Gamblignant! You know; big hat, big boots, long coat?”

“Did you notice anything else? Physical attributes? Where she was headed?”

She is silent for so long you begin to suspect that she is inventing a lie but you do not smell any deceit in her words as she replies, “No. I only saw her for a second and I was too preoccupied with not getting myself killed to pay attention to anything like that.”

*Damn.* “All right then. In that case I think we can call it a night. Thank you for your time.”

She responds with the customary stale platitudes that neither you nor she believes to be sincere. She also tacks on apology for being unable to be more helpful which you *do* believe before you see yourself out.

*This isn’t making much sense,* you think as you start toward your next stop. *Coming in plasma*
blasters blazing and taking nothing—that is not typical Gamblicant MO. They wouldn’t attack a settlement unless there was something to gain from it...so what did they have to gain?

You arrive at your second interrogation site (a low-rise building labeled “Fourth District Suppression Headquarters) eager to gather some information to help you answer that question. An hour later you leave, sorely disappointed. The story the Enforceassassinator stationed there gives you adds nothing to what you heard from Selessa and when you ask him about the Gamblicant it is clear that he has absolutely no idea what you are talking about. Your third and fourth stops are no better. As you head for your fifth and final stop you begin to suspect that maybe Selessa was suffering from a case of good old post-traumatic memory fuckery. (Big hat? Long coat? What were you even thinking; Gamblicants haven’t dressed so flamboyantly in sweeps! Way to be too ready to believe something just because you want it to be true.)

You are about halfway to your destination when your traveling computing device lets out a low chime.

Trollian. Taking a deep breath—because you have a pretty good guess as to what you are about to see—you turn your attention to the screen. Sure enough, a new chat window has appeared:

twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling g??????C????????? [GC]

TA: 54 5a 20 54 48 45 59 20 4b 4e 4f 57
TA: 54 48 45 59 20 4b 4e 4f 57 20 57 48 4f 20 59 4f 55 20 41 52 45
TA: 53 48 45 20 54 4f 4c 44 20 54 48 45 4d
GC: SOLLUX
TA: 52 55 4e 20 54 5a
GC: SOLLUX STOP
GC: 1 DO NOT SP3AK 3MD3R
GC: 1 C4NT U3NR3STD 34U
TA: T0ggU0hJVCBTT1JSWSBUWg==
TA: SVMgVEhJUyBCRVRURVI/
GC: SOLLUX?
TA: auugh FUCK!
TA: fuck thii2 2hiit!
TA: can you read thii2 now?

You are about to about to tell him that Y3S 1 C4N R34D TH4T when somebody claps you on the shoulder and says, “Taking a break to troll your matesprit, Trunak?”

You swallow back the reflexive urge to gasp in response to the unexpected contact (and then you swallow back the subsequent reflexive urge to elbow the culprit in the teeth once you notice the raspberries and talcum powder smell.) Quickly, you close your Trollian app. Then you shake the hand off of your shoulder before plastering on a tight-lipped “fuck you” smile and turning around to say, “What are you doing in my interrogation territory, Meldin?”

Dukasa offers you a shit-eating grin with lots of cream soda-smelling fang. “Just thought you might want to team up and find the fugitive everybody keeps talking about.”

“What fugitive?”

“You mean you don’t know?” He pauses, presumably to give you a chance to admit that you have no idea what he is talking about. You say nothing because his offer to “team up” reeks of bullshit and you want him feeling cocky enough to spill everything he knows. He complies with your wishes beautifully by exclaiming, “The Gamblicant chick! I heard she was holed up around here somewhere.”
“Who told you that?”

“Pretty much all of my interrogation marks?”

You raise your eyebrows. “You finished your interrogation list already?”

“I finished a couple of hours ago.” At your incredulous look, he says, “What? Goldhorn didn’t give me as many marks as you and the other recruits because I was already down here with him a couple of nights ago. Anyways, that’s all beside the point.”

“Ah. And what ‘point’ are you trying to make here?”

He throws his hands up in front of his face as though your words are poisonous barbs. “The point is that you and me are the best recruits. I bet if we worked together we could catch that Gamblignant and haul her in ourselves.”

You roll your eyes because now you see where he is heading with this sudden “let’s be friends” act and the only word you can think of to describe it is pathetic. “If I remember correctly Goldhorn forbade us from apprehending any fugitives ourselves.”

“Pff; weren’t you listening?” (He pauses again as though he honestly believes you are stupid enough to answer. You give him nothing.) “Our orders were not to apprehend any fugitives single-handedly.”

You gape at him because now you see where he is heading with this sudden “let’s be friends” act and the only word you can think of to describe it is pathetic. “If I remember correctly Goldhorn forbade us from apprehending any fugitives ourselves.”

“Pff; weren’t you listening?” (He pauses again as though he honestly believes you are stupid enough to answer. You give him nothing.) “Our orders were not to apprehend any fugitives single-handedly.”

You gape at him because sure, your impression of his level of intelligence has always been a bit less-than-charitable but you hadn’t pegged him as a complete moron. Shaking your head you say, “You know what? I’m going to finish up my interrogation marks now so feel free to play your big bounty hunter fantasy games somewhere else, OK?”

“Aw, come on Filani,” he whines as you turn away from him. “Don’t be like that.”

You continue to be “like that” by telling him to “Fuck off.” Much to your dismay, he fails to fuck off. He fails so hard at fucking off that he follows you all the way to your interrogation site. By the time you get there you are legitimately concerned that he is going to try and go inside with you. He proves that he has at least some measure of decency after all by finally peeling away with a half-muttered, “Fine; your loss.”

Your Trollian app has been pinging almost nonstop since you closed it. You are tempted to check the app before you go inside but you loathe to add any fuel to Dukasa’s conviction that you are gabbing with a potential quadrant mate like some airheaded ninny. (Then again, you suppose he was at least partially correct on that front even if Sollux and you were not in the process of exchanging sweet pale nothings.) You flick the computing device off and go inside.

The Enforceassassinator you meet here is a guy with enough salt-and-pepper strands of gray in his hair to tell you that he is dipping into the sweeps past his prime. He has a self-important air about him and the minute you open your mouth to introduce yourself he interrupts with, “Good lord did they really send a clerk to handle this?”

You tactfully bury your annoyance with his decidedly douchey attitude under a perfect mask of professionalism to say, “I assure you that Goldhorn will be synthesizing everything we discuss today with many other eyewitness accounts. My only job is to collect the information.”

Extending your hand for the customary handshake, you say, “Filani Trunak at your service.”

He hesitates to take your hand for the barest second. You think that you can smell his icky Brussels
sprouts eyes fixating on your shades. Then he says, “Warnot Evanol.” With that pleasantery out of the way, he quickly drops your hand before adding, “You’ll have to forgive me for asking, but what use to me is a blind clerk?”

You restrain the temptation to explain that you can see just fine, thanks and give his hand an extra-sloppy lick to just prove your point. Instead you go with a much less amusing polite smile and say, “I can still hear your account just fine. Now please, tell me everything you can about the most recent attack.”

He contorts his face into an expression that is rife with the stench of doubt (because he clearly thinks that you are none the wiser) but begins telling you his obviously super-important account without further complaint. Outwardly you are a flawless model of rapt attention. Inwardly you are steeling yourself for a very long hour.

Warnot is about fifteen minutes into a monologue that is nigh indistinguishable from the four you have already heard today when a sound from the street outside catches your attention: a low, almost inaudible whuff that you might mistake for a shot of compressed air if you didn’t know better (if you didn’t know who was outside, if you didn’t know what he was carrying on him). As if the sound was not enough to clue you in, the choked-off yelp that follows leaves little room to doubt.

Warnot sucks in a quick hiss of air through clenched teeth, cutting himself mid-ramble to exclaim, “What in the hell was that?”

“Sounds like one of my associates is getting a little overzealous.” You ply him with your most winning smile before adding, “Please excuse me for a moment.”

You abscond quickly, before he overcomes his surprise and remembers that public disturbances are his area of responsibility and not yours. The street directly in front of the building is empty and still. The average onlooker would almost certainly think it was nothing short of a picture-perfect example of a peaceful colony. Then again, the average onlooker would almost certainly not be able to detect the lingering odor of raspberries in talcum powder or the smell of a second troll; one that is familiar enough that you know she is a little more blue than you or Dukasa without the benefit of blood on the scene. Finding your prize is nothing more than a simple matter of following your nose as it leads you to a narrow alley behind the building.

Dukasa is standing over a girl who appears to be about the same age—exactly the same age—as you. She is decked in traditional Gamblignant garb from the buckled black-licorice boots on her feet to the wide-brimmed, blueberry feathered hat that was likely sitting atop her head a few seconds ago but is now a crumpled mess on the ground. At first you think that she is not moving but as you approach you hear her breathing grow ragged with effort and her right arm twitches a bit.

Dukasa seems to notice this as well. He prods her with the toe of his boot and snaps, “Stop moving, scum!”

The force of the stun blast has reduced the girl’s voice to a reedy whisper but she still manages to inject an impressive amount of vitriol into her tone as she rasps, “I’ve got hotter irons in the fire to deal with than you right now. Fuck off.”

“Looks like the stun didn’t paralyze your tongue.” Dukasa levels the device at her head. “Let’s see if another shot can fix that.”

The fact that you have never fired a stun device in your life does not give you pause. Without a second thought you point the tapered end of your device toward the nexus of raspberry and talcum powder and jam down the sour apple button. There is a momentary whir of charging circuitry and
then the device kicks back against your hand as it releases the stun blast. Alerted by the whine of charge-up, Dukasa makes an attempt to dodge—but his surprise makes him clumsy and you are firing from near point-blank. The wave of ozone-smelling energy hits him right between the shoulder blades. He hits the ground like a sack of earth tubers and stays down.

“Sorry Meldin,” you say. “Looks like I’ll be taking it from here.”

You cautiously advance toward him, keeping your device trained on his unmoving form. He is so furious you can smell the waves of burning coal red radiating off of him from several feet away. Once you are close enough for him to see you, his face, neck, and ears all go a blazing shade of neon raspberry. Curling his lips into a fang-bearing snarl he slurs, “Y-you….”

You are decent enough to roll him over to the side of the road without indulging in the temptation to give him a good kick in the globes. Once you are sure he is well enough out of the way to avoid being used as a troll-shaped speed bump, you sniff around until you find his signaling device. When you find it, you kneel down beside him, hold it up where you are sure he can see it, and ask, “Did you hit the signal button yet?”

The only answer he gives you is a furious glare. You think he tries to spit in your face but none of his facial muscles cooperate and he ends up drooling on himself instead. It occurs to you then that it really doesn’t matter whether or not he fired the signal. With a shrug, you toss the device on the ground and stomp it to smithereens. Then you turn your attention back to the girl in the pirate garb.

The girl is still lying where you left her and from the looks of it she is still totally incapacitated. Her lips quirk up into a twisted smile when you come into her line of sight. “Hello, Pyrope.”

“Shut up,” you hiss. Kneeling down, you drape her right arm (her good arm, the one that won’t snap off if you pull on it wrong) over your shoulder. Then you heft her up so she is hanging over your back and stagger to your feet.

“What are you doing?” she asks as you start down the alleyway. She lets out a laugh that is a weak sauce shadow of her usual biting cackle. “You going to arrest me?”

Through clenched teeth (because Jesus, she is a lot heavier than she used to be back when you were stupid kids playing FLARP together) you grate, “We need to talk, but not out here.”

To your immense gratitude, she seems to recognize that you are not fucking around because she goes quiet. You haul her as far away from where you left Dukasa as you can, ducking into branching alleyways at random until you reach the depressing rundown area that seems to be a universal constant in urban areas. Finally, with your legs trembling underneath you with every step, you duck into an empty building with such a heavy smell of pulverized stone and mold to it that you suspect it is on its last legs.

The first thing you do once you are inside is slough the girl onto the ground. Although you do try to avoid some of the more dangerous debris (the massive pile of ice crystal broken glass in the middle of the room, for example), you do it none too gently and she lets out a grunt as her shoulder barks up against one of the legs of an abandoned table. “Geez,” she groans. “Is that any way to treat an old friend?”

You give her your best steely glare even though you know she’s seen it a million times before and she’ll probably see right through it. “What are you doing here, Vriska?”

“Honestly? Trying to save you.”
“Huh,” you scoff. “Looks like you’ve got that backwards.”

“I’m serious here, Terezi.” She makes what appears to be an attempt to sit up but only her right arm
seems to be willing to cooperate with her efforts and she ends up flopping back down to the ground
with a frustrated groan. You suppose you have to give her credit because even lying face down and
near-paralyzed on the floor, her tone loses none of the classic Serket theatrical flair. “The
Legislacerators know who you really are.”

“I know.” Dukasa’s voice echoes through your pan: ‘*Scrubbing out the Scourge of the Empire.*’ You
have no idea whether he was doing it intentionally in a sorry attempt to get a rise out of you or
whether he was just too stupid to keep his cards under the table, but either way it wasn’t his first
slipup (though you suspect it will probably be his last).

The look she gives you smells of nothing but unadulterated shock. “*What?*”

You shrug. “Sorry to spoil your big reveal. I’ve known for a while that they were on to me.”

“Then why the hell did you keep hanging around? Did you just spontaneously become too stupid to
live?”

You sit down on the floor beside her, the better to watch her reaction. “I guess I was just hoping I’d
hold on long enough to see them get you.”

She opens her mouth as though she intends to speak, but you don’t care if she is about to curse you
out or beg for her life or just express some healthy shock. Before she can say anything you shove
your signaling device as close to her face as you can get it without putting it in grabbing range of her
good arm. “See this? You are already acquainted with its stun feature, but I bet you didn’t know that
it’s also a signaling device. What that means is if I push this sweet cherry red button right here—“
you tap the button with your index finger, just to make sure she is paying attention—“a
Legislacerator named Goldhorn will be here within the next ten minutes to haul you off to the
courtblocks. So now, since we’re such ‘old friends,’ I’m going to give you one chance to give me a
reason not do it.”

She gapes at you. “Have you lost your fucking mind? Do you even have any idea what they are
going to do to you? I mean, hell, *me* they’ll just interrogate and kill, but *you*? I don’t even want to
think about the fucked up shit they will do to somebody who ran around pretending to be a
Legislacerator for perigees and made them look like a bunch of fools.”

With a sad shake of your head you say, “Oh, Vriska, that’s just not going to do it for me. Sorry to
say it, but you had me at ‘kill you.’”

You make as though to push the button, going so far as to let your finger hover over it. All of the
color blanches out of Vriska’s face as she yells, “*Wait!*”

Keeping your finger on the button, you turn to look at her.

“Look, I don’t know what went down on that space station,” she says. “But whatever happened up
there must have really fucked with your head because the Terezi Pyrope I remember wouldn’t throw
her life away like a stupid fucking chump just to burn somebody!”

You make sure that you are looking her right in the eye as you say, “Well then I guess I’m not the
Terezi Pyrope you remember.” Then you give the red button—the lovely, sweet-smelling cherry
candy-red button—a good, firm push.

“Goddamn it!” she snaps. “I come here trying to save your ass and this is the thanks I get? Well fuck
you, Pyrope! You can rot in hell for all I care!”

She continues to snarl curses at you. Even though none of them are particularly creative, you don’t interrupt. Eventually, she burns through all her bluster and decides to switch tactics. With a dramatic sigh, she says, “OK. You know what? You can drop the act because I already know you aren’t going to do this.”

“Really? What makes you so sure?”

A triumphant smile edges onto her face. “Because I know you well enough to know that you don’t want to do this!”

“Well you’d better convince me you’re right mighty quick because you only have…oh, about nine minutes before Goldhorn turns up.”

“Come on; stop,” she laughs and maybe if you hadn’t known each other since you were barely-pupated grubs you would miss the strained undercurrent swirling beneath her easy tone. *Not much longer before she cracks….*

“Tick tock, Vriska.”

Her face contorts into an ugly scowl. “What the fuck is your *problem*?”

You scowl right back because *all this talking in circles is getting you nowhere.* “You want to know what my problem is? Here, let me tell you a story: once upon a time a certain spider troll stole a ship for an idiot named Eridan. But when Eridan forced his friends to use that ship on a super-secret covert mission, it ruined everybody’s lives because—surprise—turns out it was tagged as stolen. Now my moirail is a ship and I’m a fugitive from the law. The end.”

“Oh my god, that wasn’t what was supposed to happen,” she groans.

“Oh yeah?” you counter. “Care to explain what, exactly, was ‘supposed’ to happen?”

“Well OK, I *did* know the ship would get tagged—but I thought somebody would track it down and find it with Eridan before you guys ever ended up using it for anything!”

“What did you think *that* would accomplish?” you demand. “And while we’re at it, where did you get that ship in the first place?”

She manages a jerky shrug. “I figured Eridan would get off with a slap on the wrist and we’d all have a laugh at his expense. Wholesome fun for all the little grubs and wigglers. As for where I got the ship…it’s sort of a long story.”

“Then I suggest you talk real quick because you’re already down to six minutes.”

“OK, fine; I get it,” she grumbles. “I guess I’d better start at the beginning.”

“That would be the place to start, more often than not.” You tap the nonexistent watch on your wrist and say, “Five minutes, fifty-five seconds left.”

She grinds her teeth hard enough you can hear the enamel wearing away under the abuse, but she is smart enough to stop wasting time whining and cut to the chase. “I was never planning to ascend and join the fleet with everybody else. I mean, can you picture *me* falling in line and taking orders with a bunch of Slashsternminators? Talk about boring! So I started poking around, making connections until I eventually found what I was looking for.”
“I take it you mean the Gambllignant rings?”

“Psh. Try Gambllignant ring. I only ever managed to get in contact with one. But man, by the time we found out that Karkat was still kicking around, they were practically tripping all over themselves to get me to join them.” She pauses and you get the impression that she is furrowing her brow before she asks, “Hey, speaking of everybody’s favorite little shouty asshole, what happened with—”

“Wow,” you interrupt. “Guess what we are talking about right now: not that.”

“Really,” she drawls, somehow drawing the word out into the equivalent of eight teasing syllables. “Sounds like that’s quite the touchy subject.”

Your voice is as cold as chilled steel blades and twice as deadly as you reply, “Yeah. It is. You have five minutes.”

She mutters something that sounds suspiciously like “God who went and shoved a stick up your ass” before continuing her narrative with: “So anyway, I was already in good with one of the Gambllignant rings when Eridan contacted me, begging me to get him a ship. At that point the Gambllignant ring was prepared to do pretty much anything to get me to join up so I told them to send a tagged ship Eridan’s way and I’d go with them. They did so I left with them a few nights before the whole ‘rescue Karkat’ shit went down. Like I said, I figured I had what I wanted, Eridan would get what he had coming for being an annoying douchebag, and everything would work out fine.”

“Except that’s not what happened, is it?” you press.

“Oh, you think you’ve had it rough?” She laughs; a dark and mirthless sound. “Turns out the only reason the Gambllignants gave a shit about me was because I happened to know little miss Empress-to-be Feferi Peixes. Get this—they actually want to fight for her against the Condesce. Something about promoting their lame-ass free power political agenda? I don’t know. Anyways, I guess they were expecting me to be their gateway to getting in contact with Feferi, but after all the rescue Karkat shit went down she quit talking to me. Hell, everybody quit talking to me!

“The Gambllignants were pissed once they figured out that they weren’t going to get what they wanted from me. I figured the only way I was going to stay alive was if I gave them a name; someone who could connect them with Peixes—but like I said, literally everybody just refused to talk to me. I couldn’t even get Tavros to answer me. I was actually desperate enough to ask Tavros Nitram for help! That was an all new type of low, let me tell you. I really was way beyond my last resort…but then I got an idea.”

She stops and you realize then that she is beginning to give off a musky odor of nervous sweat. “Come on,” you prod. “You only have three minutes left. What was your big idea?”

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“OK, you are probably going to get pissed about this, but just hear me out. I needed somebody who Feferi would talk to and I was in a really desperate situation—I’m talking life and death here and—“

You cut her off with a sharp chop of your hand. “Just tell me what you did.”

“I told them about you.” You try to keep your face neutral but you must be failing epically on that front because she suddenly cackles and says, “Looks like I got to drop at least one big reveal on you after all.”

This time it’s your turn to grind your teeth as you say, “What, exactly, did you tell them?”

She sighs. “Enough for them to enter in the parameters I gave them and come up with a recruit
named Filani Trunak who looked a hell of a lot like Terezi Pyrope. From there they contacted the League of Legislacerators with a proposition. They played it off like they wanted to get rid of me and by that point they probably didn’t care if things went sideways and I got caught. Then they told the Legislacerators about you—how you were parading around under a false name, how you and I used to be the Scourge Sisters and that if anybody could lead them to me it would be you. They made it sound like a real win-win situation: they get rid of somebody they want to get rid of, the Legislacerators get a two for one deal and everybody goes home happy. The Legislacerators were plenty willing to play ball, so we staged the raid and made sure enough locals saw me running around so you would know I was here. Then all I had to do was wait until the Legislacerators showed up and turned you loose.”

“Well would you look at that, you think. I guess I was right to wonder what that Gamblignants were after with their weird attack pattern. I just wasn’t expecting it to be me. Aloud you say, “And that’s it? That’s everything you have to say for yourself?”

“Yes,” she affirms. “That’s the whole story.”

You scrutinize her lying there on the floor, trying to read for any of her more obvious tells and coming up empty. You are tempted to open up and tell her exactly what you think—But I have to be sure first, you think. Pursing your lips you say, “Sorry. That’s not enough.” You stand up and start for the exit. “Enjoy your last few minutes of freedom.”

“What?” she screeches. You hear a flurry of movement as she tries to force her body to get up: shoes weakly scuffing against the floor, a hand slapping against the table leg, and then nothing but her frustrated panting. You are at the door, about to step outside when she yells, “Wait, Wait!”

You stop. Without turning around, you say, “What is it, Vriska?”

“You said that four-eyes is a helmsman now, right? Well, I know some people who might be able to help him.”

“What people?”

“Just people—Gamblignants!” she shouts. “I don’t know if there’s much they can do for him, but if there’s anybody out there who can help it would be them. Terezi, come on. Please!”

“How can I know you’re telling me the truth about all this?”

“You can’t!” she snaps. “But if I could get onto my knees I’d be there now because I am begging you. Please don’t leave me here.”

You allow yourself one quick smile before you turn around to face her because that’s it; now you know she’s tapped out. Then you say, “OK Vriska. I believe you.”

Her sigh is one of genuine relief, devoid of any melodramatic embellishment. “Thank you. Now can we please get the hell out of here?”

You cross the room and arrange her right arm over your shoulders. You are pleasantly surprised to note that the stun has worn off enough for her to carry most of her own weight. All you need to do once you have her standing up is prevent her from falling down as she hobbles forward. As the two of you leave the building, you toss the signaling device back inside and whisper to her that you’ve made it out with only seconds to spare. You decide that there is no need to tell her that you’ve had it turned off since you used it to stun Dukasa.
twinArmageddons [TA] began trolling g??????C????????? [GC]

TA: 54 5a 20 54 48 45 59 20 4b 4e 4f 57
TA: 54 48 45 59 20 4b 4e 4f 57 20 57 48 4f 20 59 4f 55 20 41 52 45
TA: 53 48 45 20 54 4f 4c 44 20 54 48 45 4d
GC: SOLLUX
TA: 52 55 4e 20 54 5a
GC: SOLLUX STOP
GC: 1 DO NOT SP34K COMPUT3R
GC: 1 C4NT UND3RST4ND YOU
TA: T0ggU0hJVCBTT1JSWSBUWg==
TA: SVMgVEhJUyBCRVRURVI/
GC: SOLLUX?
TA: auugh FUCK!
TA: fuck thii2 2hiit!
TA: can you read thii2 now?

g??????C????????? [GC] is an idle troll!

TA: goddamn iit.
TA: TZ ii hope you read thii2 before iiit ii2 two late.
TA: the legii2lacerator2 know who you are. you need two get out of there NOW.
TA: iif thii2 get2 two you iin tiime me22age me when you are 2afe.
TA: plea2e be 2afe.

TwinArmageddons [TA] ceased trolling g??????C????????? [GC]
g??????C????????? [GC] began trolling twinArmageddons [TA]

GC: H1 SOLLUX
TA: oh my god TZ are you ok?
GC: 1M F1N3!
TA: what happened?
GC: 1TS K1ND OF A LONG STORY
GC: M4YB3 1 W1LL TELL Y34H A L1TTL3 L4RVA
WORM >:P
TA: chrii2t TZ dont even joke. you 2cared the 2hiit out of me.
GC: W3LL YOU SC4R3D TH3 SH1T OUT OF M3 W1TH 4LL TH4T COMPUT3R SP34K
CR4P SO 1 GU3SS W3 4R3 3V3R ON TH3 SH1T 1NDUC1NG T3RROR FRONT
TA: yeah 2orry about that.
TA: wriitiing iin letter2 feel2 kiind of weiird for me now.
TA: ii dont really have much of a rea2on two u2e them for anythiing anymore.
GC: Y34H 4BOUT TH4T
GC: 1 M3T SOM3 P30PL3
GC: TH3Y M1GHT B3 4BL3 TO H3LP YOU W1TH TH4T 1F YOU G3T WH4T 1 M34N
TA: waiit really?
GC: Y3S
TA: who are they?
GC: H4V3 YOU 3V3R H34RD OF TH3 FR33 POW3R MOV3M3NT?
TA: no. but ii can run a 2earch and know everything there ii2 two know iiin le22 than 0.22 2econd2.
GC: DO 1T TH3N
TA: ok.
TA: oh. oh holy 2HIIT!
GC: I KNOW
TA: are you wiith them right now?
GC: Y34H
GC: IF YOU T3LL M3 WH3R3 YOU 4R3 THEY C4N COM3 4ND H3LP
TA: ok. thii2 ii2 going two 2ound in2ane but can we hold off on that for ju2t a liittle whiile?
GC: WH4T? WHY?
TA: there ii2 2omethiing ii need two do fiir2t.
GC: WH4T 1S 1T?
TA: TZ…ii found AA.
TA: 2he ii2 aliive.

> Karkat: Make a new friend
You have always known that you are monumental fuckup and thus, you have learned to allot yourself room for at least one act of shameful ineptitude per day. Trying to prevent your daily act of all-around self-humiliation is about as fruitful as shoving a fistful of pumpkin seeds up your own ass crack and expecting them to grow into majestic California redwoods. Your only hope is to delay it for as long as possible. Some days are more successful than others. Today happens to be an especially brilliant example of the depths of your epic assholery because today is the first day in which you have managed to execute your daily fuckup before you even leave your room.

Tomorrow is John’s birthday. You will not be seeing John tomorrow because tomorrow is Saturday and John’s dad is taking him all the fuck over to Seattle to watch the great American pastime of sweaty men in tight pants trying to hit a ball with a club and calling it “baseball.” Consequently, you had planned to give him his birthday present at school today because you are a good friend and you have your shit together. Except apparently you are wrong on both fronts because sometime between going to bed last night and waking up this morning you managed to lose John’s present.

You distinctly remember signing the card (a truly repugnant number featuring Nicolas Cage making the most epically horrified face you have ever seen in your life with the caption “OMG YOU’RE *HOW* OLD???”), sealing it in the equally garish envelope last night, and setting the whole deal down on your desk last night. Past you must have then suffered a sudden case of uniquely toxic and severe pan flatulence because apparently he chose to do something idiotic and unnecessary with it after that and now present you has no idea where the fuck it is.

You have already looked through all your desk drawers and emptied your backpack and so far you have come up with nothing. You continue to tear your room apart, looking behind your desk (a perfectly reasonable place to look), going through all your dresser drawers (why the fuck would you have put it in there?), taking a peek under your bed (did you really expect to see anything under there other than a couple of really impressive dust bunnies?), and even resorting to looking under your goddamn pillows (wow, are you even trying anymore?) until you are dangerously close to your self-imposed get-the-fuck-out-of-the-house by 6:30 deadline. Finally, after one last futile sweep of the room, you are forced to accept that John’s present is long gone and you are the shittiest friend. It’s you.

You head downstairs, intending to grab something you can eat on your way to the bus stop in order to ensure that you make it out of the house before Nora gets home from work. When you enter the kitchen you suffer a bowel-shriveling moment of “oh shit” because Otto is sitting at the table and his posture is enough to tell you that he is waiting for somebody. Since you are the only other person in the house, you are going to wager that the somebody he is waiting for is you.

For about half a second you consider turning around and leaving the kitchen before he sees you. (Sure, it would mean leaving the house without breakfast but you aren’t some pooping little wiggler who can’t handle missing a meal if the situation calls for it. Since this is pretty much a FUCKING RED ALERT, you are going to go ahead and say that in this case yes, the situation absolutely calls for it.) That half-second turns out to be exactly 500 milliseconds too fucking many because while you are standing there being an indecisive nookwhiff Otto looks directly at you. Casualy, he holds up a blue and yellow envelope. “Looking for this?”

You bristle because even though the envelope is turned the wrong way for you to see the name scrawled on the back, there is no question as to what it is. “Give it back.”
“In a minute. You and I are going to have a little chat first.”

He motions for you to sit in the chair beside him but you decide that fuck that, you earned your justification for being a hostile little shit the second he decided to steal your things. You aren’t sitting anywhere near him unless he makes you.

“What the fuck are you still doing here?” you demand. “Don’t you have work?”

“Perhaps I haven’t made myself clear,” he replies. He grasps the edges of the envelope in both hands and twists. “Sit down now.”

You open your mouth to protest because who in the fuck does he think he is, you don’t care if he is higher rank than you, that is yours, give it back. He responds by giving the envelope a sharper twist, hard enough for you to hear the paper begin to tear. With a glare fit to vaporize reinforced steel, you sit in the chair facing him.

“When did Nora and I ask you to invite your friend over?”

“I don’t know,” you grumble. “December?”

“December,” he repeats. “Yes, I believe that’s right. Your long-term memory is clearly intact. Now tell me: what month is it right now?”

You sigh because you can already see where this conversation is going and you are in no mood to be having it now or ever. “April.”

“Yes; that is also correct. You appear to have enough intelligence to understand orders. That leads me to my final question.” He leans forward, getting right the hell up in your business to say, “Why have Nora and I yet to see this—“ he pauses to read the name on the back of the envelope in his hands “—John?”

“I…. To your utter horror, your pan utterly fails to produce a single viable excuse. Instead all you can do is marvel at the knowledge that this is the one time in your shitstain of a life in which you really need your propensity for producing strings of speech vomit to come through for you and would you look at that your store of word bile is completely dry. All you can do is offer up a supremely unconvincing response of “I’m working on it.”

“Are you?” he scoffs because wow, obvious bullshit fabrication is obvious. “The fleet is very displeased with your lack of progress.”

Since it went so well for you the first time, you wisely decide to try lying again. “I’ll get him over here soon.”

He jumps to his feet and oh fuck, his baby face is twisted into something ugly. You have never thought of him as especially threatening, but Jesus Christ here he is looming over you like a nightmare apparition ejected from the asshole of the vengeful gods of intimidation. He raises his hand and your gut does a lazy, adrenaline-filled 180 as you realize that shit, he’s really going to hit you, isn’t he? You throw up an arm to block the incoming blow but when he lets fly his hand doesn’t go toward you. Instead, he smashes his fist into the table beside you as he snarls, “You’ll get him over here tomorrow!”

You make damn sure not to flinch away from his sudden tough guy act because you are not about to let him think you are some feckless little weakling that he can just walk all over. No; you do not give him a single inch as you snap, “I can’t! It’s his birthday tomorrow; he’s going out of town.”
“Another convenient excuse,” he sneers. “What a surprise.”

“I’ll do it as soon as I can.”

He glares at you for a few seconds, no doubt expecting you to break down into a trembling puddle of crying fear piss. You glare right back with all the burning intensity of a case of the vengeful taco shits. Finally, he backs off and says, “You’d better because if you don’t there are going to be some serious consequences.”

“Yeah, OK dad,” you grumble, relaxing a bit now that he’s gotten his halitosis-infected self out of your face. “Give me back my card.”

He glances at the envelope in his hand as though he has forgotten it was there. Then he tosses it onto the table beside you. “Get to school.”

You wait until his back is turned to you before flipping him a quick double bird. Then you grab a blueberry bagel and hustle your ass out the door before Nora gets home and you have another close encounter of the douche-thumping kind. Once you are safely on the bus, you examine the envelope to see if it shows any signs of the abuse Otto-the-fucktarded-macho-man inflicted on it. There is a tiny tear at the top of the envelope but the card inside does not seem to be any worse for wear. The gift is still in perfectly acceptable condition for giving. (You are relieved that this is the case because if something had happened to render it un-givable you would have been left with no choice other than to throw yourself off the bus, drag your ass home, and deliver a swift kick to Otto’s unprotected shame globes. It took you weeks of skimming dollars off the paltry amount he and Nora supply you to purchase lunch at school in order to save for this piece of shit and you are goddamned if you are going to let all those sacrificed tater tots go to waste.)

When the bus drops you off at school, you do not meander toward the front doors with the herd of barely-awake and therefore stupidly complacent human teenagers around you. Since your two (!) close encounters of the Aria kind on Valentine’s Day, you have been careful to never keep the same morning routine for more than a couple of days. This mostly consists of changing up your route to the cafeteria every now and then because she won’t approach you once you are with John and you are free to spend another day wallowing in the knowledge that you are still being a massive bulge about this whole embarrassing situation. (You are pretty sure that John has caught onto your shitty little game by now and you suspect that he doesn’t appreciate being your de facto body guard but he hasn’t mentioned anything about it yet and you aren’t about to poke the sleeping choler bear as long as he is willing to continue playing along.)

Today’s route takes you all the fuck around the perimeter of the school to the doors that open into the art lab. You are silently thankful that the room is empty this morning because the last time you tried taking this route some young Picasso got a little overeager with the potter’s wheel and you received a big, wet glop of clay to the face. You weave around canvases holding half-finished abominations (or maybe it’s actually high fucking art; fuck if you know) until you reach the door.

The exit deposits you into one of the smaller, less-populated hallways. You see a guy putting a French horn case into his locker, another guy sitting in a corner tapping away at his cell phone, a girl gnawing on a granola bar, and that’s it. You follow the hallway until it feeds into the main hall, meeting nobody on the way. In the main hall, you do your best to fade into the crowd. From there you ride the currents of the ever-shifting mass of human adolescent drama bullshit until you finally reach the cafeteria.

You scan the room and see that John is already in the usual place, thank fuck. (You have had only a couple of mornings in which John failed to arrive before you and every last one of them had been an exercise in rectum-puckering suspense as you sat there praying that he would find you before stalker
girl extraordinaire Aria did.) You waste no time in scuttling over and planting your ass in what you have come to think of as “your” seat.

“Morning, Karl,” he yawns.

“Hi, John.” Quickly, before some cosmic misfortune can crop up to stab you in the crotch and leave you disfigured for the rest of your life, you produce the bright envelope from the depths of your backpack and slide it across the table to him. “Happy early birthday.”

He is still in the middle of what was probably meant to be a jaw-unhinging yawn but he cuts it short to utter an incredibly eloquent “Huh? Then, seeing the envelope in front of him, he says, “Oh! Thanks, Karl!”

He picks up the envelope and proceeds to sit there staring off into space like a doofus for a good ten seconds. You wait until your sense of anticipation begins to prickle in your bowels like a rancid cloud of flatulence. Then you groan, “Come on; what are you waiting for? Open the damn thing already!”

“Sorry,” he laughs. “I was just thinking we’ve been friends since September and I still don’t even know when your birthday is.”

You almost bust into a serious case of the hysterical scoff-snorts because even you don’t know any way to guess where your wiggling day would fall on a human calendar and even if you did he would be the first person to give a shit about that worthless day since ever. “Why does it matter?”

“Are you kidding? It’s kind of an important thing to know!” He frowns. “You haven’t already had it, have you?”

“No.”

His frown quickly morphs into a bright smile. “Oh, good! For a second there I was worried that you might actually be older than me. So when is it, then?”

“When is what?” you intone, wishing he would just open the envelope and complete the human wiggling day gift-accepting ritual like a normal person instead of wasting his breath talking about you.

“Your birthday!”

Your first instinct is to shrug and say “I don’t know” but you realize that would be an extremely fucking weird response and catch yourself in the nick of time. Quickly, you blurt out the first arbitrary date that pops into your head: “June twelfth.”

“Cool. I’ll remember that!”

You hold back a wince because even though you realize he means that as a promise, you can’t help thinking it sounds more like a threat. “Yeah thanks,” you mumble. Nodding toward the envelope, you say, “Now open that.”

He tears into the envelope with all the voracious energy of a wolverine ripping into the innards of its most recent prey. He smiles when he sees the (beautifully unscathed yet still truly hideous) Nicolas Cage card and then he opens the card and his smile evolves into a full-on grin. “Oh, sweet!” he exclaims. “A Netflix gift card!”

You squirm in your seat because even though you are slowly beginning to acclimate to the ins and
outs of human friendship you still aren’t quite used to seeing anybody get this excited over something you have done to them. It’s a weird feeling; one you aren’t sure how to describe outside of “vaguely pleasant.” Somehow in the face of your pan-swirling confusion, you manage to cough, “Yeah. Well, now you can watch all the shitty movies you want.”

“Heh, you know me so well,” he laughs. “Thanks!”

You are about to reply with a heartfelt “You’re welcome” when a hand comes out of nowhere and snatches the card out of John’s hands. John lets out a yelp, his expression passing from surprise to slow-dawning anger as he realizes what is happening. You, on the other hand, skip the surprise and go straight for the full-throttle rage spasms because you can see what is happening and it is a more gigantic pile of bullshit than even the most record-sized Twelfth Perigee’s Eve behemoth leaving.

Behind John, Cory Manson sneers, “What’s this? Is today your birthday, Egderp?”

John clenches his jaw in a way that says he is trying really hard to restrain the temptation to turn around and give Cory a well-placed punch on his Ken doll face. “Give it back, Cory.”

“What, this?” Cory dangles the card in front of John’s face. Predictably, he pulls it out of reach the second John makes a grab for it. “Ooh, you’re going to have to be quicker than that!”

You sit and watch, your blood boiling hot enough to curdle your brain as Cory leads John through a few more rounds of this douchebaggery until John finally manages to grab onto the card before Cory can pull it away. You are about to relax because you figure Cory-the-assbutt is going to fuck off now that he’s had what qualifies as his nook-spewing brand of fun—but then you notice that Cory isn’t letting go of the card. Before you can say anything John pulls down, Cory pulls up, and the card tears right down the middle.

You aren’t sure why but something inside you snaps when you see that horrifically ugly card rip apart. Maybe it’s a product of having narrowly avoided seeing it folded, spindled, and mutilated once already today. Maybe you still have a few really fucking obnoxious bees in your bonnet over all the bullshit you have already endured this morning. Or maybe it’s because this is the first time you have ever given a gift to somebody for this purpose and some little, tiny part of you—the part that was afraid that you were going to fuck this up and make a total ass of yourself like you always do—is righteously incensed because once again everything you have your grimy hands on has turned to shit even though you did everything right. Whatever the reason, you are so angry you are actually seeing red. (Coincidentally, this only serves to make you even angrier because you hate that fucking color, you hate it for everything that has happened to you because of it.)

Your voice climbs a dangerous crescendo to arrive at an earsplitting shriek of unfiltered rage as you shout, “Oh my god will you just FUCK OFF?”

Cory fails to recognize the precariousness of the situation. He retaliates by flipping you off and saying you don’t know what because you are already launching yourself at him. You pile drive your whole self into his solar plexus and he goes down hard. For about one billionth of a second the only sound you hear is the dull thud as Cory—all 240 football-playing, shit-spewing, ass wipe chewing pounds of him—hits the ground. Then the entire cafeteria erupts into chaos. You hear feet slapping the tile floor as people come running over for a better look, people yelling, John shouting something that sounds like “Karl, don’t!” except you can’t be sure because whoops you are way too busy to process any of that right now but thanks for trying, John, please come again later—and then Cory slams a fist into your face hard enough to knock you off of him.

The punch leaves you reeling, too clumsy and stupid to get out of the way before Cory throws himself on top of you. You can feel him trying to force you onto your back so he can get at all your
more vulnerable areas but you aren’t about to just lie down and let him have at you that easily. The
two of you end up grappling on the floor in a tangle of limbs. You have to give him credit: he clearly
knows what he is doing because even with the benefit of sweeps of strifing with Crabdad on your
side he is giving you one hell of a run for your money. In the end the only thing that saves you from
having your ass served raw and filleted is his impatience: he tries to sneak in a sucker punch and
misses. You take the opportunity to elbow him in the gut as hard as you can. It’s a sloppy hit and it
barely even leaves him winded but it does get him to back off enough to let you wiggle out from
under him.

He is after you almost immediately but this time you are ready for him. When he lunges for you, you
mash your foot into his face. Something under your shoe goes crunch. He claps a hand over his nose
with a shriek but instead of staying down he surprises you by coming at you like a fucking berserker,
all swinging arms fists of fury. You try to move out of the way because he is bigger than you with a
hell of a lot more muscle power and you know you aren’t going to be able to block a wild punch
without getting hurt. The crowd around you is so thick by now that there is nowhere for you to go.

Just as you are sure you are about to take a really unpleasant hit to the face (or at least you really
hope he’ll go for the face because that’s a fuckton easier to dodge than a hit to the globes), somebody
yells, “STOP!” and shoves you out of the way. You almost take a reflexive swing at the interloper
(because hell, for all you know he’s one of Cory’s buddies coming in to help fuck you up) before
you realize it’s John; it’s John and he is telling you to calm down, DON’T HIT JOHN YOU DUMB
ASS? A few feet away, you see a group of three guys gathered around Cory—two of them holding
him back and all of them saying shit that would only be printable in triple X-rated pale porn rags
back on Alternia—and you realize with a start that the fight is over before it’s really even begun.

“Jesus, Karl, you didn’t need to do that,” John pants. “Are you OK?”

“Yeah,” you say. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You’re bleeding,” he says and for the first time you notice the warm gush of blood on your chin
and the copper taste of it in the back of your throat.

He goes on to say something about “Mr. Underwood is going to have a freaking conniption” but you
fail to fully process the words tumbling from his squawk blister because oh great, once again, Aria is
staring at you and making everything about a billion times more uncomfortable than necessary. You
can feel her eyes boring into you, lingering on the blood dribbling down your chin with way more
intensity than strictly needed—and then you see her give a little sigh before peeling off from the
crowd and heading for the doors of the cafeteria. You decide right then and there that fuck it,
you might as well bite the bullet and settle this situation once and for all because for all you know you are
going to be expelled by the end of the day and if you are about to suffer the end of your human
academic career you might as well see to it that you have all of your affairs in order.

John is still babbling on about “Whoa, I think you might have actually broken his nose.” You start
after Aria but he moves to stand in front of you and says, “Where are you going? You know the
school admins are going to be a lot more pissed if they have to hunt you down, right?”

“Yeah, yeah,” you say with a dismissive wave of your hand. “I’ll be back in a second. I just want to
get all this fucking blood off of me.”

“Do you want some help? It looks like he might have knocked a couple of your teeth out!”

“No; it’s fine.” You quickly run your tongue along your gumline, just to be sure because your mouth
actually does hurt like a bitch. Thankfully, all of your teeth are still intact. “I’ll be fine. Really. And,
uh…in case I don’t get to see you again today: happy birthday.”
He offers up an incredulous laugh and it strikes you that oh fucking Christ, that was a really stupid thing to say, wasn’t it? Way to go, farts-for-brains. Then he moves out of your way and says, “OK. See you, then.”

You weave your way through the dissipating crowd as quickly as you can. Lucky for you, most of the people standing in your way are more than happy to get the fuck out of your way really quickly. (What can you say? Going batshit insane all over the general vicinity of another classmate’s face appears to have its perks.) Aria has already left the cafeteria by the time you start for the doors but you don’t have any trouble spotting her once you get into the main hall. You hurry after her but the hall is as crowded as ever and most of the assholes milling around out here are much less amenable to moving their asses to let you pass. By the time you begin to make up any ground, Aria has led you halfway across the school to slip inside the gym.

You reach the doors a few seconds behind her and you pause to utter a silent prayer that she is not heading for the locker room because that would be a real bitch of a situation. (Not to mention ironic as fuck, seeing as that is pretty much the same goddamn thing you did to her the first time she ever attempted to approach you.) Then you go inside.

At first you think that she really did go into the locker room because the gym appears to be empty. The lights are dimmed, there is no one to be seen, and the room is silent in that special, oppressive way unique to really fucking big, empty spaces. Then you hear something from underneath the bleachers: a quiet chiming noise that would be easy to misconstrue as one of the myriad of available text alert tones on a human cell phone if you didn’t know what you were hearing—but you happen to know exactly what you are hearing.

Your heart leaps up into your throat and threatens to asphyxiate you to death right then and there because it’s not possible, you are hearing things; clearly your little tussle in the cafeteria has fucked you up more significantly than you had first thought and this is all some richly elaborate trauma hallucination. Then you hear it again and this time there is no mistake: it’s a Trollian alert signal.

Cautiously, you approach the bleachers. It takes your eyes longer to adapt to the half-light than you would like (much to your dismay, it seems that perigees of diurnal living has properly fucked your night vision all the way from here to China and back), but when they do you are able to see that yep, somebody is under the bleachers typing away on a handheld device and yep, it’s Aria.

Once you are close enough to catch her attention without screaming like a rabid boar, you clear your throat and say, “Aria?”

She must have been really involved in whatever she was writing because she jumps at the sound of your voice and drops the device in her hands. It tumbles to the ground and bounces once, twice, three times before it hits your shoe and comes to a rest on the ground right in front of you.

You can see her making a scramble to get to it before you do, but the thing is literally right next to your foot so of course you get to it first. You pick it up, fully intending to hand it back to her without looking at the screen because you recognize that whatever the hell she was talking about it is none of your damn business, but it’s been so long since you’ve seen anything written in Alternian and you need to be absolutely sure that she was using a Trollian chat client before you say any of the things you are thinking about saying so you give the screen a perfunctory glance—and then you proceed to lose your entire stock of trademarked and off-brand shit.

As expected, the screen is filled with Alternian letters (and holy fuck, you did not even realize just how much you missed seeing those beautiful symbols). As absolutely not fucking expected, some of those letters are spelling some very familiar names:
TA: but are you really sure that it what you saw?
TA: what if it was a trick of the light?
AA: sorry sollux
AA: i wanted it to be karkat too
AA: but i know what i saw and there is no way he could be a troll!

Aria is already reaching for the device. You pull it out of her reach and demand, “Who are you? How do you know my name?”

“Karkat?” she gasps.

For just one second your heart stops in your chest because that’s it, that’s your real name in real Alternian and it feels so goddamn good to hear it again that it makes your throat close up a little. Then you come to your senses and hiss, “Yes. Who the hell are you?”

She laughs and says, “Karkat, it’s me. Aradia.”

Your jaw drops so fast it very nearly detaches from your skull and shatters on the floor at your feet. “Megido?”

“Yes!”

“No,” you breathe. “That’s not possible—you’re dead!”

“Oh, I assure you I am very much alive and I intend to stay that way.” She pauses, the edges of her lips curling into a curious frown. “Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

“What is it?”

She gestures to the blood congealing on your chin. “Is that your natural blood color?”

You worry your lower lip between your teeth. (This turns out to be a fantastically stupid idea because the wound there immediately begins to bleed like a fucking faucet and it hurts like a bitch.)

Even though the two of you are far removed from any circumstance in which this shit should matter, the thought of letting anybody know the truth about the sludge flowing through your vascular system still makes you feel kind of sick inside. Still, the Aradia you remember has always had a bit of a weird streak and she’s already seen a whole bucket’s worth of your blood today anyway so fuck it, you might as well tell her the truth and get that little unpleasantry out of the way so you nod your head and let her know that yes I am a repulsive freak of nature.

“Oh,” she says. “Well that explains a lot.”

“Wow, fuck you, too,” you grumble, though you do not put nearly as much fire into the words as you normally would because you are pretty sure she isn’t purposefully insulting you. “Care to explain to me how the fuck you’re alive?”

She furrows her brow. “Sorry; I don’t understand. Or I guess do understand the question but I don’t understand why you are asking it!”

“Everybody back home thought you were dead—Sollux thought he’d killed you!”

Her look of curious confusion deepens. “Why would he think that?”

“I don’t know. Something about Serket mind-controlling him into blowing up your hive? He was pretty fucked up over it because he never found your….” You trail off, realization dawning. “Oh my
god you weren’t there, were you? Holy shit, the Threshecutioners must have come by your place and carted you off before it happened.”

“I’m still not following you here. What Threshecutioners?”

You throw your hands into the air and let out an exasperated groan. “The Threshecutioners that came around to dole out the initiatory ass whooping before kidnapping you and drafting you into this whole asspurge of an operation!”

She shakes her head. “Karkat, I volunteered for this.”

“Why in the fuck would you want to do that?”

Her expression darkens considerably. “I had my reasons.”

You are about to ask her what “reasons” could possibly justify voluntarily subjecting yourself to permanent mutilation and guaranteed isolation from everything and everybody you have ever held dear when the intercom system crackles and a curt voice says, “Karl Vantross, please report to the vice principal’s office. Karl Vantross, to the vice principal’s office.”

“You should probably go,” she sighs. “They’ll be a lot harder on you if you keep them waiting. But first—“ she fishes into her purse and withdraws a tiny package of Kleenex “—here. Take these with you and try to clean up a little on the way. You look like death!”

You trade her (still chiming) device for the package of tissues with a grudging “Thanks.”

She smiles and says, “We’ll talk again later, OK?”

You tell her “OK” and you make damn sure to say her real name because you haven’t forgotten how nice it felt to hear your name again and you imagine that it’s been a hell of a lot longer for her than it has been for you. Then you start for the vice principal’s office and probable expulsion. (You and Cory both end up getting suspended from school for three days and he practically starts crying like a little bitch right there in the vice principal’s office. You decide that makes spending three extra days stuck at home with Nora and Otto totally worth it.)

> John: Pester Jade
ectoBiologist [EB] began pestering gardenGnostic [GG]

EB: jade i have a bit of a dilemma here.
GG: a dilemma???
GG: that sounds serious :O
EB: well ok maybe dilemma was kind of a strong way to put it.
EB: but it’s definitely a big deal!
GG: what is going on??
EB: ok so it’s karl’s birthday in a couple of weeks.
EB: it is just a couple of days after graduation.
EB: i remember him saying that he isn’t getting a graduation party so i thought it might be cool to throw him a surprise graduation/birthday party thing.
GG: ooh!!!!
GG: that sounds like lots of fun :D
EB: but there’s just one hitch.
EB: well actually there are a couple of hitches but this the main one.
EB: dad is having the whole house painted on that day.
EB: i can’t have it at my house.
GG: so have it at his house then!!
GG: duh!
EB: well i would except here’s the thing: i’ve never been over to his house before.
EB: actually i’m not even sure i know exactly where his house is!
EB: (geez, that is sort of embarrassing.)
GG: what???
GG: why not??
GG: i thought you said you guys hang out together a lot!
EB: we do. just not at his house.
EB: jade, i’ve never even met his parents.
EB: actually sometimes i get the feeling he goes out of his way to keep me from meeting them.
GG: well thats weird :/
EB: you think?
GG: john i live on an island with just a dog and the mummified corpse of my grandpa and i am saying thats weird
EB: yeah. sometimes i wonder if
GG: what???
EB: never mind. they are probably just really annoying or something.
EB: maybe they tell embarrassing stories about karl to everyone they meet.
EB: (haha that would actually be pretty funny.)
EB: anyways the point is i’ve never met them.
GG: oh
GG: well call them and introduce yourself then!
EB: i guess i could do that.
EB: he never gave me his home phone number but there is only one vantross family in maple valley so that must be it.
GG: there you go!
GG: crisis averted :)
EB: thanks, jade.
GG: you're welcome!
GG: talk to you later
GG: and see you soon!!!
GG: only a couple more months :D
EB: yeah!
EB: see you later jade.

ectoBiologist [EB] ceased pestering gardenGnostic [GG]

> Feferi: When are you going to join the memo?
> Feferi: When are you going to join the memo?

You’ll join the memo in just a couple minutes! But right now you need to focus on finishing up your little errand because it’s something you have been putting off for much too long and you are pretty sure that letting it go any longer would be a real problem.

Right now you are skimming along the ocean floor a few miles away from your hive. At this depth everything is pitch black. The only way you can see where you are going is to rely on the fuchsia glow from your skin and gills. It’s a little spooky, but the weight of the water around you is better than the cuddliest blanket and there are plenty of cute little glowy sea creatures to lighten things up.

Normally you would be swimming at a much faster clip but the weight of the net you are pulling with you is much heavier than usual and slaughtering all the lusii by yourself had proven to be a bigger chore than you had expected it would be. Still, you are sure that the extra-big feeding will more than make up for the long stretch in which you had barely been able to scrape together the motivation to gather enough food to keep your lusus alive and, if not exactly happy, at the very least quiet. (You still don’t particularly like to think about those couple of perigees around ascension. Feeding your lusus wasn’t the only thing you had a hard time motivating yourself to do. You will never share this with any of your friends, but there were a couple of days in there where you just did not have the energy to feed yourself or get dressed or even get out of your recuperacoon. Today is a different story, though! Today you are looking forward to catching up with some really great friends and you feel more like yourself—good-happy-excited!—than you have in a long time!)

Your lusus senses you coming long before you are close enough to see her. You feel more than hear her voice as it projects into your head and zings down your spine:

welcome daughter hello

You are pretty sure that just like the bottom of the ocean, most people would find her voice to be kind of scary. Not you, though! It may not be pretty, but to you it is a comforting sound that makes you feel warm and safe. You smile and think, Hello mother.

it’s been so long too long i missed you

I know, you think. I’m sorry. Coming into range of her longer tentacles, you think, I brought a lot this time—more than usual!

You hurl the contents of your net in the general direction of her mouth and the tentacles come alive, snatching at a halved Whaledad here and a filleted Squidmom there until all the carcasses are gone. The whole process takes only a half-minute at most, but you can’t help noting with a twinge of trepidation that it’s much slower than you would have expected it to be even a perigee earlier.

thank you child thank you thank you

you are a good daughter

i missed you please come back sooner next time

You spend the majority of the swim back to your hive trying not to dwell on the changes you have seen in your lusus over the past several perigees. You know that she is old—ancient, even—but you can’t help thinking that this is the first time she has ever really struck you as old. If her appetite wasn’t as insatiable as ever, you might even think that she looks a bit sick and…and you don’t want to think about that right now; time to think about something else!
You sure are excited that you will be talking with all your friends in just a few more minutes! In fact, you are so excited that the second you get home you head straight to your computing device and sign into your Trollian account. Just as you expected, the private memo invite is waiting for you and from the look of things it’s been waiting for a while. Quickly, you click the link.

cuttlefishCuller [CC] joined memo

CT: D --> You have clearly failed to grasp my logic
CT: D --> You will allow me to e100cidate my point at once
TA: oh, you can go ahead and order me all you want.
TA: the an2wer ii2 2tiill going two be fuck no.
CC: S)(ello everybody!
CC: Sorry I’m so late.
CC: O)(, it looks like I am glubbing in on somefin IMPORTANT!
TA: hii FF.
CC: )(i Sollux! 38D
CC: W)(at )(ave I missed?
GC: NOT MUCH
GC: W3 W3R3 JUST H4V1NG 4 H34T3D D3B4T3 OV3R WH3TH3R OR NOT W3 SHOULD 1NV1T3 4 C3RT41N GR4P3Y POPS1CL3 FR33Z3 S34DW3LL3R W1TH 4 P3NCH4NT FOR D3C3PT1ON TO JO1N US
GC: 1N F4CT D3B4T1NG 1S PR3TTY MUCH TH3 ONLY TH1NG TH4T H4PP3N3D SO F4R!
CC: Is it safe to assume that by “grapey popsicle freeze seadweller wit)( a penc)(ant for deception” you are glubbing about –Eridan?
GA: Yes And I Hate To Say This But We Have Made Very Little Progress On The Matter
GA: Actually I Did Not Hate To Say That At All Because It Was The Truth
TC: well it ain’t like this all is a motherfucking easy decision what to make.
AG: Yeah no thanks to you.
AG: I’m getting real tired of your “I’m going to change my vote every 8 seconds 8ecause I don’t have the glo8es to make up my mind” schtick.
AG: That’s the sort of 8ullshit I’d expect from Toreasnore.
AT: hEY vRISKA,
AT: lEAVE gAMZEE ALONE,
TC: YOU’D BEST BE LAYING OFF TA VBRO, WICKED SPIDER SISTER.
TC: lest i be getting the twisted desires to be inflicting of the most righteous of motherfucking subjugglations.
AT: gAMZEE, nO,
AT: NO SUBJUGGULATION TALK TODAY,
AT: oR AT LEAST, nOT IN HERE,,,
TC: SORRY, BROTHER.
TC: it’s powerful hard for a brother to restrain himself when spider bitch be all up in my motherfucking aggravation sponge, though.
AT: i KNOW,
AT: jUST IGNORE HER,
AT: iT’S WHAT i DO,
AG: Gaaaaaaaag, do not want D:::
GA: Dot Dot Dot
TC: MOTHERFUCKING SPIDER BITCH NEVER BE GETTING WHAT SHE’S ALL UP AND DESERVING.
AT: oK, i AM GOING TO PAP YOU,
AT: iF YOU DON’T STOP RIGHT NOW,
CT: D --> Oh my
CT: D --> I
CT: D --> I believe I require a fresh towel
TC: aw shit.
TC: HOW COME OUR MAIN HORSE BROTHER HAS HIS PROPER SELF ALL UP IN A MOTHERFUCKING TIZZY?
TA: you two do realize that your voice two text 2hit ii2 running, riight?
TA: we can read liitterally everything you are 2ayiing each other right now.
AT: wHAT,
AT: oH, oOPS,,
AT: uH, cAN WE ALL PRETEND THOSE LAST FEW LINES WERE A THING THAT DIDN’T HAPPEN,
AC: :33 < no n33d to be embarrassed
AC: :33 < i think you are furry cute meowrails!
AG: Pff. Says the girl who thinks running around in 8loody animal pelts qualifies as cute.
AC: X(( < wow rude!!!
AG: What, I was just making a st8ment a8out how my definition of cute differs from yours.
AG: I can’t help it if watching those two morons whisper pale nothings to each other made me throw up a little.
GA: That Is Enough Vriska
TA: TZ can ii plea2e ban her now?
GC: NO NOT Y3T
GC: TH4T 1S ONLY H3R F1RST STR1K3
AG: Hey, fuck you 8oth!
GC: OH LOOK 4T TH4T
GC: STR1K3 TWO
GC: ONLY ON3 STR1K3 L3FT
GC: GOT 4NYTH1NG 3LS3 TO S4Y?
AG: 8LUUUUUUUUUH!!!!!!!
AG: How can you 8e such a tyrant when you aren’t even a moder8or this time?
AG: How is that even possi8le?
GC: GU3SS I 4M JUST T4L3NT3D L1K3 TH4T >:P
GC: BUT S3R1OUSLY W3 SHOULD PROB4BLY TRY TO ST4Y ON TOP1C H3R3 K1DS
GC: 4ND 1N TH3 1NT3L3NT OF ST4Y1NG ON TOP1C 1 S4Y W3 L3T F3S3R1 T3LL US
WH4T SH3 TH1NKS OF TH1S WHOL3 LF3T 3R1C1P4T3 1D34
GC: F3S3R1 1F YOU WOULD B3 SO K1ND?
CC: I don’t reely sea w)(y t)(ere is muc)( to debate.
CC: W)(ose idea was it to begin wit)(, anyway?
CT: D --> It was mine
CT: D --> Forgive my insolence but I will be allowed to e100cidate my thinking before you reach any definitive conc100sion on the matter
CC: -Er..OK t)(en.
CC: Go a)(ead -Equifis)().
CT: D --> When I put forth my proposal that we allow the seadweller to join us I was not suggesting that we trust him
CT: D --> Doing so would be most f00lish as he has already made his %%ing nature abundantly clear
CT: D --> I was merely suggesting that his superior knowledge of military tacti% might prove a useful resource for the di%ussion at hand
TA: yeah and ii 2ugge2t that he ii2 a ma22iive bulge who will fiind 2ome way to 2crew u2 over the 2econd it 2top2 being conveniente for him two play nice.
AC: :33 < but shouldnt you be able to purrvent that from happening pawllux?
AC: :33 < i mean dont you sort of have compurplete control over where he goes and who he talks to?

TA: ye2. but only a2 a re2ult of the way he fucked u2 over la2t tiime we triied doiing 2omethiing liike thii2.

GA: I Am Afraid That I Share Solluxs Sentiments On The Matter
GA: The Information We Will Be Discussing Tonight Is Tantamount To Treason And It Could Easily Put All Of Our Lives Into Jeopardy
GA: We Need To Be Selective Of Who We Choose to Share It With
TC: if we’re all down with the heavy concern talk of what we’re all to be trusting then why the motherfuck is spider sis here?
AG: Wh8t?
AG: I thought we were talking a8out how Eridan is too much of an ass to be trusted. Why are we suddenly making this a8out me????????
AT: wELL gAMZEE DOES HAVE A POINT,
AT: yOU WERE SORT OF IN CAHOOTS WITH eRIDAN, wHEN EVERYTHING WENT WRONG LAST TIME, i MEAN,
AG: Yeah and if I heard right your little clown 8oyfriend tried to kill Sollux and Terezi when the shit went down so who’s the untrustworthy one now????????
AT: uH,,,
AG: I don’t get why you are suddenly trying to kick me out anyway.
AG: I mean, I am on the same side as you in this little de88: Eridan is an ass and we are all 8etter off without him.
AT: uH, aCTUALLY i THINK WE SHOULD LET HIM IN,
AG: WH8T? Why?
AT: wELL i DON’T KNOW MUCH ABOUT PLANNING A MILITARY ASSAULT, aND IT IS LIKELY THAT THIS IS TRUE FOR OTHER PEOPLE AS WELL,
AT: iT MIGHT BE A GOOD IDEA, tO GET HIS INPUT, mAYBE,
GC: Y34H 1T K1LLS M3 TO S4Y TH1S BUT i C4N’T H3LP S331NG 1T TH4T W4Y MYS3LF
TA: 2hiit, not you two TZ.
GC: WH4T?
GC: W3 M4Y NOT L1K3 H1M BUT TH4T DO3S NOT CH4NG3 TH3 F4CT TH4T H3 COULD PROV3 US3FUL TO US
GC: 3V3N 1F H3 IS 4 D3C31TFUL 4SS
TA: ok all of you are clearly inn2ane.
TA: remember all the 2hiit that went wrong la2t tiime?
AT: uH, sOLLUX
TA: what
AT: sORRY TO INTERRUPT WHAT IS GOING TO BE A WELL THOUGHT-OUT RANT, i AM SURE,
AT: bUT CAN YOU MAYBE, nOT RESPOND SO FAST,
AT: iT’S MAKING MY TROLLIAN DO WEIRD THINGS,
TA: oh well EXCU2E ME for typing two fa2t for your outdated 2oftware two handle.
TA: how ii2 thii2?
AT: uH,,nOT MUCH BETTER,
TA: really? what a 2urprii2e.
TA: 01101001 01101001 00110010 00100000 01110100 01101000 01101001 01101001 00110111 00100011 01110101 01110101 01110100 01110100 01101001 01101001 01101001 01101001 00110101 00110000 01101110 01111001 00110000 01100100 01100101 01110100 01110100 01101001 01101001 00111111
AT: wAIT, ARE YOU TYPING FASTER,
TA: 6f 68 20 68 65 79 20 79 6f 75 20 6e 6f 74 69 69 63 65 64 2e
TA: 67 6f 6f 64 20 6a 6f 62 2e
AT: WHY ARE YOU TYPING FASTER,
TA: 69 69 20 68 61 76 65 20 6e 6f 20 69 69 64 65 61 20 77 68 61 74 20 79 6f 75 20 61 72 65 20 74 61 6c 6f 72 61 62 6f 75 74 20 54 56 2e
TA: 6d 75 73 74 20 62 6f 75 74 69 69 6e 61 74 69 69 6f 6e 2e
TA: 65 68 65 68 65 68 65 2e
AC: :33 < ok can you stop?
CT: D --> Lowblood I command you to cease this tomfoolery at once
AC: :33 < this is really making my trollian lag

adiosToreador [AT] is an idle troll!
terminallyCapricious [TC] is an idle troll!

GA: Sollux My Trollian Application Is Going To Crash If This Continues Much Longer
GC: SOLLUX CUT 1T OUT >/
TA: d2FpaXQgd2hhdD8=
TA: b2ggZnVjay4=

arsenicCatnip [AC] is an idle troll!
grimAuxiliatrix [GA] is an idle troll!
gallowsCalibrator [GC] is an idle troll!
arachnidsGrip [AG] is an idle troll!
centaurstesticle [CT] is an idle troll!

TA: oop2.
CC: 38O
CC: SOLLUX! W)(AT TH---E S)(---ELL DID YOU DO?
TA: ii might have acciidentally cra2hed everybody2 trollian account2 at the 2ame time.
CC: W)(y in t)(e glub did you do t)(at?
TA: ii diidnt realiiize that inputiiing data fa2ter than 5000 key2troke2 per miiniute would fuck up the older 2oftware that bad.
TA: good thing your 2tuff ii2 good enough two handle iit.
CC: W)(at aboat t)(e otters?
TA: they 2hould be back iin a miinute or two. ii thiink.
CC: Glub glub SIG)(
TA: 2o...
TA: what are you goiing two do about ED?
CC: Blu)(, I don’t know.
CC: I mean P-ERC)(FINALLY I am still angry with )(im and I’m not s)(ore I will ever reely trust ) (im after w)(at )(e did.
CC: But I know t)(at )(e probubbly COULD give us a good idea of w)(ere we need to go from )(ere.
CC: Better t)(an anybody else, acs)(ely.
CC: W)(at do YOU t)(ink I s)(ould do, Sollux?
TA: ii think you 2hould not put two much 2tock iin my 2hiity idea2.
TA: choo2e the thing you thiink ii2 be2t.
TA: even iif ii nt the 2ame thing a2 what ii think ii2 be2t.
CC: Yea)(, I guess you are rig)(t.
CC: I mean once I am ---EMPR---E---ESS I will )(ave to make toug)( decisions all the time!
CC: T)(anks seas)(elox <3
TA: <3
TA: al2o that la2t pun wa2 fuckiing terriible.
CC: I know 38P

TC: WHOA. THIS MOTHERFUCKER’S COMPUTER FINALLY STOPPED KICKING THE WICKED SHIT AND GOT ITSELF WORKING LIKE THE SWEET FUCKING BITCH TITS.
CC: (i Gamsea!
CC: Is anybody else back yet?
AC: :33 < *ac gives ta a furry unamewsed look*
AC: :33 < i am here now no thanks to mew! *says ac*
AG: You know what? I don’t even give a shit if this counts as my last strike because there is a
8urning need for this to 8e said: FUUUUUUUUUCK YOOOOOOOOOU, CAPTOR!!!!!!!
AG: Does that count as my strike three?
GC: N4H
GC: I WILL L3T IT SL1D3
GC: BUT JUST TH1S ON3 T1M3!
GC: NOW WHO 4R3 W3 M1SS1NG?
AT: wELL i AM HERE,
AT: sO NOT ME,,,,
GA: I Am Also Present And Accounted For
CT: D --> As am I
TA: well that ii2 everybody we 2tarted wiith. thank fuck.
TA: 2orry about that guy2.
AT: iT’S OK, i GUESS,
AT: jUST DON’T DO IT AGAIN IF YOU CAN HELP IT, tHAT IS,
GC: B3L13 V3 M3 H3 C4N
CC: W(ale now t(at everybody is back I t(ink I’ve made up my mind about –Eridan.
CC: I t(ink we s(ould at L-EAST listen to w(at )e (as to say.
GC: H3H3H3 VR1SK4 YOU OW3 M3 500 C43G3RS >:]
AG: God damn it! XXXX(
GC: P4Y UP SP1D3R BR34TH
AG: Ugh, fiiiiiiiiine.
GC: CH4-CH1NG!
GA: Did You Two Actually Establish A Wager Around Feferis Vote
GC: …M4YB3
TA: well ok then.
TA: ii gue22 ii will 2end hiim an niinvite two the memo iiif that ii2 what you want.
CC: Wait! Before we invite )im in I do )ave ON-E condition t(at I want met.
GA: What Is It
CC: Fis)(ka leaves the memo.
AG: Oh come on! That’s 8ullshit!
CC: T(at’s my decision.
AG: Oh my GOD!
AG: Will some8ody please tell princess fish 8reath her decision sucks?
AG: Terezi?
AG: Fuzzyfangs?
AG: ANY8ODY????????
AC: :33 < sorry vwhiskers but she kind of does have a point
AC: :33 < things wouldnt have been so pawful last time if you and eridan hadnt b33n so sneaky!
AG: Oh please. Do you guys actually think I am dum8 enough to try THAT again?
CT: D --> I decline to comment
AG: Oh, haha. 8ut seriously, even if I was looking to plot some 8ehind the scenes shenanigans—which I am not—do you really think we could conduct any super secret 8usiness right here in front
of all of you?
CC: T(at isn’t w)y I want you to leave.
AG: Oh reeeeeeeealy? Then 8y all means, enlighten me.
CC: W(ale for one t(ing, I want to make S)(OR-E that –Eridan is focused on kelping us w)(ile )e is
(ere.
CC: I don’t t)(ink t)(at will )appen if you are )ere to antagonize )im.
AG: Are you shitting me? That’s the lamest excuse for an excuse that I have ever heard in my entire life but OK.
AG: Whatever.
AG: I can play nice if we are really that concerned with protecting your ex-moirail's delic8 little ego.
CC: -Everybody knows you gave –Eridan a tagged s)(ip on porpoise.
CC: More importantly, -ERIDAN knows you gave –Eridan a tagged s)(ip on porpoise.
CC: If you are )ere t)(en )e will spend more time floundering around pointing )is flippers at you t)
(an )e will kelping us!
CC: I'm sorry, Vriska, but I R-E-ELY DO t)(ink it would be best if you weren’t )ere.
AG: Oh my g8d that is s88888888 unf8r!
AG: Fuck you, Peixes!
GC: 4444ND NOW TH1S WHOL3 4RGUM3NT 1S 4 MOOT PO1NT B3C4US3 TH4T
WOULD B3 STR1K3 THR33
GC: VR1SK4 1 W1LL FILL YOU 1N ON TH3 1MPORT4NT B1TS L4T3R
GC: SOLLUX GO 4H34D
TA: wiith plea2ure.
TA: ehehehe….
twinArmageddons [TA] banned arachnidsGrip [AG] from responding to memo

GC: 4L4S POOR SP1D3R TROLL W3 H4RDLY KN3W Y3
TA: anybody have anythiing two 2ay before ii iinvite hiip2er douchebag ii?
GA: If We Are Truly Going To Attempt This Then Might I Remind Everybody Of The Old Axiom
That You Will Attract More Flying Vermin With Nectar Floss Than You Will With Overly
Fermented Sour Alcohol Product
CT: D --> Yes
CT: D --> That is a most reasonable suggestion
CT: D --> You will all heed the jadeb100d and treat the seadweller with the respect he does not
deserve
TC: whatever you say, brother.
TA: oh my god ii am 2orry ii even a2ked.
TA: ok let2 get thii2 over wiith, ii gue22.
twinArmageddons [TA] invited caligulasAquarium [CA] to memo
caligulasAquarium [CA] joined memo
CA: wwhat the fuck is all this
CC: )i –Eridan.
CA: oh fuck no
caligulasAquarium [CA] left memo

CC: 38O
CC: RUD-E!
TA: hang on a 2ec.
TA: ii bet ii can get hiim two come back.
twinArmageddons [TA] is an idle troll!

CC: Sorry everyone.
CC: I knew )e would probubbly be UPS-ET but I t)(oug)(t )(e would AT L-EAST stay long enoug)
(to let me ask for)is opinion!
AC: :33 < its okay fefurry!
AC: :33 < i bet he will come around in the end
AC: :33 < even if that first little bit was about as successful as a floating amusement sphere made of lead
TC: THAT'S THE SADDEST MOTHERFUCKING THING I EVER DID HEAR OF, KITTY CHICA.
TC: some poor fucking amusement sphere all trapped down on the ground on account of its being all sideways filled up with motherfucking lead.
AT: uH, gAMZEE YOU DO REALIZE THAT IS ACTUALLY A FIGURE OF SPEECH,,
   rIGHT,
TC: YES.
TC: don’t make it no less sad to think of, though.

CA: all right all right
CA: im here
CA: noww turn the goddamn climate control back on sol
CA: there are literal ice crystals formin in my recuperacoon
TA: well…ok.
TA: but only because you asked 2o niicely.
CA: fuck you
TA: oh, and ii love you two.
TA: a22hole.
CA: fuck all a you
CA: wwhat the fuck do you evven wwant
CC: We want your advice!
CA: wwhat makes you think i am gonna givve you anything
GA: Because We Happen To Be Discussing Military Strategy And That Happens To Be One Of Your Areas Of Expertise
GC: Y34H NOBODY 1S B3TT3R TH4N YOU WH3N 1T COM3S TO M1L1T4RY T4CT1CS
GC: YOU 4R3 S1M3PLY TH3 B3ST TH3R3 1S
CA: ok fuck this
CA: evven if you are right on that front i can tell you are playin some kinda bullshit mind game here
CA: so just tell me wwhat the fuck you wwant
CC: Okay. But –Eridan, t)(is swimformation needs to stay S-ECR-ET.
CC: I want you to SW-EAR t)(at you will not glub a word of t)(is to anybody else –EV-ER and I want you to mean it.
CA: fef i am trapped on a starship in the middle of fuckin nowhere an the only other person on board is a crazy helmsman wwho has total control over literally everything i do and evverywhere i go and wwho also happens to be your goddamn boyfriend
CA: i couldnt blab evven if i wwanted to
CC: O)(. W)(ale in t)(at case I guess I can go a)(ead and tell you.
CC: I am ready to c)(allenge the –Empress.
CA: an im about to become head a my owwn fleet
CC: 38O
CC: R-E-ELY?
CA: no
CA: the wwhole trapped on my owwn ship by a psycho helmsman thing sorta put a damper on my military career
CA: wwhat im really sayin here is howw in the fuck do you think you are anywhere approachin
the general vicinity a ready for that sorta bullshit
CA: last i heard you didnt evven havve a proper army
AC: :33 < she does have an army!
CA: since wwhen
AC: :33 < obviously since after the last time you talked to her :pp
CA: ok wwho is this army
CA: an if you say somethin dumb like oh its just us wwe may be small but wwe havve HEART i wwill fuckin scream
CT: D --> I can assure you that is not the case
CT: D --> It is a force several thousand STRONG comprised mainly of societal malcontents with an extraordinary amount to gain should the current regime be overr001ed
CA: several thousand
CA: thats not much but i guess its a start
AT: sEVERAL THOUSAND SOUNDS LIKE A LOT, tO ME ANYWAY
CA: tavv there havve been rebellions wwith several MILLION that still failed hard
CA: thousands is fuckin peanuts
AT: }:(
CA: are you guys expectin any more forces to join up
TA: Not At The Moment No
CA: okay
CA: if thats the case then pretty much your only hope is a surprise attack
CA: youll need to find some wway to get the condesce wwhere you wwant her
CA: then you wwill hafta strike hard an fast an hope she doesnt havve too much backup wwith her
CA: youll need a fuck ton of luck for that to wwork and just to be clear no one has EVVER been lucky wwhen it comes to ovverthrowwin the condesce
CA: but hey if you wwanna givve that a shot then far be it from me to keep you all from dyin horribly
CC: You said we need to get the Condesce w)(ere we want )(er.
CC: Any suggestions as to )(ow we can do t)(at?
CA: i dunno
CA: i mean the condesce goes pretty much wwherever the fuck she wwants
CA: but there is one thing you could try i guess
TC: THEN LAY ON THE CONSPIRACY SPEAK, BROTHER.
CA: fuck gam wwhat the hell happened to your typin quirk
GC: TH4T 1S 4 LONG 4ND TOT4LLY 1RR3L3V4NT STORY
CA: wwell excuse the fuck outta me for bein curious
TA: ju2t tell u2 your iidea, fiish diick.
CA: goddamn it sol stop fucking around with the lights
CA: you knoww i hate that
CA: wwhatever
CA: wwhat i wwas gonna say wwas that you could try an create some kinda diversion
CA: it wwould hafta be somethin big enough to really piss her off an it wwould hafta be somethin that wwould make her wwanna deal wwith it personally instead a just throwwin a chunk of the fleet at it
CA: maybe blowwin up one a her big trade routes or stagin a fake revvolution somewhere
CA: the point is you set up a couple a straww soldiers for her to focus on an wwhen she comes in to take care a them you go in an take her out
TA: 2traw 2oldiier2, huh?
TA: ii think ii miight know a way two make that work.
GA: Really
GA: What Did You Have In Mind
TA: ok 2o mo2t of you know by now that AA ii2 aliive.
AT: wHAT,
TC: what kind of motherfucking miracle from the mirthful messiahs is this?
TA: and some of you know that 2he ii2 on earth ju2t liike KK.
GA: What
CT: D --> What
CA: wwhhat
AC: :OO < what???
TA: well you all know now. anyway2, what iif we have them fuck around with the earth inva2iion?
TA: pretty 2ure that would be enough two get condy2 pantiie2 in a bunch.
AT: bUT, wOULDN’T THAT PUT THEM IN DANGER OF GETTING HURT,
AT: oR POSSIBLY EVEN KILLED,
GC: W3LL 1TS NOT L1K3 W3 COULD FORC3 TH3M TO DO 4NYTH1NG L1K3 TH4T W1THOUT TH31R CONS3NT
GC: TH3Y 4R3 SM4RT 3NOUGH TO KNOW WH4T TH3Y W1LL B3 G3TT1NG TH3MS3LV3S 1NTO 1F TH3Y 4GR33 TO H3LP US OUT
CT: D --> Yes and might I add that involving Vantas in this operation may have greater benefits than one would imagine at first 100k
CT: D --> Keeping in mind certain historical facts it would almost certainly ensure that the Empress would opt to respond to our straw man threat personally
CT: D --> Not to mention inspiring the cultists to even greater devotion to our cause
GA: It Does Sound Like A Plan With A High Chance Of Success However I Have A Concern That I Feel Needs To Be Expressed
CC: W(at at is it, Kanaya?)
GA: Forgive Me If I Am Mistaken But Earth Is A Significant Distance Away From Alternia Is It Not
TA: yeah. it2 a bit of a go but realii2tiically peakiing you could probably make it here in a little over a periigee.
GA: Oh My That Is Even Farther Away Than I Thought
AC: :33 < i dont s33 why that is such a purroblem kanaya
AC: :33 < even if the cultists ships are a little older im sure we will make it there on time!
GA: I Have The Utmost Confidence That These Older Starships Are In Perfect Working Order
GA: Actually That Was Sarcasm I Have My Reservations Regarding That Point As Well But That Was Not My Current Object Of Concern
GA: Feferi How Often Do You Need To Feed Your Lusus Before It Becomes A Problem
CC: 38(
CC: More often t(an once every two periigees….
CC: If I am going to c(allenge t(e Condesce mys)(elf t)(en it will need to be somw)(ere closer to Alternia t(an Eart)(.
CC: Sorry Sollloc(). It was a good idea w)ile it lasted.
TC: MAYBE IT AIN’T GOT TO UP AND STOP BEING AN IDEA JUST YET.
TC: all thanks to our righteous motherfucker tavbro.
AT: hUH,
AT: gAMZEE WHAT ARE YOU EVEN TALKING ABOUT,
TC: I SEEN YOU LAY DOWN THE WILD MIND SHIT ON CREATURES WHAT ARE TEN TIMES YOUR SIZE AS EASY AS THE WICKED ASS SHIT TITS.
TC: you and me we even killed ourselves a giant ass spider once.
AT: uGH, DON’T REMIND ME, pLEASE
GC: W41T YOU GUYS K1LL3D VR1SK4S LUSUS?
AT: yES
AT: iT WAS AWFUL
TC: it was a motherfucking miracle.
TC: AND IT ALL LEADS A MOTHERFUCKER TO WONDER IF YOU GOT ENOUGH POWER UP INSIDE YOU TO DO SOMETHING WHAT'S LIKE THAT WITH FISH CHICA’S LUSUS.
CC: 38O
CC: Tavros, do you t)(ink t)(at is somet)(ing you cod do?
AC: :33 < tavros?
AC: :33 < are you still here?
TA: he i2 tiill online.
TC: sorry brothers i think i might have up and broke his motherfucking pan with them wicked suggestions.
TC: HE’LL BE COMING BACK IN ANOTHER MINUTE OR TWO.
AT: i...
AT: i DON’T KNOW,
AT: i GUESS, i COULD GIVE IT A TRY,
CT: D --> E%cellent lowb100d
CT: D --> Your courage is to be commended
CA: are you fuckin kidding me here
CA: please tell me you are not seriously considering hedgin all a our hope on tavvs ability to control fefs lusus
GC: T4VROS 4B1L1TY TO COMMUN3 W1TH F3ROC1OUS B34STS 1S H1GHLY D3V3LOP3D
GC: I S33 NO R34SON TO B3L13V3 TH4T H1S 4B1L1TY W1LL NOT C4RRY OV3R TO F3F3R1S LUSUS
CA: yeah except he said he GUESSES he can GIVVE IT A TRY
CA: do you havve any clue wwhat wwill happen wwhen he fucks it up
CA: MASS EXTINCTION thats wwhat
CA: and wwhile wwe are at it wwhat the fuck wwas all that about kar and the condesc havving some kinda history
CA: and cultists
CA: wwhat the fuck
GC: MOR3 1RR3L3V4NT D3T41LS
CA: irrelevvant my ass
CA: i think its high time i started gettin some answwers
TA: and ii think iiit2 hiigh time you got the fuck out of here.

twinArmageddons [TA] banned caligulasAquarium [CA] from responding to memo

GA: So Is This The Plan We Are Going To Go With Then
CC: Y-ES!
CC: Unless t)(ere are any otter conc)(erns?
TC: nah chica.
TC: IT’S COOL.
GC: 1 S4Y W3 G1V3 1T 4 SHOT
TA: yeah, why not?
TA: iiit cant work out any wor2e than our la2t try at thii2.
GA: Actually It Probably Can
GA: But I Have No Other Reservations To Speak Of At The Present Moment
AC: :33 < i think efurrything sounds purrfect so fur!
CT: D --> As do I
CT: D --> Er
CT: D --> Sans the feline puns
CC: Tavros? Are you on board wit)( t)(is?
AT: i,,i GUESS SO,
AT: iT CAN’T HURT TO TRY, aT LEAST,
TA: ok. ii wiill contact AA and see iif 2he and KK can do their thing.
CT: D --> Nepeta Kanaya and I will prepare the cultists to mobilize
GC: 4ND 1 W1LL T4LK W1TH VR1SK4 4BOUT DO1NG TH3 S4M3 W1TH H3R SP4C3 P1R4T3S
CC: GR-EAT!
CC: In the meantime, Tavros and Gamsea: I t)(ink we s)(ould meet up as soon as posibubble so
Tavros can meet my lusus.
AT: oK,
TC: you got it, sis.
GC: LOOKS L1K3 TH4T COV3RS PR3TTY MUCH 3V3RYTH1NG W3 C4N DO 4T TH3
MOM3NT
TA: yep. now everyone out 2o ii can lock thii2 thing.
CC: ------E-E-E-E! T)( is so -----------EXCITING!
CC: We’ll glub again soon!

cuttlefishCuller [CC] left memo

> Karkat: Surprise
Your room is a disaster area. Books on the floor, shoes piled on your desk, charger cords of the cell phone, iPod, laptop and digital camera varieties strewn around the room like skinny little snakes lying in wait to slither up your pant leg, get trapped there, and bite you on the ass in their desperation to escape the horrifying smell. On top of all that, it looks as though your dresser has finally been subjected to one too many pairs of your musk-infused underpants and responded by vomiting every single article of clothing you own all over your room. You are not exactly renowned for your tidiness but for fuck’s sake there are jeans hanging from your curtain rod, what a fucking disgrace.

At the moment you are attempting to mitigate some of this cluster fuck of a mess by sitting atop a small mountain of socks and tossing them into either a box marked “THROW THIS SHIT AWAY” or into a duffel bag for safekeeping. You have developed a very stringent criterion for determining which socks deserve to live and which ones deserve to die in the trash heap. It is a complicated process which involves weighing a plethora of factors such as the number and location of holes, whether it has a mate, whether you have ever worn it before and so on. (Luckily, it does not include evaluating the smell because it is hot as balls in your room and your hands are getting their sweat stink all over everything you touch.) In fact, it is so complicated that you lost yourself in it for several hours now. You fully intend to continue to lose yourself in it for the rest of your life, barring the occasional piss break because you would rather do that than spend one shit-mongering second thinking about why you are so preoccupied with such an inane task.

You graduated five days ago. You got to wear the silly robe and the silly table hat and you got to walk across the stage and get the silly piece of paper that says you have fully completed all four years of USA, Earth high school. (You find this last bit exceptionally silly because in truth you have only really completed one year of human high school to supplement your one sweep of covert training and general schoolfeeding knowledge.) Of course, neither Nora nor Otto bothered to show up. You were totally OK with this because even though the chances of them sitting near John’s dad were barely this side of zero, the very idea of it still makes you want to puke. (You were a lot less OK with the vaguely sad look John gave you when he noticed your “parents” weren’t there. You don’t know what the big deal was because his dad’s cheers for you were loud enough for the both of them.) Following the sort of boring-as-hell ceremony, you proceeded to spend several hours at John’s house, feasting on pizza and homemade cake until it was late enough you were sure Otto would be in bed and Nora would be out of the house and at work. Then you’d gone home and enjoyed a nice, quiet evening free of Tweedle Dumb and Tweedle Fuck. In all, a surprisingly not-shitty day.

Of course you should have expected the universe and everything in it to get together and collectively piss in your metaphorical Cornflakes just to even out your acquired levels of karmic bullshit. It still came as a shock when Otto practically tore down your bedroom door the following morning in order to barge in and tell you to pack your shit because you are all being relocated effective next weekend. You have consequently spent the past four days scrambling to shove all of your belongings into boxes and duffel bags and absorbing yourself in all the wonders of sock sorting and underwear folding.

You have not been able to bring yourself to tell John about this turn of events yet. You keep trying to tell yourself that you are a brainless dunderhead who must have eaten one too many lead lollipops in his wigglerhood to feel even the smallest hint of regret surprise over any of this because wow, were you really stupid enough to hope that you would get to fuck around in Maple Valley with John like a brainless idiot forever? (The answer is yes; yes you really were that stupid. You should really return that stupid diploma because you’ve achieved a brand-new level of
stupidity so potent it negates the value of any knowledge nuggets you might have acquired in the past year.)

You have also not shared this information with Aradia yet because wow, you sure have been swamped with placing all your shit into boxes and taping them up, look at you you’re a regular postmaster. (If you are being entirely truthful with yourself—which, let’s be honest here folks, is exactly what you don’t feel like doing now or anytime in the foreseeable future—the thought of losing her hurts almost as much as losing John because you just found her and you were just getting accustomed to the idea of having a link to your old life. Hell, the last time the two of you had talked to each other she’d even gotten hold of Sollux and let the two of you gab at each other over Trollian like a couple of ornery parakeets for an obscenely long time.) Your load of karmic bullshit must still need some balancing because after several hours of mindless sorting, you unearth your cell phone from amid all the pairs of white socks, black socks, blue socks, sport socks, and wool socks and there is a wall of now-familiar red (maroon) text on the screen:

apocalypseArisen [AA] began pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG]

   AA: hi karl
   AA: are you still asleep?
   AA: guess you are not an early riser!
   AA: thats ok
   AA: i just wanted to see if you would like to meet me in the park around one today
   AA: its supposed to be a very nice day
   AA: perfect to take a long walk and discuss a few things
   AA: drop me a message if you are interested!

apocalypseArisen [AA] ceased pestering carcinoGeneticist [CG]

You chew your lip as you consider how you are going to handle this. For a minute or two, a stupid, cowardly part of you urges you to put it off for just a little longer; the longer you put off telling her the longer you can put off having to tell John. Then you expel a deeply offended huff and think, Jesus miracle-farting Christ, what is the matter with me? Shaking your head in response to your own deep-seated shame, you check the date of the message: today, thank fuck. Then you check the current time (because you have not left your room once all day and for all you know it’s the middle of the afternoon, you fucking disgrace to society): just a few minutes before noon. You then proceed to send her a quick message just like the very mature almost grown-up you are to let her know that you will be there and sorry for being a bag of dicks and not answering her earlier.

You are all set to resume your ever-stimulating game of Adventures in Sock Sorting when the doorbell rings. Since nobody you give an inkling of a phantom shit about knows where you live, you ignore it. You nearly have a small heart attack and keel over dead in a puddle of surprise juice and your own body fluids when Nora pokes her head into your room and says, “Come downstairs; it’s for you.”

At first you don’t notice the cruel quirk of her lips behind her standard doll face smile; you fail to recognize the dark tone coloring her words like the curling tentacles of an extra-handsy Eldritch abomination rising up from the depths of the Sea of Fuck You. Then you get downstairs and it hits you harder than a bag of wet horse dicks to the face.

The kitchen has been decked with what you are sure must qualify as the sorriest excuse for birthday decorations in the history of Earth. There are a few sad-looking crepe paper streamers trailing from the ceiling in such a way as to suggest that a spider on a psychedelic bender had a case of the mind-bending shits all over the room. A wrinkled banner proclaiming “HAPPY BIRTHDAY, SPORT!”
is lying on the table. You don’t waste much time fixating on the sub-par decorations, though. Nope; your attention is focused squarely on the person setting a beautiful, home-made cake on the table. He looks your way as you enter the room, a shit-eating grin crawling onto his lips as he shouts, “Surprise!”

You have to give him credit for stating the explicitly obvious. Rare is the occasion you have ever been shocked into total speechlessness but here you are opening and closing your mouth like a beached fish, able only to sputter a single throat-tickling syllable to express the depths of your surprise: “John?”

“Happy birthday, Karl!”

“No,” you mutter. Shaking your head you repeat that word a couple more times just to convince yourself that this is all some fuckt-up hallucination from the darkest bowels of the nope region of your psyche. When John fails to disappear like a good little delirium demon, you arrange your face into a furious scowl to demand, “What the fuck are you doing here?”

He laughs. “Uh…celebrating your birthday?”

You look at Nora and Otto, standing together on the other side of the table and oh Jesus, they are staring at John like a couple of starving jackals and it’s creepy as fuck. “Did you guys set this up?”

“No,” Otto replies. A smile climbs on to his face; a too-wide thing that turns his baby face into a deranged caricature. “This was all John’s idea.”

“Yep!” says John. Then, grossly misinterpreting your bald faced sentiment of vomit-spewing horror, he adds, “Looks like I got you good, too.”

Your eyes dart from John (once again wearing that same shit-eating grin) to Otto and Nora (who are both still giving John the creeper eye). You want to scream at John to get the fuck out of here, you idiot; fucking run but you still possess enough functioning brain cells to know that response would raise some really fucking uncomfortable questions about the state of your fake family unit. (Of course, that’s assuming you would live long enough to hear any questions before Nora and Otto ripped your head clean off and used it to play a rousing game of bowling for insubordinate shitbags. Truthfully speaking, you are surprised they haven’t done this already, given how you spent six full months dickin' around deliberately not following orders.) Through the sense of despair bubbling in your bowels, you dredge up a nervous laugh and say, “Yeah. You got me.”

From across the room, you see Otto give you a nigh imperceptible nod. His expression is jovial but the implication of “Keep it up, you little shit” is very clear. Beside him, Nora says, “Well, I guess I’d better go and get the candles. You boys want anything to drink while I’m up?”

“I’ll have a root beer, dear,” says Otto and where the fuck did he come up with that ‘dear’ bullshit; you’ve never heard either him or Nora ever use saccharine terms of endearment for each other before so why start that puke-worthy habit now?


Nora turns to you. “Karl? Anything to drink?”

You narrowly avert the automatic reflex to flip her off, settling instead with a sullen, “No.”

“Suit yourself,” she shrugs.

Moments later the four of you are seated at the kitchen table, John, Nora, and Otto sipping away at
tall glasses of foamy root beer and you hunkered down and sipping nothing but the sour taste of suspicion. Nora and Otto are all smiles as they tell John that they’ve “heard so much about him from Karl” and how it’s “really too bad Karl never invited him over before.” They tell him all about how “Karl seems to have a hard time making friends” and “you can probably imagine how happy we were to hear he’d made such a good friend” and “it was so thoughtful of you to suggest this little get-together, wasn’t it Karl?” At one point John insists on snapping a shitload of photos of the proceedings on his phone; pictures of you standing next to the cake, pictures of you with Nora and Otto, pictures of you and him together…you cannot imagine why any one being could ever need or want to own so many useless images.

After an excruciating fifteen minutes of small talk in which Otto and Nora produce more canned laughter than a shitty old sitcom, Nora finally says, “I guess we’d better cut that cake while it’s still fresh.”

As Nora begins to arrange the candles on the cake, Otto turns to John and says, “What kind of cake did you say it was again?”

“Uh…chocolate.” John pauses a moment, a look of confusion clouding his eyes. “Wait, no…I mean German chocolate. Sorry.” He turns to you with a dopey smile on his face before adding, “Your favorite, right?”

You nod. A pit that threatens to swallow up all your internal organs opens at the bottom of your stomach because of course John and his dad would remember stupid details like that.

“It’s a beautiful cake,” says Nora. She strikes a match and touches it to the first candle. “Is that frosting home-made, too?”

It takes John a ridiculous amount of time to respond with a mumbled “Mm-hmm.”

You frown. How could it take him that long to remember that? He was talking about that shit less than ten minutes ago.

You keep your eye on John as Nora leads you through a round of “Happy Birthday to You” and the pit in your stomach develops into a sinkhole deep enough to deposit all the contents of your bowels directly atop the head of troll Satan. John isn’t singing. His lips are barely even moving at all. Instead, he is slumping in his chair with his eyes at half-mast, looking for all the world like he guzzled an entire bottle of human soporifics.

Nora and Otto are still wailing out the final irritatingly off-key bars of the song when you say, “John? Are you all right?”

“’M fine,” he slurs. Taking off his glasses to rub at his eyes, he adds, “Jus’ tired.”

Your chest goes numb because it’s obvious to you now that something is very wrong. You turn your attention to Otto (who, you note, is once again looking at John with that fucking awful jackal stare) and you try to sound dangerous but your voice comes out as nothing more than a choked whine as you say, “What did you do?”

“Everything’s fine,” says Nora. She sets a slice of cake in front of you. “Here; eat your cake.”

You gape at her. She looks back, her doll face smile as creepy as ever. Across the table, you see John pick up his fork. He tries to stab at the confectionary on the plate in front of him a couple of times but he only makes it about halfway to his goal before his arm just kind of gives up and flops back onto the table as though it is filled with nothing more substantial than boiled diarrhea.
A sense of shit-stirring urgency tears through you and you are yelling in earnest now: “John! Goddamn it, John, wake up!”

He barely seems to have the strength to speak with any level of intelligibility, let alone raise his head to look at you as he whispers, “M sorry…. Then he crumples in his seat and doesn’t move again.

The following three seconds of utter silence are the worst three seconds of your life. Then Otto turns to Nora and tells her to go get the car keys. Something about this—the ridiculous incongruity of such an ordinary statement in the face of the all fucked-up shit that is going down around you—snaps you out of your stupor.

“What the fuck is going on?” you demand. “What did you do to John?”

Nora and Otto exchange a look. He motions for her to leave, presumably to resume getting those super-important keys. She does and now it’s just you, Otto, and John.

“What is going on?” you repeat. Then, upon noticing Otto reaching out to prod John’s arm: “Don’t touch him!”

Ignoring your request like a total fucknugget, Otto gives John’s shoulder a good, firm shake. “He’s not dead if that’s what you’re worried about.”

A weight you hadn’t realized was even there lifts off your chest and you breathe—really breathe—for the first time since you saw John go down. “Then what the fuck did you do to him?”

“We just put something in his drink to help him relax until we are finished carrying out our orders.” You shake your head because what in the bullsquatting fuck is he talking about? Aloud, you say: “What in the bullsquatting fuck are you talking about?”

“Our orders were to acquire certain specimens and hand them over to the fleet for research purposes.” With a grunt, Otto hefts John up and out of his seat, dangling John’s limp body over his shoulder as easily as a hefting drone lifting a sack of earth tubers. “Why do you think we ordered you to bring your ‘friends’ here?”

And there it is; all the rust-caked tumblers within your brain finally align and everything clicks into place. They needed specimens. They ordered me to make friends so I would lure them here. I was bait.

You feel like a fool. How could past you have been stupid enough to take Nora’s orders to “make friends” at face value? How could you have failed to see that there had to be more to it than that; that the fleet would never conceive of something so preposterous? The extent of your idiocy is so great that you are surprised you have not collapsed into yourself under the force of it and formed a black hole of stupid.

Worse yet, you feel used. Sure, you had never expected to be informed of all the minutiae of the invasion up to and including who was wiping whose ass and when and where said ass-wiping was occurring. You were a foot soldier. You understood that your job was to receive and follow orders. But to be treated like a fucking puppet—put into a position that would lead you to develop real feelings for a stupid alien kid only to see that very bond used to take him away from you for good…it’s enough to make you feel dirty.

You are so angry with yourself—for your sac-turning naivety, for letting them use you like a fucking tool—that you could scream. You want to yell and scream and go back in time so you can shake the living shit out of past you and make room for even the smallest pebble of common sense in that
stupid pan of his. Then you realize that there is no time to sit around berating yourself because Otto is already walking toward the door. Desperate, you shout, “Otto, wait!”

He doesn’t turn around but he stops in the doorway and thank fuck, that’s something. You try to come off as cool and composed. Your voice comes out sounding cracked as though you are on the verge of tears: “You can’t take John.”

“The fleet is already expecting him.”

“I’ll get you somebody else. I can get someone here by tomorrow, I swear. Just not John. Please.”

Now Otto does turn around and you realize with a start that the bastard is laughing at you. “My god,” he snorts. “You actually care about this piece of filth, don’t you?”

You grit your teeth. You can feel your face growing hot and you legitimately do not know whether it is from shame or whether it is from the rage roiling in your gut like a pissed-off raccoon. Either way, you know that you are running out of time. You cast around for something that might be hiding in the pit-stained corners of your head that you can say to prevent this from happening and what do you know, you strike paydirt: “Otto, listen to me. John’s dad is going to notice he is gone. He’s going to know John was here, with us.”

He shrugs. “If anybody asks, we’ll tell them he never made it here.”

Yeah, good luck convincing anybody of that with all those photos he was taking.”

“He cell phone will be destroyed at the drop off location.”

“Oh my god, that is not going to do shit. Didn’t you see that he was texting that shit to somebody, or were you too busy calling Nora made-up bullshit nicknames like Snuggy Bear to notice?” In truth, you have no idea whether or not John did any such thing. Otto gives you a sidelong glance, no doubt looking to call your bluff. You focus every mutated cell of your being on maintaining the best high-stakes card-playing face the world has ever seen and you must pull off a an acting job right up there with Troll Adam Sandler before he went and started taking really shitty movie roles and forgot how to act because Otto seems to slump a bit in the face of your stone-cold seriousness. You decide to strike while the metal is red-hot and malleable with: “I can have somebody else here tomorrow. Somebody no one will miss.”

Otto’s eyes narrow to poisonous slits. “Who?”

You blurt out the first name that comes to mind: “Cory Manson.”

He gives you another long stare. Then he lets out a drawn-out sigh and says, “OK. But if you fail yet again I will—” you never get to hear what Otto would do to you if you failed to produce Cory Manson within the next 24 hours because his words dissolve into a nasty, gurgling sound.

At first you are bewildered. It sounds as though he is choking on an extra-large gulp of root beer but his half-full glass is still sitting on the table next to you. Then you see the blood pouring down his front: a slow-blooming trickle that stains the front of his shirt with a just a few polite little drops until Nora pulls the knife out of his back and it turns into a fucking tidal wave of maroon. He manages to stay on his feet for about two more seconds with his mouth puckered into a surprised little “o” before his body craps out and he falls to the ground with still-unconscious John sprawled on top of him.

You sit in your chair, more profoundly frozen in place than a shit-brained deer in the headlights of a semi truck direct from Nopesville as Nora moves John off of Otto and uses the tip of her shoe to flip Otto onto his back. Otto is barely breathing, a wet crackle accompanying each breath. You see his
lips move as though he is attempting to say something but the only thing that comes out of his mouth is a bubbling gobbet of blood. Nora hesitates just long enough for his half-lidded eyes go wide with an unvoiced sentiment of oh shit. Then she brings the heel of her shoe down on his neck with a wet snap. Then and only then do you remember that you are an actual troll with fully functioning vocal cords and not some dumb-as-hell woodland creature on the verge of becoming road kill on the highway of Holy Shitballs

“What the fuck are you doing?” you shriek.

You make as though to get up out of your chair but Nora points the blood-coated knife at you and says, “Sit.”

The thought enters your head that you should run, get the fuck out of here right now but you discard it almost as quickly as it appeared because John is still out cold and you are not the type of person to abandon your friends to the mercy of a crazy psycho killer under the best of circumstances, least of all when they are completely defenseless. (Not to mention that even if you were the type of person to do such a heinous thing, the fact still remains that suddenly-psycho Nora is still standing in the doorway, effectively blocking the only way in or out of the kitchen.)

Keeping your ass firmly planted on the chair, you shout, “Why did you do that?”

“Because he was too soft.” She gives the knife in her hand a practiced twirl before adding, “I have half a mind to do you, too.”

“What? Why?”

She tosses the knife up into the air and catches it. “Do you have any idea what the last six months have been like for me and Otto? Do you have even the slightest clue what kind of hell you put us through?”

You shake your head because you do not have the soggiest idea what she is talking about. As far as you know you have spent the last six months avoiding the shit out of the two of them, thereby living if not in perfect harmony then at least in functional tolerance. Where the fuck does she get off telling you about living in hell after everything you did to try and make this crapper of a situation slightly less awful?

She gives the knife another toss, another easy catch before she says, “The fleet was on our backs constantly, always bitching about how we weren’t meeting our specimen quota. And in spite of everything we did—she chuckles under her breath and waves the knife in your general direction “—you just couldn’t be bothered to follow orders.”

You scoff. “In spite of everything you did?” Here’s a novel idea: why didn’t you guys ever try telling me truth?”

“Would you have acted any differently if we had?” You say nothing but your silence speaks so many volumes it could fill an entire old school Encyclopedia Alterniana and still have enough left over to fill a three year update supplement volume for good measure. Nora nods, tosses the knife again, catches it. “That’s what I thought. Every day you came home empty-handed was another reason for the fleet to come down on us. Do you know they even reached the point of threatening termination for all of us?”

She looks at you as though she actually expects you to answer, even though you both know that the answer would be a resounding wait, WHAT? Eventually, she gets tired of waiting for you to speak up so she starts talking again: “I told Otto over and over again to report you for your lack of
productivity so the fleet would ease up on us, but he wouldn’t hear of it. ‘Ooh no,’ he said. ‘I’m the commanding officer and nobody is getting culled on my watch,’ he said. Bah.”

She shakes her head. “Like I said, he really was too soft to be a good leader. I mean, even now, when we have a perfect specimen all ready to go, he almost let you talk him down from finishing the job. But none of that matters now because unlike him, I am perfectly capable of finishing what I start.”

She starts toward John and even though you know that she isn’t going to let you talk her down like Otto did (because gee whiz, she literally just finished telling you as much), you say, “Stay away from him, Nora.”

“Oh, please,” she groans. “Look, if you don’t give me any trouble I’ll tell the fleet that you helped with this. We both finish the day in good standing. Everybody wins.”

Yeah, sure. Everybody wins, all right. Everybody except John who gets to spend the rest of his life being cut into little pieces and put under microscopes. The thought dredges up a slew of unwelcome memories: Torkal looking at you with that vaguely hungry look in his eyes; nightmares of knives and probes and antiseptic; the pants-pissing desperation you had experienced which had driven you to do everything in your power to ensure that you never, ever experienced such a fate…it all comes crashing back into your pan hard enough to make you dizzy and you know beyond any shadow of a farting doubt that you cannot let this happen.

“No!” you shout. “I’m not letting you take John!”

Nora’s face breaks into a spiteful grin that is a hundred times more genuine than any of her stupid doll smiles but about five billion times uglier. “Oh?” she sneers. “What are you going to do to stop me?”

You dart your eyes around the room, looking for something you might be able to use for a weapon. Your eyes fall on the knife that Nora used to cut the cake, still sitting within arm’s reach on the table. It’s much smaller than the big butcher knife Nora has in her hand and it’s covered in delicious home-made frosting and German chocolate crumbs, but at least it’s something. You pick it up and jump to your feet.

You attempt to look menacing as you stand there wielding your (admittedly pretty damn pathetic) weapon but you haven’t laid a finger on anything sharp and pointy in over a sweep. It must be painfully obvious that you are out of practice (or maybe it’s the remnant cake innards clinging to the blade detracting from the whole threatening image you are going for), because Nora barely manages to keep a straight face as she says, “Put that thing down before somebody gets hurt.”

“Get away from John.”

“Well come on then,” she laughs. Spreading her arms wide, she says, “Go ahead; have at me!”

You shuffle your feet and you tell yourself that you are just adjusting your fighting stance even though you know that what you are really doing is being a worthless chicken shit. “I don’t want to have to do this.”

“Oh my god, if you are going to do something then DO IT!” she roars.

You want to rush her. Every fiber of your being is screaming at you to stop her; what the fuck are you doing, go save John—but you don’t move. You don’t take a single step toward her because she is better armed than you and, if the way she was throwing that knife around a couple of minutes ago
is any indication, absolutely in her element and Karkat Vantas knows a trap when he sees one, goddamn it.

“Hmph, that’s what I thought,” she grunts. She begins to kneel down as though to return her attention to John—and then she whips back around to face you and hurls the knife across the room at you.

It happens so fast you don’t have time to think—just react. Lucky for you, your reflexes direct you to throw yourself to the side and out of the path of the spinning missile of death. It whistles past your left ear, close enough you can hear the zing of resonating metal as it goes by. Nora comes bounding across the room after the knife and even though you can see her coming, you are still off balance when she gets to you. You slash with your knife, hoping to get a good hit in before she has a chance to pick up her weapon but you were absolutely right to think that this was her element: she easily bats your hand out of the way hard enough you almost lose your grip on the knife.

In the fraction of a second it takes you to adjust your grip, she has picked up her knife. You see it whistling toward you, a gleaming flash of silver spattered with Otto’s blood and you throw up an arm to block, steeling yourself because you know it is going to hurt like a grub-screaming motherfucker when the blade bites into your forearm—and the blow never comes. Instead Nora hooks her foot around your ankles and sweeps your feet out from under you.

The move catches you by complete surprise. You throw your arms out, trying to keep your balance but you already know there is no escaping the weight of this colossal fuckup. You can already feel yourself falling. Your head smashes against something (The table? The chair?) hard enough to make your vision go totally black for a couple of seconds.

Those seconds must last a really fucking long time because when you open your eyes you aren’t in the kitchen anymore. Instead you are in the bathroom upstairs, sprawled in the…the thing you take a shower in, the ablution trap, the why the hell can’t you remember what you are supposed to call it now? There is something underneath you. It’s uncomfortable and you want to figure out what it is but there is a terrible pain in the back of your head that ebbs and flows with the rhythm of your heartbeat and you can’t think straight through the hurt.

Something cool and wet splashes onto your face—water? You part your lips to let it fall in your mouth because water sounds great right now, thanks except fuck, fuck, fuck it isn’t water it’s something that makes the inside of your mouth feel oily and it has a sharp smell that burns your nose and makes your head hurt and don’t drink that shit, you stupid fuck. The oily sensation lingers after you spit it out and you lie there trying to remember what this shit is; it has a name and you know it, you know…gasoline. Somebody is pouring gasoline on you.

You know that should probably concern you but can’t remember why and besides that you are way more concerned about the thing you are lying on. It’s soft but not soft and lumpy and it has a leg, you can feel a leg with a foot in a shoe underneath you, it’s a person. It’s a person who isn’t moving, not even to breathe. You can tell because you are lying on their unmoving chest and it’s wet in a completely different way than the gasoline raining down on you. It’s sticky and dark red from the fucking ocean of blood that came pouring out of his chest when Nora stabbed him through with the butcher knife. Otto. Holy squirting nookwaste SHIT you are lying on top of Otto’s dead body.

This last little epiphany wakes you up enough to bring all of the globe-tickling events from the kitchen crashing back to you. You remember John slumping over onto the table (oh GOD, where’s John is he even still here?), Nora killing Otto (he was going to let John go, goddamn it he was at least a semi-decent person and she fucking murdered him in cold blood), Nora throwing the knife at you (you had been trying to keep her from taking John and she decided to give you a fucking
concussion for your trouble), and now somebody (Nora, it’s Nora; why the fuck didn’t you notice that little detail before?) is pouring gasoline on you—except no they’re not. They’re not because they’ve stopped to pick something up that was lying on the edge of the tub—a paper book of matches.

Your brain chooses this exact moment to begin firing on all cylinders and you very suddenly realize what is happening, what she intends to do. You also realize that you are going to be very suddenly dead as fuck if you don’t do something right now.

Nora isn’t looking at you. Her attention is entirely focused on the matchbook in her hands. You can hear her cursing under her breath as tries to tear a match free from the flimsy packaging. Apparently she has decided that you are either too dead or too unconscious to give her much trouble and for that you praise the mother grub for being kind enough to shit an overbalance of total negligence into the egg that eventually blossomed into the mentally deranged example of trollkind standing over you right now. Quickly, before she manages to strike a match and prepare a healthy serving of extra-crispy Vantas, you hook an arm around her legs and pull.

She gasps with exactly the same level of shock you would expect from somebody who was not expecting the about to be dead person lying on the ground in front of them to suddenly come alive and attack them. (By your estimate that would be one metric fuckton of shock, but who has time for counting and weighing intangible bullshit like that? Not you, that’s for sure. The intangible bullshit will just have to pile up in the intangible shipyard until you are no longer preoccupied with important shit like not dying.) She staggers back from the bathtub, trying to keep her footing but a second later she hits the ground with a thud.

You roll out of the bathtub and ugh fuck, the motion makes the pain in your head evolve into a whole different entity with all-new and exciting ways of causing you untold levels of grief. A groan rises up in your throat because it hurts so much it is making you dizzy but you have way more important things to do than sit around moaning over a little minor head trauma so you force the groan back and lunge toward Nora instead.

She is already getting back to her feet when you slam into her. The force is enough to knock her off-balance and the two of you end up in a tangle on the ground. You hold your own against her for as long as you can (and with your head still aching and the advantage of surprise no longer on your side, it turns out to be not very fucking long at all) before she manages to raise you up by the shoulders and crack your head against the ground.

The hit sends a kaleidoscope of crackling lightning through your head. Somebody lets out a choked-off scream and it takes you a second to realize it’s you, you are screaming because oh god she is going to kill you and she is going to take John and it hurts, it fucking hurts! Then your vision is back and you can see her on top of you, see the murderlust in her eyes as her hands settle around your throat and squeeze.

Your throat pushes out a dry gag around the pressure and then Nora’s hands clamp down and you can’t even do that. The throbbing ache in your head develops into a sensation of terrible pressure. You feel as though your head is swelling, your eyes tearing up and threatening to pop out of their sockets. You writhe underneath her and claw at the hands around your neck but your human fingernails are so worthless you might as well be trying to snap a lead pipe in half using a feather made of unicorn farts and the power of wishful thinking.

Nora’s lips are moving. You can’t hear what she is saying over the sound of blood rushing in your ears but you don’t need to hear her to recognize the word “mutant” on her lips, recognize that she is laughing at you. Her thumbs drive into you, trying to crush your windpipe and you know you can’t
give up; you have to stop her, you have to SAVE JOHN, have to…

Have to…

Your hands fall away from hers. Your fingers brush against something lying on the ground beside you and you take longer than you have any business taking to recognize that it’s the blade of a knife, still sticky with Otto’s blood. Without thought, your fingers scramble for the handle. By the time you find it the edges of your vision are spotted with a dark fog that is wrapping around you like the tentacles of some horrifying abomination from the floor of the Alternian Sea. You slash blindly with the knife, all the while telling the sea abomination that it can go fuck itself, you are not in any mood for its tentacle porn shenanigans now or ever.

A gout of hot blood splashes onto your face and then Nora’s hands are no longer around your neck. You suck in a deep breath and then you immediately choke on it and end up in the throes of the worst coughing fit you have ever experienced in your life. It leaves you fighting to drag air in past your thoroughly sandpapered throat and it goes on until it finally deposits you at a state of being somewhere just this side of puking all over yourself. When you are no longer in danger of coughing yourself sick, you lie on the ground and drink in obscene lungfuls of air until your head begins to clear.

You sit up slowly. Nora stays on the ground beside you, one hand loosely wrapped around her neck as though to close the gash that has opened her throat like a deep-cut filet of fish. Her face is frozen in an expression of surprise that seems to say, how the hell did I get taken out by a worthless little bulge muffin like you? You close her eyes with a shudder. (It doesn’t do much to improve the what the hell, how am I dead expression but the whole situation is surreal enough without her dead eyes staring into your soul.)

Using the wall for support, you stand up. Your reflection looks like something that stepped straight out of the shittiest slasher movie ever. The hair on the back of your head is matted with blood. Your face is an absolute fucking mess. Your clothes are beyond salvage. The expression on your face is a perfect image of shellshock (and on a totally unrelated side note, you can now safely say that the none of the actors in troll cinema know shit about conveying real, honest-to-fuck shock because their attempts at doing so pale in the face of the expression you are making at this very second). You are also still drenched in gasoline and the fumes are making you feel ill. You are, to put it as delicately as possible, fucking disgusting.

You know that you should be freaking the fuck out right now but you have a feeling that the effects of repeated head trauma, near-strangulation, and gasoline fumes have combined to create a giant wall of “NO FUCKING WAY” that is preventing you from processing everything that has just happened. (Though if the way your hands are trembling is any indication, a healthy freakout is in your very near future.) You end up staring at your reflection for a stretch of time that would probably meet the technical requirements for narcissism if you hadn’t been reduced to a slow-witted trauma monkey. Then you make the completely rational decision that the next step you need to take is to get all of this disgusting shit off of you. You decide that you will have to go to the master bathroom to do that because oh look at that, the whole room reeks of gasoline and the thought of showering in front of Nora and Otto’s corpses is so unspeakably horrifying you cannot even bring yourself to craft a clever metaphor to illustrate the inherent awfulness of that idea.

You leave the room, fully intending to execute this reasonable course of action, but then it occurs to you that there is something you need to do first. Instead of heading for the master bedroom, you let your feet carry you downstairs and into the kitchen. The relief you feel when you see that John is still there is almost enough to bring you to your knees. You get close enough to ensure that you can confirm he is still alive by the rise and fall of his chest. Your voice is a painful rasp as you say, “You
stay there.” Then you go back upstairs.

Once you are in the master bathroom you waste no time in turning on the water full bore. You adjust the temperature to something just this side of help I’m boiling myself alive. Then you peel off your ruined clothes and climb in. You stand there, letting the water sluice all the filth off your body until it begins to dawn on you that you just killed one of your own, the fleet is going to fucking DESTROY you; oh holy bulge-riding Jesus what are you going to do now? The clusterfuck of oh man, oh god, oh shit hits you hard and you are struck with a sudden desire to curl into the fetal position and hyperventilate for a while. The only thing that keeps you from ruminating on the full extent of precisely how fucked you are (and thus, saves you from becoming a completely useless pile of drool) is the knowledge that you need to get out of here and you need to do it NOW.

When the water starts to get cold you grab a towel, go to your room, and put on the first set of clothing you find in the mess of boxes and packaging. Then you grab one of the duffel bags scattered around your room, a full one you remember putting a decent amount of clothes in back when moving was still a thing. You tuck your cell phone into your pocket and go back to the master bedroom, meaning to look for the car keys there. Halfway through fondling all the contents of Nora’s purse like a creeper, you remember that Nora had gone upstairs to retrieve the keys after John passed out and you realize that hey, guess what the keys aren’t in here, you stupid jackass.

For a moment you panic because you really have no idea what Nora might have done with the keys after she picked them up. For all you know she flushed them down the toilet or hid them somewhere exotic like in the refrigerator or—hell, why not?—up her ass. Then you decide that you really need to quit being a dumb fuck because there are only two places the keys are likely to be: in the kitchen or somewhere on Nora’s person. (You really, really hope it’s the former because you are doing a commendable job of keeping your shit together and if there is any way to ensure that you lose your well-collected shit, you are pretty sure that having to rifle through dead Nora’s pockets would do the trick in a real hurry.)

The keys turn out to be on the kitchen counter. You take a moment to appreciate small miracles, but you do not go so far as to thank the fake-as-shit Mirthful Messiahs because that would be dumb. Then you become aware of the fact that you can’t just leave Nora and Otto to be found by human law enforcement because that would raise some really interesting questions like “what the hell is up with these weird indentations in their skulls” and “whoa, why is their blood that color?” You waste an inordinate amount time trying to conceive of some idea that does not absolutely suck but you aren’t some raging psychopath so it’s not like this is something you have spent a lot of time pondering. It eventually occurs to you that despite being a crazy murder-happy bitch, Nora may have been onto something with the whole burn the evidence thing she was attempting to pull off back there in the bathroom.

You consider lighting a pack of matches and tossing them into the already gasoline-soaked bathroom but in the end you chicken out because you are a quivering little weenie and the thought of actually watching Nora and Otto burn is a little too heavy on the unleaded nightmare fuel for your tastes. Instead you go upstairs and retrieve your gross, blood-and-gasoline-caked clothes from the master bathroom and—OK, maybe you still aren’t thinking in a completely rational manner here—you cram them into the oven. You dig around the kitchen until you find a book of matches (just like the one Nora had been planning to use on you, how ironic is that? Why, if you knew somebody with a bizarre fixation on irony, you are sure that they would be shitting their pants over your handling of the situation. Lucky for you, you have never met anybody like that and you probably never will.) Finally, you strike a match and use it to light the whole book on fire before tossing it into the oven.

The clothes immediately burst into flames with a low whuff, the smoke pouring out of the oven thick enough to make you choke (and ow, the coughing is about as pleasant on your still-aching throat as swallowing a big old shard of bird shit-stained glass).
John is still out like a light. He doesn’t move or make a sound, not even when you shake him hard enough to make his head flop back and forth like the world’s dorkiest-looking ragdoll. You are left with no choice but to carry him out of the house, bridal-style. (Except you very quickly discover that won’t work because Jesus dicks, John is a lot heavier than he looks. You end up hobbling out to the car with him hefted over your shoulder instead, with the ever-so-delightful consequence of his ass being about two inches away from your face the entire way there.)

Smoke is already beginning to pour into the garage by the time you have both John and your duffel bag comfortably nestled in the back seat. You couldn’t imagine a clearer TIME TO GO signal even if it was printed in ten foot-high letters fashioned out of neon glowing sea creature phlegm secretions on the wall in front of you. You get into the driver’s seat, turn the key in the ignition. The car sputters and for one shit-blasting second you think that maybe all the smoke has managed to fuck it up somehow, but then the engine is turns over and you are pulling out of the garage.

It takes you a couple of minutes to acclimate to the feeling of being in the driver’s seat. Nora and Otto had only allowed you to drive a handful of times and all of those were before you started actively avoiding them way back around Christmas. Even with your minimal experience, you have no problem keeping the car between the lines and your speed reasonably close to the limit (which would lead you to wonder, if the situation wasn’t so pants-shittingly dire, why the fuck Nora seemed to have such a problem managing to do so.) You even manage to come to an admittedly really jerky stop when you reach the stop sign at the end of the street like a real champ.

Once you are no longer preoccupied with trying to discern the difference between which lever turns on the blinkers and which one works the windshield wipers, you come to the startling realization that you have no idea where you are going to go. After all, it’s not like past you devoted any quantity of thought juice on developing an orderly procedure for dealing with the contingency that your fake family unit would devolve into crazy arson murder high jinks. You have absolutely nothing you can do, nowhere to go—except wait just one grub-fisted second yes you do. In fact, improbable as it may be you have somewhere you are supposed to be right fucking now. Your concussed self embraces this idea in a bear hug fit to crush its ribs and snap its neck clean off and you head for the park.

Aradia is sitting on a bench near the parking lot when you get there. She doesn’t notice as you pull in but she smiles and waves when you (clumsily) pull into the closest open space you can find and roll down the window. You do not wave back and you sure as fuck do not smile. Instead you make a choppy motion that you hope conveys your full sentiments of come over here right now we are on red alert and this is not a fucking drill. Luckily, Aradia is and continues to be one of the more competent examples of trollkind that you have acquainted yourself with. She rolls her eyes but comes to the car, trailing a small rolling suitcase along behind her.

“Hi Karl,” she says. “What’s up?”

“Get in the car.”

She raises her eyebrows, presumably in response to the torn-up croaking that barely passes as your voice. (Or maybe she does it in a show of STERN DISAPPROVAL because she knows that you do not have a driver’s license yet here you are joyriding around town like some petty miscreant.) “Are you alright?”

You cannot believe your ears. Clearly you were way off on your assessment of Aradia’s competency level. Here you are, a big-ass lump on the back of your head, a lovely ring of bruises around your neck, and a wild-eyed expression that practically screams “I have seen some serious shit” and she has to ask if you are alright? The question is so ridiculous that you almost lose it right there and dissolve into a hearty round of hysterical panic giggles. To your credit, you manage to hold yourself
together enough to repeat, “Get in the car.”

“OK.” She comes around to the passenger side of the car, gets in, closes the door. “So where are we going?”

You don’t answer because you have no idea where the fuck you are going beyond the general vicinity of “NOT HERE.” Instead you put the car in gear and, in the interest of going to “NOT HERE” you head for the freeway. Beside you, Aradia mutters something that sounds like “Well OK then.” She twists around a bit, attempting to maneuver her suitcase into the back seat. Then she lets out a surprised gasp.

“Kark—Karl,” she hisses. “What is John doing here?”

And right there, that’s it. You have done a fantastic job of keeping it together thus far, but no more! As you merge onto the freeway the magnitude of just how fucked you descend upon you and your whole body feels cold. You can’t feel your hands on the steering wheel. Even your eyes have gone numb—you can’t see properly because even if the Empire doesn’t disembowel you with a rusty pickaxe you are pretty fucking sure that human law enforcement is going to be hellbent on serving your ass filleted and minced. Some of the shit you pulled today may fly on Alternia (hell, some of it was even encouraged) but you are pretty fucking sure that at the very least the patricide is going to come around to bite you square in the ass.

A voice cuts through your shitty internal monologue of self-condemnation like an ice pick through cotton balls. It says, “Karl, pull over.”

Pull over? Now why the fuck would you do that? No; it’s all so clear to you now: you need to place as much distance as possible as quickly as possible between yourself and the clusterfuck you have created. What you need to do at this point in time is, put simply, haul some fucking ass.

“Karl!” exclaims the voice. “Stop the car!”

You aren’t thinking straight. You are definitely not thinking straight because if you were you would still be flooring the accelerator, not listening to the voice and jamming down the brake pedal. And yet, for some reason, you continue to stomp on the brake, bringing the car to a jarring halt. There is a screech of brakes behind you. A white pickup truck peels out into the lane beside you and screams past with its horn blaring. A hand shoots out of the driver side window and you are treated to the universal one-finger salute.

Beside you, Aradia exhales through pursed lips and says, “OK. Good. Now pull over to the side of the road.”

“Yeah,” you mutter. Your voice comes out shaky with a scratched, faraway quality to it like radio waves on bad reception. “Yeah, OK.”

A few more disgruntled drivers and honking horns later, you are situated on the shoulder—a much safer place to have a panic attack, now that you think about it. You would offer your sincerest thanks to Aradia for suggesting it (as well as your apologies for ever doubting her competency) if you could manage any meaningful communication around the sudden urge to hyperventilate.

“What is going on?” Aradia asks.

The words reach your ears but you can’t believe she is serious. You feel a laugh bubbling in the back of your throat and you have no idea why because nothing about this situation is funny and yet here you are giggling like a fucking moron oh my god why can’t you stop?
“Karl!” she shouts and goddamn, her voice is like a slap to your face. It leaves you feeling dizzy but—hey, look at that!—it manages to stop that fucktarded laughing. “You need to calm down,” she says. “I need you to calm down and tell me what happened.”

You try to think of a logical way to present all of the bullshit you have been through over the course of the past two hours. You really, really do. However, your trauma-addled brain just barfs out a series of disjointed images (your fingers closing on the knife, the smell of gasoline, John falling down on the table and oh fuck, for one terrible second you are sure that he is dead) in order to show that it is in no mood to form any line of coherent thought. Still, you somehow manage to spit out a machine gun fire stream of babbling that goes: “Holy shit, I fucked up, I fucked up. Oh my god I fucked up and we are both fucking dead now. OK, maybe only I am the only one here who is officially fucking dead at the moment and I am so fucking sorry I just went and got you involved in this because I am pretty sure that you are going to be fucked just for associating with me now. I mean, holy shit we are beyond screwed here.”

“OK,” she says, and somewhere in the deeply buried recess of your brain to which your capacity for conscious, rational thought has retreated, you think that she must have the patience of a saint to deal with your less-than-worthless ass. Then you remember exactly who her moirail was (is? Fuck if you know) and that same blessed, rational part of your brain realizes that she has probably had a fuckton of practice dealing with exactly this sort of thing. You have no idea why thinking about her and her stupid, lisping, bifurcatin-fetishist, actually kind of awesome moirail and their deeply intimate activities like a gross creeper lifts some of the tightness out of your chest, but somehow, you find yourself breathing just a little easier and your head begins to clear.

“Can you tell me exactly why we are so fucked?” she asks.

You let out another stupid giggle, but this time you manage to swallow back the festering bubble of laugh vomit welling in your throat. “I killed my parents. I didn’t mean to—well OK, actually I did mean to kill Nora—but shit, Aradia, they were going to…it was for John. They were going to hand John over to the fleet to do fuck knows what to him and I couldn’t just sit there and let them do it.”

“So you killed them?”

“I didn’t have any choice! They drugged him and they tried to kill me and oh my god we are fucked.”

She holds up her hands. “I am not judging you. I was just confirming the facts. You killed them because they threatened you and John?”

“Yeah. Yes. And then guess what? After that I freaked the fuck out and burned the house down so it looks like we can add arson to our ever-growing list of felonies committed by Karkat Vantas. That’ll look so great next to the patricide and oh wait, let’s not forget kidnapping. Wow, my nonexistent citizenship record is going to be such a giant, quivering ass spasm of shit it will clog every single toilet in the United States. People will wake up one morning and find that they are unable to evacuate their waste because surprise, their bowl is already filled to the brim with Karkat Vantas’ shitload of monumental fuckups.”

“Is that everything?”

You think for a moment. It turns out to be a terrible idea because it sends another cascade of gut-spewing imagery through your head, but this time you manage to keep it together. “Yes. That’s everything. Except for the fact that John still has no clue what the barfing fuck is going on and I have no idea what I am going to tell him once he wakes up.”
“Well I think all of that sounds perfect!”

Your jaw drops wide enough it could be mistaken for one of the vast subterranean brooding caverns back home on Alternia. “What?”

She shoots a quick glance at John, still asleep in the back seat. Then she nods as though to say yep, he’s still asleep all right. “I’ve been talking with Sollux over the last couple of days and there are some big things going on back home.”

“What the hell are you talking about? ‘Back home’ as in back on Alternia? And hell, while we are having this heartwarming little question and answer bulgefest—” you motion to the suitcase in her lap “—why the fuck are you carting that thing around?”

“Because I do not intend on returning to my human hive.” The look on your face must do a pretty accurate job of communicating your rapidly-increasing levels of I’m so confused it actually hurts, somebody please help because she quickly adds, “Er…here, give me a chance to bring you up to speed.”

She then proceeds to spout out a crapload of some of the most improbable bullshit you have ever heard in your entire life: Feferi Peixes amassing an army fit to challenge the Condesce herself; Terezi and Vriska rolling with some space pirate crew; Kanaya, Equius, and Nepeta hanging around with some weird fringe religious group neither you nor Aradia have ever heard of in your lives; Tavros Nitram attempting to control the motherfucking speaker of the Vast Glub…if it wasn’t all so insane you would think that she was crafting some elaborate story just to fuck with you and you would be forced to resume your previously-scheduled uncontrollable giggling, though with the notable exception of pointing your finger in her general direction to clarify that yep, you are indeed laughing at her and her tableau of obviously fake brain barf. Unfortunately, it is too insane to be made-up and your only option is to listen in ever-growing shock as she tells you about the role you have been asked to play in this clusterfuck of a scheme; to be a diversionary agent fit to attract the attention of the goddamn Condesce herself. She finishes with, “Honestly, I was having trouble coming up with what we were going to do in order to create a proper distraction, but you’ve already taken care of it!”

You sit there, steeped in the knowledge that you should probably be freaking the fuck out right now but there are only so many shocking things you can experience in one day before it all begins to feel like a matter of course and you have already soared so high over that threshold you might as well be a world-class tall jumper in the I can’t believe this shit is happening to me Olympics. Or maybe the magnitude of this shocking news is enough to exactly balance the magnitude of all the other shocking things you have been through today, leaving you at a balance of zero shock. Either way, the only thing you can do is throw your hands up and groan, “OK. Fine. I’m a regular grain warrior or whatever it was you said we were supposed to be. Hip-hip-fucking-hooray for me. So now what the hell are we supposed to do?”

Aradia opens her mouth to answer but it is at this precise moment that you hear movement in the back seat. She flicks her eyes toward the back seat and mouths, “What are we going to tell him?”

“I don’t know,” you whisper back.

Apparently you both suck at whispering because John’s voice slurs, “Tell me what? Wait…when did we get into a car?”

You wonder if there is any conceivable way of telling somebody that their planet is in the grip of a major extraterrestrial invasion which is likely to end in nothing but pain and endless servitude without scaring the shit out of them. Barring that, you wonder if there is any conceivable way of telling somebody that their best friend is an alien without coming off as completely insane. You
quickly reach the understanding that the answer is “No; fuck no” on both accounts so you decide that you might as well give it to him straight and see what happens because why the hell not?

You turn around in your seat to find John staring back at you. His eyes are half-lidded but he has propped himself into a half-sitting position so you deem him fit for receiving a quick dose of Karkat Vantas’ craptastic schoolfeeding shitfest.

“Hi, John.”

“Hi, Karl.” Rubbing at his eyes he says, “When did Aria get here? What’s going on?”

You take a deep breath and, without further ado, commence the shitfest: “John, Aria and I are aliens. Our race is trying to invade your planet and I am so, so sorry.”

He blinks, laughs, says, “OK. Sure. And Nicolas Cage is an ageless vampire. But seriously, what’s going on?”

“He isn’t lying, John,” says Aradia. “We really are aliens! I believe that the closest English approximation of the name of our race would be…er…trolls…?”

“Trolls? Oh, I get it!” John’s laughter evolves into what you can only describe as a very hearty guffaw. “Because you’re trolling me! That’s pretty funny.”

You feel a hot flush rising on your cheeks. “We are not ‘trolling’ you! We’re aliens, your planet is being invaded, and I am being a perfect fount of truthfulness here so you’d better at least have the decency to stop laughing, shut the fuck up, and be properly freaked out!”

He gives you an appraising look. Then: “Sorry, Karl, but you really need to work on your delivery. Aria’s way funnier than you!”

“Oh my god, you dense fuck! Do I have to take off my pants and show you my weird alien junk? Is that what it is going to take to convince you that I am telling you the truth?”

John shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

Aradia must not realize that John is being a facetious little shit because she hurriedly says, “Actually, I don’t think that will be necessary.” She leans into the back seat, grabs one of John’s hands. He lets out a surprised squawk that makes him sound like a really indignant chicken and tries to jerk it away from her but she doesn’t let go. Instead she guides his fingers through her hair and along her scalp.

“Aria, what are you—“ John cuts himself off midsentence and his eyes go so wide they threaten to pop right out of his head and roll around on the floor like a couple of overripe grapes. “What the hell is that?”

Aradia grins. “It’s the place where one of my horns used to be!”

“What?” John jerks his hand out of her hand and holds it up to his chest like he just dipped it into a giant vat of acid-flavored nacho cheese.

“Karl has them, too,” says Aradia. She turns to you, says, “Karl, will you show him?”

You shrug because sure, why not? As you reach out and grab one of John’s hands, you notice that the look on his face suggests that he may be on the verge of peeing himself a little. Still, he lets you have his hand without complaint (though if the look in his eyes is anything to go by, you suspect that he is no longer fully aware that his hand belongs to him anymore.) You run his fingers along your
scalp until you feel them ghost over the area that used to be your right horn. Then you drop his hand and say, “There. Happy?”

John utters a wordless squeak that still manages to say one hell of a lot. (By your estimate, it would be some variation of “OH MY GOD WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU KIDDING ME HOLY SHIT THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE”) Then his face goes paper-white and he slumps into a dead faint.

You exchange a look with Aradia, one that says well THAT went well, A+ bit of schoolfeeding there, would schoolfeed again. Then she says, “We are going to have to give him a better explanation when he wakes up.”

“No shit,” you grumble. “In the meantime, can we please get the fuck out of here?”

“Sure. But you should let me drive.”

“Why in the ass-purging hell should I do that? I was doing fine!”

“Because I have a driver’s license,” she says as if owning some stupid rectangle of plastic with her picture on it makes her the fucking Queen of Sheba. “And also, no you weren’t doing fine.”

You bitch and moan but eventually you surrender the keys and let her take the driver’s seat. She proceeds to get you back onto the freeway (and, you notice with dismay, she does it with a buttload more finesse and confidence than you). Then you are hurtling along with everything you thought you knew and understood behind you, the open road ahead of you, and absolutely no idea where you are going to go from here.

> END OF ACT 3
ectoBiologist [EB] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

EB: hi dave.
EB: i know you are probably offline right now.
EB: that’s ok!
EB: i am messaging you now because i need to ask you something.
EB: i swear that i am not trying to freak you out or anything but karl and i are in trouble.
EB: and when i say trouble i don’t mean oops i accidentally blew up prom type of trouble.
EB: i mean real trouble.
EB: do you think we could come and stay with you for a couple of days?
EB: message me back when you can.

ectoBiologist [EB] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG]
turntechGodhead [TG] began pestering ectoBiologist [EB]

TG: ok i swear to god if this is a joke i am going to kick your ass
TG: i will kick it so hard it ends up turning into some kind of looney tunes shit and my footprint stays
all up in your ass like your ass is made of memory foam mattress
TG: but yeah
TG: i will talk to my bro and work something out

turntechGodhead [TG] ceased pestering ectoBiologist [EB]
You have been driving for way too long. Actually, that is a filthy fucking lie. Due to your utter failure to possess either a driver's license or any driving experiences whatsoever, Aradia and John have taken it upon themselves to ensure that you do not so much as fart in the general direction of the steering wheel throughout the duration of your road trip through ass crack nowhere, USA. You have therefore done exactly zero seconds of driving over the last 48 hours. Even so, that does nothing to change the fact that you are going to rip out your own anguish gland and eat it in order to save yourself from experiencing this degree of torment ever again if you do not get out of this car within the next ten minutes.

It’s not that you have developed some sort of deep-seated dislike for John or Aradia. (In fact, if anything this little cross country shitfest has only further hammered home the startling reality that they are quite literally the only two friends you have on this whole nook-grinding world and you are lucky as fuck to have them with you.) Rather, it’s your tolerance for the inevitable byproducts of being caged together with two other living beings for much longer than nature ever intended, unable to leave or even stand up aside from the occasional emergency piss break that is wearing thin.

None of you have laid hands on so much as a Handi Wipe since you left, let alone had the opportunity to actually bathe in any meaningful sense of the word. You doubt that the consequences would be so dire under normal circumstances, but something about being enclosed together for hour after relentless hour has created a stench of body musk so pungent it would probably kill any small woodland creature who accidentally wandered into the toxic cloud of stink.

Of course, it’s not just the stink that is beginning to get to you. As it turns out, there are a crapload of things about up and fucking off out onto the open road like a trio of extra free-spirited fart tumblers that are just not nearly as fun and exciting as every heartwarming coming of age film featuring road trips would leave you to believe. One of the first things you had run into was something that is almost universally ignored in every road trip movie you have ever subjected yourself to, and that would be the really fucking worrisome knowledge that well fuck me, Aradia is the only person between the three of us with any money to pay for gas or food or fucking anything at all. (You suppose that John can hardly be blamed for his inability to contribute because it’s not like he waltzed his dimpled ass over to your house expecting to be abducted and subjected to any of this. However, you are still mentally kicking the shit out of past you for being too nub-blistering stupid to at least swipe a couple of bills when you were pawing through Nora’s purse like a goddamned Neanderthal.)

Your woeful lack of funds has left you with few options with regards to securing anything even remotely resembling decent food and lodgings. Still, you are not some crotch-fondling, whiny little pissant who bursts into despair tears at the idea of a little stink or a little discomfort. Sure, you are tired of the stink—but you can deal with it. You can deal with the disgusting food and the cramped sleeping quarters. You can even deal with the relentless midwestern sun burning through the windshield like a beacon fired from the asshole of some burning entity from the depths of Troll Dante’s seven layers of hell. Or at least you could if not for the ground rule shat out by the canker-encrusted orifice of bad ideas that is your own self: that you are not to leave the car until you arrive in Houston unless ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY.

It had seemed like a perfectly reasonable precautionary measure two days ago, with the full weight of your fuckup bearing down on you harder than three million tons of fermented cow shit. Human law enforcement was bound to be after you, so why place yourself—and, by extension, your friends—at risk by dragging your blemished backside out into the open and making yourself more visible than
necessary? You had therefore made both John and Aradia promise to enforce this incredibly important survival tactic in your own words “no matter how much I bitch, moan, or threaten to disembowel myself with a rusty paper clip and make you both bathe in my overstock of anguish fluid.” John and Aradia, being the excellent friends that they are, have followed your orders to the letter with an almost gleeful enthusiasm.

Now here you are two days later with the knowledge this was an absolute turd of an idea formed in the twisting bowels of the bad ideas fairy. Never in your life did you once think you would reach a point at which you would be deeply envious of another person’s freedom to walk into a shitty Minute Mart in the crappiest part of downtown Wichita, Kansas—yet here you are, watching Aradia disappear inside the saddest-looking convenience store you have ever seen in your life with a jealousy that burns so hot it threatens to set your globes on fire and send you into the afterlife a screaming, globeless mess. Truly, you have reached a new all-time low.

You are still staring at the doors to the convenience store wistfully imagining all the decadent things you would do if you could actually go inside (holy shit, you would walk up and down all the isles like nobody’s business and oh my fucking god if you were feeling especially daring you might even open a couple of the refrigerator unit doors and let the artificially-chilled air flow over you like the gentle caress of a really handsy ghost) when John clears his throat and says, “Hey Karl? Can I ask you something?”

You grunt out something that functions as a rough equivalent of “Yes, go ahead” because you are still half-lost in a perverse fantasy involving the Slushie machine and your ability to go inside pull its levers. (God, for all you know Aradia is doing that in there right now.)

“What’s your real name?”

“Huh?” Goddamned salacious Slushie machine, you think. I knew I should have worked out a quadrant schedule for its affections before it came to this.

“Your real name,” he repeats. “I mean, unless your name actually is ‘Karl’ but that seems like kind of a lame name for an alien.”

“Oh.” You turn away from the window because it very suddenly hits you that he’s right; you have known each other for the better part of a human year and yet he’s still calling you by your stupid made-up human name and that’s really fucking weird.

“Car-cat?” You scowl. “No. Like my name.”

“Car-cat,” he repeats and ugh, twist your waste-crusted undergarments and insert them into the deepest regions of your nook you have never heard your name twisted into such a shameful heap of trash.

“Jesus, John, if you’re going to say it then at least try not to sound like a giant doofus,” you groan. “Here, listen: Karkat.”

“Car-cat?”

“Stop saying it like it’s two words! It’s Karkat!”

“Car-cat.”

You execute a facepalm fit to destroy the bulbous cartilage nub that has the nerve of calling itself
your nose because you are reaching a point at which you don’t know whether he really is this pan-
numbingly stupid or whether he is doing this on purpose to be an irreverent little shitstain. Either way
you are having none of it today. Very slowly, taking extra care to accentuate the trill and the half-
stop click at the end, you say, “Karkat.”

“Kaaaaaaaarrrr. Kaaaaatch.”

OK, now you know he is fucking with you. You give him a dirty look that you hope says “you’ve
had your brand of fart-whistling fun so now wring out your sponge for the few meager drops of think
juice in it and put forth a respectable goddamn effort here.” Then you say, “No, ass huffer. Look, I’ll
say it nice and clearly for you: Kaaaaaarrrkkaaaat.”

He proceeds to shit all over both you and your efforts by producing something that barely even
qualifies as being in the general diamond-shaped playing field of your name. Your attempts to correct
him seem to fall on deaf ears: by the time Aradia finally returns to the car, the two of you have
devolved into flinging incoherent word feces at each other like a couple of howler monkeys.

Aradia—bless her perceptive heart—somehow manages to decipher what the fuck has gone down in
her absence through the monsoon of gibberish around her. Over your super extended throat vowels,
she says, “Oh, you told John your real name? Guess I should do the same.” She shifts her cargo of
plastic bags so she can extend her right hand and smiles. “Aradia Megido. Pleased to meet you.”

John trails off his really irritating fail of an attempt to trill in order to shake Aradia’s hand and say,
“Aradia, huh? That’s a cool name.”

You gape at him because really? He just straight up gets Aradia’s name perfect on his first try even
though it’s like twenty times more convoluted than yours? He responds to your unvoiced sentiments
of deep frustration by adding, “I’m glad I can call you and Karkat—“ (and oh look at that, now he
gets it right and he’s looking at you with that piss-swizzling gotcha grin; you should have known all
along he was being a difficult little lumpsquirt)—by your real names now.”

You quietly flip him off before turning your attention to Aradia. “OK now that we have that
seedflapping exercise out of the way: Megido, distribute the bountiful—” you trail off long enough to
flick your eyes over to the storefront name “—QuikTrip cuisine before we all starve to death and
mummify out here.”

Aradia dumps three Lunchable packs and a handful of fruit onto the empty driver’s seat without
complaint. You observe the fare with a quiet nod of approval. (And on a side note, yes you
absolutely do realize that “Lunchables and a handful of fruit” barely qualifies as food but you have
spent the last two days subsisting on nothing but the most horrifying convenience store “food”
imaginable. Your last meal tasted like it was comprised entirely of leftover lard, deep-fried and gently
re-warmed. “Lunchables and a handful of fruit” is a goddamn king’s feast in comparison and
anybody who thinks different can go caress a feral musclebeast with their bulge.) You are already
reaching for one of the boxes when you notice that Aradia is still rummaging through the bag in her
hands. A second later she withdraws a small plastic box and tosses it to John in the back seat. He
must be just as surprised by this development as you are because instead of catching the box he just
sort of swats at it like a dope, nearly batting the thing straight out the window. Totally unnecessarily,
Aradia says, “Those are for you, John.”

He picks up the box—and then his face flares as red as a radioactive tomato. “Aradia,” he sputters.
“What the crap?”

“Sorry if they don’t fit right. It’s not like I know your exact size.”
John looks as though he is on the verge of launching into a nuclear explosion of mortification. “No,” he replies. “No; these are fine. Thanks.”

You look back and forth from Aradia, climbing into the driver’s seat to John who still looks like he wants to go curl up and die somewhere. Then you say, “OK what the crotch-blistering fuck was that?”

Aradia shrugs. “You and I have luggage. He doesn’t. I figured it can’t be the most comfortable thing, wearing the same underwear every day so—”

“You bought him underwear?” you shriek.

The color of John’s face evolves from tomato-red to deep purple beet-red. Aradia frowns and says, “I don’t understand why you are both making such a big deal about it.”

“I thought we had just enough cash to cover gas money to get us to Houston and that was it,” you snap.

“Karkat, it was a three dollar pack of underwear. We’ll be fine.”

“We’ve been sleeping in the goddamn car every night!”

“We’ll be fine,” she repeats. Then she furrows her brow and says, “Actually, we might even have enough to rent a hotel room tonight.”

“What?”

She frowns. “Unless you’d rather sleep in the car again? I don’t particularly care one way or the other.”

John pipes up from the back seat, apparently fully recovered after suffering the embarrassment of having some alien broad handling his unmentionables: “Guys, do I get a vote here or—”

“No!” you snap because goddamn it, not knowing important shit like this puts you in a really ornery mood and you can hardly be blamed for being a petulant little ass muffin.

Aradia rolls her eyes, bops you on the head with her Lunchable and says, “Yes. John, what would you like to do?”

“I vote we check out the hotels,” he says. Then he turns to you and adds, “Seriously, dude, you snore like a bear.”

Your indignation flares with all the fiery passion of a thousand burning suns. “I do not! And even if I did a hotel room wouldn’t do anything to fix that, you douche-guzzling ignoramus.”

“So you would rather sleep in the car,” Aradia states.

“What—fuck no!”

“Well then it’s settled.” Turning the key in the ignition, she proclaims: “Hotel it is!” As she pulls the car out of the parking lot, she takes the opportunity to look to you and add, “And yes, you do snore like a choler bear with a head cold.”

You are half-tempted to offer up another indignant squawk, this one laced with a copious serving of vitriol and a precisely-executed hand gesture or two for good measure. Then it dawns on you that tonight you will not need to sleep on a globe-shatteringly uncomfortable car seat on some
godforsaken back road while playing a round of the ever-entertaining ‘Oh fuck, I hope the cops don’t find us out here’ game and you suddenly find yourself in much too good a mood for that shit so you bite your tongue and let Aradia drive on completely unharassed.

The three of you cruise around town for the better part of an hour in search of a motel that will fit your stringent parameters: not too expensive, dumpy enough to suggest that nobody there has enough give-a-shit to ask too many questions, yet still decent enough you won’t need to worry about waking up with a bunch of vermin gnawing on you like something out of a perverse blackrom fantasy. By the time you find a suitable place the sun is beginning to set, the Lunchables are long gone, and your patience is wearing as thin as the one-ply toilet paper you’d rasped against your vulnerable ass cheeks at the last rest stop.

Aradia goes into the management building to check in and while she’s in there John takes the opportunity to remind you that hey Karkat, according to your silly ground rule you are going to have to sleep out here in the car after all! You take the opportunity to remind him that hey John, why don’t you go suck on a possum’s hairy teat?

The hotel room turns out to be almost as cramped as the car with two beds crammed into a room clearly meant for one, but it has a shower the size of a gnat’s ass and you don’t see any cockroaches waiting to cuddle so you decide that fuck it, things could be worse. Of course, John immediately makes things worse by declaring dibs on the shower. (Though when you really stop to think about it maybe he’s actually making things one hell of a lot better because you are pretty damn sure that his body musk is stronger than yours and Aradia’s combined.)

You tell John to hold off on the ablutions long enough to let you take a piss because now that you are up and about you realize that your bladder has reached critical mass and you need to pee so bad you can taste it. He decides to be unusually kind and understanding and obliges without trying to crack any dipshit jokes. Ninety seconds later, you emerge from the bathroom with your bladder mercifully empty and a whole new optimistic outlook on life.

John and Aradia are staring at the TV with such rapt attention you momentarily suspect that they have stumbled across some kind of broadcast mind control frequency and have been reduced to mindless idiots capable only of fondling themselves and blowing spit bubbles. Then you remember that this is pretty much the default setting for watching human TV so you clear your throat and say, “What in the name of body fluid finger painting is so interesting?”

John gestures to the TV. “Looks like we’re famous.”

You look at the screen and your blood pusher clenches harder than an ass sphincter in the throes of a bout of rampant diarrhea. There are two photographs on the screen—one of you and one of John. John’s photo is standard school yearbook fare: a headshot in which he is grinning like a giant idiot, the perfect image of America’s next golden boy. Your picture is far less flattering: a poor-quality shot of you scowling and flipping off the cameraman (or at least, you assume you are flipping off the cameraman. The network was kind enough to fuzz out the area of screen over your left hand so as not to offend any of the delicate flowers watching at home.) A caption at the bottom of the screen helpfully proclaims: “Washington teens at large.”

“Washington state law enforcement wants to emphasize that the events surrounding these crimes are still largely unknown,” says a woman’s voice. “However, they ask that you call the hotline at the bottom of the screen if you know anything about the whereabouts of Karl Vantross or John Egbert. And now onto the weather with Katy Pierce. Katy?”

You snap the TV off and you feel not even the slightest ass puffing whiff of remorse for cutting Katy short because as near as you can tell all there is to say on the matter is Jesus Christ, it is hot as globes
here in south central Kansas and it is going to continue to be hot as globes for the foreseeable future. Back to you, Sara! Turning to face John and Aradia, you say, “How much do they know?”

“Enough that we are going to be in a shitload of trouble if they catch us,” John replies.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. On that note, I’m going to take my shower now.”

John stands up, starts for the bathroom. Aradia holds up the unopened box of underwear. “Don’t forget these!”

“Oh...yeah. Thanks.” He grabs the box out of her hand and hurries into the bathroom as though he is afraid she is going to somehow produce another embarrassing clothing item (a jock strap? A bolo tie?) if he fucks around for too long.

Aradia turns to you once the water is running in the bathroom and says, “You’re not just famous on human news, you know.” She withdraws her portable computing device, fiddles around with it for a few seconds. “Sollux has been working to distribute your case through the fleet. Apparently it’s causing a real sensation! Here; look.”

You accept the device and promptly lapse into quiet freakout mode at what you see on the screen. You had been expecting a news transmission, maybe even a low-scale bounty call. You had not been expecting to see a goddamn official Imperial wanted notice accruing you with an adult title and railing for your immediate extra-messy and horrifying death. The bright fucking red—goddamn it, why does it have to be motherfucking red?—culling fork seal might as well be dripping with your blood and entrails already because now you are a dead troll walking.

You hand the device back to Aradia and she yammers on about how “everything is going as smoothly as we could want it to be so far” and “oh, cool title—'The Renegade.' Very eye-catching!” You wish you could share her enthusiasm—but let’s be honest with ourselves here you are way closer to shitting your pants and bursting into tears like a sissy. Clairvoyance was never a thing for you, but you cannot shake the feeling that no matter where the shit-flavored chips of destiny fall, you are going to end up more boned than a sick bunny covered in bear pheromones.

> Rose: Pester Dave
> Rose: Pester Dave

tentacleTherapist [TT] began pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

TT: Dav.
TG: rose
TT: Dav, I hav somehting I need to stell you.
TG: It’s improtant.
TG: ok stop
TG: i really hope this is your drunk mom and not you rose
TT: Nah, it's meh.
TG: shit
TG: i thought we agreed no more drunk messaging
TG: like theres all the way there rose and theres rose light and only full meal deal rose gets to touch
the computer while rose light has to go to her room without dinner like a mouthy brat in a kids movie
from the nineties
TG: what happened
TT: I have my raisons for messagign you liek this. Reasons.
TG: well ok then
TG: but man rose youve got to quit doing this shit
TT: I kno. But Dave haven’t yuou been watching the newss?
TG: rose you insult me
TG: watching the news is for old people and squares
TG: there is no way to make it cool
TG: not even ironically
TG: but seriously whats up
TT: I think our flyuing trip is kaput.
TG: what
TG: why
TT: The newds, Dav.
TG: well shit thats what happens when you snap a bunch of x rated selfies and throw them all over
the internet like paris hiltons sex tape
TT: That’s not what I meant an dyou kno it.
TG: so whats on the news that has you all wound up like a launching skydancer doll
TG: John is in a lot oof trouble.
TT: A glut of dilemma.
TT: A veritable platoon of crisis.
TG: ok i get it
TG: john is in a real fucking pickle
TG: like someone swept him off his feet by the ankles and tossed him in a giant vat of brine until he
got all pruny and delicious
TG: but its cool
TT: No it is not “cool” Dave.
TG: yeah it is
TG: hes coming to stay with me for a couple of days until whatever is dogging him blows over
TG: then we can have our road trip as previously scheduled
TG: no big deal
TT: I belief you will find that you are shorely mistaken.
TT: It is in fact the very definition of a big dealt.
TT: Read this.
TG: ok
TG: oh
TG: oh fuck
TT: Yes, I believe that fukc is indeed the word to describe
TG: whoah
TG: you still there rose

tentacleTherapist [TT] is an idle chum!

TG: what the hell
TG: don't tell me you're passed out face down on the floor like some creepy hobo that smells like piss
TT: hi david
TG: jesus rose
TG: you were gone for literally twenty damn minutes
TT: im not rose
TG: what
TG: ok who the fuck are you then
TT: i happen to be roses drunk mom
TT: you can tell your friends that your flying trip is now officially kaput
TT: rose is grounded

tentacleTherapist [TT] ceased pestering turntechGodhead [TG]

> Tavros: Commune
It has been perigees since you and Gamzee went rogue. The two of you have spent the majority of that time holed up in the tunnel system that begins in the cliffs near your house and ends...pretty much anywhere on Alternia you can imagine, actually. Sometimes you do sort of miss seeing the sky and the open plains—but for the first time in almost half a sweep, you are finally going outside.

To be honest, you can’t really believe it. The tunnels had been your refuge when the drones came to collect you, and a home when you had nowhere else to go. (As it turns out, your knowledge of the mazelike network of caves and passageways, while sufficient to keep both you and Gamzee safe from the drones that swept through the tunnels to weed out runaways like yourselves, couldn’t do much to prevent the drones from razing both of your hives to the ground in your absence.) You’ve gotten used to the smell of dirt. The closeness of the tunnels makes you feel sheltered and safe. You’ve even come to find the perpetual dark and quiet to be soothing, like being wrapped in a big, extra-thick blanket that hides you from all the bad things in the world. (Of course, it’s not always dark and it’s not always quiet because you occasionally run into other trolls wandering around here. Most of them run away before you can say anything to them, but a few have been friendly like the skinny guy who showed you where to find food and how to gather flicker worms and use them as a makeshift lantern. A few have been not-so-friendly, too, but between your lance and Gamzee’s chucklevoodoos those don’t tend to bother you for long.)

You can’t help feeling a little nostalgic as you and Gamzee head down the tunnel that will take you to your destination. A scattered mess of pebbles in a hollow off the side of the path reminds you of the pile that you and Gamzee built there back when you first went into hiding. You think of all the good jams the two of you have had here and all of the slam poetry you wrote together. Then you see a smudge of dried blood on the wall, brown like yours and patterned into a crude representation of your symbol—the place you and Gamzee buried Tinkerbull after you’d found his body in the ruins of your hive—and you think that maybe it’s not such a bad thing you are leaving after all.

Gamzee must notice your sudden change in demeanor. From beside you he says, “Is everything all up and alright with yourself, brother?”

“Yeah,” you reply. “I’m just thinking.”

“What you thinking of, then? I’m not remembering what was the last time I saw you so motherfucking worried.”

“I’m not worried.”

“Nah, brother. You’re shook up like a bottle of the wicked elixir all set to explode.”

“I’m not worried,” you repeat. “Just kind of nervous, I guess.”

He puts a hand on your shoulder. “Ain’t got nothing to be nervous about. Long as you got my motherfucking self around ain’t nothing going to be befalling you.”

You brush his hand with one of yours and say, “I know. It’s just...I don’t know if I can do this and if I really mess it up people could get hurt or maybe even die.”

“You don’t got to be doing this if you don’t got the feeling all inside yourself for it. But I’ve got the thought all rolling sideways in my pan that you can do it.”

You are about to tell him that you think it is going to be a lot different from controlling a giant spider...
and probably a lot harder, too, but then the two of you finally emerge from the tunnel and it’s enough to take your breath away. The tunnel has deposited you at the base of one of the rolling hills not far from where your hive used to be. Everything is open, exposed—too exposed, says the part of you that’s grown accustomed to the security of earth all around—and green. (God, you’d forgotten how much you missed that color; how much you used to love it.) You are too far away from the cliffs to hear the ocean but you can see the jagged cliff edges in the distance and you can definitely still smell the briny sea smell on the wind.

“Motherfuck,” Gamzee breathes. “I forgot how fucking big the sky was.”

You look up and oh god, he’s right. It’s huge and endless and it makes you feel dizzy and small. It’s terrifying—but it’s also beautiful. For a minute or two, all either of you can do is stare and drink it all in because the stars are like scatters of twinkling fairy dust, the moons are so bright, the clouds are little puffs of frosting…

When you finally manage to find your voice again, you say, “Gamzee, we should probably go. We’ll be late.”

“Yeah,” he mumbles and for just a second he reminds you of the old Gamzee; the Gamzee who used to eat sopor back when the worst you had to worry about was Vriska bothering you. Then he shakes his head and when you look again his eyes are back to the state of tempered focus you’ve come to expect. “Let’s go.”

You don’t have far to go, which is probably a good thing because neither of you are much good at reading coordinates. Lucky for you, you can see Feferi’s ship from here; a little point of blinking light perched near the edge of the cliffs and even if you couldn’t see that, you could easily follow the jet trails the ship cut across the sky on its way to land.

When you get close to the ship, you see that Feferi is already outside waiting for you. You are surprised to see that Terezi and Vriska are with her. (Gamzee stiffens his posture beside you and a low growl builds in his chest, presumably in response to the sight of the troll he was planning to kill the first time you shoosh papped him because Vriska is the one he seems to be looking at. You brush his hand to remind him that she’s on our side now; you can’t subjugglate her. His posture remains tense but you are relieved to note that he stops growling before any of them notice.) Feferi seems to be wrapped up in discussing something important with Vriska and Terezi, but as you wheel closer Feferi breaks away from the conversation and runs to meet you.

“Hi, Gamsea!” she exclaims. “Hi, Tavros! Are you ready to meet my lusus?”

You shrug. “I guess so.”

“Great! Where do you want to do it?”

“Near the cliffs, I guess. I think it will be better if I can be closer to the water.”

She nods as though you have said something really insightful even though you have absolutely no idea what you are talking about. “Okray. Let’s go then.”

You, Gamzee, and Feferi head for the cliffs, leaving Terezi and Vriska with the ship. Once you are out of hearing range Gamzee says, “Why the motherfuck does spider sister got to be here, fish chica?”

“She and Terezi are going to get me a ride to Earth, assuming things go smoothly here.” She pauses a beat before amending, “Not that I don’t think they will—I’m sure everyfin will go swimmingly!”
“Yeah, me too,” you mutter, though you can’t help feeling an uncomfortable flutter in your digestive sac as you wheel yourself up to the edge of the cliff, like maybe you accidentally swallowed an ooganibomb and now a Fiduspawn is about to come bursting out of your chest.

You sit there for a long time, staring out at the churning waters below you; long enough that Feferi finally clears her throat and says, “Is there anything I can do to kelp you?”

“Uh…no,” you mumble. “Maybe just let me and Gamzee handle this?”

The edges of her mouth turn down in the hint of a frown. “Well, OK then. But if you need anything let me know, OK?”

You tell her you will and you watch her go back to the ship and rejoin Vriska and Terezi. You wait for the three of them to go into the ship before you turn around to face the ocean. Gamzee envelops your hand in one of his, worms his fingers around yours until he is holding your hand. The easy, familiar grip makes some of the nervous jitters in your gut calm down—not all of them, but enough that you are able to squeeze his hand to say OK, I’m ready. Then you close your eyes, take a deep breath, and you are gone.

You are moving through the water below you, going deep; deeper than you could have ever imagined. Seadweller lusii reach out to you as you go past but you let their consciousnesses roll off of you because they aren’t the ones you are looking for right now. The one you want is deeper than even them, so deep you can’t see anything anymore. You can’t see and it’s heavy and you can’t breathe, why can’t you breathe, you need to breathe—

You almost scream because her voice is like nothing you have ever heard before: intangible yet deafening and something about it seems to curl around the inside of your pan and squeeze like a slitherbeast coiling around its prey. The sound of it hurts you; it actually hurts enough to make your eyes water with the strain of it.

You can’t understand her. You can’t understand her, oh god why can’t you understand her?

Your pan is throbbing. You think you might be crying but you can’t tell because she is inside your head and she is going to devour you from the inside out until there is nothing left. You can’t take this, you can’t—

A sound comes to you from far away, a pathetic whimpering noise that you guess must be coming from you because you can feel Gamzee squeezing your hand with both of his. You wish you could stop but the pain in your pan is worse than anything you have ever experienced in your entire life. It is worse than Gamzee’s chucklevoodoos, worse than the time Vriska forced you to jump off the cliff, even. It is in a class of its own and you are legitimately afraid that your head is going to burst, you
can feel your pan melting.

It is all you can do to desperately think, *Stop; you're hurting me, please stop!*

Something gives inside you, like a stuck cog jerking back into motion and then the pain in your head *does* stop—or rather, it recedes to a dull pressure that makes your head feel heavy and overly full. It is definitely not a pleasant feeling but at least it’s bearable enough to let you breathe and oh—*oh god*—you understand her when she says i am sorry child sorry.

*It’s OK; you didn’t mean it,* you think and you realize with a start that you know that is true. You can feel her letting you in, allowing you to know everything about her just as she knows everything about you. You let yourself drift through the vast ocean of her consciousness, drinking in snips of her memories and knowledge until you run up against something that makes your blood pusher clench.

Your connection abruptly snaps and you whip back into yourself so suddenly it leaves you reeling and nauseous. Gamzee’s hands are on your shoulders, shaking you and you can’t really hear what he is saying but you do know that the shaking isn’t really helping your dizziness much. You re-orient yourself enough to resume control of your speak strings and mumble, “Gamzee, stop. I’m OK.”

The shaking stops. “Motherfuck,” he says. “You scared me something fucking proper there, brother. Are you all back inside with yourself now?”

You nod, which turns out to be a pretty bad idea because it makes everything in your vision fuzz out for a few seconds. You wait a few seconds, letting your vision clear up. Then you say, “I did it. It worked; I can do it.”

To your surprise, Gamzee shakes his head, his eyes wide with…not fear, exactly, but something that is closer to it than anything you have ever seen there before. “No.”

“What?”

“I said fucking no. Motherfucker ain’t going to do none of the miracle work no more.”

“I thought you wanted me to do this. It was even your idea.”

He wipes underneath your nose with his thumb and holds it up so you can see the brown blood he comes away with. “You was fucking hurting yourself, brother. Blood all pouring out of your smell holes like some wicked ass fountain of injury.”

With a sigh, you hold your hands out palms-up. “Gamzee, I have to do this.”

“You don’t got to up and be doing none of that sideways wicked shit. There isn’t no one what can be forcing you to. You just be telling our revolutionary fish sister that she’d better up and find another fucking way.”

“Oh,” you gasp. “You’re right; I need to talk to Feferi.”

Gamzee nods. “Motherfuck right you got to be having some of the refusal talk with that chica.”

“That’s not what I am going to talk to her about,” you reply. “There’s something she does need to know, though.”
You turn away from the cliff, intending to start back to the ship but Gamzee shifts so he is standing right in front of you. “I’m not going to let a brother be up and motherfucking killing himself. Not nothing out there what would make losing my best pale brother worth it.”

“Gamzee, listen to me.” You take his hand in one of yours and you use the other to pap his arm. Looking him directly in the eye, you say, “I can do this. It will be OK. I promise.”

He looks back at you and for a couple of seconds you think that he isn’t going to believe you. Then he slouches a bit, gives your arm a reciprocating pap before saying, “All right then, pale bro. I’m not all getting my enjoy on with this whole plan, but if that’s what you’re up and telling me then I guess that’s what I got to be believing.”

“Thanks, Gamzee. Now let’s go back to the ship.”

He nods and gets out of your way. The two of you don’t exchange a word on the way back to the ship. You are thankful for the silence because you are pretty sure that he is still really unhappy with your decision and you don’t want to get into a fight over this, especially since you aren’t exactly sure you were being totally honest with him about being able to do what you need to do without getting hurt. You make a mental note to arrange a jam so you can discuss all of this with him later, once you’ve gotten a chance to let Feferi know what you need to tell her because the thought that you might have actually been lying to your moiral makes you feel really gross. (You try to take solace in the fact that you intend to be absolutely open and honest with him at that time but that doesn’t really do much to diminish your feelings of guilt.)

When you get back to the ship, it’s Vriska who comes outside to greet you. It has been long enough since the last time you saw her that you can’t tell whether she means for the smile on her face to look like a sneer or whether she is actually trying to be friendly for pretty much the first time ever in her entire life. “Hey, Toreadumb-butt,” she drawls. “How did it go?”

You note with a bit of trepidation that Gamzee is balling his hands into fists but you are relieved to note that at least he isn’t growling at her this time. Keeping your attention more on Gamzee than on Vriska, you say, “It went fine.”

She raises her eyebrows and there is something in her eyes (or rather, eye) underneath all the usual taunting bravado; a quick flash of what you think might actually be admiration. A long time ago, that probably would have made you feel pretty good about yourself. Now you find that you can’t really be bothered to care.

“Well what do you know? I always knew that pushing you to be less of a lame-ass would pay off in the end.” She pauses a moment, shuffles her feet a bit before she says, “You know, once this whole revolution bullshit blows over, you should come and hang with the space pirates. I mean, I could totally use my own personal lieutenant with how busy I am and all.”

“Where’s Feferi?”

She gives you a blank look. “What?”

You roll your eyes because you aren’t really sure where she is going with this but wherever it is you aren’t really all that interested. “I need to talk to Feferi. Where is she?”

“She’s on the ship; who cares? The important thing here is that I am offering you an opportunity to —”

“Where is Feferi?”
She gapes at you. “Did you not hear what I said?”

“Yeah, I heard. Now can I please talk to Feferi?”

“Oh my god,” she scoffs. “Are you actually saying no to me?”

“He asked you where our fish sister is at,” Gamzee snarls. “I suggest you be all up and doing what he asked you, lest I be getting the heavy urges to be laying down the most righteous of wicked subjugglations.”

An angry cerulean flush rises in her cheeks. “Wow, fuck you, Makara.”

You say, “Just get Feferi, please.” Gamzee doesn’t say anything. (He does bare his teeth, though, and even though you don’t think he is actually planning to hurt anybody at the moment it is still pretty intimidating.)

“OK, fine!” she snaps. “I don’t have to put up with this bullshit. In fact, I almost feel sorry for Feferi, having to deal with a couple of dumb yahoos like you.” With those benedictory words, she turns on her heel and flounces back toward the ship.

You wait until you are sure that Vriska is back onboard and out of hearing range before you turn to Gamzee and say, “You didn’t have to do that, Gamzee.”

“Motherfucking treacherous spider sister’s deserving a lot worse if you’re all asking my opinion.”

You sigh because OK, maybe you don’t really like Vriska all that much and maybe she has done a lot of really awful things, but you also don’t want her to die. You don’t want anybody to die and you sort of wish that all this revolution stuff was over so you could stop worrying about everybody—yes, even Vriska—all the time.

Feferi is practically skipping as she comes out of the ship to join you. “Vriska said you did fine—er…among other things,” she says. “Is that true?”

“Yeah,” you reply. (You are suddenly glad that Gamzee cleaned the blood from under your nose because you probably wouldn’t look like you were very successful if you had a bunch of blood all over you.) “I think I can do it.”

“Oh, Tavros, you are fin-nominal!” She throws her arms around your shoulders and the force of her hug just about knocks you over, chair and all. “Thank you!”

Around the crushing grip of her arms around your chest, you somehow manage to gasp, “Uh, there’s something I need to tell you first, though.”

She releases you from her cholerbear embrace. “What is it?”

“I noticed something when I was talking with your lusus. I think…I mean I don’t know, really, but I think she might be…sick.”

“Oh.” She sighs, her face falling. “She’s been a little green around the gills for a while now. I don’t know what it is. I’ve been feeding her a lot lately—even more than usual, in fact!”

“Feferi…” you trail off, trying to think of a delicate way to say the thing you need to say even though you know that there isn’t one. “I think she’s dying.”

“Oh no,” she whispers. She looks down at the ground for a long time and you start to think that
maybe she is about to start crying. Then, with a flat voice that has none of the bubbly quality you’ve
gotten used to hearing from her, she says “How long do you think it will be until….”

“Not long, I think”

She purses her lips, thinking. Then: “Tavros, I want to be here for her when it happens and I am
going to try and get back here as quick as I can. But if I don’t make it, could you just…keep her
company so she isn’t alone?”

“I think so. Yeah.”

She gives you another hug and now you are sort of starting to feel uncomfortable because she just
keeps hugging you right in front of your moirail, but you are reasonably sure that she doesn’t mean
anything by it so you don’t tell her to stop.

“Thank you,” she breathes. Then she is letting you go and she is smiling but you don’t have to be her
moirail or even know her that well at all to know that it’s not a real, happy smile. You think she tries
to sound energetic and excited but she just sounds tired as she says, “OK, well I guess that means it’s
time for me to lift anchor then! Wish me luck!”

You do and Gamzee does, too and then she is hurrying back onto the ship. Gamzee looks like he
wants to say something to you but then the ship’s engines are starting to rev and the two of you are
scrambling to get a safe enough distance away and it’s too loud to hear yourself think let alone carry
on a conversation. Finally, after the ship has lifted off and is well on its way to the stratosphere,
Gamzee turns to you and says, “So the Rift Carbuncle, motherfucking speaker of the bitch tits vast
glub is kicking the wicked shit? What’s that even mean for us?”

You shake your head. “I don’t know. Whatever it is, I don’t think it’s good.”
> Dave: Receive guests

You have a lot of bullshit on your plate at the moment. Like, you’re some unsuspecting farmer, standing around chewing on your wheat stalk, minding your own business and somebody snuck into your barn and slipped all the cows laxative-laced triple malt prune milkshakes. Now you are armpits deep in the stuff with no escape. You keep shoveling but the shit just keeps piling up. It won’t be much longer before you are completely buried—the first person in recent history to drown in actual bull shit. (Fucking cows.)

Your bro is kicking you out at the end of summer. You guess it could be worse. After all, he could have been a dick and kicked you out the day after graduation, like what happened with the poor asshole who used to sit behind you in civics class. (You would have paid good money to hear how that conversation went down. “Happy graduation, Paul. Now pack your shit and get out. Game over, fuck you. Do not pass Go. Do not collect 200 dollars.”) Hell, he could have done it the day after you turned eighteen, way the fuck back in December. (“Happy birthday, Dave. Now pack your shit and get out. Game over, etc.”) When you think about it like that the cushy three-month’s notice he gave you seems like downright coddling, like he might as well swaddle you in a hand-knit blanket and give you a bottle of gently chilled apple juice to suck on while he’s at it. Still, coddling or not, it doesn’t change the fact that you need to find a job and a new living situation posthaste and so far, your prospects on both are a resounding bupkis. You can handle it, though. It’s your problem and you are dealing with it with the proper level of Strider cool.

What you are not handling with proper Strider cool is seeing one of your good friends systematically ruin herself. You don’t know exactly when Rose started drinking. (Actually, yeah. You sort of do. The first drunk chat pesterlog is still lurking somewhere in the bowels of the PDA Jade sent you for Christmas. You just can’t bring yourself to find it because it happened a lot farther back than you want to think about.) You do know that it’s been a problem for too long a while now and literally nothing you say to her seems to make much of a difference. It had been your hope that the road/air trip would be enough to pull her out of her funk, but ever since her mom went and put the kibosh on those plans you’ve come to realize how fucking stupid that idea was. (Seriously, what in the fuck were you even thinking there? Did you think that you and John and Jade would clap your hands and chant “bibbidi bobbidi boo” like a triad of hobo-looking fairy godmothers and all of her problems would magically disappear?)

The fact that your apartment building’s air conditioning unit bit the big one two days ago does nothing to improve your oh-so-rosy outlook. You like to call yourself an optimist (of course you’re not—you do it strictly for ironic purposes), but goddamn, it is hard to be a bright-eyed and dimpled-cheeked Pollyanna when it’s hot as balls and the air is as heavy as dog’s breath and there is absolutely nowhere you can go to get away from it. Your only defense is to plant your ass in front of every fan you own while chugging copious amounts of ice water, and even then you are still greasier than an oiled-up Chippendale’s dancer.

Yep, between the heat and the situation with Rose and your imminent assumption of the much-acclaimed role of “Homeless Urchin #2”, you have plenty of shit on your plate to deal with. And yet you have somehow managed to pile one last helping of worrisome shit onto your plate like you are a starving dung beetle and you are carrying the last plate at some world-class all-you-can-eat shit buffet. Coincidentally, it is the biggest helping of shit, easily smothering the others like gravy at Thanksgiving dinner—and it is pulling up to your apartment building right now.

You watch from your bedroom window as the black car attempts to maneuver into the only open space anywhere near your apartment complex—a tiny stretch of curb bordered on either side by red
cars that are probably hella expensive sports cars that belong to teenyboppers with hella rich daddies. (Or maybe they’re both junkers falling apart at the seams and sitting up on cinder blocks. From your vantage point way the hell up on the 34th floor the cars are about as big as ants and this whole exercise looks like something straight out of the Discovery Channel—“ah, yes! Here we see the crafty black ant attempting to hide from his predators between two red fire ants. What a clever little devil! But oh wait! Shit, looks like the ant eater still found him because anteaters aren’t colorblind. Sucks to be him.”) The car pulls forward, goes back, pulls forward, goes back in a scintillating salsa that pretty obviously says that the space is too small. You watch for a few seconds before you decide to be nice and tell them that your building has a parking garage.

Thank every long-haired, glowing hippie-looking depiction of Jesus H. Christ the elevator is working. Not that it has ever failed you before—but then again the AC has also never failed you before and now here you are lamenting its passing like it was your dearly departed pet goldfish and you just flushed it away to the great fishbowl in the sky or some shit. You therefore appreciate the hell out of the elevator’s nice, smooth descent. (No seriously, if the ride was any longer you would legit prostrate yourself on its grody-ass floor in gratitude.)

The car is somehow magically parked by the time you get down to the ground floor. You don’t know what kind of sorcery must have gone down for that to happen because there is literally a half an inch of leeway behind and in front and yet neither of the shiny teenybopper cars (oh hey, you were right) have a scratch on them. Your main man John is milling around on the sidewalk next to the car, talking to a guy who looks so damn surly you can’t help but think his face would probably break into a million pieces if he were to ever crack a smile. (You also can’t help cringing a bit at the realization that short, dark, and scowly must be Karl because yeah, John had mentioned the dude was “grouchy” but damn. You were not prepared to deal with some pissed-off pooh bear pretending to be an angry little raincloud full of piss and vinegar.)

As you walk outside to meet them, you are surprised to see that there is somebody else getting out of the car: some girl that was definitely not mentioned in the original package deal when you signed up for this shit. You suppose that given the full magnitude of shit that is in dire need of some serious ‘splaining, adding a hot chick to the mix shouldn’t be enough to get your frilly man-panties in a twist. Still, you can’t help thinking that your bro is going to have a conniption when and if he ever finds out about this. (Not so much because she’s a girl. Creepy puppets aside, Casa Strider isn’t some exclusive man cave with a “NO GIRLS ALLOWED” sign on the door. No, the thing that has you all wound up and ready to perform an acrobatic fucking pierouette off the handle is the fact that you had to practically get down on your knees and beg your bro to agree to let two of your friends crash at your place and now here they are showing up with a third like they’re the fucking full-on Josie and the Pussycats trio.)

John is in the middle of saying something to Karl when he notices you, but he cuts himself off mid-sentence to wave and say, “Hi, Dave!”

You give him a single wrist-flick wave back and reply, “Yo.” You spend an incredibly awkward ten seconds waiting for him to introduce his friends to you or offer up some explanation as to what in the hell is going down. Finally, you nod toward the guy who you have deduced to be Karl (holy shit, your sleuthing skills are so tight they would make Sherlock Holmes sixteen shades of jealous) and say, “Guess you’re Karl.” Gesturing to the mystery girl, you add, “Who’s she?”

Karl looks like he really wants to say something, but John gives him a funny look and he just scowls instead. (You have half a mind to tell the guy to quit pulling such ugly-ass faces because dude, didn’t anybody ever tell you your face will freeze that way? You would totally do it, too, except whoops, your bad looks like you’re too late to be of much help there.)
“It’s sort of…complicated,” John says. “Can we explain once we are inside?”

You raise your eyebrows ever so slightly because you don’t particularly appreciate all this cagey horseshit, but whatever. You’ve been dealing with it for the past few days so you guess you can put up with it for the next couple of minutes or so. Shrugging your shoulders, you say, “Yeah, sure. Let’s go.”

They follow you inside in a neat little single-file line like you’re a mama duck and they are your fugitive ducklings. Nobody says anything until you are all crammed into the (sweet ass hallelujah) still-working elevator. Then Karl decides that he’s a big boy who doesn’t need John’s permission to talk anymore.

“Oh my god, it is hot as hell in here,” he groans. “Is this how it always is? Please tell me you do not actually live like this. I might manage to squeeze out three whole tears of actual fucking anguish before I drown in a lake of my own sweat.”

You roll your eyes behind your shades, where nobody can see you doing it. Then, in the best affected accent you can conjure from the depths of your Texan self, you reply, “Wayell sheeyit, this heeyer’s the coolest we ayver keep it. Uhs Texans, we just luhv theeyis tahp of wayther.”

Karl gapes at you, aghast. “OK, I literally understood no more than three words of that mouth dribble, but the little I did catch was not very reassuring. Are you actually serious right now?”

“Fuck no,” you answer, dropping the shitty overdone accent. “The AC’s out.”

“Fuuuuck,” he moans and wow, you don’t care how good this guy was to your boy John in his time of need, he is really starting to grind your gears. You would probably be crafting some sick burns to sting his whining ass with if the heat wasn’t making you feel slow and stupid and all kinds of miserable. As it is, you decide that the elevator is hot enough already and you graciously choose to defer your lyrical burninating for later.

After another agonizing 20 seconds or so, the elevator deposits you on your floor. You lead your trio of baby chicks (or, if you are being particular: two baby chicks and one loud-mouth dick) to the door that leads to your apartment. Before you open the door and admit them entrance to your home sweet-ass home, you clear your throat and say, “OK, kids, here’s the deal. My bro’s got gigs every night this week so rule numero uno for sleepover at the Strider penthouse is keep the noise down to a minimum during the day. I’m talking inside voices, golf claps, tiptoe through the tulips like a sugarplum fairy because if he wakes up, you guys are out the door. Got it?”

“Uh…yeah,” John whispers. “Sure.”

The girl flashes a smile, executes a mock salute, and says, “Roger!”

Karl shrugs and mutters something under his breath that sounds like “fucking Christ.” You decide to be charitable and interpret that as a solid “Sir, yes sir!”

“OK,” you say. Opening the door, you say, “Welcome to the humble abode of Dave and Bro Strider, bitches.”

Once you are all inside, you herd your guests over to the couch. You are tempted to start grilling them right then and there but then you remember that they have been crammed together in a hot and smelly car for a stretch of time that almost definitely qualifies as “inhumane” so you sashay your ass over to the fridge, snag three bottles of chilled water, and lob them across the room to their rightful recipients—the girl first, then your bro John, and then surly-ass Pooh Bear Karl last. They accept
your generous offering with varying degrees of thanks. You hesitate in joining them just long enough to grab a cool bottle of AJ (aka: elixir of the gods, yo) for yourself. Then, standing in front of the couch like you are their sensei and they are all young grasshoppers in your personal dojo of sick beats, you say, “All right, what the hell is going on?”

John squirms in his seat like he desperately needs to take a piss. (You realize that this is entirely possible, but he owes you some answers and you have been patient for plenty long enough. If he really does need a potty break, he can damn well ask you for one.) “Like I said,” he whispers, “it’s kind of a long story.”

“Well shit, guess I’d better get all nice and cozy so you can share your little campfire stories.” You dump a pile of your bro’s Smuppets off the beanbag chair in the corner and kick the chair along the floor until it is directly in front of the couch. Then you plop you ass down and sigh, “Aah, there we go. OK. Got my AJ, got my comfy seat…somebody better whip out the shitty acoustic guitar because it’s fucking story time up in here.”

Karl looks at you like you have just announced that you are Buffy the Vampire Slayer and you are going to stake all their asses. The girl seems to get your sense of style because she flashes you another smile. John sighs and mumbles, “I guess I should start by introducing you to my friends.”

He looks at you like he is awaiting your approval. You stare back at him because John is a big boy and he doesn’t need you to pat his hand and slip him a bag of animal crackers every step of the way. He seems to get the hint because he nods toward the guy you have already figured out must be Karl and says, “You have probably already figured out that this is Karl.”

Karl glares at you like he would just as soon flip you off as wave in your general direction. You remain impassive because who the fuck cares what he thinks? The situation is about as awkward as a one-legged Russian bear trying to play hopscotch. Thankfully, John diverts the imminent ass-over-tail tumbling wall of bear by gesturing to the girl and saying, “This is Aria…except that’s not actually her real name and Karl’s name isn’t actually Karl, either.”

You allow your eyebrows to creep ever so slightly higher than the line of your shades.

“Well, they’re actually aliens—they used to have horns and everything!—and their real names are Karkat and Aradia.”

Your eyebrows continue to rise like the heat waves emanating off a flow of liquid-hot lava. You say nothing.

Karl—Karkat? Is that what John just tried to tell you his name was?—lets out an exasperated noise that sounds like something a frustrated terrier would make. Mimicking as though he is holding something large and unwieldy in his hands, he says, “Wow, John. Look at this: it’s your award for shittiest explanation in the history of the universe. Please accept it with the proper amount of shame and shut the fuck up.”

“Pff, like you did any better the first time you tried to explain it to me,” John laughs. He turns his attention back to you and says, “Sorry Dave, that was a really dumb place to start. It’s just…I guess I don’t really know where to start to make any of this sound any less ridiculous!”

Your eyebrows have reached their apex and so has your patience for this bullshit. “Why don’t you start by explaining why the hell you—” you stab one finger toward John “—are a missing person and he—” you stab your finger in the general direction of Karl-Karkat’s ugly mug “—is wanted for fucking patricide.”
“Oh my god,” Karkat-Karl groans. “I fucking knew the patricide would come around to bite me in the ass. Aradia, did I not say that the patricide was going to come around to bite me in the ass?”

Aradia (Aria?) very seriously nods her head. “Yes, I think you did mention that a couple hundred times or so.”

Something in the pit of your stomach gives way because fuck, are they serious? Jesus fuck, you’d been banking on the idea that this was all some jacked up misunderstanding but you have a really uncomfortable feeling that they are being serious here. You try to maintain your default veneer of impregnable cool but your voice is a decidedly uncool squawk as you sputter, “Wait, what? Did he actually kill his parents?”

John and his two friends exchange looks that are varying degrees of fuck, this is not going well, is it? Then John replies, “Well…yeah—but he only did it to save me! He saved my life! And, uh…I don’t think they were really his parents?”

“Oh, well that makes it all OK,” you retort.

John cringes and you feel like sort of a dick because you hadn’t meant your sarcasm to come out with more bite than a giant tub of ornery-ass gingersnap cookies. Then you remind yourself that you’ve spent almost a full week worrying your ass off like some hands-wringing old lady on his behalf and you think that you were not nearly sharp enough.

“Geez, I’m really doing a crappy job explaining this,” John sighs. “You want to know what happened? Here’s what happened: I tried to throw a surprise birthday party for Karkat and his parents—or at least, the people I thought were his parents—tried to kidnap me.”

He pauses to look at you, presumably to gage how readily you are going to swallow this story but you give him nothing. He seems to take this as your way of saying “Yep, totally legit story, bro” because he quickly goes on with, “They were going to hand me over to their fleet to….”

He trails off, turns to “Karkat”, says, “Hey, you never did tell me what they were going to do to me.” For the first time since you laid eyes on him, Scowly McFrowny-ass’s face contorts into an expression that is not some subtle shade of pissed-off. It’s the face of somebody who has been thoroughly squicked and his voice is weirdly distant as he replies, “Believe me, you do not want to know.”

“Oh. Well OK then.” John turns back to you, leaving Karl-kat to wallow in whatever trauma flashback he’s tumbled down into. “Apparently they were going to do unspeakable things to me. The point is, Karkat saved me. Also Karkat and Aradia’s alien race is invading Earth but Karkat and Aradia and me are all trying to stop it so I guess that means we are sort of like superheroes now but without any cool superpowers?”

You shake your head. “John. You’re my bro. I love you, man. But seriously, dude, two people are dead and you’re sitting right in the middle of it like the cherry on top of a murder sundae. You need to quit dicking around and tell me what the fuck is actually going on here.”

“He’s telling you the truth, numb nuts!” Karkat snaps.

Aradia reaches across John to prod at Karkat’s arm. “Inside voices, Karkat.”

Karkat gives her a dirty look and mumbles something that sounds like “Fuck you that is my inside voice.” John gives the both of them a look that you can only describe as supremely uncomfortable before saying, “Dave, I swear I am not dicking around. That was the truth.”
“Right,” you reply. “So you would rather spout some bullshit made-up fantasy about aliens and saving the world than tell me the truth. Not cool, man. Not cool.”

John frowns. “But it’s the truth.”

“Everyone knows aliens are as fake as Santa Claus and the Easter bunny. There are no little green men. There are no glowy-fingered ET’s waddling around. They aren’t real.”

“‘Not real?’ Oh, I’ll give you ‘not real’,” Karkat retorts. He gives you the finger like the super-mature asshole he is and says, “There. Is that ‘real’ enough for you?”

John looks like he wants to say something but Aradia beats him to the punch. “Just because you’ve never seen something doesn’t make it fake, Dave,” she says. “Actually, you’ve probably seen lots of us and never even realized it!”

You give her an incredulous look. “Seriously? This is starting to sound like something out of a shitty anime. I’d best watch myself or next thing I know you’re going to tell me to put on my sexy schoolgirl uniform and start shooting rainbows out of my ass.”

“Ooh!” John exclaims, launching himself off the couch like somebody just applied a red-hot branding iron directly to his ass. “Dave, I think I know a way to convince you we are telling the truth!”

Craning your neck to look up at his beaming face from the depths of your sweaty-ass beanbag chair, you say, “John? Bro. Gigs. Quiet.”

“Oops,” he whispers. “Sorry. But I think I can prove that Karkat and Aradia are aliens! First you have to tell Karkat something that none of us could know about. Oh, and Aradia, can you cover your ears for a minute?”

You know that you are perfectly within your rights to be a difficult piece of shit and demand a straight answer but fuck it. Aradia’s already got her ears covered. You decide that if they are this committed to their stupid bullshit prank you might as well humor them so they will cut the shit and tell you the truth that much sooner. With a shrug, you roll off the beanbag chair and silently lament the fact that there is absolutely no way to roll off of a beanbag chair without looking like an awkward duck.

Karkat is glaring at you like he is gearing up to pull a Mike Tyson and bite your ear off if you come anywhere near him. You get all up in his business because joke’s on him you were never super-attached to your ears anyway so go ahead, chow down, motherfucker. Leaning in so your lips are practically tickling his ear all matrimonial-like, you whisper, “John might have told you about my penchant for collecting weird-ass dead things. Well, just yesterday I got my hands on a sweet fetal pig in a jar. It is sitting on a shelf in my room, judging the fuck out of everybody who ever gnawed on a piece of bacon in their entire life.”

You wish you hadn’t left your cell phone in your room because the look on Karkat’s face is priceless. (Seriously, you could use it for blackmail someday and make a goddamn killing.) “Strider, that is disgusting. You are fucking disgusting.”

“Forget it. You have no idea. Man, I am skankier than two week-old potato salad. Sicker than a fucking flu virus over here, yo.”

John frowns at you. “Geez, Dave, what did you tell him? Wait, no! Don’t say it yet.” He pokes Aradia’s arm, waits for her to uncover her ears. Once she does, he says, “OK, Karkat. Tell Aradia
whatever Dave told you—but not in English.”

Karkat gets another funny look on his face (and goddamn, you are kicking yourself for not snagging your phone because this boy is a regular fountain of absurdly amusing facial expressions). Then he proceeds to make the most horrifying noises you have ever heard in your life and you proceed to narrowly avoid dropping a giant shit in your fancy man-panties. It’s a weird, guttural sound that seems to come from deep in his throat, peppered with bizarre trills and chirps and Jesus Christ, those are sounds no human should ever make, can humans even make those sounds, you are pretty sure they can’t.

When he’s done, Aradia’s eyes light up. “Really? That is so cool!”

It takes you a second to remember what she is supposed to be responding to because you are still hung up on trying to process the terrible sounds that were just coming out of Karkat’s mouth, but when you finally recall the point of this exercise you can barely hold back a smirk. No way any of that meant anything to her, you think. Nobody in their right mind would respond like that to what Karkat was supposed to be telling her.

“Well now I’m really curious about what he told you,” John mutters. “Aradia, what did he say?”

“Oh! Just that your friend collects dead things and that he apparently got a fetal pig in a jar the other day—and on a side note can I ask you to show it to me later because that sounds fascinating.”

For just one second, your jaw drops as wide as the Lincoln Tunnel. Then reason begins to set in and you quickly pull yourself together. (Jesus, your bro would be ashamed of that tragic slip of Strider cool.) Looking from Karkat to Aradia and back again, you say, “All right, you guys are clearly pulling some kind of David Blaine: Street Magic bullshit here. What’s the trick?”

“There is no trick, you dense fuck,” Karkat grinds and thank sweet fuck, he was nice enough to say it without making any more awful noises (or at least, without making any noises more awful than the sound of his mildly irritating voice). “I don’t know how to penetrate that giant helmet of stupid some people call your skull, so I am going to be charitable and say it one more time, nice and plain for you: me and Aradia are aliens, you dumb fart whiffer.”

You shake your head. “No.”

Karkat makes an annoyed sound—but at least it’s a human sound—and throws his arms up in the air like he just doesn’t care. John groans and buries his face in his hands like you have spoiled the ending of every great movie, ever. Aradia grins and whips out her cell phone. Thumbing through apps with the ease of any self-respecting Millennial, she murmurs, “Mmmm, where did I hide those pictures?” A few seconds later, her grin broadens into something you can only describe as “full-on slasher smile” and she hands her cell phone over to you, imploring you to “Here; look at this.”

You glance down at the screen and your gut clenches like you just took a swig of piss when you were expecting sweet, sweet AJ. The image on the screen is like a “spot what’s wrong with this picture” game. There is green grass, starry sky—and two Technicolor moons. There is something that looks like it is supposed to be a building in the background—but it looks like it was made from the bastard child of alien geometries and a sandcastle with a pinwheel on top. There are two figures in the foreground—but they have gray skin and fangs and fucking candy corn-colored horns on their heads.

“What the fuck is this?”

“It’s a picture of what I looked like before all the surgeries.” She pauses a moment before amending,
“Actually, the one on the left is me. The guy wearing the 3-D glasses is a friend of mine.”

You stare down at the picture and yeah, the girl in the picture has Aradia’s curly hair and Aradia’s face and you could totally see this person being Aradia from a few years back wearing some kind of bizarre costume—except…except you really don’t think that’s a costume. It’s too worn and comfortable; there’s a *realness* to it that even the greatest wizards of Photoshop and airbrush could never hope to achieve.

“This is impossible,” you mutter.

Aradia puckers her lips together, thinking. “Karkat and I could let you feel the spots our horns used to be. Oh, or I guess I could show you my vestigial grub leg scars.”

“No; it’s fine,” you respond, trying to hold back a shudder because *holy shit, there are actual, honest-to-hell aliens sitting on your couch and you have no idea what vestigial grub legs are but you don’t particularly feel like finding out.* “I believe you.”

John grins. “Really?”

“This is straight-up Twilight Zone levels of mind fuck, but yeah.”

John exclaims, “Cool!” at the exact same time Karkat rolls his eyes and grumbles, “Fucking finally.”

The four of you share an intimately awkward moment of silence in loving memory of when life made any fucking shred of sense whatsoever. Then you sigh and say, “So. Aliens. Earth invasion. What now?”

“Now?” John repeats, waggling his eyebrows up and down. “*Now we save the world!*”

You raise your eyebrows in a show of Cirque du Soleil acrobatics that serves as a perfect complement to the world-class eyebrow salsa that John is performing over there on the couch. “*That* was the narmiest thing I have ever heard.”

“What a shocking development,” says Karl. “I actually agree with something that Strider birthed from his unholy speech hole.”

“Screw you both,” John snorts. “Seriously though, Dave. Team Fuck Up the Alien Invasion—you in?”

You shrug. “Sure. Why not?” At the very least, it’ll be something to spice up your dismal-as-fuck resume for the job search.

> **Jade: Pester Rose**
> Jade: Pester Rose

gardenGnostic [GG] began pestering tentacleTherapist [TT]

GG: hi rose!!
TT: hello and thnx for messaging rosie. if you are seeing this msg then it means that my daughter is still grounded atm and therefore not in possession of her pda. try back in a few days or wait for her to msg you. w/e works for u i guess. sincerely rolal senior aka mommy dearest.
GG: huh?????
TT: hello and thnx for messaging rosie. if you are seeing this msg then it means that my daughter is still grounded atm and therefore not in possession of her pda. try back in a few days or wait for her to msg you. w/e works for u i guess. sincerely rolal senior aka mommy dearest.
GG: uh…does this mean the flying trip is off??
TT: hello and thnx for messaging rosie. if you are seeing this msg then it means that my daughter is still grounded atm and therefore not in possession of her pda. try back in a few days or wait for her to msg you. w/e works for u i guess. sincerely rolal senior aka mommy dearest.
GG: :( 
TT: hello and thnx for messaging rosie. if you are seeing this msg then it means that my daughter is still grounded atm and therefore not in possession of her pda. try back in a few days or wait for her to msg you. w/e works for u i guess. sincerely rolal senior aka mommy dearest.

gardenGnostic [GG] ceased pestering tentacleTherapist [TT]

> Nepeta: Convene with cagey cultist and mannered morail
Er…that’s what you are supposed to be doing right now, but you just woke up a few seconds ago. You are now frantically trying to towel off the slime while simultaneously throwing on enough clothes to walk around in public without offending anybody.

You cannot believe that you overslept. Back on Alternia you would wake up before the sun set because everybody knows the best time for hunting is at moonrise, when all the day animals are getting sleepy and all the night animals are still groggy. That wasn’t the only reason you got up early, though! Even before you were old enough to know much about hunting, you were always an early riser. Heck, when you were really little, Pounce de Leon had to guard the entrance to your hive to keep you from wandering outside and getting burned by the last angry rays of the setting sun. To borrow a robotics phrase from your moirail, you would have told anybody who asked that you are “just wired that way.” Except apparently you aren’t anymore—and you have a feeling you know why.

You haven’t been on a real hunt in several perigees now. You haven’t needed to because the Cultists have insisted on preparing all of your food for you. And it’s not just meals: they have been waiting on you and Equius hand and foot ever since they took you to their commune. When you mentioned wanting to explore the area around the commune, they supplied you with a party of fifty trolls, more food than you could eat in three days, and a covered sedan chair that you quietly refused to use because you can walk just fine. When you asked about the best places to look for gathering painting supplies, they presented you with the most extravagant painting set you had ever seen, with hundreds of pigments for mixing the most subtle color differences and clamored over even your crappiest little scribbles like they were high art. You appreciate all their efforts to keep you happy—really you do! —but if you are being totally honest, you kind of wish they would tone it down a little.

You had assumed that they would back off a bit once you were all aboard starships and headed for possible war, but now that you are on a little ship and in constant close quarters, it’s only gotten worse. Just last night, they made you a huge dinner with plenty of meat prepared just the way you like it (super extra rare, with all the juices flowing). You ate so much it made you feel all sleepy and stupid and now you’ve gone and overslept.

Once you are dressed, you scoop up your coat and hat and hurry to the door of your private respite block. Even though you are in a hurry, you take a second to press your ear up to the door and listen. It turns out to be a good thing that you did—you can hear a set of footsteps out there, walking down the hall away from your door. You hold your breath, waiting until the footsteps fade away before you crack open your door and peek outside.

The hallway is now empty. Quietly, you close your door and start down the hall opposite the direction you’d heard the footsteps moving. It’s the completely wrong way for where you want to go, but you’d planned on taking this route anyways because there is an air vent just around the corner. If you can just make it there, you can go through the ventilation shafts and get to your meeting without the risk of running into anybody along the way.

You don’t normally avoid the Cultists like this because it kind of makes you feel like a jerk—but you haven’t got much of a choice if you are going to make it to your meeting on time. Once the Cultists notice that you are out of your room and on the move, it’s only a matter of time before about twenty or thirty of them descend on you with offers for entertainment, gifts, manicures, full-body massages, specialty desserts, and almost everything and anything else you could ever possibly want in your entire life. You know that they are trying their best to please you, but sometimes it feels a lot less like
being surrounded by mildly overzealous religious devotees and a lot more like fighting off an unruly mob. (Not that you can’t handle your own crowd control. You can! It’s just that getting through a hallway crammed with thirty people when it’s really only meant for about ten with all of them wanting to talk to you isn’t something that is going to happen in a hurry.)

Rounding the corner, you are quietly relieved to see that the hallway with the air vent is just as deserted as the one you have just left behind. You are less glad to see that somebody has restored the grate in front of the opening to the vent since the last time you used this route. It’s a sturdy chunk of metal, too thick for you to tear open with your claws (your weapons, not your actual physical claws because that would be dumb). Your only option is to deal with things the boring way: by loosening the screws securing the grate to the wall. Using your claws (your actual physical claws, not your weapons because that would be silly), you set to work.

The screws come loose more easily than you had expected. (In fact, you have a sneaking suspicion that whoever installed the grate left the screws loose on purpose because they knew that you like using this route and that you would want to use it again. Either that or they really just weren’t paying attention. Either way, you aren’t complaining!) You quickly make short work of the first seven and are about to start in on the eighth and final one when a voice says, “Hello, Young Disciple. Would you like your breakfast now?”

For a second, you consider ignoring the voice, pulling the grate off, and jumping into the ventilation shaft. It would be easy enough—with one screw holding the grate onto the wall, all it would take is just one good pull. Sure, it would probably leave a hole in the wall, but you are pretty sure you could do it before they got close enough to stop you. Then you sigh because no, that would be a mean thing to do and possibly being late to a meeting isn’t a good excuse for damaging the Cultists’ property! Besides, unless you are mistaken, that voice belongs to Marnel and as far as overzealous Cultists go, he’s pretty chill.

Turning away from the vent (and oh good, you were right; it is Marnel), you say, “No thanks. I really appurreciate the offur, though!”

The left side of his mouth twitches down into a bit of a frown. “Is there anything else I can do for you, then? Fresh sopor slime for your recuperacoon? More painting supplies?”

“No; everything is fine.” You pause for a beat before amending, “Actually, I’m kind of in a hurry beclaws there is somewhere I am supposed to be right now!”

“Oh. In that case, I’ll escort you to wherever you need to go.”

You are about to wave him off; insist that you are just fine and dive into the vent before anybody else comes along, but something stops you. At first you can’t quite put your paw on it, but once you take a second to really look, you notice that there is something in his expression—a strained quality hiding in his eyes and in the edges of his attentive half-frown—that makes you change your mind. Nodding, you reply, “Yeah, OK. Let’s go.”

“Thank you, Young Disciple.”

Now it’s your turn to frown. “You really don’t need to thank me for giving you things to do. Also, I thought I told you that it’s OK to call me by my real name. ‘Young Disciple’ is sort of…I don’t know…formal for me.”

“Yes, Young Disci—I mean…yes, Nepeta. Thank you.”

You resist the urge to ask him to stop thanking you for everything (after all, as far as you know your
willingness to carry on a basic conversation like any other halfway decent troll isn’t that big of a deal). Instead you motion for him to come with you and start back the way you came.

The two of you walk in silence, you preoccupied with devising a route that won’t take you through any of the more crowded hallways and he too polite (nervous?) to interrupt somebody who looks like they are thinking about something important. Even though you do a good job of avoiding most of the bigger hallways, you inevitably run across other Cultists as you go. It isn’t long before you have acquired a posse of at least fifteen trolls, all of them clamoring to do your laundry for you or invite you to listen to the poem they wrote for you or try the dessert they made “just a couple of hours ago.” A few of them try to give you little silver necklaces with Karkat’s symbol which you would take if you didn’t already have about thirty hanging in your room already. There are people begging you to take bouquets of flowers (and where in the world did they even get those on a space ship, did they make those bouquets before you left?), people asking you to critique their paintings (some of them are really good—lots better than yours if you are being totally honest), people asking you questions about Karkat (“Did you talk with him a lot?” “What was he like?” “Do you think he’ll like us?”), people pushing other people out of the way just to catch a glimpse of you as you pass by…you try to handle the situation as calmly as you can, but you really start to lose your patience when the hallway finally gets so crowded with well-wishers, and people prostrating themselves on the floor in front of you that you can’t keep going forward.

Coming to a stop (because at this point you really don’t have much of a choice in that matter anyway), you cup your hands around your mouth and shout, “EVERYBODY STOP!”

The hallway goes dead silent. One of the younger Cultists—a girl who looks like she is barely even old enough to be a sweep past her wiggler molt—freezes in mid-bow. Somebody—you can’t even see who because they are standing behind you—quietly withdraws the painted clay figure of either a very cute grub Karkat or a very cute grub Signless that they were trying to force into your hands. Everybody is gaping at you as though you’ve suddenly transformed into a furious beast and they are afraid that you are about to tear them to shreds with your fierce claws. Under normal circumstances, you might feel a little guilty for freaking them all out, but you have been trying to deal with this for over half a perigee now and you need it to stop now.

In a firm voice, loud enough for everybody to hear, you say, “Listen. I understand that you think I am the next Disciple and I understand that you are trying to make me happy, but you don’t need to do all of this. In fact, I would be happier than Pounce de Leon on catnip if you would just…stop trying to make me happy.”

A few people begin to murmur. It’s a worried buzz that reminds you of the noise some of Equius’ robots would make before he tore them apart. Raising your voice, you repeat: “You do not need to keep trying to make me happy!”

Somebody quietly clears their throat beside you—Marnel. With his eyes trained on his feet he mumbles, “Er…actually, we sort of do.”


Behind you, the troll who kept trying to give you the grub figure exclaims, “Because it’s the end of times!”

It is like a small explosive weapon goes off at the words “end of times.” The hallway devolves into such an uproar of people shouting over each other that you can barely pick out any of what they are trying to tell you. The few words you do manage to pick up—“appease”, “satisfy”, “afterlife”, “death”—don’t make you feel much better.
Waving your hands over your head, you shout, “Everybody QUIET NOW!”

The hallway drops into silence again. This time you are too disturbed to notice the way everybody is gaping at you. Instead, you point to Marnel and say, “You. Marnel. Explain to me what everybody is talking about.”

Marnel continues to look ridiculously uncomfortable. Without looking at you, he says, “The Second Signless is on his way to completing the Signless’ vision. When that happens, the end of the world will begin and we’ll all join the Signless in paradise. This might sound kind of stupid, but we thought that by serving you, the incarnation of his closest and most beloved follower, we might…I don’t know…garner favor with him in the afterlife?”

Something curls in your gut, like maybe you accidentally ate a bit of bad meat. You remember Nilosa mentioning something about the “end of the world” when you’d first woken up at the commune, but between being worried about Equius, being worried about the rescue mission and being half-drugged with knockout juice it had gotten lost in all the other crazy things she was telling you. The few times it had niggled at your mind since then, you had assumed that since you didn’t exactly sense the atmosphere of panic you would expect in the event of the actual end of the world that the apocalypse talk was metaphorical. Now you have a very uncomfortable feeling that maybe there was something more to it after all.

Deciding to put the whole “garner favor with our god through pleasing you” thread on the back burner (because that is clearly a whole other kettle of delicious stewed fish), you demand, “What exactly do you mean by ‘end of the world’? Why are you talking about the afterlife?”

“It means that trollkind as we know it is going to die. We assume that means the Vast Glub is imminent.”

Your breath catches in your throat. What they are telling you matches just a little too well with what you know is happening back home right now and you really hope that you are misinterpreting something here because if you aren’t then that means that they might actually be right and…and oh god, you need to talk to Equius NOW!

Marnel is still talking but you don’t know whether he is still speaking to you or whether he is talking to the other Cultists or whether he is just standing there mumbling to himself. Whatever he is doing, you do not even register his reaction as you duck away from him and begin plowing your way through the crowd as fast as you can. You must look pretty frantic—like a vicious feline gone feral—because everybody scrambles to get out of your way with nary an offer to cook your next meal.

You sprint through the tangle of halls, no longer bothering to modify your route to exclude major hallways. You pass several other Cultists as you go. They wave to you, try to talk to you or catch your attention, but you ignore them and run past before they have a chance to slow you down. By the time you reach the room in which you were supposed to meet Equius and Nilosa, your heart is hammering, your face is slick with a cold sweat, and you are at serious risk of hyperventilating. You burst into the room a bedraggled mess because you really hope you are wrong about this but the more you think about it the less likely that seems; you really, really hope that Equius will say something to convince you that you are wrong.

It looks as though they have started the meeting without you or maybe they are making small talk while they wait for you to show up. You can’t really tell one way or the other because Equius cuts himself off mid-sentence to say, “Nepeta, this tardiness is unacceptable and I must STRONGLY reprimand you for your—“ He then cuts himself off again to sputter, “Nepeta, are you alright? What in the world is the matter?”
You launch yourself halfway across the room with one of the sloppiest, most desperate tacklepounces you have ever made into your life and hit him square in the chest. He grunts and you feel his body sway against the force of your impact, but then he catches his balance and his arms are wrapping around you to keep you from bouncing off of him and onto the ground. You must look even worse than you think you do because you feel him stroking your cheek with the tips of his fingers as he says, “Nepeta, what is the reason for this undignified behavior?”

“We have to go back,” you half-sob. “Equius, we have to contact Feferi right now and tell her she needs to go back!”

You see him exchange a look with Nilosa. The rational part of your pan reminds you that you should probably let him put you down because you know he doesn’t like being romantic in front of other people. The rest of your pan is too busy screaming in a blind panic, demanding that you stay here with your moirail’s strong arms around you and your head on his chest, where you can hear his heart beating and know that he is still alive. Panic wins out and you end up clinging onto his tank top while you try to calm yourself down enough to talk like a normal person.

When you finally stop shaking, he whispers, “Nepeta, what is the matter? You must tell me what has happened so that I can assist you.”

“Feferi needs to go back to Alernia right now.”

His mouth puckers into a confused line. “Why do you believe that the Heiress must return to Alernia?”

“Because her lusus is going to kill us all.”

His confusion deepens enough to contort his face into an expression that would probably make you want to bop him on the nose and tell him to calm down if you weren’t in some serious need of calming yourself. “Nitram remained on Alernia with the highblood in order to prevent that from happening.”

You shake your head. “No; Equius, Tavros isn’t going to be able to stop it!”

“My understanding was that Nitram successfully demonstrated his ability to commune with the Heiress’s lusus. I strongly doubt the Heiress would have acquiesced to leaving the planet if she believed his power would not be sufficient to restrain her lusus in her absence.”

“Equius, listen to me. The Cultists just told me that their prophecies say that the Vast Glub is going to happen after this war is over. This is the first time Feferi has ever left the planet. Something’s going to happen; something is going to go wrong with Tavros and Gamzee and the Vast Glub will happen!”

The confusion on Equius’ face bleeds into a smoldering anger. “The Cultists told you this?”

“I…yes.” You take a deep breath and let go of his shirt, signal to him that you are ready for him to put you down. As he sets you on your feet, you repeat, “Yeah. They just told me.”

With an ugly scowl on his face, Equius turns toward Nilosa and demands, “What is the meaning of this?”

Nilosa holds her gnarled hands out in front of her, palms up and replies, “Nothing more than superstition, I assure you.”

“If that is the case, then I will ask that your followers refrain from sharing their upsetting superstitions
with my moirail. Now you will excuse us; this meeting will take place once my moirail and myself are in an optimal state of mind and not a moment before.”

Nilosa opens her mouth as though she is about to protest but then she sighs and nods her head and the next thing you know Equius is leading you out of the room. He leads you all the way to his respiteblock, deterring any eager Cultists from approaching you with a furious glare. (He even goes so far as to crack his knuckles at a particularly persistent guy and you don’t know whether you should papa him for that or not because you are too worked up to know if he is seriously considering hurting the guy. Luckily, it turns out to be a non-issue because the guy decides to back off.)

Once the two of you are safely inside his respiteblock, he motions to the small pile of robot parts sitting in the corner. It’s not as big or as comfortable as the pile he used to have in his hive, but right now you need this too much to be picky. You dive onto the scraps of metal and a few seconds later, he settles in beside you.

“Now,” he says. “Do you still believe that we must contact the Heiress and demand that she return to Alternia immediately, or are you sufficiently convinced that your fears are merely the product of religious superstition and nothing more?”

You shrug. “I don’t know. I mean, I know it sounds stupid. It’s just that the Cultists have been right about a lot of things so far.”

“They are wrong. Did you not hear Nilosa confirm as much a few moments ago?”

“Yes,” you sigh. “But Equius, what if they aren’t wrong? What if something happens to Tafuros so he can’t control her?”

Equius is quiet for a long time, his fingers absently grazing against your shoulder as he considers what he is going to say. Finally, he replies, “Do you believe that I would ever allow anything to harm you?”

“Well, no…why are you changing the topic?”

“And would you ever allow anything to harm me?”

“What? No!” you exclaim. “Of course not!”

He nods. “You will remember that Nitram also happens to possess a moirail—an exceptionally strong specimen of a moirail, no less. I am confident that the Highblood will not allow anything that might jeopardize the mission to befall Nitram.”

You sigh and rest your head against one of his big biceps. “What if something really major happens while Fefurry is gone, though? Something Tafuros can’t control—something big enough to trigger the Vast Glub?”

He brushes his fingers against your shoulder again. “If that is the case then it would almost certainly be a result of something that would be inevitable, regardless of whether or not the Heiress is present.”

He pauses to give your shoulder the gentlest pap he can manage (it’s still hard enough to hurt a little, but it’s a nice, firm feeling and you like it). “Of course, such an occurrence is highly unlikely. I strongly believe that Nitram’s end of this mission will proceed without incident. Your worries would be better directed toward ensuring the safe and successful execution of our part in this mission.”

For the first time since you woke up this morning, you laugh. “Oh, I’m not worried about that! I know efurrything will work out just fine for us!” Equius does not reply and you realize a moment too late that maybe your moirail is in need of a little pile talk, too. Quickly, you amend, “But if you’re a
little perturbed about it, now might be a good time to talk about it!”

You notice him tensing up a bit and for a second you think he is going to lead you through the usual song-and-dance about not needing to discuss his feelings because he is strong enough to deal with them on his own. Then he surprises you by admitting that he *is* anxious about it and that he *has* been worrying about your safety. As you set about talking him through his fears, you feel your own begin to ease. *Equius is right, you think. I shouldn’t let a bunch of silly superstitions scare me so much.*

> Rose: Do something unexpected
You have not left your bedroom in four days aside from the occasional excursion to the bathroom or the even more occasional jaunt into your mother’s barroom in order to pilfer another bottle from her impressively diverse collection. (The first you do out of pure necessity; the second you do less out of a desire to acquire more alcohol—though you do occasionally take a sip or two when you are feeling especially maudlin—and more out of a juvenile desire to retaliate against your mother and everything she stands for.) In all that time, you have fully occupied yourself with reading all of the best parts of your favorite books, writing in your diary, attending to the many knitting projects that you have had sitting around for so long it is scarcely this side of legal, and anything and everything you can conceive of to keep from dwelling on how everything you had been looking forward to has turned out so fantastically wrong.

You are, of course, still furious with your mother for calling off your flying trip. For eighteen years, you met and even surpassed all of her expectations like a dutiful little worker drone. (At first it was all done in the spirit of your mutual and ongoing back-and-forth of passive aggressive antagonism: you would bring home a perfect report card, she would frame it and hang it on the wall; you would erect a small shrine around the framed evidence of your academic superiority, she would arrange a spotlight to shine on it at all hours of the day and so on. You are not entirely sure when or how your silly antics of one-upsmanship spiraled into the all most exclusive universities in the country beating a path to your front door in order to woo you with offers of full-ride scholarships, internship opportunities, and statistics regarding their campus diversity and student-to-professor ratios. What you do know is that you have poured a substantial part of your life into fulfilling goals which were more for the benefit of your mother and everyone privy to your long-running game of one-upsmanship than they were for yourself.) The flying trip had been your metaphorical ray of light; a much-needed divergence away from the carefully-crafted persona of perfectionism and predictability expected of you and toward something you and you alone wanted. You had needed it more than you had understood—and in appreciation for all the time and energy you devoted to becoming the type of daughter to be bragged about over martinis at the next Astrological Sciences Symposium, your mother had taken it away from you the moment you set one perfectly-manicured toe out of line.

You are also furious with yourself—for a number of reasons. You cannot believe you were foolish enough to believe that becoming the perfect Ivy League Student with the perfect record and the perfect extracurricular involvement would bring you all the perfect satisfaction that your tutors, teachers, mother, and society in general had advertised. (Of course, in hindsight all of this seems painfully obvious. So much for your purported intellect and psychosocial awareness.) Worse yet, you cannot believe that you have resorted to drinking alcohol—the one thing you vowed you would never do—in order to escape your mounting feelings of frustration and resentment. You had told yourself it would be a temporary fix; a crutch until you reached summer and had a chance to do something purely for your own pleasure. Now here you are, wanting another pull off the bottle stashed under your bed and hating yourself for it because it was supposed to be something to help you deal with everything until you reached the flight trip and now it is the very thing that led to it being taken away from you.

Worst of all, you are worried for your friends. When your mother grounded you, she was quick to confiscate all of your electronic devices. Consequently, you have had no choice other than to postulate on the preliminary news reports you saw before you contacted Dave. Unfortunately, the little you did manage to glean was not at all reassuring: John caught in the middle of a crime so sensationalistic it took less than three days for it to garner national attention; Dave in danger of implicating himself as an accessory to the crime, and in the middle of it all, John’s mysterious friend Karl Vantross—a person you have heard John mention precisely twice over Pesterchum.
You are quite aware that your mother might relent enough to allow you to use your PDA if you simply leave your room and allow her to express how she is “very disappointed in your choices” and perhaps how she “will not tolerate this self-destructive behavior.” However, you cannot bring yourself to approach her in a state of hangdog penitence, proclaiming that you are “terribly sorry” and that you “will never do it again” because you are not at all sorry and as long as your flight trip remains a wash, you almost certainly will do it again.

You are therefore sitting at the edge of your bed, fully occupied with massacring a knitting project gone horribly wrong when your mother knocks on the door and says, “Rose, you need to come downstairs. You’ve got visitors.”

Dropping the mess of yarn and needles, you say, “What?”

The door swings open and your mother enters the room without bothering to wait for you to invite her in. You quickly slide off of the bed and stand up. This turns out to be a severe tactical error, as the double shot of silver tequila you took less than ten minutes ago has just begun to do interesting things to your sense of balance. You end up swaying—not enough to betray anything to the odd onlooker, but certainly more than enough for your mother’s seasoned eyes to register. Your mother pauses just long enough to give you a thin-lipped look that clearly conveys she knows exactly what you have been up to before repeating, “You have visitors. Come downstairs now.”

You narrow your eyes a bit to show her that yes, you may be a bit tipsy at the moment but you are not impaired enough to believe she would allow you visitors when you are on lockdown. “Who is it?”

“Come downstairs and see.”

You frown, scrutinizing her face for any clue that might reveal what her game is. If you were just a bit less astute or a bit more drunk, you might miss the tense lines pulling at the crow’s feet around her eyes; you might not notice the grim set at the edges of her lips or the nigh-imperceptible paleness that has settled into her cheeks. It hits you all at once that your mother is nervous. The realization cuts through the comfortable warmth of the alcohol buzz and sends a stone-cold sober chill through your spine. You have seen your mother a lot of things, but you cannot recall a single occasion in which she was actually nervous in earnest. You decide that this is qualifies as grounds for bypassing your regular cagey snarkfest so with a stiff nod, you follow her downstairs without comment.

You don’t know what you were expecting to see when you walked into the living room. A representative from Columbia University stopping by for a surprise visit, or perhaps a distant relative stopping in to inform you that your dear Aunt Mary has passed away. You had not been prepared to see two middle-aged gentlemen in sharp business suits seated on the couch and sipping tea from your mother’s most expensive china set. Their demeanor—a heavily affected casual; the sort that almost always masks something dangerous—immediately raises red flags in the back of your rapidly-sobering mind.

The man sitting closer to you sets down his teacup when you enter the room, gives you a horribly artificial wave, and says, “Hello, Rose. I’m Agent Cooper and this is my partner Agent Hudson, FBI. We’d like to ask you a few questions about your friend, John Egbert.”

You take a moment to flick your gaze back to your mother, still standing behind you with her face lined in anxiety, in order to convey your sentiments of deep-seated love and appreciation for failing to inform you that by ‘visitors’ she did not in fact mean ‘friendly acquaintances with a desire to share a lighthearted afternoon discussing H.P. Lovecraft.’ Then you plant yourself the chair directly across from the agents and say, “All right. What do you want to know?”
Apparently, Hudson defers to Cooper because he continues to quietly sip his tea as Cooper says, “What are your impressions of John? What type of person is he?” You shrug. “A good friend. Generally quite positive and happy. Smarter than most people think he is, including himself. Meeting the minimum requirements to be called a bit of a nerd. Interesting sense of humor; enjoying the occasional harmless prank now and then. Are there any other particular personality quirks you are waiting for me to highlight or have I drawn a clear enough picture of the typical American teenaged male for us to move on?”

Your mother frowns, opens her mouth as though she wants to reprimand you, closes it again. You know that you are probably not doing anything to encourage her to relax your current regimen of electronic isolation, but you do not care a single whit what she thinks of your behavior. You figure that if the agents are going to put on an affable front in the hopes that they will lull you into unwittingly revealing any incriminating information about your friend, then you are well within your rights to respond to their inept brand of coercion by putting up a counterfront of being a pretentious little shit. Neither of the agents seem to be as disturbed by your spiny behavior as your mother: Hudson continues sipping his tea and Cooper says, “Did he ever share anything about his social life with you? Friends, involvement in any extracurricular activities?”

You pause because you have a very good idea of where Cooper is leading you with this vein of questioning. You half-consider simply telling him the information he is waiting to hear, but then you decide that as long he continues to give you open-ended questions, you will continue to supply him with ambiguous answers. “Occasionally. No more or less than what might be considered normal for the average high school student.”

Setting down his cup of tea, Hudson says, “Are you aware that he was unpopular among his peers?” “Yes. He may have occasionally referenced that fact.”

“Any reason that might be the case?” queries Cooper. He pauses for a beat like a well-practiced actor before adding, “A ‘typical American teenaged male’ like John wouldn’t have any notable social problems unless there was some reason.” “Yes,” you sigh because despite your penchant for being right, you had hoped that you were mistaken about where their questions were leading. “As far as I know it’s the result of a prank gone wrong at his junior prom.”

“A prank gone wrong?” repeats Hudson. “Do you realize that this harmless ‘prank’ was serious enough to earn him a criminal record?”

“An unfortunate result of a very unintentional outcome,” you reply.

Cooper nods. “I’m sure it was.” He pauses to take a carefully-staged thoughtful sip of tea before changing tack with, “Can you tell me, did John ever speak to you about his friend, Karl Vantross?” “Yes.” “Did you ever at any point speak with Karl yourself?” “No.” “Based on what John told you, what was your impression of Karl?”

You pucker your lips in a carefully-staged show of dredging through your memories of every Pesterchum conversation you have held with John over the past twelve months. “A good friend to
John. Prone to making mildly amusing yet imaginatively vulgar remarks. Loyal.”

“’Loyal?’” Hudson repeats. “What makes you say that he was loyal?”

“He was one of the only people who stood by John when he returned to school after the incident at prom. I heard that he occasionally defended John from bullying.”

Cooper and Hudson share a fleeting glimpse between themselves which is significant enough to suggest that you have shared some piece of critical information which they had previously been lacking. Then Cooper says, “When was the last time you spoke with John?”

“A while ago. Before graduation.”

“Can you remember the exact date?”

“I believe it was June ninth or tenth.”

“How did you communicate with him? What medium did you use?”

You furrow your brow. Of all the questions they have asked you, this is the first that seems to have no obvious bearing on anything they might want to know. Carefully, you reply, “We used Pesterchum.”

“Interesting,” Hudson replies. “Our records show that you have not contacted him via Pesterchum since December of last year. Care to explain how that is possible?”

Your throat constricts as you realize that there is a very simple explanation and it is going to paint you in a much shadier light than you would like when you are in the middle of discussing a double murder-arson with federal law enforcement. The PDAs Jade made for all of us last Christmas, you think. They wouldn’t be traceable because they run on her private network. It is at this point that your mother chooses to speak up, a perfect image of righteous ire. “Excuse me?” she says. “Are you implying that you’ve hacked into Rose’s personal data in order to track her online activity?”

“Allow me to clarify, Ms. Lalonde,” says Hudson. “We did not acquire Rose’s data specifically. However, we did obtain comprehensive records detailing the online activities of John Egbert and Karl Vantross. Your daughter’s conversations with John were incidentally included in those records.”

Your mother eases back into a more comfortable posture, but you are quietly gratified to hear her mumble something that sounds distinctly like “bullshit” under her breath. Hudson turns his attention back to you and repeats, “Care to explain how you could have spoken with John via Pesterchum two weeks ago when we have no record of any Pesterchum contact between you and John in over six months?”

You sigh because the only way around this question is to refuse to answer and if a response exists which is more damning than that, you cannot conceive of it. “A mutual friend gifted us with PDAs last Christmas. They run on a private network in order to ensure optimal performance.”

Hudson and Cooper exchange another meaningful look. You are expecting them to demand that you divulge the name of your ‘mutual friend’ so you are wholly surprised when Cooper says, “You said you spoke with John around June tenth. What did you talk about with him then?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. Graduation. Life in general. He mentioned that he had enrolled in a few classes at his community college and I wished him the best of luck.”
“Did he mention anything about plans involving his friend, Karl Vantross on June twelfth?”

You shake your head. “Not to my recollection, no.”

“Are you aware of what happened between Karl and John on June twelfth?”

“Yes, to a limited extent.”

“What, to your knowledge, happened?”

You hesitate to answer because you have had no access to any news source in over four days and you are aware that there have almost certainly been new developments in the case since then. You sit there, choosing your words until Cooper’s expression begins to harden into something unpleasant. Then you say, “As far as I know, John went to Karl’s home to celebrate Karl’s birthday. Sometime during the day, Karl’s parents were murdered, the house was burned down, and neither Karl nor John have been seen since.”

“You know nothing else?” Cooper presses. “You have no idea where either of them might have gone?”

“No.” The lie tumbles from your lips so easily even your own mother would be fooled.

Hudson smiles and it is tight-lipped and cold. “We happen to know you are lying, Miss Lalonde.”

Your heart skips a beat but your voice remains steady as you say, “How so?”

“Because we happen to have spoken with Dave Strider just yesterday and he told us that the three of you were planning to use your plane to flee the country together.”

You knit your brows. “Dave told you that?”

“Yes, ma’am, he did.”

You realize with a sudden rush of relief that they are lying—bluffing sloppily in order to scare you into slipping up. They would have almost certainly found John if they were at Dave’s apartment yesterday, you think. Besides, Dave would never sell me out like that. Aloud, you say, “Then I’m afraid that Dave is pulling your metaphorical chain because that is not true.”

“Is it?” Hudson retorts. “We have records of you and John planning a plane trip from as far back as November of last year.”

“The plane trip was to be the equivalent of a post-graduation summer road trip between friends. You might note that I am referring to it in the past tense. It likely comes as no surprise that the plane trip has been cancelled, given the current circumstances.”

“Yes, of course. Very unfortunate,” replies Cooper. “However, I am afraid that we are going to have to ask you to allow us access to that PDA in order to confirm all of this.”

This time your heart does not merely skip a beat; it slams to a reverberating halt in your chest because the content of your most recent Pesterlog alone is enough to give away John’s location, illustrate that you have knowingly lied to a federal agent, and implicate Dave as a possible accessory to crime. Once again, it is your mother who comes to your rescue.

“Now wait just one second,” she says. “Do you have a warrant for that?”

Hudson frowns. “Well no, but—“
“But nothing. You aren’t taking anything out of this house without a warrant. In fact, I’m going to go ahead and say you’re done here.”

“Ms. Lalonde,” says Cooper. “You must understand our position here.”

“Oh, I understand completely,” she spits. “You come in here trying to intimidate an eighteen year-old girl into handing over her belongings when you haven’t got a legal leg to stand on. I want you out of my house now.”

Clambering to his feet, Hudson sighs, “All right. But we’ll be back tomorrow and I can absolutely guarantee that we will have a warrant.”

“Good,” your mother retorts. Shouting after their retreating backs, she adds, “Come back here without it and I’ll be phoning your direct supervisor to have both your asses fired!”

You sit in your seat, very narrowly diverting the urge to let your jaw go open. You have seen your mother do some crazy things before, but you have never seen her do anything on the scale of telling off two federal agents and sending them on their way thoroughly cowed. You would be perfectly content to persist wallowing in your own speechlessness for a stretch of time that breaks the bounds of embarrassment and encroaches on the border of obscene, but your mother has other ideas. The moment you hear the front door close, she rounds on you with, “What do you know about all of this?”

You shake your head. “Nothing.”

“So if I log into your Pesterchum account and look through the old logs I won’t find anything to tie you to what is happening with your friend John?” She waits for you to answer. You look at the floor instead.

“OK,” she says. “I’m not going to go through your Pesterchum logs. In fact, you know what? Wait here.” She hurries from the room. A moment later she returns with her purse, rummages through it, withdraws your PDA, and hands it to you. “Here. Take it back. But Rosie, if you know anything, I need you to tell me right now.”

You look at her and it strikes you suddenly that she’s not just nervous—she’s downright scared. For one painful second, you want to tell her everything you know and beg her to make it right because it isn’t fair; doesn’t she see that John is a good person and so is Dave and god, you do not want this to be happening, you do not want any of this. Then you say, “Sorry, mother. I don’t have anything to tell you.”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, she groans, “God.” Then: “All right then. Just…go back up to your room.”

You do as she asks taking a slight detour to the bathroom in order to vomit up a mouthful of stomach acid and silver tequila on the way. The moment you walk into your bedroom, you dig out the half-empty bottle of liquor from underneath your bed, dump its contents out your open window, and throw the bottle as far from the house as you can. Then you flop down onto your bed with your hands over your face and your PDA lying on the pillow beside you.

You know that you need to message Dave, warn him that the FBI is almost certainly heading for him (and by extension, John), but you feel too sick and dazed to think clearly. You end up closing your eyes and slipping into a half-doze that ebbs and flows for hours.

When you finally wake, it is dark outside. You check the time on the PDA lying next to you—just
past two in the morning. Seven hours—maybe less—before Agents Cooper and Hudson return and your life (not to mention Dave’s and John’s) will be over.

Taking a deep breath, you try to consider your options. You know that you could easily delete the more incriminating Pesterlogs from your Pesterchum account before you turn over the PDA. You also know that doing so would do very little to resolve your predicament, as you have no doubt that the FBI has considerably more resources and technological know-how on their side than you do. Even if you did attempt to apply your admittedly limited knowledge of advanced digital security measures, you cannot imagine that it would take them more than an hour or two in order to recover the deleted files.

An idea occurs to you—an outrageous, absolutely ridiculous idea that you would have to be completely insane to even consider. You take another deep breath, willing yourself to think rationally. The idea continues to gnaw insistently at you, demanding that you listen to it, consider it, give it a fair shake and a fair try. You spend a full hour trying to quash it and conceive of something more reasonable—but the more you try to ignore it, the more its appeal grows and by 3:15 am, you decide that if the Feds are going to arrest you then you might as well make it worth their while.

You methodically fill the first of your many felted traveling bags you come across with spare clothing, toiletries from your bathroom, your PDA, the entire contents of your purse, and then you creep into your mother’s barroom—not to pilfer another bottle but to dig through her purse until you find her car keys. Stealthily, you make your way downstairs, through the kitchen, out into the garage. The garage door makes an incredible racket as it opens, but your mother is a heavy sleeper and you are already in the car and halfway down the road before she could have possibly made it downstairs anyway. You drive for over an hour and all the while you feel nothing but exhilaration because this is it; this is the first time in longer than you can remember in which you are doing something wholly unexpected and wholly for yourself and god, it feels good.

The sun is just starting to rise when you pull into the parking lot near the airstrip. You know that the aviation club doesn’t officially open until 7:00 am, but the club was good enough to supply you with your own key as a show of gratitude for mother’s generous donation of five brand-new aircraft to fill their hangar. You slip inside unhindered.

In a matter of minutes, you are climbing into the pilot seat of your Cessna 182. You pause just long enough to dash off a quick message to Dave on the PDA:

TT: Feds are coming.
TT: I am on my way.

Then you fire up the engine and coast onto the runway.

> Karkat: Don't get caught
It has taken you three days and about a gallon more sweat than stiff-assed muscle-bound Zahhak could ever produce in his entire lifetime, but you are finally beginning to acclimate to the particularly hellish armpit of the universe that is Houston in the summer. Of course, when you say “acclimate” what you actually mean is “exist without wishing every three seconds that the world would just fucking kill you and put you out of your abject misery.” The heat is still all manner of shit-kicking awful and the humidity still makes the air too thick to breathe and you are never going to be OK with being so goddamn sweaty you can feel it dribbling all the way down your back to lubricate the darkest reaches of your ass crack at all times. Your only consolation is that everybody, including Dave “I have no facial expressions whatsoever because I think that makes me *so cool*” Strider is equally miserable. It is a fact that you hold near and dear to your bloodpusher, keeping it close to remind yourself that literally everybody else is dealing with the same level and intensity of shit, don’t whine about it, you pants-pissing little wiggler.

You have also done your damndest to acclimate to the addition of Strider to your merry band of crotch-twiddlers. If you are being completely honest with yourself—and hey, when would you ever miss an opportunity to express some healthy self-loathing and ruminate on your own personal inadequacies?—you still haven’t quite figured out his deal. On the one hand, he’s done a shitload of things for the benefit of you, John, and Aradia. Opening his horribly warm home to the three of you, jumping head-first into an intergalactic war because his friend and two people he’s never even met asked him to, marching his ass downtown to buy you all pizza for dinner…it all points toward Strider being a Pretty Decent Guy. But then he does stupid shit like inviting you to sleep in a pile of—what the hell had he called them? Slutpups? Smuppets?—or insinuating that the apple juice you drank half an hour ago may have contained actual human urine, leaving you to conclude that he is actually an asshole 99.9% of the time. (To be fair, you have dealt with plenty of shit-spewing ignoramuses over the course of your miserable existence. Compared to them, Strider is a pristinely bleached and carefully groomed asshole that farts out clouds of daisies and bubblegum—but still an asshole, nonetheless.) You are therefore surprised (but not shocked) to find him half-kicking you awake at the crack of dawn, his foot prodding your shoulder and hovering close enough to let you start your day with a delightful whiff of human foot fungus.

“Ugh,” you groan. You twitch away from the smell of foot stink and throw one of the thin sheets you are lying on over yourself to put an added layer of protection between Strider’s disgusting appendage and the tender, unprotected flesh of your innocent shoulder. Blearily, you ask, “What the hell, Strider?”

“Pack your shit,” he replies. “It’s time to go.”

Well. That revelation is so completely out of What The Fucksville that it’s enough to put the risk of a little reeking human foot fungus exposure back into perspective. You swipe the sheet back off of you, sit up and demand, “What the fuck?” That’s what you mean to say. The jaw-cracking yawn that erupts from your chitinous windhole at that exact second takes your words and distorts them into something that sounds a lot closer to vulgar moaning than anything you are comfortable with producing within a fifty mile radius of Strider at any time or under any circumstance, ever.

Strider seems to understand what you mean and apparently he’s decided to be Not An Asshole because he makes nary a single derogative remark about how you sound like some back alley tramp doped up on novocaine and laughing gas. Instead, he just says, “Bus leaves in fifteen minutes, short stack. Get up and catch it or get left behind and end up begging your mom for a note to show the principal when you finally get around to dragging your tardy ass to school.”
“Joke’s on you, douche wipe,” you mumble as you sit up and rub the crusty sleep cobwebs from your eyes. “I don’t have a mom.”

Strider has already sashayed his ass away from you, apparently to occupy himself with cramming the entire contents of one of his dresser drawers into a tiny backpack. Fully engrossed in sorting through handfuls of mismatched socks as he is, he still manages to reply, “Exactly my point, man. Exactly my point.”

You half-consider demanding that he slow the fuck down, back the fuck up, and give you a proper rundown of what the fuck is going on, but the urgency with which he is dumping shit into that bag is enough to convince you to find somebody else for your explanatory needs. Once you are fully awake, you realize that this is probably for the best. After all, the chance that Strider will continue to ply you with nonsensical bullshit (seriously, what was all that crap about principals and notes?) rather than tell you anything useful whatsoever is ridiculously high and you are just not in the mood to swallow any more of his phlegm-frosted crap right now. You therefore get up and leave Strider’s room in search of somebody marginally less aggravating.

You immediately find John standing in the kitchen, absently staring out the window and munching on a Doritos-flavored bagel. You glance outside, following his gaze just to ensure that you are not missing something absolutely vital here. The only thing to see out there on the abandoned street is the curls of vapor curling up off the damp cement under the heat of the rising sun. Your perplexity fluid is now running fast and thick throughout the entirety of your nasty mutated vascular system. Clearing your throat, you say, “OK, what the fuck is going on?”

“The Feds are coming,” John whispers.

You blink because what? Did he seriously just say what you think he said? “The Feds? As in the fucking FBI who wants to haul in your ass and my ass and probably Aradia’s ass and fuck everything up worse than a crowbar wedged into the most heinous and unspeakable regions of my bowels?”

“Yeah. Pretty much.”

“How the fuck do they know we’re here?”

He shakes his head. “They don’t. At least, not yet.”

“Then why in the name of piss-drenched electrodes to my ass sphincter are they coming here?”

He shoots another glance out the window, as though he is afraid that the FBI is going to come swinging through it like a troupe of goddamn orangutans the second he looks away. Then he turns to you and says, “They interrogated Rose yesterday.” You open your mouth to demand that he explain exactly who in the hell this ‘Rose’ character is but he doesn’t leave you any room to speak before going on with, “Apparently they’re tracking down all my online friends. Or at least, all the ones who have citizenship records and registered addresses.”

You pinch the bridge of your nose, mumble a delightful cocktail of all your favorite swears, both English and Alternian, before saying, “When are they going to get here?”

“How the hell am I supposed to know? I mean, it’s not like they phone ahead so we can make them cupcakes and lemonade. Rose thinks they’ll come today, though.”

You repeat your lovely tapestry of swears, louder this time so Strider and Aradia can bask in the afterglow of your obscene wordsmithery. Then you groan, “Jesus fuck, the car was shitty enough
with just the three of us holed up in there; how in the barfing hell are we going to do this with four? Where the fuck are we even going to go?"

Aradia emerges from Strider’s tiny gnat’s ass of a bathroom, hauling your duffel bag and her rolling suitcase along with one hand, and attempting to tug a comb through her hair with her other hand. She pauses in her attempts to beat the shit out of her hair in order to look at you and say, “If I understand things correctly, we won’t need to worry about being in the car for much longer. John’s friend happens to own a plane and she is on her way to pick us up right now.”

“A plane?” you repeat. “A fucking plane? Like that’s not the most conspicuous thing ever. Shit, let’s all put on hideous skintight superhero costumes and run around the city with our heads up our asses, licking the armpits of everyone we meet and pretending that we’re offering free armpit inspections while we’re at it!”

Aradia puckers her lips. “Karkat? Inside voices.” You clench your teeth so hard you are practically on the verge of popping an eyeball and showering her with a hemorrhaging mess of blood and eye juice, but somehow you tamp down the frustrated scream that is clawing at your throat. Aradia seems to take this as a sign that she should continue talking. She motions to the duffel bag draped over her shoulder and says, “I’ve already packed your things for you. We’ll head out as soon as Dave’s ready.”

“Oh shit,” John breathes. “No we won’t. Look outside.”

You exchange a look with Aradia that says something in the vicinity of Fuck, fuck, fuckity-fuck, we are more boned than a bulge-riding pile of rancid nookwaste, aren’t we? Then you take a casual peek out the window and oh look, there are two black cars pulling up to the front of the building. You are too high up to see if there are any official logos or markings identifying the cars as belonging to federal law enforcement, but oh gee look at that, you don’t need to see any of that shit because both vehicles are very helpfully and considerately flashing double sets of red and blue lights like they think they are Sollux motherfucking Captor.

For about three seconds, you stand there, staring out the window with all of your insides threatening to drop all over the floor and leave a horrifying mess for whoever the hell is unfortunate enough to clean the Strider’s carbuncle of an apartment. Then Strider comes rocketing out of his room like somebody planted an incendiary device up his ass. He is clutching that ridiculous tiny backpack in his hands and even with those dumb shades hiding his eyes from view, it’s pretty apparent that he is in a state of utter freakout to equal your own. Gesturing toward Aradia and her flotilla of luggage, he gasps, “Oh, hey. Looks like you guys were good kids and got all packed. What say we all get the fuck out of here?”

“I’ll second that,” says John.

You and Aradia do not even bother to reply because you are way too occupied with doing more practical things like heading for the goddamn door. Once you are all out in the hallway, you take about two steps in the direction of the elevator before Strider grabs your arm and motions you to proceed in the completely opposite direction. You give him a dirty look and jerk your arm free from his gross hands (because who knows where those nasty suckers have been) but follow him without comment when he breathes, “Fire escape’s this way, wonder butt.” (And on a side note, wow, were you really going to plunk your ass in the elevator that goes straight down to the goddamn lobby? What the hell were you thinking; that you would go and greet the nice, friendly FBI agents with a thumbs up and an extra-cheesy “Whoops! Looks like you caught me, fellas. Guess I’m really fucked now”? Apparently, that was exactly what you were planning to do. You make a mental note to thank Strider for saving you from yourself later.)
Strider leads you and your bright-eyed crew of shit whiffers around a corner and down a hall that has a fucking ginormous window at the end of it. It ends up taking the combined efforts of both Strider and John to get the damn thing to open, and when it finally does it makes a squealing noise that you are certain that everybody living two counties away could hear. Aradia is through the window and onto the landing so fast you barely have time to ask her to let you carry your own damn bag, seriously there is no reason to carry fucking everything by yourself. John goes next and then Strider is needling you to “hurry up and go; are you waiting for Santa to fly his fat red ass around and pick you up because you’re like half a year early there, man.”

You flip him off with your free hand (the one not hefting your heavy-ass duffel bag around), climb through the window, and gah holy nookspurting pus on a rice biscuit you forgot just how fucking high 34 floors actually is! You stand there staring down at the very hard and unforgiving cement that is suddenly way farther away than it seemed like it was when you were still inside Strider’s apartment until Strider punches you on the shoulder and hisses, “What the hell are you doing? Go!” Then you very quickly remember that the metaphorical shit has just gotten very real and that means it’s time to pull yourself together and put on your grown-up pants and that means you need to get your quivering fear-piss soaked ass down this fire escape right now. You therefore hurry down the rickety safety structure as quickly as you can, reflecting on your shameful ability to lose your globes over something as minor as being a little too high off the ground the whole way down.

It takes the four of you such a long time to get all the way down to the ground you are half-expecting the Feds to be sitting around playing a round of high-stakes poker and waiting for you when you get there. (That they are not is nothing short of a miraculous gift of favor vomited up from the monstrous maw of the capricious entity known as fate, especially considering the fact that you are close enough you can hear their radios from where they are parked just around the fucking corner.) The second all four of you have your feet firmly planted on solid ground, Strider whispers, “Come on; this way.” He proceeds to lead you through a meandering tour of practically every back alley in Houston, Texas until you eventually come to the consensus that trotting around the COMPLETELY FUCKING EMPTY STREETS with the FBI hot on your trail is a really dumb idea. You end up holing up in some no-name coffee shop because it is the only thing that is open at this ungodly hour.

The dude behind the counter proves that he is a total shitsponge by immediately demanding that you purchase something in order to stay so Aradia peels a couple of bills off her ever-dwindling stack and foots the bill for all of your worthless asses. (John orders coffee with cream and sugar because he’s boring. Aradia orders something none of you have ever heard of because why not, it’ll be a surprise! Strider orders fucking apple juice because he is a piece of human trash. You order the blackest coffee they have with nothing in it because you’re just that badass. You are going to be seriously disappointed if your teeth aren’t melting by the time you are done.) Once you are all seated and sipping away at your preferred beverage choices, you decide to discuss what in the general vicinity of gibbering fuck you are going to do next. John generously starts your conversation with a well-articulated and emotionally moving “OK…now what?”

“I’ll tell you what,” says Strider. “We’ve got to go off the fucking map. That’s what.”

You roll your eyes. “Wow, no shit. Any bright ideas floating around in that body cavity of bad ideas some people are charitable enough to call your skull on how we are going to go about doing that? Because unless either of you happen to know someone who lives an ocean away from all forms of modern civilization, I’d say we are fucked.”

John and Strider share a deeply meaningful look; one that makes you say, “Oh fuck me, don’t even try to pretend you guys actually know someone who lives an ocean away from civilization. In fact, let me offer up a hearty serving of preemptive derision chuckles to prevent you from even attempting to voice that turd of a joke. Hahahaha. There. No need to talk about it anymore. Now let’s move on
to discussing this like actual sentient beings instead of a bunch of doofuses with our thumbs up our asses.”

“Oh my god,” groans Strider. “You really need to chill the fuck out. You are probably going to have an aneurysm or some shit over this, but yeah. We actually do know someone like that.”

“Wow, Strider,” you scoff. “Did you not hear the preemptive laughter I laid down just a second ago in order to prevent you from spewing that idea from your speech hole? Here, I’ll do it again: Hahahaha. Now can we please drop it and move on?”

“It’s not a joke, Karkat!” John exclaims. “We have a friend who lives on a tiny little island out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Her name is Jade. Actually, she’s kind of already expecting me and Dave to come and visit her with Rose, but she’s really cool. I bet she wouldn’t mind having a couple of other guests!”

You shake your head and mumble, “You have got to be shitting me.” Then you take a sip of your black as black coffee and promptly spit it back out because augh, why did you order this, you don’t even like coffee what the crap were you thinking?

Aradia takes the opportunity to pipe up while you are still gagging on the mouthful of acid you just attempted to swallow. “Dave, you said that Jade is ‘off the map.’ Is she also off the grid?”

Strider gives her a blank look (though to be fair, you really have no idea whether he is confused or whether he is just innocently staring at her because “blank look” is pretty much his default setting). “How are those not the same thing?” (Well fuck you, he actually was confused.)

“I mean no outside surveillance, unmonitored airspace…basically an ideal place for top secret goings-on, if you catch my drift.”

“Oh. Well, it’s more secluded than a super villain’s evil lair, so I guess that would be a yes. Where are you going with this? Are you planning on turning into some mustache-twirling drug baron or something?”

“Not quite,” Aradia laughs. “Actually, I have an old friend I would like to see again and he needs someplace he can land undetected.”

You miss John and Dave’s reactions to this shocking revelation. You are too busy trying not to freak the fuck out because holy shit, one of her old friends is probably one of your old friends, too. Is it Sollux? God, you hope it’s Sollux. Or Terezi or Gamzee. Or, hell, maybe it’s Tavros. Fuck, you don’t care who it is because you would totally hug the shit out of any of them right now until you both died of asphyxiation and shame. By the time you recover yourself enough to process what anybody is talking about, Aradia is saying, “Also, I was thinking that the island might serve as a good home base for all our ‘dethrone the current empress and head off the Earth invasion’ needs.”

John and Dave both make throat noises of general approval. You decide that this means they reacted in a similar manner to Aradia’s first request and that means holy weasel-mongering shit you are going to get to see your old friends again soon. The thought is enough to make your throat close up and nope, whatever it is that’s making your eyes sting, it must be residual effect of practically blowing your head off with a mouthful of motor oil masquerading as coffee. Yep, that’s it. Quickly, before you do something to embarrass the shit out of yourself, you clear your throat and say, “So how are we getting out there? Can your friend Rose fly us?”

“Well, that was the plan originally,” replies John. “I’m guessing that’s where she’s planning to take us now.” He turns away from you to face Strider and says, “Hey Dave, when did Rose say she was
“She didn’t,” says Dave. “I’m assuming she’ll be here sometime this evening because New York is a long-ass way away from here and she left like an hour ago.”

“Oh. So…what do we do until then?”

In an effort to keep a low profile, you end up coffee shop hopping all day, hemorrhaging Aradia’s money out the ass along the way. Actually, wait. No you don’t. That’s a pile of bullshit. What you actually do is visit two more coffee shops, the saddest example of a McDonalds you have ever seen in your life, a Sheri’s restaurant, another coffee shop, and some teriyaki restaurant that seems to have no name until Strider finally gets a text around 6 pm. Then, using the last of Aradia’s cash, you hail a taxi that smells like old cigarettes and piss to take you to a tiny airstrip out in the middle of nowhere. As you get out of the cab and relish the sensation of odorless air caressing your abused nostrils, you are relieved to see that there is indeed a plane sitting at the end of the runway because the four of you no longer have a fucking dime between you and it would fondle major bulge to have to march your asses all the fuck back to downtown Houston.

A girl with short hair and an irritating know-it-all smile gets out of the plane as you approach. You assume she must be Rose. Your assumption proves correct when John screeches her name like a dolphin in heat and runs to give her a hug that damn near pops her head off her shoulders like a dandelion. By the time those of you who aren’t pretending to be hyperactive numb nuts (aka: literally everybody except John) join them, John is already babbling about “oh my god, Rose, we have so much to tell you. You are going to flip when you hear about what is going on. Like, seriously, you’re going to think I’m pranking you when I tell you everything and yeah, I guess it kind of would be a cool prank but even I’m not enough of a pranking master to pull off something like this!”

Rose holds up a hand and John abruptly cuts off his fevered monologuing. (You instantly decide that Rose earns three whole cred points on Karkat Vantas’ sliding scale of human palatability. She should appreciate being on the positive side of zero while it lasts. Pretty much every other human you have ever encountered is already sitting below negative two million.) She says, “I would love to hear the whole epic tale of sorrow, tragedy and horror, but I seriously doubt that there is time for us to hash out the full version right now. The FBI likely already knows that I have left via plane. I assume it won’t be long before they start sweeping all of the airstrips in Houston. I am going to ask you two questions, and I want you to tell me the truth, John.”

He frowns. “Oh. OK. What do you want to know?”

“First: did you or Karl have a hand in the deaths of Nora and Otto Vantross?”

John shoots you an uncomfortable look. “Uh…yeah. I mean, it’s complicated, but yes.”

Rose nods. “All right. Now for my follow-up question: was there a reason that Nora and Otto Vantross had to die?”

You can’t stop yourself. The words just come exploding out of you like ten gallons of pent-up projectile vomit that has been percolating in your digestive sac over the course of your entire lifetime and lying in wait for this precise moment. You shout, “Fuck yes, there was!”

“Wow,” Strider deadpans. “John, you got a lot shoutier and more obnoxious.” Aradia is charitable enough to laugh at Strider’s pathetic attempt at witticism. John executes an eyeroll of such epic proportions it might as well be coming from you. Rose just fixes you with a look that says I was not talking to you person I have never met, why did you think you had to open your worthless squawk blister, what the hell is the matter with you? (And Christ, it has been so long since you have had to
contend with anything even approaching one of Cennia’s looks that it catches you completely off guard and any words of follow-up you’d had die like ineffectual clouds of flatulence dispersing in your windpipe.)

Rose redirects her attention to John and says, “John, if you please: was there a reason that Nora and Otto Vantross had to die?”

John shrugs. “Well, yeah. I mean, they didn’t really leave us much of a choice. I’m pretty sure you’d think they deserved it.”

Rose stands there looking cryptic as a shit floating in the toilet of an abandoned house for just long enough to make you think she might actually decide to just take John and Strider and leave you and Aradia to fend for yourselves. Then she says, “All right. Everybody on the plane. It’s a long flight to Jade’s; you can tell me all the pertinent details on the way.”

You all waste no time in piling into the little aircraft. As you attempt to make yourself comfortable, you remember that oh joy, human planes also happen to run on things that fucking explode, just like human cars except with the added “fun” of being way the fuck up in the air because it’s not like that shit was terrifying enough when you were on the goddamn ground. As you white knuckle your way through liftoff, you make a mental note to slap John across the face later and demand why humans have such a bizarre fixation on blowing everything the fuck up.

> Island arrival x2 combo!
> Island arrival x2 combo!

> Jade: Time to wake up!

Ugh, you know. You don’t normally sleep in this late, but you saw a super cool shooting star last night—the biggest, brightest one you have ever seen, actually, and that is saying a lot because living out here with the clear, dark night sky has given you the opportunity to see lots of other shooting stars for reference! You ended up lying out on the beach, staring up at the night sky for hours because you thought that maybe it was a sign there was going to be a meteor shower worth watching. Sadly, you wound up laying out there on the cold sand for no reason: you didn’t see any more shooting stars while you were out there, let alone a whole meteor shower.

By the time you finally gave up and went to bed, the moon was riding low on the horizon and the stars were already starting to fade. Now here you are, lying in bed thinking about all the things you need to do today and too sleepy to do much of anything about any of them. You need to feed Bec. His coat is starting to look a little ratty, so he could probably stand to have a bath if you can catch him. You need to water all the plants in your garden. Some of the trails along the mountainside are getting overgrown again…you should really start trimming them back now or else they’ll be a real pain to deal with later….

You hear the distant roar of an engine: a plane. Must be another supplies drop, you think. You lie in bed staring at the ceiling above you as the plane gets closer. The engines get louder and louder until it passes by your bedroom close enough to set all your hanging flower baskets swinging. A few seconds later, you hear a distant thud as it deposits its cargo. You groan because it’s a pretty sizeable drop from the sound of it and that means that you are probably going to be hauling supplies up to your house all day. (It’s not exactly hard work, but it is boring. You didn’t even order anything interesting like new motherboard components to make the task seem a little more appealing.)

You don’t waste any time getting up after that. There are usually at least a few perishables in most of your supplies drops—a gallon or two of milk, chilled meats…you are pretty sure you remember ordering a couple of tubs of ice cream this time as well, and it would suck if you just let it melt out of sheer laziness.

You are pulling on your shoes when you notice that Bec is barking. That is enough to raise your hackles, too, because Bec has never barked at a supply plane before and he is too smart to start doing it now. Something must be wrong!

You hurry over to your window, but it happens to be facing in exactly the wrong direction for seeing what the plane dropped. Scooping up your trusty hunting rifle—because your grandpa always used to give you hell if you left the house without it even when there weren’t suspicious goings-on going on—you run downstairs and go outside.

Your house is situated atop the highest mountain peak on the island. From your vantage point, you can see almost everything there is to see on the island: the lagoon and the half-submerged ruins in it, the swatches of inland vegetation and flat plain, all ringed with a thin strip of beach for good measure. You can also see the small plane that has landed on the corner of island farthest away from the (fortunately) inactive volcano, not far from the place you’d laid staring up at the stars last night. You see one person getting out, then another, and another, and even though they are way too far away for you to be able to see any of their faces, you let out an excited little yelp because you don’t need to see their faces to know who they are! Setting the rifle back inside, you run for the trail that will get you down the mountain fastest.
It takes you a lot longer than you would like to get down to the place where the plane landed. By the time you finally get there, Bec is already running back and forth between all of your guests, jumping up on them, licking their hands and faces, and trying to entice them into throwing a stick for him to chase.

As you run the final few yards to meet them, you shout, “John! Rose! Dave! I thought you weren’t coming! What happened?” You pause, noticing now that there are two people you were not expecting; a guy and a girl who you have never met before. Nodding toward the strangers, you add, “Er…hi, people I don’t know. My name’s Jade. Who are you?”

The guy starts to say something, making it just far enough to say, “I’m Ka—” before John interrupts him with “Hi Jade! This” (he points to the guy, who is now giving him a very annoyed look) “is Karkat and this” (he points to the girl) “is Aradia.”

Aradia is smiling at you, so you smile back and say, “Hi Aradia!” Then, for good measure, you add, “Hi Karkat!”

Karkat is in the middle of ranting at John; something that sounds like it’s along the lines of “John, Aradia and I are completely capable of introducing ourselves to your friends like fully sentient life forms so you can stop doing it for us, you stupid fuck nut.” He interrupts himself mid-rant to offer up a choppy wave and a really grouchy “Hi” before he goes right back to ranting about John’s “pants-pissingly embarrassing lack of decent fucking social etiquette.”

Since John and Karkat seem to be busy at the moment, you turn your attention to Aradia and say, “I don’t mean to be rude when I ask this because any friend of John or Dave or Rose is totally welcome here, but why did you and Karkat want to come all the way out here with them?”

“It’s kind of a complicated story,” Aradia replies. “Hope you don’t mind.”

You shrug. “OK. Shoot.”

She along with Dave, Rose, Karkat, and John then proceed to tell you the most outrageous story you have ever heard in your entire life; an unbelievable mix of alien invasion, crime, and revolution. They try to convince you that John and Karkat (and possibly Rose and Dave) are fugitives from the law and that Karkat and Aradia are aliens. You of course do not believe a single word of it, but they all insist that it’s true no matter how many times you tell them that you don’t buy it.

You have half a mind to be pissed with them for thinking that you are dumb enough to fall for something that ridiculous (after all, you might live on a secluded island, but you’re not stupid!) Even so, you can’t help feeling just a little impressed with John (because this definitely smells like a John prank all over) for getting everybody to play along so seamlessly. Besides, you are too excited to have them all here to stay mad at them for too long. You finally shrug and say, “OK, fine. Whatever you guys say.”

You figure they’ll tell you the real story soon enough. Imagine your surprise when, two hours later, a spaceship lands on the beach.

> Aradia: Greet your friend

A thrill of excitement shivers through your digestive sac as you watch the ship’s smooth descent. Sure, you’ve been communicating with Sollux via Trollion for several human months now. The two of you have spent countless hours sharing all the adventures you have had in each other’s absence, trying to set a rendezvous location, and coordinating everything you need to do for Feferi’s
revolution to succeed. Even so, something about seeing the ship touching down on the sand really seems to bring it all home for you: Everything is falling into place. The revolution is about to take off. You are going to see your old friend and moirail again.

Beside you, Karkat is watching the ship with such a focused intensity his entire body seems to be vibrating with it. You know that he and Sollux were close back home—at least as close as you and Sollux were with each other. (In some ways maybe even closer: although Sollux never said as much one way or the other, you’d always had the impression that there might be something pitch going on between the two of them. If their more recent Trollian logs are anything to go by, you’d say that hasn’t changed at all!)

Your human friends are being a lot more vocal:

From somewhere behind you, you hear John exclaim, “That is so freaking cool!”

Rose responds with, “Yes, John, I think I have to concur with that sentiment. It is very impressive.”

Meanwhile, Jade is in the process of having a bit of an admittedly somewhat justified freakout, repeating “Oh my god, you guys were telling the truth? This is really happening? Wait, does this mean that Karkat and Aradia actually are aliens? Ugh, why didn’t you guys try harder to convince me that you were telling me the truth?”

Dave is alternating between answering Jade’s stream of questions and shooting incredulous glances at the ship. “Yep, 100% truth.” (Glance.) “Totes happening, Harley.” (Glance.) “Can you think of any other reason to explain how the hell Karkat is so weird? Because I can’t.” (Glance.) “Hey, cut us some slack. It’s not our fault you don’t believe in shit like fairies and Never Never Land.” (Glance.)

The ship settles, the low hum of its engines going quiet. As you approach the entry hatch, the excitement in your chest develops a sour, apprehensive edge. It hits you that the ship is much larger than Sollux had led you to believe—too large to travel far without some form of psionic power. The ship looks to be very new—not a scratch on its pristine surface, and the violet accents raise all manner of red flags in your pan because it is very clear that this is a royal ship. A suspicion begins to take root, one you seriously hope is wrong even though you already know that something is wrong, Sollux would never willingly set foot on a ship like this.

The entry hatch opens with a hydraulic hiss and you are dismayed to see that it is not Sollux but somebody else, a seadweller—you remember his name; you remember it’s Eridan Ampora—standing there. His eyes are half-shut against the harsh midday Earth sun, his fins are flared, his fangs as bared, and he is pretty clearly scared out of his mind. You would probably feel sorrier for him if he wasn’t holding a huge rifle and wildly aiming it at alternately you, Karkat, John, Rose, Dave, and Jade.

Between his heavy seadweller accent and his panicked, rapid-fire speech pattern, you have a hard time deciphering what he is saying when he shouts, “Stay the fuck back! Who are you? Where the fuck is Kar? Where the fuck is Megido?”

You and Karkat exchange an awkward look of secondhand embarrassment as you both simultaneously realize that he has no idea that you are trolls and not human aliens. Then Karkat shouts back, “Put that thing down right this goddamn minute; it’s us, you dumb piece of brine-swilling trash!”

Eridan’s eyes go wide and then he sucks in a pained gasp and rapidly blinks his eyes as they water against the sting of the unforgiving sun. He doesn’t let go of the rifle, but the arm holding it falls limply to his side. “Oh my god,” he gasps. “Kar? Is that you?”
“Yes, you stupid bulge-licking fart huffer.”

“Fucking hell, Kar, you look terrible!”

Karkat’s face flushes red. He flips Eridan off with both hands and you strongly suspect that he would flip him off with both feet if he had the dexterity to do so. “Fuck you, too!”

Behind you Rose clears her throat and whispers, “Forgive me if this comes across as culturally insensitive, but is this normal greeting behavior for your species?”

“Er…not exactly,” you reply.

“What are they saying?” asks John.

You shrug. “Basically Eridan is insulting Karkat’s appearance and Karkat is insulting…well, pretty much everything about Eridan.”

“Oh, so his name is Eridan then?” Jade whispers.

You nod, watching Karkat hurry forward to meet Eridan as he climbs down the boarding ramp. Karkat takes him by the hand and leads him toward you and your group of friends. (The way in which Eridan flinches when Karkat touches him, as though he thinks the cosmetic alterations are some contagious disease rather than the sum of multiple surgeries, is not lost on you. You imagine that it is not lost on Karkat, either.) Once they reach you, Karkat reverts back to speaking English and says, “OK, everyone. This douchebag is—“

“Eridan!” Jade exclaims.

Eridan jumps and stares at her, apparently shocked by her ability to pronounce his name correctly. Karkat scowls and groans, “Oh my pants-shitting Christ, is it too much to ask to let me do one proper introduction? Is it really that hard?”

Dave shrugs. “Sorry, man. Aradia beat you to the punch. You’ve got to be quicker on your feet if you want to be the sugarplum fairy of introduction.”

“Thank you, Strider, for answering my goddamn rhetorical question,” Karkat snaps. “I really appreciate that, you putrescent pile of worm-infested dog shit. Should I even bother telling him your names, or have you somehow managed to telepathically beam that information directly into his skull just to further emasculate me? Oh, what’s that? You haven’t done that yet? Then here; allow me to perform the forbidden ritual of mutual barf huffery known as the social introduction. Any objections? Too fucking bad, here I go!”

You hold up a hand and say, “Wait a second, Karkat.”

Karkat looks as though he is about to burst a blood vessel or twenty, but he grits his teeth and grates, “Yes, Megido?”

Turning to Eridan, you say, “Where’s Sollux?”

For the first time since he came blustering out of the entry hatch, Eridan seems to droop a bit. He doesn’t look at you as he replies, “He’s on the ship. Go inside, take the fourth hall to the left, and it’ll be the sixth door on the right.”

“Thanks.” Turning to the rest of your group, you say, “Excuse me.” Then you head for the ship.
Your suspicion from earlier returns and it is like something sharp and sour rolling around in your gut as you board the ship. Still, you tell yourself that maybe you are wrong. You tell yourself that maybe Sollux is just wrapped up in a coding project (you know how he can get when that happens, when he gets so fixated on something that he’ll forget to eat or sleep for days….) You take that lie and you hold on to it until you are standing outside the door to the helmsblock, and even then you try to tell yourself that maybe you misheard Eridan’s directions, maybe you miscounted your doors, maybe… you go inside and your blood pusher sinks at what you see.

Sollux looks so small in the snarl of biowires that secure him in his prison you have trouble differentiating where the wires end and he begins. Your eyes wander over his limbs, but the helmsman’s column wires are mercifully thick enough to obscure the amputation sites from view. You do not know how long he has been trapped here, but he is already starting to look gaunt: his face is all sharp angles and pinched hollows. Even so, you try to smile as you say, “Hi, Sollux.”

He turns his head as far as the wires will allow in order to look in your direction, even though you are pretty sure he doesn’t need to be looking directly at you in order to “see” you. The smile that breaks onto his face is the same sharp-edged smirk you remember from sweeps ago as he says, hii aa. He pauses and you think you see him furrow his brow, though it’s hard to tell with that awful goggle rig covering half his face. Then: god, look what they did to you.

“Look what they did to you,” you counter.

touché, he laughs. His smile abruptly fades as the tail end of his laughter adopts a choked quality. ii mii22ed you, aa.

You cross the room until you are standing directly in front of him. The wires are too thick to allow you to wrap your arms around his shoulders for a proper hug, so you wrap your arms around his torso instead. “I missed you, too.”

You feel something wrap around your back: a tangle of biowire encased in a fuzz of psionic energy. Your first instinct is to shrink away. Even with your old telekinetic powers no longer at your disposal, the wires still cause an uncomfortable pressure to bear down deep inside your pan. Then you realize that this is his only means of hugging you back so you try to relax instead.

You hold each other like that for a long time. Neither of you speak until you let go of each other. Then you gesture to the biowire, the helmsman rigging, and you say, “Why didn’t you tell me about all of this?”

ii diidnt want two freak you out. e2pecially 2iince ii am not goiing two 2tuck iin here much longer anyway.

“You’re getting out?” you gasp. “Is that even possible?”

yeah. tz2 piirate2 are gettiing me out once all thii2 revolutiion 2hiit ii2 over.

You nod. “Terezi is a good moirail. I’m glad.”

yeah…ii 2tiill mii22ed you, though. god, aa, ii feel liike 2hiit knowiing you were 2tuck here alone all thii2 tiime. ii never even looked for you! 2hiitty ex-moiirail ii2 2hiitty.

“It’s OK; Sollux, I am OK with everything that happened to me.”

how can you be?

You shrug. “It’s been a real adventure! I’ve done things here I never could have done if I’d stayed
back on Alternia. And humans are…well, they are definitely interesting!”

He shakes his head, grumbles, whatever you say, ii gue22.

The two of you are quiet for a long while. Then, you take a deep breath and ask, “Is…is it as terrible as it looks?”

nah. in some way2 it’s kind of cool. Your expression must betray the sick horror you feel because he is quick to add, ii mean ii can code way fa2ter now. and flyiing ii2 pretty 2weet.

You frown. “You could fly before, Sollux.”

yeah but not at freakiing warp 2peed and not out in the middle of 2pace! but…ii do mii2 haviing hand2. and leg2. oh, and eatiing. ii never appreciated how fuckiing awe2ome food wa2. ii 2wear the fiir2t thiing ii am going two do when ii get out of here ii2 eat grubloaf until ii puke. oh, and…. He trails off, his lips turning down into a frown. Then: whoa, you ok? your heart rate and temperature are both 2piikiing.

For one second, you consider admitting that you are furious. You consider telling him the truth: that it doesn’t matter that he is getting out when he never should have been stuck in this hellish little room in the first place. Instead you say, “Do you want to see Karkat now? He’s just outside; I’ll send him in.”

ok…but aa, youll come and 2ee me again, riight?

“Of course!”

He grins and you smile back as you leave the helmsblock. You hold that smile on your face as you walk through the ship even though your face starts to hurt and your lips start to twitch and there is a tightness building in your throat. You hold it until you are finally stepping out of the entry hatch and walking down the boarding ramp. Then you lose it.

You don’t break down into a crying mess because you’ve never really been prone to tears, but your throat feels like it closes up a bit and you can feel yourself shaking. You are too hot and too cold and you wish you had your old whip with you because you want to retreat into the overgrowth and take out all your anger on the overhanging vines and brush. You feel like you are going to scream or throw up. Either way, you know something is coming out of your mouth very soon.

Karkat must notice your distress because he breaks away from Eridan and the humans, hurries to meet you at the bottom of the ramp, and demands, “What the hell happened?”

You are so angry that the words come out bitten and sharp: “They helmsed him. Even after all I did, they still helmsed him.”

“What?”

“Did Eridan not tell you?”

“No, he missed that shit-licking little detail.” Karkat scowls, shooting a poisonous glare back toward Eridan, who, you notice, is pointedly ignoring every attempt John, Dave, Rose, and Jade make to communicate with him. “And what the farting fuck do you mean ‘after all you did’? You couldn’t have done anything. You were here the whole time.”

You sigh. “Remember how I said I had my reasons for volunteering for this?”
“Yes. Yes, I do. I also remember wondering who in their right mind would actually volunteer themselves to be subjected to this clusterfuck, but then I remembered that you are fucking weird as hell, so I figured it was just a product of you being fucking weird as hell.” His frown deepens as he adds, “Was I off the mark with that assumption?”

You laugh but it’s a humorless sound that hurts your chest. “Just a little. You want to know why I volunteered?”

“Sure. I mean it’s not like I’ve been waiting for you to drop the ten ton sack of leaking human waste on that matter for the last three months now or anything. Go ahead.”

You glance back toward Eridan and the humans. John, Rose, Dave, and Jade seem to have given up on trying to communicate with Eridan and are instead talking amongst themselves. Eridan is sitting on a large rock several feet away from them with the most exaggerated example of a pout you have ever seen in your life. You are quietly glad that they are keeping their distance. This is not a story you are eager to share

“Back when we were five sweeps old, Sollux hacked into something he shouldn’t have.”

Karkat rolls his eyes. “Big surprise there.”

“No; I mean he hacked into the Imperial databanks and he saw something he wasn’t meant to see. Well, actually, he probably saw a lot of things he wasn’t supposed to see because I’m pretty sure those things are super-restricted access for a reason. Anyways, the point is that he found a listing of all the trolls in our cohort who were on the shortlist for the helmsblock. He and I were both on it.”

“Shit,” Karkat breathes. “Well that explains why he always had such a paranoia hard-on over everything even remotely related to helmsblocks, but it doesn’t explain why you would decide to fuck off into the merry blue yonder of cosmetic mutilation and identity loss.”

“I know,” you reply. “I’m getting to that.”

Taking a deep breath, you continue with: “Sollux tried everything he could do to alter the record and take us off the list, but even though he could access the information, he couldn’t change it. That’s when I saw a call for recruits to join this program. More specifically, I saw the bit that said that volunteers would be ‘granted special favor, upon request and within reason.’ So I volunteered under the condition that Sollux would go free if I completed the training and got placed on earth. I thought that I was saving myself and saving him as well.” You glare at the ship sitting on the sand behind you before adding, “Obviously, that didn’t happen.”


“Don’t say you are sorry,” you interrupt. “You had no part in any of this. It’s my own fault for being naïve enough to think they would follow through on their end of the deal. Just go in and see Sollux now. He’s waiting for you.”

Karkat nods, starts up the boarding ramp. As you cross the beach to re-join your human friends and Eridan, you find yourself hoping more fervently than ever that you’ll get to see Feferi lop the Condesce’s head clean off her shoulders before this is all over.

> Kanaya: Inform Karkat about secret admirers
Kanaya: Inform Karkat about secret admirers

grimAuxiliatrix [GA] began trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

GA: Hello Karkat
CG: KANAYA?
CG: OH MY GOD, WHY ARE YOU TROLLING ME NOW?
GA: Forgive Me
GA: I Did Not Realize That Contacting You Unannounced Would Be Such A Source Of Grief And Hardship
GA: I Suppose I Should Take Measures To Ensure That It Does Not Happen Again
CG: FUCK. THAT CAME OUT SOUNDING A LOT WORSE THAN I MEANT IT TO SOUND.
CG: I MEAN WOW; FIRST TIME I TALK TO YOU IN TWO SWEEPS AND I IMMEDIATELY FUCK IT UP BY REVEALING THAT I AM STILL A TOTAL BAG OF BULGE NIBBLETS WHO SHOULDN’T BE ALLOWED AROUND NORMAL, DECENT PEOPLE.
CG: IF MY LUSUS WAS STILL ALIVE HE WOULD SCREAM LIKE AN UNHOLY BEHEMOTH AND HANG HIS HEAD IN SHAME AT THE REALIZATION THAT THE TROLL HE RAISED HAS THE SOCIAL COMPETENCY OF A CLOD OF DIRT.
GA: Karkat You Did Not Actually Offend Me I Was Being Facetious
CG: OH. GOOD.
CG: BUT SERIOUSLY, WE ARE GOING TO BE SEEING EACH OTHER IN PERSON IN LIKE, TEN MORE HUMAN HOURS.
CG: WHY THE HELL ARE YOU TROLLING ME NOW?
GA: Has Anybody Informed You About The Collective?
CG: THE WHAT?
CG: WAIT, ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT THAT WEIRD CULT THING THAT RANDOMLY DECIDED TO GO MILITANT AND JOIN FEFERI'S ARMY FOR NO APPARENT REASON WHATSOEVER?
CG: BECAUSE IF YOU ARE, THEN YES. I HAVE HEARD OF IT.
GA: How Much Do You Know About It
CG: WELL LET’S SEE...
CG: THE ONLY THING ANYBODY HAS TOLD ME IS THAT IT’S A WEIRD CULT THING THAT RANDOMLY DECIDED TO GO MILITANT AND JOIN FEFERI’S ARMY FOR NO APPARENT REASON WHATSOEVER, SO I GUESS THE ANSWER TO THAT WOULD BE JACK NUB-HUMPING SQUAT.
GA: Oh Dear
CG: “OH DEAR?” WHAT DOES “OH DEAR” MEAN?
GA: Oh Dear Is An Expression Of Sympathy Dismay Shock Or In This Case Exasperation
CG: OH, HAHAHA. THANKS FOR CRACKING OPEN THAT BARREL OF NUB-TICKLING HILARITY.
CG: NOW LET’S GENTLY ROLL IT OVER TO THE SIDE OF THE ROAD AND DEPOSIT IT INTO A BOTTOMLESS INCINERATOR SO WE CAN TALK SERIOUSLY FOR A SECOND.
CG: IS THERE SOMETHING ELSE I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS COLLECTIVE CULT THING?
GA: Yes
GA: You Might Say That
CG: OK.
CG: CARE TO CUT THE CAGEY HORSESHIT AND TELL ME WHAT IT IS?
GA: Do You Know Anything About Your Ancestor
CG: ANCESTOR? KANAYA, YOU KNOW AS WELL AS I DO THAT ANCESTRAL
LEGACY STORIES ARE JUST A BUNCH OF MADE UP JERK OFF FUEL FOR
HIGHBLOODS.
CG: EVEN IF I DID SUBSCRIBE TO THAT STUPID MALARKEY—WHICH I DON’T—I
DON’T SEE HOW THAT HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH WHAT WE ARE TALKING
ABOUT RIGHT NOW.
GA: Please Just Answer The Question
CG: NO, I DON’T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT ANY SUPPOSED ANCESTOR I MAY OR
MAY NOT HAVE HAD.
CG: ARE YOU GOING TO TRY AND TELL ME HE’S IN THAT WEIRD CULT THING OR
SOMETHING? LIKE, HE’S SOME OLD FART SITTING UP THERE WITH YOU RIGHT
NOW, PICKING HIS ASS AND DROPPING A BUNCH OF MOUTH DRIBBLE ABOUT
MIRACLES TO ANYONE WHO IS UNFORTUNATE ENOUGH TO GET TOO CLOSE TO
HIS REEKING CARCASS OF A BODY?
CG: BECAUSE IF THAT’S THE CASE, I’D BE A LOT HAPPIER IF YOU KEPT THE
GRUESOME DETAILS TO YOURSELF AND LET ME CONTINUE TO BELIEVE THAT
THE MOTHER GRUB HAS ONLY FUCKED UP BADLY ENOUGH TO CRAP OUT THE
WALKING COMBINATION OF BULGEREEK GENETIC MATERIAL THAT PRODUCED
ME JUST ONE TIME.
GA: I Can Assure You That Your Ancestor Is Not With Me At The Moment
GA: He Is Not Even Alive
CG: OH. WELL THEN WHY DID YOU BRING IT UP IN THE FIRST PLACE?
GA: I Am Not Sure How To Explain This Without Sounding Completely Fantastical But
Everything I Am About To Tell You Is True
GA: The Cultists Worship Your Ancestor
CG: WHAT?
GA: Your Ancestor Was A Major Revolutionary Force
GA: He Had A Substantial Following In His Time
CG: WHAT??
GA: He Ended Up Being Executed
GA: Actually I Suppose A More Correct Term Would Be Martyred
CG: WHAT????
GA: The Point Is That His Followers Deified Him After His Death
GA: They Worship Him And By Extension You
CG: *WHAT??????*
CG: KANAYA, SLOW DOWN HERE.
CG: WHAT DO YOU MEAN THEY WORSHIP *ME*? THAT’S THE DUMBEST THING I
HAVE EVER HEARD IN MY ENTIRE EXISTENCE AND THAT IS TAKING INTO
ACCOUNT EVERY STUPID THING GAMZEE EVER SAID TO ME WHEN HE WAS
BAKED OUT OF HIS PAN ON SOPOR SLIME PIE.
CG: ACTUALLY, NO. IT’S WORSE THAN STUPID. IT’S COMPLETELY GRUB-
SHITTING INSANE.
GA: I Believe I Did Give You Fair Warning That This Was All Going To Sound Grub Shitting
Insane As You Have So Delicately Phrased It Just Now
GA: However They Truly Seem To Believe That You Are The Living Reincarnation Of Your
Ancestor And Therefore Apparently Their God
CG: OK, HAHA. JOKE TIME’S OVER.
CG: TIME TO PACK IT ALL IN AND SETTLE DOWN OVER A HEAVILY-STEEPED
KETTLE OF ALL THE ANGUISH FLUID I JUST SHED THINKING ABOUT HOW
EMBARRASSINGLY BAD THIS JOKE IS.
GA: I Am Being Entirely Serious
CG: DID YOU MISS MY GENEROUS BOUT OF SCORN GIGGLING UP THERE? HERE, I’LL DO IT AGAIN: HAHAAAAAAA.
CG: THERE. JOKE’S OVER NOW.
CG: BYE-BYE CRAZY MADE-UP BULLSHIT TALK.
GA: Karkat How Do You Think You Got A Lusus
CG: WELL, LET’S SEE: I’M GOING TO GO WITH HE CHOSE ME? YOU KNOW, THE SAME WAY EVERY SINGLE *OTHER* TROLL IN EXISTENCE GOT A LUSUS. SO WHAT?
GA: That’s Not What I Was Getting At
GA: What I Intended To Ask Was How Do You Think You Were Able To Find A Lusus To Match Your Specific Blood Color
GA: Karkat
GA: Are You Still There
CG: GODDAMN ARADIA.
CG: I MEAN, I KNOW SHE’S WEIRD BUT I THOUGHT SHE WOULD AT LEAST HAVE THE DECENCY TO REALIZE THAT SPREADIGN AROUND INFORMATION ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE’S BLOOD COLORS WITH RECKLESS BULGE-SQUIRTING ABANDON IS A REALLY SHITTY THING TO DO.
CG: WHEN DID SHE TELL YOU?
GA: Aradia Did Not Tell Anybody About Your Blood Color
CG: HOW COULD IT *NOT* HAVE BEEN HER? SHE’S THE ONLY ONE WHO’S EVEN SEEN IT!
GA: Your Ancestors Blood Color Is Part Of The Collectives Core History
CG: SO *THEY*RE* THE GIANT PULSATING CROTCH BLISTER WHO DECIDED IT WAS OK TO GO SPEWING MY PERSONAL INFORMATION AROUND LIKE RANCID SHAME VOMIT?
CG: WHEN DID SHE TELL YOU?
GA: Aradia Did Not Tell Anybody About Your Blood Color
CG: OK, I GUESS I DID WONDER SOMETIMES HOW THE HELL A GENETIC FUCKUP LIKE ME JUST HAPPENED TO SERENDIPITOUSLY SHIT-WADDLE MY WAY DIRECTLY TO A CREATURE WITH THE EXACT SAME CALIBER OF GENETIC FUCKUP.
CG: I DON’T KNOW HOW ANYONE CAN “MAKE” A LUSUS, BUT OK. I’LL SWALLOW
THAT INFORMATION PELLET.
CG: BUT WHY IN THE GIBBERING ASS MUNCH DO THESE PEOPLE THINK THEY NEED TO WORSHIP ME?
GA: They Seem To Believe That You Are The Living Reincarnation Of Your Ancestor And That You Are Here To Complete The Work He Left Unfinished
CG: WELL THAT’S AS STUPID AS A BIG BAG OF SPILLED IGNORANCE HOLE SEEPAGE.
CG: YOU’RE GOING TO HAVE TO TELL THEM THAT THEIR GOD IS AN INEFFECTUAL PIECE OF APATHETIC SHIT BECAUSE I HAVE DONE LITERALLY NOT ONE SINGLE FUCKING THING IN MY ENTIRE LIFE TO FINISH SOME ANCIENT DEAD GUY’S “UNFINISHED BUSINESS” AND I SURE AS FLAMING GRUB TURDS DON’T PLAN ON STARTING NOW.
GA: Sorry To Break It To You But You Are Entirely Wrong On That Front
GA: To Clarify I Am Not Actually Sorry At All Because I Am Experiencing A Moment Of Private Amusement Over What You Just Said
CG: OH, WELL THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR SHARING THAT WITH ME. I SURE DO APPRECIATE HOW YOU ARE JUST A FOUNTAIN OF DIRECT AND UNCOMPLICATED ANSWERS, CLEAR OF ALL INFURIATINGLY CAGEY HORSESHIT TODAY.
CG: OH, WAIT. WHAT'S THIS?
CG: LOOKS LIKE I CAN DO THE SARCASM THING, TOO. WHY, I AM JUST SHITTING MY PANTS AT SUCH A SHOCKING TURN OF EVENTS!
CG: NOW CAN YOU PLEASE TELL ME WHAT YOU THINK IS SO FUNNY?
GA: Nothing Much
GA: Its Just That Contrary To Your Affirmation That You Have Done Nothing To Carry On Your Ancestors Legacy The Role You Have Played In Feferis Revolution Certainly Gives The Impression That You Have Willfully Rekindled The Revolution Your Ancestor Began
CG: WELL LET’S HOPE TO FUCK THAT’S NOT TRUE.
GA: Why Not
CG: BECAUSE WHAT I’M GETTING OUT OF ALL OF THIS IS THAT MY ANCESTOR’S REVOLUTION WAS AN ALL-EXPENSES PAID CRUISE ON THE SS FAILBOAT AND—OH YEAH—LET’S NOT FORGET THE PART WHERE HE FUCKING *DIED.*
CG: I DON’T CARE HOW BADASS THAT MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE BEEN, I’D REALLY PREFER NOT TO GIVE THOSE RELIGIOUS WEIRDOS A REPEAT PERFORMANCE ON THAT FRONT.
GA: No Worries
GA: I Am Sure You Wont
GA: With Any Luck This Will All Be Finished Within A Few More Days Preferably With All Of Us Still Alive And Well
CG: I HOPE SO. I REALLY FUCKING HOPE SO.
GA: As Do I
CG: HEY, KANAYA?
GA: Yes
CG: I APPRECIATE YOUR TELLING ME ABOUT ALL THIS WEIRD BULLSHIT INSTEAD OF JUST LETTING ME FALL ASS-BACKWARDS INTO A CROWD OF RELIGIOUS FANATICS WITH MY METAPHORICAL BULGE OUT, BUT IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU NEED TO TELL ME THAT CAN’T WAIT UNTIL YOU GET HERE?
CG: IT’S THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW WHICH FOR REFERENCE IS EQUIVALENT TO THE MIDDLE OF THE DAY ON ALTERNIA.
CG: EXCEPT WAIT. SHIT. YOU ACTUALLY USED TO STAY UP ALL DAY BACK HOME, DIDN’T YOU?
CG: FUCK, I DON’T KNOW HOW TO CLEVERLY TRANSLATE FUCKED-UP EARTH
TIME TO ALTERNIA TIME FOR YOU, BUT THE POINT IS I’M ABOUT TO CRASH HARD INTO A PUDDLE OF MY OWN SLEEP DROOL.
GA: I Apologize I Did Not Realize That I Would Be Waking You Up
GA: I Have Told You The Gist Of What I Intended To Share And I Can Wait To Flesh Out The Details Until After I Arrive
CG: THANKS. SORRY.
GA: No Trouble At All
GA: Sleep Well Karkat

grimAuxiliatrix [GA] ceased trolling carcinoGeneticist [CG]

> Terezi: Land already
Your life sure has gotten weird. Why, just a few short perigees ago you were a fugitive from the law—still a fugitive from the law—respectable young Legisclacerator-in-training by the name of Filani Trunak and now here you are, back to being Terezi Pyrope and getting along with a bunch of wild and crazy Gamblignants better than Vriska “I am the gr8est pir8, it’s me” Serket herself! (You have a hunch that last bit has less to do with your mad, rad pirate tendencies and a lot more to do with the fact that Vriska’s “Gamblignants” turned out to be little more than a band of aggressive political activists for a cause that happens to hit so close to home for you it might as well be nestled into your recuperacoon. Regardless, Vriska’s got about eighty-eight bees in her bonnet over your supposed “pir8 cred” and you find that to be amusing as hell.) Now, you are about to land on an alien planet in order to meet up with two people you thought you were never going to see again as part of an elaborate plot to execute the biggest act of treason in Alternian history—or at least, you would be if a certain Heiress would get her fishy butt in gear!

You have already spent over an hour waiting at the shuttle dock with no sign of Feferi. You are now on your way to her respite block because you are beginning to believe that she is either a) dead, or b) still packing her things for the trip. Either way, it’s pretty clear that she is going to need some serious help if the two of you are ever going to get out of here.

When you reach her block, you give the door five nice, firm drubs with your cane in order to convey your attitude of geez, what’s the holdup? You had been fully expecting to get salted raspberry-scented Feferi, so you are surprised when the door opens and you are greeted with sour blueberry Vriska instead.

“What are you doing here?” you ask, allowing the corners of your lips to drift into the faintest shadow of a frown.

She shrugs. “Helping little miss Empress-to-be pack.” You must be doing a really crappy job of hiding your feelings of total incredulity because she rolls her eyes so hard you can practically hear them scraping in her sockets before she says, “What? I can do nice things sometimes.”

You are about to respond with a heartfelt “Well OK then” but before you can say a word, Feferi’s voice comes to you from somewhere deep inside the bowels of her block: “Oh, is that Terezi? Hi, Terezi! Come on in!”

Feferi’s block is pretty much a war zone. You have no idea whether this is a product of preparing to travel to an alien planet or whether she actually is this messy all the time, but you are having serious trouble finding space to plant your feet around all the clothes, shoes, goggles, and hundreds and hundreds of tiny glass globes housing cuttlefish. Feferi emerges from a particularly crowded corner with an armful of luggage and you have to give her some serious props for somehow managing to execute the maneuver without planting her foot in one of the cuttlefish prison bubbles. She says, “Sorry, Terezi, am I running reely late?”

You shrug. “Only about an hour and…eh….fifteen minutes now?”

“Oh my glub!” she exclaims. “I didn’t realize I was that far behind!”

“Do you need some more help?”

She carefully slides a cuttlefish bowl and three sets of goggles aside to clear a space on the floor for her luggage before replying, “No; I’m almost done now thanks to Fishka. It should only take me a
couple more minnows to finfish if you two want to relax and glub together.” Then she deposits her luggage on the ground and hurries over to a corner piled with silky fabric in varying shades of yummy cotton candy pastels.

“There, you see?” says Vriska. “Told you I could be nice.”

You swallow back your default response of “No; I can’t see anything” because you recognize that she actually is trying to do something decent and you are pretty sure that bringing up old wounds—even in a joking context—would be a fantastic way to make a nice situation super awkward. Instead you say, “Yeah, I got it.”

“Good.” She pauses for a beat, then: “So are you ready for everything to go down?”

You shrug. “Ask me in a perigee.”

“Psh. It’ll be over in a perigee.”

“Exactly.”

“Oh. Well I don’t see what you’re so worried about. I mean, all you have to do is hang out on some tropical island with Feferi and Kanaya for a few days and talk logistics. Frankly, I feel sorry for you because that sounds like a real snooze fest!

She pauses to let out an exaggerated yawn before going on with: “Now if you want exciting, me, Nepeta, and sweaty-ass Zahhak are the ones who are going to be in it when the Condesce gets here, right where the action is, ordering the troops around face-to-face and shooting that bitch down!” Her voice adopts a charged quality as she says, “I’ll bet you a million caegers my ship is the one that gets her.”

Now it’s your turn to roll your eyes at her. “You don’t even have a million caegers.”

“Oh, I will once this is all over and everyone knows who the real hero is! Just you wait.”

Something about the way she says this—full of earnest bravado and dripping with a gallon of dramatic flair—is so ridiculous and so Vriska that you can’t help but laugh. It starts as a peal of giggles bubbling up in the back of your throat and the next thing you know you are letting out a full-on string of cackling.

“What?” she scowls. “Why are you laughing? I’m being serious here!”

You shake your head and, still laughing, say, “You are such a dork and I love it.”

Her scowl deepens and she says “oh, fuck you” but the half-swallowed laughter behind the words sucks away all the bite that might have come with them and it isn’t long before she is laughing along with you.

The two of you keep laughing for just a little longer than such a silly exchange deserves and you realize that it’s been a long time since you laughed together like this—too long, really. You had forgotten how nice it was back when you were five sweeps old, before shit was complicated with marked ships that got your moiail helmsed and FLARPing fiascos that ended with crazy double reacharound revenge cycles. You find yourself hoping that someday she’ll sincerely apologize for all that shit even though you’re pretty sure she won’t. You also find yourself hoping that when—if—that day comes you’ll have it in you to say you forgive her and mean it.

By the time your guffawing is finally starting to die down, you see Feferi approaching you with an
armload of luggage. She clears her throat to say, “Sorry to glub up your fun, gills, but I think I’m ready to go now.”

Vriska takes one look at her and, gesturing to the huge double trident strapped to her back, says, “Oh my god, don’t tell me you’re taking that huge-ass thing with you.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Have you even seen how tiny the shuttles are? It’s never going to fit through the door.”

“Shore it will! Beachsides, you never know…I might need it!”

“For what?” Vriska exclaims. “Fighting the Condesce? Because if that’s the case I’ve got news for you, Peixes: it’s never going to come to that.”

Feferi lets out a huff. “How do you know that?”

“Because me and all the rest of your army are going to be vaporizing her ass before she even knows what hit her, that’s why!”

“I am NOT dropping anchor on an alien planet in the middle of a revolution conchpletely unarmed.” Feferi pauses and you catch the faintest whiff of mischief gland fluid before she adds, “I bet you just want me to leave it here so you can take it.”

Vriska lets out an indignant “What?” before composing herself enough to demand, “Why the hell do you think I would do that? I mean, what would I even do with it?”

“Whale, it is solid gold…for all I know you might try to sell it and get a head start on that million caeger bet you made with Terezi just a second ago.”

“I’ll have you know I won’t be needing to do that because I plan on winning that bet!”

“Ah,” says Feferi. “So you were planning on selling it when you lost!”

You snort at that, trying not to laugh because you have no idea what has gotten into Feferi today but this is pretty much the first time you’ve ever seen anybody other than yourself intentionally pushing Vriska’s buttons and it is truly a sight to behold. Vriska shoots you a poisonous glare, rife with the reek of aggravation sponge secretion before adding, “Whatever, Peixes. Just don’t come crying to me when you realize that you can’t cram that stupid piece of tin into the tiny little shuttle.”

The “tiny little shuttle” turns out to be about the size of two big respite blocks—plenty large enough to accommodate all of your luggage including Feferi’s trident and still leave you with plenty of leg room. Once you are settled in, one of Vriska’s pirates—a tall lady named Volara—boards the shuttle. You grin as you realize that she is going to be your pilot because the colorful baubles she likes to braid into her hair always give you plenty of interesting color combinations to feast your nose on. (Tonight is no exception—she’s got about fifty jeweled rings in there and it pretty much smells like she’s walking around with a big bowl of sugary gumdrops glued to the top of her head.)

Volara closes the hatch behind her with a hiss of hydraulics. Then she turns to you and Feferi and says, “Ready to get this show on the road?”

You and Feferi give Volara an affirmative response (or, to be more accurate, Feferi gives her a very enthusiastic “YES!” while you give her a nod and devote the majority of your energy toward enjoying the collage of cherry-grape-lime-lemon-coconut candy emanating from her general direction). Volara heads for a chair situated in the center of the room. When she gets there, she unties
a flap on her flight suit to expose her back and you catch a whiff of the weird metal-on-flesh smell of
the ports that track down the length of her vertebral stack. Then she is sitting down and you are
letting out a breath you hadn’t even realized you had been holding when the back of the chair damps
the scent of the ports, hiding them from your perceptual field.

There is a quiet whirring sound as the biowires emerge from the chair, then a series of clicks that
sound like a robot’s posture pole crackling as the wires find the ports and snap home. A few seconds
later, Volara says, “All right, kids. Buckle up because we’re out of here.”

You smell a fuzz of psionics—fizzy banana-yellow soda pouring into the wires—and then the
engines are firing. The shuttle pulls away from the ship so gently you have no idea why Volara even
wasted her breath warning you and Feferi to “buckle up.” Then you begin to coast through the
ragtag labyrinth of ships that comprise your armada. You pass by mostly tiny ships, barely big
eough to accommodate a crew of twenty, but there are a decent number of mid-sized cruisers, and
even a few hulking destroyers that could hold over a thousand if they were filled to capacity.
Eventually, you reach an old ship that really wouldn’t stand out from any of the others if not for the
symbol—Karkat’s symbol—crudely painted on the hull in lovely cherry red to mark it as the Cultist’s
flag ship.

As Volara guides the shuttle toward the flag ship’s docking bay, Feferi clears her throat and says,
“Hey, Volara? Can I ask you something?”

“Mmm?” says Volara. “What is it?”

“When your people take Sollux out of his ship, are they going to give him ports like the ones you
have?”

Volara raises her eyebrows. “That’ll be up to him.”

“Do they hurt?”

“Plugging in is a bit of a jolt, I guess. But other than that? Nah.” Feferi looks as though she wants to
keep asking questions but Volara follows this remark with, “Whoop, we’re all docked up. Let’s get
your friend on here.”

The shuttle hatch opens and then Kanaya Maryam is walking onboard. You are about to offer up
your greetings in the form of a grinning “What’s up, Miss Minty-Fresh?” but then you notice that she
is hauling a cart with a seriously obscene stack of trunks, boxes, and crates on it behind her and you
end up sputtering, “Whoa—is that all your luggage?”

She shakes her head. “No. The Cultists asked me if I would be willing to deliver a few gifts to
Karkat.”

“A few gifts?” Feferi repeats.

Kanaya looks at the pile of packages behind her as though seeing it for the first time before saying, “I
did not anticipate that the Cultists would have such a faulty understanding of the word ‘few.’” She
turns her attention to Volara, says, “I hope it won’t be too much trouble to bring a little more cargo
than originally planned.”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Volara replies. “Just put it over with the other luggage.”

Kanaya drags the laden cart across the room and deposits it in the corner in which you and Feferi had
stashed your things. (The hulking heap of goods is enough to dwarf both Feferi’s pile of luggage as
well as your own at least three times over. You have a feeling that Karkat’s reaction to this turn of
events is going to be priceless.) Then she takes a seat next to Feferi while Volara gets you headed for Earth.

As it turns out, the unfortunate consequence of centering a coup d’état around a planet that happens to be smack dab in the middle of being invaded by the état that you are trying to coup is that you need to keep your army way the hell away from everything lest any surveillance vessels happen to stumble into you and sound the alarm. The trip therefore ends up being a long one, clocking in at just under seven hours.

With Volara present, most of the conversation ends up looping around to center on the Free Power movement—not that that bothers you any. As far as you are concerned, a freewheeling band of self-modified detachable helmsmen trying to free commissioned helmsmen by beating the shit out of small chunks of the Imperial fleet is plenty interesting. Still, sitting for seven hours is long enough to bring on some serious leg and butt cramps, so it a relief when the shuttle finally passes through the layers of whipped cream clouds and touches down on Earth.

Your first impression of Earth is that it is very warm. The air is so thick it seems to stick in your throat and after seven hours of mostly featureless shuttle interior, the scents that come to you are so vivid they are like a serious punch in the nose. You smell dusty sand over rich earth, lush vegetation, and…barkbeast lusus? Yeah, you’re pretty sure there’s a barkbest lusus running around because you can hear it howling at the shuttle. Weird.

Karkat is shouting your name. You hear him approaching in true Karkat fashion—big, galumphing steps that would probably wake the dead and the next thing you know he’s throwing his arms around you, lifting you up off the ground, swinging you around…and then he’s tripping over his own feet and bringing you both crashing down to the ground in tangle of limbs.

You lie there for a moment to get your bearings, just long enough for you to realize that yeah, there are now eight other people including four alien kids you have never met before staring at the two of you. You spit out a mouthful of sand and cough, “Good to see you, too, doofus.”

“Fuck,” he grunts. He clambers to his feet, offers you a hand, and adds, “Clusterfuck of embarrassing bullshit was not where I was going with that. Sorry.”

You get to your feet, pick up your cane, dust it off. “It’s fine.”

“I’ll…” He trails off and does a wonky little dance that makes you think that maybe he needs to use the load gaper before saying, “I’ll just go and say hi to the others then.”

You are about to reiterate that it’s fine, seriously, quit being such a dummy about it but he’s already making his way toward Kanaya. You kind of wish he would come back so you can give him a proper hello, but you aren’t standing alone for more than a couple of seconds before Aradia appears beside you (and oh, you feel kind of bad that you don’t recognize her right away. The only thing that clues you in to the fact that she is a troll and prevents you from making an ass of yourself is that she has the same chemical coffee smell clinging to her as Karkat.) She smiles at you and says, “Since Karkat seems to be a bit…preoccupied…at the moment, I’ll go ahead and introduce you to the human kids now.”

She leads you over to a group of four aliens, points to a goofy-looking guy wearing glasses and says, “This is John.”

“Jan?” you repeat. Then you frown because you are pretty sure you aren’t saying it right but you are having a hell of a time forcing your speak strings to cough up the funny alien sounds so you decide that for all intents and purposes “Jan” as close as you are going to get for now. For some reason all of
the human kids except John seem to find this amusing.

Aradia alternately points to a smiling girl with glasses ("Jade"), a guy wearing sunglasses that make him look like he thinks he’s some kind of coolkid (“Dave”), and a girl who has an air about her that would make you think she was some kind of stuck-up royal blood if she was a troll ("Rose"). You dutifully repeat their names, pointing at each of them in turn (“Jed, Dav, Ruhz”). Then Aradia is talking to them in a language that is all funny mouth and tongue sounds (gosh, human language sure is weird!) and they are all trying to say your name. The flat mouth sounds don’t really lend themselves to pronouncing Alternian names correctly but they all manage to produce something that sounds close enough to register as your name so you give them the universal thumbs up to let them know that they got it right.

From back over by the shuttle, you hear a particularly earsplitting shriek from Karkat that leads you to believe that a) he is being slowly torn apart by a horde of angry ripper wasps, or b) Kanaya just explained who all the packages are for. You turn your attention over toward them and yep, he is standing in front of the loaded cart with his mouth gopping open and an attitude of consternation that is so intense you can smell it wafting off of him from all the way across the beach.

Aradia touches your shoulder, bringing you back to the conversation at hand. "Do you want to see Sollux? Now would probably be the best time.”

You nod so she leads you across the beach, away from the human kids and towards a big ship with grape jelly purple accents—Sollux’s ship, you think. The front hatch is open and if the mess of sand and dirt on the floor just inside the door is any indication, you’d say that it probably hasn’t been closed since Sollux and Eridan arrived. Eridan. You purse your lips as you remember that he’s here somewhere, too. You wonder whether you should take his absence on the beach as a bad sign. Then you decide that bad sign or not, you are perfectly happy to delay dealing with him for as long as possible and you imagine that Kanaya and Feferi feel the same.

It occurs to you as Aradia leads you through the ship to remember the relationship she and Sollux used to have. You still remember how badly it had fucked him up to lose her, how he’d just straight-up disappeared from Trollian for so long—three perigees—that Karkat had convinced you to go with him to Sollux’s hivestem and make sure he was still alive. Of course he was, but the state he was in suggested that he’d spent the last three perigees treating himself as though he wasn’t. It was an unspoken rule that none of you discussed what had happened, not even after you became moirails sweeps later because doing so was a surefire way to send him spiraling down into a miserable funk.

You are pretty sure that they would still be moirails if things had happened just a little differently, and you don’t doubt that Aradia knows it, too. You try not to think too far beyond that because the farther you take it, the more awkward your current situation begins to feel. It's still a relief when Aradia stops outside the helmsblock and says, “I’ll give you two some time alone.”

Even though you already know what to expect, it doesn’t make it any easier to smell all those too-sweet bubblegum pink biowires wrapped around your scrawny-butt moirail. You take a minute to remind yourself that this is only temporary, that Volara and the other pirates are going to be getting him out of here in just a few more days. Then Sollux is saying, hey TZ.

You don’t say anything. Instead you walk across the room until you’re standing right in front of him, wrap your arms around him, and hug him hard enough to make him wheeze.

“That’s for saving me back on the space station,” you say. You follow this up by bringing a hand up through the wires and giving him a good, hard smack on the back of the head. “And that’s for getting yourself caught, you big jerk. Seriously, I will freaking kill you if you ever pull a stunt like that again. Got it?”
yeah, he says. ii think ii learned my le22on. no more beiing a hero for me.

“Good. I’m holding you to that.”

2o FF2 army ii2 ready two go then?

You nod. “Ready as a super mismatched band of rebels and malcontents will ever be. What’s the latest on the Condesce?”

2till headed for u2. the la2t report2 ii 2aw put her arriviing here iin fiive more day2. plenty of tiime for u2 to polii2h up our plan of attack.

“And she’s still coming by herself?”

2he 2till thiink2 that KK ii2 the only thiing 2he ha2 two worry about. You must be doing a bad job of hiding the frown that is pulling at the edges of your mouth because he says, what? that wa2 what we wanted, right?

“Yeah,” you mumble. “It’s just…doesn’t this all seem to be just a little too easy?”

you know, normally ii would probably be a piiece of 2hiit and 2ay ye2. But TZ, ii have been bu2tiing my a22 for the la2t periigee buiildiing KK up into a hiigh profile crimiinal and moniitoriing all the offiiciial report2 two make 2ure that the fleet 2wallow2 that bull2hiit. a2 far a2 ii can 2ee, everyone—even the Conde2ce—ha2 fallen for iit hook, liine, and 2iinker. He pauses there, makes a face, mutters, aw 2hiit. ii wa2 2aviing the hook, liine, and 2iinker biit for FF. do me a favor and dont 2poiil iit for me?

“Sure, whatever you say,” you laugh, and with that the apprehensive knots in your digestive sac finally begin to loosen a bit. Sollux is the one with all the tingly senses for the imminently doomed, you think. If he thinks everything is going to be OK, then everything is probably going to be OK. You tell yourself this over and over as your conversation turns away from revolution talk and begins to settle on all the mundane details of life that you have experienced since your last Trollian chat. Eventually, you almost start to believe it.

> Karkat: Fail hard at interspecies diplomacy
You are having one hell of a morning, and by “one hell of a morning” you mean that it has been a rollercoaster ride from start to finish with so many highs and lows you are on the verge of developing a case of really fucking serious mood whiplash. After meeting up with three more of your long-lost friends (fucking awesome thing) and making a total ass out of both yourself and the girl you would have really preferred to have impressed (fucking embarrassing as hell thing), you spent three hours going through about a hundred chests packed with tribute from a bunch of straight-up flying squeakbest crazy religious fanatics who are apparently convinced that you are the second coming of Troll Jesus (how do you even begin to deal with this fucking thing?) And yet in spite of all that, the shit that you are bearing witness to now, at this very ass-biting moment, is the biggest behemoth’s leaving that you have been subjected to yet.

You are sitting in the shade of the vegetation at the far point of the beach with eight other people, each representing their own unique and exciting flavor of douchebaggery. They are situated in a circle around you, as though they have just finished performing some obscene ritual to combine their powers of douchiness and summon forth their great and powerful Douchelord. Sadly, rather than enjoying all the respect and reverence that an actual celestial Lord of Douche would surely demand, you are instead steeling yourself for to act as the most obscene sort of interspecies ashen concubine in all of Alternian history.

“Karcrab,” says Feferi. “Tell the humans that we are very excited to be here. As the soon-to-be Empress of Alternia, I want to perchfinally thank them for letting us use their home planet as our bass of command and also apologize in advance for any irreparabubble damages we might inflict on their planet while we are here.”

You raise your eyebrows because wow, is she even serious right now? “OK yeah, I’m not saying that.”

She knots her eyebrows in a show of genuine confusion and fuck, she really was being serious. “Huh? Why not?”

Rolling your eyes, you reply, “Thanks for letting us crash on your planet, alien kids I met like two hours ago. Sorry we’re going to fuck it up.”

“That’s not what I said!” she huffs.

“Yes, those are not the precise words that you just said; however, I think that Karkat might have a point here,” says Kanaya. “It would be better to leave that last part unsaid for now.”

“Whale I just wanted to let them know that I was thinking of all of the possible repercussions of our making waves here! What’s wrong with showing them a little conchsideration?”

Dave clears his throat from somewhere behind you. “Yo, Karkat,” he says. “Did you already forget your job? Share with the rest of the class already.”

You look over your shoulder and snap, “Strider, I am getting there so go fondle your weird human genitals or whatever you need to do to keep your filthy bleat hole shut!” Then you realize that fuck, you just said all of that in Alternian, didn’t you? Judging from the confused looks on all four of the humans’ faces, you are going to go ahead and say that yep, you totally did. You amend this by waving your hands in their general direction and saying—in English—“Hold your shit, I’m getting there.”
You turn back to Feferi in order to offer up suggestions for making her statement not suck so hard, but then John decides to be an asshole and whisper, “Hey, Aradia, can you tell us what she said?” You therefore turn right the fuck back around again, point to Aradia, and snarl—in Alternian—“Don’t you fucking dare!”

Things are already going so well that Terezi takes that as her cue to start cackling like a deranged hyena. Over her laughing, you hear John mutter, “Geez, I guess that’s a no.” You flip him the bird because this is already on its way to becoming the least successful peace conference in the history of anything, so why not give it the nudge it needs to bring it home?

Eventually, Feferi decides to listen to you and Kanaya and lets you translate her message sans the whole “Sorry we’re about to fuck up your world” bit. (You also do it sans the fish puns because she’s never going to know the difference anyway so fuck that shit.)

The humans all exchange looks between themselves to suggest that they have no clue how to respond to the really simple sentiments of “Nice to meet you, thanks for letting us crash here for a few days.” You wonder how the hell it can be that difficult to come up with an acceptable response when they had like five minutes to discuss it among themselves while you were busy arguing with Feferi, were they just sitting there with their thumbs up their asses or what? Finally, Rose proves once again that she is the least incompetent of the four of them by saying, “We are pleased to meet you and are likewise excited to act as representatives of the human race.”

You relay the message back to Feferi. She smiles because that was one whole super-successful exchange, isn’t interspecies diplomacy fun? Then she says, “Aradia and Karkat tell me you have some concerns about what is going to happen after we finish our fishion here.”

She nods to you and you pass on the message like a dutiful little delivery drone. Again, Rose is the one to respond: “Yes. We understand that your species is in the process of invading our planet. In the event that you successfully complete your coup, what are your plans with regards to that?”

Feferi sighs when you tell her what Lalonde said. “I guess we would have to reel that back in.”

“Yes, but you had better let them know that it might take a while to get the spherical merriment object rolling on that front,” says Kanaya.

“Yeah,” Terezi chimes in. “I mean it’s not like we’ve ever gone into an invasion with an exit strategy before. It’s going to take some serious doing to get the rest of the Empire to buy into something like that.”

Kanaya looks like she is about to start enumerating a very well thought-out list of all the ways you can go about doing that and even though you know that cutting her off is a dick move, you do it anyway because the point of this exercise is Definitely Not That. “Well this sure is stimulating as all fuck to listen to but can we decide on what the hell I am going to tell the alien kids now? I swear to god Strider is starting to look at me cross-eyed over there.”

Kanaya puckers her brows together. “How can you tell behind those ocular shielding devices?”

You say “I just can, OK?” at precisely the same moment Terezi whispers, “He’s not, I can smell it.”

“Just tell them that we will stop the invasion but that we might need to wait a while before we start reeling in all our military scrods so we can eel out the new political tide,” says Feferi.

You do. John nods and says, “That sounds reasonable, I guess.”

That sounds like a perfectly acceptable response to you, but Feferi puckers her brow when you
translate it back to her. You are about to demand why she is looking at you like you just announced that you like to violate yourself with live cuttlefish in crowded public spaces when she says, “Crabsnack, why aren’t they laughing at any of my fish puns? Are you not translating them?”

“What?” you splutter. “Of course I am!”

Aradia, being the ever-so-helpful example of trollkind that she is, pipes up to say, “Actually, no he’s not.”

“Karkat!” Feferi exclaims.

“Oh my god, I’m getting all the important shit!”

“Fish puns are important,” Feferi grumbles, flaring her fins in a show of totally ineffectual irritation because—guess what—that’s never going to happen!

From behind you, John says, “Geez, did I say something wrong? I wasn’t trying to piss her off!”

“No, John, you didn’t say anything wrong,” says Aradia. “She’s just mad at Karkat because he isn’t being a very accurate translator.”

You turn around to face John and Aradia. “Yes I am being accurate! Who the fuck cares that I’m not translating a bunch of stupid fish puns?”

Dave gestures toward Feferi. “Apparently she does.”

“OK, you know what? You want shitty fish puns? Fine! Here we go!” You then proceed to repeat Feferi’s assurances that the Earth invasion is no longer a thing, preserving each nautically-themed pun with all the loving care of a lusus tucking his troll in to the slime for the day. You give each pun the attention it truly deserves, devoting time to read it an unintelligible bedtime story, check its diaper nub, and prepare a warm liquefied meal for it before releasing it from your squawk blister. When you are finished, all four humans are looking at you like you proudly announced that you have just shit your pants and invited them to smell it.

“Is…” Jade trails off, presumably to formulate some diplomatic way of expressing how she feels about being buried in a metric fuckton of total nonsense (helpful hint: there is no diplomatic way of doing this). Finally, she says, “Is it funnier in Alternian?”

“No!” you snap.

There is an awkward pause as your cry of utter torment echoes out across the beach and dies a shameful death somewhere out over the warm ocean waves (which, you note with a sense of deep irony is the very thing that is causing your untold misery and grief. Holy shit, Strider must not be paying attention to anything because if he was he would be going apeshit over this opportunity to go through his whole irony schtick.) Then Aradia clears her throat and says—in English—“If there are trolls who are interested in staying here on Earth rather than leaving once all of this blows over, would that be an option for them?”

“Who cares?” you snort. She gives you tight-lipped smile that still somehow manages to convey an impressive amount of wow, fuck you so you quickly add, “What? Don’t tell me you’re actually thinking about staying here.”

She shrugs. “What are you going to do once this is all over, Karkat?”

“I…” you suddenly realize that you have absolutely no idea how to answer that question because
past you never had the foresight to address it. You would go back to the fleet, of course. Feferi would pull some strings so you could be a Threshecutioner and you would be great, you would have everything you ever wanted...except you’d still never really look like a troll again and—oh yeah—you’d never see John again or Rose or Dave or Jade, for that matter....

Aradia is gracious enough to save you from having to pony up a response to her super awkward question by turning her attention back to the humans and saying, “Anyways, what do you guys think?”

“There must have been some reason you decided to invade Earth in the first place,” Jade replies. “Maybe we could make some kind of an alliance? That would probably make it easier for trolls to stay here if they wanted to. Actually, it would probably make it so some of you had to stay here for a while, at least!”

Something pokes your back—Terezi’s cane prodding you right between the shoulder blades like some gnarled corpse finger yet far more annoying. “Karkat, what is going on? What are we missing here?”

“Fuck,” you mutter. “Sorry. Aradia asked them if any trolls might get to stay here after everything was over and Jade just suggested making some kind of troll-human alliance thing.”

“An alliance?” Feferi repeats. “Hmmm, I pike the sound of that! It would take a lot of hard work to get enough wind in the sails for it to work, though.”

“Yes, and it would almost certainly require some degree of cultural exchange,” Kanaya adds and wow, she sure is looking at something with enough focused intensity to make you really fucking uncomfortable. You follow her gaze but the only thing in her direct line of sight is Rose and—fuck, you have a feeling that you know exactly where this is going. Your suspicions are confirmed when she says, “We already have several trolls who are well-versed in human customs and culture; however I seriously doubt that the reverse is true. Karkat, would you please tell our human friends that in the event of an alliance we would need humans willing to become experts in Alternian culture?”

You roll your eyes because goddamn it, Kanaya, I am not a human/troll sloppy makeouts facilitator. Then you decide that maybe you are reading way too much into this. Potential sloppy makeouts aside, it’s still a valid point.

Of course Rose is the one to respond when you dutifully pass on this message. “Ah, and I suppose certain trolls would be particularly up to the task of facilitating that process?”

Kanaya smiles just a little wider when you translate this response (oh great, looks like you weren’t reading too much into this after all). She says, “Tell her that certain trolls would also be particularly up to the task of becoming specialists in human culture as well.”

You almost decide not to translate Kanaya’s words because holy nook-biting ass burgers this is getting ridiculous but Rose is already giving you an expectant look, so you go ahead and relay the information like the dirty interspecies intermediary that you are.

Now Rose is smiling as she says, “Tell her that certain humans would be up for that as well.”

You do, but this time you add, “And while you’re at it, here.” You grab both of Kanaya’s hands and even though she’s a shitton taller than you, she’s too surprised not to go along with what you are doing as you haul her to her feet, herd her across the circle, and deposit her on the sand next to Rose.
“There,” you say. “Go wild! Enjoy your multicultural whatever because I am officially resigning my position as mildly nauseated go-between.”

You step through the gap in the circle that you created by relocating Kanaya and you keep walking because between the fish pun fiasco, your abrupt realization that guess what, fuckstick, life is going to keep happening once this is all over, and being forced to act as the filling in a two-way interspecies flirt sandwich, your patience for this shitmongering is at an all-time low. Behind you, Feferi shouts, “Karkat, where are you going?”

“Nope, fuck this,” you reply. “Karkat is broken now. Try using Aradia instead.”

“But—“

“Just let him go,” says Aradia.

“OK, fin,” Feferi sighs. “But Karkat, don’t forget about the strategy planning memo in an hour!”

You wave to indicate that yes, you heard her and yes, you will be there. Then you set off toward the ship at the other end of the beach. It takes you a few minutes to get there and by the time you are coming up on the ship you still aren’t sure whether you feel up to going onboard and fucking around with Sollux for a while or whether you just want to go for a walk and enjoy the shade of the trees behind the ship by yourself. As it turns out, the whole thing ends up being a moot point because Eridan emerges from the ship just as you arrive at the boarding ramp.

“Kar!” he exclaims. “Hi.”

“Hi.” You notice then that he kind of looks like hell—wild-eyed and pale with his cape on crooked—so you add, “What the hell happened to you?”

“Can we talk?”

You shrug. “Sure. What’s up?”

He looks down the beach toward the Council of Barf Chewers taking place at the other end of the beach and says, “Walk with me.”

He leads you around the ship, onto one of the meandering paths that lead through the jungle. You walk for a while without saying anything. When you are far enough away from the beach you can’t hear the waves anymore (and presumably, can’t be heard by any other sentient being on this tiny ass pimple of an island), you say, “OK, what did you want to talk about?”

“I guess I just…wanted some advice?”

You frown because this hesitant, nervous bullshit is really fucking bizarre coming from Eridan of all people. No; Eridan’s usual operating protocol would be to come to you and straight up demand that you listen to him with the promise of some juicy quadrant gossip to keep you extra-interested. What the hell is going on?

“OK. What is it?”

“I’ve just been feeling really fucked up since Fef got here,” he sighs. “Like, I want to talk to her because I miss her but I know she’s still pissed at me so what’s even the point? She’ll just ignore me like she always does now.”

You consider for a second. Sollux has told you bits and pieces about what went down after you last saw them on the space station (and on a side note you are still kicking yourself for not doing more to keep them safe. What you could have done you have no idea but there had to have been something.
You could have talked to Migdal; maybe made him understand that they had been there because of you, that if somebody needed to take the heat for this, it was you. You still don’t know the full story about what happened between Eridan and Feferi in that whole clusterfuck of awful, but you’ve heard enough to know that it was—understatement of the sweep—bad. Finally, you say, “Did you ever say you were sorry?”

“What do you take me for, some kind of moron?” he replies. “Of course I did!”

“Did you ever mean it?”

That seems to take the piss right out of his sails. “Not at first,” he sighs. “But now? Yeah, I guess I wish I’d done a few things differently.”

“OK. Did you ever actually admit you shit the bed to her, though?”

“Well no, I guess not…but Kar, I really didn’t mean for everything to end up the way they did! I thought I was being a good moirail—maybe even matesprit material, you know?”

You throw your hands out, palms up as though to say wow, are you seriously that dense, you pan-numbed dumbass, I mean really, give me something to work with here.

“Well look at that, I must be a fucking genius because I’m pretty sure I’ve found the subterranean growth nodule of your problem for you.”

He gives you a wounded look because apparently he really is that dense after all. He cements his place as King of all Nookbags by saying, “Huh?”

Even though you are still in kind of a shit mood after the whole peace conference circle jerk, you slow down, back up, and explain like the charitable and magnanimous example of trollkind you are because the only place this asshole is going if left to his own devices is nowhere fast. “You literally just finished telling me that you ‘wish you did a few things differently.’ In other words, you fucked up.”

“But I—“

You hold up a hand and he is smart enough to shut up so maybe there is hope for him yet. “No; there are no ‘buts’ except the thing surrounding your waste chute. You fucked up so stop making excuses, put on your grown-up striped hipster pants and own it.”

He stares at the ground for a long time even though you both know goddamn well that you’re right. Then he says, “She still won’t forgive me. Hell, I wouldn’t forgive me.”

“Then she doesn’t forgive you,” you groan. Quickly, before he can get any farther down the road on his private self-pity jerkoff session, you change the topic with, “Tell me about the trip here.”

“The trip here?” He laughs and it’s a cold, bitter sound. “The trip here fucking sucked.”

You mentally slap the shit out of yourself for bringing up that topic because instead of getting this conversation turned off the road to Eridan Self-Pity Wanksville, you’ve apparently managed to merge onto the freeway to take you there even faster. Way to go, past you, what were you even thinking?

Eridan is still talking. “Think about all the shit a helmsman controls on a ship,” he says. “I mean, there’s the engines, yeah, but then there’s all the really mundane shit like climate control, electricity, gravity modulation… Now think about how easy it would be for a really fucking pissed off helmsman to use all of that shit to screw with someone they don’t like.”
You don’t say anything to that, but it’s not hard to imagine a veritable assload of unbridled shit that could go wrong just by considering the door locks alone (trap someone in their block, lock them out of the meal block, lock them out of the latrines….) Part of you wants to think that Sollux wouldn’t pull that kind of shit, but part of you also knows that Sollux is at least as big an asshole as you are and you honestly can’t say that you wouldn’t do the same if you were in his position.

“You want to know the best part?” he asks, even though it’s clear that he has no intention of waiting for you to answer. “I couldn’t even contact anybody unless he let me. I couldn’t send a distress signal or talk to any of our friends or do anything to make it stop. It was a nonstop shitfest for almost half a fucking sweep.”

“I’m really sorry to hear that,” you say because even if he fucked up as badly as you suspect he did, you don’t particularly savor the idea that he spent the better part of a human year being tormented.

He looks up from the ground, looks at you, smiles. “Thanks, Kar. That means a lot. You’re a good friend—pretty much the only friend I have left at this point, really.” Then his smile fades and he’s looking at the ground, at the tree behind you, at the jungle canopy above—pretty much anywhere except your face as he says, “That’s why I want you to know that I really, really wish I didn’t have to do this.”

Your lips are already halfway to forming the words “Do what?” when he lunges for you. You raise your arms to fight back, but the assault is so sudden, so fucking unexpected after the pseudo-pale exchange that you just had that he has no trouble getting you into a headlock and forcing you off the trail, through the underbrush, and out onto a strip of beach that you’ve never seen before. You struggle against him, scratching at his arm, but goddamn it, he has seadweller strength on his side and even if he didn’t, your fucking useless human fingernails aren’t sharp enough to hurt him much. Through your totally ineffectual flailing, you hear him shout, “Here’s the Renegade! I’ve got him!”

There are hands on you, arms with rock-hard muscles circling around you, pinning your own arms to your sides as they pull you away from Eridan. You see one, two, three huge adult trolls in addition to the bruiser holding you, all of them holding gleaming military-grade sickles and goggling at you like you’re the star attraction in your own personal freak show and oh fuck, oh fuck, you know what is happening, the last pieces of the filthy murder-betrayal puzzle clicked into place the second Eridan called you by your fucking stupid criminal title. Eridan—that backstabbing sack of used bulge wipes—is just standing there a few feet away, doing his best to pretend that you don’t exist. You scream at him, tell him he’s a double crossing piece of shit, tell him that you can’t believe he is doing this to you, tell him you fucking trusted him because you thought he was your friend until the Threshecutioner who has hold of you gives you a rib-cracking squeeze that knocks the wind out of you. Through your coughing, you hear the Threshecutioner snarl at you to “shut the fuck up.”

You want to keep screaming. Even though you know it’s useless, your friends must be all the way on the other side of the island from where you are now, you want to scream to warn them (or maybe you just want to scream to them for help like a spineless little shit weasel, who knows?) You can feel the scream rising up in you like a fucking rabid wolverine clawing at the back of your throat. As it turns out, the cold, sharp edge of a sickle against your throat turns out to be all the encouragement you need to stay quiet.

One of the Threshecutioners—the smallest one, although that isn’t saying much because the dude is still probably at least twice your size—says, “Wow, I heard they did some fucked up shit to people in this Earth invasion thing, but goddamn did they ever make him ugly!”

You know it’s a stupid cheap shot. You know he’s only trying to get a rise of you. It still pisses you off enough to make you hiss and bare your teeth at him. Of course, this just makes him and all the
other Threshecutioners laugh because that gesture only looks intimidating when you have fangs, dumb shit.

Another Threshecutioner—the lone lady of the bunch—steps forward and says, “All right, boys, let’s get this shit loaded and get the hell out of here.”

The guy holding you oh-so-considerately moves the blade away from your neck as he starts toward the stealth cruiser sitting at the end of the beach. You proceed have a full-blown freakout because you can’t let them get you in there, you are going to fucking die if you let them get you in there! You kick your legs against him, flail in his arms, smack your head against his chest…if you weren’t in crazy about-to-die freakout mode you would have to give yourself some serious credit because you actually make him stumble and almost drop you (though really, what good would that even do when you are totally unarmed and up against four deadly trained Threshecutioners and one two-timing bastard you thought was your friend?) Then you hear a voice—a familiar voice that makes your bloodpusher come to a screeching halt in your chest—say, “What the hell is this?”

You immediately stop struggling to look at the place where beach merges with trail. You hope to all fuck that you heard wrong, that maybe fate will be nice to you just once in your entire godforsaken shitstain of a life. Of course fate just decides to take a steaming piss in your eye and laugh about it because standing there at the edge of the beach is none other than John Motherfucking Egbert.

“What the hell is this?”

He locks eyes with you and for a minute you almost think he’s going to do something incredibly stupid like stay and fight. Then he turns and darts off down the trail with two of the Threshecutioners—shorty and the lady—tearing after him.

You sit there in the Threshecutioner’s arms, hoping that his asshole cronies will come back empty-handed. For a few shit-squirting, heart-pounding seconds, everything is dead silent. Then you hear a scream followed by a sharp smack, and then the sounds of somebody getting beat the hell up. You immediately resume your totally ineffective struggling because no, they are hurting John, you have to get over there and make them STOP HURTING JOHN!

The sounds of the beatdown come to an abrupt stop. A few seconds later, the Threshecutioners are back. The small guy is carrying John over his shoulder and John…oh, Jesus, John looks like hell. His glasses are gone, there’s blood all over his face, and you can see the gash from the blow that knocked him unconscious (god you hope he’s unconscious and not something worse) bleeding on the back of his head.

Something breaks in you when you see John dangling over the Threshecutioner’s arm like a lifeless hunk of meat. You don’t just go into full-on freakout mode. No, you go absolutely globes to the wall berserk. You kick the Threshecutioner holding you so hard it hurts you, smash your head into his face, spit on him, and even try to bite him with your useless-as-hell human teeth—which turn out to be not nearly as useless as you thought they would be because this time he does end up dropping you.

He dives to catch you again but you roll out of reach and kick sand in his face. Then you’re up and sprinting for Shorty, screaming bloody murder as you go because you are going to straight-up kill that son of a bitch for hurting John and—goddamn it, you forgot about the fourth Threshecutioner!

The guy tackles you into the sand hard. You try to buck him off of you, but he’s got you pinned with his knee planted in the small of your back and his hands driving into your shoulders. With your face smashed into the ground, you can’t see the other Threshecutioner coming but you definitely notice when he (she? Fuck, maybe it’s the lady) gets to your side because there is very suddenly a
very sharp sickle tip resting on the back of your very exposed neck.

Eridan’s voice comes to you as a shrill whine that is about three octaves higher than normal as he shouts, “Whoa, stop! Don’t kill him!”

“Why the fuck not?” demands the lady (and oh, hey, guess that means she’s the one who has the deadly weapon to your neck. Drop your pants and paint your globes, what a shocking development). “This little piece of scum just attacked a member of my squad.”

“Because…” Eridan trails off and you get the impression that he is digging for some excuse to keep you alive even though he just betrayed your ass and that makes no goddamn sense whatsoever. Finally, he says, “Because she wants him alive.”

For a few seconds, you think she is going to go ahead and kill you anyway. Then she growls under her breath and you no longer feel the sickle against your neck. She takes a few steps away from you before saying, “Fine. She wants him alive so bad, we won’t kill him. But she never said anything against us having a little fun.” Her voice morphs into something that makes your blood run cold and freezes the piss in your bladder as she says, “Boys? Go ahead and subdue the target.”

The next thing you know you are getting the shit kicked out of you by three Threshecutioners—or to be more precise, two of the Threshecutioners actively do the shit-kicking while one of them (you think it’s Shorty, but oops, it’s really hard to pick out super-important details like that while you are in the process of getting totally thrashed) holds you down. You don’t know how long it lasts because time is a heinous bitch that has a way of slowing down when bad shit happens. You do know that by the end of it your left eye is swollen shut, your mouth is full of blood and puke (fuck, when did you puke? You don’t remember doing that. You hope you at least managed to aim some of it into those bastard’s faces), and you hurt too much to speak, let do something extremely stupid like try fighting back again.

The last thing you remember is the feel of the warm, gritty sand getting into your shirt as they drag you toward their ship. Then, mercifully, you black out.

> Everybody: Join memo iidiot factory 2trategy talk
Everybody: Join memo iidiot factory 2trategy talk

twinArmageddons [TA] opened PRIVATE memo iidiot factory 2trategy talk
twinArmageddons [TA] invited apocalypseArisen [AA] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited adiosToreador [AT] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited carcinoGeneticist [CG] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited arsenicCatnip [AC] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited grimAuxiliatrix [GA] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited gallowsCalibrator [GC] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited arachnidsGrip [AG] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited centaursTesticle [CT] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited terminallyCapricious [TC] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited caligulasAquarium [CA] to memo
twinArmageddons [TA] invited cuttlefishCuller [CC] to memo

apocalypseArisen [AA] joined memo
grimAuxiliatrix [GA] joined memo
gallowsCalibrator [GC] joined memo

CC: )I –EV-ERYBODY!
AA: hello :)  
GC: LONG T1M3 NO SM3LL  
GC: (H3H3)
GA: I Would Offer My Greetings As Well However That Seems Silly When The Only People In The Memo At The Moment Are All Sitting Next To Each Other In The Same Room
TA: going two have two agree with KN on that one and 2ay THII2 II2 2TUPIID.
CC: Geez, SOM-EBUOY s)(ore is being a crabby mot)(erglubber today!
CC: (e’d better be careful.
CC: If ) (doesn’t stop being so adorabubble I mig)(t )ave to quiet )im down MYS)(-ELLF!
CC: 38D
CC: Oops. –Er…t)(at was supposed to be a winky face.
CC: Can everybody pretend t)(at was a winky face?
GA: I Am Going To Make This Face Now :/
GC: 3H 4T L34ST TH3Y 4R3 CUT3
TA: wow. ii have two 2ay ii feel2 2o good two have everybody privy two all the totally per2onal and intiiimate detail2 of my liife.
TA: not liike that ii2 kiind of really fucking embarrar2iiing or anythingi.
TA: (you can totally 2hut me up after the memo ii2 over.)
CC: (YOU GOT IT, MIST-ER!)

terminallyCapricious [TC] joined memo
adiosToreador [AT] joined memo

TC: hey, my conspiracy-talk brothers.
TC: WHAT IS ALL UP WITH YOUR CONSPIRACY-TALK SELVES?
AT: ,, 
TA: okay, now we can 2tart 2ayiing hello wiithout lookiing completely 2tupiid.
TA: hey GZ. hey TV.
AT: ,, 
AA: tavros are you okay
AT: ,,  
GC: =>?  
GC: OK4Y, WH4T TH3 H3CK 1S UP W1TH TH4T?  
TC: tavbro ain’t exactly at his righteous motherfucking best.  
TC: IN FACT I’D SAY HE’S GOT SOME WICKED INDISPOSITION ON AT THE MOMENT.  
GA: Are You In Need Of Medical Assistance  
AT: ,,nO,  
AT: i'M FINE,  
AT: jUST, rEALLY BUSY,  
AT: aND ALSO TIRED, aT THE MOMENT,,  
AA: are you sure you are alright  
AA: you are acting really strange!  
AT: nO, i AM FINE,  
AT: bETTER THAN FINE, aCTUALLY  
AT: bUT, i REALLY NEED TO GO NOW,  
AT: sORRY,  

adiosToreador [AT] left memo

TA: well nothing about that came acro22 a2 not really fuckiing worri2ome.  
CC: Yea)(…  
CC: I really )ope my lusus isn’t too muc)( for )im to )andle.  
GC: G4MZ33, SHOULD W3 B3 S3ND1NG 4 M3D1CULL3R YOUR W4Y?  
TC: nah, chica.  
TC: I’VE GOT IT ALL UP IN MY PAN AIN’T NO MEDICULLER WHAT CAN BE HELPING HIM.  
GA: Since None Of Us Are Anywhere Near Your Current Location I Suppose We Have No Choice Other Than To Trust Your Judgment  
AA: take good care of him gamzee  
TC: don’t none of you be suffering the preoccupations over tavbro.  
TC: I’M THIS BROTHER’S MOIRAIL.  
TC: i got this.  

arsenicCatnip [AC] joined memo  
arachnidsGrip [AG] joined memo  
centaursTesticle [CT] joined memo

AC: :33 < *ac gives a furiendly wave and says hi efurryone!*  
CT: D --> Nepeta, this is an e%temely serious strategy meeting  
CT: D --> It is no place for f001ish role playing anti%  
CT: D --> You will cease this instant  
AC: :33 < *ac sticks her tongue out at ct and says sh33sh loosen up a little you big strong buzzkill*  
AG: You guys are fucking un8elieva8le.  
AC: :33 < aww thanks vwhiskers  
AG: That wasn’t a compliment.  
AC: :33 < i know  
AC: :33 < :PP  
GC: W3LL TH4T SUR3 H4PP3N3D  
GC: W3LL TH3 M3MO GUYS  
GA: Yes I Believe That Greetings Are Now In Order  
GA: Hello Vriska Nepeta And Equius  
AG: Hey, fussyfangs.
AG: So is everyone here so we can get this party started or what?
AA: actually no
AA: we are still missing eridan and karkat
AG: W8, really?
AG: I thought those losers were 8oth with you!
CC: Well Karkat WAS until )e went storming out of our peace conference!
GC: Y34H, H3 THR3W 4 R34L T3MP3R T4NTRUM!
GC: IT W4S K1ND OF 3MB4R4SS1NG >:/
AG: Psh. Why am I not surprised?
TC: WHAT THE MOTHERFUCK EVEN HAPPENED TO GET KAR BRO ALL FULL OF
THE BITCH NASTY FURY?
TA: ii think the better que2tion would be what WOULDNT cau2e KK two have a conniiption.
GA: Actually I Believe I Am At Least Partially To Blame
GA: My Requests That He Act As Interpreter To Some Rather
GA: Ah
GA: Suggestive Exchanges With The Rose Human May Have Been A Bit Inappropriate
AC: :33 < ooh!!!
AC: :33 < kanaya do you like one of the humans?
GA: May I Decline To Comment
AC: :33 < no!
CT: D --> Yes you may
CT: D --> In fact I order you to refrain from disclosing any further details
TA: yeah. 2orry KN but a2 much a2 2ome of u2 would probably love two hear about how you are
mackiing on 2ome hot alien chick, that really ii2 not what we are here two talk about right now.
TA: FF are you 2ure KK knew about the memo?
CC: Y-ES! I reminded )/im about it w)(en )e left the conference.
CC: Acs)(elly, I t)(oug)(t I saw )/im go off wit)( -Eridan about an )/our ago.
AG: Oh my god. They are pro8a8ly off somewhere ga88ing a88out shitty romcoms like a couple of
8ig dwee8s.
AG: Can we pleeeeeeeease just get started without them?
CC: I don’t know.
CC: I would eely rat)(er )(ave –EV-ERYBUBBLY )(ere for t)(is.
TC: we already ain’t having the full miracle congregation here anyway, sis.
TC: OR ARE YOU FORGETTING ABOUT OUR MOST RIGHTEOUS BROTHER
TAVROS?
CT: D --> The highb100d makes an e%quisitely valid point as to be e%pected for one of his station
CT: D --> Furthermore Vantas has already completed his part in our insurgency plot
CT: D --> The seadweller has likewise already served his mane purpose by formulating the plan for
our military tacti%
CT: D --> Unless I am STRONGLY mistaken this conversation is for logistical purposes only
CT: D --> I see no detriment in e%cluding them from the discussion at hand
CC: I guess we cod always fill t)(em in on all t)(e details later…. CC: Does anyone have a problem wit)( starting wit)(out t)(em?
TA: nah.
AG: Nope!!!!!!!!
GC: SOUNDS F1N3 TO M3
AA: i am okay with it
GA: No
AC: : 33 < ac doesnt mind
CC: All rig)(t)(en.
CC: Sollux, you are t)(e one w)(o )(as all the coordinates. Do you want to do t)(e )(onors?
TA: 2ure. why not?
TA: that way when 2hiit get2 fucked up we will know exactly who two blame.
GC: SOLLUX, 1 DO NOT C4R3 1F YOU 4R3 JOK1NG DO NOT S4Y SH1T L1K13 TH4T RIGHT NOW
TA: ii wa2nt jokiing.
GC: >:?
TA: whoa. what the fuck?
GC: WH4T 1S 1T?
TA: diid anyone el2e ju2t get a pm from ED?
CT: D --> No.
AC: :33 < uh-uh
TC: i’m not seeing no messages all stacked sideways up in my inbox, brother.
TA: oh holy 2HIIT.
AG: What the hell, Captor?
TA: no, no, no, FUCK!
CC: Sollux? W)(at’s wrong?
TA: you guy2 are not going two beliieve thii2. ii mean, FUCK, thii2 ii2 bad.
AA: what does it say sollux
TA: fuck. 2orry. ii wiill copy pa2te iit for you. here.
TA:

This message was delivered using the Trollian automated queue feature at 13:00:00 AST
CA: if youre gettin this message then it means i wwent through wwith it and i am really fuckin sorry
CA: she didnt leavve me any fuckin choice
CA: not that any a you wwill understand

)(er Imperious Condescension began trolling caligulasAquarium [CA]
)

)(IC: yo guppy
CA: wwhat the fuck
)(IC: that any way to talk to your glubbin empress
CA: oh my god
CA: i
CA: no
CA: this is fuckin impossible
)(IC: oh i ashore you this is –ENTIR-ELY possibubble cause it is happenin right the fuck now
CA: you must be contactin the wwrong trollian handle then
CA: er
CA: maam
)(IC: pretty shore im not
)(IC: sea i happen to know exactly where youre at right this minnow
)(IC: more importantly i also happen to know who youre with ATM
CA: wwho im wwith
CA: im not wwith anyone
CA: not anyone important anywways
)IC: buoy anyone ever tell you you're one S(-ELL of a bad liar
)IC: now you listen up cause imma say this just once
)IC: im up here chillin in my sweet ass battleship with you and all a your lil fronds driftin in ma crosshairs
)IC: now i got a threshie squad landin on the beach on the far side a the island from where you at in ten earth minnows
)IC: if you're not there to meet ma threshies WIT)( the renegade then imma blow that island and everyone on it right off the face a that barnacle encrusted planet
)IC: you get what im sayin guppy
CA: oh god
CA: i
CA: yeah
)IC: you got T-EN MINNOWS
CA: okay
CA: ill be there
)IC: you betta be

(er Imperious Condescension logged the fuck out

> Eridan: Do something incredibly stupid
Eridan: Do something incredibly stupid

Oh, haha. Yeah, you know that pretty much nobody is going to understand why you did what you did because nobody ever understands why you do the things you do. After all, it’s not like you wanted to do this to Kar. You like Kar. You’ve always liked Kar. Hell, way back when you were six sweeps old, he was the only person you always quietly excluded from your stupid bullshit fantasies about killing all the landdwellers. But with the Condesce here now, so far ahead of schedule and all your carefully-laid plans on the verge of going to shit around you, what other choice had you had? None, that’s what.

Ten minutes would never have been long enough to stage an evacuation and even if it was you have no doubt the Threshecutioner squad would have had no trouble shooting down any ship you tried to leave by, be it yours or be it the girl-human’s pathetic petrol-guzzling puddle hopper. You also have no doubt that consulting with Fef or Kan or any of the others would have been just as useless because they don’t understand that sometimes you have to cull a few grubs in order to have a successful military campaign. None of them would have ever consented to handing Kar over—and the only thing that would have gotten them was killed, their revolution dying right along with them.

Not that Kar is the only one making a sacrifice here. You saw the wanted notices. You know what the Empire will do to anybody caught so much as looking at Kar. Your only hope of coming out of this alive hinges on convincing the Condesce that she should be grateful enough to you for catching the big bad Renegade to spare your life. Realistically speaking, the chances of doing that are pretty fucking slim. Good thing you still have some time to cobble together your argument.

You are just getting settled into the stealth cruiser for your trip up to the Battleship Condescension—and by “settled in” you actually mean manhandled into the hold of the ship and handcuffed to a wall like a criminal. (Oh, you had snarled at the Threshecutioners for that. You had cursed them out and screamed at them that they “couldn’t treat you like this”, that you were “a fucking royal blood so get your filthy hands off of me.” They’d laughed in your face and done it anyway, reducing your hopes that your whole talk the Empress out of killing you plan would work from “pretty fucking slim” to “pretty much nil.”)

Kar and one of the human kids—the boy with dark hair—are here, too. They are on the opposite side of the room and chained in the same manner as you with the one notable difference of being beaten, bloody, and unconscious. You keep trying to look at anything besides them, but there is nothing in the hold other than the three of you so your eyes keep drifting back to them anyway.

The Threshecutioners must have gone easy on the human kid. Sure, he’s probably going to have one hell of a headache when he wakes up, but as near as you can tell he got off with nothing worse than a split lip and a quick, clean smack on the back of the head. Kar, on the other hand…yeah, the Threshecutioners definitely didn’t go easy on him. You’d bet good money that something—nose, jaw, rib, take your pick—is broken and his face is so smeared with blood and sand and puke you can’t tell where he’s hurt and where he isn’t. (And on a completely unrelated note, god, was that his real blood color or was it more evidence of all the fucked up shit they did to make him look more like those revolting humans? You honestly can’t decide which is worse, but either way the implications are fucking appalling.)

You sit there looking at them while trying not to look at them until you hear the quiet whoosh of the stealth craft’s engines firing up. A few seconds later you get that weird feel of your digestive sac being squished down toward your feet that always comes with the sudden upward acceleration of liftoff. You brace yourself against the wall behind you as the ship makes the bumpy transition
between the planet’s atmosphere and space proper.

Across the room, the human kid groans. You watch him blearily bring his free hand up to his head and wince when his fingers find the wound. Then he tries to move his other hand, the hand that is chained to the wall and his whole body seems to go stiff. You see the surprise on his face melt into panic melt into realization. He quickly sits up, sucks in a gasp through his teeth as he sways and almost falls back against the wall, and then he’s groping around the ground around him with his free hand like he’s looking for something—his glasses, you think. He had glasses.

He keeps fumbling for the glasses that he’s clearly never going to find since they are way the hell back on that too-hot, too-bright island you just left until one of his blind sweeps whacks his hand up against one of Kar’s shoes. You hear him say something that you assume is a swear word in his dumb human language because you would totally be swearing if you were in his situation and seeing what he is seeing. The chain anchoring him to the wall isn’t long enough to let him get much closer to Kar but he manages to stretch far enough to nudge Kar’s hip as he says Kar’s name followed by a string of human gibberish.

He does this for a minute or so without getting any response from Kar before he finally gives up and sits back against the wall. Then he seems to notice you for the first time. His eyesight without his glasses must be about as shitty as yours because he squints at you for a long time before he says your name with the rising intonation you’ve come to recognize represents a question in his human language. You nod without the slightest idea whether he will be able to see you doing it or not.

Regardless, he spits another string of question noises at you. Even without Kar or Megido to translate for you, it’s pretty obvious that he is asking you some variation of “what the fuck is going on?” You choose to ignore him because it’s not like he is going to understand a single fucking word you say anyway.

Kar lets out a really pathetic whimpering sound and the human kid immediately forgets that you exist, which is fine by you because your non-conversation sucked anyway. He says Kar’s name and something you figure must mean “are you OK?” Kar responds by saying the kid’s name—John—moaning something in English and immediately bursting into tears.

John’s voice takes on a softer quality and then he’s…shooshing Kar? You have no idea whether John knows how moirallegiance works or anything about quadrants at all, but the noises he’s making sure sound a hell of a lot like shooshing to you. Whatever John’s intentions are, be they romantic or not, Kar settles down enough to speak to him.

They talk for a couple of minutes before Kar slowly maneuvers himself into a sitting position, propping himself against the wall. John uses the break in their discussion to give you a really nasty look, one that is a lot more unnerving that it has any right to be coming from his dopey human face. The two of them continue to talk with each other, John shooting you increasingly furious looks and Kar doing absolutely nothing to acknowledge your presence even though he is sitting directly across the room from you and there is literally no way he could miss seeing you.

You tell yourself you don’t care that they are pissed at you. They don’t understand why you are doing this and even if they did they wouldn’t appreciate how important it is. You know you did the right thing and that’s all that really matters. You still feel like shit.

It’s not long—five, maybe ten minutes—before you hear the whir of extending docking gear. There is a series of loud clunks as the docking mechanism locks home and a faraway hiss of equalizing gas pressures. You’ve barely had time to realize that the ship has stopped, that you are here before the Threshecutioners come barging into the hold.

They head for Kar first, all four of them looming over him. One of them—the one he’d blinded with
sand back on the beach—says, “Ready to go, runt?”

Kar doesn’t say anything in response but the glare he gives them speaks volumes. He doesn’t move when they unlock the cuff holding him against the wall, not even when the first guy snarls at him to “Get up, you ugly little shit.” The guy clenches his fists like he’d really like to whup Kar’s ass again but the squad leader shoots him a gesture that pretty clearly nixes that unspoken request. In the end, the two guys who beat the fuck out of Kar back on the beach get on either side of him and haul him to his feet.

John yells at the squad leader as she approaches him and crouches like he’s about to try and tackle her. You don’t know what the hell he thinks he is going to gain by doing this—it’s not like the squad leader is going to understand anything he is saying and you seriously doubt he would have a chance in crying hell of knocking her over even if he wasn’t still chained against the wall. The squad leader gets right up in his face, bares her teeth and snarls. It’s a dumb, exaggerated move that no troll would ever take seriously but it’s enough to put John in his place damn quick.

The remaining Threshecutioner finally gets his ass over to you. He sneers, “Time to go, your majesty.”

You roll your eyes because wow real fucking classy, you air-sucking ignoramus but you decide that you are not going to embarrass yourself like John and Kar. No, as soon as he releases you from your cuff you stand up, swipe the dust off your pants, and rearrange your crumpled cape so it’s hanging just the way you like it with all the quiet dignity to be expected of a royal blood like yourself. You resolve that you will give him all the attention his insignificant ass deserves: none.

Ignoring him turns out to be much easier said than done as he none-too-gently marches you out of the hold along with Kar and John. His stubby fingers are digging into your arm hard enough his claws are about that close to drawing blood and he’s herding you along at a clip that is closer to a trot than your preferred walking speed. Given that, you still manage to do an impressive job of ignoring him by burying yourself in the grandeur of the Battleship Condescension.

The Condescence’s flagship is, put simply, fucking incredible. Everything is gleaming white, crisp Imperial purple, or gold—so much gold. You see gold doorknobs studded with tyrian jewels, gold wall accents, gold statuary, and even a larger-than-life shoulders-up gold bust of the Condescence complete with her signature mane of hair and wide smirk. One of the corridors you traverse is lined with gold tridents of all styles and sizes—trophies from all of the previous Heiresses who have challenged her and failed. You count sixty before you are even halfway down the hall.

It strikes you as the Threshecutioners lead you deeper and deeper into the ship that aside from the trundling footsteps of your troupe echoing off the walls, everything is dead silent. You hear no troops exchanging casual banter about the latest military campaigns. There are no crashing footsteps of recruits racing from one station to the next in order to make it to their strategy meetings. You pass a dining hall meant to accommodate several hundred without a single soul in it. It’s the sight of that empty dining hall, totally abandoned even though you know damn well that it should be teeming with crew members because it’s smack in the middle of a military-regulated meal block, that really brings it home for you: the fact that the crew of the Battleship Condescension, the jewel of the Imperial fleet, the flagship of the Empire consists of the Empress, whoever the fuck her helmsman is, and that’s it.

You shake your head because god, it’s a brilliant strategy to ensure that political assassinations are never a thing and no wonder you never hear about anyone actually getting selected to join the Battleship’s crew no matter how good they are. You wonder how long this has been a thing. Judging by the perfect, unblemished everything, you’re going to go ahead and say a very fucking
You have no sooner come to this realization than you arrive at a massive set of double doors with Fef’s caste symbol inlaid on them in equally massive pink jewels. (Seriously, every one of those suckers must be about the size of a leviathan’s tooth.) The squad leader gives one of the doors a nudge with her hip and it easily glides open on meticulously-oiled hinges. A throaty voice from inside says, “That you, Threshies? Y’all get your basses in here right this sea-cond.”

The Threshecutioners march you through the door and into a throne room fit for...fuck, fit for the most prosperous and ruthless Empress in the universe. The room is big enough to house your whole mid-size ship with enough space left over to comfortably hold the Threshecutioner’s stealth vessel. The first thing you notice is the huge, full-body statue of the Empress standing in the back of the room. The statue is holding a trident in one hand with her other hand on her hip and, like the bust you’d passed earlier, the thing is solid gold. Behind the statue, a fucking gigantic tapestry with the Imperial trident on it hides the entire back wall from view. There is a pool of water the width of a small lake in the middle of the room and the surface is so glassy it puts out a perfect reflection of the troll standing in front of the tyrian purple throne situated in the middle of it.

The Condesce is...shorter in person than you had imagined her to be. If you ignored her insanely long horns, she would barely stand any taller than you and considerably shorter than Eq or Gam. Her smile is every bit as cruel and intimidating as it appears in every one of her official addresses, though, and the cool ease with which she twirls her (what else?) solid gold trident is enough to remind you exactly why she has been Empress for so goddamn long.

Her smile fades as she watches the seven of you approach her lake. She steps off of her throne-island and marches through the knee-high water to meet you at the edge of the lake. With a furious scowl on her face, she says, “The shell is this?”

The Threshecutioners all exchange an uncomfortable look between themselves and you feel a secret rush of pleasure at their distress. Take that for shoving a fucking royal seadweller into your cargo hold, you assholes, you think.

The squad leader is the first one to find her voice. “I apologize, your majesty, but I’m afraid we don’t understand why you are angry.”

The Condesce jabs one long, magenta-manicured claw-tipped finger toward John. “Why you brigging me some codclam useless human urchin grub?”

“He saw us as we were loading the fugitive. We brought him with us so he wouldn’t go telling any of the humans about us.”

The Condesce purses her lips, her fingers dancing up and down the shaft of her trident. Finally, she says, “Whatever. Just throw him in the brig and get your useless floundering asses off my ship.”

The Threshecutioners all bow (as they fucking well should. You honestly don’t know how the hell they managed to get off without a trident to the face. You hope this means that the Condesce is in an extra-good mood today and willing to listen to your bullshit made-up excuses about why she shouldn’t kill you. You hope real fucking hard.) Then they turn around and leave, dragging John with them as he keeps darting freaked-out glances over his shoulder toward you and Kar.

Kar watches them go with a look on his face that conveys the exact same level of freaked the fuck out as the looks John is sending him. He buries his face in his hands as they disappear through the door but hey, at least he doesn’t start crying again.
“Now don’t you be hiding that rebellifish mug from me,” says the Condesce, reaching out and batting Kar’s hands away from his face. “Ain’t every day I get to see something as damn funny as a little shrimp who thinks he got the globes to go pulling half the shit you did.”

She stares at him like a hungry howlbeast eying a slab of meat. It’s creepy enough to make you uncomfortable and you really have to give Kar credit because he somehow manages to stand there and take it without looking away or squirming at all. Slowly, she reaches out, wipes at a blob of half-dried blood at the edge of his mouth with her index finger, and brings it back to her eye level for closer examination.

“Fucking disgusting,” she mutters. “You’re his descendent for shore.”

You have absolutely no idea what she means by that and Kar doesn’t do or say anything to demystify it for you (though you guess it does give you definitive proof that Kar’s blood really is that color naturally. You aren’t sure how you would have dealt with that information about an hour ago. Now that you are both about to be dead, it really doesn’t seem to matter much—or at least, not as much as it probably should. The color still kind of makes you want to throw up a little, though.)

“So,” says the Condesce. “Got anyfin to say for yourshellf before I krill you, buoy?”

Kar looks at her with a cold, furious intensity. “Let the human go.”

The Condesce narrows her eyes to dangerous slits…and then she’s laughing at him. Her laugh is booming and cruel and it goes on until the room echoes with it and it sounds like there is a whole royal court’s worth of spectators laughing along with her. When her laughter finally subsides into something more manageable, she wipes the tyrian tears from her eyes and wheezes, “Buoy, you got to know that option isn’t even on the table. Can’t have that little shit telling all his fronds about what he seen. Nah, that kid is chum. Now go ahead and say somefin not conchpletely stupid.”

Kar lets out a long, tired sigh that must take the last of his spirit with it because he seems to shrink a bit as he looks down at the ground. You realize with a start that he’s just giving up. It’s so fucking strange, so unlike the Kar you thought you knew that you kind of want to kick him and insist that he go out fighting or at the very least with a good insult.

“Nothing to say, huh? Well at least that’s one way you’re different from your basshole of an ancestor. Seariously, that pufferfish could not keep his blowhole shut for a single damn minnow. Guess that means I can get this over with nice and quick.”

She levels her trident at him. He closes his eyes and fuck, he’s just going to let her do it because all he’s doing is standing there.

“Wait.”

The word is a half-whispered rasp that is almost completely swallowed up by the size of the room. You don’t even realize you said it out loud until the Condesce is turning to look at you and saying, “What is it, guppy?”

Your throat is dry as sandpaper. You try to swallow and you almost choke. “You don’t want to do that.”

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Your throat is dry as sandpaper. You try to swallow and you almost choke. “You don’t want to do that.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Oh, I think I do.”

“No,” you reply. “No, you don’t because he’s trying to start a rebellion, right? So…so you should make an example of him.” Kar’s eyes fly open and he shoots you a totally incredulous look, but she hasn’t killed him yet so you decide to keep talking. “Give him a public execution,” you say. “That
way everyone will see exactly what happens to scum like him.”

She stands there with her trident leveled at his chest for just long enough to make you think that she’s just going to go ahead and fork him anyway—but then she flips the weapon in her hand and, with a flick of her wrist, uses the shaft to sweep his legs out from under him. Kar goes down with a yelp, falling backwards and cracking the back of his head against the ground with a thud that makes you wince. The Condesce doesn’t give him a single second to recover. No; she is on him immediately, flipping him onto his belly and driving one of her knees down into the small of his back.

Kar scrabbles underneath her but she forces his shoulders down into the ground, pinning him there as surely as a butterfly in one of the repugnant insect collection displays you saw in the Jade girl’s hive back on the island. With Kar still flailing under her, she turns toward you and grunts, “Make yourself useful. Come over here and hold him for me.”

Shaking your head, you take one slow step back to put just that much more distance between you and the fucking awful shit that is happening in front of you. “I’m not going to help you hurt him.”

“I guess I didn’t make myself clear.” She snatches her trident up from the ground beside her, presses the center tine against the back of Kar’s neck just hard enough to well up a single bead of that nasty red blood of his. Kar gasps and goes dead still. You don’t think you even see him breathe as she says, “You get over here and hold him or I’ll cut off his head and then I’ll krill you—nice and slow.”

You don’t want to do this. You really do not want to do this—but you are unarmed and she has you cornered so you don’t even hesitate. On legs that feel completely numb, you walk to her side, kneel on the ground by Kar’s head and put your hands on his shoulders. You feel him trembling when you put your hands on his shoulders, feel his muscles working to make him stop trembling as you lean your weight into him and force him to stay down.

“That’s more like it,” says the Condesce. She moves the trident away from Kar’s neck, hooks one of the tines underneath Kar’s shirt and slashes the fabric from hem to collar, exposing his back.

You stare at the weird human-colored skin on his back because you can’t bring yourself to look at his face as you say, “What are you going to do?”

“Chillax, guppy. I’m not going to krill him yet. As a manatee of fact, I’m taking your advice.”

Kar’s trembling evolves into unabashed shaking. You frown. “You are?”

“Yes. Only trouble is he still looks like one of them glubbing humans. If we going to be giving him the real starfish treatment we got to make shore everybubbly knows who he eely is. Now hold him nice and still while I make him stop trembling as you lean your weight into him and force him to stay down.

“We want more like it,” says the Condesce. She moves the trident away from Kar’s neck, hooks one of the tines underneath Kar’s shirt and slashes the fabric from hem to collar, exposing his back.

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“Yes. Only trouble is he still looks like one of them glubbing humans. If we going to be giving him the real starfish treatment we got to make shore everybubbly knows who he eely is. Now hold him nice and still while I make him pretty for the cameras.”

She ghosts one of the prongs of her trident along his back, tracing out a pattern without leaving a mark on his skin. At first you don’t know she intends to do—but then you realize that you recognize this pattern. It’s a pattern you haven’t seen in a long time, but you still know what it is and you very suddenly understand exactly what is about to happen. You tighten your grip on Kar’s shoulders and hope it gives him some level of comfort because god, Kar, I should have just let her kill you quick, I’m so fucking sorry.

The first cut is slow and deliberate and designed to hurt. Kar’s shoulders tense under your hands as the Condesce opens an arc of red that spans from shoulder blade to shoulder blade. The muscles in his neck stand out like thick cords—forcing back a scream? Fuck, you don’t even want to know. You silently will him to pass out before he has to endure much more of this shit.
Of course he doesn’t pass out once while the Condesce takes her sweet fucking time carving the design into his back with what you decide to classify as a really fucking creepy level of care and precision. Somehow—fuck if you know how—he manages not to make a single sound throughout the whole ordeal. By the time it’s over, Kar’s back is completely slicked with blood. Even so, you have no trouble making out the circular symbol there—Kar’s symbol.

Kar doesn’t even try to move when the Condesce finally stops kneeling on his back. (Not that you blame him. You aren’t sure you would be able to move if you were in his position and you at least have seadweller strength and stamina on your side.) The Condesce stands over him and stares at his bloody back for a few seconds, presumably admiring her handiwork. Then she drives her trident straight down, burying all three tines deep into his torso.

You barely hear Kar’s choked scream over your own yelp of “What the fuck!” The Condesce looks at you with an unreadable expression and you try to rein in your shock and your total fury because she lied, she fucking lied and forced you to help her do this to him. Your voice still comes out as a tense whine as you shout, “I thought you weren’t going to kill him!”

She plants one foot on Kar’s back and uses it to stabilize his prone form as she yanks her weapon free. “I only need him alive long enough to blow a kiss to the cameras. Beachsides, we got lots of time before he keels over.”

You look at the spreading puddle of too-red blood, incredulous—but then you realize that she is right. The puncture wounds are deep, but they are far to the side and well away from anything that would grant him an instant death. Of course not, you think. Why give him a mercy cull when you can watch him bleed out instead?

“You see buoy? Told you he wasn’t dead yet. Now wait here. I got one last thing we got to do before he’s ready for his close up.”

You are so busy thinking about how this isn’t fair, how you knew she would kill him but you hadn’t wanted it to be like this that the meaning of the words barely register at first. It isn’t until she is walking for the doors that you fully appreciate the significance of what she has just said—that she is leaving you alone and totally unguarded.

You watch her saunter across the room at an easy pace, pull open one of the huge doors, and disappear into the hallway beyond and all the while your pan is screaming at you that there is no way she is leaving you an opening like this, there is no way you could possibly be this fucking lucky, there has to be some kind of trick, it’s a trap, she must be waiting outside to cut you down when you try to escape—but trap or not, you have to take your chance. You are halfway to your feet when a pained cough from Kar stops you in your tracks.

Kar. It wouldn’t be right to leave him here and at the mercy of that tyrannous bitch…but what choice do you have? Your only option would be to carry him and even if you did somehow manage to do that without killing him, hauling around a whole troll’s worth of dead weight is pretty much a surefire ticket to getting you both caught. No; the smart thing to do—the reasonable thing—would be to leave by yourself, hide out until a supply ship or another military squad stops by, and smuggle yourself onboard. You could do it alone. You’re sure there are plenty of hiding places on a ship this big, and Kar is the one the Condesce really wants. For all you know, she might not even bother to look for you all that hard.

You tell yourself you are going to do it (you have to do it)—and then Kar is curling his fingers around the hem of your pants. Voice hoarse and weak, he whispers, “Eridan? Please don’t leave me here alone.”
There is a long moment in which you consider ignoring him. Kicking his shaking hand away and pretending you didn’t hear what you just heard him say. Going with your escape plan, saving your own skin…but then you realize that your escape plan is complete shit. (“Hide and hope the extremely pissed-off Empress decides not to look for you?” What the hell were you thinking?) As the realization that your hastily cobbled escape plan is totally useless sinks in, you decide that you are going to take a good piece of advice to heart because Kar is fucking dying here and even though you and he both know damn well that it’s your fault, he is still asking you to stay.

You fucked up. Now you are going to own it.

Situating yourself on the ground beside him, you put a hand on his shoulder. You whisper, “Kar, I’m sorry.”

He shudders under you, groans “Shut up.”

“I’m so, so sorry. I didn’t want it to happen like this but she…” You cut yourself short as you realize you’re doing it again; making lame excuses for your shitty mistakes. “I’m just sorry, OK? I fucked up and I’m sorry.”

“Goddamn it, stop saying you’re sorry.” You think he wants to say more but he ends up coughing instead. It’s a nasty, thick noise that sounds like it hurts like hell. You don’t know what you can do to make it any better for him so you move your hand off his shoulder and hold his hand instead. By the time he’s done coughing, he doesn’t seem to have it in him to finish what he was going to say. He just lies there gasping for breath and squeezing your hand so hard you can feel the bones in your hand screaming in protest as they grind against each other.

That is how the Condesce finds you when she returns. When she sees you, she shakes her head and barks out a harsh laugh. “What you doing there, guppy?”

You don’t bother to give her an answer. Instead you pry your hand free from Kar’s death grip and gesture to the metal case she is lugging along with her. “What’s that?”

“It’s a surprise.” Depositing the case on the floor beside Kar, she adds, “It’s not ready yet, though, so I think it’s aabout time you and me had a little talk. See, I really pike the way you think, guppy.”

“Oh,” you stammer because this is certainly not the direction you were expecting her to take this. “You…you do?”

“Yep. The whole public krilling thing you came up with? Glubbing brilliant.” Her tyrian-tinted lips quirk into a grin that puts your teeth on edge. “That’s why I’m going to give you one chance to tell me what’s eely going on here.”

You frown and offer up a decidedly undignified “Huh?”

“I know what’s eely going on here. I want you to tell me all about it.”

Your frown deepens. “He’s a rebel and you’re going to execute him. I don’t know what else you expect me to….” you trail off as the smile on her face melts away to reveal something cold and ugly.

Twisting her voice into an exaggerated parody of yours, she says, “‘The point is you set up a couple of straw soldiers for her to focus on and when she comes in to take care of them you go in and take her out.’ Sound familiar, guppy?”

Your digestive sac drops as though your whole body is in freefall. You feel like you can’t breathe,
there is something rising in your throat and it must be a scream because she knows. “How—how did…?”

“Aw, don’t take it so hard. That plan was shellac inventive compared to some of the bullship some of them other Heiresses came up with. Might’ve even worked if I hadn’t taken the liberty of having every new Heiresses’ lines of communication tapped since before any of you was ever even an idea.” She breaks into a huge grin with lots of fang before adding, “What can I say? I may look fabulous but Gl’bgolyb didn’t raise no fool.”

“So you’ve known everything from the start,” you groan.

“Pretty much.” She raises one ring-encrusted finger and shakes it at you like she’s scolding a naughty grub. “Don’t you worry, though. I am currently taking care of everyfin as we speak. First and foremost, I got an elite assassin scrod headed for the home world for the sole porpoise of taking care of that clam animal telepath.”

“What?” you exclaim because out of all the shit you and your friends had planned, that was the one thing you had figured she wouldn’t touch, the one thing that had the potential fuck shit up for not just everybody involved in your rapidly-failing conspiracy plot but for pretty much everybody in the entire goddamn fleet as well. “Why?”

She shrugs. “I can’t have some little bottom feeder floundering around with controlling sweet mama glub. I dealt with all that before and I can tell you it’s a codclam liability. He wants to chill with my lusus so bad, I say let him sleep with the fishes.”

“But the Vast Glub—“

“Isn’t nothing to be conchcerned about. Bereef me, unless dear old glubbers is about to go belly-up the worst that’ll happen is a localized planet-wide glub. I’m not particurrently happy about losing a whole pool of potrenchful recruits, but it’s a price I’m willing to pay if it drowns that little worm.”

You gape at her. Sure, you may have hatched plans to eradicate all the landdwellers when you were young and full of it back on Alternia—but for all your blustering ambition there was a reason your plans always failed spectacularly and it wasn’t due to incompetence or sabotage from a shifty-as-hell spider troll. After all, the idea of casually sacrificing an entire generation of young trolls is wasteful at the very least and at the most…well, you knew the Condesce was coldblooded (hell, she would never have gotten to where she is today if she wasn’t), but goddamn.

The Condesce seems to take your silence as a cue to keep telling you horrifying things. She says, “Of course, all that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Y’all thought you were the only ones who could go feeding a bunch of bullship to your anemones to get them all packaged and stowed away? I been circulating fake-ass ‘o-fish-al’ military intel from the minnow y’all battened down the hatches on your little conchspiracy plan and y’all fell for it hook, line, and sinker. Now I got a special forces fleet on deck and once they get here your sad little army won’t even know what hit it. Not to mention I still got all the rest of your fronds, including that bubblehead Heiress of yours drifting in my crosshairs. Soon as we’re finfished here, I am going to wipe out that island and everyone on it myself.”

Beside you, Kar lets out an agonized moan. You honestly can’t tell whether it’s because he is in actual, legitimate agony or whether it’s in response to all the shocking bullshit you are hearing. Either way, you feel like an asshole for not letting him keep holding your hand earlier. The Condesce watches him and you, waits for him to quiet back down before saying, “I guess that’s my cue to bring this ship back a few knots and talk about what’s going to happen right now.”

Bending down to loop one of Kar’s arms around her shoulders, she says, “Right now, we going to
make a movie. And this little shit—" she stands up and Kar gasps, a gush of blood rolling down his
back as she forces him to his feet "—is going to be the star."

She starts toward the wall closest to you, stops, says, "Yo, guppy, you want to kelp? Bring that box
along for me."

You look at the box, look at her, and you don’t move a single fucking inch. She raises her eyebrows
and says, "Not interested?"

You look at the ground and say nothing. She sighs, grabs a handle on the box with her free hand,
says, "Fin. Suit yourself, I guess."

You keep looking at the ground as she hauls both Kar and the box across the room because you are
tired of watching Kar suffer and you wish she would just put him out of his misery and be done with
it already. You still hear the sound of the box scraping across the floor, hear the sound of Kar
swallowing back a pitiful cry as they arrive at the wall and she dumps him on the floor, hear the
sound of the snaps on the box opening. You hear her mutter, "Yep, these are just percheft." You
hear a chain rattling, hear her whisper something (what it is you can’t quite make out)—and then you
hear a sizzling noise followed by a scream that makes the hair on the back of your neck prickle.

The scream is the worst sound you have ever heard in your life. It’s worse than the sounds of all the
lussels you killed for Fef back on Alternia. Worse than the sounds that had come out of Sol when
he’d woken up on your ship for the first time. It’s less the sound of a troll in pain and more the sound
of a wounded animal and you can’t keep your eyes from wandering toward the source of that sound.
What you see makes an icy tongue of horror curl through your gut.

Kar’s right wrist is secured into a set of irons. They are the old-fashioned kind, with two opposing
arcs linking the cuffs together so they function as one unit. They would look just like Kar’s symbol
—except instead of the gray which you’ve grown used to, these are glowing orange-red and, if the
smell of burning meat—burning Kar—is any indication, hot as hell.

Kar is slouched against the wall, still screaming and so focused on frantically trying to jerk his hand
free of the red-hot metal that he doesn’t even notice the Condesce has his other hand, doesn’t notice
what she is about to do until she brings his free hand into contact with the open half of the irons. You
watch with your jaw hanging open as he lets out another fucking terrible scream and struggles to
yank his hand away from the metal. His whole body is jerking with the effort, but the Condesce has
no trouble keeping his wrist steady as she flicks the cuff closed with a pair of handling tongs. You
hear the metal locks click home and Kar’s screaming dissolves into ragged sobbing.

You think that now she has to be finished, what more can she even do to him—but she isn’t. She
grabs hold of a chain fastened through a peg high on the wall and pulls. The chain goes tight and
Kar’s arms go up, up until he’s on the balls of his feet, up onto his tiptoes, up—

“Leave him alone, you fucking bitch!”

The Condesce looks at you, lets go of the chain. Over Kar’s howling, she says, “Excuse you, the
fuck did you just say?”

Your mouth is a desert. Your throat is cracking dry. You lick your lips, look her in the eye, and say,
“I said leave him alone, you heinous fucking harpy BITCH!”

She strides across the room toward you, leaving Kar writhing on the wall behind her. When she gets
to you, she crouches so her face is inches from yours. She is so close you can smell her breath—a
mix of dead fish and something sweet—as she snarls, “Listen here, guppy. No matter how you cut
this, you are going to die. The only question we got here is whether you get to die quick or whether I get to have some fun first. Now I can tell you right now what’s fun for me is going to be hell for you so I suggest you clean up your dirty fucking mouth right the fuck now. Got it?”

You look her in the eye and then you do something incredibly stupid. You spit in her face.

She reels back and stares at you with her mouth gaping open in complete shock. For a few seconds neither of you do or say anything. Then you notice that she is holding something; a heavy, old-fashioned iron key—the key to Kar’s shackles? You have no idea—so you do the only thing you can do: you reach out, snatch the key from her hand, and proceed to run like hell.

You manage to make it all the way out of the throne room before you hear her enraged scream. The sound is still ringing in your ears when you hear thundering footsteps and you realize that oh hell, she is coming after you. You pour on the biggest burst of speed you have ever coaxed out of your legs in your entire life. Your whole body feels as though it is dragging, like you are running through mud but you know you have to keep running, damn it because she is going to fucking rip you apart if she catches you.

The first door you reach is locked. You waste a few precious seconds wrenching on the handle anyway. Then, letting out a silent scream, you keep running. You run past the next two doors you see, opting to turn down the hallway beyond them in order to put you out of the Condesce’s direct line of sight. There is an open door at the end of this hall. The lights are off and you can’t see what is inside but you decide you would rather take your chances with whatever might be lurking in the room than risk getting your ass caught so you make a wild dash for it.

With the Condesce’s footsteps growing louder behind you, you duck inside—and narrowly avoid breaking your goddamn neck when your foot plunges about a half foot further down than expected. You windmill your arms out to the sides, slamming your hands against the walls on either side of you to catch yourself mid-fall. A set of motion-sensitive lights click on to reveal that you are hanging at the top of a very narrow, very steep flight of spiraling stairs. You take a half-second to right yourself on the top step. Once the danger of falling to your fucking death is past, you follow the stairs as far from the sound of the Condesce’s pursuing footsteps as they will take you.

The stairwell deposits you at beginning of a long hallway. The hallway has at least twenty smaller branching corridors, all of which look as though they have the potential to serve as excellent hiding places for somebody who absolutely does not want to be found—but that is not the first feature of the hallway that you notice. No; the first thing you notice is that the hallway is lined with hundreds of cells with barred doors, all of them empty except the one closest to you. That one happens to hold a familiar (if not friendly) face.

John looks at you from inside the cell, wild-eyed. He says your name, says a bunch of stuff in English you can’t understand, punctuates the whole thing with Kar’s name. You figure he must be asking something about Kar and whatever it is he is asking—where is he, is he OK, what happened to him—you have a feeling that the answer is going to be the same so you just close your eyes and shake your head. Apparently, he gets the gist of what you are trying to convey because he gasps and goes quiet for a couple of seconds. A few seconds later, he is talking again. You don’t bother to listen to a word he is saying because it’s not like you are going to understand any of it. You are way more focused on the electronic lock release on the wall beside his door.

There are only two buttons on the keypad: a red X and a green circle. Freeing him would be nothing more than a matter of reaching out and pressing the green button. Although you don’t particularly savor the idea of skulking around hiding for your life with an annoying human kid, you know beyond all doubt that this is what Kar would want.
You reach out to push the button—and then you pull your hand back when you hear footsteps on the staircase behind you. The Condesce’s voice echoes down the stairwell to you: “I know you’re down there, guppy! Ain’t nobubbly can hide from me on my own clam ship!”

Cursing under your breath, you run down the hall and wind through the branching network of corridors until you can’t hear John shouting your name after you anymore. You resolve to come back for him and Kar later, if you somehow manage to lose the Condesce and find a way out of this fucking hellhole.

> END OF ACT 4 (Part 1/2)
It is a beautiful day. There isn’t a single cloud in the sky (a fact which you are able to appreciate to the fullest thanks to your ocular modifying lenses!) An ocean breeze is wafting up off the beach, perfectly tempering the heat of the tropical midday sun and imbuing the air with an exotic, salty tang. Under normal circumstances, you would be busy exploring the inland jungle or checking out the cool temple ruins situated in the lagoon—but not right now. No; instead of adventuring the whole island over, you are on your way up the mountain trail that leads to Jade’s house, tasked with the really unenviable responsibility of breaking the news about Karkat to your alien friends. Beside you, Feferi and Kanaya are holding a terse conversation about…actually, you don’t know what they are talking about because you are too worked up to listen to much of anything at the moment.

You never particularly gave a damn about what the Empire thought of you, even if as a “lowblood” it was “not much.” You never lost any sleep over the fact that your “official” value as an Alternian citizen was little more than cannon fodder. You’d lived the first several sweeps of your life convinced that haha, the joke was on them, you were living your life out on your own terms and enjoying every minute of it! In all honesty, you still really do not care what the Empire does to you at all—but you are sick of the Empire ruining your friends’ lives.

A snippet of conversation between Feferi and Kanaya comes to you: “Do you eely bereef that they will refuse to mobilize if we tell them?”

You furrow your brow. Mobilize? I thought we all agreed that strategy talk was on hold until we decided what to do about Karkat.

“I not only believe it,” replies Kanaya. “I am certain of it.”

OK, you think. Time to find out what in the world is going on. Aloud, you ask, “What are you talking about?”

“Oh,” sighs Feferi. “We were just glubbing about whether or not we shoald tell the Cultists about Crabkat. Kanaya thinks they might refuse to mobilize if we do.”

Huh. There’s that word again…. “Mobilize?”

“Weren’t you listening to anyfin?” Feferi groans. You shrug and Feferi seems to pick up your sentiment of no, not really because she adds, “The Condense glubbed that she is close to Earth right now. Whale, that was what we were originally planning for, so we were thinking sending our army after her.”

You frown. “But aren’t Karkat and Eridan onboard?”

“We do not technically know whether or not that is true,” Kanaya replies. “But yes, that is a distinct possibility.”

“So you are going to sacrifice them then.”

“It is not something that any of desire to do,” Kanaya retorts. “However, if Eridan was willing to betray Karkat like this then there is no way to know how much he may be willing to share with the Empress with regards to our surprise revolution. This may be our only chance to catch her unaware and relatively unarmed.
Your frown deepens. Sure, you want the Condesce dead and you are not against a little sacrifice or death to achieve that. In fact, the expressions of genuine distress you see on both Feferi and Kanaya’s faces lead you to believe that you are much more OK with the idea than they are. Even so, the thought of condemning Karkat to become an involuntary martyr to your cause leaves a bad taste in your mouth.

“Anyways,” says Feferi, “if we tell the Cultists that Karkat is on the ship we want them to attack, then they might refuse to kelp us… or worse, they might turn against the rest of the army! We would lose for shore if that happened.”

“Yes, but failing to inform them of that fact could also lead to some significant problems for you, even if we do win,” Kanaya replies. “After all, they only chose to support you in the first place because they believed that you hold Karkat in very high regard.”

“I know,” Feferi groans. “And I still hate the idea of krilling our fronds! It’s something she would do, Kanaya, and that’s not the Empress I want to be!”

You stop paying close attention to their conversation there because you realize that they have returned to the debate that you interrupted and it is clear that a verdict is not going to come any time soon. You instead turn your attention toward formulating how, exactly, you are going to approach telling the human kids about Karkat.

You are not formulating for long when you round a bend in the path and almost collide with Jade. (The fact that you somehow manage to avoid crashing into her is a small miracle because she is running at a dead sprint and you are meandering along the very middle of the path, but somehow you manage to throw yourself one way while she dodges the other and the two of you pass by with nothing more than a hair’s breadth between you.) Once that disaster is averted, she comes to a stop and, wild-eyed and frantic, she says, “Have any of you seen John or Karkat?”

For half a moment you consider telling her the truth, that you may not know about John but you certainly know where Karkat is. Then you decide that you would much rather tell all of the humans together, so you instead respond with “Not since the peace conference.”

Jade moans and rakes her hands through her hair. “Have Feferi or Kanaya seen him?”

You translate the question, but they both shake their heads.

“Damn it!” exclaims Jade. “Nobody has!”

“What’s going on?” you ask. “What do you need them for?”

“Interpol is coming to arrest them and throw them in prison for like a billion years!” She stops, frowns a bit before asking, “Wait, do you know what Interpol is?”

You raise your eyebrows and this seems to convey your feelings of “of course I do, what a silly question” because she smacks her forehead with one hand and sighs, “Ugh, that was a doofy thing to say. Forget I said that.” She then immediately points to Feferi and Kanaya and gasps, “Oh my god, they’re aliens!”

You glace at Kanaya and Feferi and note that yes, they are just as not-human as you and unlike you, they look it. They are in fact so not-human in appearance that you have a very difficult time believing that Jade has failed to notice this small yet important detail until now. You have never seen a human nervous breakdown before, but you find yourself suspecting that Jade is in the middle of one now because that is the only feasible explanation you can come up with as to why she would be acting
this way. To that effect, you say, “OK, back up a second. How does Interpol know we are here?”

“I don’t know!” Jade wails, throwing her hands into the air. “Rose thinks that maybe her mom had a tracker installed in the plane. Or maybe it was John—he turned on his iphone last night like a big dummy even though he has the pda I made for him. But all that is beside the point. The point is that Interpol is going to be here in like five minutes and they—” she jabs a finger forward Feferi and Kanaya “—are aliens!”

You wait for her to elaborate on this statement. When she doesn’t, you shrug and say, “And?”

“And nobody on Earth—not even Interpol—knows that aliens actually exist. They need to hide! Oh, and the ship on the beach…I don’t even know what we are going to do about the ship on the beach, but—wait...where’s Terezi?”

“I don’t know,” you reply. “I haven’t seen her since we all got off the memo.” You pause, considering whether you ought to tell Jade about Karkat now and you quickly decide against it. (No need to add to the freakout train she is riding at the moment, you think.) Instead, you say, “I can go look for her.”

Jade nods. “That would be great. But before you go, can you tell Feferi and Kanaya about what is going on and ask them to come with me so we can find a good hiding place?”

You nod, turn to Feferi and Kanaya, and explain the situation as best you can. When you are finished, they exchange a look that is equal parts confusion and concern. Feferi says, “But shouldn’t we at least try to help John?”

“It does seem a bit cold to simply allow John to be captured,” adds Kanaya. “Furthermore, if we are going to proceed with our plans for a human-troll alliance, we will need to make our first point of contact somewhere, and I see no reason why it can’t be with human law enforcement.”

You take a moment to remember the many human movies that dealt with alien invasion you were shown on the training station before you reply, “Maybe you can’t, but I can. Trust me, it will be better for everybody if you hide.”

“Well okay,” Feferi sighs. “If that’s what you think is best, I guess. I still think it’s a little seally, though.”

“I know,” you say. “Just go with Jade for now—and don’t get caught!” Then you turn and start down the trail, back toward the beach. You run most of the way there, using the downhill to your advantage until you are moving so fast you would be in some serious trouble if you did something silly like trip over a rock or a tree root. Luckily, you do not trip because you are a seasoned adventurer with plenty of experience in traversing treacherous terrain. (Not that this terrain is all that treacherous to begin with. Jade has done such a fantastic job of keeping the path pristinely maintained you might as well be running along a paved road.)

It doesn’t take long for you to reach the beach. When you get there you make a beeline for the ship parked on the far end, kicking up big sprays of sand in your wake. You are pretty sure that Terezi stayed on the ship after the whole memo fiasco went down and even if she isn’t there now, you can always ask Sollux if he knows anything about where she might be. You also should probably suggest that Sollux move the ship to someplace a little less conspicuous than the wide-open beach, though if Interpol is as close as Jade seems to think they are, you aren’t sure whether he will be able to do that without being seen.

You are no sooner up the boarding ramp and on ship when the hatch closes behind you. That stops
you cold. As far as you remember, Sollux hasn’t closed the hatch once since he landed on the beach two days ago. The only reason you can think of for him to be doing it now is that he is planning to launch—*But that doesn’t make any sense*, you think. Sensible or not it’s only a few seconds before the rev of a freshly-engaged engine confirms your theory that yes, Sollux is definitely planning to launch.

You run to the helmsblock as fast as you can. When you get there, the whole room is already flashing with the glow of Sollux’s psionics as he pours his power into the ship. Terezi is sitting cross-legged on the floor beside the helmsman’s column. Both of them are wearing the sort of grim-faced determined expression that you always used to love whenever it came up in one of your Troll Indiana Jones movies. You walk into the room and say, “Hey guys. What’s up?”

The psionics lightshow comes to an abrupt stop and you hear the whine of engines powering down as Sollux says, aa?

You smile at him, say, “So where are we going?”

“We’re bringing Karkat back.” Terezi replies. “You want in?”

You shrug. “What’s the plan?”

ii hacked ed2 trolliian and piinged the iip of the 2hiip that contacted hiim. iit ii2 le22 than fiifteen minute2 away. ii am takiing u2 there and tz ii2 going two…ii dont know…do whatever iit take2 to get hiim back ii gue22? He groans before finishing with: fuck, tz, thii2 plan 2uck2.

“Oh shut up, no it doesn’t,” Terezi responds. She turns back to you and says, “So are you in?”

You look from Sollux to Terezi and back again and think that you really should just tell them to put the kibosh on any crazy dangerous rescue maneuvers because human law enforcement is on its way—pfff, yeah right. Like you would ever pass up the opportunity to participate in wild adventure movie antics! Nope, you just grin and say, “Heck yes!”

Terezi grins and offers you a (too-hard) fist bump—something you suspect she picked up from watching Dave. You make a mental note to tell her that the object of a fist bump is not to try to break the recipient’s hand later.

awe2ome, says Sollux. let2 get thii2 2hiit2how on the road then. Sollux’s eyes glow bright and then the room is flickering with pulsing blue and red. You hear the engines revving, feel the ship shiver with liftoff and then the weird sensation of rapid upward acceleration.

The ride is just beginning to settle into an easy cruise when Sollux says, guy2? ii think we have a problem.

“What is it?” you ask. “Are there other ships around to worry about?”

no. iit2 ju2t…ii hear kk now and ow, 2HIIT iit doe2 not 2ound good. what do you want two do?

The grin that Terezi has been wearing since liftoff melts into a pained expression. You have no trouble understanding why. Sollux may not be able to hear the voice of every single doomed troll, but as long as you have known him, you can’t recall a single instance of a troll surviving much longer after he started hearing their voice with imminently deceased.

Terezi’s voice is hard as steel as she says, “We’re still bringing him back.”

Sollux nods. okay. ju2t wanted two give you 2ome warniing about what you might be walking
“Yeah, I get it. Thanks.”

“How fast can you get us there?” you ask.

“Yeah, I get it. Thanks.”

“How fast can you get us there?” you ask.

You nod and tell him thank you. You seriously hope that will be fast enough to allow Karkat to be with his friends when the inevitable happens.

> Gamzee: Take care of your palebro

You told your palebro. You motherfucking articulated all your worry-thoughts about what would befall him if he followed your conspiracy fish sister’s intention. You had the long-ass discussion over it together and that sweet diamond brother had twined his fingers through your hair all gentle-like until all the dissention thoughts ran right out of your pan. He had looked you in the motherfucking eye with his own gaze globes and had promised you that not a single hurt would fall on his head. It never occurred to your pan that your palebro, your diamond brother, your motherfucking moirail could utter the wicked falsehoods to you. Now here you are praying to the Messiahs that you can undo the result of the treachery talk and nursing up the fear that you won’t be possessing a palebro at the end of this whole conspiracy design.

It wasn’t this motherfucking bad at first. Those first nights were downright affectionate in the cave with the sound of the waves shooshing the both of you to sleep every morning. You sat out near the water on the soft like powder sand and composed the tenderest verses together. You forgot all the worry you had inside you. Then the vile unwellness began to appear.

First it was the waking up all covered with the blood that poured from his smell holes like a fountain of injury every day while you slept. You told him again about all the anxiety that clawed around all up in your pan and he smiled and stroked your hand all warm and tender while he told you he was going to be all fine and that he didn’t feel any of the loathsome pain. You understood then that he was spitting wild fabrications to make you stop worrying. You saw the suffering light in that motherfucker’s eyes.

From there it started to get worse with the same unrepentant velocity as a vicious Subjugglators wounding club. He would go away all inside himself to someplace you couldn’t call him back from for hours. The only thing you could do was knead your fingers all up around his hornbeds and hope it made the wicked pan aches he always woke back up with a little more endurable. You told him that it hurt your blood pusher to see him doing this. You motherfucking begged him to stop doing this to his guiltless self and then the tears came out his eyes and down his face. He said he wished he could stop and said he couldn’t, said the motherfucking blasphemy that he was sorry for being a bad moirail so you’d papped his too-warm cheeks and stroked his illness-scorched front nug and held him until he lost himself again.

Now he’ll go whole nights just sitting all limp and sleep-eyed and nothing you do will wake him up. He’ll look at you like you ain’t even there, like he lost the recollection of who you even are or who even he is. Sometimes, in the quiet time before sunrise when you know nothing will come and inflict any injury on Tavbro, you go outside and pummel your clubs up against the giant-ass walls of stone around the cave mouth until your arms and shoulders give out all the protestations. Sometimes, when that isn’t enough to make all the frustration thoughts in your pan shut their speech holes, you don’t
bother to bring the clubs. Instead you use your bare hands until the walls are all covered in purple.

You aren’t doing the nasty wall violence right now, though. Right now you are with Tavbro. Your pale brother is in another far-off spell, has been ever since he left the memo that delivered the nasty treachery revelations. At the moment you are trying to get some food into his speech hole because you can’t even remember when the last time you saw him eat was. It’s a whole lot harder than your pan ever imagined it could be. In fact, you would even go so far as to say that it’s a real motherfucking trial.

You found out early on that you have to mash everything down like grub paste and bestow it to his mouth in the most diminutive of bites or else your brother will just forget it’s even there and let it fall down his chin instead of into his digestive sac. Sad thing is it barely even matters whether or not you do everything right because there is always more food on his outside than on his inside and the whole motherfucking process takes most of the night besides. Still, you figure the paltry little bit that does make it down his alimentary canal is better than nothing so you deposit another nourishment well full of pulped eats into his mouth.

You think most of it must go down his meal tunnel this time because only a piddly dribble comes out the side of his mouth. You are just cleaning the sticky rivers from off his lips when you hear something that jangles all the alert bells you’ve got sitting in up in your pan. You’ve heard plenty of the animal claws scratching around on little paws. This ain’t nothing like that. No, this is the sound of feet in shoes slapping against rock all together so you can’t even tell how many they are.

Quietly, you set the meal-paste down so it doesn’t end up all spilled on the floor. You look at your Tavbro sitting so still and quiet and you trace the tender circles with your thumbs as you tell him not to worry, you won’t be gone for very motherfucking long. Then you pick up your clubs and you go outside.

There are five big motherfuckers approaching you. They’re all carrying the red culling fork on their chests and bright, shiny implements for inflicting the motherfucking hurt on anybody standing in front of them. You tighten your grip on your clubs because you have a powerful feeling that you’ll be performing the sicknasty violence tonight. Your instruments sit all comfortable-like in your hands as you say, “Hey there, my imperial motherfuckers. What’s up with yourselves?”

The brother in the middle, the biggest of the group, taller than you and wide as a motherfucking tree says, “You with the animal telepath, kid?”

You toss the club in your right hand up and catch it. “Maybe I motherfucking am.” Toss, catch. “Maybe I motherfucking ain’t. What you wanting out of him?”

“Imperial culling order,” responds the wide motherfucker. “Get out of the way or we’ll cut you down, too.”

“Nah, man. You come one step closer to Tavbro and I can up and guarantee that the one on the ground isn’t going to be this motherfucker.” You find yourself wanting to SHOUT all the important information nuggets as you go on and it feels so motherfucking natural you just let it happen: “Now I would all up and SUGGEST YOU MOTHERFUCKERS UP AND ABScond before I be getting the inclination all up inside myself to MAKE YOU ABScond MY MOTHERFUCKING SELF.”

The wide brother shrugs. “All right, you little punk. Just remember you brought this on yourself.”

He flicks his nug toward you and his whole entourage comes rushing at you, all waving their implements of injury like they think that alone will sweep you all horns over heels backwards. They
don’t do much to get your stress fluid pumping. Nah, you feel right relaxed as you ride on the waves of wicked chucklevoodoo coming out of your pan.

One of the motherfuckers rushing you drops to the ground and writhes there just like the sacrilegious little weakling he is. Another stumbles like you went right up and punched him in the breathe box with, but he ain’t quite so poor as the first because he keeps fumbling toward you like he’s running through a pool of the old miracle slime. The other two don’t seem too hindered by the waves of ill jiju, but that’s OK because you got two clubs and that’s enough to give them both one each.

They come at you, a brother flicking a chain all covered with the wickedest sharp spikes on one side and a chica swinging an axe with a blade as big as you are tall on the other. You twist away from the axe and bat your arm at the chain, letting it coil its teeth around your forearm until there ain’t nowhere else for that fucker to go. You got purple blood running down you free as the wicked elixir but it doesn’t hurt you none with your pan all swimming with the chucklevoodoos. You just use the chain to swing that brother around off his feet until he collides with the axe sister and they both fall horns to the ground and asses to the sky. From there it’s nothing to bring your clubs down straight down onto their vulnerable motherfucking melons.

The slower brother is coming up on you and there are words coming out of your mouth. You’re saying something to this motherfucker and you don’t even know what it is, don’t even see what kind of wounding instrument he’s got before you launch your whole self forward. Something glances off your shoulder, you feel more of the hot elixir blood pouring down your back but you don’t give it no care because it feels motherfucking good. You keep driving forward until your horns go right

THROUGH

that

MOTHERFUCKER’S

wicked

CHEST

Slow brother lets out a sound you don’t hear through the haze of the righteous chucklevoodoos and the laughter coming out your own squawk hole. Motherfuck you forgot how good it feels to let yourself drift into the fullest influence of the darker Messiahs. You can’t remember why you ever thought to live apart from it. Your last coherent thought is that these motherfuckers don’t stand a single bitch’s chance. Then the chucklevoodoos take you.

> Vriska: Be the hero, save the army

You officially have no idea what the fuck is going on. One second you’re chilling in the command center of the cool-as-shit space pirate’s flagship waiting for SOMEBODY—Fussyfangs, Terezi, Peixes…you would even take four-eyes Thollukth Captor for crying out loud—to quit wasting time going “boo-hoo oh, poor Karkat, whatever shall we do” long enough tell you where the hell they want your army to go. (Not that you don’t feel bad for Karkat. He’s a decent guy even if he is obnoxious as fuck, but god you would think that at the very least Terezi would hold her shit together.) The next second you have a platoon of about two hundred Imperial warships popping out of nowhere and beating the shit out of your rebellion fleet.
You can barely see anything through the endless barrage of lasers and plasma cannon blasts. What you can see is enough to make your blood boil: smaller ships trying to escape and getting blown to smithereens, bigger ships sitting there doing nothing as the warships take out all their weaponry, even more ships weaving through the whole thing like the drivers are high on sopor as they try to avoid the Imperial death hail and fucking running into each other like idiots, and nobody—nobody—attempting to fight back. Your ship is shuddering against the force of the blasts hard enough you can barely stand up, but you manage to stagger over to the control panel, toggle the COMM button selector to BROADCAST and send out the fleetwide order to “Get your shields to full capacity and fire back, you dumb shits!”

A few more seconds of utter chaos later, the fireworks display of exploding ships settles enough to let you see things a little more clearly. There are holes in your fleet. Big, fucking holes filled with all manner of debris. Bits of torn-up engine here, a thermal hull scarred black, half a yellow recuperacoon just floating through space like flotsam on a calm ocean. Something orange-yellow-red and cylindrical—somebody’s horn—bounces off your viewport. You slam your hand down on the control panel and shout, “God fucking damn it!”

Your COMM button pings, the screen beside it flashing a message:

![Incoming video conference call request from Sufferer’s Legacy
Accept? Y/N](image)

You select the “Yes” option with a groan because you already have a good idea of who is calling. A second later, the menu screen is gone and—sure enough—Equius Zahhak’s sweaty mug is on your screen.

“Serket,” he says.

“Zahhak,” you reply. You can’t see his moirail around his muscle-bound self, but you don’t doubt that she’s close by so you add, “Leijon.”

Nepeta’s voice comes to you over the speakers: “Hi, Vriska!” (And fuck yeah of course you were right. You always are!)

“It appears as though the Empire has become privy to our plans,” says Equius.

You roll your eyes. “Wow, no shit. Got any ideas on what we’re going to do about this clusterfuck?”

Equius puckers his lips like he wants to lecture you about your “100d language” because he’s a stodgy doofus with a stick permanently inserted up his ass but then Nepeta lets out a shriek that makes both you and him jump. At first you think that their ship got hit and they’re about to explode or something—but the comm connection doesn’t dramatically dissolve into a wall of snow and you realize then that Nepeta isn’t screaming. She’s laughing like a fucking hyena, clapping her hands, and shouting, “Yes! Oh my god, Equius, look outside, look!”

You flick your attention to the viewport and would you look at that, one of the warships is going down in flames. You can’t tell whether it was your pirates or whether it was one of the Cultist’s bigger cruisers that put in the killing blow but either way you have to pause a second to think hell yeah, that’s what I’m talking about right there!
You are so stoked that you don’t even notice that Equius is talking again until you hear him say the word “retreat.”

You don’t wait for him to finish after that. Nope, you interrupt him nice and loud to show him exactly how little you think of that stupid turd of an idea. “Retreat? Are you even serious right now?”

He gives you another puckered lip bitch face, but—thank fuck—Nepeta seems to share your sentiments of that’s a really freaking dumb idea because she says, “But Equius, we just shot down one of their ships! We can take them—we should stay and fight!”

“No we cannot ‘take them’,” he replies. “They decimated 8.3 percent of our forces in a single charge and they clearly have more artillery and resources at their disposal.”

You shake your head. “That shit is for losers and scared little bitches. I’m not running away like a fucking coward.”

“I see nothing cowardly in living to fight another day.”

Nepeta lets out another squeal and shouts, “Equius, they got another one!”

You grin, nice and sharp because you’re right and that sweatbag is wrong and you both know it. “There,” you say. “You see? They took us by surprise but we still outnumber them and now they’re dropping like flies. Everything is going to be fine.”

“Have you looked at your radar in the last few minutes? I strongly advise you do so now, and try doubling the radius of the tracking area.”

You give him the biggest eye roll (you are the eye roll queen. It is you) and flip him off but you do as he asks. You sit there, grumbling under your breath about “ugh, how can he be this big of a sissy when he’s that physically strong” as the radar display screen recalibrates. When the recalibration completes, your jaw practically hits the floor at what you see. It takes you a full twenty seconds to recover from your shock and even then, all you can do is shake your head and breathe a single word to summarize what you are looking at: “Shit.”

There is a white dot in the middle of the radar screen to represent your ship. Within the standard tracking area radius around your white dot, there is mostly open space speckled with blue dots corresponding to friendly ships and red dots corresponding to the Imperial warships. In that space, there are clearly more blue dots than red dots— but out towards the edges of your new radius, far beyond the default tracking radius, there is a solid ring of red. The red ring is so thick it extends all the way to the edge of the screen and it is slowly closing in on your area of open space.

Equius is talking again and this time you listen as he says, “This is not intended to be a fair fight. If we remain here for even five more minutes, it will be too late to escape. It will become a massacre.”

“OK,” you sigh. “New game plan. Operation: abscond the fuck out of here is officially a go.”

You mash the END CALL button and wait until the screen goes dark before you let out a frustrated scream and kick the control panel in front of you so hard you end up hopping around trying to rub your foot for a few seconds because ow, you are pretty sure you just broke your damn toe. When the screaming pain in your foot dulls down to a quiet throb, you use the COMM button to send out another fleet-wide announcement: “Change in plan, folks. Initiate retreat measures. This is not a drill.”

You have to give your fleet some credit because you do not get a single retaliatory backtalk
transmission. Nobody even hesitates. Every ship, big and small, pirate and Cultist cuts and runs. Or at least, that’s what they try to do. The warships immediately snap into action, screaming off another heavy artillery charge that herds your fleet back together and forces you right back to where you started. They don’t hit any of your ships this time, but the message is still loud and clear: you aren’t going anywhere as long as we’re here. You groan and kick your control panel again (more gently this time, with the other foot) because even though you probably do have the means to fight off these chucklefucks and punch a hole in their blockade, you just do not have the time.

Except….

Except maybe not. You’ve still got one more trick up your sleeve. Even though it’s a long shot, it might work and hell, even if it doesn’t it still has the potential to let you say you fucked these bastards’ shit up on your way out. Either way, you figure it’s worth a shot.

You take a deep breath and try to focus. It’s been a long time since you tapped into your mind control powers and it takes you a few seconds to flip that rusty switch in your brain, but once you do it feels perfectly natural. When you were younger, you used to bring your fingers up to your temples when you did this, less because you thought it would make your powers work better and more because you just thought it looked cool. You decide to do it now for good luck because you need every last morsel of luck you can get if this is going to go the way you want it to.

With your fingers on your temples, you let your consciousness wander off your ship, across the empty space, onto a warship. You encounter plenty of weak-willed lowblood trolls ripe for a hefty dose of Serket mindfuck roaming around onboard but you aren’t interested in any of them. No, you let your mind wander deep into the core of the ship, into the helmsblock until you find the helmsman—the brown blood helmsman without a single thought or will left inside his burned-out pan.

Over the next few minutes, you repeat the process with as many of the warships as you can. You find plenty more empty helmsmen: two more browns (yes), five maroons (hell yes), and a whopping twelve yellows (hell fucking yes.) You hold them in the back of your consciousness, telling them to wait for just a second, just wait. Then you punch the COMM button again.

For half a second you are tempted to tell everyone to “stay put; I’ve got this” but no, you can already feel yourself starting to fatigue under the strain of maintaining control over the twenty unresisting trolls you’ve got right now. There is no way you are going to have the stamina to take out the slaughter-platoon’s worth of warships that are coming your way by yourself. Your fleetwide announcement is therefore nothing more than: “On my mark, charge through and retreat.”

A voice—Equius—crackles on your radio transmitter: “What are you intending to do?”

“You’ll know it when you see it,” you respond. “Now shut up and let me concentrate.”

The line goes dead. You return your full attention to your mind control army to issue a command that resonates as you think it as though your own head has been transformed into a private echo chamber: Fuck shit up. Then you snap back into your own head and watch.

Your command had been to “fuck shit up” and boy do they ever. Two of the warships veer left to smash into the ships beside them. One of them just flares its engines and takes off. Four of them immediately begin firing on the other warships with everything they’ve got and causing a colossal amount of absolute fuckery…it is, in your not-so-humble opinion the most hilarious blockade breaker in the history of everything. Laughing hysterically, you push the COMM button one last time to say, “All right; time to go!”

This time none of the warships get in your way because they are all too busy trying to untangle the
colossal clusterfuck of hilarity that you have inflicted on them. You know as your fleet fucks off for safer harbors that this is probably only a temporary fix. There is no question in your head that the massive armada of red death is going to find you and your fleet and that it’s probably going to happen sooner rather than later—but at this moment you cannot even be bothered to care because *hell yeah, you are fucking awesome!*

> **Terezi: Rescue your friend(s)**

About five seconds after Sollux announces that he is docking with the Battleship Condescension, it hits you: the enormity of what you are about to do. As far as you know, this is the first time in Alternian history in which somebody has covertly boarded the Condescence’s personal flagship. You are aware that there is a reason for this. You suspect that it’s because nobody has ever been stupid enough to attempt it.

Seriously, what the hell are you thinking? For all you know, there could be a bunch of Imperial guards hanging out by the airlock just waiting for the door to open so they can murder the shit out of you and even if there isn’t, there’s a whole host of other shit that can go horribly wrong. You could wander around for days on a ship this size and never find Karkat because he could be literally anywhere onboard. How you are going to avoid getting caught—*like the last time you tried to do something like this, when you almost got killed and Sollux got helmsed and you ended up leaving without Karkat besides*—you have no idea. And inviting Aradia (or to be more precise, Aradia who looks like a human and will stick out like a freaking sore grope digit no matter where you go) on your little “rescue Karkat take two” mission was probably your dumbest decision of all.

You always used to pride yourself on being smart and logical. Even when your actions seemed to hold neither rhyme nor reason for anybody else, there was always a method to your madness. It was what led Goldhorn to select your for fast-track Legislacerator training several perigees ago and it was what made you such a dangerous FLARP player sweeps before that. But now here you are acting on a plan that isn’t so much a plan as a hopeless wish (*save Karkat*) and nothing about what you are doing is smart or logical and *you are going to get your friends killed, you are*—Sollux is talking.

huh, he says. that wa2 weiiird.

Aradia looks at you and politely decides to ignore your internal freakout session before she turns to Sollux and asks, “What was weird?”

ii wa2 fuckiing around wiith the 2ecuriity code2 2o we could dock wiithout triigeriing a 2hiitload of alarm2 and 2omebody el2e came iin and took the whole dockiing alert 2y2tem offline.

“Who would do that?” you ask.

that ii2 the weiiird part. ii thiink ii2 wa2 the helm2man.

The perplexity gland secretions are running so thick that between the three of you, you are practically gagging on a big cloud of collective *what the hell.* Aradia says, “Why would the helmsman…?”

You hear the rustling sound that the biowires make when Sollux does something approximating a shrug. (It’s a weird motion that comes from the shoulder blades because his actual shoulders are all too jacked up to give a proper shrug.) who care2? he says. we have a free ride two dock now.

You shake your head, your imaginings involving Imperial guards hanging out by airlocks returning
with gusto. “What if it’s a trap?”

ii really don’t think that it is. I am synchronizing with the docking bay camera right now and there is nobody out there. He pauses and when he speaks again his voice has an edge to it, the kind of darkly irritated tone he takes whenever he gets to talking about a line of code that isn’t behaving the way he wants: hold up, there is somebody out there after all. I don’t think he will allow you guys down two much, though.

You knit your brows, wondering how he can be so sure of that. When you ask him who he sees, his response only furthers your curiosity. He pauses and says, “Go to the airlock. You will see.”

It must not be anybody like the bruise who we ran into back on that space station, you think as you follow Aradia out of the helmsblock. A newbie recruit, or maybe an Administrangler. When you get to the airlock, you stand there psyching yourself up for a fight (Strike hard and fast. No dawdling. No giving them easy opportunities.) Aradia is standing beside you, and from the smell of stress fluid wafting from her pores you are going to wager a guess that she is every bit as on edge as you are (if not more. You didn’t realize it until now but she is totally unarmed. Chalk up another demerit against this ridiculous non-plan of yours.)

The airlock hisses open. You come barrelling out with your double blades drawn and at the ready to lop the head clean off the shoulders of anybody standing in your way. You smell brined grapes—seadweller—to your right so you charge right, raise your blades—and come to an abrupt halt when the target of your wrath lets out an undignified yelp and shouts, “Ter, stop! It’s me, goddamn it! Stop!”

“Eridan?” you gasp. The tip of your right blade is flush against his chest. You know you could end him with a single flick of your wrist and more importantly, you know that he know it, too. You keep your blade right where it is as you ask, “What do you want?”

“I’m trying to help, I swear!” he exclaims.

“Just like you ‘helped’ by betraying Karkat?” you demand. You add the tiniest bit of pressure to the blade sitting up against his chest. It’s really not enough to do more than poke a hole in his shirt, but it’s enough to make him awfully damn nervous.

“I know where Kar is,” he half-pleads. “I’ll take you to him if you’ll just stop pretending you’re about to murder me—ow.”

You flash him a smile and savor the smell of the plummy purple bruise that is already beginning to appear where you whacked him on the cheek with the flat of one of your blades. “All right, Mr. Grapey Popsicle. Lead on.” You wait for him to turn and get in front of you before you press the tip of your blade against his back, right between his shoulderblades and add, “But don’t try any funny business or you’ll be down a few limbs.”

“OK. God,” he replies. He mutters something under his breath that you probably wouldn’t have heard if you didn’t have the benefit of being totally blind for the past several sweeps and thus, way the hell more reliant on all your other handy senses like hearing. (It’s “Crazy fucking broad.”) You decide to be charitable and let it slide because he is the only person between you who has a single inkling with regards to where Karkat is at the moment.

Eridan leads you and Aradia through a maze of hallways that smell, to put it frankly, like a gaudy kaleidoscope of ostentatious wealth on display. You haven’t been walking for more than a few minutes before your nose is so full of gold you might as well be drowning in it. You suppose some people might be impressed by the never-ending parade of “look how rich I am—no wait! Now look
—oh, hold up! Why yes I am still rich as fuck, thanks for noticing.” You don’t really see the attraction, not in small part due to the fact that the color gold doesn’t give off a very interesting scent at all. (Nothing like a nice, bright red or a cool, refreshing blue or even a cheery lemon yellow! Nope, it’s just metal honey that sits in your sinuses and gives you a headache.)

You walk for so long that you seriously begin to believe that Eridan has no idea where he is going (or worse, that he’s leading you into a trap). Then a new smell comes to you. At first it’s just a trace of something you can’t quite identify, but it quickly intensifies until it is so strong you can barely believe that Eridan and Aradia can’t smell it, too. Steely copper and raw meat rolled into a cocktail that has a mild yet distinct edge of organic rot: blood, and lots of it.

You already know where—who—the blood is coming from because more than the coppery metal or the raw meat or the organic rot, you smell red. Even so, when Eridan comes to an abrupt stop, you find yourself thinking that you were wrong, he was leading you to Karkat and you’ve arrived well before you ever reached the source of that smell. You hold onto that hope for only a few seconds before reason dashes it to the ground: you are standing at a junction with a smaller hallway and Karkat is nowhere to be smelled. Clearly, this is not your final destination. To that end, you scratch the tip of your blade up and down along Eridan’s vertebral stack and demand, “Why are we stopping here?”

“Fucking hell, Ter, will you stop with the I’m about to kill you theatrics already?” he whines. You just stare at him until he sighs and says, “OK. So there’s a bit of a kink in the plan. It turns out one of the human kids—John? He’s here, too.”

You and Aradia do not need to exchange a look in order to coordinate your reaction of total shock. No, you both exclaim “What?” in perfect, synchronized harmony.

Eridan looks down at the floor because apparently the cold ice-white tile is suddenly super interesting. “He tried to save Kar back on the beach,” he explains. He throws his hands up in front of himself as though to protect himself from the scathing looks you and Aradia are giving him before adding, “What? It wasn’t my fault!” You and Aradia continue your pejorative glaring until he sighs and says, “OK, maybe it was. But the point is he’s here now and in a totally different place than Kar. We’re going to have to split up.”

You give him a long look, trying to sniff out any signs of deceit. You smell nothing but earnest truth. “OK,” you say. Turning to Aradia, you ask, “How do you want to do this?”

“It might be better if I go for John,” she responds. “He’d probably be happier with somebody who can understand what he is saying.”

“In that case you’ll be going with me,” says Eridan. He turns to you, says, “Ter, if you keep following this hall you’ll end up in this big throne room. Kar’s in there.”

“Yeah,” you reply. “I know. I can smell him.”

A moment of supreme silent discomfort follows this statement. Aradia is good enough to break it with, “Rendezvous back at the ship then?”

You nod. “Sounds good to me.”

You are about to start off down the hall but Eridan clears his throat and says, “Oh, Ter? One last thing.” He presses something into your hand: cold metal with a jagged edge, but too short and too dull to be much use as a weapon—a key. “Take this with you. You’re going to need it.”
You thank him, give him and Aradia a quick wave, and then you are going one way and they are going another, the sound of their footsteps fading fast as you make your way along the curving hallway. The copper-meat-rot smell intensifies as you go. No doubt about it, you think. I’m definitely getting close to the source. The thought has no sooner entered your head when the hallway deposits you in front of a set of double doors. There are stones scattered over the door, big pink gems that would probably smell like delicious rock candy if the smell of blood wasn’t so overpowering. You take a deep breath. Then you duck inside.

The room you find yourself in is huge and…empty? No. Finding the source of the blood is hard when the whole room reeks of blood and burning meat (?), but you manage to pinpoint it to a substantial puddle of red on the floor. The puddle is at the end of a trail. The trail leads to a pair of feet up against the wall on the right. The feet belong to a troll (or rather, somebody you know to be a troll even though he doesn’t look much like one anymore). The troll has blood all over him—on his arms, on his legs, in his hair, on his back, on his front. His arms are above his head, his wrists locked into oh god that looks like it hurts.

You start toward the troll and even though you really hope he’s dead because at this point it would be merciful if he was, you whisper his name: “Karkat….”

He doesn’t do or say anything to acknowledge your presence as you approach and at first you think that maybe he actually is dead already. Then you hear him breathing, an ugly crackling noise that sounds like he’s slurping a milkshake up through a straw. His face is a mess of blood-puke-tears—name it. You reach out, try to wipe some of it away so you can at least see some of Karkat underneath it all.

The second your hand comes into contact with his skin, he gasps and tries to twist away with a weak scream. You jerk your hand away but he keeps writhing until you are legitimately concerned that he is going to hurt himself even worse. Quickly, you say, “Karkat! Karkat, stop. It’s OK. It’s me.”

He sags against the shackles at the sound of your voice. His right eye flutters open and his left eye tries but it only makes it about a quarter of a way there. He looks at you, rasps out your name, and then he’s sobbing “No, oh god, fuck, she got you too, fuck, I’m sorry.”

“Nobody ‘got me’,” you reply. “I’m here to get you out.”

He stops crying, says, “You are?” Then he says something that worries you, something you know he would never say unless he was exactly as bad off as he looks: “OK.”

You want him to rant at you for being stupid. You want him to shout about how you shouldn’t be risking your life to save his. You want to shake him, slap him, do something to make him say all of the stupid things you know he would say if he could. All you do is say, “Let’s get you out of those things.”

The metal is still warm enough to hurt as you feel for the keyholes. Your fingers are burning by the time you manage to fit the key into the first lock but you don’t let go until the key turns. The shackle doesn’t open by itself. Karkat groans when you pry it open and the metal—the burning hot metal—takes the skin off his wrist. His arm falls like dead weight, but you catch him before he loses his balance and ends up hanging by his other arm.

“Here,” you say, pressing the head of your cane into his free hand. “Use this.”

He’s shaking, eyes closed and you think that he might not have heard or understood you but then he’s shifting his weight off of you and onto the cane. You give him a quick once-over to make sure that he’s not going to collapse if you move away. Then you get to work on the other shackle.
He doesn’t moan when you open the second shackle. Instead he lets out a strangled cry and then he’s losing your cane and losing his balance. You catch him under his armpits and end up staggering down to your knees with his head mashed up against your chest but hey, at least you don’t drop him.

“Come on,” you whisper. “Help me help you stand up.”

You try to get up but he just hangs on your arms like a sack of earth tubers that smells like blood and sweat. Frowning, you say, “Karkat? Can you walk?”

His response is muffled because he says it into your chest, but you hear it loud and clear: “Just leave me here. Don’t want you to get caught because of me.”

“Nope. Not an option. Either we go together or we stay here together. Nobody gets left behind. That’s the deal.”

You feel like shit using such a bullshit manipulative ploy, but it’s the only thing you know will coax him into doing what you need him to do fast. Sure enough, you feel him struggling to get his legs under himself. Together, you manage to get him on his feet. He’s wobbly and he would fall if he didn’t have an arm looped around your shoulders, but he’s upright and hell, that’s a start. Carefully, you start to hobble toward the door.

Your progress is painfully slow. Karkat barely seems to have the strength to lift his feet high enough to clear the floor between steps and his knees keep trying to give out on him as you go. You end up supporting almost all of his weight, half-dragging him with you just to keep him from falling face-first on the floor. It takes you several minutes just to make it across the room. Considering just how slow you are moving, you go a miraculously long time without any encountering a single soul, friendly or otherwise.

When you are halfway back to Sollux, you hear a machine gun fire clack-clack of fast-approaching heeled boots. You do not know anybody who wears boots with stiletto heels, so you come to the perfectly reasonable conclusion that the troll coming toward you is none other than the ruler of all trollkind herself, Her Imperial Royal Condescension. (Of course, you know that the Condesce isn’t the only troll capable of wearing stiletto-heeled boots. Still, the intensifying smell of salted raspberry-flavored rock candy and copious amounts of aggravation sponge fluid does a lot to lend credence to your theory.)

Cursing under your breath, you lug Karkat over to the nearest door. A quick jiggle of the handle is enough to confirm that the door is mercifully unlocked, so you throw it open, haul Karkat inside, and kick it shut.

The room is larger than you were expecting and filled to the brim with the scent of plastic and synthetic flesh—biowires. Helmsblock. You are in the ship’s helmsblock and if you let your nose wander just a little, you can smell the poor bastard serving as the helmsman. It comes as a shock to you that he is old. Older than old, really. Everything about him smells faint from the stale mustard of his blood to the dried-up appleberry of his psionics and…appleberry?

You sniff again, more closely this time and you sense two sets of horns…oversized teeth…a caste symbol, faded almost beyond recognition, but still recognizable to you because you know it, you've seen it hundreds of times. There is in short nothing to convince you that the troll you are smelling is not Sollux Captor’s ancestor.

Part of you—the part that aches every time you think about what (shouldn’t have) happened to your moirail—wants to go to the troll trapped in the wires just to see if there is anything you can do for him. The larger, more rational part of you knows that you can’t—you have Karkat and you have to
get back to the ship and you just do not have time to dawdle here with a troll who could be Sollux a couple hundred sweeps from now.

You wait for the sound of the Condesce’s footsteps to pass; wait for them to fade far, far away before you reach for the door and—nope, Karkat’s coughing. It’s too loud and it’s forceful enough you are having a hard time keeping him up off the floor and it goes on and on and on until finally he sags against you, gasping for breath. You stand there with your arms around him, just trying to keep him from falling down until he can catch his breath.

You’re still holding him when he shifts his weight a bit, putting you almost cheek to cheek. His voice is just a croaking whisper as he says, “I don’t think I’m going to hold on for much longer. I just…..” He trails off and you worry that he’s about to launch into another nasty coughing fit, but he doesn’t. Instead he shifts his weight a bit more, twists so he is facing you and…is he trying to kiss you? You’re pretty sure he’s trying to kiss you but it’s heavy with the taste of copper cherry blood and there’s barely any conviction behind it. You can smell him crying and you think you might be crying too, but you kiss him back anyway because you pity this dumb jerk so much it hurts.

A dry, weak voice says, K4NKRI

You abruptly pull your lips away from his to sweep the room for other trolls. You hadn’t thought that there was anybody else in here with you besides the helmsman and there is no way it could have been him because he’s too old, he’s been plugged in for too long for there to be much of a troll left in there at all. The voice is back; an old man’s voice that clearly hasn’t been used in a very long time: K4NKRI 15 7H47 Y0U

You turn your attention over to the helmsman and oh god, you smell a sharp appleberry gaze focused directly on you. He is definitely awake and definitely aware of your presence. Very slowly you sidle toward the door of the helmsblock. Or at least, that is what you try to do.

Karkat isn’t moving with you. You think at first that maybe he’s finally passed out, but no. He’s digging his heels in, pulling you back, doing everything he can to keep you right where you are, and doing a surprisingly good job of it for somebody who can barely even stand up.

Putting on your best Legislacerator under fire in the courtblock voice, you say: “Come on, Karkat. Time to go.”

You make another try for the door but he just digs his heels in even harder as he says, “No, wait. It’s OK. I think I know who he is. Kanaya told me…told me about him.”

You shake your head because what? How on Alternia could Kanaya know anything about the Condesce’s helmsman? The only conclusion you can come to is that all the blood loss has left Karkat totally delirious. Yep, that’s it. Clearly, the only course of action you can take is to drag him out of here before he does something to put you both in danger but whoops, too late: he’s already doing that right now.

“I’m sorry,” he says. (You wince, half because his voice is still just a reedy warble even though he is trying to speak more loudly and half because ugh, what is he even thinking?) “I’m not Kankri.”

You don’t have to smell the appleberry stare this time. It’s so intense you can feel it ghosting over your skin like a wave of tingling static electricity. N0, says the helmsman. 8U7 1 KN0W WH0 Y0U 4R3

“You do?”
Y35. R3N3G4D3 A pause. Then: JU57 L1K3 H1M

Karkat shakes his head. “No. I’m not. Not really.”

3V3N 50UND L1K3 H1M. 47 7H3 3ND.

Karkat looks at you like maybe you know what this guy is talking about. You give him a look back that says hell if I know; you’re the one who knows who he is. The helmsman says, G0. I W1LL N07 4LL0W H3R 70 F1ND Y0U

Karkat doesn’t make any move toward the door, though you have a distinct inkling that is less due to being frozen with shock and more due to still being horribly injured. You take the initiative to half-drag him to the door. The helmsman’s voice follows you as you step out of the helmsblock: I W1LL K33P Y0U S4F3 7H15 71M3 K4NK1.

You aren’t sure how much stock you should put in a promise from the helmsman of the metaphorical Big Bad. Still, you start on your way and even though it takes you forever, you manage to reach the docking bay without meeting anybody. By the time you get there, Karkat isn’t trying to move his legs anymore. He’s just sagging all his weight on the arm he’s got draped over your shoulders, an arm that wouldn’t be strong enough to manage even that if you weren’t securing it there yourself.

You board the ship and hobble the short distance to the helmsblock with Karkat mumbling to you all the while about how he’s sorry for being a complete piece of trash and making you do all the work.

When you enter the helmsblock, John is the first to notice your arrival. He takes one look at you, wails Karkat’s name, and closes the distance between you at a dead sprint. He shoots a string of frantic English at you and even though you can’t understand any of the words, it’s pretty clear that he is beyond distraught.

Karkat says something back to John and then John is spitting out another string of stuff you can’t understand outside of the general tone of really super distraught. Clearly, they have a lot to talk about at the moment. You wave at John with your free arm to catch his attention, motion for him to help you sit Karkat down. He nods, says something to Karkat (presumably “we’re setting you down now so bear with us”) and then the two of you carefully lower Karkat down until he’s sitting on the ground with John kneeling behind him and hugging him up against his chest to give Karkat somewhere to rest his head.

On the other side of the block, you hear Sollux swearing at the extent of Karkat’s injuries, swearing at Eridan, swearing at the Condesce. You hurry across the block, passing Eridan who is sitting as far away from everybody else as he can get with the reek of regret hanging over him like an opaque cloud of stink, passing Aradia who is watching the whole scene unfold and sadly shaking her head at it all. Sollux must see you coming because he calms down enough to let you say, “Alright, Mr. Appleberry. Time to get our asses out of here.”

He directs one last glance in Karkat’s direction, utters one last fuck before saying, 2o about that. ii wa2 2ort of talkiing two the helm2man on Condy2 2hip whiile you were gone. we came up wiith a plan two take her down riight here, riight now.

“Oh really?” you say, raising your eyebrows. “What is it?”

he ju2t 2hut down all the 2hiel2 2y2tem2 on her 2hiip. all iit would take ii2 one 2oliid hiit. none of our weapon2 have the fiirepower two take her down but that ii2 okay becau2e we happen two have 2omethiing wiith u2 right now that ii2 biig, heavy, and move2 very fa2t.

Your raise your eyebrows because he’s taken on a cheeky edge to his voice. You are about to tell
him that *right now* is not exactly the best time for being coy, but at the last second you decide to play along instead so you say, “And that would be…?”

look around. pretty sure you will figure it out on your own.

You frown, do a quick sweep of the helmsblock and notice nothing out of the ordinary. Then it hits you all at once and you understand exactly what he is implying. “Oh my god,” you breathe. “Will that even work?”

we ran the figure 2. ramp up our shield, get going fast enough, and yeah. it had a good shot of fucking her up pretty good.

“Can this ship take something like that?”

only one way two find out.

You shake your head, give him a pap, and say, “Fuck it. Let’s do it, you crazy jerk.”

He nods, raises his voice for the benefit of everybody else onboard as he announces everyone hold on because this is going to suck.

Then you hear the engines rev into a high whine as he pushes them into overdrive, past overdrive, as high as they will go. The whole ship lurches forward so suddenly it almost knocks you flat on your ass. The ship accelerates faster, so fast your whole body feels heavy. Then, when it seems as though you cannot possibly move any faster, there is a jolt that is so abrupt it actually does knock you on your ass. There is a scream of metal on metal that makes your vertebral stack shudder and the jolt evolves into a rattling that you feel down to the roots of your teeth as Sollux grinds the ship up through the triple-reinforced underbelly of the Battleship Condescension, up through its multi-leveled warren of hallways full of ridiculous excess, up until you emerge from the roof of that flying red nightmare, leaving behind an open gash that is irreparable, inescapable and, above all, deadly as hell.

Pretty much everybody except you is screaming, either at Sollux, at each other, or just straight-up screaming throughout the entire process. When the ship stops behaving like a giant earthquake simulator and things calm down a bit, Eridan looks directly at Sollux and demands “What the *f*uck was that?”

that, says Sollux, was winning the war. oh my god, he is going down HARD. i can’t believe that worked. Fuck, i can’t believe we survived.

The words have only just left his mouth when the ship gives a sudden stomach-turning lurch. You have only just started to get back on your feet, so of course, you end up right back on the ground again.

“Er…is that supposed to happen?” Aradia inquires from her newly-found position on the floor.

fuck. no. i think we might be crashing. Another vertiginous lurch prompts him to amend this disquieting assessment to yeah. definitely crashing.

There is one last lurch, and then the ship goes into what you can only describe as “unabashed freefall.” The result is total pandemonium. John screaming and trying to hold onto Karkat, Eridan screaming at Sollux to *f*ucking do something, you screaming at Eridan to *shut up, just shut up*, and Sollux screaming at everybody to hang on, goddamn it!

There is a fizz of appleberry psionics strong enough to make your nose burn with ozone and then the ship settles into a drop that is still too fast for comfort but at least it’s a step above uncontrolled freefall. Beside you, Sollux grunts okay. i have it. going two land in four minutes2.
“You can’t sustain this much output for that long,” Aradia says. “You’ll burn out.”

“So fucking help him!” Eridan snaps. “You are a telekinetic, aren’t you?”

She shakes her head. “Not since I lost my horns.”

“Fuck!” Eridan groans. “OK, so what are we going to do then?”

You shrug. “We’re going to crash. Sollux will get us as close as he can—without killing himself—and then we’ll deal with it from there.”

we are almo2t two the ii2land, says Sollux. ii think ii miight be able two get u2 there.

You shake your head because wow, you can smell the mustard-yellow blood that is starting to pour from his nose. Aradia was right this is too much. “Time to let go, Sollux. Now.”

no, ju2t a liittle further.

“Sollux,” Aradia warns.

not yet.

The blood is dripping down his chin, beads of it starting to well in the corners of his eyes. You are about to yell at him to let go, goddamn it but then he finally gasps, okay that2 iit. hang on.

The crackle of active psionics fizzles out. The ship drops. It seems as though you are suspended in time as you hover in the weightlessness, like the moment lasts forever.

Then 5…

4…

3…

2…

1…

You hit.

> EOA4 (part 2/2)
Rose: Prevent an interspecies throwdown

While the importance of preventing any hoopla between Interpol and your newly-acquired extraterrestrial allies is not lost on you, that is not your area of concern at the moment in large part due to the fact that you, Dave, and Jade have already exhausted every option at your disposal to avoid this dreaded interspecies throwdown. Jade, being the most acquainted with the island and all its hiding places, has already spirited Kanaya and Feferi away to a safe hiding place. As for Sollux and the spacecraft to which he is unfortunately integrated, both lifted off a few minutes ago, presumably with Terezi, Eridan, and Aradia onboard. You are in précis, as prepared as you are going to be on that front and therefore free to focus all of your attention on a different yet equally pressing matter at hand: what you and all of the other human occupants of the island are going to do once the Interpol helicopters arrive.

You are currently sitting with Dave in Jade’s home, waiting for her to return with John and Karkat so the five of you can formulate some semblance of a plan. The two of you have been waiting since well before the spaceship on the beach took off and disappeared into the stratosphere. Dave is beginning to get antsy, tapping his feet on the ground and drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair. You are also beginning to feel more than a touch of nerves, though you have not yet felt the need to resort to fidgeting to relieve them.

“I’m telling you,” he says. “We should have all just piled our asses onto that sweet-ass space ship and bailed while we had the chance.”

“Yes, but I’m afraid that ship has sailed in both the literal and figurative sense.”

He swivels in his chair, the better to look at you as he says, “Was that supposed to be a joke? Like full-on standup comedy club time bullshit? Because if it was then I’m sorry to tell you that joke has a terminal case of the not funnies. Like Adam Sandler since the 90’s went all ollie outtie. Man, Adam Sandler. Freaking tragedy there. Guy used to be pretty dang hilarious and then he woke up one day and went ‘nope, no more funny for me. Just lots of obnoxious crap from now on.’” He pauses and frowns before saying, “Oh my god, where was I even going with that? The point is: don’t turn into Adam Sandler, Rose.”

You raise your eyebrows. “You’re rambling.”

“I know. I do that. You know I do that. Especially when bad shit is on the horizon. Like now. You should totally expect me to be rambling right now. I mean, if I were you I’d be more concerned if I wasn’t rambling. Like oh, Jesus Christ, the shit’s going down and Strider’s not rambling? Take that puppy to the vet because he’s clearly sick as a dog.” He trails off with a sigh. Slouching down into the depths of his armchair, he mumbles, “We’re fucked, aren’t we?”

“Yes. That appears to be an accurate assessment of the situation.”

“And while we’re at it, what the hell is the holdup with Jade?”

You shrug. “Perhaps she is having a harder time with tracking down John and Karkat than anticipated.”

“Yeah, but that seems kind of weird. I mean, this is her island. If some pirate went and buried his gold here like a stupid jackass and someone wanted to give me the map, I’d say screw the map I’ve
got Harley. She knows all the places people could hide or get lost. It shouldn’t take her this long to find them. So where is she?"

From the entryway, Jade’s voice says, “Are you talking about me? Because if you are, I’m right here!”

“Psh. Not everything’s about you all the time, Harley,” Dave replies. Jade scowls and sticks her tongue out at him and he quickly amends, “But yeah. That time totally was about you. Hey, where are John and Karkat?”

“I couldn’t find them anywhere. Seriously, guys, I’m like ninety-nine point nine percent sure that they aren’t on the island anymore. I think…maybe they were on the ship when it left?” She punctuates the remark with a shrug before going on with, “Anyways, I came back up here because there are a whole bunch of choppers headed for the beach right now. Any ideas about how we’re going to handle this?”

You purse your lips, considering the extremely limited number of options you have at the moment. Then, finally, you say, “I think we should go meet them and turn ourselves in.”

The response is an immediate, synchronized, and above all, resounding “What?” uttered in the exact same squawking pitch from both Jade and Dave.

Dave quickly clears his throat in order to add, “OK, no. Look, I know you’re miss college-bound, smarter than a shelf full of Encyclopedia Britannica and all so maybe I’m not following here, but as far as I can tell that is a completely terrible idea.”

“We can’t run,” you say. “There’s nowhere to go. If we hide they’ll just tear the island apart until they find us—or until they find two horned aliens, one of whom happens to be spearheading a revolution that will put a stop to the silent invasion of Earth by putting her in charge of her entire race, and the other who happens to be acting as central command for half of the armed forces participating in said revolution.”

“Oh,” Jade whispers. “I guess I didn’t think about it that way. But wouldn’t they still tear the place apart looking for John and Karkat?”

“Possibly. But if we are cooperative, they might be more inclined to listen to us when we tell them all about how we decided to ditch Karkat and John at our fuel stop in Guam because they were the ones everybody was after and were therefore too much of a liability to keep with us.”

“That’s our story?” says Dave.

“Unless you can devise anything better,” you reply.

“Nah, it’s fine,” he says. “It kind of makes us sound like a bunch of dicks, though.”

“Hey speak for yourself!” Jade exclaims. “I never saw either of them, remember? That means that you two are the real dicks and I have a clean slate.”

You nod. “Excellent. Unless there are any other questions, I’m going to say it’s time to get down to the beach.”

The three of you start toward the front door. As you leave the room, Jade neatly flips a shotgun out of an umbrella stand and slings it over her shoulder—a maneuver that leads Dave to raise one eyebrow (his left, you note) and plant himself directly in front of her. “Whoa there, deadeye,” he says. “Showing up armed to the teeth like fucking Rambo doesn’t exactly scream ‘we come in peace
please arrest us and put us in your shitty international gulag.’ Maybe leave the huge-ass gun here?”

Jade looks at the firearm in her hands and sets it back into the umbrella stand with an embarrassed giggle. “Oops. I didn’t even realize I did that. Old habits die hard, I guess.”

The helicopters are so loud once you are outside that it would be impossible to miss them even if you had no idea where they were intending to land. As it is, you have no trouble locating the three gray helicopters closing in on the beach. You, Jade, and Dave hurry down the trail, running too quickly to speak between yourselves. Unfortunately, even with the sharp downhill grade of the mountain trail to speed you along, you are not fast enough to make it to the beach before the helicopters do. Not only have all three helicopters landed by the time you get there, a contingent of officers clad in the white-on-royal blue bulletproof vests universally associated with law enforcement has poured out of them and begun to comb the beach.

You stand at the junction between beach and trail with Jade and Dave, trying to catch your breath as the officers continue to survey the beach. Beside you, Jade whispers, “So how are we going to do this?”

“Just follow my lead,” you whisper back. You put your hands up, palms out and, voice loud enough to carry across the open space yet still light with an easy, amicable tone, you say, “Good afternoon, officers.”

Every one of the officers stops what they are doing and there are suddenly fifteen eyes all watching your every move. Very, very slowly, you start forward. “What seems to be the problem?”

One of the officers, a middle-aged man with hard lines etched around the creases of his mouth, says, “Rose Lalonde?”

Keeping your hands up, you nod. He points to Dave and Jade standing behind you and says, “Dave Strider? Jade Harley?”

They presumably nod because he lets his hand drop and says, “Agent Wilson.”

He makes a gesture to the officers standing near him and they begin to advance on the three of you. “Keep your hands where we can see them. You are all under arrest.”

“Yes; we figured that may have been your intent,” you respond. Two officers seize your arms, one on each side. A third begins to methodically pat down your shoulders, sleeves, the wasteland of your skirt, your socks. Behind you, you can hear Jade and Dave receiving the same treatment. You do your best to ignore your somewhat undignified position. Keeping your eyes on Agent Wilson, you say, “Is there anything we can do to make this process run more smoothly?”

He reels off your Miranda rights like a practiced machine (Ah, you think. I suppose that means that Jade’s island is a US territory after all. You take a moment to appreciate the resolution of a mystery that has sat idle in the back of your mind for several years.) Immediately following the conclusion of his legal recitation, Agent Wilson says, “If you want to help us out, you will tell us the whereabouts of John Egbert and Karl Vantross at this moment.”

“They’re not here,” says Dave. “Seriously, man, getting caught with like the top two America’s Most Wanted? No thanks. We cut them loose in Guam.”

Jade plays along admirably by letting out a sharp gasp and exclaiming, “You did what? I thought you said they got themselves caught, you giant dick!”

Agent Wilson holds up a hand and Jade goes quiet with an indignant huff. Addressing you and...
Dave, he says, “So they’re in Guam. Can you recall the exact date and time you left them there?”

“Yes, it was two days ago at….” You trail off because something has caught your attention. There is a speck high in the sky; a speck that is rapidly growing in size as it descends with alarming speed toward the ocean below.

“Miss Lalonde?” says Agent Wilson. You shake your head and keep staring at the sky as you realize that there are in fact two specks: one large and falling fast, the other significantly smaller and descending in a jerky yet apparently semi-controlled manner.

“It was two days ago right around three pm,” says Dave. “That would make it, what, June twenty….” He must finally have noticed what you are looking at because the only two words he utters after this are “oh shit.”

“Three pm on June—“ The far-off whine of a massive failing engine begins to fill the air and now it’s Agent Wilson’s turn to go silent. He glances over his shoulder and catches a perfect view of two alien spacecraft—one immense with a visibly smoking gash torn into its bright red body, the other smaller but immediately recognizable to you with its violet accents—tumbling out of the sky.

For a full thirty seconds, nobody says anything as the failing engine whine grows louder and louder; too loud for casual conversation over the whereabouts of two wanted juvenile criminals, to be honest. Then the larger of the two crafts crashes into the ocean with a colossal sound of splintering metal and rushing water.

One of the officers has just enough time to shout, “What the hell was that?” before the second craft finally loses all semblance of control and plunges down into the water as well.

From somewhere in the foliage just off the trail comes an inhuman scream that sends chills down your spine. There is a sound of something struggling in the bushes, a guttural exchange between two voices in a language that has only existed on Earth for a few short hours—and then Feferi is barreling down the trail and out onto the beach, still screaming as she runs directly into the thick of the officers assembled in front of you.

The officers scatter, letting fly a cloud of exclamations peppered here and there with the choice expletive—but that’s not the only thing they let fly. A few seconds later there are one, two, three gunshots in rapid succession. Feferi stumbles as she claps a hand over her right flank but if anything, she runs for the water at an even faster pace.

Your ears are still ringing with the shots when you hear Dave grunt, “Oh hell no” from behind you. The next thing you know he is running for the tangle of officers that Feferi has just scattered and throwing himself onto one of them—a younger man who is in the process of aiming his still-smoking pistol for another shot at the retreating troll.

The next several seconds are a jumbled mess of confusion. The officer goes down with Dave sprawled on top of him. Agent Wilson screams at Dave to “put your hands on your head; get down and put your hands on your head right now!” Feferi disappears into the rolling surf. Dave wrestles the gun away from the officer under him and throws it halfway across the beach. Then there is another shot—not from a firearm but from an entirely different sort of gun and Dave collapses on the sand with a yelp, writhing as his muscles seize against the taser blast.

When the taser blast ends, four officers (including Agent Wilson and the officer that Dave tackled), all scream at Dave to “stay down and put your hands on your head!” This time he doesn’t try to fight back (A good thing, you think, as approximately half of the officers now have their guns pointed at his head.) Quickly, without even attempting to roll over and get his face free of the sand,
he puts his hands on his head and lays still.

For a few moments—just long enough to believe that the excitement is over—everything is quiet. Then there is a gunshot from behind you and the sound alone is enough to tell you that it came from something far more substantial than the officer’s little peashooter. You look behind you and just as you suspected, you see Jade with a rifle pointing skyward and fire in her eyes.

“I thought we agreed that we weren’t bringing any firearms with us,” you whisper to her as half of the officers (the half not currently aiming for Dave) train their guns on her.

“Sorry,” she whispers back. “I always keep a spare by the beach. And they were hurting Dave.”

You shake your head because yes, you had anticipated that this might go wrong, but you had not imagined that everything would deteriorate quite this fantastically. There is only one element left in order to transform this situation into the perfect storm of total failure so of course, it happens: while half the officers are shouting at Jade to “drop the gun” and Jade is screaming at the officers to “let Dave go” and the other half of the officers are yelling at Dave to “stay down” and Dave is hollering at the officers about “don’t hurt Jade”, Kanaya emerges from the trail and out onto the beach, fixing you with a quizzical look.

You see three officers immediately lift their guns away from Dave to take aim at Kanaya instead, hear one of them exclaim something like “Oh, hell no this is some kind of area 51 bullshit here.” Pursing your lips, you give them the most scathing glare you can summon from the depths of your Lovecraftian grimdark soul and plant yourself directly in front of Kanaya with your arms spread wide. She puts a hand on your shoulder. You put your hand over hers. Then you take a deep breath and bellow, “EVERYBODY FREEZE!”

To your surprise, everybody—Dave, Jade, the officers, even Agent Wilson—stops what they are doing and look at you. You know the shock value of your outburst won’t last for long so you capitalize on it quickly. Turning to Jade, you say, “Put the gun down, Jade.”

She frowns. “But—“


“OK, OK; fine,” she sighs, setting the gun on the sand at her feet.

Voice muffled from his place on the ground, Dave says, “OK, what the hell is going on now?”

You smile. “Dave?”

“Yeah?”

“Please shut up.”

He surreptitiously flips you off. None of the officers seem to notice. Directing your attention to Agent Wilson, you say, “We are going to have a talk right now about what, exactly, is going on here.”

Agent Wilson looks at Kanaya, glances back at the half-submerged spacecraft and replies. “I think that would be a very good idea.”
> Sollux: Detach

Once, when you were still young enough to be figuring out the limits of your psionic powers, you hit a particularly bad streak of super-shitty hyper-happy time. Normally, you would deal with your manic episodes by holing up in your hive and scribbling code over every available surface until you collapsed into your recuperacoon with your fingers cracked and bleeding from the nonstop chalk dust exposure. Or sometimes you would contact AA or KK and send them walls of yellow text for hours until they either came to your hive to force you to get some rest (usually AA) or resorted to blocking you for a few nights (always KK). Not this time, though. No; this time you got the extremely stupid idea into your pan that you were the most powerful psionic ever and you were going to fucking prove it. You were going to do something no other psionic has done, ever because you were feeling awesome. You were going to move a mountain, and not in the figurative sense. Uh-uh. You were literally going to pick up a whole mountain and move it with your mind.

Of course, that went about as well as can be expected. Read: fucking horribly. You had flown your ass out to the closest mountain range and fucked around out there for four nights throwing everything you had at those giant piles of rock until you were spitting blood and on the verge of total burnout. You were damn lucky that Aradia managed to find you and drag your ass back to your hive at the end of that fourth night. The psionic feedback headache that pounced on you mere hours after you were back home left you sicker than you have ever been in your life before or since. For five nights, you were so incapacitated Aradia had to spoonfeed you and help you to the ablution block like you were a wiggler. Hell, for the first few nights the pain was so distracting you couldn’t even remember how to speak properly and you have more than an inkling that Aradia was afraid you’d straight-up melted your pan.

The headache you are experiencing now isn’t as bad as the one you experienced then (thank fuck), but it’s still enough to make you feel pukey and miserable and as an added bonus, it’s not the only thing happening to remind you that your body hates you with a burning passion. You are pretty sure that the force of the impact tore a couple of your ports. You can feel a mixture of blood and biofluid sluicing from the places the wires should be. You can also feel all the damage the ship took on in the crash. The snapped-off cannon turret is a funky tingling in your nonexistent fingers. The smashed-up hull is a dull phantom ache in your chest. You have a feeling that the shattered viewing ports would be doing something with your eyes and ears but—ha—your eyes and ears are already burning as a product of the insane amount of psychic discharge you exposed them to.

Around the helmsblock, your friends are all groaning, slowly getting to their feet. (Everyone except KK, that is. He’s doing all his groaning lying down, but he was lying down to begin with.) You could run a bioscan on their vitals or do a multi-angle check for any visible blood or injuries. (Technically, you already have. The health status sensors send constant streams of data directly into your software for every passenger on the ship.) You decide to use your words instead. Everybody okay?

Everybody sends up a chorus of things that generally equate to “yes”—or to be more accurate, TZ and AA say “yes”, ED says “fuck you, Sol”, KK wheezes “fuck you” and flips you off, and John doesn’t say anything because he has no idea what any of you are talking about. You say, good. Then you notice that something feels...off. You feel unstable, too heavy, like your whole center of gravity is all thrown to shit. You close your eyes, giving full attention to your camera feeds. What you see makes you very quickly amend your assessment from good to FUCK!

TZ’s glasses are hanging onto her by one ear only. Adjusting them so they sit properly, she turns to you, she says, “What is it?”
the 2hip ii2 fuckiing 2iinkiing. that2 what. everybody need2 two get out. now.

There is a long stretch of uncomfortable silence as the full impact of this statement—ugh, pun absolutely not fucking intended—sinks in. Then, from across the room, you hear a wet choking noise coming out of KK, like he’s got a bunch of pebbles clacking around inside his air sponges. Because you have spent the last half hour with his voice echoing inside your pan like the shittiest internal radio station ever, your first thought is welp, this is it; here he goes—but no. You quickly realize that’s not right, that the asshole is laughing as he lies there horking up gobs of nasty shit.

ED stares at him, eyes wide as he demands, “What the fuck, Kar?” (And wow, a flock of oinkbeasts must have gone soaring over your rapidly-sinking party because for once you find yourself agreeing with him on something. Seriously. What the fuck?)

“Jokes on you assholes: I can’t swim,” KK rasps. He lets out one more shit-mired choke-laugh before adding, “Make sure my headstone reads ‘Here lies Karkat Vantas. Survived super-fun playtime with ruthless Empress. Totally fucking wrecked by a little—” another round of ugly coughing overtakes the rest of his one-troll bitching session.

John starts talking to him in English and KK keeps trying to answer him between spitting up strings of gunk because he is a moron. When the coughing fit finally lets him go he lies there gasping for a few seconds before he wheezes, “Scratch that. Apparently John can tow me.”

TZ says, “I can’t swim either.”

“Fuck,” ED mutters. He jabs a finger at AA and says, “Megido, can you swim?”

AA grins. “Yes! I learned not too long after I got to Earth.”

“OK,” says ED. “Good. Ter, I’ll get you back to shore.”

TZ gives him a look that pretty clearly says she’d be much happier stabbing him in the neck with one of her double blades but says, “OK.” Then she turns to you, frowns, and says, “Sollux, what about you?”

You almost laugh because sure, you can’t swim but that’s kind of a moot point when you can just fly and you really can’t understand why TZ is looking at you like that, why she’s plucking at your wires with an expression that suggests she is on the verge of tears and—oh. Oh fuck.

“If we take you out, do you think you can hold on until the space pirates can get here?” asks AA. only one way two fiind out. (Wow, that’s the second time you’ve said that in the last five minutes. You sure hope things go better this time.)

“OK,” sighs TZ, eying the biowires attached to your arms. “How are we going to do this?”

ii dont know. pull them out?

She and AA each grab handfuls of wires (TZ gets the ones going into the small of your back, AA goes for the ones near your shoulders) and pull and ow, ow, OW the wires are too deep, you can feel them tearing you and it hurts.2top, 2TOP! you scream. OW, NO, BAD PLAN, 2TOP!

They both let go of the wires as though they were scorching-hot. “OK,” says TZ. “That’s not going to work. Maybe try cutting them?”

Behind them, ED shakes his head and mutters, “You guys are going to fucking kill him. He is going
to straight-up die if you go through with this.”

“He’s going to die if he stays here,” TZ fires back. She separates her cane into its double blades, hands one to AA. They start sawing away and OK, yeah, this doesn’t exactly feel good but it’s definitely more tolerable. You can handle this—except you soon discover that the wires are very durable, built to weather a lot more abuse than what can be inflicted with a set of straight blades.

Minutes pass and between the two of them, they only manage to sever two small wires apiece. This is taking way too long, you think. They are never going to finish in time.

You are about to tell them to forget it, forget you and get out while they still can—but then something big and gold is slashing through the air above your head, tearing through all the wires holding you in place in one clean sweep. You have just enough time to register that it’s a trident, it’s FF, FF is here before you go tumbling forward. You try to catch yourself with your arms but pff, you don’t have arms anymore, great plan, dumbass. You try to catch yourself with your psionics and ow, nope psionics are not happening right now, try again later. You end up flopping into three sets of arms (TZ-AA-FF) that gently lower you to the ground.

The trident flashes through the air again and your lower body is free; again and the big wires going into you back are off and oh god you can’t see or hear anything; your own eyes and ears seem so weak after half a sweep of multi-angle cameras and constant perceptual data and sound input from everywhere on the ship; but god, you can feel the cold of the floor against your face, you can feel the hands on you—the fleshy, vulnerable you that’s not several tons of reinforced steel and it is so intense it paralyzes you, so intense you can barely even breathe, can’t breathe, can’t—

“Breathe, Sollux,” says AA. “Come on; in and out, deep breaths.”

You suck in a deep breath, feel the cold air traveling through your mouth, all the way down your chitinous windpipe, into your thorax. Then you let out a weak chuckle and croak, “Hey guess what. I don’t hear me screaming with the dead.”

“Well that sounds like a good sign to me!” says FF. “Come on; let’s go.”

You try to get up and your nonexistent arms and your nonexistent legs execute a beautifully nonexistent standing maneuver with a couple of lovely nonexistent pirouettes for good measure. Your actual body just stays face down on the floor, a nigh-immobilized mess of a torso with wires sticking out of it. FF kneels down, easily scoops you up and slings you over her shoulder. Then she’s up and moving, carrying you toward the door of the helmsblock before you can even decide precisely what portion of this situation you want to bitch about. (And god have you got a stockpile of shit to bitch about. You could bemoan the way her shoulder is digging straight into your gut, but then again, being without your psionic power and totally helpless does present a strong case for winning the Worst Thing About This Crapper of a Situation Award.™ The fact that your current position is pretty much just ass to the heavens for all to see over the shoulder of your matesprit really does nothing to improve matters.)

TZ and AA are working with John to get KK on his feet. You hear TZ say, “Come on, Karkat, you need to work with us here. Use your legs”

The pained warble that is KK’s response is too quiet to hear properly with your ears, but you hear it loud and clear inside your head: “Ow, fuck. I can’t. Stop. I’m sorry. I can’t.” You wish you could block it out. (Not that what he’s saying isn’t par for the course for the imminently deceased. This is pretty standard, really, and under normal circumstances shit like this doesn’t hit you so hard. It’s just that hearing KK—loudmouthed, stubborn-as-shit, obnoxious KK—act this way feels wrong, like you’ve stumbled across some kind of dirty secret that you can never unsee or hear.)
FF carries you out of the helmsblock and even though you can’t see what is going on with KK anymore, you can still hear his half of it in your head like you’re listening in on him having some kind of awkward one way Trollian voice chat. You hear him groaning, hear him saying shit in English you can’t understand, hear him say, “What? No, don’t carry me, No, I said don’t!” A few seconds later, you see TZ, AA, and John emerge from the helmsblock carrying between them a beaten, battered KK who is wearing an expression that would probably be something along the lines of disgruntled underneath the lines of pain and exhaustion contorting his face.

You turn your attention away from the scene because it seems like an incredibly uncomfortable situation for all involved, letting your head flop down and rest against the cloud of black that is FF’s hair. God, you love FF’s hair. It’s so soft the way it brushes against your cheeks, and so long (how does she even get it that long?) wait, what?

You look again and oh. Fuck.

“Oh my god,” you groan. “FF, you’re bleeding.”

“I know,” she replies back. She rubs the small of your back and gah, it feels so good even though your body still doesn’t really know what to make of tactile input yet. “Don’t worry. It’s fin.”

It doesn’t look like it’s “fine.” There is a nasty gash above her right hip. It looks like someone tried to slice her open with a home-made piece of shit knife and fucked up fantastically somewhere halfway though. It looks like it hurts like hell. She doesn’t complain, though—not even when you reach a stretch of corridor that is already flooded waist-high and the salt water gets into the wound and sends little curls of fuchsia into the water around her.

“Okray, Shoallux,” she whispers once the two of you reach the exit hatch. “I’m going to have to get you into the water now.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured that,” you mutter back. You twist so you can look out the exit hatch and see the stretch of open water standing between you and the far-off strip of brown and green that stands for safety. “This is going to suck, isn’t it?”

She shrugs. (Her shoulder momentarily digs into your gut even more.) “I don’t know. I promise I will make it as quick as I can.”

You mumble something along the lines of thanks as she lowers herself down to sit on the edge of the open hatch, down until you feel the water on your back, feel it up to your armpits and augh, Jesus CHRIST it’s cold, you forgot what cold felt like, and you forgot what wet felt like, too, and the cold and the wet take your breath away. Through the overload of sensory input, you hear FF saying, “Sollux? Are you OK?”

Your teeth are chattering so hard you can barely force the words out: “Y-yeah. J-j-jus-st c-c-ol-l-ld as f-fuck.”

She runs her hand up over your forehead, rakes her fingers through your hair, ghosts them across both your right hornbeds and oh, that feels good, it feels good but you’re still cold, still cold, mmm, keep doing that, but ugh, make the cold stop. You let out an awkward moan that is made even more awkward by jackhammer chattering of your teeth. She says, “All right. Here we go.” Then she slides off the edge and out into the open water.

You hear TZ, AA, and John lowering KK into the water behind you, hear him gasp as the water comes into contact with his torn-up wrists and his blood-slicked back. There is a lot of splashing around as they all arrange themselves into their pre-determined pairings—John towing KK backwards with his arms hooked under KK’s armpits, TZ holding onto ED for dear life, and AA
alone, unfettered, and grinning ear to ear. You hear ED gasping, “Fuck, Ter, stop wrapping your arms around my neck. You’re going to strangle me and then we’ll both fucking drown.” Then FF starts for shore.

You always forget how fast FF is in the water. One second you’re at a standstill, the next you are flying forward fast enough the drag of the water hammers you up against her shoulder and it digs into you even more. Still, you can’t complain too much. The ride is smooth and at this rate, you’ll be on shore in just a few minutes.

You haven’t been moving long when the group behind you lets out a collective exclamation of alarm. AA’s voice carries to you over the distance that FF has put between you: “Feferi! Feferi, wait!”

FF grumbles something under her breath. (You think it’s an apology to you, but it’s so quiet you can’t be sure.) Then she turns around and swims back to the ragtag group coming along behind you. When you get there, she asks, “What is it? Do you need some kelp with getting Terezi and Karkat to shore?”

“It’s not that,” replies AA. She gestures to the endless stretch of open ocean behind your ship and says, “Look over there. We’ve got company.”

At first you don’t see anything except miles and miles of ocean and nothing else. Then you squint your eyes, following the direction in which she is pointing and you see it: a white-crested wave in the still water moving with a directed purpose straight for you at a very fast clip. The wave isn’t very high, but it has two ridiculously long horns—a troll. A troll is swimming towards you and even though you can’t see her face you know who she is, who she has to be. Condesce, you think. The crash didn’t kill her. Fuck.

FF must see exactly what you see because she gasps and whispers, “Oh, cod.” Then she says, “Aradia, can you take care of Sollux for me?”

You say “Wait, what?” at the exact same moment AA says, “Yes.” The next thing you know, FF is transferring you onto AA’s shoulder and oh, ow, AA, that water is cold, please tread water more steadily, OK that’s better.

“What are you doing?” you demand of FF. (Actually, “demand” is a bit of a stretch. What you actually do is whimper like a crying little pupa.) “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to take care of her,” she replies.

“What?” you gasp. “No! You can’t—FF, she’ll—“

She cuts you off with a kiss, short and sweet and soft (you forgot how soft her lips are). She says, “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fin.” Then she’s gone.

You shout “no”, try to use your psionics to bring her back. The only thing you get for your efforts is a couple of fizzling wisps of energy while your headache ratchets up a couple of notches until AA bops you on the head and says, “No psionics for now, Sollux. Just focus on staying alive.”

As she swims the two of you toward shore, all you can do is think be careful, FF.
Save the universe? No, you don’t think you have time to do that. You are kind of in the middle of something really important at the moment. Maybe you can try saving the universe later. (Not that you think that saving the universe is something you could do single-handedly. It would probably take a lot of really strong people working together to do something like that and as far as you know, there aren’t any groups of people like that around here at the moment. Come to think of it, far as you know, the universe isn’t in need of saving at the moment, either.)

You have been communing with Feferi’s lusus for the past several hours. (At least you think it’s been hours. Time has a way of doing weird things when you are doing this. The last time you took a break, you thought you had been at it for only a few minutes but Gamzee had told you that you were out for almost three days.) Actually, communing isn’t really the right word to describe it. What you are doing has evolved into something that is a lot more than communing. Your consciousness has been swimming for so long in hers and hers in yours that the boundaries between you and her have started to get kind of…fuzzy. Like she is becoming a part of you and you are becoming a part of her. Of course you know that’s stupid. You know that there is still a troll named Tavros Nitram with really big horns who still likes Fiduspawn even though everybody says it’s a wiggler game and you know that there is a huge tentacle monster thing that lives at the bottom of the ocean and eats other trolls’ lususes and you know that those are two very different things. Even so, it’s getting harder and harder for you to figure out where you end and she begins when you let your consciousness drift along with hers. You are starting to think that it won’t be much longer before you can’t tell the difference anymore at all.

That’s not such a bad thing, though. Her consciousness is huge, but it’s warm and nice. You feel safe when you are with her, like she can protect you from all the bad things in the world. You need her—and what’s more, she needs you. She may be a huge, powerful monster, but she’s definitely lonely and you think that maybe she is also a little scared. If she was a troll, you would probably pity her. You think you might pity her a little anyway.

You know that this is wrong. For one thing, you already have a moirail—a really, really great moirail who you pity a lot! What’s more, trolls don’t go into quadrants with lususes. Even thinking about that makes you feel gross. Still, you can’t help feeling as though cheating on Gamzee while you are doing this and it makes you feel terrible.

Of course she immediately senses that you are upset about something. (She and you are basically the same consciousness at this point, after all.) She asks you what is the matter little one

It’s nothing, you think. Don’t worry about it. Her disappointment carries over as a twinge inside your pan. You know that she doesn’t like it when you keep secrets from her but you also don’t want her to think that you are upset with her over your current situation. Besides, you can tell that she wants to say something else, something really important.

She says, it is time

You already know what she is talking about. Her thoughts are your thoughts. You can feel her fear. You still find yourself hoping that you are wrong as you think, Time for what?

She doesn’t bother to answer. Instead, you feel her withdrawing from you, slowly unwinding her consciousness from yours piece by piece.

This scares you. She has never withdrawn from you like this. Until now it has always been you doing the withdrawing and even though you explain to her that you will be back every time, that you just need a short break, she has always begged you to stay. You think, What are you doing?

goodbye child
No, you think. You don’t need to be alone for this. Let me help you.

The only response she gives you is a mental shove that further delineates the line between you and her. The push is actually pretty gentle considering how there is just so much more of her than there is of you, but it still hurts. Your pan reels with it and you can hear yourself—the real, physical you sitting in the cave a hundred miles away—screaming.

Through the pain, you feel her slipping away from you. By the time you manage to pull yourself together enough to do something about it, she is little more than a wisp of sea foam inside your pan. You latch onto her and think, Wait! You could probably count number of times you have actually seen Feferi in person on one hand, but you rack your pan to remember every last detail: long, pretty hair; a smile full of really sharp teeth (but not as long or sharp as yours or Gamzee’s!); a sweet, airy voice; the smell of ocean all around you when she’d hugged you with her strong—so much stronger than they looked—arms. You picture it all as clearly as you can, hoping the lusus will see it and it must work because she stops trying to push you away and hovers at the periphery of your consciousness.

left me, she says. left me my daughter left me like all my other daughters hurts

Slowly edging yourself back into the outer coils of her mind, you think, She didn’t want you to have to be alone for this.

alone left me alone

You burrow a bit deeper until you are drifting with her again, floating along the surface of her fathomless well of memory and experience. She wanted someone to be here for you.

not the same left me

You are hovering in the middle of her ocean-sized mind, your head barely above the metaphorical surface. She notices what you are about to do and tries to push you away just a split second too late. You think, I’m here to help. Then you dive.

You dive deeper than you ever have before. Deep enough you feel as though she is crushing you and you are drowning in her. You can also feel her tearing at you, trying to force you out, but you are so deep now she can’t get at you and when you ask her to please stop she has little choice other than to listen to you.

With nothing but her around you, it is almost impossible not to feel her dying. You feel the strength draining out of her, feel her pain—and not just in your intangible self, either: your real body is crying. (At least you really, really hope the hot liquid you are feeling on your cheeks is tears and not blood. With as much as you are hurting at the moment, it really could be either.) Wondering whether it is more for your own benefit than for hers, you think, Don’t be afraid. It’s OK.

Her awareness begins to deteriorate around you. When she speaks, it’s a garbled roar that burns at your essence:

You don’t know what she is saying. She is so far-gone now there is nothing left—no memories, no
thoughts, not even any emotions—that can reach you through the rapidly-closing darkness. The only thing that does reach you is a sound that seems to resonate deep within you. You can feel it in your vertebral stack, in the base of your horns, in the roots of your teeth…but most of all you feel it in your pan.

It’s a pressure in your pan that builds, like you are being torn apart from the inside out and it burns. You are screaming, you must be screaming because you don’t know what this is but she does, she knows and that means you know that it’s the End, it’s the Great Scream, the Glub, the—

Stop, STOP, you think and you aren’t trying to be a hero. You aren’t thinking about saving anybody. All you want is for the pain to go away—and you are so deep, your mind is so tangled with hers that it does stop, suddenly and shockingly.

The relief is so abrupt it snaps you back into yourself with enough force to make you feel dizzy and sick. You reel with it for several seconds, trying to make yourself say your moirail’s name and tell him that you are alright. Then you must pass out because the next thing you remember is waking up slumped forward in your chair with cold and crusty blood all over you. It’s on your chin, under your nose, in your ears, on your shirt. Your head is throbbing, the worst headache you have ever had that ebbs and flows with the rhythm of your bloodpusher. Groaning, you sit up and instantly regret it when the motion makes you dizzy, adding a component of nausea to your already really uncomfortable situation.

You gag, hoping you’ll throw up because you suspect you will feel a lot better if you can but the only thing you do is retch a couple of times instead. When you’re done, you let out the most pathetic noise you have ever made in your life and bury your clammy face in your equally clammy hands. Carefully, already suspecting what you are going to find, you reach out with your mind for Feferi’s lusus. You sense hundreds of sea-dwelling creatures, plenty of other sea-dwelling lususes even—but no sign of the creature you have been communing with for the past several perigees.

Hot tears well up as you realize that this is the second creature—the second lusus—to die while you were communing. You knew it was likely to happen this time and you know it’s not your fault—but knowing all that doesn’t make you feel any less terrible. You want Gamzee to hold you and tell you that everything is OK and maybe also help you get cleaned up a little so you don’t feel quite so disgusting and…wait, where is Gamzee?

You frown and look around the cave (and oh, that was a bad idea because the motion makes you feel all dizzy-sick again.) Gamzee is nowhere to be seen. That concerns you because he has never been gone when you woke up. What concerns you even more is the sound you are hearing outside: a guttural snarl that probably anybody else would think was coming from a really ferocious animal, but not you. No, you’re pretty sure you’ve heard this sound before and really hope you are wrong about what it is.

Slowly, you wheel yourself to the entrance of the cave. This turns out to be much harder than usual because movement is still definitely not your friend and your arms feel all weak and shaky. By the time you get there, you really just want to go to sleep until you feel a little stronger and a lot less sick. Unfortunately, you know that you can’t afford to do that if you are right about what—who—is making the sounds you are hearing right now. You silently beg your arms to give you just a little further as you wheel out of the cave and onto the uneven terrain outside.

The first thing that strikes you is that it’s late—so late the moons are on the verge of setting and the sky is starting to turn the colorless gray you get not long before the sun comes up. The next thing you notice are the bodies, or to be more accurate, what’s left of the bodies. There are pieces of troll all over. You see part of an arm, from the elbow down lying on the side of the path, the fingers still
curled around the shaft of...something that probably was a weapon at one point but sure isn’t one now. Bits of broken horn are scattered everywhere. Part of a head is lying on the ground in front of you—you see hair, the ragged base of a snapped-off horn, and one blue eye staring sightlessly up at you. You cannot even begin to guess how many trolls this all came from, but the rainbow mix of blood (blue-teal-green) coating the ground is enough to tell you that it was a lot more than one. It’s only after you’ve had a few seconds to take in the carnage around you that you locate the source of the snarling. What you see is enough to make your bloodpusher break.

Gamzee is hunched over with his arms buried elbow deep in something that looks like it might have been a torso at one point. He is so covered in blood and filth that his clothes are clinging against his body and his hair is plastered down against his face and neck. His blood-soaked clubs are lying on the ground beside him but he doesn’t seem to be planning on using them anytime soon. Instead he is busy clawing at the mess in front of him, tearing it apart with his teeth and claws like an animal. You watch in mute horror as he rips something free with a twist of his neck—a chunk of flesh or maybe part of some internal organ?—and starts to gnaw on it like he might actually be planning to eat it.

“Oh my god,” you whisper.

“Gamzee....”

You begin to wheel yourself toward him, careful to avoid running over any of bits of troll on the path in front of you. He must hear you coming because his body tenses and he whips his attention toward you. A low growl begins to build in the back of his throat. You feel an edge of the chucklevoodoos radiating off of him, but you’ve had plenty of time to get used to the feeling of his chucklevoodoos by now and it’s nothing like the psychic shockwave that you just endured a minute ago. It’s not enough to deter you.

He bares his fangs at you and snarls as you approach, like he doesn’t even recognize you. This scares you because yeah, you’ve seen him frenzied before but not like this. You want to cry because you are legitimately afraid that he has actually gone feral and that this time you won’t be able to bring him back. Instead, you slowly shake your head and, voice little more than a thin whisper, you say, “Gamzee, shoosh. Please.”

He stays where he is, staring at you with all the intent focus of a predator about to pounce. You bring yourself just a little closer to him, slowly hold your hands out in front of you and repeat, “Shoosh. Please, Gamzee, shoosh.”

His eyes narrow. You see his lip curl, revealing the full length of his long eye teeth. Then he’s charging toward you, staggering over his feet as he goes and letting out some of the most horrifying noises you have ever heard. (Honks, you numbly think. I think they are supposed to be honks.) For a few awful seconds, you think that you’ve made a mistake, that he is going to attack you because he is just too lost. You close your eyes and brace yourself for pain as he launches himself at you and yes, it does hurt when he hits you but it’s nothing more than the dull impact of his body colliding with yours as he throws his arms around you and your chair so hard you both almost end up flipping onto the ground.

You wrap your arms around him and he is shaking, babbling incoherent as you pap his cheeks and gently shoosh him again and again until he takes a deep shuddering breath and sobs, “They were going to up and motherfucking kill you, pale brother. I couldn’t let them take you the motherfuck away. I couldn’t—”


He covers your hand on his face with one of his, holds it there as he presses his cheek against you. Then he is letting go of your hand to pap you back and knead his fingers through your hair and down around the base of your hornbeds the way he knows you like him to. He says, “Motherfuck,
you are all kinds of injured, Tavbro.”

“So are you,” you retort, noticing the purple blood oozing down his arm and back.

He shrugs. “Don’t give that no care. Are you all up and alright?”

“Yeah. I think so.” You pause before adding, “I think it’s over now.”

He stops massaging you, surprise evident on his face. “You up and killed the wicked tits rift’s carbuncle?”

“No. She just…died. Oh, and I think I might have stopped the vast glub?”

The surprise on his face morphs into wonder. Shaking his head, he whispers, “You little miracle motherfucker.” Then he hugs you again.

With your face buried in his shoulder, you say, “Come on; we should probably get inside before the sun comes up.”

He nods and proceeds to push you back toward the cave. Normally, you would tell him to let you take care of that yourself but you are still feeling pretty tired and sick, so for now you are happy to relax and let him do it for you. You hope that you will have the energy for a really good feelings jam or maybe a slam poetry session once you are finished taking care of each other.

> Feferi: Strife

Too fast. Everything is happening too fast. One second you were on the human’s cute little tropical island, the next you were cutting your matesprit out of a helmsblock, and now here you are, heading for the biggest showdown of your life nervous, unprepared, and—on top of everything else—injured. (Not that something as minor as a grazing bullet wound is enough to slow you down much. Being top of the hemospectrum does have its advantages in that respect. You can still feel it nagging at you, though, and the idea that you are going into this at anything less than optimal is…well…a little scary, to say the least.)

This is so not what you had had in mind back when you were a wiggler fantasizing about the day you finally challenged the Empress. Back then you had thought you would battle her in some kind of fancy arena with cheers and jeers of millions of other trolls ringing in your ears. They were always cheering you and jeering her in your fantasies because three sweeps-old you was convinced that was how it would go down in real life. Of course, you also fantasized that she would just surrender once she saw how wonderful you were and you would assume the throne and grant her full pardon to show everybody how different the Empire would be under your leadership. In hindsight, your wigglerhood fantasies were all pretty silly.

Pretty much the only thing about this situation that even loosely resembles your old fantasies is the fact that you have your trusty trident by your side and for that much, you are grateful. At the behest of your lusus, you devoted a good chunk of your wigglerhood to training with your weapon, until it felt as natural to you as an extension of your own arm. The Condesce may have more experience than you do, but at the very least you are far from helpless in that respect.

You do wish that her ship hadn’t landed out in the open water where you have nothing to use in order to implement a sneak attack, though. In fact, the water is so clear she sees you coming long before you are anywhere near attacking range. You stop somewhere just outside of what you
estimate to be her farthest throwing range. She does the same and you can feel her sizing you up, from the symbol on your shirt to the trident in your hand. You don’t know how she does it, but she somehow manages to give you the distinct impression that she doesn’t think much of you with your colorful pastels and your smaller horns and your plain trident without saying anything at all.

Finally, she shakes her head and sneers, “So you’re the beach behind all of this bullship, huh?”

Your throat feels constricted, like it is trying to keep you from responding. You push the words out anyway because you are not going to let her know that you are nervous, you are not going to let her know that she scares you. “That’s right. I’m challenging you for the throne right here, right now.”

“Yeah, I can see that. You think I’m blind, you li’l fingerling?” She pauses like she expects you to answer her question. You glare at her to show her that you are not going to embarrass yourself by folding in front of her. Rolling her eyes, she says, “Whatever. Let’s make this quick. I got a lot of other naughty little guppies lined up for a good forking.”

She lunges toward you, trident leveled for your neck and oh, she’s fast. You barely have time to block her charge with your own weapon and even then the force of it is almost enough to buckle your elbows. You grapple with her for a few seconds, both of you straining to force the other’s weapon out of her hands. Then she pulls away and in the blink of an eye she’s coming at you from the left with a quick jab intended to impale you right between the ribs.

This time she leaves you no time to block. Your only option is to throw yourself out of the way. You attempt to spice this maneuver up a bit by adding a spinning kick to her wrist but she sees you coming a mile away and effortlessly brings the shaft of her trident around to crack you across the ankle—hard. You withdraw your leg with a gasp and god, you are lucky this fight is taking place in the water, you think she might have broken your ankle.

You are still reeling from the sudden pain when she comes at you with a powerhouse volley of thrusts and jabs that would leave you plenty of great openings if it didn’t force you into a constant stream of defensive blocking. The volley goes on for a long time (longer than it has any right to, really. You should be finding an opening by now, she should be fatiguing by now), ending only when she flips her weapon sideways and whaps you upside the head with the flat side of it, right over the membranous part of your right fin. You feel the thin tissue split under the abuse and you draw back, clapping a hand over the tear—which turns out to be a mistake because she is immediately on you, leaving you no choice but to go on the defensive again.

The strife goes on like this for several minutes: her attacking you relentlessly and you doing nothing but ducking, dodging, and blocking, taking on a scrape here, a blunt blow there. Then, in the middle of one of her charges, you see an opening: a good, clean shot at her gills. Your lunge is sloppy with fatigue but your aim is true and you’re going to get her this time, you’re going to—she ducks out of the way, digs her claws deep into the bullet wound in your side and twists.

There is a sharp pain in the wound (of course), but something about the suddenness of it, something about the unexpectedness seems to amplify its effect. Hot tendrils race through your whole right side, up into your arm, down your arm and into your wrist, into your hand, into your fingers until the muscles there begin to spasm. Your hand falls open, your trident tumbling from your boneless fingers.

The Condesce lets out a cruel, harsh cackle as you make a desperate grab for your weapon and miss. You see the trident sinking down into the depths, a rapidly diminishing glimmer of gold tumbling farther and farther away. In desperation, you flail your legs in a blind kick. Your foot mercifully connects with something solid. You hear the Condesce gasp, feel her grip loosen enough to let you twist free and then you are diving after your weapon.
You don’t even make it a single fathom before the Condesce is in front of you, blocking your way with her own weapon. You try to feint around her but she sees through your attempts and easily forces you to retreat further and further away from the place you dropped your weapon until you can’t even remember exactly where it happened.

“You really otter give it up, guppy,” she grunts as you dodge yet another deadly thrust. “Ain’t no way you’re going to win this when you don’t even got your fins on a proper weapon.”

*She’s right,* you think. And so, alone and unarmed, you do the only thing you can do: you turn tail and you abscond.

Behind you, the Condesce barks out a cold scoff, shouts, “Trying to run away? Never thought I’d live to see the day when one of my descendents turned out to be a glubbing *coward!*”

You ignore the jab and keep swimming. You may be absconding for the moment—but you happen to be absconding with a specific purpose in mind. The sinking Battleship Condescension isn’t far from where you first encountered the Condesce. Your fight has driven you even closer still. Its hulking form is already half-submerged, the gash that Sollux’s ship tore into it lying open and exposed to anybody who would care to swim inside. If you can just get onboard and get yourself a minute or two to look around, you might find something you can use.

The Condesce is coming up behind you. You can hear her gaining, but you don’t dare to look over your shoulder to see how close she is. Instead, you pour on as much speed as you can (more than you thought you had in you) and throw yourself at one of the smaller holes in the ship’s hull. The hole is so small you experience one terrifying instant in which you almost get stuck halfway in and halfway out, but you thrash your legs and pull with your arms and pop through the hole before she can get close enough to grab you.

You know once you are inside that the hole is too small for the Condesce, that she will need to find another way onboard but you don’t stop to breathe a sigh of relief. Instead you opt to keep swimming through the room you have just entered and head for the hallway beyond as quickly as you can. This turns out to be a life-saving decision. Seconds after you are through the hole, one three-tined head of the Condesce’s trident bursts through the hole and rakes the water all around the entrance, searching for something interesting to impale.

You swim through the maze of hallways, trying doors at random in the hope that you will stumble across something you can use when the Condesce finds you again. The longer you look, the more you begin to think that you may have used up all of your luck just getting yourself to the ship alive. None of the rooms have anything to offer in the way of weaponry. (*You do experience one heart-fluttering moment of hope when you come across a hallway lined with mounted gold tridents, but twist and pull and beg and plead as you might, you cannot dislodge any of them from the wall. You end up leaving the treasure trove of potential weaponry empty-handed and cursing under your breath over your awful luck.*)

Maybe I could lift a few knives from the nutrition block, you think as you drift down yet another hallway. Weaving around an array of rubble floating around the half caved-in wall, you quietly groan and think, *Bluh, that’s a dumb idea! Even if I did know where the nutrition block is—which I don’t—there’s no way a chintzy little dinner knife is going to do anything against—*your train of thought suddenly derails as something brushes up against your leg and stings you, bad enough to make all the muscles in your leg seize up.

You jerk back with a shriek, more of surprise than of pain, and just as quickly as it began the stinging stops. Frowning, you examine the area you just swam through, trying to find the source of the stinging sensation. Your eyes fall on a tendril of biowire, exposed inside the gap in the wall and
undulating in the water like a piece of kelp. Slowly, you reach out, ghost your fingers over it and —ow, it delivers another wallop of a shock that makes your whole arm ache and prompts you to let out another pained yelp.

From far away, you hear the Condesce’s voice sing-song: “I heard that, mini-me! Ready or not, here I come!”

You look one last time at the pink biowire swaying in the water like a benign bit of pink ribbon. Then you get an idea. Abandoning your futile efforts to find a suitable weapon, you swim as quickly as you can through the maze of halls, heading for the most central part of the ship. You make noise as you go—not too much, not enough to raise any suspicions. Just a bump against a corner here, a bout of panicked gasping there until you reach your destination.

You offer up a silent prayer that the door will open and your sigh of utter relief is loud but absolutely not exaggerated in the slightest when you feel the doorknob turning in your hand. You sit there with the doorknob turned in your hand, waiting to throw the door open and go inside until you hear the Condesce approaching the corner nearest to you. As you hurry inside, you know that she going to see where you have gone but that’s OK. In fact, you want her to follow you in here because you have no idea what you are going to do if she doesn’t.

As you back away from the door, you are careful not to touch any of the biowires on the walls or ceiling. You keep backing across the room until you reach the helmsman’s column. Then you stop and, with the door in front of you and the helmsman’s column behind, you wait.

Not ten seconds pass before the Condesce swims into the room after you. “Game over, guppy,” she leers. “I win.”

You say nothing. Your bloodpusher is pumping so hard against your chest you can barely gulp water. The fear in your eyes as you watch her sauntering across the room toward you is absolutely real.

When she is standing directly in front of you, she leans forward until you are eye to eye and, mouth contorted into a terrible grin, she says, “Got any last words, kid?”

You bow your head and close your eyes, the perfect picture of defeat because you want her to believe you are beaten. You want her to believe that you have given up. You hold your breath as you hear her adjusting her grip on her trident, feel the drag of the water around you as she flips the trident into striking position. Carefully, you crack one eye halfway open to confirm that she is lined up and ready. The prongs of the trident are pointing directly at your face, neck, and chest. A one-hit kill.

She strikes, all power and speed without restraint. You twist to the side, catch the shaft of her trident with both hands, and pull. The momentum of her thrust topples her forward, directly into the tangle of biowires behind you.

The biowires immediately leap to life, mercilessly discharging into her. She screams and writhes against the wires, but whether she is trying to get free or whether it’s just a product of her muscles seizing it’s no use. The only thing she manages to do is get herself even more hopelessly entangled.

You wait until she stops twitching, wait until all the crackling red and blue psionics (red and blue? How…?) die out. Only then do you scoop up the trident she has dropped, swim up until you are eye level with her, and, with a wide sweep of your arm, lop her head clean off her shoulders.

You grab a handful of her hair, intending to make a clean getaway, but you soon find that her hair is
hopelessly tangled with the wires around her. It ends up taking you several minutes to hack off enough of her hair to free your trophy. By the time you are done, the water around you is inky with tyrian blood. Still, you would swear that even through the dark and even through the cloud of near-opaque blood, you could see that the helmsman (the troll who looks like your Sollux with his double horns and his red and blue psionics and even his symbol) had died smiling.

> Karkat: Say something badass

You are so, so tired. Not that you have never been tired before. Hell, the perigees in which you were being weaned off sleeping in slime exist in your memory as nothing more than one big nook spasm of shambling zombieism. But what you are feeling now, this is Tired with a capital “T.”

You barely have the energy to listen to John babbling at you nonstop as he tows you along through the water, let alone respond to him with anything more articulate than the occasional generous “Mmm…” In fact, let’s be real here, folks: the only thing keeping you awake is the water itself, and not because it’s cold. Oh, no. You are too fucking tired to care whether it’s warm as piss or cold as a seadweller’s globe sac. The water is keeping you awake because every single time you nod off you wake up choking on it and (as an added bonus) scaring the everloving peewads out of John like the shitstain of a friend you truly are.

In addition to being tired enough to fall asleep while you are floating in the goddamn ocean, you also have the distinct pleasure of being as cold as a polar bear’s asshole. Your whole body feels numb. Your legs are useless blocks of ice, your arms are equally useless blobs of shit, and frankly, you are 100% OK with this development because it beats the fuck out of being in pain.

There is something under your feet. You can feel your feet dragging—sand. You’re in the shallows and John is saying something to you, saying “Come on, buddy, you need to stay with me now”, saying “Help me out a little if you can.”

You try to plant your feet in the sand but you can barely summon up the strength to move and the effort pushes you into another one of those fucking awful coughing fits. You end up sagging against John like a pathetic little bitch, coughing up the most disgusting shit ever and trying not to embarrass the both of you by doing something totally stupid like puking on him while he continues to drag your worthless ass onto dry land.

The coughing fit keeps going long after he deposits you onto the beach. John kneels on the sand next to you, saying something you can’t hear over your own coughing. He looks like he’s about to start crying, though, and that pisses you off. You don’t want him to cry over you. You try to tell him that it’s OK, you’re OK, don’t cry but you can’t seem to get the breath you need to say it. Your only choice is to just ride the coughing fit out and ow, it feels like something is tearing inside you, you wish it would just fucking stop already.

When it’s finally over, you are still gasping for breath. John has you sitting with your head and shoulders propped against his chest (and holy trellis-humping Christ, how did you not notice him getting you into this position? Apparently he’s turned into some kind of goddamn personal space-invading magician.) You are holding his hand (or, to be more precise, squeezing the shit out of it.) He is talking to you with a tight, wavery tone that is something just a shade away from panic: “Karkat, you need to breathe. Come on, deep breaths.”

You try to do as he asks. After all, it’s the least you can do since he just saved your ass from drowning. You strain to suck in a deep breath and ow, fuck, nope, the only thing you get out of it is a
feeling of pressure in your chest, like your lungs are already filled past capacity and adding any more air to the mix will just cause them to go absolutely tits-up. (You also make a nasty gurgling sound that would probably concern you if you weren’t so fucking tired.)

Not far down the beach, you hear a large number of people going absolutely ape shit. Turning your head to see seems to take a monumental effort, but you manage it. Your eyes are doing some kind of tunnel vision bullshit, the edges of your visual field rippling with dark tentacles that are creeping closer and closer like they have some insatiable urge to bad touch you into the hereafter. You still don’t have any trouble seeing what all the commotion is about. Feferi is emerging from the water, carrying the Condesce’s trident in one hand and dragging the former Empress’s head along by the hair with the other.

A phrase comes to your mind as you watch her coming ashore, one you heard way back on the training station. You still don’t know exactly what it means (god you wish you’d imbued your own reeking behind with a little initiative and found out), but that’s OK. You are pretty sure that whatever the hell it actually means, it applies in this case.

Lips numb and quivering, you force the words out with the last of your breath: “Sic semper tyrannis.”

Then you black out.

> John: Freak the fuck out

For a few really scary seconds, you think that Karkat is dead. You think that you straight-up just watched your friend die in your arms like the two of you are putting on some awful parody of Hook with you playing the adult Peter Pan to his Rufio. You frantically shake him, shout his name, beg him to “wake up, you asshole; come on!” You go on like this for a full thirty seconds before you consider doing something sensible like actually confirm he’s dead. You hands are shaking so badly it takes you another minute and a half to determine whether or not he is still breathing (he is) and check his pulse (it’s thready and weak but it’s definitely there).

Knowing that Karkat hasn’t flown off to Neverland yet doesn’t do much to reassure you. If anything, seeing him this quiet freaks you out even more because if there is one thing Karkat has never been in all the time you’ve known him, it’s quiet. That more than anything else is a surefire tell that he needs urgent medical attention and he needs it now.

Fortunately, there are lots of people on the beach who can help. Unfortunately, none of them happen to be paying attention to you and Karkat at the moment. They all seem to be preoccupied with Feferi and the—ugh, OK, that’s really gross!—severed head she is carrying with her. You decide to make them pay attention to you. Sucking a deep breath, you scream, “We need help over here; somebody help!”

A good chunk of people—Jade, Aradia, and a handful of guys in…police uniforms (huh?)—break away from fawning over Feferi and hurry toward you. Jade is first to reach you. Eyes wide, she gasps, “Oh my god; what happened?”

“Who cares? Please, can we just fix this?” You glance around the entourage of people who are assembling around you—or to put that more accurately, the totally unmoving entourage of people assembling around you. You let out a frustrated groan and shout, “Why isn’t anybody doing anything?”
Aradia shakes her head. “There isn’t anything we can do. He’s already lost too much blood.”

You frown. “So give him a blood transfusion then! There are plenty of trolls here, aren’t there?”

“It’s not that easy,” she replies. “Troll blood comes in lots of different colors. Giving him a color different from his own would kill him—and Karkat happens to be the only troll with that blood color.”

Your heart sinks just as hard as that horse from *The Neverending Story*. You are about to ineffectually demand that some unspecified somebody do some nebulous something to prevent the inevitable when you get an idea. Blood color, you think. *Oh my god.* Aloud, you say, “Use me.”

Aradia raises her eyebrows. “What?”

“We have the same blood color—the same blood type, even. Use me!”

Jade and Aradia exchange a look, one that you are pretty sure is something along the lines of “what the fuck?” (It’s a good compliment to the general attitude of what the *fuck* coming off all the police guys standing around you.) Then Jade says, “Well…my grandpa did have an old blood transfusion apparatus. He even taught me how to use it! But will human blood even work for him?”

“I don’t know,” Aradia replies. “I guess it’s worth a shot.”

“OK, I’ll go get it then. Wait right there!” Jade frowns before amending, “Not that you are going anywhere. Just…I’ll be back in a minute.” Then she takes off at a dead sprint for the trail that leads up to her house.

She hasn’t been gone for more than a few minutes before one of the police officer guys turns to another and says, “All right, Renaud. Go warm up one of the choppers. I don’t care if he’s an alien. The kid needs a hospital and he needs it fast. As soon as Jade is done doing her thing, we’re airlifting him out of here.”

A guy who must be Renaud goes running off across the beach. A few seconds later, you hear the roar of a revving helicopter engine. A few minutes after that, Jade comes back carrying something that looks like some kind of medieval torture device.

“You,” she mutters, plopping onto the sand beside Karkat. She drapes one of his arms across her lap, kneads at the crook of his elbow, all the while mumbling, “Donor equals cubital vein. Cubital vein….”

The next thing you know, she’s shoving a really huge needle into Karkat’s arm with about as much loving tenderness somebody stabbing a side of boiled liver with a fork (and *wow*, you’re glad he’s unconscious because he could barely deal with the totally benign lancets way back in biology class. You don’t even want to think about how he would react to *this.*) She tapes the needle onto him, winding the tape around and around his arm because he’s still soaking wet and gross and the tape won’t hold otherwise. Then she turns to you and says, “All right. Your turn.”

You look at the needle in her hand and *ugh, fantastic,* it is just as big as the one she just stuck into Karkat. She must see you looking at it because she rolls her eyes and says, “Don’t be a baby. Give me your arm.”

“Yeah,” you respond, keeping your eyes glued to the *giant stabbing implement in her hand.* “OK. Here.”

She grabs your arm, pokes around with her fingers until she finds a spot she likes, then—*ow, OK,*
that really sucks—she jabs the needle into your arm. You suck in a gasp between clenched teeth because you can actually feel the thing moving around inside your arm as she tapes it down and that is really gross. When she’s done abusing your poor, defenseless arm, she orders you to clench your fingers a few times and whoa, there goes your blood into the tube, heading right for Karkat, that’s still gross but also kind of cool you guess?

“You need gravity to keep the blood going the right direction so keep your arm above his,” she orders. Even though you nod to show her you understand, she still turns to the group of police officers mulling around you and says, “Whoever’s going with them, make sure John keeps his arm higher than Karkat’s. Got it?”

The officers all nod meekly like a bunch of naughty school kids getting scolded by teacher Jade. (God, you think. What the hell happened while we were up there on that alien ship?) Then three of the officers are hustling you and Karkat into a helicopter, lying him down flat on the floor and sitting you down on a seat right next to him, and telling you to “try to relax”, “keep your arm still”, “just stay in the seat and keep your arm higher than Karkat’s.” You tell them you are and you will and you already know that, Jade just told you.

Until about three hours ago, you would have been pretty stoked about getting to ride in a helicopter. Now, after being in a freaking alien ship and flying into space, it doesn’t seem so exciting. The liftoff seems jerky and the whole thing is just one big, noisy mess. You spend a good several minutes just staring at Karkat lying on the floor while you try to acclimate to the weirdly bumpy ride and the constant whoop-whup-whup of the propeller. You know it’s stupid but you keep expecting him to wake up mumbling something along the lines of “Wow, what happened?” (That is how it works in the movies, after all.) Once it becomes evident that isn’t going to happen anytime soon, you decide to do something to distract you from being super worried.

Turning to the officer sitting next to you (the one who had ordered the helicopter for you no less), you ask, “So what were all of you guys doing back there on the island anyway?”

“We were going to arrest you and Karl—er, Karkat.” Your expression must give away the fact that you are on the verge of having a total freakout because he quickly adds, “Call it a hunch, but I’d say that’s on indefinite hold.”

“Oh,” you say, because what else can you even say to that? You flounder to come up with something that doesn’t sound completely stupid. You say, “Well that’s good, I guess.”

The officer frowns, says, “You tell us if you start feeling lightheaded, now. It’s a long flight and the last thing we need is to have two people who need urgent care.”

You tell him you will but of course you don’t. No matter how long you sit there dumping blood into Karkat, he doesn’t wake up or move or do anything to let you think you are helping him. He just looks pale and sick and…well, kind of dead, really. You figure the longer you can stay connected, the more blood you can give him, the better off he’ll be when you get to wherever you’re going, so you don’t say anything when you start feeling dizzy and kind of nauseous.

It’s not until you are starting to feel really gnarly when the officer realizes what is going on. Even though you protest multiple times, even though you tell them that “It’s OK, I’m OK; just let me keep helping”, they still disconnect you. (And wow, taking the needle out is just as uncomfortable as putting it in. Maybe it’s not such a bad thing that Karkat didn’t wake up yet because he really isn’t in any shape to have to deal with that on top of everything else.)

The ride feels like it is the longest helicopter flight of your life. (You have never been on a helicopter before so it is also technically the shortest helicopter flight of your life. Regardless, it takes f-o-r-e-v-
The sun is starting to set when the helicopter touches down on the roof of a hospital in...huh, you have no idea where you are right now. Australia? New Guinea? Hell, you might as well be on Mars for all you can tell. You have just enough time to ponder asking the officer sitting next to you before the helicopter is flying open and the paramedics rush in. What follows is pretty much the hospitalized version of a *Keystone Cops* routine.

The paramedics get between you and Karkat. You try to squeeze around them so you can still see him while they load him onto a stretcher. They tell you to “Please stand back, sir; sir, we need you out of the way.” You try to reason with them (“But he’s my friend”, “Is he going to be OK?”, “Wait, no, he wouldn’t want to be alone!”). One of the officers—you think he said his name was “Wilson. Agent Wilson” and that led you to decide that he was secretly a James Bond fanboy—leads you back to your seat, out of the paramedics’ way. Then the paramedics are stopping you both, asking you when you hit your head, asking you how long you were transfusing your blood, asking you if Karkat was conscious when you started transfusing, and you are trying to answer them but god you really aren’t at your best at the moment and would you just let me go with Karkat and make sure he is OK?

By the time you are finished answering all their questions, Karkat is nowhere to be seen and maybe it’s the blood loss, maybe it’s the stress of all the ridiculous bullshit you have been through already today, maybe it’s the cumulative effect of worrying yourself sick for the last however long it took you to get here, but you end up bursting into tears like a moron. (You try to tell yourself that they are heroic man tears like Nick Cage at the end of *Con Air* but deep down you are aware that you are in fact just bawling like a baby.)

The paramedics who were grilling you just a second ago tell you to follow them. At first you think that they are leading you to see Karkat but they end up dumping you off in an exam room in the Emergency Department instead, where a troupe of two different nurses and a doctor run you through even more questions while you try to hold back your (not really) heroic man tears. They clean up the gash on the back of your head (ow, you forgot that was still so tender), stick you with a needle (total child’s play after the freaking elephant dart that Jade stabbed you with earlier), and take some of your blood (which seems kind of silly to you because you would think that if they are this worried about how much blood you gave to Karkat, the last thing they would want to do would be to make you lose even more.)

Once they have determined that you are not about to keel over dead, they release you back to Wilson, Agent Wilson. He greets you with a basket order of chicken strips and fries from the cafeteria and a bottle of apple juice. “Figured you might be hungry,” he grunts.

You don’t feel hungry right now. You feel kind of sick. You thank him and nibble away at the fries anyway—and the second you do, you realize that you really are hungry after all. You set to work devouring the meal as quickly as you can. As you swig down a few sips of your apple juice, Agent Wilson says, “Your father is on his way here.”

You pause, a half-eaten chicken strip hanging in the air mere inches away from your mouth. “Oh my god. He must have been worried. Is he mad?”

“Hard to say,” he shrugs. “Sounded more relieved than anything else, to be honest. But let me tell you, I’ve got a daughter about your age and if my daughter pulled some of the stuff you did, I’d be pissed off. Proud, but pissed.”

You wince because yeah, that’s probably pretty accurate. “How long until he gets here?”

“Not until late tomorrow.”
“OK. Good.” You pause before saying, “How is Karkat?”

He sighs and the crow’s feet around his eyes suddenly look a lot deeper. “Last I heard they were still working on him. My impression was that it would be a while before we heard anything definitive. In the meantime I would suggest you try and get some rest.”

You nod, tell him thanks even though you have absolutely no intention of going to sleep until you know how Karkat is doing. Yet even through your super-strong resolve that you will stay awake until Karkat is OK you can’t help noticing that the waiting room chairs are surprisingly comfortable. You also can’t help noticing that the area you are hanging in is…well, maybe not quiet, exactly, but peaceful with a constant hum of controlled activity. What’s more, with some food in your belly, you are starting to feel kind of drowsy and sluggish. You don’t last 20 minutes before you drop off into a deep sleep.

You don’t know how much time passes before Agent Wilson shakes you awake. (You do know that it’s a good chunk of time because the windows across from where you are sitting are now pitch dark where they were lit up with early evening dusk before.) The lady standing in front of you is wearing a white coat that makes her look very serious and official and pretty clearly marks her as a Doctor. You try to get a gage on her expression but it is totally neutral.

She looks at you, waiting as you yawn and rub the sleep out of your eyes. Then she says, “I was just telling Agent Wilson that I am Doctor Harding. I was the head surgeon for Karkat in the operating room.”

Your heart is doing some kind of Riverdance routine in your chest. Past the lump forming in your throat, you say, “Is he—“

“He is alive,” she interrupts.

The breath you’d been holding comes rushing out in one big gush. You are so relieved you can barely even hear your own voice as you say, “Is he going to be OK?”

“That is up to him,” she replies. “We have done everything we can to help him and so far, he seems to be responding well.”

“Can I—I mean, is it OK if I see him now?”

For the first time, she smiles. “Yes. Come with me.”

You get up, follow her with Agent Wilson trailing behind you. She proceeds to lead you through a maze of elevators and hallways. As you approach the ICU, she says, “I just want to give you a heads up that he is still unconscious right now. You can talk to him, though, and just hearing a familiar voice can make a big difference.”

You solemnly nod even though you aren’t sure you believe her on that front because that’s what they say in pretty much every movie and TV hospital scene ever.

When you reach the doors of the ICU, she stops and says, “I understand that you gave blood to Karkat before you got here. That was a very risky thing to do.” You look at your feet, thinking she is about to lecture you or something. Instead she puts a hand on your shoulder and says, “It also saved his life.”

You raise your eyebrows. “It did?”

“In my opinion, he would not have made it this far without it.” She smiles again and it’s a nice smile,
one that makes you want to smile, too. “He’s lucky you are such a good friend. Now if you’ll just follow me, he’s right this way.”

Dr. Harding leads you through the doors, into the ICU and it’s weird because it’s really not much like the ICUs you’ve seen in the movies or on TV. It’s…quieter than you expected, and smaller. All of the rooms have clear doors, so you can see inside as you walk past. (You try not to look too closely, though. You have a feeling that the people inside probably wouldn’t appreciate being gawked at.)

It feels totally surreal when you finally get to Karkat’s room. The first thing you see is all the lines and tubes—so many lines and tubes. It looks like a spider web of plastic, and Karkat is lying in the middle of it, unmoving. You are glad to see that they cleaned all the blood and other nasty crap off of him, but without it he looks pale and…kind of sick, you guess. His arms are both propped on pillows on either side of him, both wrapped with heavy-duty ACE wrap from his fingertips to his elbow. You remember the burns around his wrists with a shudder, and you are suddenly grateful that he isn’t awake and having to deal with all of this right now.

You approach the bed and half-whisper, “Hey, buddy.” Then you frown (because wow, why the heck do you need to whisper, it’s not like you’re going to wake him up), clear your throat, and repeat a little louder: “Hey, buddy. It’s John.”

He doesn’t do anything to acknowledge that you are there. You take a deep breath, let it out, say, “Docs say they’ve done everything they can to help. Now it’s your job to get better. No giving up now. Not after we won.”

You look at him, trying to determine whether any of this is getting through. He doesn’t so much as twitch. “I guess I should enjoy the quiet while it lasts, huh? I bet you’ll be awake and ranting like old times in a couple of days.” You try to laugh but it’s a hollow sound. (Which makes sense. As far as jokes go, that was pretty weak soup.)

You can’t really think of anything else to say. (That makes you feel totally lame. You always thought you would come up with some inspirational speech like Morgan Freeman in Armageddon if you were faced with a situation like this. Go figure.) Deciding to go for the dramatic, you point at him and say, “You get better.”

Pff. Wow. If any of this is getting through to Karkat, you have a feeling he’s rolling his eyes and possibly mentally flipping you off for good measure. But hey, if he’s well enough to flip you off, even mentally, then you figure that’s a good sign. With any luck, you figure he’ll be awake to do it for real soon enough.

> Karkat: Choose
> Karkat: Choose

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Something very strange is going on. Actually, no. Strike that. “Strange” is such a gross understatement you should be kicked in the globes by the idiot police for thinking it applies here. The word you are looking for is straight-up fucking weird.

The English schoolfeed was supposed to start over half an hour ago, the schoolblock is full, and Migdal is nowhere to be seen. You’ve seen a few fellow snot-chewing ignoramus recruits show up late to schoolfeeds (and you have also had the delightful experience of seeing what happens to fellow snot-chewing ignoramus recruits who show up late to schoolfeeds), but you have never seen an instructor perform such an act of gross incompetence. What’s more, out of all the asshole instructors you’ve had the distinct displeasure of having to deal with over the past few perigees, Migdal is the biggest hardass of them all. He is pretty much the last person you would expect to spontaneously develop an issue with punctuality of all things.

You shoot a glance around the schoolblock to see if this development is grinding anybody else’s globes as hard as it is grinding yours. Apparently, you are surrounded by a roomful of utterly oblivious fuck-offs because nobody else seems the least bit perturbed at all. The tall, muscular girl and her twitchy psionic friend (what were their names? Fuck, maybe you would manage to summon up the requisite level of give-a-shit to find out if they weren’t such bastards) are busy harassing hornless Shrega, kicking the back of her seat and flicking her on top of her head where her horns ought to be. She flips them both off, gets up, and goes to sit with a group of trolls halfway across the room. You are glad to see them greet her and let her sit with them. You are also glad that everybody politely ignores the trail of blood and entrails that dribbles from her gut wound as she goes.

Beside you, Evrind is asking you to explain conditional tense one last time. You are trying your best, but he’s really having a hard time following. Part of that is his own fault: he keeps trying to twiddle his broken horn between his fingers and dropping it on the floor like a doofus. You can’t put all the blame on him, though. You keep getting distracted from the task at hand by the blood and chunky bits of brain matter oozing out of his nose and ears. (It doesn’t seem to bother him much, but it bothers you because it’s unsanitary as hell to be leaking body fluid all over the floor. With your luck some nitwit will come along and slip in it.)

Ignoring the gob of gelatinous goop slithering from the corner of his lips like a champ, you say, “I know you know how to do this. Quit being a dipshit and think about your verb tenses.”

“OK. I think I understand.” He scrunches his face into his I’m either thinking really hard or I’m about to squeeze out a shii look before he says, “If you stay here much longer, you won’t be able to leave.”

“There; was that really so—“ You trail off as the meaning of what he has said sinks into your comprehension plateau. “What are you talking about?”

He smiles and suddenly he looks exactly the way he did when you first met him—face clean, both horns intact, and not a day older than six sweeps. “I mean, you’re totally welcome to chill with us here forever if that’s what you want to do. But I figured I’d better at least tell you that it’s OK to leave while you still have the chance.”

You shake your head and—wait, what the hell, why is there something on your head? Do you have
horns again? Under the pretense of brushing a stray hair out of your face, you sneak a hand up to check and hot liquefied fuck, you run up against the base of your left horn. Apparently Evrind isn’t the only beneficiary of the random jacked-up time travel treatment. You ask, “What the fuck are you talking about? What’s going on?”

“I think you know,” he replies. Blood starts to bubble down his face again. This time it seems to be coming from the corners of his eyes.

“No I don’t,” you grumble. “Maybe you could quit the cagey hoofbeast shit and tell me where you are going with all this? Here; you can whisper it if you need to. Just try not to let your halitosis dragon breath melt my defenseless auricular sponge clots.”

He laughs so hard two of his teeth come out. (You note that this time he has the decency to catch them and tuck them away into his pocket rather than just letting them fall on the floor like a disgusting slob.) Still chortling, he gasps, “God, I forgot how funny you were. And seriously, I don’t think you need me to spell it out for you. You’re smart. Or at least, smarter than I am—was.”

You sigh and shake your head because even though he is still carrying on with being a cagey douche you think you know what is going on now. This is a dream, you think. A very, very fucked up and creepy dream that is going to require about ten gallons of brain bleach to forget. Aloud, you say, “Does being here suck as much as it looks like it does?”

“Noah,” he replies. His horn snaps off, lands on the desk in front of you with a clunk. He picks it up and goes back to twirling it between his fingers like he didn’t just create another shitpile of nightmare fuel for you to enjoy. “It’s actually kind of nice. People aren’t as douchey as they used to be.” He must see you shooting a sidelong glance toward body builder chick and her asshole friend because he quickly amends, “Most people aren’t as douchey, anyway.”

You nod and suddenly your horns are gone again and the skin on your wrists is turning black and peeling away. You watch with trepidation as the burn wounds creep about a quarter of the way up your forearms, less because it hurts (it doesn’t) and more because guess what watching your arms burn in super slow-motion is really fucking unsettling. “It’s going to be really shitty when I leave, isn’t it?”

“Probably,” he replies with a shrug. “You’ll live, though.”

“Yeah,” you mutter. “Great.”

The bank of lights at the far end of the room suddenly click off and augh, holy fuck that part of the room doesn’t just go dark. Nope, it straight-up stops existing altogether. Evrind must notice your abject horror because he turns around to see what you are gapping at like a pail-gulping cretin. When he turns back to you, his eyes are wide with a beautiful example of the classic oh shit expression. He jumps to his feet and takes your hand (oh hey, he’s very considerably put himself back to six sweeps old and totally clean Evrind, so none of his nasty shit gets on you. What a pal.) Dragging you out of your seat, he says, “Time to go.”

You stand still like an idiot just long enough to watch a second bank of lights (the ones right over the instructor’s floor) blink out into oblivion. Then you let him hustle you down the row, out onto the stairs that lead to the door at the back of the room.

The lights keep clicking off as you go, taking chunks of the room with them. Click, the group of trolls sitting in the front row is gone. Click, the stairs at the far end of the room disappear. Click, Shreg and her entourage are no more. By the time you reach the top of the stairs, it’s just you, Evrind, the door that leads out of the schoolblock, and that’s it.
Evrind lets go of your hand and says, “You’ll have to go through by yourself for obvious reasons.”

“Yeah,” you sigh and suddenly you feel like shit because you don’t want to have to leave him here; he doesn’t deserve to be left here. Your hand is on the doorknob but you let it go because you could have done more to save him, should have tried harder to help him. Turning around to face him, you say, “I’m sorry I was such a shitty friend. I knew you needed help and I just—“

“Oh my god, are you kidding me right now?” he groans. Rolling his eyes, he says, “It’s not your fault, OK? I was being a stupid bulge. Now hurry up and go.”

“But I—“

He shakes his head and says, “If you’re going to go, you need to do it right—“ that is as far as he gets before the bank of lights shining on him cut out and he is gone.

You turn back to the door, look at the handle. It would be so easy to stay. You could give Evrind a proper apology, and maybe even apologize to Shrega for being an impotent shitstain and never doing anything to help her, too. There is also the bulge-tickling fact that you have no idea how you got here or what kind of shitstorm you are going to be walking into if you leave (though if the shit you’ve been seeing appear and disappear on your arms is any indication, it’s going to suck harder than a starving nook worm.) Hell, for all you know your friends are all dead. Clearly, the safe option—the smart option—is to stay here, where nothing can hurt you and you know exactly what you are going to get. And so, of course, you reach for the doorknob, pull open the door, and step through as the last bank of lights clicks off behind you.

The first time you wake up you have no idea where you are beyond the vague realization that you are lying on your back on something soft and there are…things…sticking into you. You can feel things sticking into your chest, things in your arms, things in your throat and it is fucking terrifying because your body has straight-up decided to be a mutinous piece of shit and not listen to you. You try to move your arms, try to roll onto your side so you can get this shit out of you and you can’t. You can’t move and you can’t speak and god, you don’t know where you are and you are tired, you are so fucking tired.

There is a troll in the room with you; an old, old troll you have never seen before in your life. You can see her lips moving. You think she is trying to speak to you but you can’t decode what she is trying to say because oh god, you’re drugged, aren’t you? You’re drugged, your pan is all fucked up on whatever is pumping into you and you should hurt, you should hurt but you don’t and god, why can’t you move?

It occurs to you that you must have fucked up and landed yourself in Torkal’s lab after all. You must be wallowing in the middle of one in an endless chain of totally fucking inhumane experiments. There is clearly no other reasonable explanation for why you would be in such a miserable state of affairs.

This revelation tears at something deep in you because this was the one thing you tried so hard to avoid, how can this be happening to you, you did everything right, you did everything they asked you to do and more. You forget your pride. You forget everything and you cry (and fuck, you can’t even do that properly because the shit in your throat won’t let you make any sound. The best you can do is lay there with the tears lazily welling up at the edges of your eyes to roll down the sides of your face.)
The troll lady sees you crying like a useless piece of trash. She says more shit you can’t follow as she brushes the tears off your face. Her fingers twine through your hair and you suddenly realize that you are sick. You are sick and weak and your body won’t move, why can’t you—

You fall asleep.

The second time you wake up, somebody is moving your wrist and oh, oh god, stop, it hurts, stop, make it STOP! You find that your throat is clear this time, you can scream, and you do because they are moving your wrist and it burns, it burns, no, oh god, she’s burning you, oh GOD, PLEASE STOP!

You have no idea you were saying any of this out loud until a voice says in English, “It’s OK, Karkat. You are safe. We need to move your hands so they will heal properly.”

That does not make a single shit-squirting lick of sense to you. They are tormenting you: your arm is screaming pain, worse than anything you can imagine and all you can do is scream to them to STOP, NO, FUCK, IT HURTS, STOP! You realize halfway through your unintelligible stream of fear babbling that you are screaming in Alternian so of course they can’t understand you. God, how can you be fucking everything up this badly?

You switch to English and you’re begging now, pleading like a pathetic weakling. Under any other circumstance you would be ashamed of yourself for breaking so easily. Right now, you are too desperate to care. You cry and beg for them to stop and it finally does.

The voice is back. It says, “Yeah, I think he needs more sedative if we are going to keep going with this.”

You can’t untangle what they are talking about before you are asleep again.

Someone is moving you. There are hands on your shoulders. You can feel them sitting you up, feel them—something is in your mouth. A straw. Weak broth. Weak, nasty broth. You try to turn away from the straw but it follows you.

A voice says, “Come on, Karkat, you need to eat something.”

It’s a voice you know. You know it, you know...you know you don’t want to drink this shit. The straw is poking at your lips. You moan and shake your head.

The voice says, “Just try to drink a little, buddy.”

You know...who is this? You can’t...you take a sip, choke on it, ow. Hands are on you again, sitting you up more. The coughing still hurts like fuck-all but at least you can breathe a little easier.

“You OK now?” asks the voice.

You don’t know. You don’t know anything because god, you feel so hot. Your pan is too cooked to crap out anything in the way of clever metaphors or similes to describe it. You just want to crawl into a tub of ice and drown the fire burning you from the inside out, drown yourself, make it stop, make it...fuck, are you naked? You think you might be naked. This is suddenly the most important thing,
taking precedence over everything else.

You manage to pull it all together—throat, tongue, jaw, lips—to say, “Where are my clothes? Why am I…why…?”

Another voice you know (you know who it is, it’s…it’s someone…you…know…) says, “Karkat, do you remember where you are?”

You know that voice, why can’t you place it? You whisper, “Where are…what are you doing to me?”

A pause, then voice number one says, “You’re in the hospital man.”

If you weren’t so fucking out of it, you would probably recognize that the words have a choked quality to them, like whoever said them is trying really hard to avoid crying like a little grub who still poops hard in his diaper nubs. It’s OK, though, because voice number two has your back. It says, “It’s OK, John. The drugs are just making him confused.”

“Yeah, I know,” sighs voice number one. “It’s just…hard to watch this. I mean, there has to be something we can do to make this easier on him, right? Different pain meds or…or something?”

You miss voice number two’s brilliant answer to number one’s totally senseless question because you fall asleep again.

____________________________________________________________________

You wake up—for real this time. There is still a fog in the back of your pan, but you can feel it dispersing like the remnants of a cloud of rancid flatulence rising up into the heavens. You are with it enough to realize that you are in a hospital room, lying in a bed. You take a moment to appreciate the fact that the room is packed to the fucking gills with all manner of junk: flower bouquets, stuffed animals, balloons, and stacks and stacks of cards and letters. Then you remember (fire on your back, something stabbing you and you can’t breathe, fire on your wrists) exactly what happened to put you here and you forget all about the dopey stuffed crab occupying the chair at the foot of your bed.

You don’t want to look at your hands. You are too much of a piss-swilling coward to look. (They couldn’t save them, you think. I would feel them, they would hurt if they had saved them.) Taking a deep breath, you look. The lower half of your arms are both swaddled in bandages, from the crooks of your elbows to the tips of the fingers on your (very much still present) hands. You try to move your fingers, try to clench your hands into fists, but there is something hard underneath the bandages forcing your hands to stay in a position you can only describe as “Crabad pincers” and ow, OK, trying to force the movement is a bad idea. You aren’t sure how long this is going to be a thing, but from the look of it, you’ll wager it’s going to be a while before you can hold your sickles or button your own shirts or—hell, why not?—wipe your own ass again. You have a feeling all of that is going to become a major pain in the bulge later on down the road, but right now, you are too busy riding high over the revelation that you still have hands to worry about it much.

As the happy afterglow of discovering that yes all four of your limbs are fully intact begins to wear off, you begin to realize that you feel like reconstituted shit. Your whole body aches, like you are a throbbing bruise on the ass of an accident-prone giant. Worse yet, you are weak. The act of scooting yourself up in bed is suddenly the hardest thing you have ever attempted to do in your entire shit-heaped life. (You do manage it eventually, leveraging yourself along on your elbows because your hands are still immobilized piles of useless. The effort leaves you winded and way more tired than it has any business making you feel.)
Somebody comes into your room; a lady you have never seen before. You have no idea who she is, but you do note that she is wearing blue scrubs. The nametag that says “Lily, RN” on it is enough to confirm your suspicions that she is a nurse. Smiling, she says, “Well look who’s awake!”

You are about to respond with a deeply moving, “Yeah, no shit” but she keeps talking, leaving you no choice but to swallow your comment back for later.

“How are you feeling, Karkat?”

“Like I got hit by a truck. And a wrecking ball. And a truck carrying wrecking balls. Wait…” You trail off, realizing just a tick too slow that this lady knows something about you that she shouldn’t. Furrowing your brow into a deep crater of what the generous fuck, you ask, “How do you know my real name?”

“You have been asleep for a few days,” she explains. “A lot has changed since you got here.”

You nod like you understand what she is talking about even though that answer is vague as a doped-up murderclown’s tenuous grip on reality. Gesturing at the slew of plants, card trees, and other random crap occupying literally every free space in the room, you ask, “What’s all this shi—I mean stuff?”

She glances around the room, smiles, says, “That’s yours. Or at least, part of it. Your friends rented out a small warehouse to store the rest of it.”

Gaping at her, you exclaim, “What? Where did it all even come from?”

“You’re kind of a celebrity at the moment.” She must notice your intensifying expression of wait, what the fuck is going on here because she quickly adds, “Saving the world will do that, you know.”

Well deep-fry your bulge and serve it over a pile of grub sauce. You have known this lady for all of three minutes and yet she has already claimed the distinct honor of being one of only a handful of people to leave you absolutely speechless. It’s all you can do to look around the room and note that yeah, most of the cards and balloons are printed in English, but you can see some bearing Alternian lettering and a good chunk printed in a bunch of languages you can’t even understand at all.

You are so busy focusing in on the tag dangling off the stuffed crab you saw earlier (hot liquefied behemoth leavings, you think it’s written in Korean. Someone in Korea you have never met cared enough about you to send you a hideous stuffed crab toy and that is fucking amazing) that you almost miss the nurse saying, “I know you must be tired, but there are a few people who would love to see you if you are feeling up to having visitors.”

Still staring at the tag on the stuffed crab (thank you, person I have never so much as farted at or near; I have no idea who you are but you are awesome), you say, “Yeah. Sure. Send them in.”

“It might take them a few minutes to get here,” she warns. “In the meantime, you probably have a lot of questions about what has been happening since you got here.” (You nod because yes, yes you do. This “Lily RN” is a very insightful woman. Sollux, Tavros, and Vriska can all pack up and go home because this lady is a goddamn psychic if you’ve ever met one,) “Honestly, the quickest way you’ll get answers is probably to just turn on the TV while you wait.”

You tell her “OK” and “thanks” as she flips the TV on and adjusts the screen so you can see it. (She also takes the liberty of adjusting the volume for you because useless bandage hands strike again, you can’t do it yourself without mashing about six other buttons.) Then she is gone and you are staring at a screenful of Feferi Peixes, Kanaya Maryam, Eridan Ampora, Rose Lalonde, Dave
Strider, and Aradia Megido face to face with a bunch of people in business suits. You watch Feferi shaking hands with some old human guy as the newscaster provides oh-so-helpful commentary about how “it’s been six days since the arrival of the Alternian Empress and peace negotiations are still in progress” and “Germany has become the sixth country to offer dual citizenship to Alternian nationals currently residing within its borders.”

The image on the screen abruptly switches to a panel of people in drab business suits who are caught up in arguing over all the minutiae of forming an alliance with an alien race—all the important shit like holy fuck, think about the tourism possibilities interplanetary travel would open and I’ve already learned a few words in Alternian, what have you done? (The guy who made this last claim proceeds to say “Fef’s busy; no more photos” and “I said no more fucking photos!” You let out a derisive snort because not only is it clear to you that he has no fucking clue what any of that means, you can also discern a hint of Eridan’s dumb seadweller inflection around the heavy English accent.)

You watch the humans argue for a while but the novelty of watching a bunch of humans say stupid shit wears off pretty quickly. It’s not long before your eyes start to drift closed. (And on a side note, yes, you do realize that taking a nap less than ten minutes after you woke up is weak grub sauce bullshit, but you are too tired to care so fuck off.)

You haven’t been dozing for long when a familiar voice says, “I thought they said he was awake.”

Your eyes snap open because oh hell yes, you know that voice. You would have to be seriously fucked up in the pan to miss the stupid lisp. Voice coarse with the weight of all the sleep shit still clinging to your speech strings, you croak, “Fuck you, I’m awake.”

“Ehehe, sure you were, KK.”

You turn toward him, intending to flip him off but oh wait, fuck, that’s one weapon you don’t have in your arsenal at the moment. This turns out to be just as well because the second you see the shape he’s in you forget all about being a truculent shithead. Sollux is sitting in a wheelchair, and sure, he’s free of all the biowires but he’s missing an arm—his left—and from the way the blanket folded over his lap drapes, it looks like he is missing the better part of both of his legs, too. (You are relieved to see that he does have a right arm—a prosthetic that looks a lot like Vriska’s. The easy wave he sends your way is enough to convince you that it functions as well as hers, too. Thank the diminutive fairy of mild good fortune for that, you guess.)

Terezi is pushing the wheelchair. She wheels him into the room, parks him on one side of you, walks around to your other side, and without saying a single word, she wraps her arms around you and plants her mouth on your mouth. You don’t care that it’s sloppy with too much tongue or that her teeth are a lot sharper than you remembered. It’s fucking perfect without too much or too little of anything and you don’t want it to end. You hug her close to you and don’t let her go until Sollux decides to be a piece of shit and make a bunch of noises to remind you that he’s sitting right there.

“Just as I thought,” she says as she comes away from you. “I do prefer my cherries unsalted. No more crying when we’re kissing, OK?”

“Yeah,” you mutter. You can feel your face getting hot and your first instinct is to think, fuck, calm down, don’t let them see. Then you remember that they have both already seen you wallowing in a small lake of your own blood and they didn’t give a shit about the color then so why should they now? You let your cheeks get hot and you don’t give it another thought.

Terezi flashes you a smile. “Well now that we have that out of the way, how are you feeling?”

“Honestly? Like I got stabbed in the fucking chest six days ago.” She frowns so you quickly amend,
“I’m fine.

“Good,” she replies. A pause, just long enough to clue you in to the fact that she is waffling on what she is going to say next so hard she might as well open her own breakfast stand and be done with it. Then: “You died, you know.”

You bark out a sharp-edged laugh because yeah right, you may not always be the sharpest sickle in the adversary’s throat but you aren’t that stupid. You keep laughing, expecting her and Sollux to join in at any moment. They don’t. They just sit there looking at you with Very Serious Expressions until your laughter dies away and you say, “No really, nice joke.”

“I’m not joking,” she replies.

You shake your head. “No; that’s not possible.”

“Oh, trust me, KK, it totally is possible because it totally fucking happened,” Sollux replies. “You really were dead for like, I dunno…three, three and a half minutes? I was hearing your voice with all the other doomed that whole afternoon and everything. No worries, though. The humans brought you back to life.”

You look from Sollux to Terezi and back again, looking for any tells to give away the joke and you find diddly fucking squat. Part of you wants to believe that they are just doing a really good job of holding onto their shitty ruse. A much larger and more sensible part of you knows that there is no way in hell either of them would make it this long without laughing at you and making some dumb shit comment about how you are “way too easy to get all hot and bothered.” The only logical conclusion you can make is that they actually are telling the truth. All you can do in response to this is sink back against the bed and breathe, “Fuck.”

You keep waiting for them to make some kind of snide remark in response to your shock but they don’t. In fact, they decide to display an unusual level of social finesse and say nothing, giving you a chance to process the idea that you are, in fact, Troll Jesus. You devote a moment of silence for the last vestiges of your sanity. Then you say, “OK, so now that I know what the hell happened to me, do either of you care to tell me exactly what happened after I crapped out on the beach? Last thing I remember you still had more tentacles than a fucking jellyfish and you were getting towed to shore by Eridan fuckoff Ampora.”

They exchange a look and proceed to tell you about all the grubshit insane goings-on that have gone down over the near-week you have spent lying in bed like a useless sack of hoofbeast manure. Feferi sending out a fleetwide communiqué with the Condesce’s severed head cradled in her arms like she’s her lusus and it’s her grub to let the entire Empire know that guess what, bitches, you’ve got a new Empress now. (Apparently, she sent the message without a single fart-blistered moment to spare: the fleet was hot on the trail of her cobbled-together army and on the verge of blowing the actual piss out of Nepeta, Equius, Vriska, and all of the forces they were managing. From what you can gather, it sounds like Vriska’s butt is still boiling over the fact that she had to be bailed out by none other than “Miss sea salt and bubblegum candy” while Nepeta and Equius, in a stunning display of not being egotistical jerks, are just grateful to be alive.) Tavros preventing the Vast Glub (!?!? wait, WHAT?) and Gamzee keeping Tavros alive by single-handedly beating the hell out of a goddamn elite assassination squad. Feferi going into peace talk negotiations at the goddamn United Nations with Eridan fuckoff Ampora as her main advisor (!?!? OK, NOW they have to be fucking with you) and Aradia acting as her main interpreter (OK, that’s actually kind of funny; you wonder how that is going and you really hope they managed to convince Feferi to ditch the stupid fish puns). Kanaya working with Nepeta and Equius to essentially tell the Cultists to cool their fucking rumble spheres, Karkat is going to be fine, no you cannot all go barging into a human hospital to go see him, can we
please talk about the future of our Empire and your place in it? (Apparently one of them came to see you while you were out of it? Some lady named Nilosa who is old as the earth under the shit-covered dirt. Hell if you remember that.) Vriska coordinating with her space pirates to do the same (but with a lot less OMG IS KARKAT GOING TO BE OK!?!? and a lot more LET’S SHOEHORN OUR POLITICAL AGENDA INTO FUCKING EVERYTHING INCLUDING THE LUNCH MENU BECAUSE WHY THE FUCK NOT?) It is, in short, a political clusterfuck of truly epic proportions—and yet in spite of this, it somehow seems to be working. (You haven’t got the foggiest clue how, but hey, you guess miracles happen after all. And on a side note, fuck you for thinking something that Gamzee would probably think. Fuck you so hard for that.)

Your pan is swimming by the time they finish relating all of this. You are not entirely sure whether it’s a product of all the shocking revelations they have just subjected you to or whether it’s an effect of all the pain meds that have been pumping into you over the past six days. Either way, it takes you a while to realize that something is missing from their riveting narrative of political shitstorm in motion. Trying to look at both of them (and failing miserably because they are still sitting on either side of your bed so you can’t do that no matter how hard you try as though to say fuck you, no making polite eye contact with two people at once) you say, “So what the hell were you guys doing?”

Terezi shrugs. “Waiting for Mr. Appleberry to get used to being wireless, mostly.”

“Yeah, and being mostly limbless would be a hell of a lot less annoying if I wasn’t still on double-secret psionic lockdown,” Sollux grumbles.

“Oh psh,” Terezi huffs, reaching across the bed to flick him on the side of his head. “The psionics restriction is just for two weeks. Besides, Jade’s almost done with your other arm and you know it won’t take her long to get your legs, either.”

You raise your eyebrows. “Jade is making your prosthetics?” Gesturing to the arm he is using to swat at Terezi’s hand, you say, “Human technology isn’t advanced enough to make something like that.”

“Well fuck,” Sollux groans. “No wonder she was so jazzed over the pirate’s biotech. Do you think she can figure it out?”

“She already made your arm, you dork,” Terezi responds.

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbles. “I just hope the hardware doesn’t end up failing when we’re out in deep space nine and way the hell away from anyone who knows how to repair it.”

You scowl. “Don’t be a globe-slapping asshole. If Jade made it, then it won’t fail. And what the shit do you mean ‘out in deep space nine?’ Are you planning on fucking off to somewhere as far away as possible so people won’t hear your obscene moaning during one of your routine self-fondling sessions? Because let me tell you, no matter how far you go, it won’t be far enough to prevent that.”

“Actually, TZ and I are planning on going together.”

“OK, gross,” you reply. “One, you do not have to share all the gruesome details of your own disgusting genital manipulation extravaganzas. Two, I thought you guys were moirails, not—“

“It’s for the job Feferi assigned us,” Terezi interrupts. “We’ll be traveling around the fleet and assessing whether any of the current helmsmen can be detached.”

“Oh,” you say because wow, you sure are good at inserting your foot so deep in your mouth you are
halfway to crapping out the hideous gray hospital stockings encasing your legs. “That actually sounds kind of—”

“Hold up,” says Terezi. “Someone’s coming. I can smell them.”

You roll your eyes. “It’s probably just my nurse. You know, Lily RN?”

“Nope,” she replies, flashing you a grin with lots of fang. “It’s someone you know.”

“Who is it?” you ask and goddamn it, you hope she decides to just fucking tell you instead of playing some kind of obnoxious tundra-dwelling antler creature game.

She smiles (and goddamn it, from the smile alone you know she is on the verge of playing her usual tundra-dwelling antler creature games). “You’ll see in just a second. Sollux and I will give you a little privacy.”

“We will?” Sollux gawks.

“Yes,” she replies, coming around the foot of the bed and arranging herself behind his chair. She looks back at you as she wheels him out of the room and says, “We’ll see you later, cherry lips!”

You barely have time to lament the fact that they fucked off too quickly for you to give either of them a proper goodbye before the door opens and John comes into the room. He takes one look at you and his whole face lights up with the dopiest grin you have ever seen in your entire life.

“Hey, Karkat!” he says. “Wow, you look so good—like your normal grouchy self!”

You scowl. (This seems to make John so unreasonably happy you don’t know what to think.) Then you say, “Well I feel like warmed-over elephant shit. If this is ‘good’ then I must have really looked like hell before.”

“Yeah,” he says. “You kind of did. You were so bad back on the island we had to give you a blood transfusion!”

“A…” you trail off as the spike wheels begin turning in your pan. “Wait a fucking second here. I can’t…who’s blood…?”

“Oh, they didn’t tell you?” He looks down at the floor, coughs, “It, uh, heh. It was mine.”

“Yours?” you repeat and would you look at that, you are so flabbergasted that you are struck dumb for the second time in one day. (Somebody mark the date because that is truly a happening of epic importance, worthy of commemoration to future generations of good grubs and wigglers.) Of course when you finally do find your voice again, you say something completely fucking stupid: “So I have John Fucking Egbert blood oozing through my vasculature?”

He smiles. “They said in biology that red blood cells live for 120 days, so for the next four months or so, yeah.”

You just shake your head. First you find out you are Troll Jesus. Then you find out you have human blood inside of you. Clearly, your decision to fuck off to coma-sickness land for six days has left you vulnerable to all manner of fucked-up weirdness. (You can’t help wondering what’s next? Is someone going to come along and tell you that you are also the head Threshectioner’s newly-adopted son? Or maybe they’ll tell you that the Grand Highblood has declared you the “Motherfucking Mirthful Messiah.” Fuck if you know.)
“Dave and Rose and Jade all wanted me to say hi and sorry they couldn’t be here when you woke up,” says John. “Rose and Dave are still at the United Nations with Feferi and Jade is still busy tooling around with your bizarro alien technology. Er…actually, I think I am supposed to be at the UN, too, but eh. I have more important things to do right now.”

You raise your eyebrows. “The UN wants you to be there? The motherfucking UN? What the fuck are you doing here then?”

“Like I said, I have other things to do.”

“Like what?”

He looks at you like he’s sizing you up, trying to decide what to tell you. You raise your right hand to flip him off for being a cagey nookhugger but oops, you forgot that isn’t an option again. (God, this is going to get old, isn’t it?) He must miss the entire gist of what you are trying to tell him because he very suddenly changes the subject with: “Karkat, what are you going to do now that this is all over?”

“What? I don’t know. Why?”

“I mean, were you going back to your home planet? Or I guess it would be the fleet since you are too much of a geezer to live on the planet anymore. Or were you going to stay here on Earth?”

“John, what are you—“

He goes on without giving you any sign he heard you talking at all. “Because if you were going to stay on Earth then you would need a family, right? I mean, you don’t really have one anymore since what happened with Otto and Nora. Anyways, my dad and I talked about it and we wanted to invite you to join our family. If you are staying on Earth. Oh, and if you want to.”

You stare at him because did he just offer you what you think he did? No; the pain meds must be fucking with your mind, you must have heard wrong. Slowly, you ask, “What do you mean?”

“I mean if you want, you can be part of our family. Like, he would be your dad and I guess that would make us brothers.”

You continue to stare at him because oh god he did offer you what you think he did? No; the pain meds must be fucking with your mind, you must have heard wrong. Slowly, you ask, “What do you mean?”

“I mean if you want, you can be part of our family. Like, he would be your dad and I guess that would make us brothers.”

You continue to stare at him because oh god he did offer you what you think he did and you can’t respond, there are no words, you can’t word, word is broken. John seems to take your silence to mean nope, fuck you because he slumps in his seat and says, “Yeah, I guess it was a dumb idea. I mean, if I was stranded on some weird alien planet, probably the last thing I would want to do is—“

That is as far as he gets before you throw your arms around his shoulders and give him the most ferocious hug you can summon from the core of your perpetually rancid and disgusting self. (To be fair, it’s not much of a hug between the stupid arm braces and the general feeling of shitty weakness. Still, it’s the best you can do at the moment and fuck anybody who thinks it’s not enough. Fuck them with an ice-cold dinner fork.)

“Oh,” gasps John around your death grip. “So…is that a yes, then?”

You just hug him tighter to you because why the hell not, he’s your human brother and that is fucking incredible. John predictably ruins your moment of heartwarming familial affection by saying, “Dude, are you crying?”

Your face is buried somewhere in the region of his chest so your voice comes out a muffled, croaking mess as you reply, “No; fuck you.”
He laughs. “You totally are. Aww, that’s so cute.”

You don’t say anything. You know that there will be time for words later, when you are wrestling with all the practical details that you will have to deal with to make this ridiculous arrangement work. (Shit like where this will put you with regards to your responsibilities to the fleet or what you are going to do about the Cultists who apparently still worship you or how this is going to affect the thing you may or may not have with Terezi.) For now you are content just to revel in the knowledge that you have a home, you have a family, and right now you are exactly where you want to be.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that is officially the end of Straw Soldiers, folks! It's been a great trip through and through and I'd just like to extend a big THANK YOU to everybody who made it this far. I hope you all enjoyed reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it :)

Also, check out the links below for some lovely fan art!

From BrOwNiEfOx: Karkat

From cosmicConundrum: Karkat, Karkat and John

From easternCriminal: LOTS of little snippets!, Sic Semper Tyrannis

From exquius: Sic Semper Tyrannis

From MitsukuriRyoko: Karkat's Transformation

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!